

2023

Narratives of Black Single Mothers Pursuing School Counseling Field Experience amid COVID-19

Kerry Lamphere Bowles
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Kerry Lamphere Bowles

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Narratives of Black Single Mothers Pursuing School Counseling Field Experience
amid COVID-19

by

Kerry Lamphere Bowles

MA, University of Lynchburg, 2004

BS, Liberty University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

May 2023

Abstract

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) graduate students, particularly those who are single mothers, have historically navigated systemic barriers such as lack of equal education, financial resources, academic experiences, or administrative support in pursuit of academic success. School closures due to the health and safety protocols during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presented additional complications for BIPOC single mother graduate students attempting to complete their master's degree, especially in school counseling. The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of BIPOC single mother online graduate students, who were in the field experience stage of their programs. Six Black single mother graduate students who attended online, CACREP, school counseling programs participated in interviews. Data were analyzed through the lens of Womanist Theory and intersectionality by engaging in the hermeneutic circle; reading, reflective writing, and interpretation. The results of this study revealed barriers these women experienced to completing field experience, the resources utilized to mitigate these barriers, and recommendations for BIPOC single mother school counseling graduate students to successfully complete field experience and ultimately their programs. Implications of these findings can assist school counselor educators to promote systemic change by creating and implementing appropriate program initiatives to directly support this population in the successful completion of field experience to ensure eligibility for licensure or certification in K-12 school counseling after graduation.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the women who entrusted me with their experiences, their barriers, their survival, their triumphs, and their voices. My prayer is to share your journey and to allow the knowledge of your experiences to serve as wisdom for advocacy in the school counseling profession, our *calling*. This journey was deeply moving and humbling, yet these women allowed me to draw upon their strength to finish. I also believe this profession is a calling. I believe the Lord places individuals in our paths at an appointed place, at an appointed time. I am grateful the Lord placed these extraordinary women on this path! I dedicate this study to these women whose stories taught me about faith, and how God uses our weaknesses and our barriers for His purpose, for His glory. He only asks us to be faithful in our journey to be a part of His plan.

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I want to first thank my Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus for calling me to serve others. I pray that you use me as your hands and feet to bless others, for you are the very best that I have to offer. Colossians 3:17, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Thank you to my Chair, Dr. Ariel Harrison, for your unwavering encouragement, guidance, patience, and support throughout this journey. You honored my desire to keep my family first throughout this journey, while also keeping me on track to finish! Your understanding of how deeply important this was for me, allowed me to give myself permission to pause and rest when needed, so that I would continue the journey and not give up. After all, this was not the race I envisioned, but it is a journey indeed! I am forever grateful for your mentorship and wisdom regarding this process from a personal standpoint (oh, the balancing act), as well as your professional research and expertise in this subject matter.

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and confidence throughout the revisions. I appreciated your experience and expertise to guide the process to completion.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background of the Study	3
Problem Statement	7
Purpose of the Study	12
Research Question	13
Theoretical Foundation	13
Womanist Theory.....	14
Intersectionality.....	15
Conceptual Framework.....	15
Hermeneutic Phenomenology.....	16
Nature of the Study	17
Definitions.....	18
Assumptions.....	20
Scope and Delimitations	21
Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers	22
Significance of the Study	24
Significance to Practice.....	25
Significance to Theory	26
Significance to Social Change	27

Summary and Transition.....	27
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	29
Introduction.....	29
Literature Search Strategies.....	30
Theoretical Foundation.....	31
Conceptual Framework.....	33
Womanist Definition.....	33
Womanist Research.....	34
Literature Review.....	36
Intersectionality.....	36
Black, Indigenusness, and People of Color [BIPOC].....	37
BIPOC Single Mother Graduate Students.....	38
School Counseling.....	42
BIPOC Single Mother School Counseling Graduate Students.....	43
Coronavirus Pandemic [COVID-19].....	45
COVID-19 and BIPOC Single Mother Graduate Students.....	46
Increased Need for School Counselors.....	47
Summary.....	51
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	52
Introduction.....	52
Research Design and Rationale.....	53
Hermeneutic Phenomenology.....	53

Central Concepts of the Study	55
Role of the Researcher	56
Methodology	58
Participant Selection	58
Instrumentation Selection	59
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection	59
Data Analysis Plan	61
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	62
Credibility	62
Transferability.....	63
Dependability	64
Confirmability.....	65
Ethical Procedures	66
Summary	68
Chapter 4: Results	69
Introduction.....	69
Setting	70
Demographics	71
Data Collection	72
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	76
Credibility	77
Transferability.....	77

Dependability	78
Conformability	79
Data Analysis	79
Step 1: Familiarization	80
Step 2: Generating Initial Codes	81
Step 3: Searching for Themes	82
Step 4: Reviewing the Themes	86
Step 5: Naming and Defining Themes	88
Findings.....	89
Theme 1: Barriers Experienced to Completing Field Experience	89
Theme 2: Resources Utilized to Mitigate Barriers to Complete Field Experiences	107
Theme 3: Recommendations for other BIPOC Single Mothers to Succeed	128
Summary	136
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations	138
Interpretation of the Findings.....	139
Barriers Experienced to Completing Field Experience	140
Resources Used to Mitigate Barriers to Complete Field Experiences Amid Covid-19	149
Limitations of the Study.....	157
Recommendations	159
Implications.....	160

Implications for Theory	161
Implications for Practice	163
Implications for Positive Social Change in the School Counseling Profession.....	169
Conclusion	170
References	172
Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Questions	195
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer	197
Appendix C: Demographic Form.....	198

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics.....	72
Table 2. Preliminary Meaning Units.....	83
Table 3. Categories	85

List of Figures

Figure 1. The Woman Herself as the Resource and Further Recommendations 88

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color [BIPOC] graduate students have historically navigated systemic barriers such as lack of equal education, financial resources, academic experiences, or administrative support in their pursuit of academic success (Clarke, 2020). Recent data reported from the United States Census Bureau (2022) confirmed the systemic issue of underrepresented populations in graduate and post graduate experiences (Clarke, 2020). BIPOC graduate level students who are also single mothers navigate additional, complex barriers that are unique to their population (IWPR, 2020; Kruevelis et al., 2017). BIPOC single mothers in higher education, both undergraduate and graduate programs, has doubled in the past 10+ years (IWPR, 2020). Despite this data, Kolodner (2017) suggested recent attrition rates may indicate an increased disparity because of systemic barriers single mothers face to complete these degrees.

Many universities and K-12 schools across the United States closed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). School closures due to the pandemic presented additional complications for BIPOC single mother graduate students attempting to complete their master's degree, especially those in school counseling. School closures resulted in closed practicum and internship site opportunities (King, 2020; Thompson, 2020). This abrupt stop in the educational journey for BIPOC single mothers also placed them at risk for not completing their desired master's degree. Higher attrition rates contribute to the systemic concern of underrepresented populations succumbing to barriers, which impedes academic success, retention, and completion of a

degree in higher education. This also contributes to a continuation of the disparity of underrepresented BIPOC individuals serving in educational professions, which utilize advocacy and social justice efforts to promote academic, career, and social-emotional wellness of others.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) projects a 10% increase in school counseling jobs by 2031, which is faster than the average increase; however, there is a lack of research on the experiences of the school counseling trainees themselves, who are attempting to graduate as soon as possible to be eligible for these open positions. The mental health concerns of K-12 students, especially amid the pandemic, increased the job outlook for school counseling professionals (Pincus et al., 2020). This prompted school counseling preparation programs to explore ways to retain school counseling graduate students and to produce licensed school counselors to meet the occupational demand for this profession.

I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study to explore the lived experiences of BIPOC single mothers who were at a higher risk for not completing their degrees due to the intensified stressors of COVID-19 during the crucial point in their degree completion, the field experience portion. I examined Black single mothers' lived experiences through a womanist theoretical lens, which was inclusive of this population's sense of community, belonging, strengths, values, emotional, mental, and spiritual connection (Heath, 2006; Walker, 1983). The goal of this study was to assist educational programs in gaining a deeper understanding of the unique barriers faced by

this group during the pandemic, and to discover potential solutions, program suggestions, and initiatives to implement to retain and support these students to graduation.

Background of the Study

The following articles and data collection are related to BIPOC single mothers pursuing school counseling field experience amid COVID-19. Key terms used to research this topic included *BIPOC graduate students*, *Black single mothers*, *single mothers in graduate programs*, *intersectionality*, *Coronavirus pandemic*, *COVID-19*, *womanist theory*, *field experience*, *BIPOC women in school counseling graduate programs*, *school counseling*, *mental health of graduate students* and *coronavirus*. Databases used included Google Scholar, JSTOR, PsycInfo, ERIC, IPEDS, and EBSCO.

BIPOC bachelor's and graduate level students are underrepresented in higher education. Preston (2017) suggested BIPOC students have navigated barriers to academic success from grade school to post graduate work, which points to an ongoing systemic issue of the lack of resources and supports for these students, which most often results in underrepresented populations in higher education, disparities in retention rates, and disparities in degree completion rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2020), 493,232 female graduate students received master's degrees in the 2017-2018 academic year; however, only 35.9% of these degrees were earned by BIPOC female graduates. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), an average of 5.9% single mothers were enrolled in graduate school in 2018. The Institute for Women's Policy and Research (2017) noted that BIPOC single mothers were less likely to obtain their degrees compared to their peers who were white married women

with children. Approximately 42.7% of married white mothers obtained their degrees, as compared to 21.9% Black single mothers, 19.6% Native American single mothers, and 15.4% Hispanic single mothers (IWPR, 2017). BIPOC single mothers face unique obstacles, in addition to the expected stressors of completing a master's degree. Cruse et al. (2018) and Vyskocil (2018) outlined a plethora of dueling responsibilities single mothers pursuing degrees in higher education face (financial, educational, physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual needs of their families), coupled with the educational responsibilities (time and financial commitments, etc.) required of a master's level student.

Palermo-Kielb (2020) explored both barriers and motivators of single mothers attempting to complete online graduate programs. This qualitative study noted that a common barrier single mothers experienced was the struggle to balance care responsibilities (self-care, physical wellness, psychological wellness), work responsibilities, and academic responsibilities. Participants from this study also described financial obstacles, time management obstacles, and role-conflict obstacles. Higher levels of educational attainment required higher levels of both informational support from counseling programs and emotional support from peers. Single mother graduate students also reported feeling like they did not belong. Motivators were resourcefulness and self-regulation. Participants also used positive self-talk to encourage themselves in the belief that quitting was not an option. Although Palermo-Kielb's (2020) study did not specifically report the ethnicity of the participants, the noted barriers of financial obstacles, time management obstacles, and role-conflict obstacles continue to be

documented in similar research, which included BIPOC single mothers. The overwhelming responsibilities of BIPOC single mothers may explain some of the disparity in the number of single mothers enrolling in graduate programs and earning a master's degree.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2022), graduate students are more likely (71%) to choose online courses or programs. There has been an increase in student enrollment in online exclusive programs, specifically, 33% in 2019 compared to 52% in 2020 of online exclusive graduate students (NCES, 2022). By 2021, the percentage had increased again to 59% (NCES, 2022). Race and ethnicity data reported 45% Black students, 31% Hispanic, 10% Asian, 33% Pacific Island students, 33% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 34% two or more races were enrolled in exclusively online master's degree programs, compared to only 26% of their white peers.

The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2019) reported approximately 46% of exclusively online students were single parents. This enrollment data suggests there is a significant number of BIPOC single mothers enrolled in and attending online graduate school. Additional data for this specific population indicates the attrition rate increases as these students attempt to complete their master's programs (IWPR, 2020; NCES, 2019).

The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2019) reported 82% of the health professions and related programs master's degrees were earned by female graduate students, and 78% master's degrees in education were earned by female graduate students. These two areas of study were chosen above all other majors. Master's degrees

in school counseling typically reside in schools of education or mental health counseling and related fields. These percentages, the National Center for Education Statistics' total number of female graduates, total number of BIPOC students, and the total number of single mother graduate students, suggest there is a population of BIPOC female students, who are also single mothers, pursuing master's degrees in school counseling.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified barriers for BIPOC graduate students. According to Lund (2020) and Tai et al. (2020), BIPOC populations in the United States experienced intensified stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic that include social prejudice and discrimination, healthcare disparities, environmental disparities, and economic disparities. Aucejo et al. (2020), Bell et al. (2020), Bono et al. (2020), Chirikov et al. (2020), and Hicks (2018) echoed similar stressors graduate students (in general) faced during the COVID-19 health pandemic. According to Garbe et al. (2020), school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more than half a billion children becoming virtual-school learners. Parent(s), guardians, siblings, and other family members assumed the new role of virtual learning facilitator, teacher, and coach.

Gabster et al. (2020) and Son et al. (2020) discussed how BIPOC single mother graduate students faced additional barriers to educational success due to the COVID-19 health pandemic, which included economic hardship and strained family responsibilities. Additionally, BIPOC single mothers may experience a lack of equal education when forced to navigate a white male-dominated institutional culture with limited administrative support to navigate these barriers, including potentially enduring implicit, subconscious biases, and microaggressions (Bhopal, 2020; IWPR, 2021; Sanders, 2021).

Lack of academic support from underrepresented BIPOC female mentors and faculty to assist these women posed yet another barrier to graduate degree completion (Bhopal, 2020).

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) projects a 10% increase in school counseling jobs by 2031, which is faster than the average increase. This statistic was important to the study because research also pointed to the mental health concerns of K-12 students, especially amid the pandemic (Hoffman & Miller, 2020), which increased the job outlook for school counseling professionals. Pincus et al. (2020) outlined data that revealed the academic, social, emotional, physical, and psychological stressors K-12 students experienced due to school closures and COVID-19. Recommendations included employing additional school counselors to meet these academic, social, emotional, physical, and psychological needs of K-12 students upon re-entering the school system. Wong et al. (2020) supported this recommendation by discussing how the mental, emotional, and psychological wellness of K-12 students has declined since the pandemic, thus prompting K-12 schools across the nation to seek employment of additional mental health care professionals, including school counselors to meet these needs. These data and research prompt school counseling preparation program leaders to explore ways to retain school counseling graduate students, and to produce licensed school counselors to meet the occupational demand for this profession.

Problem Statement

Black, Indigenous and People of Color [BIPOC] have historically faced barriers in pursuit of a degree in higher education (Clarke, 2020; Smith, 2017). BIPOC graduate

level students are no strangers to the lack of equal education, financial resources, academic experiences, or support needed to overcome unique barriers when navigating the world of academia. BIPOC graduate students have navigated barriers to academic success since grade school, which points to the systemic issue of underrepresented populations in higher education that continues through graduate and post graduate experiences (Clarke, 2020).

According to the National Center for Education and Statistics (2020), in 2019 approximately 63.4% white women completed their programs to earn their master's degree, as compared to the 36.6% BIPOC female graduate students. The breakdown of these BIPOC populations suggests specific disparities, even within the BIOPC community, with female graduate degree earners representing only 14.7% black women, 11.6% Hispanic women, 6.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, .5% American Indian/Alaska Native women, and 3% of women representing two or more races. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, of the single mothers attending college:

Women of color in college are especially likely to be single parents. Nearly two in five Black women (37 percent) and over one-quarter of American Indian/Alaska Native women (27 percent) are raising a child without the support of a spouse or partner while in college, compared with 19 percent of Hispanic women, 17 percent of women of two or more races, 14 percent of White women, and 7 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander women. (IPR, 2017, p. 2)

The overwhelming responsibilities of BIPOC single mothers may explain some of the disparity in the number of single mothers enrolling in graduate programs and earning a

master's degree. Responsibilities often include primary financial provider, physical provider (food, shelter, clothing, childcare), educational liaison, tutor, teacher, and primary disciplinarian in tandem with ensuring mental, emotional, and/or spiritual wellness of her children (Ajayi et al., 2021; Cruse et al., 2018; Smith, 2017). Single mothers who are pursuing graduate degrees must attempt to fulfill these responsibilities while balancing personal, professional, and educational responsibilities required of a master's level graduate student (Ajayi et al., 2021; Poindexter, 2017; Smith, 2017; Vyskocil, 2018).

School counselors earn a master's degree or higher in school counseling to meet their specific state department of education's requirements to obtain a certification or license to practice in the schools (ASCA, 2020). Many graduate students choose accredited programs, such as school counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). In addition to CACREP accredited program choice, national data suggest that graduate students are more likely (nearly 40 percent) to choose online courses or programs (NCES, 2019). The field experience (practicum and internship) portion of the school counseling master's degree provides this training and includes experience in elementary and secondary school levels. Field experience is the opportunity for school counseling graduate students to move from theory to practice, gain required hours and experience needed for graduation, and ultimately fulfill state requirements for licensure/certification (CACREP, 2016; Eggum, 2020).

In 2020, Coronavirus Disease 2019 [COVID-19], (a respiratory illness that caused various symptoms, including fever, difficulty breathing, new loss of taste or smell, coughing, vomiting, diarrhea) impacted many aspects of life for people in the United States and the world (CDC, 2020). Many universities and K-12 schools across the United States closed during the coronavirus [COVID-19] pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). School closures due to the pandemic presented additional complications for BIPOC single mother graduate students attempting to complete their master's degree, in school counseling specifically. Single mother school counseling graduate students not only lost educational supports and childcare assistance for their families, but abrupt school closures posed their own educational barrier for these women attempting to secure practicum and internships in K-12 schools to complete their degrees (Ajayi et al., 2021; King, 2020; Thompson, 2020). School site closures abruptly halted and/or delayed the educational journey for graduate students attempting to complete a degree in school counseling, thus increasing time and financial burdens for these mothers (Ajayi et al., 2021).

Research on the specific impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on BIPOC single mothers' time, financial state, and childcare concerns continues to emerge. Regarding childcare, single mothers may apply for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) federal grant. Unfortunately, this grant only serves approximately 1% of the student parent population and is provided for on-campus childcare (Ajayi et al., 2021). While intended to be helpful for single mothers, an explanation for the 1% usage of this grant may be contributed to university shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic

coupled with the general increase of enrollment in online graduate courses and programs (Ajayi et al., 2021; NCES, 2019).

Single mothers may qualify for federal assistance (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF]) to lessen financial burdens to support their families; however, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities indicated TANF “requires single mothers with children older than 6 years to work for 30 hours per week to qualify for federal assistance” (Ajayi et al., 2021, p. 236). The 30-hour per week requirement may hinder a single mother’s educational progress by limiting the amount of hours left in the day to care for her children’s basic (emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, etc.) needs, thus limiting the amount of time needed to successfully complete her master’s degree requirements (courses and field experiences), as well as limiting time to attend to her own basic (emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, etc.) needs. Regarding BIPOC single mother household concerns specifically, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities TANF benefits are approximately 60% below the poverty line. Further, BIPOC families are more likely to live in states where the benefits are the lowest (Safawi & Floyd, 2020). Safawi and Floyd (2020) also indicated 42% of Black families and 36% of Latino families experienced financial hardships, while only 20% of white families experienced financial hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research continues to explore graduate students’ experiences during the COVID-19 health crisis, including the exploration of short-term effects on graduate students and the potential long-term impact the pandemic may have on graduate students (Ajayi et al., 2021; Bal et al., 2020; Bono et al., 2020; Chirikov et al., 2020). Although researchers

have explored the experiences BIPOC single mothers face when attempting to complete degrees in higher education in general, there is a lack of research exploring BIPOC single mothers' unique school counseling online graduate field experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the barriers this marginalized group faces, it would be prudent to understand the experiences of BIPOC single mother online graduate students, who are at a higher risk for not completing their degrees due to the intensified stressors of COVID-19.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of BIPOC single mother online graduate students, specifically during the field experience stage of their programs, and the barriers these graduate students faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A phenomenological approach aligned best with the purpose of understanding the lived experiences (Patton, 2015) of BIPOC single mother online graduate students. Specifically, I sought to understand the barriers faced by these women, the coping skills utilized, and their progress toward overcoming these barriers to complete field experience during the global pandemic.

Research continues to explore graduate students' experiences during the COVID-19 health crisis, including the exploration of short-term effects on graduate students and the potential long-term impact the pandemic may have on graduate students (Bono et al., 2020; Chirikov et al., 2020). Although researchers have explored the experiences BIPOC single mothers faced when attempting to complete degrees in higher education in general, there is a lack of research exploring BIPOC single mothers' unique school counseling

online graduate field experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological theoretical approach supported my understanding of the phenomenon of field experience amid COVID-19 for BIPOC single mother online graduate students.

I used semi-structured interviews to ask participants open-ended questions to facilitate a narrative (Brown & Danaher, 2019) that described how they individually experienced the practicum or internship portion of their online program amid COVID-19. I sought to understand the barriers these women faced, learn of the coping skills of said barriers, and document the progress of these BIPOC single mothers' educational journey toward completion of field experience for their master's degree in school counseling. Understanding the unique experiences of these BIPOC single mothers may assist school counseling educators in the advocacy, creation, and implementation of appropriate program initiatives (Palermo-Kielb, 2020) to directly support this population in the successful completion of field experience to ensure eligibility for licensure or certification in K-12 school counseling after graduation.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of BIPOC single mother school counseling online graduate students attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19?

Theoretical Foundation

This study explored Black single mother graduate students' lived experiences during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling program amid COVID-19 through the lens of womanist theory.

Womanist Theory

Geetha and Thomas (2020) outlined the history behind womanist theory, which was postulated by Alice Walker (1967) as a more appropriate definition for feminist ideals for women of color. Womanist theory acknowledges the history of BIPOC women's experiences of victimization, oppression, and racism, but goes beyond those experiences to include BIPOC women's strengths, beliefs, and survival (Geetha & Thomas, 2020; Rousseau, 2013). Alice Walker's writings celebrate BIPOC mothers who acted with determination and courage amid victimization, oppression, and racism for the betterment of her children. Geetha and Thomas (2020) explained:

A Womanist is a person responsible not only for herself but also for those people who depend on her, especially other Black women and children. She is responsible enough to make her own decisions and face the consequences. She is the one who is serious enough to take charge of any given situation. (p. 220)

A womanist theoretical lens aligned well with the lived experiences of single BIPOC women, where the responsibility is great to care for her children, as well as the emphasis on community, belonging, strength, values, and inclusion. A foundational aspect of womanist theory is the role spirituality plays in a woman of color's identity development, response to emotional and mental well-being (Heath, 2006; Walker, 1983).

Womanist theory is a theoretical framework developed by Black women for Black women and is specific in articulating personal insights from the Black female perspective. Particularly, it focuses on the Black woman's unique

experiences with sexism, racism, and classism with the aim of empowering Black women to engage in the eradication of these intersecting oppressions. (Heath, 2006, p. 160)

Intersectionality

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; 2018) acknowledged the interconnected nature of race, class, and gender, which create an overlapping, interdependent system of disadvantage (Lexico, 2020). Collins and Bilge (2020) discussed how intersectionality recognizes how one's race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and ethnicity are intertwined and play a significant role socially, economically, and politically. Researchers continue to study the role intersectionality plays in social and economic issues, legal and political debates, power dynamics in the work force, and in higher educational programs (Carbado et al., 2013; Harris & Patton, 2019; Haynes et al., 2020). The theoretical tenants of intersectionality illuminate another layer of complex barriers BIPOC graduate students face, specifically Black women who are also single mothers (Vyskocil, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study of BIPOC single mother graduate students' lived experiences during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling program amid the COVID-19 pandemic included a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to understand the phenomenon within the context of the participants' lived experience (Crowther et al.,

2017; Patton, 2015). I used qualitative methods to explore how and why the participants experienced a phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology's philosophical movement was initiated by Edmond Husserl (1859-1938). The principles of phenomenology were further developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who introduced existential and hermeneutic dimensions to the consciousness and essence of a phenomena (Kafle, 2011). Phenomenological research is the study of the nature and meanings of a phenomena. The phenomenological researcher aims to provide richness, depth, and texture to the lived experience (Finlay, 2009). Langdridge (2007) defined this qualitative method as focusing on human experience, the meaning of the experience, and the way the meaning emerged through the experience.

Hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1889-1976) focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals or groups. The hermeneutic researcher believes that interpretations are foundational, and the description itself is an interpretive process. Guidelines for hermeneutic research include examining and interpreting the way(s) the research activities (commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole influence each other (Kafle, 2011). I used specific cyclical methods of interpretation as suggested by Laverly (2003), which pays attention to details that other researchers may take for granted, through self-reflection in the reading, self-reflective writing, and interpretation of these.

Hermeneutic phenomenology used the data collected from the participants' stories to seek a new, deepened understanding of the multiple meanings within the phenomenon (Crowther et al., 2017). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was best suited to explore the stories of BIPOC single mother graduate students' lived experiences during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling, within the context of the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crowther et al. (2017) described the intention of hermeneutic research as illuminating "essential, yet often forgotten, dimensions of human experience in ways that compel attention and provoke further thinking" (p. 827).

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was qualitative research with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, examined through the lens of womanist theory. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach sought to understand the phenomenon within the context of the participants' lived experience (Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015). This study allowed for a new and deepened understanding of the experiences of Black single mother school counseling graduate students attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19 (Crowther et al., 2017). The qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach used semi-structured, open-ended questions to gather in-depth details (Brown & Danaher, 2019) of the following research question: What are the lived experiences of BIPOC single mother school counseling online graduate student attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19? Through the continuous evaluation of the narratives gathered, I determined that saturation occurred with the sample size of 6 Black single mother school counseling

program graduate students, which aligned with the qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Malterud et al., 2016; Morse, 1995). A qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach also aligned best with the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of Black single mother graduate students, specifically exploring the barriers facing these women, coping skills utilized, and their progress toward overcoming these barriers to complete field experience during the global pandemic (Banks-Wallace, 2000).

Definitions

BIPOC: A term to identify a population of individuals who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Clarke, 2020).

CACREP: Stands for the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. CACREP accredits master's and doctoral degree programs in counseling and its specialties that are offered by colleges and universities as a standard of quality assurance:

CACREP accredits master's-level counseling programs in the following areas: Addiction Counseling; Career Counseling; Clinical Mental Health Counseling; Clinical Rehabilitation Counseling; College Counseling and Student Affairs; Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling; School Counseling, and Rehabilitation Counseling. In addition, CACREP accredits doctoral programs in Counselor Education and Supervision. (CACREP, 2021)

Coronavirus Disease 2019 [COVID-19]: A respiratory illness that may cause a range of mild to severe symptoms, including fever, difficulty breathing, new loss of taste or smell, coughing, vomiting, and/or diarrhea (CDC, 2020).

Field Experience: A required educational component of a CACREP accredited program where the intern practices school counseling related skills, in a school setting, and under the supervision of a licensed counselor:

After students have completed skill development preparation, they generally begin the clinical experience portion of a program. In a CACREP-accredited program, this consists of a minimum of a 100-hour practicum with a minimum of 40 hours of Direct Service with clients and a minimum of a 600-hour internship with a minimum of 240 hours of direct service with clients. Internships are completed in a student's program emphasis area; so, for example, students in School Counseling programs complete their internship in school settings. Students are supervised throughout their clinical experiences by qualified faculty and site supervisors. The clinical experience portion of a counseling program is time and effort intensive so students should plan accordingly. (CACREP, 2021)

Intersectionality: The interconnected nature of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and ethnicity that create an overlapping, interdependent system of disadvantage (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Lexico, 2020).

Lived experience: Ellis and Flaherty (1992) explained the importance of subjectivity of the research and the researcher, incorporating emotions, mind-body

connections, time, place, setting, and an understanding of self to provide a fuller understanding of the experience:

Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people. It may also refer to knowledge of people gained from direct face-to-face interaction rather than through a technological medium. (Oxford Reference, 2021)

Womanist theory: A theoretical viewpoint based on the historical narratives of women of color and grounded in her spirituality. The mind, body, and spirit are interconnected, and social cultural contexts are intertwined in these three aspects of a woman (Heath, 2006). A womanist “engages in issues of race, class, and gender in ways that raise awareness and provide understanding of Black women’s social, cultural, and historical experiences” (Heath, 2006).

Assumptions

There is research evidence (IWPR, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Kruvelis et al., 2017; Poindexter, 2017; Preston, 2017; Smith, 2017; Vyskocil, 2018) suggesting BIPOC single mother graduate students generally face barriers during their educational programs. Therefore, I assumed the participants for this study (Black single mother graduate students) also faced barriers in their field experience portion of their school counseling graduate program. This assumption was critical to the meaning of the study because I explored how the aspects of intersectionality and womanist theory were intertwined in the Black single mother graduate students’ lived experience of field experience amid the

pandemic. The aspects of intersectionality played a role in the type and severity of the barrier(s) experienced. A second assumption was that the Black single mother graduate student participants in this study utilized the foundational supports of womanist theory, specifically community and spirituality. The womanist theory was foundational in how these women experienced this portion of their educational journey. Womanist theory intertwined mental, emotional, and spiritual connections in how these women viewed, acted, reacted, and coped with life experiences, and ultimately overcame barriers.

Scope and Delimitations

The population studied were Black, online school counseling graduate students, who are also single mothers. I chose Black single mothers to reveal how intersectionality impacted their field experiences by viewing their narratives through a womanist lens. The womanist lens was most appropriate for Black women, as it focused on the inner strength that is historically woven within these individuals to include mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016; Geetha & Thomas, 2020; Heath, 2006; Longley, 2020; Pérez & Saavedra, 2020; Phillips, 2006; Rousseau, 2013; Walker, 1983). This specific population was chosen because research suggested these individuals face significant barriers when attempting to complete their degree (IWPR, 2018; Kolodner, 2017; Kruvelis et al., 2017; Poindexter, 2017; Preston, 2017; Smith, 2017; Vyskocil, 2018). Online graduate student experiences were specifically explored because approximately 52% (NCES, 2022) of graduate students choose online programs for the flexibility and convenience online offers for graduate students who may also work full time, as well as care for their families/other personal

responsibilities. The specific aspects of the research problem I explored included the experiences surrounding field experience (practicum and internship) only.

From March 2020 to the present day of this study, the United States has continued to experience effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, its Delta Variant, and its Omicron variant (CDC, 2021). The timeframe of this study included school counseling online graduate students who were in the practicum or internship phase of their programs. The first reason this timeframe was chosen was because this was the point in the graduate students' educational journey that required school counseling online graduate students to commit to 700 hours of in-person training and experience in the schools, typically during regular, day-time school hours. Therefore, school counseling online graduate students moved from the flexible online format to a set scheduled, in-person format. The second reason was because March 2020 was the approximate time-period where schools across the United States began to close, as recommended by the CDC to protect K-12 students, faculty, and staff from contracting COVID-19 in the schools. This study was conducted during the time period when schools were facing student and staff quarantine measures, community illness, and school closures to mitigate the health concerns caused by COVID-19, as well as Delta variant and the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 disease (Gewertz, 2021).

Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

One potential barrier I planned for was if I encountered difficulty recruiting willing participants for the qualitative interviews. BIPOC single mother school counseling students might have been hesitant to participate if the time commitment was

too great for an in-depth interview. To mitigate this barrier, the informed consent included a description of the logistics expected for the study, including the potential time commitment of the interview. I acknowledged, as the researcher, that it was important to respect participants' time by concluding the interview at the appointed and agreed upon time in the disclosure statement.

Another potential barrier involved my desired timeframe of data collection for the study. I sought to capture the experiences of the participants amid COVID-19. The CDC recommended safety precautions that should be followed to mitigate illness from COVID-19, Delta variant, or Omicron variant (CDC, 2021). Social distancing and travel restrictions in some localities were still in place during the time of data collection for this study. Therefore, video conferencing was used to conduct the interviews. Challenges with video conferencing interviews that I considered were technology difficulties, unreliable internet access, and confidentiality. To mitigate technology difficulties, the participants were provided clear directions to access the Zoom interview room. They were also provided the password for the protected virtual room access and provided clear confidentiality informed consent. The directions included procedures to follow in the event the researcher or participant experienced technological difficulties and/or was disconnected from the Zoom interview.

I used qualitative methods to seek a subjective view from the participants' narratives. As Sutton and Austin (2015) noted, "there are no statistical tests that can be used to check reliability and credibility as there are in quantitative research" (p. 229). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested four elements of trustworthiness to

increase accuracy and credibility. These four elements are “credibility (confidence in the “truth” of the findings), transferability (showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts), dependability (showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated), and confirmability (the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest)” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 229). I was the only researcher who collected and analyzed the data; therefore, there was another risk of bias in my interpretation of the results (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Review of the methodology, findings, and interpretation, as well as implementing meaningful feedback from the committee, were strategies used to mitigate these challenges and to increase credibility (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Finally, due to the obvious contrast to the population being interviewed (I am a white, married woman), basic mistrust may have occurred during the interview process if I was viewed synonymously with white privilege in higher education (Bhopal, 2020). Therefore, during the interviews, it was important to build rapport, provide comfort, and approach questions with cultural humility. Approaching questions with respectful inquiry positioned the participants as the expert of this topic. It was imperative for me to identify personal and/or professional biases during this research process to preserve these students’ narratives and reveal accurate accounts of their experiences.

Significance of the Study

Data continue to reveal academic, social, emotional, physical, and psychological stressors on K-12 students and the effects of this disruption in academia due to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Arno, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020; Dorn et al.,

2020). Recommendations for these stressors included employing additional school counselors to meet these academic, social, emotional, physical, and psychological needs of K-12 students upon re-entering the school system (Pincus et al., 2020). Although the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) projects a 10% increase in school counseling jobs by 2031, there is a lack of research on the experiences of the school counseling trainees themselves, who were attempting to graduate as soon as possible to be eligible for these open positions. The mental health concerns of K-12 students, especially amid the pandemic, increased the future job outlook for school counseling professionals.

Significance to Practice

Understanding the unique experiences of these Black single mothers may assist school counseling educators in the advocacy, creation, and implementation of appropriate program initiatives (Palermo-Kielb, 2020) to directly support graduate students who are women of color. Supporting this population in the successful completion of field experience ensures eligibility for licensure or certification in K-12 school counseling after graduation, which also increases equity of career opportunities for BIPOC single mothers. This could meet the 10% increase for the projected need for additional school counselors to be employed in K-12 schools. In addition to meeting the projected career needs of K-12 schools, this study can assist in the development of programs and initiatives that remove barriers to academic and career success, thus closing the gap of the disparity of BIPOC single mothers serving in health and education related fields requiring higher education and licensure.

Significance to Theory

This study is significant in that it utilizes womanist thought to establish a foundation for research to specifically address Black women's issues. Researchers will often use a feminist approach, western theory, or traditional educational theoretical frameworks when exploring interventions to aid in addressing concerns (Sun, 2019; Usher, 2018). While some of these theories may be helpful, they are often rooted in white history, theory, and experiences (Usher, 2018). Psychologists and behaviorists may also omit theoretical frameworks rooted in spirituality, as they may find it difficult to separate spirituality from religion definitively (Heath, 2006). However, there is growing research on the benefits of spirituality in an individual's mental and emotional wellness when approaching, coping, or healing one's presenting concerns (Heath, 2006).

Banks-Wallace (2020) explained the importance of using research designs that are "congruent to with theoretical frameworks of African American women and other women of color" (p. 34). She further explained that interventions that are congruent to the culture being examined are more apt to be successful. Finally, an overarching theme of womanist theory is noted in Banks-Wallace's (2020) statement, "Further-more, research designs grounded in culturally consistent epistemologic frameworks may offer opportunities to integrate healing and scholarly inquiry consciously" (p. 34). Heath (2006) indicated that other frameworks may omit spirituality as a factor in the thought, response, or emotion of the experience.

Significance to Social Change

This study can lead to positive social change by increasing the knowledge of the unique experiences Black single mothers navigate, including barriers to successful completion of field experience, coping skills and/or supports used during this time, and documenting the progress of their expected completion of field experience in the K-12 schools. This may prompt school counseling preparation program leaders to explore ways to retain school counseling graduate students and produce licensed school counselors to meet the occupational demand for this profession. It would be prudent to focus on the experiences of underrepresented populations (Black single mothers) who are at a higher risk for not completing field experience, and who are not completing their degrees due to the intensified stressors of COVID-19. Black single mothers' lived experiences could assist educational program leaders to understand the unique barriers faced by this group during the pandemic (or future health crisis or natural disaster), and to discover potential solutions, program suggestions, and initiatives to implement to retain and support these online graduate students to graduation (James et al., 2016; Long, 2017).

Summary and Transition

Chapter 1 reintroduced the systemic barriers such as lack of equal education, financial resources, academic experiences, or administrative support BIPOC single mother graduate students face in pursuit of academic success. The goal of Chapter 1 was to provide background of this social problem and to discuss the need to re-examine this disparity considering the global COVID-19 pandemic, specifically for Black single mother school counseling graduate students. Therefore, this study sought to understand

BIPOC single mother graduate students' lived experience during the pivotal program point of their education, the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling program, amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2 will detail current literature to establish relevance of this social problem. A description and rationale will be provided for the chosen theoretical foundations and conceptual framework of this study, qualitative research with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Relevance of intersectionality and through the lens of womanist theory will be discussed for the specific experiences of the population studied: Black single mother graduate students. Major themes from existing literature, which contributed to the present study will be explained. Finally, the potential contribution of knowledge on this topic to address the gap in the literature and the significance to counseling theory, professional practice, and social change/advocacy efforts will be discussed. This study is important as Black single mothers' lived experiences could assist educational program leaders to understand the unique barriers faced by this group during the pandemic. The findings from this study revealed potential solutions, program suggestions, and/or initiatives to implement to retain and support Black single mother online school counseling graduate students in their successful completion of their educational programs (James et al., 2016; Long, 2017).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The professional responsibilities of a school counselor have evolved to meet the academic, career, social, and emotional needs of K-12 students (ASCA, 2020). School closures due to safety protocols amid the COVID-19 pandemic impacted K-12 students in many areas; specifically, in social, emotional, and mental health issues (Adıbelli & Sümen, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Middleton, 2020; Pincus et al., 2020). Research continues to support the importance of meeting students' social and emotional development for academic and career success, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic (ASCA, 2021; Middleton, 2020; Pincus et al., 2020). These growing concerns for K-12 students prompted school districts to seek additional school counselors to meet student needs (Bailey & Hess, 2020; Borup et al., 2020; Dorn et. al., 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021).

School closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic also presented school counseling graduate students with additional barriers to overcome to successfully complete their school counseling degrees and obtain these career opportunities. Graduate students who already faced barriers to degree completion (BIPOC single mothers) may have experienced an increase of unforeseen obstacles during the pandemic. These unforeseen obstacles may delay graduation, increase attrition rates, and/or decrease retention in school counseling programs. These factors create an increased disparity of BIPOC single mother graduate students serving in the school counseling profession.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of Black single mother online graduate students, specifically when entering or currently in the practicum or internship portion of their programs, and the barriers these graduate students faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Results of this study may assist counselor educators in the development of programs and initiatives which remove/mitigate barriers to graduation and career advancement, thus closing the gap of the disparity. This chapter will present the literature related to educational barriers BIPOC single mother graduate students face, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all students' educational experience. The tenants of intersectionality will also be discussed and how this influenced the presented problem. The lens of womanist theory assisted in discovering potential solutions for coping with or overcoming these barriers.

Literature Search Strategies

The following articles and data collection are related to BIPOC single mothers pursuing school counseling field experience amid COVID-19. To support this study, I used the following key terms to research this topic: *womanist theory, intersectionality, BIPOC graduate students, single mothers in graduate programs, COVID-19, coronavirus pandemic, field experience, BIPOC women in school counseling graduate programs, school counseling, mental health of graduate students* and *coronavirus*. Databases used to search these key terms included Google Scholar, JSTOR, PsycInfo, ERIC, and EBSCO. At the time of this study, research related to the coronavirus pandemic was limited and continuing to emerge. Therefore, I also used the reference sections of relevant

articles (at the time) or cited data sources found within peer-reviewed journals to further expand my search for literature.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this qualitative study is hermeneutic phenomenology. I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Black single mother graduate students during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling online program amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenology's philosophical movement was initiated by Edmond Husserl (1859-1838). Phenomenological research is the study of the nature and meanings of a phenomena. The phenomenological researcher aims to provide richness, depth, and texture to the lived experience (Finlay, 2009). I explored the phenomenon of graduate student experience of practicum or internship at a specific point in time (field experience portion of their program and during the pandemic), and with the specific population of Black single mother graduate students. This theoretical foundation was the most appropriate for this study to focus on human experience, the meaning of the experience, and the way the meaning emerged through the experience (Langdrige, 2007).

Hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1889-1976) focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals or groups. The hermeneutic researcher believes that interpretations are foundational, and the description itself is an interpretive process. Guidelines for hermeneutic research include examining and interpretating the way(s) the research activities (commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question,

investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole) influence each other (Kafle, 2011).

I used Van Manan's approach, which fused both descriptive and interpretative-oriented phenomenological research to find the meaning embedded in the experience. Heotis (2020) described this approach as "an expressive and creative process that can be dynamically placed on a continuum" (p. 2). My goal for this study was to provide a voice for these women regarding their experience. This fusion of description and interpretation was most appropriate for my study as I currently serve as a clinical director for practicum and internship students for an online school counseling program. This type of approach acknowledged my experience, knowledge, and presuppositions with this phenomenon, while also allowing for my knowledge and experience to enhance the interpretation of the overall experience (Heotis, 2020). I used specific cyclical methods of interpretation, as suggested by Laverly (2003), to focus my attention to details that I may normally take for granted through self-reflection in the reading, self-reflective writing, and interpretation of these. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to analyze behaviors through observation of the video recorded interviews, as well as analyzing the verbatim transcripts of the participants' responses (Heotis, 2020).

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to understand the phenomenon within the context of the participants' lived experience (Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015). Hermeneutic phenomenology used the data collected from the participants' stories to seek a new, deepened understanding of the multiple meanings within the phenomenon (Crowther et al., 2017). The hermeneutic phenomenological

approach was best suited to explore the stories of Black single mother graduate students' lived experiences during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling program within the context of the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

This study was framed within the womanist theory. This conceptual framework was chosen specifically to provide a lens that was inclusive of the Black woman's mind, body, and spirit connection to their experiences. Pérez and Saavedra (2020) noted the limited discussions of spirituality in academia and the trend to separate spirituality from research. Womanist theory changed the focus of the study to include ancestral knowledge, strength, spirituality, and activism. The spiritual tenants of womanist theory also offered a healing component as a potential solution to the problem as explored from the point of view of the Black woman (Pérez & Saavedra, 2020). Finally, I had the responsibility as the researcher (especially as one who is not a person of color) to use this framework "with particular self-reflection, awareness, and ownership of their privilege, respect for self-definition, and a focused active commitment to combating racialized gender oppression, as well as all intersecting forms of oppression" (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016, p. 7).

Womanist Definition

Alice Walker's 1983 definition of a womanist is a woman of color who is outrageous, audacious, willful, and courageous (Walker, 1983). A womanist prefers woman's culture, emotionality, and strength. A womanist finds strength in music, dance, the Spirit, food, love, struggle, knowledge, ancestry, her children, and her community

(Phillips, 2006). It is important to note womanism differs from feminism in that feminism focuses largely on gender inequalities only, where womanism encompasses gender, race, class, and all forms of inequity and oppression in humanity (Longley, 2020). In addition, the womanist is not interested in pursuing equity with traditional male privilege, or even standards set by men, but instead examines what people with marginalized identities, such as Black single mothers, need to thrive (Phillips, 2006). The need to thrive includes femininity and culture, both of which the traditional white male does not possess.

Bryant-Davis and Comas-Diaz (2016) further described womanist theory as “rich and complex, encompassing self-expression, creativity, nuanced gender roles, spirituality, community and family orientation, resistance, and resilience” (p. 3). A womanist seeks to bring healing, wholeness, and restoration to herself and her community (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016). She does not try to seek standards set by society or white men. A womanist embraces herself, her culture, her history, and her spirit, and seeks to thrive in those tenants (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016; Longley, 2020; Phillips, 2006).

Womanist Research

Advocacy and social justice efforts are the ethical responsibility of an individual serving in the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016). The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) states, “counselors who conduct research are encouraged to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession and promote a clearer understanding of the conditions that lead to a healthy and more just society” (p. 15). The foundation of womanist research is advocacy and social justice. The focus of this framework transcends simply identifying the marginalized experience, but

explores ways of coping, growing, and thriving. Bryant-Davis and Comas-Diaz (2016) stated that BIPOC women “must not be narrowly viewed from a deficit perspective but instead as an asset and contributor to meaning, identity, and strengths” (p. 3). Womanist research acknowledges the intersections of gender, race, culture, socio-economic status, marital status, educational status, spiritual/religious affiliation. The importance of the womanist research approach is further supported by the American Psychological Association’s (2017) *Multicultural Guidelines: An Ecological Approach to Context, Identity, and Intersectionality*. Guideline #5 states the following:

Psychologists aspire to recognize and understand historical and contemporary experiences with power, privilege, and oppression. As such, they seek to address institutional barriers and related inequities, disproportionalities, and disparities of law enforcement, administration of criminal justice, educational, mental health, and other systems as they seek to promote justice, human rights, and access to quality and equitable mental and behavioral health services. (APA, 2017, p.4)

Additional support for the use of the womanist research approach for this study is included the American Psychological Association’s (2017) ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. The code of conduct instructs individuals in the profession of counseling as follows:

[To be] aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status, and consider these factors when working with members of such groups. (p. 4)

Several researchers describe intersectionality as an integral aspect of womanist theory. Womanist theory extends intersectionality beyond gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. identities to include the depth of a woman, her spirituality, beliefs, principals, and practices. This study related these concepts (intersectionality and womanist theory) to Black single mother graduate students seeking practicum or internship in the school settings amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016; Longley, 2020; Pérez & Saavedra, 2020; Vyskocil, 2018).

Literature Review

The literature review examined concepts with respect to their connection and relevancy to BIPOC (specifically Black) single mother graduate students entering their school counseling field experience portion of their program during the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. These concepts included intersectionality, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), BIPOC single mother graduate students, school counseling, and BIPOC single mother school counseling graduate students. Finally, the following concepts were examined as relevant to the timeframe of the study to include the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), COVID-19 and BIPOC single mother graduate students, and the increased need for school counselors.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989, 1991) defined intersectionality as an interconnected nature of race, class, and gender that create an overlapping, interdependent system of disadvantage (Lexico, 2020). Collins and Bilge (2020) provided the following definition for intersectionality:

Intersectionality investigates how intersection power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age- among others- as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. (p. 2)

According to this concept, the experiences of online graduate school counseling students during the pandemic cannot be investigated without acknowledging how the intersections of a Black single mother may have influenced this experience. There is a growing body of literature that suggests the intersections of race, culture, gender, and socio-economic status influence the graduate student experience of a Black single mother. Researchers continue to study the role intersectionality plays in social and economic issues, legal and political debates, power dynamics in the work force, and in higher educational programs (Carbado et al., 2013; Harris & Patton, 2019; Haynes et al., 2020). The theoretical tenants of intersectionality illuminate another layer of complex barriers BIPOC graduate students face, specifically Black women, who are also single mothers (Vyskocil, 2018).

Black, Indigenusness, and People of Color [BIPOC]

BIPOC is an acronym used for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Clarke, 2020; Raypole, 2020). Raypole (2020) suggested the term originated in the early 2010s. The updated term BIPOC is more specific to people of color, rather than the generic terms marginalized and/or minority. The term *Black* is inclusive of individuals who may trace their ancestry to Europe, Jamaica, or other Caribbean countries/islands, etc. and not

just Africa. *Black* recognizes that not all individuals identify as African American (a term that is used in general yet may not be accurate of an individual's heritage. For example, an individual may identify as Black, Jamaican American) (Adams, 2020; Raypole, 2020). *Indigenous* refers to the native tribes who first lived in North America. While there are almost six hundred specific tribes, this term is inclusive of all Native Americans, First Nations, and Alaska Natives (Raypole, 2020). *People of Color* refers to individuals who are not white. This term is inclusive of individuals with descent from India, East Asia, Mexico, the Pacific Islands, or the Philippines. The term BIPOC is appropriate as it acknowledges systemic racism, prejudice, and oppression that continues to exist in the United States (Clarke, 2020; Raypole, 2020).

BIPOC Single Mother Graduate Students

BIPOC graduate students have a history of navigating systemic barriers such as lack of equal education, financial resources, academic experiences, or administrative support in pursuit of academic success. BIPOC graduate level students who are also single mothers navigate additional, complex barriers which are unique to their population. Recent data reported from the United States Census Bureau (2022) confirmed the systemic issue of underrepresented populations in graduate and post graduate experiences (Clarke, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 59% graduate students identified as white females, compared to approximately 41% of BIPOC women (NCES, 2019). Of the 41% BIPOC female graduate students, nearly 60% are single mothers (NCES, 2019). According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, approximately 30% will complete their programs

and earn a degree (IWPR, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) indicated only 14.9 percent were earned by Black women.

Black single mothers may experience a lack of equal education when forced to navigate a white male-dominated institutional culture with limited administrative support to navigate these barriers, including potentially enduring implicit, subconscious biases, and microaggressions. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported that among full-time professors, approximately 53 percent were White males and 27 percent were White females. This was a sharp contrast to BIPOC professors employed in degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported 8 % were Asian/Pacific Islander males, and 3% were Asian/Pacific Islander females. Black males, Black females, and Hispanic males each accounted for 2% of full-time professors. Hispanic females, American Indian/Alaska Native individuals, and individuals of two or more races made up of 1% or less. The trend continued for full-time assistant professors: 34% were White males and 39% were White female assistant professors. In contrast, only 7% each were Asian/Pacific Islander males and Asian/Pacific Islander females, 3% were Black males, and 5% percent were Black females. Hispanic males, and Hispanic females each accounted for 3% of full-time assistant professors, and American Indian/Alaska Native individuals and individuals of two or more races each made up 1 % of full-time assistant professors employed by degree-granting institutions. Lack of academic support from underrepresented BIPOC female mentors and faculty to assist these women pose yet another barrier to graduate degree completion (Gabster et al., 2020; Vyskocil, 2018).

Research also suggests this population of graduate students take longer to complete their degrees, due to the unique responsibilities faced by single mothers (IWPR, 2020). BIPOC single mothers often bear the primary responsibility of assuming role of head of household. Responsibilities often include primary financial provider, physical provider (food, shelter, clothing, childcare), educational liaison, tutor, teacher, and primary disciplinarian in tandem with ensuring mental, emotional, and/or spiritual wellness of her children (Cruse et al., 2018). According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2019 data, families headed by BIPOC single mothers suffered the most economic hardship. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) indicated 38% Black single mothers lived in poverty, 38% Latinx single mothers lived in poverty, 43% of Native single mothers, and 20% Asian single mothers lived in poverty. The lower socio-economic status of these women may further explain some of the disparity in the number of single mothers enrolling in graduate programs and earning a master's degree. While her peers may depend on a partner to share these responsibilities, single mothers who are pursuing graduate degrees, attempt to solely fulfill these responsibilities while balancing personal, professional, and educational responsibilities required of a master's level, graduate student (Poindexter, 2017; Vyskocil, 2018).

There are programs designed to assist single mothers with financial barriers that may impede their higher education completion. Single mothers are eligible for various state and federal aid, including grants and scholarships specific to assisting BIPOC single mothers. While these programs are beneficial, there may be a lack of mentorship in financial literacy and knowledge of access to these funds (Ingersoll et al., 2021). National

University (2021) stated a lack of childcare and balancing studies, with work, and family responsibilities is the number one reason single parents drop out of college. One program to assist with childcare is the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program (U.S. DOE, 2021). Single mothers can apply for this federal grant to assist with the costs of on campus childcare services. While this program is beneficial for BIPOC single mothers attending brick and mortar institutions, these types of initiatives are not beneficial for BIPOC single mothers who are enrolled in online programs.

Many underrepresented, first-generation, low-income university students are BIPOC single mothers (Ingersoll et al., 2021; Stebleto et al., 2014). Ingersoll et al. (2021) suggested that the intersection of these identities cause this population to face both personal barriers and systemic barriers to academic success. BIPOC single mothers must utilize their strengths to increase their chances for success in completing their degrees. Ingersoll et al. (2021) found that a foundational strength was their religious and/or spiritual identities. Religion/spirituality offer both strength and support by providing a sense of meaning and purpose for their lives, including career and educational path to achieve the career choice (Oveido, 2019). In a case study conducted by Ingersoll et al. (2021), these population of students sought various assistance such as material supports (food, clothing, etc.), mentoring in spirituality, psychoeducation, and financial literacy. The sense of community offered by the church normalized the mental and emotional stressors felt by this population of students, yet also provided tangible supports to assist in mitigating these barriers while they attempted to complete their degrees. Ingersoll et al. (2021) concluded religious and spiritual communities can assist underrepresented, first-

generation, low-income university students (many of whom are BIPOC single mothers) in reaching their academic goals by providing the supports needed and including their religious/spiritual well-being. Although religion and spirituality may be a foundational source of strength and support, universities often overlook this resource as a factor in academic success (Harris et al., 2019).

School Counseling

School counselors are a vital part of the school system through their engagement in leadership, advocacy, and collaboration with stakeholders. They are trained to appropriately address students' career, academic, and social/emotional developmental needs. School counselors deliver comprehensive school counseling programs and services to K-12 students that are researched based, implemented, and evaluated for accountability and improvement. Comprehensive school counseling programs aid in the removal of barriers that impede K-12 students' social, emotional, and behavioral development which supports academic achievement (ASCA, 2020).

School counselors earn a master's degree or higher in school counseling to meet their specific state department of education's requirements to obtain a certification/license to practice in the schools (ASCA, 2020). Many graduate students choose accredited programs, such as school counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP]. CACREP (2016) is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a standard of for ensuring the school counseling program, education, and experience meets the profession's expected standard of quality (TCS, 2020). The field experience (practicum and

internship) portion of the school counseling master's degree provides this training and includes experience in elementary and secondary school levels. Field experience is the opportunity for school counseling graduate students to move from theory to practice, gain required hours and experience needed for graduation, and ultimately fulfill state requirements for licensure/certification (CACREP, 2016; Eggum, 2020). Internships provide opportunities to build professional relationships with school administration, networking, and recommendations for future careers (Eggum, 2020). CACREP (2016) accredited programs require school counseling graduate students to complete supervised practicum and supervised internship which include direct student services with K-12 students as well as indirect services on behalf of K-12 students.

BIPOC Single Mother School Counseling Graduate Students

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), 82% of the health professions and related programs master's degrees were earned by female graduate students and 78% master's degrees in education were earned by female graduate students. These two areas of study were chosen above all other majors. Master's degrees in school counseling typically reside in schools of education or mental health counseling and related fields. These percentages, the National Center for Education Statistics' (2019) total number of female graduates, total number of BIPOC students, and total number of single mother graduate students, suggest there is a population of BIPOC female students, who are also single mothers, pursuing master's degrees in school counseling. National data also suggests that nearly 40% of graduate students choose online courses or programs (NCES, 2019).

Graduate students who pursue careers in school counseling earn a master's degree or higher as well as complete field experience in K-12 schools. Field experience is essential to meet their state department of education's requirements for a certification/or license to practice in the schools (ASCA, 2020). Accredited programs, such as school counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) require 100 hours of practicum experience and 600 hours of internship experience. Although BIPOC graduate students who are single mothers can complete most of their courses remotely, allowing for flexibility of schedule for work and childcare, the field experience portion of their program requires serving in school sites during traditional day-time school hours. Although there are significant networking, experience, and academic benefits to the field experience training in the schools (Binder et al., 2015), students may experience personal, academic, career, financial, social, and/or emotional hinderances during this time (Eggum, 2020; Foss-Kelly & Protivnak, 2017; Jones et al., 2018). Research suggests graduate students' self-care significantly decreases due to lack of time for leisure activities, social interaction, or rest (Bekkouche et al., 2021; Chirikov et al., 2020; Foss-Kelly & Protivnak, 2017; Jones et al., 2017). Lack of sleep, proper nutrition, and/or exercise may contribute to the lack of personal self-care. School counseling graduate students often resign from their jobs or switch shifts to accommodate the school day schedule to complete the required 700 hours (Eggum, 2020). Most internships are unpaid and could take graduate students a year or more to complete, causing financial strains for the graduate student. High stress and anxiety are also a common experience for school

counseling graduate students who are completing the course requirements and hours, while also being keenly aware that they are being evaluated for fitness for the profession (Eggum, 2020; Foss-Kelly & Protivnak, 2017; Jones et al., 2018).

Coronavirus Pandemic [COVID-19]

In 2020, Coronavirus Disease 2019 [COVID-19], (a respiratory illness which may cause a range of mild to severe symptoms, including fever, difficulty breathing, new loss of taste or smell, coughing, vomiting, diarrhea) impacted many aspects of life for people in the United States and the world (CDC, 2020). While the physical symptoms of the illness were dangerous enough, especially to vulnerable populations who experienced severe symptoms (many fatal), research continues to uncover additional consequences of the virus (Del Rio et al., 2020). Isolating and socially distancing caused psychological consequences, including heightened stress, fear, anxiety, and depression (Del Rio et al., 2020; Novacek et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). For many families, quarantining caused relational stress, noted by the rise in domestic violence incidents reported (Bradbury-Jones, & Isham, 2020). Unemployment and poverty rates increased significantly during the pandemic, contributing to economic hardship for many Americans and at higher rates for BIPOC individuals (Altig et al., 2020; Laborde et al., 2020; Witteveen & Velthorst, 2020). BIPOC single mothers in the United States experienced intensified stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic including social prejudice and discrimination, healthcare disparities, environmental, and economic disparities (Glennon et al., 2021; Lund, 2020). In 2021, Delta and Omicron, variants of the coronavirus disease, emerged. In addition to the effects the U.S. experienced from the

original COVID-19, these variants continued to impact the U.S., with similar symptoms, quarantine requirements, and school closures (CDC, 2021; Gewertz, 2021). At the time of the data collection for this study, the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2021) stated that individuals should expect more variants to emerge.

COVID-19 and BIPOC Single Mother Graduate Students

Coronavirus Disease 2019 [COVID-19] impacted many aspects of life (CDC, 2020). Individuals across the United States and the world felt the impact in academia, from grade school to post graduate school. Many universities and K-12 schools across the United States closed during the coronavirus pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). BIPOC single mothers in graduate school programs faced stressors related to the coronavirus pandemic in addition to their currently strained personal, professional, financial, and educational responsibilities (Gabster et al., 2020; Garbe et al., 2020). School closures due to the pandemic presented additional complications for BIPOC single mother graduate students attempting to complete their master's degree in school counseling specifically. Single mother graduate students may depend on day-time school hours and after school programs which offer educational assistance and extended childcare. Prior to school closures, these supports may have provided additional time for single mothers to work and complete their own educational requirements (Fulweiler et al., 2020). However, school closures presented another challenge for single mothers. Garbe et al. (2020) explained "more than half a billion children were forced to become virtual-school learners as they shelter in their homes, while parents, siblings, and other family members have taken on the new role of learning facilitators, pseudo-teachers, and

coaches” (p. 45). Single mother school counseling graduate students not only lost educational supports and childcare assistance for their families, but abrupt school closures posed their own educational barrier for these women attempting to secure practicum and internships in K-12 schools to complete their degrees (King, 2020; Thompson, 2020). School site closures abruptly halted and/or delayed the educational journey for graduate students attempting to complete a degree in school counseling, thus increasing time and financial burdens for these mothers (Cruse et al., 2020). This abrupt stop in the educational journey for BIPOC single mothers also places them at risk for not completing their desired master’s degree. Higher attrition rates contribute to the systemic concern of underrepresented populations succumbing to barriers which impede academic success, retention, and completion of a degree in higher education (Kolodner, 2017; Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). Thus, the cycle continues of the disparity of underrepresented BIPOC individuals serving in educational professions which utilize advocacy and social justice efforts to promote academic, career, and social-emotional wellness of others.

Increased Need for School Counselors

Researchers revealed academic, social, emotional, physical, and psychological stressors on K-12 students, as well as the direct effects of this disruption on K-12 students’ academic and career development (Arnove, 2020; ASCA, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2020). Student learning and test preparation were impacted by the school closures. Middleton (2020) suggested school closures due to the health safety protocols of the pandemic may have impacted foundational learning concepts. Learning

may have been compromised by stress, anxiety, illness, unfamiliar online format, and lack of access to materials may contribute to student academic deficits.

Adıbelli and Sümen (2020) conducted a study which surveyed parents and guardians regarding the effects of the lockdown had on children in the home. This study reported that some children experienced a sedentary lifestyle, inconsistent or increased sleep (approximately 34%), and (approximately 41%), which may lead to several chronic diseases in children post pandemic. Participants reported their children's internet use increased (approximately 70%), which Adıbelli and Sümen (2020) suggested the additional screen time may become a psychosocial concern for children and teens. Eighty percent of the parents and guardians also reported feeling fearful, stressed, and anxious in the home and followed the news coverage of the pandemic regularly. Children and teens in the home were also exposed to these on-going stressors, which in turn may have caused increased feelings of fear, stress, and anxiety in children and teens. Many families experienced job loss, therefore the financial hardship during this time often transferred to the children and teens being exposed to adult worries and responsibilities, such as paying bills and providing food for the family (Adıbelli & Sümen, 2020). Overall, 45% families reported negative effects on mental health while staying isolated in the home (Adıbelli & Sümen, 2020).

Loades et al. (2020) conducted a study which explored the effects of physical and social isolation regarding adolescent mental health during the pandemic. Children and adolescents experienced physical isolation from peers, teachers, extended family, and regular recreational activities which normally provided social interaction. Loades et al.

(2020) found children and adolescents experienced “fear of infection, boredom, frustration, lack of necessary supplies, lack of information, financial loss, and stigma” (p. 1218). Although loneliness may not be a direct result of isolation, it was noted that over one third of the children reported feelings of loneliness, which could be associated with mental, emotional, and psychosocial concerns in adolescents.

Imran et al. (2020) highlighted children’s vulnerability during the pandemic and how it could take a toll on physical and mental health:

Children are particularly vulnerable because of their limited understanding of the event. They are unable to escape the harms of the situation physically and mentally as they have limited coping strategies. They may not be able to communicate their feelings like the adults. Closure of schools and separation from friends can cause stress and anxiety in children. Exposure to mass media coverage of crisis event and unverified information circulating on social media may aggravate the mental distress. (p. 67)

K-12 students reintegrating back into the schools may need counseling to process the events of the pandemic. School counselors are trained to identify these social-emotional needs and provide individual counseling, group counseling, community resources, and/or referrals.

The stress of the negative effects of the pandemic felt by parents and guardians seemed to escalate during this timeframe. Thomas et al. (2020) noted children in the United States experienced an increase of abuse and neglect during the pandemic. The authors indicated that 20% of childhood abuse and neglect cases are reported to Child

Protective Services by school personnel (Thomas et al., 2020). School is often a safe place for children, especially for children who experience childhood abuse or neglect in the home. School closures significantly decreased contact between K-12 students and teachers, school counselors, and other faculty who would have daily interactions with these children and could have reported suspected abuse and/or neglect much sooner to mitigate this increase in incidents. Unfortunately, several states reported a decrease in child protective hotline calls, however the number of the incidents increased. Thomas et al. (2020) suggested the long-term effects of abuse can lead to health consequences, including mental, emotional, and physical health. School counselors are trained to recognize childhood neglect and abuse as part of their licensure requirements and legal and ethical responsibilities (ASCA, 2021).

As K-12 students reintegrate into the school system, research suggests students may carry these effects with them into the classrooms. Recommendations include employing additional school counselors who are trained to meet these academic, social, emotional, physical, and psychological needs of K-12 students upon re-entering the school system (Pincus et al., 2020). The mental health concerns of K-12 students, especially amid the pandemic, increases the job outlook for school counseling professionals. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) projects a 10% increase in school counseling jobs by 2031, which is faster than the average increase. However, there is a lack of research on the experiences of the school counseling trainees themselves, who are attempting to graduate as soon as possible to be eligible for these open positions.

Summary

It was important to explore the experiences of Black graduate students who are also single mothers during the pandemic to document a narrative, from these women themselves, of the barriers or supports they have experienced in pursuit of obtaining field experiences during the time of school closures. These results of this study may prompt school counseling preparation programs to explore ways to retain school counseling graduate students and to produce licensed school counselors to meet the occupational demand for this profession. It is prudent to focus on the experiences of underrepresented populations (Black single mothers) who are at a higher risk for not completing their degrees due to the intensified stressors of COVID-19. Black single mothers' lived experiences could assist educational programs to understand the unique barriers faced by this group during the pandemic and to discover potential solutions, program suggestions, and initiatives to implement to retain and support these students to graduation. In Chapter 2, I provided the literature research strategies used, the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework of the study, and the literature review. I described factors regarding the Coronavirus [COVID-19] pandemic, tenants of intersectionality regarding the population to be studied, and the framework of womanist theory to determine the gap and provide support for this study. In Chapter 3, I will discuss my research method.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

School Counselors serve a vital role in the academic, career, social, and emotional development of K-12 students (ASCA, 2020). School closures due to safety protocols amid the COVID-19 pandemic impacted K-12 students in many areas, but specifically in social, emotional, and mental health issues (Adibelli & Sümen, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Pincus et al., 2020). These growing concerns for K-12 students prompted school districts to seek additional school counselors to meet student needs (Bailey & Hess, 2020; Borup et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). School closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic also presented school counseling graduate students with additional barriers as they worked to successfully complete their school counseling degrees. Many graduate students who already faced barriers to degree completion (Black single mothers) experienced an increase of unforeseen obstacles, thus potentially creating an increased disparity of these individuals serving in the school counseling profession.

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of Black single mother online graduate students, specifically when entering or currently in the field experience stage of their programs, and the barriers these graduate students faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The study results may assist counselor educators in the development of programs and initiatives which remove/mitigate barriers to graduate academic and career success, thus closing the gap of the disparity of Black single mothers serving in the school counseling profession. This

chapter includes discussions of the research question, the central concepts and phenomenon of the study, and provides rationale for the chosen research tradition: a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015). Finally, this chapter will also present the researcher's role, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

The research design for this study was a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015). Phenomenology's philosophical movement was initiated by Edmond Husserl (1859-1838). The principles of phenomenology were further developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who introduced existential and hermeneutic dimensions to the consciousness and essence of a phenomena (Kafle, 2011). Phenomenological research is the study of the nature and meanings of a phenomena. The phenomenological researcher aims to provide richness, depth, and texture to the lived experience (Finlay, 2009). Langdrige (2007) defined the qualitative method of phenomenology as focusing on human experience, the meaning of the experience, and the way the meaning emerged through the experience. I used qualitative methods to explore the research question: What are the lived experiences of BIPOC single mother school counseling online graduate student attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19?

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutics (Campbell, 2020) focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals or groups. The hermeneutic researcher believes that interpretations are

foundational, and the description itself is an interpretive process. Guidelines for hermeneutic research include examining and interpreting the way(s) the research activities (commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole) have an effect on each other (Kafle, 2011). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to understand the phenomenon within the context of the participants' lived experience (Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015).

I used semi-structured, open-ended questions to gather in-depth details (Brown & Danaher, 2019) of Black single mother school counseling online graduate students' accounts of their lived experiences of attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19. I implemented the hermeneutic circle, specific cyclical methods of interpretation as suggested by Laverly (2003), which pays attention to details that others may take for granted through self-reflection in the reading, self-reflective writing, and interpretation of these.

Reflexivity is the ongoing process in which the researcher immerses themselves in the study to continuously question, examine, accept, and articulate the researcher's attitude, assumption, perspective, and role (and potential shift) within the social realities one interacts with (Barrett et al., 2020). Ramani et al. (2018) discussed the importance of reflexivity in researcher immersion qualitative research. As the researcher, I reported on how my preconceptions, beliefs, values, assumption, and/or position influenced the

research to include choice of topic, research question, theoretical lens, and chosen methods (Barrett et al., 2020; Ramani et al., 2018).

The use of hermeneutic phenomenology involved data collection from the participants' stories to seek a new, deepened understanding of the multiple meanings within the phenomenon (Crowther et al., 2017). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was best suited to explore the stories of Black single mother graduate students' lived experiences during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling program within the context of the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crowther et al. (2017) described the intention of hermeneutic research "is to illuminate essential, yet often forgotten, dimensions of human experience in ways that compel attention and provoke further thinking" (p. 827). The goal of this study was to provide a voice for Black single mother school counseling graduate student participants, to raise awareness of the central concepts, and to seek a deeper understanding the participants' lived experiences during the practicum or internship portion of their school counseling within the context of the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Central Concepts of the Study

I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences Black single mother school counseling online graduate students attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19. This study explored these experiences through the framework of womanist theory concepts and included tenants of intersectionality. The theoretical framework of womanist theory emphasizes how mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects shape Black women's experiences (Geetha & Thomas,

2020; Rousseau, 2013). In addition, womanist theory transcends beyond static experience and provides movement toward solutions to overcoming hardship and barriers (Geetha & Thomas, 2020; Rousseau, 2013). The concept of intersectionality was included to acknowledge the interconnected nature of race, class, and gender, which create an overlapping, interdependent system of disadvantage (Lexico, 2020). Intersectionality recognizes the complex barriers BIPOC graduate students face, specifically Black students who are also single mothers (Vyskocil, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) identified three main characteristics of qualitative research. These included a focus in the process, understanding, and meaning; the process is inductive and produces richly descriptive data. In essence, “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 15). The researcher’s role of primary instrument required me to be responsive and adaptable throughout the study. The hermeneutic phenomenologist approach allowed me to engage in interpretative narration to the description. As the role of primary instrument, I was the primary researcher to gather and interpret data for emerging themes. It was crucial to engage in reflexivity and follow specific strategies to improve quality and rigor of the study (Ramani et al., 2018). I closely followed the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics standards for researchers in Section G: Research & Publication (ACA, 2014).

I currently hold a school counseling license in Virginia and serve as Clinical Director for School Counseling Field Experiences for a university. I worked to increase my awareness of my own personal and/or professional experiences or biases as related to

the phenomenon. I am a married, white, female counselor educator. This was a sharp contrast to the participants' identification of Black, single mother and graduate student. I completed my school counseling program in a timeframe that was not during a global pandemic, when schools were open, and field experience students were welcome to enter the school buildings. I had not experienced the complex barriers Black single mothers face in pursuit of their master's degrees in general. While the hermeneutic phenomenologist approach allows for researcher interpretation of the data, my primary role will be to intentionally work within the framework and lens of womanist theory and intersectionality to provide a voice for the participants' experience based on their emotional, mental, and spiritual being during this phase of their educational journey.

Upon participant selection, there may have been school counseling candidates who were aware of my professional role in counselor education. This knowledge may have posed a feeling of positional power within the interview between me and the participant. To mitigate this potential barrier to participant openness with me, I approached the interviews with transparency, cultural humility, and respectful inquiry. Rapport, trust, and genuineness were implemented in the exploration of the participants' experiences. It was important to share the goal of the study with the participants, which was to allow their voice to contribute to social change and advocacy efforts for Black single mother graduate students in their quest to complete their master's degree. Specifically, I explained how understanding the unique experiences of these Black single mothers may assist school counseling educators in the advocacy, creation, and implementation of appropriate program initiatives (Palermo-Kielb, 2020) to directly

support this population in the successful completion of field experience to ensure eligibility for licensure or certification in K-12 school counseling after graduation.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participants for this study included individuals who identified as Black, single mother, school counseling program graduate students in CACREP, online school counseling graduate programs. I used a purposeful sampling method to gain an in-depth understanding of information rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling is the best method to obtain information rich cases to gain a deeper understanding of the central themes of their experiences, which aligns to the purpose of the research question. The criterion for selected participants was very specific to the purpose of the study. I described the criterion and informed potential participants of the importance of the criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). The criterion to be eligible to participate included being a BIPOC, single mother, school counseling program graduate student in a CACREP online school counseling graduate program who was entering or currently in the practicum or internship stage of their master's program.

I initially sought to interview BIPOC, single mother online school counseling graduate students. I was able to explore part of this population's story via six Black single mothers. The time frame of this study was amid the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure participants met the essence of the hermeneutic phenomenological study. For my planned research design, I needed a sample size of 6-10 single mother school counseling program

graduate students who identified with BIPOC, which aligned with the qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Malterud et al., 2016). I determined saturation occurred with the sixth Black, single mother school counseling graduate student's narrative (Morse, 1995).

Instrumentation Selection

I used a semi-structured interview questionnaire (Appendix A) as my research instrument (Hammer & Wildavsky, 2018). The questions were constructed as open-ended topics to allow for varied and diverse experiences to be disclosed by each participant. The questions aligned with the goals of the primary research question and were inclusive of the tenants of intersectionality and womanist theory. The research questions were specifically formulated to gather data of the experiences of BIPOC single mother graduate students in school counseling programs who were entering or had just entered practicum or internship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions were explored through the semi-structured interviews via Zoom with participants.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) outlines the importance of researchers planning, designing, conducting, and reporting research in a manner that is consistent with ethical principles, federal and state laws, institutional university regulations, and scientific standards governing research. Therefore, I implemented specific procedures to recruit participants, based on the determined criteria, and data collection for this hermeneutic phenomenological study. First, I gained approval from the institutional review board (IRB) to conduct this study. Once approved, I recruited

potential participants via email with a flyer (Appendix B) emailed to school counseling graduate students through ASCA Scene and CACREP social media online school counseling program groups. I included the nature and purpose of the study, participant criterion, statement of the importance of the study, and significance to social change.

Once approved by the program and clinical directors, I emailed the participant invitation/consent form to school counseling graduate students, outlining the purpose and criteria for eligible participants. The invitation included informed consent, background information of the study, procedures, and sample questions. The invitation also included a description of the voluntary nature of the study, risks, benefits, and measures to protect participant privacy. My email and contact information were provided in the invitation, as well as directions for potential participants to respond via email to volunteer to participate in the study.

When graduate students emailed me to indicate an interest in participating, I first reviewed eligibility of the required participant criteria. Pre-screening demographic information of the participants was gathered and included gender, ethnicity, marital status, number of children in the home, geographic area where the participant lives, employment status, socio-economic status (income), type of program (online/brick and mortar/public/private), and program stage of field experience (practicum, internship, pre-practicum, pre-internship).

Once I determined if a potential participant was eligible, I sent an email to thank them for their interest in participating in the study and set up the Zoom interview. I outlined the purpose and importance of the study, as well as informed of the potential

impact of the participant's role in social change and advocacy efforts. Risks and benefits were reviewed again, including the voluntary nature of the study and the right for participants to withdraw from the study at any given point. The email contained logistics of the data collection, including interview questions, various interview timeslots to choose from, duration of interview (approximately 45-60 minutes), and procedures for secured face-to-face interview via Zoom technology. I gathered data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews via Zoom, which were recorded. Recorded interviews were reviewed in the process and organization of the study. Finally, a courtesy email was sent to participants who did not qualify for the study to thank them for their interest and to inform them that they did not meet all criteria to participate.

I implemented purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to continue to recruit participants until saturation occurred. The conclusion of the interview was reserved for the participant's questions, concerns, or any final contributions to the narrative the participant felt important to contribute to the narrative. The strategy of member-checking was implemented (Guba, 1981). Although there were no formal follow-up interviews, each participant was emailed a copy of the transcript data to check for accuracy. The email contained my contact in the event the participant had a question, concern, or to add or retract information.

Data Analysis Plan

The data included Black single mother online graduate students' responses from semi-structured, open-ended interview questions regarding their lived experiences while attempting to complete practicum or internship program requirements amid the COVID-

19 pandemic. I reviewed the Zoom recorded interviews in the process and organization of qualitative hermeneutic study. I used journal entry notes, recorded observations of verbal and non-verbal communication and behavior of the participants, and engaged in the hermeneutic circle; reading, reflective writing, and interpretation (Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003). Additional data analysis procedures for coding included the use of interview transcripts, notes, video, and audio recordings (Brown & Danaher, 2019). I used the framework analysis of familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, coding, charting, mapping, and interpretation (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Kafle, 2011). I used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program which offered a graduate student membership, to assist in the confidentiality of the participants, storage, and organization of the data, and to aid in the interpretation of the meanings, relationships, and themes of the narratives.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research supports standards of quality known as validity, reliability, value, goodness, rigor, or trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). Criteria to increase the trustworthiness of this study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016). There are specific techniques which were implemented to meet each of these criteria, to increase the rigor, or trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility

Credibility is described as internal validity or “confidence in the ‘truth’ of the finding” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). For this study, I used Zoom to record both audio and

visual aspects of the interviews to ensure accuracy of the transcription and observation notes. Another strategy included member checking or offering the participant a copy of the transcript data to check for accuracy (Guba, 1981). Interviews continued to be conducted until saturation occurred, which was a point in the study where sufficient and adequate data was gathered to understand the phenomenon surrounding the research question. I followed the American Counseling Association's (2014) ethical guidelines for research, as well as adhered to Walden University Institutional Review guidelines and standards.

Transferability

Transferability is described as external validity or “showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). I implemented the strategy of thick description to increase transferability. In addition to gathering data from the narratives of the participant's lived experiences, I gathered additional information from the participants, including demographic information such as gender identity, ethnicity, marital status, number of children in the home, geographic area where the participant lives, employment status, socio-economic status (income), type of program (online/brick and mortar/public/private), and program stage of field experience (practicum, internship, pre-practicum, pre-internship). I chose to collect demographic information of the participants for several reasons. The first reason was to increase trustworthiness, accuracy, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The chosen criteria for participant eligibility were determined from previous research. Unemployment and poverty rates increased significantly during the pandemic, which contributed to an increased economic

hardship for many BIPOC single mothers (Altig et al., 2020; IWPR, 2018; Laborde et al., 2020; USCB, 2019; Witteveen & Velthorst, 2020). I gathered participant demographic data to confirm the participants met the required criteria to be included for the study prior to setting up the interview. A second reason was to gather details that may emerge as valuable or meaningful contributions to the findings. Finally, I felt it was important collect information that may provide additional connections which could be explored in future research.

Transferability is important to allow the reader to visualize the events of the research process and then transfer conclusions of this study to other times (Amankwaa, 2016). The timeframe of this study was amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past, there are records of pandemics or natural disasters which presented barriers to degree completion. Conclusions which are transferable to potential global concerns which impede the educational journey in the future, could assist counselor educators to create programs which mitigate or eliminate barriers for BIPOC single mother graduate students in graduate school.

Dependability

Dependability or reliability of the study is defined as “showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). Strategies to increase dependability included engaging in an inquiry audit, where the committee reviewed the methodology, the research process, data, results, and interpretation of the data. An objective researcher can evaluate if the conclusions are supported in the data as well as align with the theoretical lens (Amankwaa, 2016).

Confirmability

Confirmability or objectivity is defined as “a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). An important strategy to increase confirmability was to engage in reflexivity. Reflexivity required me to identify and reflect on my own personal biases, beliefs, and assumptions and how these affect the study and how the study affects me (Ramani et al., 2018). Reflexivity facilitated an increased my awareness of the unique needs of Black single mother graduate students. Prior to this study, I believed that pursuing a degree was solely a personal choice and with that choice, the master’s student needed to find ways to meet the requirements to succeed. However, this belief was also hinged on the assumption that the master’s student had the resources to meet the requirements. I had not considered that obtaining a master’s degree was not a choice for some students, specifically for Black single mother graduate students to survive. I believe reflexivity increased cultural humility in me. As a woman and a mother myself, their stories increased my empathy and connection to them through the womanist lens. It also increased my awareness of areas that I was privileged in, specifically with the financial means of a two-income family, as well as the general support and help I receive from my husband. With this increased awareness of my own privilege, I intentionally seek to understand my current students’ stories, barriers, values, and beliefs. I am proactive and intentional in providing moral support and/or extensions when needed, to mitigate single mothers from feeling that they must choose an assignment over their child. Reflexivity prompted me to apply what I have discovered in

my own career in counselor education. I have seen first-hand how utilizing accommodations that are relevant to the Black single mother prove to be effective in their continuation of their programs.

A second strategy included theory/perspective triangulation which increased the development of the robustness and richness of the data (Amankwaa, 2016; Patton, 2015). This strategy required me to examine the data through the womanist theoretical lens as well as the tenants of intersectionality.

Ethical Procedures

The American Counseling Association's code of ethical standards (2014) and Walden University's Institutional Review Board research ethics approval checklist was used to guide ethical procedures for this educational research study. The first step was to obtain institutional permission to conduct this study, including IRB approval.

The data was stored securely. I used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to securely store audio and video recordings, transcripts, recorded observations and notes. The program was downloaded to my personal laptop, which is password protected and not connected to my workplace or outside/public servers.

I contacted CACREP online school counseling program directors to establish communication, adhere to participant recruitment procedures, and request an agreement to recruit participants for the study. Recruitment, consent, and data collection procedures were clearly outlined, including my ethical and legal responsibilities as the researcher. The participant names were not used in the data collection. I asked participants to choose a pseudonym instead of identifying their given/full names. As a second layer of

confidentiality, I also used generic pseudonyms, (participant 1, participant 2, etc.) to identify participants for this study. Specific participant contact information (given name, physical mailing address, phone number) was not necessary to the study, as met criteria for the study was sufficient. However, general participant information (email associated with pseudonym and/or general demographic information) will be gathered for member-checking purposes or to support future research, and to share results of the study. Data will be stored for five years in the password protected program and deleted and destroyed immediately following the fifth year. In the event I engage in inquiry audit, a confidentiality agreement will be signed and filed. This one to two-page summary will not contain participant identifiers. This summary of results will include a narrative of collective lived experiences of BIPOC single mother online school counseling graduate students' lived experiences amid COVID-19, conclusions from the study, and recommendations for social change and advocacy.

This educational research study was considered of minimal risk and addressed concerns of marginalized individuals. However, the participants were not considered a vulnerable population. The topic may have been deeply personal to the participant eliciting sensitive responses such as frustration, anger, or sadness, etc. At the close of the interview, each participant was offered general resources to further explore feelings that may have arisen as a result of sharing their personal educational journey in a stressful era, the COVID-19 pandemic. It was vital to explain my role as the researcher and not of a counselor to assist with these feelings.

Summary

This chapter informed the reader of the research question, the central concepts and phenomena of the study and provided rationale for the chosen research tradition; a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Crowther et al.; Patton, 2015). This chapter discussed my role as the primary researcher. The methodology, including participant selection, procedures to conduct the study, and data analysis plan were outlined. Finally, this chapter addressed trustworthiness, specifically in the areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and adherence to ethical standards and guidelines. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the results of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of BIPOC single mother online graduate students, who were entering or currently in the field experience stage of their programs and the barriers these graduate students faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to explore the barriers faced by these women, coping skills utilized, and their progress toward overcoming these barriers to complete the field experience portion of their programs during the global pandemic. The 2021 U.S. Census Bureau survey indicated that many students did not return to their post-secondary education during the pandemic. The Institute for Women's Policy and Research further discussed how BIPOC single mother students were a significant number of these students not returning to school or to their employment (IWPR, 2021). My intent was to seek the experiences of BIPOC single mother participants who were able to continue their education, practicum, and/or internships despite the pandemic, and to reveal the resources they were able to utilize to continue through their programs. The research question was as follows:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of BIPOC single mother school counseling online graduate student attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19?

To answer this question, I used semi-structured, open-ended questions to gather in-depth details (Brown & Danaher, 2019) from BIPOC single mother school counseling students. BIPOC single mothers were more likely to stop pursuing their degrees during

the pandemic, with the highest number identified as Black women (Foster, 2022; Rothwell, 2021). Therefore, I sought to interview BIPOC single mothers who were able to continue in their programs despite the pandemic to gain in-depth details of their experience. It was my hope to understand the barriers faced and reveal the supports utilized to continue toward degree completion.

I used the thematic framework analysis of familiarization, coding, charting, mapping, and interpretation (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Kafle, 2011). Laverly's (2003) cyclical methods were used to aid the process of data analysis and interpretation (Crist & Tanner, 2003) of the participants' narratives. This chapter will present description of the study, the setting, and demographic information of the participants. The process of data collection and analysis will also be described. Finally, this chapter will present evidence of trustworthiness and the results of the study.

Setting

The setting for this study included the virtual platform of Zoom. Five participants chose to turn their camera on for the full interview, while one participant requested to use the Zoom audio feature only because she was traveling in her car during the interview but still wanted to keep the scheduled Zoom appointment. Prior to the recorded interviews, I reminded each participant that the interview would be recorded and to seek verbal permission to record. Each participant provided their verbal consent. The verbal consent was in addition to agreeing to the written consent, which was sent via email prior to scheduling the Zoom interview. Five participants completed the interview in their homes, and one participant completed the interview in her car.

Demographics

The participants for this study consisted of six Black single mother graduate students. All the participants were master's level students attending CACREP school counseling online programs. Although each participant was in the field experience portion of her program, there were some variations in how far into their field experiences they were at the time of the interviews. Three participants were in the practicum portion of their program, two participants were in their first internship, and one participant was in her final internship. Three participants identified as African American women. Three participants identified as Black women. Ages of the women varied from age 26 to age 43. The participants lived in various locations in the United States, including Illinois, North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia.

Although each participant indicated they were single mothers, there were variations in their identified relationship status and number of children. Employment status and annual household income were also reported by the participants. Two participants were employed part-time, whereas two participants were employed full-time. One participant was not employed and one participant was seeking opportunities to work. Three participants reported their annual household income was below \$25,000, two participants reported income in the range of \$25,000-\$50,000, and one participant reported her annual household income was between \$50,000-\$75,000 (see Table 1). The employment status and annual salary information was significant to this study because the reported data from the participants confirmed previous research of the lower

socioeconomic status and financial strains experienced by single mother graduate students (Ajayi et al., 2021; Cruse et al., 2018; Smith, 2017).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

P	Field Placement	Race	Age	Location	Relationship Status	Number of Children	Annual Household Income	Employment Status
1	Practicum	Black	26	North Carolina	Single (Unmarried)	1	\$25,000-\$50,000	Employed Full-Time
2	Practicum	African American	27	Illinois	Dating	1	\$25,000-\$50,000	Seeking Opportunities
3	Internship 2	Black	35	Virginia	Dating	1	\$50,000-\$75,000	Employed Full-Time
4	Practicum	African American	43	North Carolina	Divorced	4	Less than \$25,000	Employed Part-Time
5	Internship 1	African American	42	North Carolina	Divorced	3	Less than \$25,000	Not Employed
6	Internship 1	Black	32	Maryland	Divorced	2	Less than \$25,000	Employed Part-Time

Data Collection

The first step of data collection was to gain approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After I gained approval (IRB # 03-24-22-0756573), I used purposeful sampling to recruit potential participants who met the criteria of the study (Patton, 2015). I posted the participant recruitment flyer (Appendix B) in the American School Counseling Association (ASCA Scene) community boards. In addition to the ASCA Scene community boards, I posted the recruitment flyer on various CACREP university school counseling social media student communication groups. I researched CACREP online school counseling programs (CACREP, 2022) and sent the

recruitment flyer to online school counseling programs to post in open student communication forums to seek potential participants who met the criteria for the study. The final participant recruitment strategy I used was snowballing. The flyer contained my Walden University email for potential participants to contact me if interested in participating.

Each time an individual emailed me indicating their interest in the study, I emailed the invitation/consent form, outlining the purpose and criteria for eligible participants. The invitation included informed consent, background information of the study, procedures, and sample questions. The invitation also included a description of the voluntary nature of the study, risks, benefits, and measures to protect participant privacy. Directions were given for the individual to respond via email the words “I consent,” which was required to move forward in the study process.

Once I obtained the electronic consent via email, I started the pre-screening process by emailing the demographic link to confirm the individual met the criteria for the study. In addition to the link, I asked for times/days that would be best for the individual to meet via Zoom. This assisted in setting up the interview as soon as I reviewed their demographic information. Over approximately two and a half months, eight individuals indicated their interest; however, two individuals did not fully meet the criteria. One individual identified as a Latina single mother in a doctoral program (not in a school counseling program). The other individual met most of the criteria, except she indicated she was white. Both individuals were thanked for their interest in and support

of the study; however, they did not meet the criteria. Therefore, I would not be able to use their experience for this project.

The six individuals who met the criteria were informed via email and then scheduled for their Zoom interview according to their preference of time/day. I conducted the interviews either in my private work office (door closed/locked) or in my private home office (door closed/locked). Five participants chose to be interviewed with their camera on and in their home. One participant chose to have her camera on for our initial introductions. She then turned her camera off before the recording began and completed the interview in her car.

I served as the primary and only researcher. I used a semi-structured interview questionnaire (Appendix A) as my research instrument (Hammer & Wildavsky, 2018). I felt it was imperative to establish rapport, affiliation, and empathy with the participants. Prior (2018) found:

When people talk about personal experiences of any great emotional intensity, there is an expectation that their recipients show not only their understanding of the content of the talk but also their understanding of the teller's stance toward that talk by displaying affiliation and empathic alignment with the teller. (p.20)

This approach facilitated an environment to share emotion felt within their journey through empathetic moments (Prior, 2018).

The average time of the six interviews was between 45-60 minutes. At the conclusion of each interview, I engaged in member-checking with each participant to increase accuracy and credibility of the data. All participants agreed to communicate via

email. I informed each participant that I would send their transcript via email so that they had a copy. During the member-checking process, I encouraged each participant to inform me if they wanted to add information or retract information prior to confirming accuracy of their narrative to be included in the data analysis. All participants verbally verified their information and narratives were accurate. Participant 1 requested to add an extra emphasis on financial assistance as a primary recommendation for universities. I added this information and Participant 1 confirmed. Participant 2 requested to add an extra emphasis for the need for moral support at the university level (professors and support groups). I added this information, and Participant 2 confirmed.

I used a notebook during the interviews and recorded key words, phrases, or emotions that I felt may be important to the study. My interview notes also contained verbal and non-verbal communication and/or behavior noted. The Zoom recordings were electronically transcribed, and I then checked the transcripts against the recordings for accuracy and made the necessary corrections to ensure accuracy. Raw data and transcripts were kept in the ATLAS.ti program, which is password protected and web licensed. Although I utilized the ATLAS.ti program to keep the data, I felt that hand-coding would be more effective with the framework of thematic analysis as the charts allowed themes to emerge visually. I printed the transcripts to hi-light any words I felt could be codes which aligned with the purpose of the study through the lens of womanist theory and intersectionality. Transcripts of each participant were kept secure in my home office. I continued to recruit additional participants while reviewing transcripts and recordings until I felt that I had reached saturation.

For this study, I was unable to interview Indigenous Peoples or other People of Color. This supported the background literature, as these individuals represent a very small percentage of graduate students. Furthermore, research suggested many of these individuals did not return to graduate school during the pandemic (IWPR, 2021). Therefore, locating this small population to interview during the pandemic proved to be very difficult. For these reasons, I chose to narrow down my focus to Black, single mother graduate students; however, it is still important to include BIPOC single mothers in the discussion because single mothers who identify as Indigenous Peoples or other People of Color also face barriers to degree completion, are underrepresented in higher education, and are underrepresented in the field of school counseling (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; Lopez-Perry et al., 2021). There were no other unusual circumstances in the data collection process or variations in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (p. 15). My role as the researcher required me to be responsive and adaptable throughout the study. The hermeneutic phenomenologist approach allowed me to engage in interpretative narration to the description. I focused on the process, understanding, and meaning to inductively produce rich and descriptive data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It was crucial that I engaged in reflexivity and followed specific strategies to improve quality and rigor of the study (Ramani et al., 2018). I followed the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics standards for researchers in Section G: Research

& Publication (ACA, 2014). To provide evidence of trustworthiness, I employed several strategies to increase credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of this study (Guba, 1981).

Credibility

Credibility is described as internal validity or “confidence in the ‘truth’ of the finding” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). Guba (1981) described credibility as the truth value of the study. To test the credibility of a study, the researcher will engage in “member checks, that is, testing the data with members of the relevant human data source groups” (p. 80). At the conclusion of each interview, I summarized key information generated by the interview questions. During the member-checking process, I encouraged each participant to inform me if they wanted to add information or retract information prior to confirming accuracy of their narrative to be included in the data analysis. Two participants requested to add meaningful information to their narrative and then confirmed the accuracy of their narrative. The other four participants did not wish to add or retract any information; therefore, they also confirmed their narratives. After confirming the consent for communication via email, I informed each participant that I would send their transcript via email. Participants were encouraged to contact me if they wished to add or retract statements. No participants contacted me to add or retract information from the narrative.

Transferability

Transferability is described as external validity or “showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). This aspect requires the

researcher to provide a *thick description* of the details of the study. The researcher “does not attempt to form generalizations that will hold in all times and in all places, but to form working hypotheses that may be transferred from one context to another depending upon the degree of “fit” between the context” (Guba, 1981, p. 81). This was achieved by providing a thick description of the background literature in Chapter 2, as well as the framework of the study which included descriptions and definitions of womanist theory and intersectionality. The research design, methodology, participant selection, and instrumentation selection were thoroughly described in Chapter 3. I provided relevant details of each participant in Chapter 4, including their identified race, gender, age, relationship status, number of children, employment status, annual household income, level of field experience, and the location where they currently reside. I also described the communication and interview process. The length of the interviews and location of the interviews were also described. The timeframe of this study was amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted in Chapter 3, there are records of pandemics or natural disasters that presented barriers to degree completion. Conclusions from this study, which are transferable to potential global concerns that impede degree completion, may assist counselor educators to create programs that mitigate or eliminate barriers for BIPOC single mother graduate students in graduate school.

Dependability

Dependability or reliability of the study is defined as “showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). To demonstrate consistency, I used the same semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A) for each

interview. To increase dependability, I provided the rationale for the chosen research method (qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological approach) and the theoretical framework, womanist theory and intersectionality (Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015). In addition to the provided rationale, I engaged in the approval processes of the committee, to include revisions from the evaluations of my chosen methods, instrument, and framework to increase dependability.

Conformability

Confirmability or objectivity is defined as “a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest” (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). To establish conformability, I engaged in reflexivity during the process of this study. Reflexivity required me to identify and reflect on my own personal biases, beliefs, and assumptions and how these affected the study as well as how the study affected me (Ramani et al., 2018). I also engaged in theory/perspective triangulation, which increased the development of the robustness and richness of the data (Amankwaa, 2016; Patton, 2015). This strategy required me to examine the data within the same method and through the womanist theoretical lens, as well as the tenants of intersectionality.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data by engaging in the hermeneutic circle; reading, reflective writing, and interpretation (Kafle, 2011; Laverly, 2003). To organize the data, I used the framework of thematic analysis of familiarization, generating initial codes, charting, mapping, searching for themes, naming and defining themes, and finally interpretation

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). I utilized an inductive approach in the data analysis as I considered the semi-structured questions which organized the participant narratives of their experiences. I anticipated some concepts may be discussed based on the literature and prior research. However, the inductive approach allowed the participants to speak freely of their experience and to discuss aspects of their experience that were most meaningful to them. I also encouraged the participant to *take me wherever they wanted to go*. This approach fostered narratives that revealed more than was assumed or already known from the literature (Simons, 2009). The semi-structured questions remained the same for each participant for consistency and organization of the process, however the participants were encouraged to be free from structure in their narratives (Azungah, 2018). This organized process inductively moved the data from initial codes to categories to themes, mapping of the codes/themes, and then to overall themes.

Step 1: Familiarization

The first step in data analysis was to become familiar with the data.

Familiarization requires the researcher to become familiar with the data by actively reading and re-reading the data in its entirety (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I immersed myself in the data by reading each transcript of the recorded interviews and watching the zoom recordings to check for accuracy with the transcriptions. In addition to the transcription, I referred to my notes of the interviews and wrote down additional verbal/nonverbal behaviors that I observed in the participant(s). As I read and re-read the transcripts, I often asked myself, how were these women able to continue their education despite the indicated barriers? What experiences have set them apart to succeed? What aspects of

womanist theory (if any) connect with their experiences? How did aspects of intersectionality play a role in their experience?

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

The second step involved reviewing each transcript separately to generate initial codes. I read the transcripts line by line and was sure to focus on qualitative units that had potential meaning to the context of the study (Chenail, 2012). I then created a list of codes from words and phrases that were provided by the participant. For this first phase of data analysis, I wrote down and/or hi-lighted words and phrases directly onto the transcripts. I also noted connections and/or patterns that I felt aligned within the framework womanist theory and the lens of intersectionality. This process took several rounds as I would go back to revisit specific transcripts to be sure I exhausted all areas that were similar or connected. Next, I re-read each transcript to systematically extract the data in an organized chart format which resulted in the first round of initial codes. The extracted data and initial codes were organized separately in chart form which corresponded to the specific participant. Initial codes included: COVID, mental stress, emotional stress, physical stress, alone, balance/time management, finances, self-talk, religion/spirituality, cultural stress, single motherhood, advocacy, proactive, resourceful, determined, university impact/support, and community/connection. After the initial codes were extracted from each of the six narratives, I combined the initial codes together to create a data set. I went back to the raw data often from which the code was extracted from, to be sure I was staying close to the participant meaning. I also noted areas that were discussed more extensively than others. From these initial codes, I grouped them

together by meaning to begin searching for themes. Data was analyzed by engaging in the hermeneutic circle; reading, reflective writing, and thematic analysis (familiarization, generating initial codes, charting, mapping, searching for themes, naming, and defining themes, and interpretation was used as the organized process to inductively analyze the raw data from initial codes to categories, to themes, mapping of the codes/themes, and then to overall themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Step 3: Searching for Themes

Meaningful Units

For this step, I began to organize the data by grouping the preliminary units together with similar meaning. This also allowed me to visually see connections and move codes into distinct categories if/when needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I identified three meaningful units: barriers, resources, and recommendations (see Table 2).

Table 2*Preliminary Meaning Units*

P	Meaning Units	Examples from Interviews
1	Barriers	<p>“I am entering internship, and this is where I’m finding myself really struggling, finding a balance between work, life, kid parenting, like all those things.”</p> <p>“I was able to collect unemployment for the missed wages and I was part of that group that made more from unemployment than I made when I was working full time.” “I’m working 20 hours versus 40, um, I’m making more money and then I’m able to use that extra time for school.”</p>
	Resources	<p>“The first thing that comes to mind for sure is financial assistance during that time, like people say money, isn’t everything, but money is important. <laugh> like, not even just important, it’s essential, it’s vital. It’s, it’s necessary. <laugh> And especially for single mothers, um, you know, or single parent in general, but financial assistance during that time, its number one.”</p>
	Recommendations	<p>“Some type of assistance, because whether it’s for food, whether it’s for clothes, whether it is to help pay rent or whatever the case.” “I think having a Black mentor specifically, um, for me as a woman, it would be awesome.” “It is nice to see people like you, um, people like you period.”</p>
2	Barriers	<p>“I have an eight-year-old going on nine-year-old, um, daughter. So, it’s kind of like hard trying to work around her schedule because I don’t have a lot of support when it comes to like picking her up from school and stuff like that. So, I was like, that’s one of the difficulties I do have when it comes to schooling in general as a single mother.”</p>
	Resources	<p>“My daughter is very supportive. Um, even at her young age, she’s like, no, you got it. You can keep doing it. So that just made me wanna keep going for the most part.”</p>
	Recommendations	<p>“A mom support group, I would love to have that, um, especially for single mothers.” “Just have like a support group for mothers just to vent, express how we feel, uh, if we need to collaborate, to try to whatever, that would be awesome.” “Just to have that space to vent and just to check on each other to be supportive, like, I’d be there for you if you need anything.”</p>
3	Barriers	<p>“For practicum, it made it extremely hard because a lot of offices weren’t accepting students because of the pandemic.”</p>
	Resources	<p>“My site supervisors and people that worked at the practicum location and the schools, they were very supportive, um, to this day.” “I got some support from a few of classmates... students that I had built connections with.”</p>
	Recommendations	<p>“Maybe like a group that just belongs specifically to women who are mothers who, you know, are not, or who are not married, or, you know, they’re not living with a spouse or partner or something like that, cuz I’m not. You know, a group or something for them to kinda be, be motivation and mentors for one another kinda would, you know, that even that even might, you know, just help ease the load just a, just a little bit. I feel like maybe that mentor group or support just for the single moms would, would do wonders.” “Maybe some sort of scholarship to help with whatever you need. Some women do need it for childcare, but maybe others could use it for books or others could use it for food or others could use it for whatever transportation to and from, you know, um, no, you know, no restrictions on what it’s used for.”</p>
4	Barriers	<p>“Well, my district is kind of, they’re kind of acting like they don’t really want us to contact them, so it’s been kind of hard, you know, just trying to find a place, as far as, you know, doing it on my own.”</p>
	Resources	<p>“I do a lot of self-talking.” “A lot of self-talk cuz um, if I don’t, if I give up then, I mean... that’s not even an option. I’m like, no, I have to do it. I’m doing it for my, for my boys and for myself and just, you know, just making sure that I know that I can do it. I know I can do. I’m like, okay, you didn’t know it was gonna be this hard, but you know, we got this, we got this.”</p>
	Recommendations	<p>“I think they need emotional support more than anything as well, encouraging them. Maybe a group for African American women, and we can network and talk to each other, um, you know, just seeing how we’re doing.” “Definitely single mother grants or scholarships. I would’ve, I would’ve applied definitely. Especially for school counselors and mental health right now with the pandemic.”</p>

(table continues)

Table 2 cont.*Preliminary Meaning Units*

P	Meaning Units	Examples from Interviews
5	Barriers	“I came into the semester with COVID for the second time. Um, the school that I was at, they were out a lot. Like <laugh> like every time you turn around, they were outta school.”
	Resources	“I did tell my professor about it, and she was just like, breathe <laugh> she was like, everything is gonna be okay.” “I did what she told me to do. I did breathe and I kinda, I took a step back and I talked to my site supervisor, and I don’t know if I could do it cause I was ready to quit. But then I was like, I’m too far in it.”
	Recommendations	“It would be nice to have an outlet for the single moms be like, hey, how was your week? You know, just to go in it for us to talk to and chat and be like, hey, what’s going on with y’all this week? Um, how’s it going? Anybody need, you know, to take a breather, anybody needs to vent, you know, something for us, you know.” “I’m wondering, cuz I know if they were on campus, they have work study, but I’m wondering like, is there a way to do work study and be online? Like is there some way that you can, that they can create online work study positions for some of these students. That would help, especially for those that are in practicum, or you know, internship that have to juggle their internship and work their job at the same time. So that, that would help as well because if they’re using financial aid, then that means most likely they are eligible for work study as well. So, if they can figure out a way to do work study for online students, that would be great as well.” “I mean, with COVID, a lot of at home jobs have been created, so I’m like, why not?” “I mean even, if they have virtual grad assistants or something like that.”
6	Barriers	“...seeing how it affect me mentally, you know, feeling like, again, I’m not gonna get it. You know what I mean? Oh my God, I’m gonna have to postpone my semester. I’ve already postponed my graduation multiple times. You know, like three times I should have been graduated in like 2019, but I didn’t, you know, because I had to take a break. I was so sick. I was, you know, working myself to the bone as a single mom, not having any help...”
	Resources	“So, you know, I, because I believe in this and God has shown me through counseling, through people coming to me, and my professors. Good, good Lord. I feel like if they could carry me on their backs as one unit and one sound, they would make sure that I made it.” “I knew then that this is where I needed to be, which is why I can’t quit. It’s not just about me anymore.”
	Recommendations	“Communication and financial aid.” “A community group that we actually learn from each other. We’re not just there meeting, cutting a breeze. Like it’s actually something meaningful, like, okay, all of us are here. Are we having resources today? What’s going on? We have all these mothers who are here struggling.” “You can’t drop your kid off at an online university, but a lot of times scholarship stuff is, um, it has to be for something specific, but why can’t it just be, look, I need childcare this month. I need groceries this month. So, resources, you can choose. You can choose what your children need, you know?”

Categories

I moved the meaningful units to categories to reveal any connections from the initial codes described in the participant narratives. For the first category, the following initial codes were grouped together under *Barriers*: COVID, stress (emotional, physical, mental, negative self-talk), spiritual/religious stress, cultural stress, finances, lack of balance, alone, single motherhood, and unsupportive university professors/field experience sites. For the second category, the following codes were grouped together

under *Resources*: COVID, extra time, financial assistance, virtual options, mental/emotional strength, positive self-talk, determined, spiritual/religious support, advocacy, proactive/resourceful, time management, connection, single motherhood/family support (children, mother, and/or grandmother), and supportive university professors/field experience site. Finally, the third category was *Recommendations*. The following codes were grouped under *Recommendations*: university support and community/connection (see Table 3).

Table 3

Categories

Barriers	Resources	Recommendations
COVID- school closures, illness, quarantine	COVID- extra time, government financial assistance, virtual options	University Support (university policies)
Stress: Emotional, physical, mental, negative self-talk (mom guilt)	Mental/emotional strength: positive self-talk, determined	Community/Connection (support group)
Spiritual/Religious stress	Spiritual/religious support	Community/Connection (support group)
Cultural stress (mom guilt)	Advocacy	University Support (BIPOC professors)
Finances	Proactive/resourceful	University Support (scholarships, grants)
Lack of Balance (childcare, work, field experience)	Time Management	University Support (extra time)
Alone	Connected with other women in master's program	Community/Connection (support group)
Single Motherhood	Single motherhood/family support (children, mother, and/or grandmother significant)	Community/Connection (support group)
Unsupportive university professors/field experience site	Supportive university professors/field experience site	University Support (BIPOC professors)
COVID- school closures, illness, quarantine	COVID- extra time, government financial assistance, virtual options	University Support (university policies)
Stress: Emotional, physical, mental, negative self-talk (mom guilt)	Mental/emotional strength: positive self-talk, determined	Community/Connection (support group)
Spiritual/Religious stress	Spiritual/religious support	Community/Connection (support group)

Mapping

Kiger and Varpio (2020) suggested that “themes are constructed by the researcher through analyzing, combining, comparing, and even graphically mapping how codes

relate to one another” (p.852). Once I determined categories, I engaged in mapping to further examine additional connections between the categories and codes. This assisted in the next step of reviewing the themes for additional insights prior to defining and naming the themes.

One major insight emerged from the narratives of the six participants. Although each woman experienced similar barriers during the field experience portion of their programs, each of the women chose to utilize many of the COVID government and university accommodations to mitigate these barriers and furthered their progress in their school counseling graduate programs. Therefore, I chose to examine the connections from the point of view of the six participants. I focused on the Black single mother as the main resource for mitigating barriers to complete field experience during the pandemic. Mapping deepened my understanding of the interconnectedness and relatedness (intersectionality) of the Black Single Mothers’ (womanist theory) experiences.

Step 4: Reviewing the Themes

Level 1

Braun and Clark (2006) described the step of reviewing themes as having two levels. The first level requires the researcher to review the “coded data placed within each theme to ensure proper fit” (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 851). Kiger and Varpio (2020) suggested “themes can be added, combined, divided, or even discarded” (p.851). For this step, I revisited the data (narratives, charts, maps) to combine and/or revise the themes to ensure they were an accurate reflection of the narratives to represent the data

wholistically. The wholistic review of the data lead to the second level of reviewing the themes.

Level 2

Braun and Clark (2006) described this step of the researcher determining “if individual themes fit meaningfully within the data set and whether the thematic map accurately and adequately represents the entire body of data” (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 851). To complete this level, I re-read each of the six narratives and adjusted the themes to represent the research question and purpose of the study. Although the background literature discussed potential barriers faced by BIPOC single mother graduate students, I did not assume these were all true for the six participants, as each participant may have experienced this phenomenon uniquely. Many of the known barriers (which were discussed in the background literature) were confirmed to be relevant for this study. However, there were also similar themes of how these women utilized these said barriers to overcome. One goal of this study was to learn about the experiences of the unknown: the *resources* these women utilized to continue in their field experiences despite the barriers faced during the pandemic. This step was intentional to ensure my interpretation also stayed within the theoretical framework and lens of the study. For level 2 of the thematic analysis, I shifted my focus back to the Black single mother, who revealed the resources used to succeed. Finally, to be sure I included the entirety of the narratives, I include participant recommendations for universities, school counseling programs, and counselor educators. There were two similar recommendations identified from the participants. All six participants expressed the need for financial assistance specific for

the online single mother graduate student. All participants expressed the need for BIPOC mentors/online support groups/virtual communities specific to the BIPOC single mother students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Woman Herself as the Resource and Further Recommendations



Step 5: Naming and Defining Themes

Step 5 was the process of creating definitions and providing a narrative for each of the refined themes. Within these definitions, the researcher must also discuss the

importance and meaning of the theme, as well as the connections they have in relation to each other, and to the overall study and research question (Braun & Clark, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). I cross referenced each of the six narratives to gather evidence for each of the three themes. This process resulted in the final themes of the study. The final themes which captured the narratives wholistically for this study included:

1. Barriers Experienced to Completing Field Experience
2. Resources Utilized to Mitigate Barriers to Complete Field Experiences
3. Recommendations for BIPOC Single Mothers to Succeed

Findings

The following section will discuss the findings from the narratives for each of the three themes, as well as the sub-themes.

Theme 1: Barriers Experienced to Completing Field Experience

This theme emerged from the beginning of the study with the first few interview questions (Appendix A). These questions were: “What was/is your experience in finding a school placement for practicum or internship during the coronavirus pandemic?” and “What barriers did you face in finding a school placement for practicum or internship during the coronavirus pandemic?” Each interview began with the participants describing various barriers encountered during the pandemic while trying to complete their practicum or internship experiences. All six participants described experiencing high levels of multiple stressors during the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they tried to balance the responsibilities of a graduate student, single mother, and a job to financially support their families. The stress of the unknown, financial insecurity, as well

as feelings of loneliness were described as experiences that almost led these participants to discontinue their programs. This stress often took a toll on their mental, emotional, spiritual, and even physical wellbeing.

Covid

The timeframe of the pandemic presented various barriers to the participants finding a site as well as completing hours at their sites. Five participants indicated a lack of communication and placement delays with school districts. Participant 1 stated, “I began the search of reaching out to all of these different counties. Um, and a lot of them were some to this day, still, never heard a response.” Participant 4 experienced a lack of communication from her potential site as well. She stated,

My district is kind of, they’re kind of acting like they don’t really want us to contact them, so it’s been kind of hard, you know, just trying to find a place, as far as, you know, doing it on my own.

Participant 3 explained a delay in the district confirming her site placement. She stated, “It just took like a lot longer to find a placement than, you know, what would, what normally happens. And I think maybe I got that placement like maybe a week before the semester was supposed to start.” Participant 5 stated, “I can say this was probably one of the hardest semesters, simply because this semester started January the 10th and by that Friday, I still had not been placed. I was panicking <laugh> ...like I was frantic.” Participant 6 also discussed her concerns related to a lack of communication and a delay in her site confirmation. She stated,

My experience has been difficult, um, to say the least. I'm trying, trying to find a placement. Emailing so many different places at one time, people not returning calls or emails for that matter. I got this internship at the last minute because my site was delayed. Constantly calling them and trying to reach out to them. And at the last minute I got this internship. Everything was delayed.

Two participants indicated that some of their potential sites were not accepting interns or other visitors yet, as they were just opening their doors to their own faculty and K-12 students. Participant 1 described,

I really feel like for some of them, the answer was no, at the time they weren't even thinking about interns because they were kind of adjusting to the pandemic and virtual school and all those type of things. I know that people aren't probably trying to really have interns like that because, you know, just with everything going on, they're just trying to make it themselves.

She further explained, "It limited my options" and "It definitely did set me back a little bit in that way." Participant 3 stated, "For practicum, it made it extremely hard because a lot of offices weren't accepting students because of the pandemic." Participant 3 also experienced a waiting list as she described,

I think that a lot of schools are just, well from my district, I think that they probably just have a backlog of people that have been trying to get in. I think the pandemic had something to do with it.

Participant 5 experienced a delay in getting started at her site as well as difficulty completing hours during the field experience (due to COVID exposure and illness.) She explained,

This past semester with my internship one, dealing with either myself having to quarantine or a child being exposed.... so, the type of school that I was at was a private, Episcopalian school. They were real strict with COVID. It wasn't necessarily, it wasn't my child. It was more so I was the one that was exposed. I actually came into the semester with COVID for the second time. And then, um, a possibility of thinking I had it for a third time. So, the nurse at the school, she was real strict. So, if you even had a snuffle <laugh>, she was not allowing you on the campus without going to get tested. And she was like, okay, you have, at minimum, three days before you can come back. So, they were, she was real strict. I had to do my own testing and show my results in order to come back. I think I had to do that at least twice. So, it got down to the end where I was pushing to get my hours in, um, as well as on top of other stuff that I had going on. And that was that was both practicum and internship. I came into the semester with COVID for the second time. Um, the school that I was at... they were out a lot. Like <laugh> like every time you turn around, they were outta school.

Participant 6 expressed her frustration with news reports of the mental health crisis in the K-12 schools surrounding the pandemic, yet she felt like schools were not opening their doors to individuals who could help these students in crisis. She further explained that these individuals were qualified; they were licensure seeking interns who

have devoted time and money towards skills to help K-12 students. Therefore, she felt the field was not welcoming. She expressed,

It was just a little frustrating, especially because we are told in this profession, and you're told even on the news, that we are in a mental health pandemic... it's the whole entire United States that are experiencing so many different, especially in the midst of COVID. COVID really like, I don't know if it made people face their selves in the mirror and face their real issues because they were confined and forced to do so. But we had a high spike or increase of violence just among young people, especially. So, I'm thinking, this should be a no brainer. You know, you have a person that's not just getting a master's, but they're also getting a license. They're focusing on even paying extra money to get the professional added to their name. So, this is not just a degree. This is training. This is constant experience that is useful for life skills and for our students' futures. And it was just disheartening to me that it just wasn't an opening field.

Stress

All six participants experienced various levels of stress, as well as various forms of stress, including mental, emotional, and physical stress. Participant 1 expressed high levels of stress and fear of the unknown aspects of her site experience during COVID.

She stated,

As the pandemic went on again, way further than summer of 2020, I started to feel more discouraged. I felt discouraged because I knew that I didn't want to do my field work virtually because even though the pandemic was lasting way longer

than expected I knew, or I had hoped for eventually that things would go back to normal. I was really fearful and anxious about the idea of doing my entire field work virtually, and then eventually finding a job and things are back in person and feeling really, um, not qualified or, you know, not experienced. I was really fearful about that. It was a lot of thoughts and emotions and things in that way.

Participant 2 experienced a significant lack of sleep, which also contributed to her mental, emotional, and physical stress. She described feeling frustrated and discouraged from the lack of support from universities or from her cultural community. She expressed,

It's frustrating, as a single mother, not having that support. Cuz we already think we can't do it like, okay, how are we gonna do this with one or more multiple kids? Um, on top of trying to work, on top of having a business, or just life, mental health, you know, physical health, um, how do you know, we already think we can't do it. And if we feel like we're gonna get shunned upon or just not having that moral support coming from our school, it's just like, what, what can we do?

Participant 4's experience shared the same emotional toll. She stated, "Yeah. worry. I worry a lot. Oh, it's been, it has been very stressful, very stressful. I didn't think it was gonna be this hard."

Participant 3 also experienced the physical and mental stress from the lack of sleep during this timeframe which almost caused her to delay her degree completion. She stated,

It was a lot of nights I stayed up, um, really, really late. Just tried to, you know, basically just rough it out, doing what I could with the time that I had to do it. Um, yeah. And it was like I said, it was definitely an experience that I'll never forget because like I said, it was a lot of days that I felt like I couldn't do this, you know what I mean? That I would have to put this to the back burner.

Participant 6's experience captured multiple stressors in the same timeframe, which almost caused her to discontinue her program as well. She shared,

Being a single mom, seeing how this profession has helped me with my children, but also seeing how it affect me mentally, you know, feeling like, again, I'm not gonna get it. You know what I mean? Oh my God, I'm gonna have to postpone my semester. I've already postponed my graduation multiple times. You know, like three times I should have been graduated in like 2019, but I didn't, you know, because I had to take a break. I was so sick. I was working myself to the bone as a single mom, not having any help, you know, having people watch my children.

Participant 5 described cultural-related stressors during this time. As previously noted above, she expressed feeling panicked as the semester approached and she still did not have a site. She described frantically emailing every private and charter school in hopes to secure a site, since she was not having success getting placed in a public setting. Although she did secure a site last minute, she expressed that the demographics of the school population (predominantly white, affluent, religious private school) caused her internal cultural-related stress. This resulted in significant mental, emotional, and physical symptoms during the first few weeks of her field experience which almost

caused her to quit the term. Participant 5 explained how this stress took a toll on her physical wellbeing:

I'm at a private school and yeah, they have their problems, but these kids ain't really trying to talk or say anything. So, it was like pulling teeth. So, I'm like, I'm panicking. I'm like, how am I gonna get this? Like, I literally had full blown anxiety attacks, to the point where just stepping on the campus, I would have migraines. I would get sick. So, the first couple of weeks, a month or so it was rough. Cuz like I said, I was just like sick to my stomach. Uh, like and anxiety, like literally full-fledged anxiety attacks, which I hadn't had in years. I was literally in tears, and I was like, are you kidding me? And I was like, okay, whatever. Like, I'm done. I'm not doing this anymore.

Single Motherhood

All six participants discussed aspects of single motherhood which caused barriers during their field experience phase of their programs during the pandemic. These aspects of single motherhood revealed the interconnection between finding balance between the responsibilities of a graduate student and the unique responsibilities of a single mother. The participants described feelings of mom guilt and/or loneliness associated with their efforts to balance field experience, work, parenting, personal care, and childcare. There was a reoccurring theme of lack of support and help with daily responsibilities which contributed to the lack of balance and feelings of loneliness.

Balance. Four participants described their struggle with balancing field experience and the needs of their own children. Participant 1 stated, "I am entering

internship, and this is where I'm finding myself really struggling, finding a balance between work, life, kid parenting, like all those things." Participant 2 also described the emotional toll she experienced trying to balance her daughter's schedule with her own educational schedule. Participant 2 did not necessarily have a difficult time locating a site in her area; however, she had trouble finding a site that would also work with her unique childcare schedule and financial needs. She explained,

Is it hard? I won't say it's hard, but then it is due to the pandemic and due to the fact that I have to work around my daughter's schedule.... I don't have a lot of support when it comes to picking her up from school and stuff like that. That's one of the difficulties I do have when it comes to schooling in general as a single mother. It's just trying to time management and balance between the two, being a mother in school. It's just trying to balance it and not trying to lose my cool while doing it.

Participant 2 further described her concerns with balancing her new baking business, her courses, and parenting during the pandemic:

So, it was a lot at that time and it's still a lot, just trying to balance. That's like the main concern in my life as a single mother, trying to balance a lot of things. And now that I have a business it's even tougher, but I've been doing it. I can multitask a lot, but it's now that my business is like growing a little bit more and having more orders, it's a lot trying to deal with that. It was trying to balance school and being with her at home was the difficult part <laugh>, cause it is just

like having to make sure she's online for eight hours a day and helping her homework and trying to do my homework at that time.

Participant 2 noted that to balance her responsibilities, she had to give up sleep to complete all of the tasks she was responsible for.

Participant 6 described feelings of self-doubt in her abilities as a woman, mother, and counselor as she struggled to balance these three aspects alone. She shared,

I'm constantly questioning myself as a parent, as a woman, as a counselor. Like, you know, if I can't be adequate in these other things, how can I be adequate in this? You know? And so, it's just, it's a struggle. It's a balance because I don't want my children to go through anything that I have endured, and they have already, which hurts, you know? The balance part is the part that I struggled with and still are struggling with from day one, up to this point. I don't have people to come and pick my kids up. I can't call people and say, hey, I can't get to, I don't have that. I have to be everywhere at every moment. So, because of that, just realizing how to balance my time. That is my biggest struggle, in my internship and just in school, just balancing, being a student, being a mom, being a career person, and just being me. Like really, really being me.

Struggling to find balance was also a concern for Participant 3. She described how her experience of trying to balance her job, her education, finances, and her parenting felt strained and often were negatively impacting each other. She explained,

It, it was, it was a lot, I'll just be honest. Work at that time, like I kinda went back to work and then trying to work, even though it was from home virtually, after

getting outta school for the internship and then having to come and do homework and attend the meetings for the internship. Like the weekly check-ins, it was, it was, it was very difficult. I felt like I had no life to be honest with you. Like my life revolved around school internship. And I'm gonna be honest, my work performance had significantly declined like, you know, for my job. Because it was just too much, like it was. I knew that I was taking on more basically than I could chew... I got to a point to where I felt like I needed to not put so much effort into school because I'm thinking, well, you're in school. If you lose your job, school is not going to pay you right now. You cannot depend on school for a paycheck right now. So, I felt like I was being torn because I want to do well in my classes so I can retain this information that is being taught and all of this stuff that I have to, but it's just like, if I do that, am I realistically gonna be able to still do my job and care for myself and care for my child? Or, you know, take care of my household? And it was like, I think for me it was a week-by-week thing. Like one week I was like, okay, I'll just put more attention into school then one week, well, these assignments are gonna get done, but am I really gonna be putting in effort? I don't know. It kinda like flip flopped, like back and forth, back and forth, between like work and school, work and school.

Mom Guilt. Four participants experienced mom-guilt as they navigated balancing single motherhood with field experience. During this portion of their education, these women experienced having to make the choice between their educational needs and/or

their children's needs. Participant 1 struggled with the amount of time her child was in daycare so she could work and complete her field experience. She described,

I struggle with that too, because it's like, she would literally be there from open to close, you know what I'm saying? And so, a part of me like struggles with me just feeling bad, like, dang, she's there for 11, 12 hours, you know? Um, that's a long time. So, part of me feels like, okay, dang, I'm not even gonna be present or, you know, I'm not even gonna be spending time with her like that." She went on to share that she noticed some behavior struggles from her daughter during this time.

Participant 2 indicated having a bad experience with childcare. To move forward she is worried about finding safe childcare to complete her program.

Participant 4 also discussed feeling guilty for the decreased academic support she was able to provide for her son while completing field experience. Balancing the two responsibilities meant that she could not substitute teach as much where her son attended school. She was placed in another school for field experience. She noticed his grades suffered without her support. She stated,

It's already affected 'em since I've been in school. So, I'm praying that it won't like stress us even more, cuz it's been stressful like mentally and you know, everything. So, I know my son's grades, the youngest is definitely, his grades have gone down because I haven't really been, you know, at his school to sub. I've been, you know, at another school.

Participant 3 described mom-guilt for feeling depleted with balancing her emotional availability for her son and for her students at the internship site. She described

giving so much her emotional energy to her students at her internship, that she did not have anything left to give to her son when she came home. She shared,

I felt like it, it was like me being a bad parent because I'm like, all right, I've been with other people's kids all day. And then it's like, I come home, and I don't even wanna talk to my own son because it's like, I'm burnt out. For being, you know, at the school and dealing with, you know, such heavy topics, like other people's mental health, you know. I felt bad because it's like, well, goodness gracious.

Like, I know I'm supposed to be here for my own son. And I feel like I'm putting in more effort for these other people's children than my own.

Alone. Four participants indicated feelings of loneliness, lack of emotional/moral support, and/or a lack of connection to peers and faculty during this time. Participant 1 noted the lack of Black persons in her school counseling programs. Participant 1 stated, "We don't have a lot of people of color, especially Black women, or just Black people... as far as faculty, that's also not diverse, at least not in my program...I don't feel like it's diverse." Participant 1 also found it difficult to relate to her married peers. She stated, "Unfortunately, I don't feel like I can relate to a lot of people in my program in that way, because most of the people in my program, most of them are non-traditional, but a lot of them are married." Participant 1 shared that she goes to therapy to have a space to connect with her counselor and work on managing her emotions. However, due to financial strain, she shared, "I had to cut back on that from biweekly sessions to monthly...I definitely feel like it's affecting my mental health."

Participant 2 noted a lack of emotional support within her own cultural community. She expressed that in her culture, raising children is priority over education for women. She stated, “It’s looked upon, look down upon that women should just like, you know, just focus on your kids. Why are you trying to go back to school? So, it’s just, you know, I’ve had that conversation.” Participant 2 disclosed that she became a single mother in high school. Although she is still working towards finishing her master’s degree, she indicated feeling like her community was not expecting her to succeed. She stated,

People are shocked that I’ve actually graduated high school. I have a college degree, like, oh, you’re getting your masters now too. Like, so it’s just hard for women in general, but as a single, as a mother and a single mother at that.

She indicated feeling like people in her community were not genuine, although saying they would help, they would not. Due to the lack follow through, she indicated that she stopped asking. Participant 2 also chose to distance herself from family relationships that are strained. “I don’t have the best relationship with my family.... so, it’s just as I’ve gotten older, I distance myself a lot” and “the relationship with my child’s father is not the best. So, it’s just like he’s in and out whenever he wants to. So, I choose not to deal with him at all.” Although distance was a healthy boundary for her, it also came with the realization of having to navigate this balance alone.

Participant 4 discussed feelings of being alone with regard to single motherhood, student-life, and her personal life, to include relationships and leisure activities:

So, I'm divorced, but I have been trying to date and it has been so hard cuz it's like, I don't have time. I don't, I don't even. Like they come in my life, and they leave. I mean, they stay for about maybe <laugh> a few weeks and they see all these books in my room and that I have, and I'll be like, I have a paper or you know, and I have this and I have to do that, and I have a class <laugh>. She expressed a loss of interest in leisure activities such as travel.

She also stated, "I haven't even felt like going anywhere and I feel bad cuz I, you know, normally at least go somewhere, maybe every two months or something, but I don't."

Two participants lost a family member during this timeframe of field experience and the pandemic. Participant 1 lost her aunt, who was a supportive person in her life. Participant 3 expressed a deep sense of loneliness when she experienced the loss of her main support for completing her school counseling degree, her mother. When her mother passed away, Participant 3 described feeling very alone in her educational journey. She shared,

As far as the support that I, that I'm, that I'm used to, which is my mother, um, she passed away during, during the course of this program. So, my support, I felt like without her, just being honest, no, I didn't have support because that was the closest person to me. And without her, I was just like, look, I'm just here by myself, basically. You know, when she was here, she was very encouraging very, very much like wanted me to persist and have resilience and kind of do what I needed to do, because she was one of the people who understood, like, this is why I'm doing this. Without that, it's like, I kind of went on like autopilot. It was like

just mindlessly doing things like I'm there, but I'm not there. I'm functioning because I have to, but if I'm being honest, I know that I could have probably caved at any time.

The experience of the loss of her mother also came with spiritual stress for Participant 3. Her church, which normally provided a sense of community and comfort, was closed for COVID precautions, furthering her sense of loneliness. She shared,

As far as like spiritual, things that were going on, you know, I was really upset with God because I really didn't understand, like, you know, why did it have to be my parent? I never stopped believing in God, but I was just upset. I guess it didn't really waiver for me, but it was like, even church was closed. My like church was closed, and we were doing like virtual services and stuff like that online. Um, which is, you know, which was okay, but it's still not like the full experience was like going to church.

Finances

Another major concern that was expressed by all six participants was financial strain/stress. Participant 2 indicated that getting a degree was a financial risk because she did not have another income to fall back on, if this degree does not work out. Participant 1 described her financial situation compared to her married peers. She explained,

They have other incomes and things like that, where I don't have a second income. This is it. <laugh>. Although I had a wonderful support system, from my parents, my sister, my daughter's father is in her life. So, you know, things like that, but it's still different from a whole second income, so I don't have that. I am

the only one paying my rent and taking care of all major bills and food and things like that.

She further discussed feeling grateful for the financial help from her family, but she also did not like depending on this help either. She explained, “I don’t like depending on people to care for my daughter, you know what I’m saying?” Participant 1 worked at the same daycare where her daughter attended. She was able to still complete practicum with the 100 hours. However, the commitment of her 600-hour internship required her to resign from her job, thus losing the free childcare she received.

Participant 4 stated,

It’s been hard. I mean, I try to save. A lot of times I’m like, okay, let me just make sure that this bill is paid before I go and get them what they want because they do want expensive shoes and expensive clothes <laugh> and I’m like, we can go right around the corner to the local. So, we just, you know, we improvise. I try to make sure that everybody, you know, gets what they need, mainly what they need and not what they want. It’s been more like that and making sure priorities are taken care of. They definitely wanna travel. So, I haven’t been able to help with that, like spend money on, you know, going to Disney World or whatever, you know, I’mma try to work on that, getting things in place. But other than that, yeah, it’s been kind of hard.

Participant 4 worked as a substitute teacher; however, she discussed her hope to still work as a substitute teacher a few hours during her field experience. She shared, “I’m gonna see if they’ll let me, I wanna do four hours subbing. Hopefully that’s enough

money. That's about half of my check, you know, at least half." In addition to working part-time, Participant 4 explained that the student loan also helps with financial needs, however it is still not enough to depend on. During her interview, she began to contemplate giving up her nights to work additionally. This was an ongoing concern; to provide for her family financially as well as the responsibilities of a single mother and student. She stated,

I look forward to the fact that I do get the, you know, the loan, the money from financial aid, but I know that's not gonna really <laugh> take care of the full year, so I'll just make sure that... I don't know. I'll just work at night. Maybe if I have to. So, it's been a process.

Participant 5 also worked as a substitute teacher during her practicum. She explained, "I became a substitute teacher. So, I was doing that on a regular basis. Um, you know, in the fall I was able to still do that a little. It was only a hundred hours." However, once her internship semester started in the fall, her availability to accept those jobs were significantly decreased due to the 600-hour commitment of her internship. This significantly impacted her financial security. She further explained, "But this semester I wasn't as lucky. I did stuff here and there. It was very hard. Luckily, um, my dad, he has helped out a little bit."

Participant 6 discussed the financial insecurity she experienced with her family during this time of her program. She stated,

You know, they've had me, but they've had to go without food. Sometimes we had to go to food banks. We've had to go multiple times my whole duration while in grad school. I've had so many eviction notices having to move.

The financial strain on her family also strained her mental and emotional stamina to continue in her program.

Theme 2: Resources Utilized to Mitigate Barriers to Complete Field Experiences

This theme emerged almost simultaneously when participants described the barriers encountered. Contrary to the statistics, the women in this study chose to use the very things that could have been a barrier to stop their programs, as a source of motivation to overcome that said barrier and continue forward. The main source of motivation for all six participants was the Black woman herself, the single mother. The participants expanded upon and described these motivational experiences in more depth facilitated by the question (Appendix A), "Describe the supports/strengths used during the pandemic (or currently) to cope with the mental, emotional, or spiritual effects of this experience." The participants began to describe various mental, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and family strengths they used to motivate themselves to continue. In addition, these internal resources were also revealed earlier in the interviews with the questions (Appendix A), "Describe how this experience (or barriers) affected you: mentally, emotionally, and spiritually" and "Describe how this experience (or barriers) affected your: personal life, family, finances, and education". The participants described being resourceful in finding benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, including using the extra time and financial assistance to their advantage in continuing their field

experiences, while also financially supporting their families. Although the each of the six participants experienced high levels of stress, they sought to strengthen that area of their lives to cope. Positive self-talk was used by the participants to self-motivate and persevere, some participants sought personal counseling, and all participants sought support from a significant woman in their life (family, friend, or mentor). Five of the six women described using the resource of spiritual strength with belief in God, prayer, and meditation. Cultural factors such as giving back to their community, advocacy, and the belief in systemic change were also strong motivators for the participants to continue in their field experiences.

The Woman as the Resource Herself

Woman. Each of the women in this study described unique ways in which they motivated themselves to keep going. Three participants recognized the need to take care of themselves emotionally and sought therapy during this time. Participant 1 shared, “that’s one of the biggest goals that I’m working on in therapy, is trying to like, obviously get things in order to the best that I can and then just kind of accept things the way they’re gonna be.” Participant 2 shared, “a lot of times I feel like we don’t have people to vent to. I just started counseling in 2018. So, I just starting to open up, cause I’m not a person just to express how I feel.” Participant 6 indicated self-care was more important than she realized, and her personal counseling confirmed school counseling was the profession she should be in.

Other motivators included an internal survival mindset which reflected a feeling that there was not an option to fail. Five participants used self-talk and relied on their

inner determination. Participant 1 would remind herself that the stress of field experience was only for a small period of time. She stated, "I know that this period of my life will be temporary, but it's still vital." Participant 4 described using this coping skill often. She stated,

I do a lot of self-talking...a lot of self-talk cuz um, if I don't, if I give up then, I mean.... that's not even an option. I'm like, no, I have to do it.... I know I can do. I'm like, okay, you didn't know it was gonna be this hard, but you know, we got this, we got this.

Participant 3 also stated giving up was not an option for her. She said,

When you feel like you have no choice, I feel like that's a driving factor for some of the things that you, you feel like this, even though this is an option, but this is something that I started and I have to do this because if I don't, then I'm not gonna be able to provide for, you know, my family or keep a roof over my head long term basically. So even though it's a choice, it's not quite a choice, you know what I mean?... I felt like I had no choice because I had to get this stuff done.... it's just, it's, it's really tough. I'll just say that it's really tough when you try to look at things realistically, and then when, when it hits you, it's just like, well, it's too late. I have to. I cannot undo halfway through this program. I have to keep going.

Participant 2 revealed her inner determination when she stated,

It impacted me... but not to the major point where I was like, I'm gonna quit, because I'm not a quitter. I might get frustrated a lot, but like, I was just so

determined... it was hard. But I was just determined to keep going. Once I put my mind to something I'm just gonna do it.

Participant 6 used self-talk to remind herself that she was too far into the journey to give up. She expressed,

I want a degree. I want money. I wanna, you know, be looked at as something different, not just the single mom struggling anymore, you know, to make ends meet. I wanna give my children freedoms and open businesses. I want this degree to give me freedom. But then in the process, I had to realize I'm actually providing a freedom to others as well. So, it's not just about me. Um, but I can't forget about me either, which is something I do in this profession. The mission is so important to me, which is why I won't quit at this point, whatever obstacles come this way, I'm just gonna take 'em.

She further explained,

Just in my moments, you know, of trying to just encourage myself that everything is gonna be okay, like, you've come so far and that's, what's brought me this.

Like you come so far, like you come so far to quit now.

She also described the mental and emotional inner toil she experienced to fight to keep going. She expressed,

And I know it feels like every demon in hell is trying to fight me, but it's something that I have to reach. Like, it's something that I have to do. And it's hard like this semester with this internship, I knew that it was gonna be a struggle because I was behind, you know, which already kind of dampen my mood and my

psyche, because I already felt a little defeated because I was behind everyone else.

So, I felt like I had to do the best job.

Her determination was evident from her narrative. She stated, “Like at this point, I’m going to get this degree.”

Four participants experienced support from family or a significant woman in their life. Participant 1 shared,

I had a wonderful support system, from my parents, my sister, my daughter’s father is in her life... my best friend, she is like my go-to person as well, and then a cousin of mine. I feel like I have people that I can talk to people that are rooting for me, um, who genuinely wanna see me win.

Participant 2 was able to rely on her mother’s help from time to time. Participant 4 relied heavily on her mother’s help and encouragement. She stated,

I have a lot of help with my mother. So other than that, I wouldn’t have been able to, you know, accomplish a lot of work. I mean, she really, she helps me so much as far as the fact that I have most of the time there with her. And then I go over there after work, help with dinner, homework, and everything... she’s like, okay, I’ll see you later. Go ahead. I got the boys.

She shared how her mother was a schoolteacher and provided accountability and discipline. Participant 5 relied on her mother, grandmother, and a few friends to help with her children while she was completing field experience. She said,

My mom and my grandmother are here. They live on the other side of town. I can, if I really need to, I can rely on them. If I need them to pick them up, um, or do

something, they would do it. And I do have friends that are on my side of town that if I need to, you know, they like, okay, we'll get 'em, just let me know.

The emotional support from friends was also a factor in her moving forward and not giving up:

I had my friends, they was like, you can't quit! <laugh>...they was like, you're almost done! And I was like, you're right, I'm almost done. So, I was like, I had to get it together. I had to get it together. And they was like, you can't, you can't quit. And I was like, why can't I? <laugh>. Like I said, toward the end, it all paid off and I just know this is where I am supposed to be.

Five of the six women utilized religious and spiritual supports to manage stress and balance emotions to continue to move forward in their programs. Participants 3, 5, and 6 utilized prayer during times of discouragement. Participant 6 went on to share that she felt that this journey was part of a bigger plan from God, and also utilized prayer with a professor for support. She stated, "God has shown me through counseling, through people coming to me, and my professors. I knew then that this is where I needed to be, which is why I can't quit. It's not just about me anymore." Participant 2 explained her support as being more spiritual and less religious:

I won't say I'm super religious, um, more spiritual now. I've been on a spiritual journey for the past few years. Um, and I just praying for myself, like my mom's very religious and she's a praying woman, but like I, as an adult now, like I have to pray for myself and manifest things that I want in my life. And I see a difference in how my life is when I do pray. When I do manifest those things,

when I do meditate and stuff, and I'm teaching my daughter that at an early age, cause I wasn't taught that besides praying and going to church. We like manifesting, journaling and stuff, doing yoga, meditating and stuff like that. I'm teaching her at an early age how to balance her emotions. Um, cuz I'm just now learning how to balance my emotions and not letting people get to me and stuff like that. So, um, praying now, especially with me being in school and trying to balance 50,000 things, is a lot. So, just praying and just letting it be, you know, I can't control everything and sometimes I try to control every situation that I'm in and I know that's not realistically how life is gonna happen. So just praying on it and just letting it go and just let God work through it.

Participant 4 relied on her church community for support. She stated,

I go. We go every Sunday, and I couldn't do it without God, like I would not be able to do it without Him. So definitely, church is definitely a part of my life. It's no matter how tired we are, we go, we go to church. It's an African American church. I have to go. If I don't, my week just doesn't feel right.... I know God, like He, He has helped me as far as, um, just keeping me here. There's been times when I just wanted to like, not even be on this earth anymore because it was so hard, but God said, He said, I took you through so much, you know, more than if I took you through before, then I'm gonna bring you through again. And I just, I know that He really wants me to complete this and I'm gonna complete it.

Single Mother. Each participant shared how single motherhood provided unique challenges to completing field experience during the pandemic, however single

motherhood was also a major source of proactivity, planning, multi-tasking, organization, and motivation to move forward in the program. Proactive measures were taken by Participant 1 when she started her search early for a school that would accept interns during the pandemic as well as organize her schedule and childcare for her daughter. She also noted how her daughter was a source of motivation to continue in her program. She discussed the role her daughter play in her motivation to succeed:

I want to definitely provide a good life by her. You know, not saying that means I need to be rich, but I don't ever wanna, like, I don't want her to think back on her childhood, like, yeah, like my mom struggled, like we struggled or feeling like, yeah, I remember my mom like stressing about bills and things like that. You know what I'm saying? ... me just thinking about like what type of life I want for her, how I want her to grow up, how I want her to, as an adult to think back on her childhood, I'm like, yeah, I gotta make a change. And that just continues to stick with me. Like that continues to stick with me. Like I know the life that I want for her or, or at least I, that I wanna try and provide for her and to model.... I still feel like education is super, super imperative... for my daughter to be able to grow up and say, yeah, my mom got her masters. I just feel like that's, that's gonna be bomb to me. <laugh> ...and I hope that she'll see it that way too. And I do feel like I will model things for her that's positive and especially in a sense of education.

Participant 4 also shared how her sons motivated her to continue. She stated, "I'm doing it for my, for my boys and for myself and just, you know, just making sure that I know that I can do it."

Participant 2 was proactive in planning for daughter's schedule. "I was just like trying to prepare myself mentally for that and to like literally think ahead of how her schedule will be, and just try to find the help." Participant 2 further discussed the support and accountability she received from her daughter during field experience and taking courses. She shared, "My daughter is very supportive. Even at her young age, she's like, no, you got it. You can keep doing it. So that just made me wanna keep going for the most part." Participant 2 became emotional as she discussed the meaning of support and encouragement from her daughter. She shared,

She's one of my biggest supporters, to be honest, I'm trying not to cry. To have somebody actually genuinely support me. Actually, wanna see me win. She's there for me. She's seen me go through a lot. And I just want to be the best mother I can be to her. Just having that support coming from a child. Because as African Americans, we don't have that. They say children should stay in a child's place, to a certain extent I do understand that. But like for a child to actually wanna support you and be your cheerleader, um, and you know, stand up for you when you feel like as an adult, you should stand up for yourself, but to have a child to actually stand up for me, you know, that's my heart. She actually wanna see me win, and tell me I can win, I can do it. Even though when I wanna give up,

I didn't think that I could, but when I don't wanna press, she's like, no, you got it.

She's like my mom sometimes. She's like, did you do your homework? Did you?

Participant 3 discussed aspects of single motherhood and the role her son plays in her drive to successfully complete her program:

I feel like we're, we have to, we have that pressure on us to do well, because there is no failing at this. For us, it's like, you risk a lot when you take on something like this, when you take on continuing education. And we know that these jobs and employers and stuff are gonna look at these transcripts because everywhere you go, you have to attach transcripts to applications. So, it's like, you don't wanna risk anything being on that transcript that somebody may look at you negatively because it's like, that's gonna lessen your chance of getting a position that you probably really desire or, you know, making more money or whatever the case may be. So, it's like we, and, and I'm not saying this, that this doesn't apply to, to mothers who are married, but I can say for me, like there was no option to fail.

She went on and discussed the importance of being a positive role model for her son during her field experience:

The fact that I had somebody that's looking at me who watches what I do, you know, and how I maneuver through different situations and things. And I'm like for him to see me go through this out of everything else that I've dealt with, you know, the loss and, you know, health challenges and things like that. And to see that you don't have to become a statistic just because you are one, if that makes

sense, because you know, there's tons of statistics for single mothers.... if I can show him that you, you can be more than numbers and you know, all it takes is your drive, you know, and your faith and what you want to see yourself accomplished, to be able to get these things done. It's possible. You just have to believe that you can do it. You just have to know and tell yourself no matter what, I know that I have to keep doing it.

She expressed the importance of modeling hard work and achieving goals for her son.

She stated,

That was probably the driving force, because I'm like, he can't see me give up because he's gonna think that that is okay. And I don't want him to get that idea that doing so is gonna be okay. And I don't want him to feel like he's entitled to anything because he's not like you have to work for things, you're not entitled to anything.

Participant 5 discussed multi-tasking her son's sporting activities with her weekly supervision for field experience. She shared,

A whole lot of juggling, uh, I can tell you like my practicum, I spent a lot of time in the car, during my weekly, supervised groups with our class, at the baseball field while I'm with my son, at baseball practice, in between ripping and running.

Participant 6 echoed the importance of organization. "I've gotten better and how much organization is important to my life because I am a single mother." Participant 6 further explained how being a single mother was a major source of motivation. She explained,

I need this profession because my children have sacrificed so much, and I've had to sacrifice so much, just so I can keep them safe. I need to finish because I need to provide more safety. I need to be able to afford more help. You know what I mean? So that I can be able to not just help my children but help more people and work more freely so that I can help them.

Black. A common theme which emerged as a motivator was advocacy in the school counseling field for K-12 students and especially for children and adolescents of color. Participant 1 expressed wanting to help all children, but specifically representing an individual a student of color could identify with. She stated,

I think it's so important, like I'm going into a helping field. Of course, I love everybody, I wanna help everybody. You know, but let's be honest. It is nice to see people like you, um, people like you period.

Participant 3 discussed the importance and the need for more people of color to be represented in the school system. She explained,

That's what I wanna do, help with the girls and the boys that are very, that need, you know, like they need Black school social workers and school counselors. It's mainly the inner city. I think that's my calling... that is why I wanted to be a school counselor, because like, you know, there, there, there aren't really a lot of African American school counselors, not in this area and there're not a lot of African American women school counselors.

Participant 2 shared her experience of not having a person of color as a school counselor growing up. This motivated her to join the profession to make a difference. She explained,

I actually didn't have that growing up. So that's exactly why I chose this field because I wanna give children that help, like it's more to life than what you think it is. I didn't have a school counselor in high school. There were like advisors, but they were men. So, I was just like... eh ... they didn't really understand. I actually wanna go into this field to make change. I wanna help academically, of course, but more mental wellbeing, social emotional, like all that, and then to encourage children. And so that's exactly why I chose this field, particularly the school counseling route because I didn't have that growing up. So, I wanna show, especially girls, that it's okay for you to be a school counselor. You can, you can, if that's what you so choose to do. You could be anything you want, you put your mind to it, and put the work in, and to be there for children to give them that moral support. There's a lot of children, children in the school systems that don't have that, you know, so to be that for them, that's why I chose this field.

During her field experience, Participant 4 noticed the need to persons of color in the school counseling office and noted a stronger connection with BIPOC K-12 students. "It's a different level. It really is. It really is. Cuz a lot of them have issues that I didn't even know existed. They just come and talk to me."

Participant 6 felt a strong sense of advocacy during her field experience, which also kept her motivated to finish. She stated, "I know that I'm relentless and I'm, I'm an

advocate for myself because I'm advocating for my, my place at this table. I need a place at this table." She further explained,

I do believe I engulf so heavily in this profession because helping people helps me. It just is like, when I feel helpless and I can help another, I don't feel helpless anymore. You know, even though I can't do things in all of these other situations in my life, I could still, would be there for other people. That's one thing I can control, you know, my time, my support, my dedication, you know?

She shared,

Like it's so many things that play a part, which is why I understand that each of these experiences that I endured while pursuing this degree, even all the way down to almost being at the end, I understand that I am going to have clients, students, families that will have experienced all or some of what I am going through wanting to better themselves. I can't let these kids down that I'm working with.

Instead of the barriers causing her to discontinue her program, she used these to strengthen her empathy and advocacy for others. "My professor was concerned that this would break me. It didn't break me. It built me. It didn't break me because I need to understand how to interact with different people in this profession."

Resources Utilized Amid COVID

Government Financial Support. Although the pandemic caused some workplaces to close or reduce hours of operation which caused financial hardship on

many individuals, Participant 1 shared how the government issued financial assistance allowed her to continue in her field experience. She stated,

I will say in some ways I was fortunate, as far as like money wise and things, I'm sure you may be aware that unemployment, like the COVID unemployment... fortunately, I was a part of that group, so although I still worked, my hours dropped. I was able to collect unemployment for the missed wages and I was part of that group that made more from unemployment than I made when I was working full time. I'm working 20 hours versus 40, um, I'm making more money and then I'm able to use that extra time for school.

All six participants relied heavily on the government school loans to sustain their family's basic physical needs during field experience. Although these funds helped, they did not cover the entire term.

COVID Shutdowns. For the single mom, time management to balance the unique responsibilities of a single mother in graduate school is essential. However, COVID-19 shutdowns stopped many activities across the nation, including the many activities that these women balanced. This stop in time seemed to allow these participants to forge ahead in their educational programing for many reasons. Participant 3 was proactive and secured a site due to other people dropping out:

I called like more than half of that list. They had openings because some of the people who had signed up, they didn't feel comfortable because, you know, COVID was still very much around at that time. So, I think they kinda like

dropped off. So, then they let us, they let like me and another person, they let us like come on when the other people said that they didn't wanna come.

Participant 3 also used shutdown time to focus on her education:

And then with everything being still kind of semi-closed and not fully operational, that kind of took a toll on me too. I think that's probably why I kind of like forced myself into just to keep going, because it's just like, well, I guess if it will be any perfect time for me to get this stuff done, it will be when I don't have that many distractions from what's going on, like leisurely, like, oh, you can't go out or whatever, but because there was no going out <laugh>.

The pandemic also allowed for some of her field experience work to be virtual. This option was vital for Participant 3. She shared,

So, some of my practicum and then like some of my internship 1 was virtual based too. I was like, well, thank God they were virtual because if they weren't, there's no way I would've been able to do it in no way.

With her reduced work hours, as well as the option to work from home virtually, she was able to fit in work and complete her field experience. She shared this was a supportive factor for her completion:

I probably would've struggled a lot. Tried to find childcare and stuff, and just trying to juggle the responsibilities of being a mom, a parent, and a caregiver for a child and trying to like stay on top of practicum. And then my other classes that I had homework in as well.

University Level Support. All six participants discussed various forms of support from their universities. Some professors offered extensions to complete assignments. University advisors assisted with additional placement options and networking opportunities. Most notably, all six participants formed some sort of connection and/or community with other BIPOC women (faculty, site supervisors, university advisors, or peers) within their university, to gain emotional and moral support to continue in their programs.

Participant 1 discussed having the option for additional time to complete assignments. She stated,

Although I haven't had to really ask for accommodations with school, I feel like my professors are really great about even offering like, hey, if you need assistance, if you need additional time, if you need, you know, just let us know what you need, and we'll try everything to make it work. Although I haven't used those accommodations, I feel good knowing that I had that option. I do feel like I would be supported if I did need that additional help or assistance in any way.

Participant 2 discussed her experience with understanding professors. She shared,

Thankfully I have professors that are understanding... providing that moral support that it's okay, you know, you got this and stuff like that. I need support, they very understanding, very supportive. I've built relationships with most of them. So just have that understanding that, you know, um, sometimes I might need an extension and they're very understanding of that... I'm really picky with my assignments. So, like I don't like missing assignments. Like I'm a stickler for

that. But if something has come up, they're very understanding and say, they'll give me an extension.

Participant 2 went on to share a unique extension she was provided with by of her professors:

I actually had an incident this semester, like in the beginning of the semester I had, cause my daughter, I have to pay extremely high tuition. So, I didn't have the funds to purchase my course book that I needed. So, um, I was like three chapters behind. So, my professor gave me two weeks to catch up and she was like, you know, I understand, you know, to give you an extension. So that really helped me out. I finally caught up, um, last month with, you know, so that just giving that understanding, you know, it's hard as a single mother, and just to have that support to give me extensions, even though like, I really don't use them, but in some cases, especially in the pandemic is just like, you know, and my daughter, it's a lot dealing with her, with her schooling.

Participant 6 experienced a BIPOC professor who provided her an extension on an assignment, but also checked in with her multiple times to encourage her to finish and to keep her accountable. Her professor would say to her,

You really want this? Is this what you want then? What are you gonna do to get it? Because I can give you all of the extensions. I can do all of this, but you have to do the work. You have to get it. And you do great work. I see it in here, but I can't grade you if I don't have the work.

This professor also helped to shape her professionally. Participant 6 recalled her professor saying, “Remember, it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.” She further recounted,

Just that kindness of putting me and making sure that I can check myself and I’m accountable for myself, that was important too. And also, just encouraging my determination and kind of figuring out what I wanted. So just that, you know, that dialogue, that conversation, it is the care. It is the care for me.

Participant 6 shared that even though she was online, she felt that consistent interaction was key to her successful completion of internship.

Participant 1 discussed her connection with a Black faculty member at her university who also assisted her in networking:

As far as Black women, like I remember distinctly having this Black professor early on and she was so amazing. I just feel like I had more of a connection with her. She even gave me resources too, not one but two friends of hers, because I do eventually want to move. So that’s where I’m seeking licensure. She gave me their contact information for me to reach out to them. I was able to talk to them through Zoom cuz they live in the area where I’m hoping to move to. I was able to connect with them and they were super. They were also Black women, and they were super open and transparent about everything, and you know, made me feel very, um, very, uh, what’s the word... like basically, you know, if you need more information, if you wanna talk again, feel free to reach back out. Just very open. It seemed very supportive in that way.

Participant 2 also discussed her connection with faculty who are also women of color. She shared, “I have three of them that I can really connect with and have that support as well. I would like to have more, I wish there would be more, but I can take what I can get.” She went on to state that she had an advisor who was personally assisting her. She stated, “My advisor’s been actually helping me look for placements for my practicum and internship.”

Participant 5 shared a pivotal experience with a Black professor when she was in distress during her internship:

I did tell my professor about it, and she was just like, breathe <laugh> she was like, everything is gonna be okay. I did what she told me to do. I did breathe and I kinda, I took a step back and I talked to my site supervisor, and I don’t know if I could do it cause I was ready to quit. But then I was like, I’m too far in it. And you know, the professor was like, just breathe. She was like, you’re not breathing, but she would tell us that in class, cuz she could see. Cuz, we would be talking and then she was like, you’re not breathing. That one particular day during online supervision, she said, I could tell something was wrong. She said, but I didn’t wanna call you out and tell you to stay after. But I ended up staying after. Cause I, I don’t know why I stayed after to talk to her about. And she said, I just have a question for you. She said, what’s wrong? And I was like, what are you talking about? Cause I wasn’t trying to say what was going on. Cause I didn’t want her to think that it was my, cause it technically, it wasn’t my site supervisor. It was just the preconceived notion that I went in because I’m at a predominantly white,

private school. <laugh>. I know you have a bunch of wealthy people who send their kids there. I just had myself worked up and I was like, how do I talk to these kids and make sure that I don't say the wrong thing? For they go back to tell mommy and daddy, well, this black lady done said X, Y, Z to me, y'all need to do something. You know? So, she was just like breathe, just be yourself. And I just let it go. And, and that's what I did. And funny thing is, <laugh> they all love me. I was overthinking stuff, and she was just like, I just need you to stop and breathe. And, and that's what I did.

Participant 3 experienced supportive site supervisors which was a factor in her continuation of field experience. She shared,

My site supervisors and people that worked at the practicum location and the schools, they were very supportive to this day. Like I'm still friends with them. You know, because I felt like they've been through it before, so they kind of could relate to the experience because it's like, well, all of these terrible things have happened, like with COVID and you know, people being disconnected and here you are like, you're going through school and you're just trying to do what you have do, and you know, you're working and then you're in here, you know, helping us. I feel like I had supportive sites.

She went on to discuss the connections she made with the students at her site and how this was also a motivating factor to continue.

Peer connection was a contributing factor of success for three participants. The women noted it was vital to have other women to check in with and who understood their

barriers. They felt that the encouragement received from these women was more genuine and felt a deeper connection. Participant 1 shared,

The friends, I guess, or peers that I do have that are like, whenever we have a class together, whenever we happen to be on a zoom for whatever together, a webinar or something, we're always sending a direct message in a chat like, hey girl, how you been? Just to have that connection is so super, super, super important.

Participant 2 also found single mothers to form connections with. She stated, "I have found other mothers, single mothers that can relate to me. So, like we exchange numbers will talk and stuff like that." Participant 3 shared her experience with peer support. She stated, "I got some support from a few of classmates and stuff that I had built, like friendships and stuff with just by being in the some of the same classes."

Theme 3: Recommendations for other BIPOC Single Mothers to Succeed

This theme emerged from the indicated resources utilized, as well as the final interview question (Appendix A) "Reflecting on this experience and the specific supports/strengths utilized to cope with or overcome described barriers, what recommendations would you provide for school counseling programs to implement to assist BIPOC single mother graduate students seeking practicum or internship during a pandemic or other event which could impede on program completion?" The participants indicated additional university faculty of color to support, to include supportive professors who provide open communication and seek to understand the unique barriers these women face. The participants did not indicate the university was responsible for

removing the barrier, rather having a professor or mentor in the field to provide moral support and encourage them as they continue to overcome their barriers. Additional financial assistance specific to single mother online graduate students was identified by all six participants. The participants indicated that there is a need for financial aid programs that allow for single mother students to allocate the funds to their specific needs (food, rent, childcare, etc.). Finally, all six women indicated a virtual community for single mother online graduate students, which fostered moral and emotional support would be extremely beneficial. The participants indicated a consistent, safe space to vent, to encourage, and to provide helpful tips for success would increase connection to the university, to their peers, and increase retention for many single mothers.

Financial Support

All six participants stated that additional financial assistance specific to online master's students who are single parents would be extremely beneficial. Participant 1 utilized government financial assistance during the pandemic to complete her practicum. However, COVID financial assistance is no longer available. This was a significant concern for Participant 1 as she moves to internship. She stated,

I honestly think the financial piece is the biggest one, especially when students are entering that field work portion... when it clearly is gonna interfere with their work schedule. Especially for single mothers, or single parents in general, like financial assistance during that time, like number one off the gate. Something, some type of assistance, because whether it's for food, whether it's for clothes, whether it is to help pay rent or whatever the case.

Participant 1 explained that she drives 45 minutes to her site and 45 minutes back home every day for her field experience. Financial assistance for travel to and from her site was also a need she expressed. She noted additional scholarships are needed specifically for online students. The financial support was essential and her top concern. Participant 1 suggested student financial assistance during the field experience portion of the program, as many interns must leave their jobs to complete the required 700 hours per CACREP. Participant 2 and Participant 3 also indicated financial assistance such as scholarships to be used for needs would be beneficial in freeing up time to balance her educational and parenting responsibilities. Participant 2 shared,

More scholarships for like single mothers, scholarships and grants that would help, be helpful a lot, because trying to pay for it out of pocket, like doing the FAFSA helps, but like, eh, it don't give you much. So, like having like scholarship opportunities, um, would help a lot for me.

Participant 3 further explained that she still worries about paying back loans entering a profession in which she knows may not pay as well in her area. She explained, "I have no idea how I'm going to be able to manage student loans and, you know, trying to get a job that doesn't even pay me enough to make strides paying back these financial loans and stuff." Therefore, she suggested scholarships and grants would be more beneficial.

Participant 4 shared that additional scholarships would assist her in being able to spend more time with her children. She expressed that she felt that she was sacrificing time with her boys in order to work on top of her field experience to make ends meet financially:

I wish that, you know, childcare and stuff would be more affordable. Maybe some sort of scholarship to help with whatever you need. Some women do need it for childcare, but maybe others could use it for books or others could use it for food or others could use it for whatever transportation to and from, you know, no restrictions on what it's used for.

Participant 5 suggested providing university virtual work study programs for online students. This would offer flexibility and income to single mothers who are balancing their children's schedules with field experience. She noted how during the pandemic, many online jobs were created, and individuals were successful working from home. "I mean, and with COVID, I mean a lot of work at home jobs have been created, so I'm like, why not? And, and we, you know, it can be done. It's possible." Participant 6 suggested financial assistance to be used for any need a single mother may have would be very beneficial. She stated that each single mother's situation is different, therefore the financial assistance could be used for different needs. She explained,

You can't drop your kid off at an online university, but it doesn't, but a lot of times scholarship stuff is, um, it has to be for something specific, but why can't it just be, look, I need childcare this month. I need groceries this month. So, resources you can choose, what's safe for you. You can choose what your children need, you know?

University Support

Faculty Community/Connection. All six participants expressed the importance of university faculty/staff connection. This connection included increased communication

and understanding of the unique needs a single mother online student face. An increased representation of diversity in faculty and staff was also expressed by each of the participants. Participant 1 suggested, “I think having a Black mentor specifically for me as a woman, it would be awesome. It is nice to see people like you, people like you period.” Participant 3 discussed her feelings regarding the need for additional university faculty and mentors of color in her program. She shared,

I feel like I would've felt more supported, to be honest. Because at the end of the day, people, when they can relate to another person in similar aspects of their life or their upbringing or anything, it builds a foundation for those people to form a deeper connection other than professor and student. And it's like, if I know and understand that this person has been through the same thing that I have, that makes me more comfortable to be vulnerable or to share things that I'm going through, because maybe they can relate to some of my struggles and maybe if I express them, they can help me and give me some knowledge to how I can get through this.

Participant 4 suggested more faculty of color may bring longevity to other BIPOC student's educational program. She stated that she would stay in the program and not feel like giving up if she had more of these types of connection.

Participant 4 also indicated professors should seek to understand the unique barriers faced by single mothers to increase their empathy or compassion. “Maybe just having a side conversation or maybe on Saturdays having counseling sessions to talk to ‘em and see how they’re doing. Cuz I think, I think they need emotional support more

than anything as well, encouraging them.” Participant 5 expressed if she could provide feedback to professors, she would say to “just be compassionate. I mean, that’s what you’re supposed to do, that’s your job to help us or let us know or give us feedback, especially if we ask a question.” Communication was also the number one suggestion from Participant 5. Participant 2 suggested,

Having that moral support all around for mothers trying to pursue a higher education... actually putting effort to support those women who are single mothers for going back to school. And to acknowledge that, because sometimes it gets overlooked. Acknowledge the fact that, okay, we have these women coming back to school who are single. To acknowledge that we need to see, maybe have meetings with them to see if, what can we do to help them as they go through their master’s level or whatever educational degree level. Um, just to acknowledge it one, <laugh>, and not just to overlook it, just to seeing us as another student. See the concerns that we have, the needs that we may have. And we can go have those conversations, we can go from there.

Participant 3 suggested professors should provide more grace:

Mercy should be given in situations, if it is like a single mom, you know, things happen, things arise all the time. It’s kinda hard to believe and understand that when you’ve never had to go through it, but you know, when things get real and you can’t control it, you know, it gets ugly.

She further discussed,

I feel like even like a few more days of like extra time, you know what I mean would have been good. Like maybe a few more days, you know, just without being penalized, because as single parents, like, we have things that come up that we have no control over sometimes. And it's like, it, we really are put into very difficult positions where you have to choose, you have to choose like, you know what, I had to let this go, or I can't do this because, you know, I have this and I gotta get this assignment done or whatever, or I'm gonna have to call out of work because I got homework to do.

Participant 6 suggested BIPOC single mothers need to hear that they belong in the university setting. She stated, "having a person in the field specifically say, you belong here. You, you need to be connected here. Um, that's pretty important." She suggested wellness check-ins from professors. She had this experience and shared how she felt supported and accountable:

The support from my professors. I still have emails from them where they worked with me even past semesters, you know, and I know they didn't have to do that.

This was going into their time. See, when I saw them sacrificing for me. I wasn't the only one sacrificing here. It made me feel like I mattered.

Peer Community/Connection. All six participants indicated that a virtual space to connect with peers (outside of the virtual classroom) would be very beneficial for their emotional and mental wellness. Participants suggested universities should provide a virtual space that could serve as a supportive environment for other women, BIPOC individuals, or single mothers to form connections, network, and emotional support. The

participants indicated there was a need for a space to vent, feel heard, and understood by other women who genuinely understand the struggles. Participant 5 stated,

I think it would be good to have an outlet for us to talk.... It would be nice to have an outlet for the single moms be like, hey, how was your week? You know, just to go in it for us to talk to and chat and be like, hey, what's going on with y'all this week? Um, how's it going? Anybody need, you know, to take a breather, anybody needs to vent, you know, something for us, you know. Sometimes I know my friends probably get tired of me venting <laugh> and it might be a good thing to just have somewhere for us. To where other people know what we're going through.

Participant 2 also suggested,

A mom support group, I would love to have that, especially for single mothers. Just have like a support group for mothers just to vent, express how we feel, if we need to collaborate, to try to whatever, that would be awesome... to have that space to vent and just to check on each other to be supportive, like, I'd be there for you if you need anything.

Participant 3 suggested a support group and possible mentoring. She stated,

A mentor provided by the school would help. Maybe like a group that just belongs specifically to women who are mothers who are not married, or, you know, they're not living with a spouse or partner or something like that, cuz I'm not. You know, a group or something for them to kinda be motivation and mentors for one another. That even might, you know, just help ease the load just

a, just a little bit. I feel like maybe that mentor group or support just for the single moms would, would do wonders.

Participant 4 also shared, “Maybe a group for African American women, and we can network and talk to each other, you know, just seeing how we’re doing.”

Summary

This chapter included the setting of the study and the demographics of the participants. I described the data collection process, including the number of participants, the instrument used, and the platform from which the data was recorded. The revised research question was:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of BIPOC (specifically Black) single mother school counseling online graduate student attempting to complete practicum or internship requirements amid COVID-19?

I reported the data analysis procedures used to move inductively from coded units to larger representations including categories and themes. Evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were described. Finally, I provided direct quotations from the participant narratives for each of three themes and subthemes.

The results revealed the participants experienced many of the same barriers (educational, financial, emotional, mental, physical) during the COVID-19 pandemic that were found in the background literature review for this study. The participants experienced very high levels of multiple stressors during this time, as they tried to balance the responsibilities of a graduate student, single mother, and a job to financially

support their families. However, the results also revealed the participant's ability to use resources during the COVID-19 pandemic (additional time to complete courses due to quarantine, virtual job and site opportunities, unemployment financial assistance during COVID-19) to mitigate many of the barriers and move forward in their field experiences. The results revealed the women's ability to draw upon their belief in the importance of modeling success for their own children, a belief in the school counseling profession, and advocating for their future communities, specifically BIPOC K-12 students who may experience similar barriers to educational success. During this time, the participants sought to form relationships with other BIPOC women and recognized the need to strengthen their own emotional, mental, and/or spiritual supports to succeed. Finally, the results revealed two meaningful insights into the retention of these women. These included financial assistance and the importance of BIPOC peer/faculty connection.

Chapter 5 will include the interpretation of the findings in the context of womanist theory and intersectionality. Limitations of the study will be discussed as well as recommendations for further study. The chapter will address implications for positive social change, including counselor educators, university programs, and policy.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of BIPOC, single mother online graduate students, who were entering or currently in the field experience stage of their programs and the barriers these graduate students faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focused specifically on Black single mothers, who were more likely to stop pursuing their degrees during the pandemic (Foster, 2022; Rothwell, 2021). This study confirmed much of the background literature regarding the identified barriers Black single mothers experienced while completing their master's degree programs (Bhopal, 2020; Gabster et al., 2020; IWPR, 2021; Sanders, 2021; Son et al., 2020). This study also revealed the resourcefulness and inner strength of the woman herself, and how these Black single mothers utilized many of the COVID-19 accommodations to overcome these said barriers. Key findings have implications for theory, single mother master's level students, and counselor educators. This study may also provide additional insight for educational institutions, policy, and law makers to promote advocacy and positive social change.

The qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological nature of this study allowed me to seek a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by these women, coping skills utilized, and their progress toward overcoming these barriers to complete the field experience portion of their online school counseling programs during the global pandemic (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Crowther et al., 2017; Patton, 2015). Van Manan's approach, which was both descriptive and interpretative, allowed me to find meaning in their experiences and

provide a voice for these women (Heotis, 2020). To organize the data, I used the thematic framework analysis of familiarization, coding, charting, and mapping (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Kafle, 2011) as well as Laverly's (2003) cyclical methods in the process of data analysis and interpretation of the findings (Crist & Tanner, 2003). In this chapter, I will review the findings and offer an interpretation of these findings through the lens of womanist theory and intersectionality. I will outline the limitations of this study and discuss recommendations for future study. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with implications for theory, practice, and positive social change regarding the school counselor profession and education.

Interpretation of the Findings

The following section will include how the findings confirmed the significance of womanist theory and impact of intersectionality, as well as confirmed previous research outlined in the background literature of Chapter 2. The findings also revealed how these women utilized inner strength and resourcefulness amidst the barriers to continue to push forward in their programs. Finally, this section will extend knowledge of resources and recommendations based on the results revealed from the study. The findings are organized in three major themes. Theme 1 outlined the barriers experienced when completing field experience. Theme 2 revealed the resources utilized to mitigate barriers when completing field experience. Theme 3 informed recommendations for other BIPOC single mothers to succeed in their online graduate programs.

Barriers Experienced to Completing Field Experience

The barriers experienced by the participants of this study during the pandemic confirmed findings from previous literature regarding the impact of financial strain and increased stress. Unique barriers for the Black, single mother graduate students included experiencing a lack of balance, mom guilt, and loneliness, which also confirmed previous literature regarding the impact intersectionality played in the experiences of this population.

Coronavirus Pandemic [COVID-19]

The timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic posed unique barriers for the participants of this study to obtain and/or complete field experience in brick-and-mortar K-12 schools due to nationwide school closures and/or limited openings of schools. Barriers experienced by the participants included lack of communication from school districts, placement delays, and limited options due to schools not accepting interns as they began to reopen for their own students. Once sites were obtained, several participants described the difficulties of completing hours due to personal illness, family illness, or personal exposure to the coronavirus, which then required quarantine time away from their sites. The participants' concern of the quality of their field experience training, concern for the K-12 students who were no longer receiving services, and the various personal stressors experienced because of these events were consistent with the findings from previous literature (Chirikov et al.; King, 2020; Thompson, 2020). King (2020) discussed similar findings for other graduate counseling field experience students, including how clinical field opportunities decreased significantly due to site closures, site

medical policies, fear of exposure, and limited resources. King (2020) also noted the impact on graduate students including loss of hours to complete the semester delaying graduation, concerns of quality of their professional training, concerns for clients whose counseling care was halted, and most notably, the emotional stress graduate students experienced because of these events.

The literature also discussed the mental health crisis of the K-12 students in schools due to the pandemic (Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Nakk et al., 2020; Pincus et al., 2020). Many K-12 students, especially children of color with lower incomes who lacked the resources to obtain private clinicians, depended on mental health services through their schools and specifically from their school counselor(s) (Golberstein et al., 2020). Children with pre-existing mental and emotional disorders were negatively impacted as school mental health services and support halted (Shah et al., 2020).

Physical impacts from a disruption of schedule, meals, and/or sleep as well as regular social interaction and activity have been found to be additional consequences of the pandemic (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). The plethora of research on the immediate and long-term negative effects the pandemic had on K-12 students' academic skills, learning, knowledge, and potential careers all point to the need for a professional school counselor who is uniquely trained to meet the career, academic, social, and emotional needs of K-12 students (Arnove, 2020; ASCA, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2020; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Pincus et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020; Strear & Sunde,

2021). This was also consistent with one participant's vivid description of her frustration over the news reports of the academic decline and mental health crisis in the K-12 schools surrounding the pandemic. She also felt like the pandemic was preventing uniquely trained interns, who had the knowledge and skillset to help these students in career, academic, social, and/or emotional crisis, from entering the schools.

Black Woman, Single Mother, Graduate Student: Intersectionality

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 2018) acknowledges the interconnected nature of race, class, and gender which create an overlapping, interdependent system of disadvantage (Lexico, 2020). This study confirmed previous findings of the complex barriers BIPOC graduate students navigate, specifically Black women who are also single mothers in graduate school (Collins & Bilge, 2020; IWPR, 2020; Kruevelis et al., 2017; Vyskocil, 2018). Reviewing the participants' narratives revealed a complex interconnectedness that aligned with the definition of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 2018). It was important to review barriers in connection to each other because the participants' dueling identities and responsibilities contributed to their impact. The participants in this study described dueling responsibilities of the financial, educational, physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual needs of their families in addition to their own educational responsibilities (time and financial commitments) required to succeed in their school counseling field experience portion of their programs. The findings from this study confirmed Cruse et al. (2018) and Vyskocil's (2018) similar findings as well as highlighted aspects of Palermo-Kielb's (2020) study, which described the most common barrier revealed was the struggle to balance care responsibilities. For this study, the

intersectionality of the Black, single mother, graduate student revealed three common barriers to overcome while completing field experience. These included finding balance, overcoming mom guilt, and feeling alone in her educational journey.

Balance. One of the most common barriers single mothers experienced was the struggle to balance care responsibilities (self-care, physical wellness, psychological wellness), work responsibilities, and academic responsibilities (Palermo-Kielb, 2020). The participants in this study described the interconnection of finding balance between the educational responsibilities of a graduate student and the unique family responsibilities of a single mother. For example, the participants' school counseling field experience required daytime hours, typically from 8:00am to 4:00pm, to complete. Not only did this timeframe coincide with their own childcare needs, but these were also the same hours typically worked by these women to financially support their families.

While these women did secure jobs that allowed for some flexibility for childcare and field experience requirements (substitute teaching, online work, daycare, baking business), the flexibility also meant inconsistent and/or decreased wages. Busier academic times during the semester required more hours devoted to their school site and assignments, which resulted in fewer hours available to work, which then negatively impacted financial stability. Financial strains and instability also connected to the participants' stress, loneliness, and mom guilt. Some participants would work in the afternoons after their school practicum or internships; however, this resulted in an imbalance (or lack) of time to care for their own children after school. Participants who chose to work late in the evenings when their children were asleep noted an imbalance of

their own sleep patterns (to include prolonged periods of very little to no sleep), which then resulted in decreased physical wellness. This lack of rest and self-care resulted in physical exhaustion and/or reoccurring illness for a few of the participants. Similar findings were revealed in previous studies (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). This lack of balance further impacted all participants' ability to manage their stress levels, including feelings of mom-guilt.

Mom Guilt. Many mothers have a definition of what they consider qualities of a *good mother* should be (Collins, 2020). This definition is often derived from cultural norms, family expectations, community, societal norms, personal experiences, and even from various media platforms. When mothers feel that they are not living up to their perceived definition, they may experience feelings of guilt and/or shame. Collins (2020) defined mom-guilt as “guilt as a socially induced feeling of negative self-judgment” (p. 3). Carter and Rossi (2019) suggested Black women have cultural history of caring for others (family and community) over their own personal needs. This cultural norm of community value over personal value also reinforces feelings of mom-guilt if the woman sets a boundary to protect her time for her personal needs or engages in activities that are for herself and not necessarily connected to mothering (Carter & Rossi, 2019).

In connection to the lack of balance, all participants noted feelings of mom guilt associated with choosing to pursue their school counseling degree. One participant felt mom-guilt when she noticed a negative change in her child's behavior during this time, as her child was in daycare for most of the day. She shared feelings of guilt because her child was in daycare for an extended part of the day; therefore, she had less time to

interact with her child. Another participant noted a decline in her child's academics because her availability to assist her child with homework and studying was strained. One participant felt so emotionally drained from counseling other K-12 children that she expressed feeling guilty that she had nothing left emotionally to give her own child when she returned home. Negative self-talk was a common barrier for several participants in this study. Several participants reported feeling like a *bad parent* for the ramifications (extended daycare, lack of finances, lack of time, emotionally drained, etc.) of the commitment to complete field experience.

Self-care was omitted in general by all participants. The participants from this study tried to avoid feeling additional mom-guilt by making sure their families were cared for first, which left no additional time in the day to care for themselves. One participant doubted her abilities as a mother, counselor, and student as she struggled to balance. These findings were consistent with Hubert and Aujoulat's (2018) findings of mothers who experienced feelings of guilt and self-doubt associated with maternal exhaustion from trying to balance parental responsibilities, and feeling like they were not living up to these standards. For the present study, some of the participants experienced this intersection where they experienced mom guilt, but also loneliness and stress during this timeframe of their educational journey.

Alone. Loneliness was described by the participants in various forms. Several participants felt lonely in their own families, and another reported feeling lonely within her cultural community as well. Collins (2020) noted findings of women reporting not living up to their cultural definition of a good mother, which was defined as giving all her

attention and energy to her children only. This finding was consistent with one participant's report of feeling like single mothers pursuing degrees was not meeting her culture's norm of women solely focusing on their children's needs instead. Although needing additional help was part of balancing her responsibilities, asking for help with her children to complete field experience was difficult for all the participants. For some participants, this was especially difficult to ask family or community that they felt were not genuinely supporting her decision to pursue higher education. These findings were consistent with Hubert and Aujoulat's (2018) findings when their participants "reported a great sense loneliness" and "asking for help was not easy, thus adding to the burden that one is alone to cope with all kinds of expectations and responsibilities" (p. 6).

Other participants reported feeling lonely from a lack of diversity within their school counseling program faculty and peers, placement in predominantly white schools for fieldwork, and an overall struggle to relate to their married peers in the program. Palermo-Kielb (2020) found that single mother graduate students reported feeling like they did not belong. Participants for this study expressed how increased communication and connection with faculty members of color would have made them feel more like they belonged. All participants in this study expressed a need to connect with other women of color, and especially single mothers who would understand their unique barriers for moral and emotional support. Previous studies also confirmed the importance of faculty and peer connection/communication for BIPOC graduate students (Lopez-Perry et al., 2021).

Another common theme for the participants of this study was the importance of connection found in church and spirituality. To comply with health/safety regulations during the pandemic, churches began to close nationwide, which added another layer of loneliness for some of the participants. Several participants reported spiritual and emotional connection, as well as moral support, were found in their church communities. Weekly church attendance also met the need of self-care and support, which was hindered when church doors closed around the nation. DeSouza et al. (2021) reported that church attendance and prayer benefitted the spiritual and physical wellbeing of many Black individuals. Historically, Black churches serve as a valid space for coping, connection, and mental wellness for the Black community (DeSouza et al., 2021). Participants who relied on their church community for spiritual, emotional, and moral support during this stressful time lost this connection.

Financial Strain

An additional connection related to balance, stress, mom guilt, and loneliness was financial strain. Gabster et al. (2020) and Son et al. (2020) confirmed BIPOC single mother graduate students faced the barrier of economic hardship during the COVID-19 health pandemic. All six participants in this study experienced financial strain during the field experience portion of their program. Participants reported that navigating one income was a responsibility they primarily carried, alone. Examples of the connection to loneliness feeling were noted when participants reported, “*It’s just me*”, “*I am it*”, “*I am the back-up plan.*”

Some participants had to uproot their families and move homes several times, to include one participant moving to a new state for financial reasons. Another participant shared she was evicted and visited foodbanks to feed her family. One participant reported she looked forward to the financial aid to help, but it did not last for her family of five. The use of financial aid to sustain her family was another common theme.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (2019) reported single mothers have twice the student debt compared to their peers. This aspect of added stress was also expressed by the participants of this study. They reported that even when they graduate and obtain a full-time school counseling job, the student debt will be a looming stressor that far outweighs the salary of a school counselor. The financial strains increased participants' stress levels as they attempted to provide the basic needs for their families (housing, food, and clothes). Financial strain also connected back to mom guilt when participants recounted how their children also endured the hardships associated with their mother returning to graduate school.

Stress

All six participants in this study experienced various forms of stress. These included several intersections, including cultural and spiritual stress. Additional forms of stress experienced by the participants included emotional, mental, and physical stress. The physical consequences from prolonged and intense stress resulted in some participants experiencing reoccurring illness, anxiety, panic attacks, and/or migraines. Stress was a common theme found in previous studies of mothers attempting to cope with dueling responsibilities of motherhood her own needs (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). When

describing these stressors, some participants expressed they felt like they wanted to delay their program, and some wanted to completely give up. Also consistent with previous literature was the reality of these barriers placing this population at a higher risk for not completing their master's degrees (Dorn et al., 2020; King, 2020; Lee, 2020; Thompson, 2020).

Resources Used to Mitigate Barriers to Complete Field Experiences Amid Covid-19

Despite the hardships endured during the pandemic, the women in this study chose to use the very things that could have been a barrier to stop their program, as a source of motivation to overcome that said barrier and continue forward in their field experience. The main source of motivation for all six participants was the Black woman herself, the single mother. The participants used their inner (mental, emotional, spiritual) strength to seek out resources and accommodations provided during the pandemic. These resources were used to overcome barriers that could have held them back from their goal of pursuing school counseling careers and fulfill their belief in advocacy and giving back to their communities. These findings contributed to womanist theory where motherhood, community, survival, mental, emotional, and spiritual strength are foundational (Geetha & Thomas, 2020; Heath, 2006; Rousseau, 2013; Walker, 1983). Burrow (1999) discussed Alice Walker's description of the womanist which also aligned with the women's experiences in this study: "...women in the womanist tradition have generally been very mentally-emotionally strong, self-determined, sassy, survivalists, lovers of women and women's experience, as well as lovers of and caregivers to the black community. They have generally exhibited the trait of being in charge" (p. 42).

The Woman as the Resource Herself: Womanist Theory

Woman. Womanist theory interweaves mental, emotional, and spiritual connections in how Black women view, act, react, and cope with life experiences, and ultimately overcome barriers (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Burrows, 1999; Geetha & Thomas, 2020; Rousseau, 2013). Womanist theory is foundational of a Black woman's sense of community, belonging, strengths, values, survival, emotional, mental, and spiritual connection (Heath, 2006; Walker, 1983). "A Womanist perspective focuses on interpreting on how women make their way toward survival, wholeness, and enfranchisement for the African American community" (Taylor, 1998, p. 60). These foundational aspects were found in the women of this study. Similar to the findings of Palermo-Kielb (2020), the participants in this study recognized the need to mentally and emotionally regulate their thoughts and feelings to mitigate the barrier of stress that could stop them from completing their field experience. Engaging in personal counseling, utilizing positive self-talk to combat discouraging thoughts, and tapping into their internal survival mindset which strengthened their determination to succeed. Religious and spiritual supports to manage stress and balance emotions were also used to continue in field experience to move forward in their programs. Spiritual activities such as prayer, journaling, meditation, and attending church virtual or in person when open, were vital to decreasing stress and increasing determination to succeed. A strong motivator to succeed was the belief that school counseling was a *calling* and not just a job and serving in this profession was part of *God's bigger plan*. Belief in the spiritual aspect of her calling also

aligned with her belief that God would make a way for success reduced the fear and angst of failure.

Single Mother. The Black single mother's source of survival is often associated with strength, resilience, and emotional restraint to sustain herself and her family (Carter & Rossi, 2019). Burrows (1999) described these same historical attributes through womanist thought: "The roots of womanist thought, especially the idea of the strong, responsible, self-determined, in-charge black woman actually antedates American slavery" (p. 42). These same characteristics described the Black single mother graduate students in this study. The participants used their inner strength and determination to seek out whatever resources they could find to protect their children, protect their educational journey, and ultimately from the attainment of their school counseling degree, protect their belief in the responsibility to give back and advocate for their Black communities. Burrows (1999) described Black mothers as the "chief protector and defender of the black family" and "Black women are considered the primary caregivers in Black families" (p. 48). Survival is also a key component of womanist theory (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Burrows, 1999). As such, the act of finding resources for these women and their children to survive amid times of difficulty (such as the pandemic), is a deeply rooted, historical trait these women already possessed.

Palermo-Kielb (2020) found that resourcefulness and organization were motivators for academic success (or survival) of the single mother online graduate student. As single mothers, the participants in this study were already accustomed to the preplanning, management, and organization needed to balance the duties of caring for a

family without a significant other to share the responsibilities. The women in this study applied these same survival skills of preplanning, time management, multi-tasking, and organization to decrease stress and mitigate barriers that might have prevented them from completing field experience. These survival skills supported the participants' resourcefulness to use accommodations provided during COVID-19 as a pathway to meet the basic needs of her family, as well as support her academic needs to move forward in the program.

CACREP (2016) accredited school counseling programs require 700 hours of field experience as part of their graduation requirements. This often results in the need for students to significantly reduce working hours or cease working altogether to complete the 700 hours of field work required to successfully complete their degree. Internships in educational settings are typically unpaid. Universities and school districts consider the benefits of practicum and internship (experiential learning, on-site training, and skills practice under a licensed supervisor) to far outweigh any financial compensation for serving in the school. Furthermore, the experiential learning, on-site training, and skills practice are part of the course objectives and tied to the student's grades/GPA. The graduate student is meeting course requirements to pass and graduate, as well as receiving on the job training (Binder et al., 2015; Discenna, 2016; Durack, 2013; Eggum, 2020). This is considered the *compensation* for serving in the school. While there are positive aspects of unpaid internships for an intern's future career, Durack (2013) and Rothschild and Rothschild (2020), also discussed the negative aspects of unpaid internships, to include financial hardship. Durak (2013) suggested, "Students who are

required to complete an internship to meet degree requirements must have the financial resources to absorb a loss of income from accepting an unpaid internship...” (p. 251).

The participants in this study reported knowing the commitment of field placement would further strain their economic hardship which was already present due to caring for her family on a single income. Pre-COVID-19, graduate students would reduce their work hours or take a leave of absence, thus losing wages that were critical for basic needs. Several participants in this study entered field placement during the pandemic. Although several participants stopped working/decreased their hours due to closures during the pandemic, they would have needed to reduce hours or take a leave of absence regardless because of the hour requirement of field experience. The factor which made a positive difference for several participants was the COVID-19 accommodations that became available at the same time of their field experience semester. Families were able to receive stimulus checks, advanced child tax credits, unemployment benefits, and financial assistance for food, housing, and bills in the U.S. (USA.gov, 2023). One participant reported she had more income when her work hours were reduced to 20 instead of 40 hours per week, due to the COVID-19 financial assistance (unemployment funding) she received to make up for her lost wages. Not only did this financial assistance allow her to provide for her family, but the reduced work hours allowed her to better balance her time spent at her practicum site, which then resulted in more time spent with her child.

The women in this study were also able to find additional resources through the COVID-19 closures of their places of employment, schools, and social activities. In

addition to the financial resources noted above, closure of jobs sites and closure of social activities provided the gift of time. One participant reported there were no social activities to attend, therefore she devoted this extra time to her studies and to her children. Several women found additional resources due to places of employment moving to online platforms. One participant obtained work online, which allowed her to stay home with her children, have flexibility in her work hours, and earn additional funds. The closing of universities did not negatively affect the participants, as their online programs continued as normal. Although it was difficult to secure a brick-and-mortar school placement for most of the participants, they were able to step into virtual school counseling internship/practicum roles and obtain hours counseling students via technology. While schools across the nation were researching, creating online platforms, and exploring various virtual meeting spaces for the first time (Cardullo et al., 2022; Jaggars, 2021), the participants in this study already felt knowledgeable and confident in this role from their online program experience. For this present study, the skills needed of a single mother online graduate student to survive proved to be beneficial because the skills they used to navigate their everyday lives, were the same skills needed to navigate through the pandemic.

Black. An integral aspect of womanist theory is the connection and support found in family, community, and/or other significant Black women (Geetha & Thomas, 2020; Heath, 2006; Rousseau, 2013; Walker, 1983). Participants reported a sense of knowing who the genuine supporters of their success were. As noted above, asking for assistance was especially difficult for single mothers who felt unsupported (Hubert & Aujoulat,

2018). Each of the participants in this study experienced genuine support and relied on this support from at least one family member or significant woman in their life.

Supportive family members (especially mothers) were the most common source of emotional and tangible support for the participants, which they credited for much of their successful completion of field experience.

Another motivator to persevere was found in supportive relationships with other BIPOC women in their online school counseling programs. Several participants reported connecting with a few BIPOC and/or single mother classmates via phone/text. The synchronous virtual platform for faculty group supervision was an example of how participants found their initial connections with other women of similar background. While the women were able to check in with each other during the supervision session, it was outside of the virtual classroom setting/supervision platform (email, phone, text, etc.) that more authentic/genuine emotional and/or spiritual connection and relationship building took place. For these relationships to be genuine/authentic, the women reported the need to feel safe to share their struggles with other women who navigated similar struggles.

Apugo (2019) also found peer relationships among Black women graduate students were crucial for their success. Black women who did not have these connections had a more difficult educational journey through their programs (Apugo, 2019; Apugo, 2017). Apugo (2019) suggested “the relationships that Black women graduate students have with one another can be vital sources of strength, affirmation, and empowerment

that provide critical support outlets in spaces where Black women's identities and cultures are often treated as other" (p. 225).

Other participants reported that finding and connecting with a BIPOC advisor or BIPOC faculty member was vital. Previous research confirms the importance of BIPOC mentors in higher education for BIPOC student success (Harris & Lee, 2019; Apugo, 2021). Several women reported their faculty connection was a significant reason they were still moving forward in their field experience. Initially, the participants were reluctant to share their struggles and seek assistance for these. However, when a faculty member initiated the relationship to get to know the struggles of the Black single mother and offer assistance, the participants reported feeling less anxious in general. Most did not need to use any accommodations, however just knowing their professor was supportive and knowing the accommodations were there if needed, increased the women's sense of emotional safety and academic success. Genuine/authentic, supportive relationships were imperative to the participants' feeling heard, understood, and supported.

Validation of professional identity and the belief in the importance for caring for her community were also strong motivators to persevere through field experience. The barriers navigated through their own educational journey strengthened their sense of advocacy for other BIPOC single mother graduate students and for their future K-12 students' educational barriers as well. The American School Counseling Association (2022) ethical standards outlines school counseling responsibilities to include identifying and removing barriers to K-12 academic success and providing equitable education and

opportunities. Advocacy for school policies, procedures, and culturally responsive interventions to remove/mitigate barriers to academic success are also responsibilities of school counselors (ASCA, 2022). The women in this study identified barriers and used culturally responsive coping skills to remove/mitigate barriers that may have prevented them from completing field experience. The women reported how the experiences of their own graduate level educational journey would be a helpful tool to assist BIPOC K-12 students and their families who experience similar barriers to academic success amid crisis and in general. It was their hope that the knowledge of culturally relevant resources (meaningful/genuine connection, emotional/mental/spiritual supports, community financial assistance and resources, etc.) gained from their experience would be passed on to help other BIPOC K-12 students in their communities navigate barriers to academic success.

Limitations of the Study

For this study, I used qualitative methods to seek the subjective view from the participants' narratives. However, Sutton and Austin (2015) noted a drawback of qualitative study which was: "there are no statistical tests that can be used to check reliability and credibility as there are in quantitative research" (p. 229). To increase accuracy and credibility of qualitative methods, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested researchers should engage in four elements of trustworthiness. One limitation of trustworthiness may be found in the element of credibility, or confidence in the *truth* of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sutton & Austin, 2015). It is unknown the level of trust that was granted to me by the participants during the interview and member

checking process. While I took measures to build rapport, provided comfort, and approached the questions with cultural humility, I am a white, married, woman, who is employed in higher education. Mistrust may have occurred if participants viewed me synonymously with white privilege in higher education (Bhopal, 2020). In addition, the nature of rapport building and trust often requires time to develop. Full trust may not have been granted during the one-hour interview after meeting these women face-to-face, via virtual platform, for the first time. which may have resulted in participants withholding additional experiences, details, and/or emotions they may have felt I would not be able to identify with (Bhopal, 2020). It is also unknown if aspects of the women's stories were omitted or downplayed because this was an interview setting, rather than a mutual space to connect with other Black single mother graduate students who have navigated similar experiences.

A second limitation may be found in the element of transferability or showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sutton & Austin, 2015). This study was conducted during the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic, where schools were closed, closing, and/or attempting to reopen. The events amid COVID-19 that took place world-wide were experienced for the first time. Dependability was demonstrated as the experiences of the Black single mother graduate students in this study were consistent with the experiences of other Black single mother graduate students in previous research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sutton & Austin, 2015). However, the literature is sparse regarding the experiences of Black single mother, school counseling specific, graduate students during other contexts, such as another event/crisis

that would cause world-wide closures of schools. It is unknown if similar barriers and/or resources will be found in the event of school closures amid another nationwide crisis, widespread illness, or natural disaster, etc.

Recommendations

The original intention of this study was to interview BIPOC single mothers in graduate CACREP accredited school counseling programs. When reaching out to online CACREP school counseling programs, the feedback from various program leadership was positive and encouraging for the topic of study, however I was informed on several occasions that some programs did not have many (if any) students that met the criteria for the study. I was unable to locate other women of color who identify as single mothers who have completed their online school counseling field experience during the pandemic. I was able to interview six Black women for this study. Their narratives provided rich cultural and contextual knowledge that added and confirmed many aspects of womanist theory and intersectionality. However, this study was not able to capture stories, strengths, or recommendations from the unique cultural lens of other women of color.

The American Red Cross Foundation (2023) listed several natural disasters that have occurred in the United States to include earthquakes, hurricanes, winter and tropical storms, tornados, and flooding. In addition, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) report there are still many cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. and across the world at the time of the conclusion of this study. Therefore, it is plausible to expect additional events, such as natural disasters, worldwide illness, etc. will occur in the future that could cause school closures. Future research should expand to include the

experiences of other women of color who are single mother graduate students attempting to complete their school counseling field experience during events such as natural disasters or nationwide illness, that cause school closures. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) indicated there were women of color, some of whom were single mothers, who completed their graduate degrees despite barriers experienced during the pandemic. Researching single mother school counseling graduate student experiences of other women of color will expand upon the cultural and contextual knowledge, including unique barriers and resources regarding this topic.

Implications

Attrition rates of BIPOC single mother graduate students contribute to the systemic concern of underrepresented populations succumbing to barriers which impede the academic success, retention, and completion of a graduate degree (Cisneros et al., 2022; Preston, 2017). This contributes to the continuation of the disparity of underrepresented BIPOC who will serve in these educational professions, such as school counseling, which utilize advocacy and social justice efforts to promote academic, career, and social, and emotional wellness of others (Clarke, 2020; USCB, 2021). Addressing these barriers have implications for counselor educators, educational leadership within graduate school counseling programs, and policy makers who create/implement programs to assist online graduate students.

Implications for Theory

Womanist Theory and Intersectionality

Hudson-Weems (1997) suggested the use of Africana theory “makes possible for better monitoring interpretations of our works in an effort to keep them both authentic and accurate in order to maintain their originality in meaning and value” (p. 79).

Approaching research from the perspective of the researcher and not from the perspective of the population sought to understand, omits the ability to truly “analyze and extricate the many layers of interpretations that lie within” (p.79). The qualitative researcher’s perspective is not excluded, rather the researcher must refrain from hastily assigning meaning to the narrative based on their lens (bias). The researcher must be intentional in preserving the authenticity and truthfulness of the narrative through the relevant perspective of the participant foremost, before making sense (or interpreting) the data for themselves. In essence, I sought to understand the stories of these women from their perspective to preserve its truthfulness. If I, as the researcher, interpret their perspective from my lens (white woman, married, working higher education) the meaning of the content would have changed to match my perspective, which weakens authenticity and truthfulness.

The womanist theoretical lens with tenants of intersectionality offers added perspective to the importance of considering the Black woman’s cultural history, beliefs, strengths, and supports that are utilized to overcome barriers (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Another aspect of womanist theory is the Black woman’s commitment to the survival of wholeness, family, and community (Musanga & Mukhuba, 2019). The commitment to

wholeness speaks to the importance of embracing the intersectional identities of the Black woman. As defined in Chapter 1, intersectionality is the interconnected nature of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and ethnicity which create an overlapping, interdependent system of disadvantage (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Lexico, 2020). The interconnected nature (intersectionality) of Black, woman, single mother, graduate student, age, class, ability, ethnicity, mental, emotional, spiritual, etc. did play a role in the type and severity of the barriers experienced. However, the women in this study embraced these same intersections and were committed to the wholeness of them within herself. The women utilized these same interconnections (Black, woman, single mother, graduate student, age, class, ability, ethnicity, mental, emotional, spiritual, etc.) as her source of strength and survival, which is the very foundation of womanist theory. The stronger these connections are intertwined, the stronger her ability to survive. This was pivotal in how these women viewed, acted upon, reacted, and coped with life experiences, and ultimately overcame barriers that would have prevented them from field experience.

Intersectionality is often associated with barriers, disadvantage, social, and political impact. While this study acknowledged this association, the womanist lens allowed for a different perspective of advantage, strength, commitment, and wisdom:

Many African American women view experience as a distinguishing feature that separates knowledge from wisdom. Knowledge in this sense is akin to having particular information, whereas wisdom is understanding how to apply the information appropriately to achieve the desired results in a given situation.

Having wisdom based on experience is seen as crucial to individual and collective survival in the oppressive environment. (Banks-Wallace, 2000, pp. 37-38)

Based on this description, the women's experience with intersectionality is likened to knowledge and their understanding of how to apply this information to survive (wisdom) is likened to womanist theory.

Implications for Practice

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs requires their accredited programs to “make continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community” (CACREP, 2016, p.7). Therefore, school counseling program leaders should seek out and implement interventions that are evidenced and researched based, as well as culturally relevant to increase the effectiveness and success of the intervention in promoting and retaining diverse students. Banks-Wallace (2000) also suggested this imperative practice:

Interventions that are consistent with African American women's ways of knowing are more likely to be successful in promoting behavior change amongst this population. Furthermore, research designs grounded in culturally consistent epistemologic frameworks may offer opportunities to integrate healing and scholarly inquiry consciously. (p. 34)

Counselor Education

University Faculty Community/Connection. It is vital for school counseling programs to educate and train counselor educators of the unique social, emotional, and

academic needs of this population to assist in the mitigation of barriers which support their academic success. Leaders in graduate school counseling programs should encourage increased communication and intentional connection with online students, specifically Black single mothers who utilize these connections as supports to sustain their academic progress. Intentional relationship-building is essential for this populations' need for genuineness and trust between the graduate student and their faculty member (Lopez-Perry et al., 2021).

Palermo-Kielb (2020) found that single mother graduate students reported feeling like they did not belong. Participants for this study expressed how increased communication and connection with more faculty members of color would have made them feel more like they belonged and their contribution to the program mattered. Previous studies also confirmed the importance of this mentor-mentee connection and communication for BIPOC graduate students. Lopez-Perry et al. (2021) suggested counselor educators should be intentional in creating spaces and opportunities for meaningful discussion and relationship building. Lopez-Perry et al. (2021) noted, "Discussions and supports can center around feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, peer disconnection, and faculty misunderstanding" (p. 14). Cisneros et al. (2022) added that culturally responsive faculty whose mindset and behaviors promote social justice and advocacy are more likely to be trusted as mentors for graduate students of color. Paolucci et al. (2021) further suggested it was vital for faculty to consider the graduate student's personal, social, and emotional realities that are brought into the academic space. Therefore, the effectiveness of their culturally responsive mentorship, guidance, counsel,

and role modeling can be a pivotal intervention for this population's academic longevity and success.

School counseling graduate programs should provide faculty training to support the overall well-being of their graduate students. Paolucci et al. (2021) suggested, "it is important for faculty and graduate administrators to view graduate students on a wellness continuum from when they begin their programs through to when they complete" (pp. 84-85). Program leaders can work with their faculty to explore accommodations that still hold students to the high level of academic integrity they expect to receive from their educational institution, while also allowing for flexibility (if needed) due to unforeseen or unexpected life experiences that may hinder successful progression. For example, the participants were not in need of resources to help them understand the material for field experience. For the study, the participants indicated their skills and knowledge were present. The participants reported needing tangible assistance, such as additional time without penalty to complete an assignment or additional time to secure funds to purchase educational resources for a course, such as a required reading material. School counseling program leadership should create an environment for their faculty to intentionally seek out communication to understand unique barriers, build rapport and trust, and seek to build the professional, teaching, and supervisory relationships that are researched and evidenced based as an intervention for student retainment (Cisneros et al., 2022; Lopez-Perry et al., 2021). Faculty who has a deeper understanding of the barriers are better equipped to provide accommodations that are appropriate for the graduate student. Paolucci et al. (2021) described the vitality of counselor educators wholistically

considering the academic success of their graduate students to include the connectedness and overall social, emotional, mental wellness of their graduate students.

University Peer Community/Connection. Black women “have long understood the need to pass on historic life-saving values such as respect for self, family, the elderly, the community, spiritual values, the importance of working cooperatively to overcome problems, giving back to the community, and the value of hard work” (Burrow, 1999, p.44). Connection with BIPOC single mother graduate peers for genuine emotional support during this time of their programs was also highly desired. Inviting Black, single mother graduate students to participate and contribute their knowledge and wisdom through an online community may be essential to development of the sense of community which is desired by the Black single mother graduate student (Banks-Wallace, 2000). To facilitate this online peer mentoring/supportive community, school counseling graduate programs can seek BIPOC student/faculty leadership to sanction online virtual connection groups for Black single, mother students. Educational institutions can implement these structural peer-mentoring groups and also ensure accessibility of the online graduate student through a virtual platform (Paolucci et al., 2021). Staying true to the womanist’s belief in the importance of connection and community, the participants in this study suggested online virtual groups that met monthly would not only benefit Black single mothers, but all single mothers and/or all women of color. Creating and implementing interventions (such as virtual peer communities) is an ethical responsibility of the educational institution and counselor

educators to increase connection, an overall wellbeing, and academic success (Paolucci et al., 2021).

University Financial Support. The financial assistance provided during the pandemic allowed the participants to allot the funds where she needed assistance. The participants reported there were times they needed additional funds for food, gas, rent, clothes, etc. These funds were especially helpful for their unexpected expenses, specifically during the time of an unpaid internship. Previous research as explored both positive and negative aspects of unpaid internships (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Discenna, 2016; Durack, 2013; Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). Unpaid interns were favored for employment, students typically performed better because the experience was connected to their grades/GPA, and interns are gaining valuable skills training and practice in their desired career setting (Durak, 2013; Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). However, the financial strain of completing an unpaid practicum or internship places additional financial stress and increased disparity of lower income students, specifically single mothers who are the main source of financial support for family's needs.

There are financial assistance programs available to single mother students, however the participants reported feeling that the advertisement and communication of these from universities was lacking. In addition, for the more widely well-known programs, there were very specific qualifications the single mother must meet to receive the financial assistance. For example, some brick-and-mortar colleges offer on-site childcare and use funding and resources from programs such as the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program. These programs are helpful for the brick-

and-mortar college student, however on-campus childcare is not an option for the online graduate student. Single mothers may qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), however how these funds are allotted depends on the state. Some programs require the single mother to be eligible for one program to be eligible for another. For example, the Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) and the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) require the single mother to receive TANF first, in order to be eligible for CARE or CalWORKs funding. One participant reported she did not want to use specific childcare assistance because she would be required to only use specific childcare programs that were approved by the grant. She reported, "*I am not leaving my child with just anyone!*" She also reported she had a negative experience with the lack of proper care her child received previously, therefore she was extremely selective of who she allowed to care for her child. Not having this choice, meant not applying for this assistance.

A lengthy search is often needed to seek out many financial assistance programs that the single mother feels she may be eligible for. However, research, reading, discussing, setting up appointments with, applying, and waiting all take time. Unfortunately, lack of time was a significant reality of the single mother online graduate student in this study. In addition to the supportive peer communities, school counselor educational programs could disseminate contacts, resources, and knowledge of financial aid programs specific to the online graduate students within their program. This would save valuable time for the single mother who may not have the additional hours to spend sifting through programs to find eligible options. The participants in this study also

reported the need for financial assistance that allowed the single mother a choice of where these funds would be helpful at the time. Needs changed from month to month and unexpected expenses were inevitable. O’Hara (2022) suggested four major areas of need for the single mother: resources, flexibility, career counseling, and community. The need for flexibility and freedom to choose how the single mother cares for her family and herself is great (O’Hara, 2022).

Implications for Positive Social Change in the School Counseling Profession

School Counseling Profession

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) discusses the importance of helping students remove or mitigate barriers that would impede their academic success (ASCA, 2020). ASCA published various position statements, ethical codes for school counselors, standards for school counselor educator programs. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019) also outlines mindsets and behaviors expected of professional school counselors. Examples (not all-inclusive) of the beliefs (mindsets) include “every student can learn, and every student can succeed. Every student should have access to and opportunity for a high-quality education. School counseling programs promote and enhance student academic, career, and social/emotional outcomes” (ASCA, 2019, p. 1). School counselor behaviors include (but not all-inclusive) identifying gaps in academic achievement, opportunities, and resources, “demonstrate understanding of the impact of cultural, social and environmental influences on student success and opportunities” (ASCA, 2019, p. 2), create culturally relevant programs to remove or mitigate gaps, ultimately, to promote systemic change in their schools and communities.

School counselor educators have the ability to model these same mindsets and behaviors with their school counseling online graduate students, and especially for those students with complex barriers that impede their academic achievement. Modeling these interventions may be an effective strategy to teach online graduate students the relevance and effectiveness of their use to mitigate barriers. For the Black woman, experiencing interventions that are culturally relevant as well as researched based as effective will move the learning environment from knowledge to wisdom. Knowledge of this information (school counselor behaviors and mindsets) is essential, however engaging in the application of this information (wisdom) is indispensable.

Conclusion

The mental health concerns of K-12 students, especially amid the pandemic, increased the job outlook for school counseling professionals (Pincus et al., 2020). The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) confirmed this prediction by projecting a 10% increase in school counseling jobs by 2031. School counselor educator programs can use many of the same principals they teach their graduate students to implement in the K-12 schools, to also assist their graduate students completing their school counseling programs. Counselor educators can promote longevity in systemic change by creating and implementing relevant interventions that will ultimately assist Black single mother students graduate, obtain their license, and school counseling position. This will ultimately result in the school counselors engaging in mindsets and behaviors, creating, and implementing culturally responsive interventions that help their K-12 students mitigate barriers and promote academic success. Counselor educators can learn from the

experiences of Black, single mother graduate students which apply this knowledge into action which ultimately produces wisdom.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What was/is your experience in finding a school placement for practicum or internship during the coronavirus pandemic?
2. In what ways did the following factors impact your practicum/internship search experience during the coronavirus pandemic?
 - Culture
 - Race
 - Gender
 - Socio-economic status
 - Single-mother responsibilities/concerns
3. What barriers did you face in finding a school placement for practicum or internship during the coronavirus pandemic?
4. Describe how this experience (or barriers) affected you:
 - Mentally
 - Emotionally
 - Spiritually
5. Describe how this experience (or barriers) affected your:
 - Personal life
 - Family
 - Finances
 - Education

6. Describe the supports/strengths used during the pandemic (or currently) to cope with the mental, emotional, or spiritual effects of this experience.
 - Family
 - Community
 - Church/Religion/Spirituality
7. Reflecting on this experience and the specific supports/strengths utilized to cope with or overcome described barriers, what recommendations would you provide for school counseling programs to implement to assist BIPOC single mother graduate students seeking practicum or internship during a pandemic or other event which could impede on program completion?

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Study seeks participants to share their experiences of finding practicum or internship sites amid school closures during the Coronavirus Pandemic

There is a new study called “*Narratives of BIPOC Single Mothers Pursuing School Counseling Field Experience amid COVID-19*” that could help program leaders understand the unique barriers faced by these graduate students during the pandemic. The findings from this study may reveal potential solutions, program suggestions, and/or initiatives to support BIPOC single mother online school counseling graduate students in their successful completion of their educational program.

This research is part of the doctoral study for Kerry Bowles, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. The approved IRB #03-24-22-0756573.

About the Study:

- One 45–60-minute confidential interview via Zoom
- Volunteers may choose the time and day for convenience of schedule
- To protect your privacy, no names or identifiable information will be released

Volunteers must meet these Requirements:

- Must be 18 years old
- Must identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)
- Must identify as a Single Mother
- Current School Counseling graduate student attending an online CACREP program
- Must be beginning practicum or internship portion of program

To volunteer for this study, please contact
Kerry Bowles at kerry.bowles@waldenu.edu

Or

Please complete this confidential interest form and
the researcher will contact you for next steps:
<https://forms.gle/YTAh8fybQ1Lk1LL46>

Appendix C: Demographic Form

Link: <https://forms.gle/PEUnqZiQhZmR92Wv5>

1. What gender do you identify as?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Prefer not to say
 - d. Other: _____
2. Please identify your ethnicity. _____
3. If applicable, please specify your religion. _____
4. What state do you live in? _____
5. What is your age? _____
6. Please indicate your relationship status.
 - a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. Separated
 - d. Divorced
 - e. In a relationship
7. Do you have any children?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. How many children do you have? ____
9. Are you currently a single parent?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. Are you a current master's student in a school counseling program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
11. Is your school counseling program CACREP accredited?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

12. Is your school counseling program residential or online?
 - a. Online
 - b. Residential

13. Is your university/college private or public?
 - a. Private
 - b. Public

14. Are you getting ready to enter practicum/internship?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

15. Are you currently in practicum/internship?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

16. What is your current employment status?
 - a. Employed Full-Time
 - b. Employed Part-Time
 - c. Seeking opportunities
 - d. Not employed
 - e. Prefer not to say

17. What is your annual household income?
 - a. Less than \$25,000
 - b. \$25,000 - \$50,000
 - c. \$50,000 - \$75,000
 - d. \$75,000 - \$100,000
 - e. Over \$100,000
 - f. Prefer not to say