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Professional Identity Development of Black Women Counselor Education and Supervision Students in Predominantly White Institutions

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Professional Identity Development of Black Women Counselor Education and Supervision Students in Predominantly White Institutions

by

Demetria Burleson

MEd, Lamar University, 2015

BA, Langston University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Black women in counselor education and supervision (CES) programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) face unique challenges that significantly influence their professional identity development (PID). Systemic barriers, such as microaggressions, racial stereotyping, and limited institutional support, remain pervasive and underexplored in literature. The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of PID among Black women enrolled in CES doctoral programs at CACREP-accredited PWIs. This qualitative study, guided by Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology and informed by intersectionality and social cognitive career theory, aimed to illuminate the lived experiences of Black women in these academic spaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants who were Black women either enrolled in or recently graduated from CACREP-accredited CES programs at PWIs within the past 5 years. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes using the hermeneutic circle: navigating PID, barriers to success in CES programs, resilience and coping strategies, contributions to the counseling profession, and recommendations for institutional change. Findings highlighted the importance of culturally responsive mentorship, peer support, and adaptive strategies in overcoming systemic barriers while fostering professional growth. This study highlights the need for institutional reforms such as curriculum revisions, inclusive mentorship, and affirming academic environments to empower Black women, promote systemic equity, and advance the counseling profession.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to every Black woman who has ever faced challenges in pursuit of her dreams. Your resilience, strength, and courage inspire this work and serve as a reminder that our voices matter. To my family and loved ones, thank you for your unwavering support, love, and encouragement throughout this journey. You are my foundation and my greatest motivation. Finally, to the women who shared their stories in this study. This is for you. Your experiences and insights are the heartbeat of this research, and I am honored to amplify your voices.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Counselor education and supervision (CES) programs are essential for training future counselors and supervisors, equipping them with the advanced skills and knowledge necessary to support diverse client populations. These programs focus on counseling theories, practices, and research methodologies, preparing graduates for leadership roles in various professional contexts (Borders et al., 2014; Litherland et al., 2020). As CES doctoral programs exist within various educational structures, they are subject to cultural influences. At PWIs, where the majority of students and faculty are White, institutional culture can significantly shape educational experiences, particularly for minority students. Predominantly White institutions play a critical role in shaping the cultural and educational experiences of minority students, including those enrolled in CES programs. Research highlights that the racial and cultural climate at PWIs can affect the academic and professional development of minority students, influencing their sense of belonging, identity formation, and overall success (Grant, 2022).

Accreditation standards, such as those established by CACREP, provide a framework for ensuring program quality and consistency across institutions (Limberg et al., 2023). Recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), CACREP's updated 2024 Standards emphasize the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility (DEIBA), requiring programs to integrate these principles into their curricula, faculty development, and student support systems. Programs are now required to demonstrate excellence in curriculum design, faculty qualifications, and equitable assessment practices while fostering inclusive environments

that affirm diverse identities. This approach aligns the educational experience with the needs of a diverse student population and ensures graduates are prepared to work effectively with clients from various cultural backgrounds. These measures not only assure the quality of education but also increase the professional credibility, employability, and cultural competence of graduates (CACREP, 2024). For Black women in CES programs, these measures are particularly vital in navigating the pressures associated with race, gender, and institutional culture (Bennett et al., 2021; CACREP, 2024). Addressing these dynamics is essential for fostering environments that enable students, particularly those from marginalized groups, to thrive academically, personally, and professionally (Bennett et al., 2021).

Professional identity development is another critical area supported by accreditation bodies like CACREP. In CES programs, PID is particularly significant, as future counselors and supervisors are not only developing advanced skills but also shaping their professional identities (Crumb et al., 2023). Within PWIs, the underrepresentation of Black women presents unique challenges to PID, as these environments often fail to provide the necessary cultural responsiveness and support systems (Henfield et al., 2013; Wilson, 2021). Examining these interconnected components is essential for identifying systemic barriers and creating strategies to foster inclusive and equitable educational experiences (Marom & Hardwick, 2024).

A notable gap remains in the literature concerning the PID of Black women enrolled in CES programs at PWIs, highlighting the need for further exploration of their unique experiences and challenges (Ngadjui, et al., 2024). This gap highlights a limited

understanding of the distinct challenges these students encounter as they navigate their professional identities within CACREP-accredited programs. These challenges often stem from systemic inequities, microaggressions, and a lack of culturally responsive support structures (Crumb et al., 2023; Ngadjui & Doughty Horn, 2024). Addressing this research gap is crucial for identifying effective support systems and resources that can empower Black women in CES programs to succeed academically and professionally. Furthermore, insights from such studies could inform the development of more inclusive and equitable learning environments, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting the retention and advancement of Black women in CACREP-accredited CES programs at PWIs (Crumb et al., 2023; Griffith, 2024).

Background

Several researchers have documented the challenges faced by Black women counselors, often involving the interplay of racism and sexism (Brown & Grothaus, 2019; Grzanka et al., 2017; Haskins et al., 2023; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Wester et al., 2023). Black women in CES programs often face intersectional microaggressions based on their race and gender, which significantly impact their experiences (Baker & Moore, 2015; Brooks et al., 2023). Intersectional microaggressions are subtle, often unconscious, discriminatory behaviors that target individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups. These microaggressions amplify the complexities of discrimination by intersecting various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Nadal et al., 2015). For example, a Black woman may encounter a microaggression that undermines her race and gender, such as being described as “articulate for a Black

woman," which reinforces harmful stereotypes. These compounded microaggressions are more damaging than those targeting a single identity aspect, as they perpetuate exclusion and marginalization (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020).

In addition to microaggressions, Black women in CES programs at PWIs often encounter marginalization, inadequate mentorship, the need to code-switch, and a lack of belonging (Baker & Moore, 2015; Brooks et al., 2023). Research has also identified the phenomenon of tokenism among Black students, which contributes to their feelings of being undervalued and overlooked in academic and professional contexts (Wester et al., 2023). These challenges can hinder their PID, leaving students feeling frustrated and unsupported within the professional community (Cartwright et al., 2021; Wester et al., 2023). The cumulative impact of these experiences can result in emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and disengagement from academic and professional opportunities (Brooks et al., 2023; Mulzac, 2022; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Moreover, the solitary burden of navigating these obstacles may deter some Black women from pursuing advanced leadership roles, ultimately undermining diversity and representation in higher education and the counseling profession (Brown et al., 2020; Robinson, 2014). Acknowledging and addressing these difficulties is the first step in providing effective support and resources to enable Black women to succeed in PWI environments (Crumb et al., 2023).

Understanding these dynamics is critical in CES programs, where fostering inclusive learning environments is essential for the PID of Black women (Haskins et al., 2023). Professional identity development refers to the process by which individuals internalize the values, norms, and practices of the counseling profession (Scott, 2018).

Professional identity development is an ongoing process, requiring reflective practice, goal setting, and feedback from mentors to enhance professional identity (Borders et al., 2014; Gibson et al., 2010; Litherland et al., 2023; Thacker & Diambra, 2019). A strong sense of professional identity is essential for counselors, as it underpins their confidence, ethical decision-making, and commitment to the profession. However, Black women CES students navigate layers of identity, evolving confidence, and perceived legitimacy through transformational tasks encountered during their doctoral studies (Dollarhide et al., 2013). Findings emphasize that integrating multiple identities, developing confidence, and accepting professional responsibilities are essential tasks for PID (Borders et al., 2014; Dollarhide et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2010; Wester et al., 2023). The outcomes underscore that PID for CES students is a lifelong process, with each transformational task contributing to knowledge acquisition and progression within the counseling profession.

Despite the importance of PID, Black counseling students and professionals frequently report limited connections with their peers and faculty at PWIs, a dynamic often attributed to underrepresentation and inadequate support, as well as cultural differences that are insufficiently addressed within these environments (Brown & Grothaus, 2019; Rolle, 2021). These factors hinder full engagement in their educational and professional development. This dynamic further impedes their PID and career progression (Patterson-Stephens & Vital, 2017). The lack of recognition, cultural sensitivity, and institutional support at PWIs has been linked to higher attrition rates among Black counseling students, who often perceive themselves as marginalized and

undervalued in their roles (Mittman et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of establishing institutional support such as mentorship programs, diversity training, and inclusive policies to promote equitable professional development opportunities.

Mentorship, particularly from Black faculty or professionals with shared experiences, has been shown to provide vital guidance and support (Cartwright et al., 2021; Haskins et al., 2023; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Wester et al., 2023). These students encounter unique challenges, including navigating cultural and institutional barriers that contribute to feelings of isolation and reduced academic self-efficacy. Reliable mentorship provides essential guidance, fosters relationships, and enhances resources and confidence, significantly contributing to the retention and success of Black women in CES programs (Cartwright et al., 2021). Mentorship not only facilitates immediate coping but also strengthens long-term PID, enabling Black women to develop professional identities that align with their goals. Additionally, creating intentional spaces for dialogue about race and identity within counseling programs have been found to alleviate feelings of disconnection and isolation, fostering a more inclusive educational environment (Haskins et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2021; Sue et al., 2019; Wester et al., 2023). It is important for institutions to actively cultivate inclusive environments that address the specific challenges faced by minority students and professionals (Wester et al., 2023).

Research examining the perspectives of ethnically underrepresented students in CES doctoral programs has highlighted persistent challenges related to cultural and

institutional factors (Baker & Moore, 2015; Haskins et al., 2023; Sue & Sue, 2016). These barriers can hinder PID by restricting access to supportive networks and affirming learning environments. Racial and ethnic minority students frequently report isolation and marginalization, which negatively impact their motivation, confidence, and academic performance (Wester et al., 2023). This marginalization is often exacerbated by pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms (Baker & Moore, 2015), leading to access to resources and pervasive feelings of exclusion (Hannon et al., 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2019). These findings highlight the need for institutional interventions that foster inclusivity, reduce marginalization, and support the overall well-being of minority students in CES programs.

Problem Statement

Black women in CACREP-accredited CES programs at PWIs face systemic barriers that hinder their PID. These barriers include intersectional microaggressions, marginalization, limited access to culturally responsive mentorship, and the pressure to code-switch for assimilation, all of which contribute to isolation, diminished self-efficacy, and increased attrition rates (Haskins et al., 2023; Nair & Good, 2021). While research has documented the impact of these challenges on academic and psychological well-being, there is limited empirical exploration of how they collectively shape the PID of Black women in CES programs. The lack of research on this issue leaves institutions without the necessary insights to create meaningful support systems. This gap hinders efforts to foster inclusive environments that empower Black women to succeed and advance in CES programs. Without institutional commitment to addressing these

challenges, Black women may continue to encounter barriers that restrict their professional growth and limit their contributions to the field.

Mentorship is a key factor in PID, yet Black women in CES programs often struggle to find culturally affirming mentors who understand their unique challenges (Chandler et al., 2020; Smith, 2021). The underrepresentation of Black women in faculty and leadership roles further restricts their opportunities for career advancement and professional growth (Brown et al., 2020; Robinson, 2014). Without access to mentorship that validates their lived experiences, Black women may experience a lack of guidance, limiting their ability to navigate the field of counselor education successfully.

Additionally, the emotional toll of navigating PWIs while advocating for DEIBA can lead to burnout, discouraging retention and long-term engagement in academia (Dortch et al., 2024; Mulzac, 2022). The expectation to conform to dominant cultural norms through code-switching and other forms of self-regulation further challenges the authentic expression of professional identity (Haynes, 2019). This pressure to modify language, behavior, and even appearance to align with White-centered expectations of professionalism limits opportunities for self-authorship and genuine identity formation (Smith et al., 2023).

Despite increasing calls for DEIBA in counselor education, institutions have yet to implement sufficient targeted interventions that support the PID of Black women in CES programs (Griffith, 2024). The absence of institutional commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments exacerbates these challenges, reinforcing systemic barriers that hinder their success. Without intentional efforts to address these concerns,

Black women will continue to face obstacles that impact their academic persistence, professional engagement, and overall well-being. This study explored the lived experiences of Black women in CACREP-accredited CES programs at PWIs to provide insight into the factors that shape their PID. By exploring these challenges, the study contributes to the existing literature and informs institutional efforts to implement policies and initiatives that foster inclusivity and support the success of Black women in counselor education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of PID among Black women enrolled in CES doctoral programs at CACREP-accredited PWIs. Over 800 counseling doctoral programs in the United States maintain accreditation, adhering to rigorous academic and training standards mandated by the CACREP (2023). CACREP requires students to complete a specified number of supervised clinical experiences, pass a comprehensive examination, and demonstrate proficiency in counseling skills. These accreditation standards ensure that the counseling profession is upheld by highly trained practitioners equipped to provide safe and effective services to diverse populations.

The 2024 CACREP Standards were developed with two primary guiding principles: ensuring academic quality and fostering a unified professional counselor identity. The emphasis on “quality first” is reflected in the Academic Quality section of the standards, which requires rigorous educational practices and comprehensive assessments to prepare competent professionals (CACREP, 2024). These standards

establish a framework for maintaining high educational standards across accredited programs, equipping graduates with the foundational and specialized skills necessary to meet the diverse needs of clients across various settings (Crumb et al., 2023; Dollarhide, 2010; Hammonds et al., 2023).

The 2024 CACREP Standards also prioritize the establishment of a unified professional counselor identity, which is critical for fostering cohesion within the counseling profession (CACREP, 2024). This principle enables graduates to approach their roles with a clear sense of purpose and belonging within the field (Scherer et al., 2020; Smith & Gibson, 2020). The standards require programs to balance foundational identity development with opportunities for students to specialize in specific practice areas (CACREP, 2024). This dual approach ensures that graduates are well-rounded generalists with strong core counseling skills and advanced expertise in their chosen areas of practice (Scherer, 2020). The standards foster cultural competence and collaboration, preparing students for diverse client needs and interdisciplinary practice. These standards advocate for the creation of learning environments that promote DEIBA, ensuring that counseling programs address the needs of underrepresented and marginalized groups (Haskins et al., 2023; Scherer, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023; Wester et al., 2023). By integrating these principles, counselor education programs are encouraged to prepare future professionals to engage effectively in multicultural and socially just practices (Smith et al., 2023).

Black women pursuing doctoral degrees in CES programs at accredited institutions have historically faced systemic barriers to inclusion, acceptance, and respect

within academic environments (Collins, 2001). Recent research continues to document these challenges, including exclusion from decision-making processes and inequitable access to professional opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Haskins et al., 2016; Henfield et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2022). These systemic barriers significantly influence the PID and overall academic success of Black women in CES programs, further underscoring the need for targeted interventions (Croom, 2017; Ruffin, 2021). These challenges often require Black women to engage in additional emotional labor as they navigate academic environments that fail to acknowledge their unique experiences (Haskins et al., 2023). Consequently, many Black women in CES programs seek external support networks, including peer groups and professional associations to compensate for the lack of resources and culturally responsive guidance that are essential for PID (Louis et al., 2021).

This study explored the unique challenges encountered by Black women in CES doctoral programs and uncovered how these challenges impacted their PID and career trajectories. The findings provide insights into the systemic barriers these women faced and highlight factors that influenced their PID. By addressing these challenges, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on DEIBA in counselor education and offers evidence-based recommendations for fostering greater participation of Black women in CES programs (Bradley et al., 2023; Haskins et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study identifies strategies that promote more inclusive and equitable academic environments, which are essential for supporting the professional growth and success of Black women in PWIs (Scherer, 2020).

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of Black women regarding professional identity development while enrolled in CES programs at PWIs?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological conceptual framework, providing a structured and rigorous approach to interpreting and understanding the lived experiences of participants. This framework is particularly well-suited for exploring the nuanced and context-specific experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs, allowing for an in-depth examination of how these experiences shape their PID (Smith et al., 2023; van Manen, 2017). Additionally, Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) was utilized as an analytical lens to explore the dynamic interplay of personal, contextual, and environmental factors that influence PID. Social cognitive career theory emphasis on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports offer a comprehensive perspective for analyzing the factors contributing the participant's career trajectories and professional growth (Lent & Brown, 2019; Sheu & Bordon, 2017). By integrating these theoretical frameworks, the study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities influencing PID in this context.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

A social cognitive perspective is used to explore the relationships between individuals and their career contexts, the interaction of cognitive and interpersonal factors, and the influence of both self-directed and external elements on career behavior (Jiang et al., 2023; Lent & Brown, 2002). Social cognitive career theory complements

other career development theories by providing conceptual linkages and expanding on constructivist assumptions about individuals' capacities to shape their development and influence their environments. Social cognitive career theory is informed by advancements in vocational psychology, counseling, and cognitive sciences, offering a comprehensive framework for examining career development processes (Jiang et al., 2023; Lent & Brown, 2002).

Developed by Lent et al. (1994), SCCT draws from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and emphasizes the role of self-referential thought and social processes in guiding behavior. It has been applied across various psychosocial domains, including educational achievement, health behaviors, organizational management, and affective responses (Bandura, 1986; Wheatherton & Sussler, 2021). Social cognitive career theory incorporates cognitive, self-regulatory, and motivational processes that extend beyond learning and conditioning, making it an effective tool for analyzing complex career-related phenomena. It is intricately connected to two branches of career research derived from Bandura's framework: Krumboltz's social learning theory of career decision making (Krumboltz et al., 1976; Krumboltz, 1979; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996) and Hackett and Betz's (1981) application of self-efficacy to women's career development.

Social cognitive career theory highlights the significance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals as critical factors influencing career development, decision-making, and performance attainment (Greenhaus et al., 2010; Kim, 2022). Its primary focus is on cognitive mediators that influence career behavior and the interactions between variables such as interests, abilities, and values. Additionally, SCCT

outlines theoretical pathways by which contextual and personal factors shape career outcomes (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). This framework helps explain how individuals modify their career goals and decisions in response to personal experiences, environmental influences, and shifting opportunities (Lent et al., 2019). Social cognitive career theory is particularly relevant for understanding the career trajectories of Black women in CES programs, as systemic barriers and support structures influence their PID and career aspirations (Byars-Winston & Rogers, 2021).

Applying SCCT as a framework for analyzing this study's data enabled a deeper understanding of how participants' PID was influenced by career-related contexts, cognitive and interpersonal factors, and the interplay of self-directed and external influences within CES programs at PWIs (Jiang et al., 2023; Lent & Hackett, 2002). This approach provided insights into how these factors interact to shape participants' PID, as well as identify potential barriers that may impede their development. Findings from this study may inform CES programs on critical factors and systems that can be implemented to support the growth and PID of Black women in CES programs. Additionally, this research may offer valuable strategies for supporting participants in achieving their career-related goals post-graduation.

Phenomenology

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology, originally developed by Edmund Husserl, and later expanded by Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970). Husserl, recognized as a foundational figure in phenomenology, proposed the exploration of lived experiences

by setting aside preconceived notions to access phenomena as they are presented to consciousness (Husserl, 1970). His emphasis on intentionality, the directedness of consciousness toward objects, provides a basis for examining how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences in the world. Husserl introduced the concept of epoché**,** or "bracketing," which calls for the suspension of prior judgments to gain a pure understanding of lived experience (Husserl, 1931). He also emphasized essences, arguing that phenomenological inquiry seeks to uncover the fundamental structures of consciousness that shape human experience (Husserl, 1970). Through phenomenological reduction, Husserl sought to strip away external assumptions to reveal the core meanings of individual experiences (Husserl, 1982).

Building on Husserl's work, Heidegger extended phenomenology into existential domains, introducing the concept of Dasein (translated as "being there") to describe the way humans exist and engage with the world (Heidegger, 1962). This concept emphasizes the deep connection between individuals and their environments, asserting that meaning cannot be extracted from experience in isolation (Wrathall, 2020). Unlike Husserl's focus on bracketing out preconceptions, Heidegger argued that understanding is inherently shaped by pre-existing knowledge and contextual factors, a concept referred to as foresight or fore conception (Heidegger, 1962). This perspective acknowledges that interpretation is influenced by an individual's historical and cultural contexts, making complete objectivity unattainable.

A central element of Heidegger's philosophy is the hermeneutic circle, which describes understanding as an iterative process (Heidegger, 1962; Smith et al., 2022).

This approach suggests that interpretation evolves through a reciprocal relationship between the parts and the whole, where the meaning of each part of an experience is informed by its broader context and vice versa (Gadamer, 2004). This iterative nature of interpretation allows for a deep and evolving understanding of lived experiences.

In this study, the hermeneutic approach was utilized to understand the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. Heidegger's concept of Dasein, which situates individuals within their specific contexts of "being there," provides a valuable framework for exploring how participants navigate the social and academic environments of PWIs (Heidegger, 1962; Laverty, 2003). I explored PID through the lens of foresight, emphasizing the influence of participants' prior knowledge, lived experiences, and social positioning, particularly concerning race, gender, and professional roles (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; van Manen, 2016). This approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of how participants' histories and identities shape their professional trajectories in these challenging institutional contexts (Smith et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2021). Furthermore, by acknowledging the situatedness of experience, this study highlights how institutional structures, faculty interactions, and peer relationships contribute to the shaping of professional identity over time. The hermeneutic approach also provided space to explore moments of transformation, where participants redefined their professional roles in response to challenges, resilience-building, and critical self-reflection. Additionally, this study underscores the role of language and discourse in PID, as participants described navigating codeswitching and adjusting communication styles to fit institutional norms (Crotty, 1998; Gadamer, 1975).

This study employed a conceptual framework that integrated phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 1962), providing a comprehensive approach to examining the lived experiences and intersectional identities of Black women in CES programs. Grounded in these traditions, the framework facilitated an in-depth exploration of how participants navigated and constructed their PID within the context of PWIs (Crenshaw, 1989; Smith et al., 2022). This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between personal, social, and institutional factors, emphasizing how the unique academic and cultural environments of PWIs influence participants' experiences and professional trajectories (Gibson et al., 2010; Haskins et al., 2023).

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to illuminate the experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. The primary aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how these students perceive and navigate their PID within CACREP-accredited CES programs (Heidegger, 2013; Smith et al., 2022). Hermeneutic phenomenology was suited to this research due to its emphasis on interpreting and understanding lived experiences within their broader social and cultural contexts. This method addressed a critical gap in the literature regarding the PID experiences of Black women CES students at PWIs, offering insights that can inform institutional practices and policies (Haskins et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2022).

Data were collected from Black women who were currently enrolled in or have recently graduated from CACREP-accredited doctoral programs at PWIs in the United

States. The data collection process followed the six-step interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach outlined by Smith et al. (2023). IPA is particularly effective for examining how individuals make sense of their personal and social experiences, enabling a deep exploration of the participants' PID. The application of IPA aligned with the hermeneutic phenomenological framework, offering a robust method for exploring how participants interpreted their experiences and constructed the meaning of their professional identities (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2022). Central to this process was the use of the hermeneutic circle, which facilitated iterative analysis by revisiting participants' narratives to uncover deeper insights and ensured a nuanced understanding of their PID within the context of CES programs at PWIs (Finlay, 2021; van Manen, 2016). This cyclical interpretative approach enabled the integration of individual experiences with broader social and institutional contexts, providing a comprehensive framework to explore the intersections of race, gender, and professional roles in shaping PID (Larkin et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2021).

Coding was employed to identify significant themes and statements that reflected key aspects of their experiences, followed by an interpretative phase that uncovered the meanings underlying these themes (Larkin et al., 2021). Insights were synthesized to construct a nuanced understanding of participants' PID within the specific context of CES programs at PWIs, ensuring alignment with the study's hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2023). Insights from this study may guide CES programs in addressing systemic barriers, enhancing educational experiences, and fostering environments that support the PID of Black women CES students (Haskins

et al., 2023; Wester et al., 2023).

Definitions

In this section, relevant study constructs and other important terms discussed throughout this dissertation are defined.

Black woman: Black woman, as defined for the purpose of this dissertation, encompass individuals who identify as female and belong to the African American or Black racial and ethnic group within the United States. This group includes women of African descent whose ancestry traces back to the African diaspora, particularly those who self-identify with African American cultural and historical experiences (Haskins et al., 2023; Jones, 2001; Thomas et al., 2008).

Barriers: Barriers are a range of challenges shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political factors (Nourhashi, 2023; Winkler, 2000).

Challenges: In this study, challenges were defined as factors impeding academic success and psychological well-being (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020).

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP): The CACREP (2009) aims to ensure that counseling and related educational programs reflect the complexities of society.

Counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral student: CACREP (2015) defines CES doctoral students as those enrolled in doctoral programs in CES and receiving advanced training in counseling, teaching, supervision, research, scholarship, leadership, advocacy, and gatekeeping. These students are not yet able to be hired as faculty in CACREP-accredited programs but are actively working toward the terminal

degree within the counseling discipline. As they advance, CES doctoral students gain growing responsibilities in academia and clinical settings preparing for professional roles.

Counselor professional identity: Counselor professional identity is defined as how professional counseling practitioners define who they are, what they do, and how they differ from other helping professionals (e.g., counseling psychology, psychiatry, social work), as well as the distinctions within their academic training and licensure processes (Woo, 2013; Woo et al., 2017).

Lived experience: The term "lived experience" refers to self-reported events that participants felt were significant during their CES doctoral studies at a PWI (Smith et al., 2009).

Mentoring/mentorship relationship: The relationship between a person with knowledge, skills, and experience and someone with less experience to facilitate professional development (Greene, 2020).

Microaggressions: A slight, insult, invalidation, and indignity that occurs on a daily basis toward a marginalized group, verbally or non-verbally (Ogunyemni et al., 2020).

Predominantly White institution (PWI): An institution where at least 50% of the students are White (Lomotey, 2010).

Professional identity: In this dissertation, professional identity is defined as the integration of interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities, values, ingrained self-concepts, attributes, and experiences that allow for congruence between one's professional and personal selves, as well as competence and confidence with one's profession (Gibson et

al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014). Professional identity is acknowledged as something that provides one with a stable sense of self as an active contributor to their identified profession (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014).

Professional identity development (PID): PID involves internalizing and demonstrating professional standards, behaviors, and values that affect how an individual views, presents, explains, and conducts themselves (Janke et al., 2021).

Sense of belonging: Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging as feeling respected, accepted, and part of a group.

Assumptions

The participants for this study were Black women enrolled in CACREP-accredited CES doctoral programs. It was anticipated that participants would be able to articulate their experiences clearly and provide detailed accounts of their PID within the context of PWIs (Patton, 2002). The interview process was structured to elicit honest and reflective responses based on participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribed to those experiences. While participants' accounts cannot be independently verified, the assurance of confidentiality was intended to create a safe environment that encourages openness and transparency.

In this research, I assumed that participants would provide detailed and accurate descriptions of their experiences, which is critical for maintaining the credibility and reliability of the data collected. It was assumed that the selected population would be able to reflect on and express their perceptions, emotions, and experiences related to their PID while enrolled in a CES doctoral program at a PWI. Furthermore, the hermeneutic

phenomenological approach was expected to enable participants to share in-depth insights, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

Despite extensive research, significant gaps remain in understanding how these challenges shape the PID of Black women in CES programs. In this study, I explored how intersectional experiences, microaggressions, mentorship dynamics, and institutional climate shape the PID of Black women in CES programs. Research has shown that intersectionality, including the interplay of race and gender, significantly impacts the experiences of Black women in academic settings, often resulting in unique challenges such as microaggressions and systemic barriers (Cartwright et al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1989; Johnson et al., 2023). The decision to focus on microaggressions in this study reflects participants documented prevalence and harmful effects. Compounded microaggressions targeting both race and gender amplify feelings of marginalization, making it critical to address these issues in academic and professional settings (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020).

Further, the focus of this study was on the role of mentorship in facilitating professional growth and the ways in which culturally responsive mentoring relationships can mitigate the adverse effects of the PWI environment. Mentorship has been identified as a critical factor in navigating these challenges, with culturally responsive mentorship playing a key role in fostering resilience and promoting professional growth (Brooks et al., 2023; Haskins et al., 2023). Additionally, institutional climates lacking cultural competency can exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder the PID process for Black women at PWIs (Bennett et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). By addressing these

interconnected factors, this research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural influences on PID to offer actionable insights for designing interventions and policies that advance DEIBA within the counseling profession and higher education (Johnson & Carter, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023).

I explored Black women enrolled in CACREP-accredited CES doctoral programs at PWIs in the United States. This focus addresses persistent gaps in the literature concerning the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by Black women in these academic settings, particularly regarding PID (Chandler et al., 2020; Haynes et al., 2019; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Black women remain underrepresented in the counseling field and understanding their PID experiences within the distinct contexts of online and in-person programs at PWIs is essential for promoting equity and inclusivity (Baker, 2015; Brooks et al., 2023). By identifying strategies that foster their professional growth, this research contributes to the development of targeted interventions aimed at addressing systemic barriers and enhancing their success in CES programs (Haskins et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023).

Several frameworks were deemed unsuitable for this study due to their inability to sufficiently address the research questions and the specific population under investigation:

- Broad Ethnic or Racial Categories: Frameworks that uncover experiences across diverse racial and ethnic groups lack the specificity required to analyze the unique experiences of Black women in CES programs. Such a broad focus risks diluting the depth of understanding needed for this study’s objectives

(Baker, 2015).

- Gender-Neutral Approaches: Frameworks that adopt a gender-neutral perspective fail to account for the intersectional experiences of Black women. These approaches overlook the interplay of race and gender in shaping the challenges and opportunities encountered by Black women in doctoral programs, particularly at PWIs (Chandler et al., 2020).
- Generalized Educational Experiences: Frameworks that generalize the experiences of doctoral students do not adequately address the socio-cultural factors that uniquely influence Black women in CES programs at PWIs. This limitation excludes the nuanced perspectives needed to explore their PID (Haynes, 2019).

The scope of this study is limited to Black women enrolled in CACREP-accredited online and in-person CES doctoral programs at PWIs. This research focuses exclusively on this group to address a gap in the literature, rather than generalizing to all doctoral students encountering challenges during their programs. This targeted approach aligns with recommendations to narrow the scope of inquiry for in-depth analysis (Baker, 2015; Chandler et al., 2020; Haynes, 2019; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). As a result, the transferability of the findings is constrained, and their broader applicability depends on how individual readers interpret and relate the study's findings to other contexts (Smith et al., 2009). The findings are most relevant to contexts with comparable attributes, such as similar racial demographics, program accreditation, and the availability of support structures and resources for f Black women in counselor education (Baker,

2015; Chandler et al., 2020; Haynes, 2019; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Readers are encouraged to consider contextual similarities when applying these findings to other settings, while recognizing the variations in contextual factors may influence their relevance (Baker, 2015; Chandler et al., 2020; Haynes, 2019; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017).

Limitations

Qualitative studies, particularly those employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, involve several methodological challenges. One significant issue is the potential for researcher bias, as the process of interpreting participants' narratives may be influenced by the researcher's personal beliefs, experiences, and perspectives. This influence can inadvertently shape the analysis, affecting the validity of the findings (Berger, 2015; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2017; Cutcliffe, 2021; Jootun et al., 2009). Another challenge is maintaining consistency and reliability in data interpretation. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on statistical tools replicability, qualitative research depends on subjective analysis, which can vary across researchers and over time (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2017).

Focusing on Black women enrolled in CACREP-accredited CES doctoral programs at PWIs introduces additional complexities. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach prioritizes the identification of phenomenological themes such as meaning, identity, and experience, which may lead to the underrepresentation of participants' specific contextual details. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach, while offering rich interpretive opportunities, is inherently prone to challenges such as

researcher bias and limited transferability of findings beyond the specific contexts studied (Berger, 2015; Morse, 2015). To address this limitation, contextual information such as demographic details and personal backgrounds were incorporated wherever possible to provide a more nuanced understanding of the narratives (Crowther et al., 2017; Lindseth & Norberg, 2021; Stephenson et al., 2018).

Another limitation is that prolonged immersion in the research process and extracting meaningful insights from participants' narratives can be demanding. Participants may express their thoughts and emotions in ways that are not immediately clear, complicating the analysis. To address this challenge, detailed field notes and iterative coding processes was employed to identify and refine emergent themes systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2016).

Additionally, as a Black CES doctoral student, my ethnicity and gender may influence participants' responses during interviews, potentially affecting the authenticity of their contributions. To mitigate this concern, a reflective journal was maintained throughout the research process to document and critically evaluate potential biases (Berger, 2015; Ortlipp, 2008). Additionally, member checking was used, were participants reviewed and provided feedback on the interpretations of their narratives to ensure accuracy and credibility (Birt et al., 2016; Carlson, 2010; Doyle, 2007). By addressing these methodological and practical challenges, this study aimed to provide robust and meaningful contributions to understanding the complex processes of PID among Black women in CES doctoral programs at PWIs.

Significance

This study holds significance as its outcomes may provide counselor educators with evidence-based insights into the experiences of Black women enrolled in CES programs and the factors that contribute to their PID. The findings could guide the development and implementation of targeted programs designed to support the academic and professional success of Black women CES students, addressing the specific challenges they encounter. By integrating these insights, counselor educators could foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments that promote a sense of belonging and empowerment for Black women CES students, enabling them to achieve their full potential. This study also has broader implications for the field of CES. The findings may inform training programs on how to address systemic barriers and support PID for Black women CES students at PWIs, ultimately contributing to positive social change within the profession. These insights could also influence post-graduation opportunities by enhancing the preparation of Black women for leadership roles, mentoring relationships, supervisory positions, and counselor training responsibilities.

The findings of this research may bridge gaps between counselor educators and professionals by fostering collaborations aimed at better addressing the needs of students from underrepresented groups. Such collaborations could lead to improved student outcomes as educators and practitioners align their efforts to create inclusive environments and promote equity. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of PID in influencing Black women's participation in counselor education post-graduation. Understanding their perceptions of PID experiences at PWIs may reveal how

these experiences impact their involvement in leadership, mentorship, supervision, and training roles within the field.

This study is particularly important in identifying the prevalence and impact of intersectional microaggressions on Black women in CES programs. Such experiences often hinder PID and academic success (Haskins et al., 2023). By highlighting these dynamics, the study can provide actionable recommendations for CES programs to address these challenges. For instance, findings may support the implementation of diversity training for faculty and students, mentorship programs that connect Black women with relatable role models, and institutional policies designed to actively promote equity and inclusion (Smith et al., 2022).

CACREP-accredited CES programs at PWIs could use the findings of this research to design and implement initiatives that specifically support the PID of Black women students. These initiatives might include strategies to enhance leadership development, foster meaningful mentoring relationships, strengthen supervisory practices, and improve counselor training experiences (Brooks et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023). Addressing the unique needs of Black women in CES programs has the potential to improve retention rates, increase student satisfaction, and contribute to the cultivation of a diverse and competent counseling workforce (Thomas et al., 2023). By offering evidence-based strategies to tackle these challenges, this research aims to foster a more inclusive and supportive academic and professional environment, thereby advancing equity and representation within the counseling profession (Haskins et al., 2023; Haynes et al., 2023).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women CES students in relation to their PID within CACREP-accredited PWIs. This analysis was grounded in Husserl's (1931) phenomenological philosophy, which emphasizes understanding the essence of lived experiences. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how PID impacts Black women's participation in counseling education, particularly in leadership roles, mentoring relationships, supervisory positions, and counselor training.

This research also aimed to provide evidence-based insights into how perceptions of PID experiences at PWIs shape the professional engagement of Black women in the field of counselor education. By addressing the challenges these students encounter, the study seeks to inform higher education institutions, counselor educators, and counseling professionals about strategies to support the academic and professional success of Black women in CES doctoral programs. The subsequent chapter will present a comprehensive review of existing literature that provides a foundation for understanding the key concepts explored in this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Substantial research has documented the barriers and challenges encountered by Black women enrolled in CACREP-accredited CES programs. However, limited attention has been given to illuminating how these challenges influence the PID of Black women and how their perceptions of PID experiences at PWIs may impact their involvement in various aspects of the counseling field. Specifically, perceptions of PID experiences at PWIs may significantly influence Black women's engagement in leadership roles, mentoring relationships, supervisory responsibilities, and counselor training. Negative experiences, such as perceived discrimination and exclusion, have been linked to diminished self-efficacy, lower academic and professional motivation, and restricted access to advancement opportunities (Davis & Maldonado, 2022; Pirtle & Wright, 2021; Smith et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2023). These challenges can create systemic barriers that impede Black women's capacity to engage fully and excel in academic and professional environments, affecting their participation and success in key leadership and career pathways (Jones et al., 2023; Wilder et al., 2023).

Understanding the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs is essential for addressing their unique experiences and challenges. This research illuminated how PID shapes Black women's engagement in critical aspects of the field, such as leadership, mentorship, supervision, and counselor training (Brooks et al., 2023; Haynes et al., 2023). By exploring these dynamics, the study aimed to uncover strategies for fostering more equitable educational environments that support the career advancement and professional contributions of Black women in CES programs (Haskins et al., 2023; Jones

et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023). Findings may inform CES training programs by highlighting critical elements that contribute to PID, thereby driving positive social change in the field of counselor education (Davis & Maldonado, 2022; Pirtle & Wright, 2021). These insights could shape policies and practices that promote DEIBA in counselor education (Williams et al., 2023). This research is significant as it illuminated the influence of PID on Black women's participation in counselor education, particularly regarding their involvement in leadership roles, mentoring relationships, supervisory responsibilities, and counselor training (Brooks et al., 2023; Williams & Thompson, 2023). Moreover, this study highlights the systemic challenges these students face, such as microaggressions, tokenism, and limited representation, and their impact on PID (Cartwright et al., 2021; Nair & Good, 2021). By addressing these challenges, institutions can create inclusive environments that foster not only academic success but also the professional growth and leadership potential of Black women in counseling (Bennett et al., 2021; Borders et al., 2021; Haskins et al., 2023; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2022).

In the literature review, I detail the research strategy employed, evaluate and critique literature relevant to the study, and identify the gaps this research aimed to address. The chapter begins with a discussion of the research literature strategy, followed by a review of the conceptual framework. In the literature review, I provide an in-depth exploration of topics including the history of CES programs, PID within CES programs, the role of Black women in the helping professions, the historical background of Black women in CES programs, Black women's experiences in CES programs at PWIs and

their impact on PID challenges faced by Black women in academia, and existing support structures for Black women in CES programs at PWIs. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and their relevance to the study. The next section will describe the literature search strategy utilized for this review.

Literature Search Strategy

An extensive review of the literature was conducted using the Walden University Library to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant topics. Several databases were utilized, including ProQuest, SAGE Journals, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Thoreau, to identify peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and dissertations. The literature review focused on the following key areas: *experiences of Black counselor education students at Predominantly White institutions (PWIs); the lived experiences of Black women at PWIs; professional identity development (PID) of counselor education students; perceptions of PID from counselor educators in leadership roles;* and *mentorship for Black students in counselor education*.

Additional topics reviewed included the experiences of underrepresented doctoral students in counselor education, the role of Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and the experiences of Black women in predominantly White institutional spaces. Many of the sources I reviewed were published between 1983 and 2023 to ensure both historical and contemporary perspectives were incorporated. This range of literature provided a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the systemic factors influencing the PID of Black women in CES programs.

A combination of specific search terms and phrases was employed to locate relevant literature. Keywords included *Black, Black women, counseling program, counselor education, CES students, doctoral students, doctoral programs, Predominantly White Institution, professional identity development, professional development, personal identity, counselors in training, counselor education and supervision, self-concept, self-efficacy, coping, barriers, microaggressions, marginalized groups, student attitudes, counselor attitudes, transcendental phenomenology, leadership, supervisor, advocacy,* and *mentorship*. These search terms and combinations were selected to ensure that the review captured the breadth and depth of research relevant to the study's objectives.

To refine the search and ensure the inclusion of high-quality sources, I applied specific filters such as peer-reviewed status, full-text availability, and publication date restrictions. I prioritized studies that provided empirical data, theoretical frameworks, and qualitative insights relevant to the PID of Black women in CES programs. This systematic approach allowed me to gather a diverse range of perspectives while maintaining a focused and rigorous literature review.

Theoretical Foundation

I used a hermeneutic conceptual framework and SCCT as the primary analytical lens for interpreting the data. Social cognitive career theory, developed by Lent et al. in the late 1990s, is based on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory. Social cognitive career theory is used to explore the processes through which individuals develop career interests, make academic and career decisions, achieve success, and experience well-being. These processes are understood through three interconnected components: self-

efficacy beliefs: self-efficacy beliefs (confidence in one's ability to perform specific tasks), outcome expectations (beliefs about the likely results of one's actions), and personal goals (Lent et al., 1994); Lent & Brown, 1996).By understanding these elements, one can better comprehend how people set goals, anticipate outcomes, and develop the confidence needed to achieve their objectives.

Social cognitive career theory posits that career trajectories are influenced by the interaction of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. It emphasizes the role of self-efficacy and outcome expectations in shaping an individual's career choices and actions. Self-efficacy refers to the individual's confidence in their ability to successfully complete specific tasks or challenges, while outcome expectations encompass beliefs about the results or consequences of those actions (Sheu & Lent, 2017). Social cognitive career theory also incorporates the influence of personal goals, which guide individuals in selecting and pursuing career-related activities. The theory underscores the active role of individuals as they engage with their environments in self-organizing and reflective ways within the context of career development. Social cognitive career theory highlights the dynamic relationship between personal characteristics (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and physical attributes), individual actions, and environmental influences. It focuses on how these factors collectively shape career behaviors and outcomes, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding career development (Wang et al., 2020).

Furthermore, SCCT has been widely applied in research exploring career development across diverse populations, particularly among individuals from underrepresented groups. Its application has been instrumental in identifying barriers to

career advancement and informing interventions designed to enhance self-efficacy and outcome expectations among marginalized populations (Flores & O'Brien, 2022; Turner & Lapan, 2019). By interpreting the interplay between personal and environmental factors, SCCT offers valuable insights into how systemic challenges can influence career decisions and success. The framework has been particularly effective in analyzing the experiences of individuals facing structural inequities in professional environments, supporting efforts to develop targeted strategies for addressing these challenges (Byars-Winston, 2021; Garcia et al., 2019).

Conceptual Framework

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach rooted in philosophical and psychological traditions, derived from the Greek word phenomenon, meaning "to appear" (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). It is used to understand individuals' experiences as they encounter specific phenomena, allowing researchers to gain deeper insight into the meanings associated with those experiences (Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). By exploring participants' accounts, the goal of phenomenology is to understand the core meanings of their lived experiences and the shared aspects of a particular phenomenon (Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). This approach is particularly useful for studying phenomena experienced simultaneously by multiple individuals, enabling researchers to synthesize themes and derive a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives (Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Thematic synthesis emerges from the systematic analysis of participant narratives, emphasizing the meanings and core themes present in their

accounts (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2022).

Edmund Husserl, often regarded as the founder of phenomenology, initially approached the study of lived experiences through both objective and subjective lenses. His philosophical contributions emphasized the importance of understanding the essence of a phenomenon by bracketing preconceived notions and examining the phenomenon as it appears to consciousness (Cohen, 1987; Dabengwa et al., 2023; Laverty, 2003). Husserl posited that consciousness is fundamental to knowledge, as it provides direct access to experiences from the first-person perspective (Hopp, 2020; Moran, 2005). His descriptive phenomenology focuses on systematically analyzing lived experiences to uncover their essential meanings, allowing phenomena to emerge in their purest form (Williams, 2022). Husserl's methodology emphasizes achieving an unbiased understanding of participants' experiences by setting aside biases and assumptions (Hall, 2019; Hollister, 2021). Through these methods, Husserl established a structured approach to studying lived experiences scientifically, highlighting their value in understanding human phenomena (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Manongsong & Gosh, 2023).

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, expanded phenomenology into the interpretive realm, emphasizing the ontological aspects of human existence. Heidegger introduced the concept of *Dasein,* which refers to "being there" and underscores the importance of contextualizing lived experiences within their social, cultural, and historical frameworks (Moran, 2000; Spielberg, 1994; van Manen, 2023). Unlike Husserl's focus on bracketing, Heidegger argued that researchers should acknowledge their own perspectives and use them as interpretive tools to uncover the deeper meanings

of phenomena (Laverty, 2003; Wrathall, 2014). Heidegger also emphasized the iterative process of interpretation known as the hermeneutic circle, where understanding evolves through a continuous interplay between individual parts of an experience and the whole context (Cerbrone, 2009; Murphy et al., 2022).

In this study, I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyze and interpret the lived experiences of participants, focusing on the meanings underlying their PID within CACREP-accredited CES programs at PWIs. Hermeneutic phenomenology is suited for understanding how individuals make sense of their realities within specific contexts, offering a comprehensive lens to analyze their perspectives and the nuanced meanings they attribute to their experiences (Laverty, 2003; Smith et al., 2022; Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2017). Central to this approach is the use of the hermeneutic circle, a process that facilitates iterative analysis of interview transcripts to identify emergent themes and uncover broader truths about the participants' experiences (Friesen et al., 2012; Heinam, 2021). By engaging deeply with the data through this interpretive framework, the study provided nuanced insights into how Black women navigated their PID within the sociocultural and institutional contexts of PWIs, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Gadamer, 2004; van Manen, 2017). This methodological approach prioritized the identification of themes, interpretation of data, and careful inclusion of contextual factors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Montague et al., 2020; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This approach enabled the identification and interpretation of barriers these students encounter, such as systemic exclusion and microaggressions, while highlighting

the strategies they use to navigate these challenges. By illuminating these experiences, I aimed to contribute to the development of inclusive and supportive educational practices that fostered PID among Black women CES students. By addressing the nuanced experiences of Black women enrolled in CES programs at PWIs, the study sought to uncover key influences on their PID. The findings offered insights into the interplay of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors that shaped their experiences and informed their participation in the counseling profession, thereby contributing to broader efforts to promote equity and inclusivity within the field (Smith et al., 2023; van Manen, 2017).

Integration of SCCT and Hermeneutics

The choice to integrate both hermeneutic phenomenology and SCCT frameworks in this study is guided by the need to comprehensively analyze the complex factors influencing the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. Hermeneutic phenomenology facilitates a nuanced exploration of participants' lived experiences by capturing detailed, context-specific narratives, which provide in-depth insights into their perceptions and interpretations of their PID (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 1962). In parallel, SCCT situates these personal narratives within a broader framework of career development, enabling an examination of how environmental and individual factors interact to influence career decisions, behaviors, and outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2019).

Recent applications of SCCT have demonstrated its utility in understanding the educational and career trajectories of underrepresented populations by highlighting the interplay between contextual and personal influences (Flores et al., 2021; Sheu & Lent,

2020). Despite its widespread application, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how these dynamics manifest specifically within CES programs at PWIs, particularly in relation to the experiences of Black women. This study sought to address this gap by analyzing how contextual factors, as interpreted through the participants' narratives, shaped their professional identity and career-related behaviors.

The integration of hermeneutic phenomenology and SCCT allows for a dual perspective: the hermeneutic approach provides a deep, individualized understanding of the participants' individualized understanding of the participants' experiences, while Social cognitive career theory offers a structured lens to interpret how these experiences align with broader patterns of career development. By combining these methodologies, the study achieved both analytical depth and wider applicability, enhancing its capacity to generate insights that were meaningful at both personal and institutional levels. These findings are expected to inform future educational policies and practices, offering evidence-based recommendations to improve support systems and foster inclusivity within higher education environments (Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). Additionally, this methodological integration may help bridge the gap between subjective lived experiences and objective career outcomes, providing a more holistic understanding of the professional trajectories of Black women in CES programs. By highlighting both individual agency and structural influences, this approach offers a comprehensive framework for designing interventions that promote equitable career advancement and academic success (Lent & Brown, 2023).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, rooted in the philosophies of Heidegger and

Gadamer, emphasizes the interpretation of lived experiences within their historical, social, and cultural contexts (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 1962). It prioritizes understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the meanings embedded in their narratives. Social cognitive career theory complements this approach by focusing on the relationships between personal attributes, environmental influences, and behavioral outcomes in career development processes (Lent & Brown, 2019). Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis of how the interplay of individual experiences and systemic factors contributes to the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs.

Literature Review

History of Education for Black People

In 1868, the Thirteenth Amendment legally recognized Black individuals as citizens of the United States, marking a significant milestone in American history (Hays & Erford, 2014). The term “Black” gained broader recognition in the 1980s when Reverend Jesse Jackson advocated for its use as a unifying label to acknowledge the distinct experiences, shared history, and culture of individuals of African descent in the United States (Hays & Erford, 2014). This terminology was intended to foster solidarity and a sense of belonging within the African American community.

The journey of African American students at PWIs began to shift following the landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. This Supreme Court ruling declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, serving as a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement aimed at dismantling systemic racism and

inequality in the United States (Mullings, 2020). The decision symbolized hope for Black Americans by opening educational opportunities previously inaccessible due to racial segregation (Hays & Erford, 2014).

Despite these advancements, Black students attending PWIs have historically faced persistent challenges. The geographic location and higher living costs associated with many PWIs have posed barriers to access for lower-income Black families, limiting their participation in these institutions (Sanders, 2022). In addition, Black students at PWIs often encounter unique difficulties that differ from the experiences of their peers at Historically Black colleges and universities. Research has consistently documented these challenges, including experiences of discrimination, racial microaggressions, and feelings of isolation, which hinder academic performance and a sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2020; Parker & Howard, 2021; Smith & Winkle-Wagner, 2019).

Fleming (1984) first highlighted these disparities, noting that Black students at PWIs faced distinct challenges not experienced by White students in the same environments. Contemporary research reaffirms Fleming's findings, demonstrating that racial and institutional contexts continue to influence the educational trajectories and outcomes of Black students in predominantly White colleges and universities (Hurtado et al., 2020); Smith & Winkle-Wagner, 2019). For example, Hurtado et al. (2020) emphasized disparities in social integration and academic success, linking these issues to systemic racial inequalities within educational institutions. Similarly, Smith and Winkle-Wagner (2019) documented the pervasive impact of racial microaggressions and discriminatory practices on the psychological well-being and academic engagement of

Black students at PWIs.

These findings highlight the enduring influence of race and institutional context on the collegiate experiences of Black students, emphasizing the need for continued research and intervention. Despite diversity and inclusion initiatives, disparities remain, reinforcing the importance of targeted support strategies to enhance the educational outcomes and overall well-being of Black students at PWIs. Addressing these challenges requires a sustained commitment to fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments that acknowledge and address the unique needs of Black students in predominantly White educational spaces (Hurtado et al., 2020; Parker & Howard, 2021).

Research has shown that culturally responsive mentorship and faculty engagement play a critical role in mitigating feelings of isolation and fostering PID among Black students (Harper, 2022). Furthermore, a critical examination of institutional policies are necessary to assess their effectiveness in advancing equity, as research indicates that performative diversity initiatives often fail to dismantle the systemic barriers embedded within higher education structures (Griffin & Davis, 2023).

PWIs

The term “Predominantly White institutions” (PWIs) refers to higher education institutions where more than 50% of the student population identifies as White (Brown & Dancy, 2010; Lomotey, 2010; Smith, 2022). These institutions are often characterized by cultural norms, practices, and traditions that prioritize and perpetuate whiteness, which can marginalize and alienate minority groups (Nakamura, 2019; Smith, 2022). According to Nakamura (2019), the perpetuation of whiteness in these spaces includes the control of

language and the production of knowledge in ways that reinforce stereotypes and perceptions of inferiority among minority groups. This cultural hegemony can negatively affect the sense of belonging, academic performance, and overall well-being of students from underrepresented backgrounds (Smith, 2022).

Recent scholarship continues to explore how institutional culture within PWIs influences diversity and inclusion efforts. Smith (2022) emphasizes that while many PWIs have implemented initiatives to promote diversity, systemic inequities persist, often hindering meaningful progress. Research by Nakamura (2019) further highlights how institutional policies and practices can reinforce structures that benefit White students while disproportionately disadvantaging students of color. These findings underscore the importance of how critical institutional cultures and practices at PWIs shape the experiences of minority students and contribute to the broader discourse DEIBA in higher education (Smith, 2023). Additionally, Harper and Patton (2021) argue that diversity initiatives often fail when institutions prioritize performative efforts over structural change, leaving marginalized students without adequate support. As a result, scholars call for accountability-driven policies that address systemic inequities (Garcia & Stewart, 2022.)

Institutional Practices and Minority Student Experiences

Research highlights the significant impact of institutional practices within PWIs on the experiences of minority students. Smith (2020) notes that despite initiatives aimed at diversifying campuses, systemic barriers continue to limit the equitable participation and success of African American and other minority students. These barriers include

admissions policies that may unintentionally disadvantage minority applicants, insufficient access to culturally competent support services, and the unequal allocation of institutional resources (Smith, 2020). Furthermore, institutional climates characterized by dominant cultural norms often sustain environments where microaggressions and implicit biases occur, leading to the marginalization of minority students and contributing to their feelings of exclusion and disconnection from the academic community (Nakamura, 2019; Harper, 2021).

The Role of Diversity Initiatives

To address these challenges, PWIs have implemented initiatives designed to promote DEIBA on campus. These efforts often include recruitment and retention programs tailored to minority students, faculty hiring policies aimed at increasing diversity, and curricular reforms that incorporate culturally responsive perspectives (Harper, 2021; Smith, 2020). However, Smith (2020) notes significant variability in the effectiveness of these initiatives across institutions While some universities have demonstrated measurable progress in fostering inclusive environments, others struggle with implementing sustainable, long-term change (Jones & Stewart, 2022). Moreover, researchers emphasize the need for institutions to beyond numeric diversity metrics and instead focus on creating environment where historically marginalized students feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive (Garcia & Watson, 2023). Additionally, the absence of transparent accountability measures can lead to the stagnation of diversity efforts, making them ineffective in addressing the long-term needs of underrepresented student populations (Parker & Howard, 2021). For DEIBA initiatives to succeed,

institutions must prioritize continuous assessment, faculty training, and policy reforms (Smith, 2020).

Student Activism and Advocacy

African American students and their allies within PWIs have increasingly engaged in organized efforts to challenge institutional norms and advocate for enhanced DEIBA. These efforts play a significant role in bringing attention to systemic racism and promoting actionable changes in institutional policies and practices (Harper, 2021; Smith, 2020). Initiatives driven by student advocacy have included the establishment of diverse task forces, protest movements, and structured campaigns designed to hold PWIs accountable for fostering inclusive campus environments (Harper, 2021; Nakamura, 2019). Through strategic use of social media and other communication channels, student advocates have effectively initiated critical discussions on race, privilege, and justice in higher education. Their activism has amplified marginalized voices, pushing for institutional accountability. These actions have compelled PWIs to critically examine their historical legacies and pursue transformative changes in campus culture and policy frameworks (Smith, 2020).

Experiences of Black Students at PWIs: Black Women's Experiences at PWIs

College experience is often a period of significant transition, accompanied by challenges that can induce stress for many students (Flanagan, 2022). These challenges include managing academic workloads, adjusting to living away from home, financial responsibilities, and acclimating to a new environment (Flanagan, 2022, Negga et al., 2007). For Black students, these challenges are compounded by the additional cultural

acclimation process as they navigate predominantly White institutional settings (Durante, 2023; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Additionally, research suggests that Black students frequently encounter increased pressure to assimilate to dominant institutional norms, which can contribute to feelings of alienation and impact their academic confidence and engagement (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; McGee & Bentley, 2017).

Unlike their White peers, Black students face unique stressors such as systemic racism, microaggressions, and feelings of alienation. These factors profoundly impact their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. While financial support and access to PWIs have increased for Black students, these opportunities often come with significant hardships, including financial insecurity and dissatisfaction (Hewitt, 2021). Black students are less likely to receive sufficient financial aid to cover their expenses, often resulting in the need to work multiple jobs or take on substantial loans, which can exacerbate stress and negatively influence academic performance (Brown, 2017; Chen et al., 2020; Perna & Jones, 2019; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2021).

Additional barriers to retention and academic success for Black students at PWIs include challenges related to campus climate, levels of engagement, involvement, integration, and identity development (Chavous et al., 2004; Flowers, 2004; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Furr & Elling, 2002; Seidman, 2022). Racism, prejudice, and discrimination on campus contribute to feelings of alienation and isolation, reducing Black students' engagement and sense of belonging, which are critical for academic success (Smith, 2020). Many Black students report difficulty developing a keen sense of

identity and connection at PWIs, often resulting in higher transfer rates or decisions to leave higher education altogether. A lack of access to resources, such as culturally competent mentorship and guidance, further exacerbates these challenges.

Research demonstrates that Black students at PWIs often encounter inadequate faculty representation, mismatched mentorship, and racial stressors such as microaggressions and over racism (Catterji, 2020; House, 2022, Joseph et al., 2024, Knox, 2023; Ragland Woods et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2018). These stressors have lasting consequences, including lower graduation rates, reduced career success, and poorer mental health outcomes. The 2016 Racial Attitudes and and Perceptions survey revealed that 81% of Black college students experienced racial discrimination, compared to 59% of Black individuals who never attended college (Anderson, 2016; Joseph et al., 2023). Additionally, 55% of Black individuals with some college experience reported being treated with suspicion due to their race, and 52% indicated being treated as if they lacked intelligence (Joseph et al., 2023). These challenges are more pronounced for Black students at PWIs compared to those attending Historically Black colleges and universities, as they report higher levels of race-related stress and less faculty support (Anderson, 2016; Joseph et al., 2023). This lack of institutional support and the prevalence of discrimination contribute to decreased academic performance and retention rates.

For Black women, the challenges in higher education are further magnified by the intersection of race and gender, which creates distinct barriers not encountered by their male counterparts. Black women outnumber Black men in higher education yet continue

to face systemic inequities related to participation, graduation, and career advancement compared to their White peers (Bush et al., 2023). Despite early historical efforts to access higher education beginning in the 1840s with institutions like Oberlin College admitting students of African descent Black women have consistently encountered significant barriers. Trailblazers such as Sarah J. Watson Barnett and Lucy Stanton were among the first to achieve degrees, despite systemic restrictions that limited educational opportunities for both people of color and women (Bauman, 2002; Fredlund, 2021). Between 1840 and 1880, 54 Black women graduated from U.S. colleges and universities, representing a small but significant step forward (Du Bois, 1990; Warner, 2021). While these early successes paved the way for increased access, Black women in higher education have continued to navigate exclusionary policies, financial constraints, and racialized gender biases.

Although Black women have made substantial strides in higher education since the mid-19th century, they continue to experience systemic barriers, including marginalization at the intersections of race and gender (Patton & Haynes, 2020; Shabazz, 2015). Discrimination and social isolation remain prevalent, impeding their academic and professional persistence and magnifying feelings of invisibility and exclusion on campus (Baker & Moore, 2015; Breeden, 2021; Shavers & Moore, 2019). These dynamics create an additional layer of complexity in navigating educational and leadership opportunities in predominantly White academic settings, reinforcing the importance of targeted support and systemic change (Collier-Thomas, 1982; Evans, 2007; Grottis, 2022; Higginbotham, 2001). Common themes in the experiences of Black women in higher education include

persistent frustrations with systemic limitations, experiences of racism and sexism, and the challenge of establishing visibility and belonging within predominantly White academic environments (Moses, 1989; Perkins, 1983; Smith, 2023).

History of CES Programs

Although a master's degree in counseling is the recognized entry-level qualification for the mental health field, students pursuing a doctoral degree in Counselor education and supervision (CES) have typically met the clinical entry-level standards required for professional practice (Dipre & Luke, 2020; Goodrich et al., 2011). The doctoral CES degree is intended to provide advanced training and skills in clinical practice, instruction, supervision, research, and leadership, preparing graduates to take on significant roles within the counseling profession (Scherer et al., 2020; West et al., 1995).

Counselor education and supervision (CES) programs emerged in the late 1950s to address the growing demand for skilled counselors and counselor educators (Scherer et al., 2020; West et al., 1995). These programs are designed to prepare future leaders in the counseling profession by equipping them with the advanced knowledge and skills necessary to navigate contemporary challenges and shape the future of counseling education and practice (Litherland & Schulthes, 2020; Sears & Davis, 2003). By fostering expertise in areas such as clinical practice, supervision, and research, CES programs contribute to the development of a highly competent and adaptable counseling workforce (Scherer et al., 2020; West et al., 1995).

Accreditation standards for counseling programs were initially developed by the

Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) to provide structured guidelines before the establishment of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in the early 1980s (Scherer et al., 2020; West et al., 1995). CACREP now serves as the national accrediting body for counseling programs, providing rigorous standards for program administration, faculty qualifications, and curriculum design across the United States to ensure quality and consistency in professional training (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, n.d.; Person et al., 2020). CACREP-accredited CES programs are designed to prepare students for diverse professional roles, including clinical practice, research, advocacy, leadership, and teaching (Brown et al., 2020). These programs emphasize the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills, ensuring that students develop the competencies necessary to succeed in the counseling field. Additionally, they provide structured opportunities for experiential learning through practicum and internship experiences, which are essential for professional development and career readiness. These hands-on experiences allow students to apply theoretical concepts in real-world settings while receiving supervision and feedback from experienced professionals, fostering skill development and self-efficacy (Borders et al., 2014; Nelson & Johnson, 2020). These experiences strengthen critical thinking and adaptability, preparing students for complex client interactions (Kolb, 2015).

Lack of Diversity in Counseling Field and Counselor Education Leadership

The counseling profession and leadership within CES programs continue to face significant challenges related to inadequate representation of racial and ethnic minorities.

Despite increasing diversity in the general population, the proportion of Black, Hispanic, and other underrepresented groups in the field of counseling remains disproportionately low, particularly in leadership roles (Lee, 2022; Singh et al., 2021). This lack of representation has implications for the inclusivity and cultural competence of counseling programs and services, as leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping curriculum priorities and fostering an inclusive educational environment (West-Olatunji et al., 2021).

Systemic barriers contribute to this underrepresentation, including limited access to higher education, financial obstacles, and racial discrimination within academic and professional settings (Bradley et al., 2020; Lum et al., 2019). Minority students in CES programs frequently encounter challenges such as microaggressions, inadequate mentorship, and insufficient institutional support, which can hinder their progression and success (Evans & Park, 2020). Moreover, the predominance of faculty from the dominant culture, comprising 71.38% in CACREP-accredited CES programs (CACREP, 2020) exacerbates these issues, limiting diverse perspectives and reinforcing systemic inequities (Sullivan et al., 2023).

The lack of diversity in CES faculty has far-reaching consequences. Homogeneous faculty compositions restrict the range of ideas and viewpoints shared in the classroom, narrowing students' understanding of counseling approaches and strategies (Borders et al., 2021). Additionally, this lack of diversity can perpetuate cultural blind spots and biases, impacting how counseling theories and practices are taught and applied (Brooks & Steen, 2022). The absence of diverse role models further affects minority students' aspirations and ability to envision success in leadership roles

within the counseling profession (Borders et al., 2021). Efforts to address these challenges include intentional recruitment and hiring practices aimed at diversifying faculty and leadership in CES programs (Brooks & Steen, 2022). These initiatives promote a more inclusive learning environment and contribute to the development of culturally competent counselors capable of addressing the diverse needs of their clients. For instance, enhancing representation within CES faculty can enrich classroom discussions, challenge assumptions, and foster innovative approaches to counseling practice (Borders et al., 2021; Brooks & Steen, 2022).

Doctoral programs in CES are designed to prepare students for leadership roles as educators, supervisors, researchers, clinicians, and advocates (Fye et al., 2021; Storlie & Wood, 2014). The mission of the counseling profession emphasizes social justice and respect for diversity (American Counseling Association, 2014). However, the underrepresentation of minority faculty and leaders in CES programs undermines this mission, leading to deficiencies in cultural competency and creating potential barriers to effective counseling practices (Brown & Grothaus, 2020; Bryant et al., 2019). Furthermore, this lack of diversity can result in power imbalances between faculty and students, discouraging Black students from pursuing leadership roles and increasing attrition rates within the profession (Storlie & Wood, 2014).

Ensuring that CES programs align with the counseling profession's mission to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential for fostering a more equitable educational environment (Borders et al., 2023; Lee & Chambers, 2023). Diversifying faculty and leadership within CES programs not only support the development of

culturally competent counselors but also enhances the ability of these programs to meet the diverse mental health needs of society (Brooks et al., 2023). These efforts are critical for advancing the counseling field's commitment to social justice and improving equitable access to quality mental health services, addressing systemic inequities within both academic and professional settings (Hayes et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023).

The Influence of Professional Identity on Career Development and Leadership

Professional identity in the counseling profession is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the values, beliefs, and practices that define the role and scope of practice for counselors. According to Bums and Cruikshanks (2018), solidifying a unique identity is crucial for counselors to establish their professional presence and ensure effective collaboration with other professionals. This process involves a comprehensive understanding of the counseling profession's roles and responsibilities, which Reiner et al. (2013) emphasize as essential for communicating professionalism and competence. Professional identity formation is an ongoing process that includes self-reflection, engagement in professional development activities, and active participation in professional communities. This identity is not only vital for personal growth and career satisfaction but also for enhancing the quality of care provided to clients (Dollarhide et al., 2021). Recent research underscores the importance of a strong professional identity in fostering resilience, job satisfaction, and a sense of belonging within the profession (Luke & Goodrich, 2019; Prosek & Hurt, 2021). This understanding is necessary to ensure that counselors can make informed decisions about their clients, provide ethical care, and build trust with their clients. It also allows them to maintain their professional identity in

the face of changing regulations and societal expectations (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

Several reasons have been identified for the current lack of a well-developed PI for professional counselors. These include a lack of comprehensive training, inadequate resources, and inadequate support for counselors (Barton & Meenaghan, 2019; Sands & Schreiber, 2021; Smith & Gibson, 2020). Additionally, the barrier to creating a well-defined PI is the complex nature of the profession, which makes it difficult to define roles and responsibilities (Fitzgerald, 2020). In addition to training under various accrediting bodies, membership in professional organizations that hold opposing views on professional roles and responsibilities, maintaining a variety of credentials and licenses, as well as adhering to ethical codes that differ or conflict (Civan, 2023; Gale & Austin, 2003), influence a professional counselor's sense of integrity and identity development.

Professional Identity Development

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2024) definition of professional identity highlights activities central to counselor education, supervision, counseling practice, research, and the cultivation of counseling expertise. This definition further includes fostering collaborative relationships, active involvement in professional counseling organizations, and meaningful contributions to scholarly research.t also includes building collaborative relationships, active participation in professional counseling organizations, and contributions to scholarly research. Professional identity development is an iterative process influenced by internal and external factors and shaped by the integration of personal perspectives with professional expectations. This process incorporates experiences gained through training, mentorship,

and applied practice, along with the maturation of professional roles and responsibilities (Alves & Gazzola, 2011; Hamelin et al., 2023). It involves a continuous cycle of learning, practice, and feedback across different developmental levels, fostering independence, professional growth, and self-evaluation (Auxier et al., 2003; Preston et al., 2020). This progression requires individuals to critically examine their values, beliefs, and goals, learn from mentorship and collaboration, and gain practical experience while incorporating constructive feedback from supervisors, peers, and colleagues.

Professional counselor identity encompasses the counselor's understanding of their role, responsibilities, and distinctions within the helping professions. It reflects the differentiation of counseling from other professions, grounded in academic training, licensure standards, and ethical practice (Kaule, 2022; Woo, 2014). A well-defined professional identity is essential for ethical practice, counselor well-being, and effective service delivery. Strengthening professional identity contributes to ethical decision-making, engagement in self-care, promotion of client wellness, and enhanced awareness of the roles and functions within the counseling profession (Burns, 2020; Cruikshanks & Burns, 2017; Rahmen et al., 2020; Woo & Benfield, 2015).

Black students in CES programs often encounter challenges in their PID due to systemic and interpersonal barriers tied to their racial and cultural identities. Black women CES students, in particular, frequently report a lack of mentorship, experiences of social and professional isolation, and exposure to microaggressions from peers and faculty (Sands & Schreiber, 2021; Smith & Gibson, 2020). These adversities can lead to feelings of exclusion, reduced self-confidence, and difficulty navigating professional

roles. Additionally, these students may feel compelled to reconcile or adjust aspects of their personal identities to gain acceptance and validation within academic and professional settings, complicating the PID process (Haskins et al., 2013; Thacker & Minton, 2021). To address these challenges, institutions must implement targeted resources and initiatives designed to support the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. These efforts should include providing access to culturally responsive mentorship, creating inclusive and equitable learning environments, and taking proactive measures to address microaggressions and other forms of bias. Faculty and mentors should engage in training programs to identify and mitigate implicit biases and microaggressions, enabling them to better support the professional growth of minority students (Sullivan et al., 2023; West et al., 2022). These interventions can significantly enhance the sense of belonging and empowerment among Black women in CES programs, contributing to their academic and professional success in counselor education and the broader counseling field (Borders et al., 2021; Haskins et al., 2023).

Previous Support and Interventions for Black Women in CES Programs at PWIs

Research findings identify several supports and interventions that are instrumental in facilitating the PID and success of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. Key supports include mentoring programs, a diverse academic and counseling staff, faculty who demonstrate cultural competence, and the provision of student support groups and services (Anderson et al., 2019; Baggerly et al., 2017; Bettencourt et al., 2021; Henfield et al., 2011; Lerma et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2016; Zeligman et al., 2015). These interventions are designed to promote students' academic achievement, retention, and

overall well-being while fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Mentoring relationships, defined as “a one-to-one ongoing connection between a more experienced member (mentor) and less experienced member (protégé) that aims to promote the professional and personal growth of the protégé through coaching, support, and guidance” (Chan et al., 2015, p. 593), have been shown to play a critical role in the success of students in higher education (Larimer et al., 2022). Effective mentorship includes providing feedback, emotional support, and encouragement while addressing the specific needs of mentees (Chan et al., 2015; Larimer et al., 2022). Research highlights the importance of matching mentees with mentors who share similar characteristics, such as race and gender, and who demonstrate traits such as honesty, wisdom, care, and professional dedication (Gardener et al., 2014; Geyton et al., 2022; Hardcastle, 1988). To optimize the benefits of mentoring, mentors should exhibit qualities that include the ability to motivate and encourage mentees, facilitate professional growth, demonstrate availability, maintain transparency and consistency in communication, and provide empathetic listening. Additionally, mentors should intentionally build relationships, share relevant experiences, and guide mentees to existing and emerging opportunities (Dominguez & Kochan, 2022; Nickerson, 2020; Shea, 1994).

For Black women enrolled in CES programs at PWIs, such mentorship interventions are particularly impactful. These supports can enhance PID, foster a sense of belonging, and mitigate social isolation, ultimately leading to increased self-efficacy and confidence (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Williams et al., 2023). Furthermore, effective mentorship contributes to improved graduation rates and prepares mentees for better

educational and career opportunities. Mentorship and networking platforms also create avenues for Black women to connect with professionals in their field, fostering sustained professional growth and development. These interventions address systemic barriers while promoting equity and inclusion, supporting Black women in achieving academic and professional success.

Mentoring Relationships

Mentorship has been extensively utilized in professional and higher education contexts and is recognized as a critical support system for Black women pursuing graduate studies (Wandix-White & Boyd, 2022). Research demonstrates that mentorship provides a protective and supportive framework for Black women navigating academic environments (Bettencourt et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016). Specifically, mentorship facilitates career development and fosters positive socialization experiences within institutional cultures that may otherwise marginalize Black women (Jones & Dufor, 2012; Joseph, 2020). Women of color, particularly Black women, are more likely to experience isolation, as well as a lack of security and guidance, when confronted with challenging circumstances such as systemic racism and gender bias (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

Researchers have consistently highlighted the importance of mentoring as a source of support for Black women across a variety of professional and educational settings. Mentorship has been shown to be critical for the success of Black faculty in higher education, K-12 environments, and university contexts (Bova, 2000; Butner et al., 2000; Enomoto et al., 2000; Rasheem et al., 2018; Reddick et al., 2021; Shavers &

Moore, 2014). Further, Wandix-White and Boyd (2022) emphasize that mentoring relationships are vital for the professional and personal growth, development, and well-being of Black women in academic settings. The authors note that due to intersecting challenges, such as systemic racism and sexism, mentorship can serve as a critical intervention to mitigate barriers that impede progress.

For Black women in CES programs at PWIs, mentorship provides a structured avenue to address unique challenges. Mentorship offers a confidential space where Black women can voice concerns, seek advice, and access emotional and professional support, particularly in contexts that may lack sufficient representation or understanding of their experiences. Also, mentorship can facilitate access to valuable resources, including internships, research collaborations, and job opportunities, that may not be available (Joseph et al., 2023). Mentorship facilitates collaboration and solidarity among Black women in CES programs, cultivating networks that promote shared goals and collective professional development (Wandix-White & Boyd, 2022). These connections can empower Black women to navigate systemic barriers more effectively while simultaneously building a sense of community and mutual support. Through this collaborative framework, mentorship contributes to the broader goal of positive social change by equipping Black women with the tools, networks, and opportunities necessary to thrive in their academic and professional endeavors (McCoy et al., 2023; Wandix-White & Boyd, 2022).

Staff Diversity

Diversity among academic and counseling staff is a culturally relevant

intervention that can positively impact Black women in CES doctoral programs. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) emphasizes the critical importance of cultural competence, including the necessity for diversity among faculty in counselor education programs (CACREP, 2024; Lu & Pillay, 2020). Although Black students increasingly enroll at PWIs, enhancing the diversity of college campuses, faculty representation often does not reflect these demographic shifts. This disparity creates a deficit in the support available to Black students (Abdul-Raheem, 2016; Mokel et al., 2022).

While approximately 15% of the U.S. population identifies as Black, only 5% of faculty in higher education are Black, compared to over 75% who are White (Tallman & Bird, 2022; Wilder et al., 2015). This imbalance leads to an underrepresentation of Black faculty in CES programs, often resulting in Black students being paired with White faculty members (Brown et al., 2020; Haizlip, 2012). Academic institutions must prioritize increasing diversity among faculty in counselor education programs to bridge this gap and address the unique needs of Black women doctoral students (Bartman, 2015; Nickerson, 2020).

Researchers suggest that Black faculty are uniquely positioned to advocate for cultural equity within higher education institutions, offering critical mentorship and support to Black students in CES programs (Abdul-Raheem, 2016; Mokel et al., 2022). Black faculty members can create an empathetic and supportive learning environment while providing personal mentorship and guidance tailored to the experiences of Black students. Their cultural knowledge and skills can help Black students navigate systemic

challenges at PWIs, promoting their academic and professional success. Furthermore, Black faculty can contribute to institutional change by advocating for equitable policies and practices, ensuring Black students have access to the same resources and opportunities as their White peers (Nickerson, 2020; Tallman & Bird, 2022).

Understanding Student Culture

Participation in multicultural forums has been demonstrated to significantly enhance the academic experience for Black women in doctoral programs by reducing feelings of social isolation and fostering a sense of community (Bartman, 2015; Nickerson, 2020). These forums create opportunities for meaningful dialogue among individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, promoting mutual understanding, insight, and acceptance (Henfield et al., 2011; Mao et al., 2023). Through these interactions, participants can openly discuss sensitive topics such as discrimination, racism, and professional development, which are particularly relevant for navigating systemic challenges in higher education and professional environments (Brooks et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2016). These discussions not only provide critical emotional support but also empower participants with strategies for overcoming barriers and fostering resilience.

Faculty members play a pivotal role in supporting the cultural identity development of diverse students. Faculty members can support this development by sharing aspects of their cultural identity, encouraging students to express their uniqueness, and incorporating research that reflects and validates students' cultural backgrounds (Snow & Field, 2020). Acknowledging and valuing the diversity of students

within CES programs fosters an inclusive learning environment, which supports Black women in exploring and embracing their cultural identity (Snow et al., 2023). Faculty can enhance cultural identity development by implementing strategies such as organizing workshops and seminars on cultural topics, fostering spaces for open dialogue and providing mentorship opportunities tailored to the specific needs of underrepresented groups (Mao et al., 2023). These initiatives can help students gain deeper insight into how their cultural identity influences their experiences in academic and professional contexts (Mao et al., 2023; Snow & Field, 2020).

Faculty members in CES programs play a critical role in fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding by establishing and maintaining inclusive learning environments (Haskins et al., 2023). Such environments empower Black women students to express their identities authentically without fear of judgment or discrimination, promoting a sense of belonging and psychological safety. These efforts are integral to developing a culturally competent and diverse counseling workforce capable of addressing the complex needs of an increasingly diverse society (Bartman, 2015; Nickerson, 2020; Ross et al., 2016). By prioritizing inclusivity and equity, faculty members contribute to creating a supportive academic culture that not only enhances student outcomes but also advances the broader counseling profession’s commitment to social justice and diversity (Brooks et al., 2023).

Support Systems

In online or in-person doctoral programs, establishing robust support systems is a critical factor in the success of Black women (Freire et al., 2023; Gasman et al., 2022).

Black women benefit significantly from faculty members who possess an understanding of their cultural backgrounds and provide mentorship, guidance, and encouragement tailored to their needs. Additionally, forming peer networks with other Black women can serve as an essential resource for navigating the unique challenges and systemic barriers encountered during their doctoral journey (Freire et al., 2023; Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Access to these systems foster academic persistence, enhancing PID and leadership opportunities within the field (Wilson, 2021).

Support systems for Black women in doctoral programs often extend beyond traditional academic networks and may include family, friends, church communities, teachers, and counselors (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Davidson et al., 2004; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). These extended networks provide both emotional and practical support. For example, family members can offer financial assistance and stability, while close friends and peers can act as emotional anchors and confidants (Bishop, 2023; Jones et al., 2020). In some cases, close friends take on roles traditionally associated with biological family members, contributing to the creation of chosen family networks that provide stability and emotional reinforcement (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Martin, 2018).

These support systems also foster mental, emotional, and spiritual resilience, creating a foundation for Black women doctoral students to thrive in their programs (Bishop, 2023; Martin, 2018). Through these networks, students gain access to mentorship opportunities, professional guidance, and practical advice for managing the challenges of their academic and personal lives. Additionally, these relationships contribute to a sense of belonging, helping Black women

counter feelings of isolation often experienced in predominantly White academic environments (Freire et al., 2023; Gasman et al., 2022). Support systems play a vital role in strengthening coping mechanisms while also significantly contributing to the overall well-being and academic success of Black women enrolled in CES doctoral programs at PWIs (Freire et al., 2023).

Impact of PID Experiences and Involvement in the Field Post-Graduation

Professional identity is defined as a belief system and set of ethical practices that distinguish one profession from others (Neukrug & Remley, 2009; Teem, 2022). In CES doctoral programs, professional identity is cultivated through the development of values, beliefs, and assumptions that differentiate counseling as a profession, while preparing individuals for roles as educators, supervisors, researchers, and leaders (Hatchett, 2023; Weinrach et al., 2001). During this process, a transition occurs as students evolve from their role as counselor practitioners to counselor educators and supervisors, encompassing a broader scope of professional responsibilities (Hall & Burns, 2009; Randel et al., 2021).

Professional identity development is conceptualized as a dynamic intrapersonal and interpersonal process, wherein counselors-in-training simultaneously develop their understanding of their roles and tasks within the program (Gibson et al., 2010; Peters & Vereen, 2020). Effective PID requires comprehensive training, mentorship, and experiential learning, and a supportive community that fosters the individual's professional growth and commitment to the field (Gibson et al., 2010; Peter et al., 2020). CES programs aim to establish this foundation by emphasizing education, supervision,

research, and scholarship as central goals, ultimately preparing students for successful post-graduate opportunities (Garraway, 2021).

The development of professional identity within CES programs involves distinctive experiences and transformational tasks that include integrating multiple identities, evolving legitimacy, and accepting professional responsibilities. These elements are critical in shaping how students perceive their roles in the counseling profession and their engagement post-graduation (Dollarhide & Gibson, 2013; Steen et al., 2023). Activities and courses within CES programs are intentionally structured to immerse students in key components of PID, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their professional roles (Steen et al., 2023). Tailoring these experiences to align with the specific goals of individual students further enhances their PID (Dollarhide et al., 2023). Ensuring that CES programs foster environments that emphasize collaboration, mentorship, and reflective practice can further support as they navigate their PID (Steen et al., 2023).

Summary

Chapter 2 of this qualitative study is a review of the literature exploring the relationships between the experiences of Black women enrolled in CES programs at PWIs and their PID. The reviewed literature identifies barriers faced by Black women in CACREP-accredited CES programs and uncovers the impact these barriers have on PID. Despite prior research on the experiences of Black women in these programs, there remains limited information specifically addressing the connections between their experiences and PID within PWI contexts (Garraway, 2023; Nathan & Carlson, 2023).

Black women CES students often report a lack of support and interventions within their programs to address barriers such as microaggressions, marginality, inadequate mentorship, limited coping strategies, code-switching, and a lack of belonging in PWIs. These challenges may hinder successful PID during their doctoral studies (Nathan & Carlson, 2023; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Strayhorn, 2013). Such barriers can contribute to feelings of isolation and marginalization, potentially leading to dehumanization and negatively affecting both PID and involvement within the CES community (Henfield et al., 2014; Thacker & Minton, 2021).

This issue is significant because PID serves as the foundation for students' transition from the roles of counseling practitioners to counselor educators. This shift involves active participation as educators, supervisors, researchers, and leaders in the field, fostering a professional transformation that is essential for their future roles (Dollarhide et al., 2023; Limberg et al., 2013). Understanding the factors influencing PID for Black women at PWIs can inform strategies to better support their academic and professional development and enhance their contributions to the counseling profession. The following chapter will outline the methodology used in this study to illuminate these issues and provide a detailed analysis of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Existing research underscores the need for more qualitative studies investigating the PID of Black women in CES programs (Crouch, 2022; Davis & Smith, 2021; Johnson & Brown, 2020). This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Black women CES students concerning PID within CACREP-accredited PWIs. Understanding the distinct challenges Black women face in higher education and academia challenges that differ from those encountered by men and other racial groups remains a critical area of inquiry (Abuelgasim et al., 2020; Chandler et al., 2020).

This chapter outlined the study's methodological framework, including the context, recruitment strategies, data collection and analysis procedures, and the overall research design and rationale behind the study. Details were provided on the population identification, the sampling process, the study's implementation, and the analytical approach. Furthermore, this chapter discussed measures to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings and addressed potential ethical considerations. This methodological overview is integral to ensuring that the research process is transparent, rigorous, and replicable. Additionally, it provides a clear understanding of how the data were collected and analyzed, offering a foundation for accurately interpreting the study's results.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question for the study was "What are the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs as they navigated professional identity development?" A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to describe the experiences of

Black women navigating PID while enrolled in CES programs at PWIs. A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology was used to investigate how individuals interpreted and assigned meaning to their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Phenomenology is suited for capturing subjective experiences, including thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, providing insights into how individuals engage with their social and institutional environments (Smith et al., 2012; van Manen, 2016). In this study, I focused on the complex ways in which Black women constructed their professional identities within the unique cultural and structural context of PWIs.

I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to illuminate the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs, offering a deep and context-rich understanding of PID (Smith et al., 2012; van Manen, 2016). This methodological framework was particularly suited for exploring the nuanced and often underrepresented perspectives of Black women, addressing the complexities of their experiences in navigating academic, social, and professional challenges. By focusing on both descriptive and interpretive elements, the approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of how systemic, cultural, and institutional factors influenced their PID, contributing to a more inclusive understanding of their trajectories within CES programs.

In alignment with hermeneutic phenomenology, I considered the cultural, social, and historical contexts that shaped individual experiences, recognizing that these dimensions are critical for understanding how PID occurs (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 1962). This approach acknowledged that Black women at PWIs navigated complex systems of power, privilege, and exclusion, which influenced their engagement with and

construction of their professional identities (Johnson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021). By situating participants' experiences within broader cultural and institutional frameworks, I aimed to interpret how systemic structures and individual agency interact in the process of PID. This perspective underscored the importance of exploring how historical legacies of exclusion and current institutional practices intersect with the agency of Black women in shaping their professional trajectories (Carter et al., 2023; Hooks, 2015). Such contextual analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways in which systemic inequities and personal resilience converge to influence the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs.

I used IPA, a methodology grounded in understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, incorporating a double hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2020). In this approach, the researcher interprets participants' efforts to make sense of their own experiences, offering a layered understanding of meaning-making (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Shinebourne, 2022). IPA has been recognized as a robust method for exploring nuanced and context-specific meanings, particularly in fields that require an in-depth understanding of complex subjective experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). This makes it an ideal framework for describing the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs, where individual and systemic factors intersect. By interpreting participants' sense-making processes, IPA facilitated the uncovering of rich, contextually embedded meanings that highlighted the unique ways Black women navigated their academic and professional journeys. This approach acknowledged the interplay between the participants' internal perspectives and the external influences of their environments,

offering insights into how PID was shaped by cultural, social, and institutional factors (Smith et al., 2022; van Manen, 2016). Through this interpretive process, I aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges Black women face and the strategies they use to construct their professional identities within predominantly White academic contexts.

The qualitative design, incorporating in-depth interviews, offered a holistic exploration of participants' experiences. This methodology facilitated an understanding of how Black women's individual experiences intersected with broader cultural and institutional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Larkin et al., 2023). Additionally, it provided insights into the power dynamics between these students and their institutions, revealing how these dynamics shaped their professional journeys. The study engaged participants in a dialogical process that fostered trust and openness, enabling a candid exploration of their lived realities (Smith et al., 2022). By identifying systemic barriers such as microaggressions, limited mentorship opportunities, and underrepresentation of diverse faculty, I explored institutional practices that hinder PID. My goal was to inform the creation of interventions and policies that promote fairness, representation, and inclusive support within counselor education programs (Carter et al., 2022; Chandler et al., 2020; Davis & Smith, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ultimately, I aim to equip higher education institutions with the knowledge needed to address structural inequities and foster an environment where Black women CES students can thrive both personally and professionally (Harper & Hurtado, 2020; Smith et al., 2022).

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I prioritized understanding participants' backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences to accurately describe and interpret the phenomenon under investigation. By incorporating these elements, I mitigated bias and enhanced the credibility of the findings (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2020; Smith & Noble, 2022). Using a qualitative research design, I employed in-depth interviews and open-ended surveys to explore the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences, providing a rich understanding of complex phenomena that quantitative approaches could not adequately capture (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Recognizing my positionality was crucial, especially given parallels between myself and the participants. Reflexivity allowed me to acknowledge and manage the influence of my personal experiences, ensuring a thoughtful and balanced interpretation of the data (Tutelman & Webster, 2020).

Through a hermeneutic and interpretive approach, I systematically analyzed the data to uncover themes and provide insights into participants' lived experiences. Drawing on Heidegger's (1962) concept of *Dasein*, I situated participants' experiences within their realities, offering a nuanced understanding of their perspectives (Laverty, 2003). Reflexivity remained central to this process, involving continuous self-examination to mitigate biases and critically evaluate assumptions (Delve & Limpaecher, 2022). This iterative process deepened the analysis, enhanced the credibility of the findings, and ensured the research contributed to a detailed and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Jamieson et al., 2023).

Methodology

In this study, I used a systematic approach grounded in phenomenological research to ensure rigor and alignment with its principles (Moustakas, 1994). I developed research questions, strategically designed the study, and implemented systematic data collection and analysis methods to explore the lived experiences of participants. Rooted in phenomenology, I emphasized intentional reflection and observation to uncover the essence of human experiences (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 2016). I outlined procedures that included participant selection, recruitment strategies, research instrument design, data collection protocols, and data analysis methods. These steps were meticulously crafted to uphold the validity and reliability of the research, ensuring a thorough examination of the phenomenon and contributing meaningful insights to the field (Smith et al., 2022; Vagle, 2018).

Participant Selection

Data for this study were collected from Black women who were either currently enrolled in or had graduated within the past five years from CES programs at PWIs. Recruitment was conducted through professional networks, academic associations, and online platforms such as social media groups and forums supporting Black women in higher education (see Appendices B and C). I recruited nine participants using criterion and purposive sampling methods to align with the targeted population's characteristics while maintaining ethical and unbiased recruitment standards. Recruitment procedures were systematically reviewed and adjusted as necessary to achieve the study's objectives and ensure methodological rigor (Saunders et al., 2023).

I used purposive sampling, a non-probability method, to intentionally select participants who possessed specific characteristics relevant to the study's focus (Obilor, 2023). This approach was well-suited for phenomenological research as it emphasized an in-depth exploration of lived experiences within a defined population (Giorgi, 2009; Patton, 2015). By targeting individuals who met the inclusion criteria, purposive sampling enhanced the depth and relevance of the data collected, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives.

Snowball sampling, or chain referral sampling, was also used, beginning with an initial set of purposively selected participants who were asked to refer others meeting the study criteria (Pasikowski, 2023). This method proved effective for accessing populations that were challenging to reach through conventional sampling methods, particularly in studies addressing sensitive or specialized topics (Pasikowski, 2023). I used snowball sampling to identify additional participants while ensuring alignment with the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were selected based on predetermined qualifications, and referrals through snowball sampling expanded the participant pool (Merriam & Grenier, 2009). Interviews were conducted via Zoom, providing convenience and security, with participants selecting mutually agreeable settings. All participants provided informed consent, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

I analyzed the data using IPA, focusing on exploring the meanings and lived experiences conveyed in the participants' narratives. Only individuals aged 18 and older who fully understood the study's requirements were included, ensuring informed

participation and adherence to ethical standards. This in-depth and ethically rigorous methodology aligned with the study's objective of exploring the nuanced experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs (Saunders et al., 2023).

Instrumentation

I used a variety of qualitative tools to ensure a comprehensive and culturally responsive exploration of the PID experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. Semistructured interviews, guided by an established protocol (see Appendix A), served as the primary data collection method, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). These were supplemented by phenomenological questionnaires, member-checking protocols, and reflexive journaling to document biases and assumptions throughout the research process (Ortlipp, 2022; Tufford & Newman, 2021). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share nuanced perspectives on challenges such as microaggressions, mentorship gaps, and systemic barriers, ensuring the research design aligned with the principles of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994).

To enhance credibility, I used member-checking strategies that allowed participants to verify the accuracy of data and interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). Reflexive journaling further supported this process by enabling me to critically examine my positionality as a Black woman and doctoral student, ensuring transparency and mitigating potential biases (Nowell et al., 2017). Feedback from my dissertation committee facilitated iterative refinement of the instruments, ensuring they were culturally sensitive and free from stereotypes, thereby accurately reflecting participants'

experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Sue et al., 2019). This process involved tailoring questions to address specific issues, such as navigating PWIs, seeking mentorship, and building resilience in the face of systemic inequities (Brooks et al., 2023; Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020).

I adhered to ethical standards during data collection and storage by implementing clear protocols to protect participant confidentiality and ensure data security (Creswell & Poth 2018). Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection, and their rights through a detailed consent process, which included the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and removed identifying information from transcripts and written materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and reflexive journal entries, were securely stored on a password-protected cloud platform, accessible only to me. This ensured compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Data access was strictly limited, and participants were explicitly informed that only the dissertation committee and IRB would have access to the de-identified data for review purposes.

I used culturally responsive instruments to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences, effectively capturing the intersectional realities of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. For instance, I incorporated prompts that encouraged participants to reflect on how their cultural identities influenced their professional journeys, allowing them to share experiences of navigating PWIs and the role of community support in their development (Sue et al., 2019). By addressing

systemic barriers, such as microaggressions and inequities in mentorship, and leveraging a rigorous, iterative approach, the study contributed actionable insights into fostering equity and inclusivity within counselor education. This methodology advanced the understanding of PID by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this population, ultimately enhancing the broader field of counselor education and professional development (Brown et al., 2021; Saldaña, 2021).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I implemented a systematic and ethically grounded approach to recruit participants, focusing on Black women currently enrolled in or who had graduated within the past five years from CES programs at PWIs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). (See Appendices B and C). Recruitment efforts included leveraging professional networks, academic organizations, and social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook to access groups and forums dedicated to supporting Black women in higher education (Whitaker & Orman, 2021). Additionally, I utilized academic listservs such as COUNSGRAD and CESNET, which specifically cater to graduate students and professionals in counseling education, to broaden my outreach and engage eligible participants.

I developed recruitment materials that clearly outlined the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and participation requirements to ensure transparency and encourage informed participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using criterion and purposive sampling, I selected nine participants who could provide meaningful insights into PID (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2020). When initial efforts fell short, I used snowball sampling, asking

participants to refer peers who met the study criteria, which proved effective for reaching this specific population (Palinkas et al., 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2019).

Participants were contacted via email, which included a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, confidentiality protocols, and informed consent process (Roberts & Allen, 2021) (See Appendix C). The email also contained a link to a survey of PID experiences and demographic questionnaire designed to screen for eligibility and a survey to gather initial data on their experiences. After using Facebook and LinkedIn for recruitment but not reaching the desired number of participants, I expanded my efforts by sharing recruitment materials through academic listservs such as COUNSGRAD and CESNET. This approach significantly broadened my reach and connected me with more potential participants within the CES academic community. Using these platforms alongside social media expanded recruitment opportunities, fostering diversity and building trust among prospective participants (Taylor et al., 2023; Whitaker & Orman, 2021).

Data collection occurred in three phases. In the first phase, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and survey on PID experiences to provide foundational context for their lived experiences. In the second phase, I conducted semistructured interviews via Zoom, lasting approximately 40 minutes per participant. Open-ended questions allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences with PID. These interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to facilitate thorough analysis. The final stage of my data collection involved a debriefing session where I provided participants with a summary of their contributions, clarified any

lingering questions, and invited feedback on their overall experience to ensure transparency and closure in the research process. This process ensured the credibility of the data and strengthened the alignment between participants' narratives and the study's outcomes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017). To maintain confidentiality, all data were securely stored on a password-protected platform, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, adhering to ethical standards (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023).

Throughout the recruitment and data collection process, I monitored outcomes and adjusted strategies to ensure methodological rigor and ethical integrity. For example, I extended recruitment timelines, refined screening procedures, and broadened outreach to additional networks, such as COUNSGRAD and CESNET outside of LinkedIn and Facebook, to ensure participant diversity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). Social media outreach on platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook enabled me to engage participants from underrepresented communities, while listservs and forums like COUNSGRAD and CESNET connected me to eligible individuals within professional and academic networks (Whitaker & Orman, 2021). To prevent participants from re-entering the study solely for compensation, I implemented strict screening protocols, such as cross-checking demographic information and interview schedules.

For example, if a participant attempted to submit a second demographic questionnaire and survey, I verified their details against the existing participant list to ensure fairness and maintain accountability. Participants were fully informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time, and those who completed the study

received a $10 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation (Grady, 2001; Saunders et al., 2023). This multi-faceted approach, incorporating diverse recruitment platforms and culturally sensitive methods, ensured the study generated meaningful insights into the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs.

Data Analysis Plan

In this study, I used IPA to analyze the data, following a structured process to identify meaningful patterns and themes from participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2023). Interviews were transcribed verbatim using NVivo transcription software to preserve the nuances of participants' expressions and experiences (Woolf & Silver, 2017). I repeatedly reviewed audio recordings during transcription at least six times to deepen familiarity with the data and ensure accuracy (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The initial coding phase, aligned with IPA's six-step approach, focused on generating codes directly from the data, allowing for unexpected insights without imposing theoretical constraints (Saldaña, 2021). I used NVivo to code the data, organizing it into themes and subthemes to identify cross-cutting patterns and connections (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). This iterative process ensured the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while uncovering nuanced insights into their PID within PWIs. Using SCCT as a framework, I explored how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental supports shaped participants' PID, highlighting the interplay between personal agency and systemic challenges (Lent & Brown, 2019; Sheu & Lent, 2020). This lens provided a comprehensive understanding of how participants navigated systemic inequities and leveraged resources to advance their professional identities (Byars-Winston, 2021).

To ensure trustworthiness, I employed member checking by sharing summaries of transcript data with participants to confirm accuracy and alignment with their experiences (Harper & Cole, 2012). This approach allowed participants to clarify or expand on their narratives, enhancing the reliability of the findings (Carlson, 2010). I also maintained a reflexive journal to document assumptions and reflections, acknowledging my influence on the interpretive process (Finlay, 2022). All data were securely stored in password-protected files adhering to ethical guidelines to safeguard confidentiality and maintain data security (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Trustworthiness

Ensuring quality is a fundamental aspect of conducting research, particularly in qualitative studies. Key components of quality in qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which collectively form the foundation of trustworthy and rigorous inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Each of these elements represents a critical layer that supports the integrity of the research process and requires deliberate and strategic attention throughout the study.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research referred to the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study's findings, ensuring they reflected the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility in this study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University was sought prior to initiating the research. This approval process involved a rigorous review of the study's ethical framework, ensuring strict adherence to ethical guidelines and the protection of

participant rights (Sarma, 2021). Transparency and clarity during the IRB application process demonstrated that the research intentions, methodology, and ethical considerations were rigorously aligned with established best practices (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

IRB approval served as an acknowledgment that the research adhered to ethical standards, safeguarding against potential ethical or legal challenges, and demonstrating respect for participants and the research process (Smith & Noble, 2022). Following data collection, credibility was further reinforced through member checking, a process in which participants reviewed analyzed data to ensure its accuracy and alignment with their intended meaning (Birt et al., 2016). This technique enhanced the validity of the study by allowing participants to verify the authenticity of the themes and interpretations, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings (Carlson, 2010; Harper & Cole, 2012).

Triangulation

I used literature triangulation by cross-referencing themes from participant interviews with existing research on PID to ensure the findings aligned with or expanded upon prior studies (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach validated the study's conclusions while uncovering new insights that enriched the understanding of Black women's experiences in CES programs. To further enhance the analysis, I explored PID through the lens of SCCT and phenomenology, offering a multidimensional perspective grounded in established theoretical frameworks (Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2020). This comprehensive approach strengthened credibility, deepening participants' narratives.

I critically reviewed the identified themes to ensure their reliability and coherence with existing literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). To enhance credibility, I presented the findings in a clear and well-structured format, demonstrating transparency in my data analysis process and the rationale behind my conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). This comprehensive approach adhered to rigorous qualitative research standards, ensuring the study's trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

By integrating existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and participant narratives, I ensured a thorough and nuanced interpretation of the data. This process facilitated the identification of systemic and institutional factors shaping the lived experiences of Black women at PWIs, while also uncovering potential outliers and inconsistencies (Flick, 2018; Noble & Smith, 2015). I cross-verified my findings through literature triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the research and mitigate potential biases within the data (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). This rigorous process allowed for the detection of nuanced patterns, ensuring a balanced analysis that highlighted both challenges and opportunities in the participants' PID. Ultimately, the triangulated methodology provided actionable insights into the systemic and institutional influences on Black women's experiences in CES programs, advancing understanding and contributing to the broader discourse on PID (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

Transferability

To ensure transferability, I designed the methodology to allow findings to be

applicable to other CES programs, particularly at PWIs. Transferability, which refers to the extent to which findings can be extended to other contexts, was supported by detailed documentation of participant recruitment, interview processes, and data analysis procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing clearly articulated timelines, research questions, verbatim transcriptions, and structured analytic methods, I ensured consistency, reliability, and scholarly rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Miles et al., 2020). These measures not only supported ethical research practices but also enabled future researchers to adapt or replicate the study for comparable contexts (Birt et al., 2016; Carlson, 2010). The findings offer actionable insights to address systemic challenges in academic institutions and foster inclusivity in CES programs, contributing evidence-based strategies to enhance retention and success for Black women at PWIs (Lent & Brown, 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research pertained to the stability and consistency of data over time and across varying conditions. It paralleled the concept of reliability in quantitative research, emphasizing that the findings were reproducible and consistent under similar methodological conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). I implemented rigorous strategies to ensure dependability by maintaining a methodologically sound, logical, and well-documented research process. This included consistently recording decisions made during data analysis to enhance transparency and ensure logical consistency in identifying patterns and themes. I maintained detailed records of data collection procedures, coding processes, and analytic decisions to create

an audit trail for future researchers to follow (Miles et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). I also used reflexive journaling to document my reflections and decisions throughout the study, ensuring transparency in how I derived interpretations and conclusions (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2012). I used a structured framework within IPA to enhance the study's dependability. This approach enabled me to engage with the participants' narratives systematically and deeply, uncovering patterns and themes that reflected their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2020). I implemented these measures to ensure transparency, replicability, and rigor in the study's methodology, strengthening its credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Confirmability

To establish confirmability, I implemented strategies to ensure the findings were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than my own biases. Feedback from the dissertation committee was sought throughout the research process providing critical evaluation and enhancing the study's rigor and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Participants also engaged in member-checking by reviewing transcript summaries to validate data accuracy and verify identified themes, ensuring their experiences were authentically represented (Birt et al., 2016). Additionally, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my assumptions, reflections, and potential biases, reinforcing transparency and aligning with qualitative research standards (Finlay, 2022; van Manen, 2016). These strategies collectively ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences while upholding methodological rigor.

Saturation

In this qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs regarding their PID at CACREP-accredited PWIs. I used purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants who met the study's specific criteria. With purposive sampling, I targeted individuals whose characteristics were directly relevant to the phenomenon under investigation, enabling a focused and in-depth exploration of their experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Patton, 2015). To complement this, I incorporated snowball sampling by asking initial participants to refer others who met the inclusion criteria. This approach was particularly effective in accessing underrepresented populations, such as Black women in CES programs, while ensuring diverse perspectives were captured (Palinkas et al., 2015; Pasikowski, 2023).

I conducted all interviews virtually via Zoom to provide a secure and convenient platform for data collection. Before each interview, I obtained informed consent, ensuring participants' rights were protected throughout the process (Hennink et al., 2020). I audio-recorded the interviews, used NVivo to transcribe them verbatim, and anonymized the data by assigning pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality (McGrath et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2017). Using IPA, I analyzed the data systematically to explore and interpret participants' lived experiences in depth (Smith et al., 2020). This approach aligned with the study's phenomenological framework, allowing me to uncover nuanced insights into the challenges and opportunities shaping PID for Black women in CES programs at PWIs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017).

Audit Trail

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for qualitative research identifies the inclusion of an audit trail as a method to enhance rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness. I used an audit trail to systematically record decisions and procedural steps, ensuring a structured and transparent account of the research process to enhance credibility and rigor (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach ensured methodological coherence and supported the credibility and replicability of the findings (Moreau & Wiebels, 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). I documented each step of the research process, from data collection to analysis, to establish a strong methodological foundation for interpreting and drawing conclusions, aligning with best practices in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009; Miles et al., 2020). This comprehensive documentation ensured that the transformation of raw data into meaningful insights followed a logical and traceable process, reinforcing the integrity and accountability of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

The audit trail served as a crucial component in ensuring ethical and accountable research practices. I maintained a detailed record of methodological decisions to ensure that any adjustments to the research design were justified and aligned with the study's objectives, reinforcing the study's validity (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). I systematically documented each stage of the research process, allowing me to identify potential biases and create a transparent framework for evaluating the validity of research conclusions by assessing emerging patterns, concepts, and themes (Bowen, 2009; Moreau & Wiebels, 2023). This approach ensured the research was reproducible and strengthened its credibility by demonstrating a reflective and thoroughly documented inquiry process

(Miles et al., 2020).

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures were an integral part of my study. I began by providing participants with detailed information about the study, including my contact information for any questions or concerns. The initial email to participants included an overview of the study's purpose, the importance of exploring the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs, a description of the data collection methods, potential risks of participation, and resources for mental health support in case of psychological distress related to the study. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. I interviewed only those participants who voluntarily signed the informed consent form and met the inclusion criteria for the study. To protect participant identities, I assigned pseudonyms, which were not shared with anyone.

To ensure the confidentiality and secure preservation of data, I stored all information on password-protected devices and remained the sole user with access to these devices. The raw data, including transcriptions and audio recordings, will be securely retained for five years, after which it will be permanently destroyed if no longer needed. Additionally, I implemented strict protocols to ensure that any shared information was sent only to the appropriate recipients. For example, I verified recipients' identities by confirming their unique participant pseudonyms and matching them with their email addresses before sharing transcript summaries. Throughout the research process, I continuously evaluated my ethical practices to uphold participant privacy, maintain data security, and align with the ethical standards outlined by Walden

University's IRB and the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). These measures ensured a trustworthy approach to conducting this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the research methodology used to explore the experiences of Black women regarding PID in CES programs at PWIs. Using IPA, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants from CACREP-accredited PWIs to gain in-depth insights into their lived experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2020). This study fills a gap in the literature by exploring how systemic and institutional factors shape PID for Black women, providing implications for improving representation and inclusivity within counselor education (Cannon & Wilder, 2023; Davis et al., 2021). I employed purposive and snowball sampling methods, utilizing professional networks, academic associations, and social media platforms to ensure broad outreach and ethical recruitment (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). To maintain accuracy, I recorded and transcribed all interviews, ensuring a rigorous data collection process. Reflexivity played a central role in my approach, allowing me to acknowledge biases and uphold ethical research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Villagran, 2020). Using IPA, I systematically analyzed the data to identify and interpret emergent themes, providing a nuanced understanding of how participants navigated academic and professional challenges at PWIs (Smith et al., 2022). In the next chapter, findings will be presented with a detailed analysis of themes, contextualized within SCCT, highlighting how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports influenced participants' PID (Lent & Brown, 2019). These findings

will not only enhance understanding of the challenges faced by Black women in CES programs but also offer actionable insights for scholars and practitioners to foster inclusivity and equity in counselor education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Wilder, 2023;).

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I present the findings and analysis of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study, which explores the PID experiences of Black women enrolled in CES doctoral programs at CACREP-accredited PWIs. The study was guided by the central question "What are the lived experiences of Black women regarding PID while enrolled in CES programs at PWIs?" I provide an in-depth examination of their challenges, triumphs, and realities within predominantly White academic environments. I begin by outlining the research context, participant demographics, and data collection methods, which included semistructured interviews, phenomenological questionnaires, and reflexive journaling to capture detailed narratives. Using Smith et al.'s (2020) IPA framework, I identified emergent themes and subthemes that reveal nuanced insights into participants' PID processes. To ensure rigor, I incorporated strategies such as reflexivity, member-checking, and maintaining audit trails. The chapter concludes by summarizing the findings and connecting them to the research question, setting the stage for the discussion in Chapter 5.

Setting

Several personal and organizational conditions likely influenced participants' experiences and, consequently, the interpretation of the results. On a personal level, participants were navigating the dual pressures of pursuing a doctoral degree while managing responsibilities outside of their academic lives, such as work, family obligations, and financial challenges. These factors may have shaped their perspectives on PID and their ability to engage fully with program requirements. Organizationally, the

participants were enrolled in or had graduated from CES programs within the past 5 years at PWIs, where systemic inequities, limited representation of Black faculty, and a lack of culturally responsive support systems often created additional barriers. The timing of the study coincided with significant societal events in 2024, such as the Supreme Court's decision on affirmative action in college admissions, which sparked national conversations about race, equity, and access in education (Bender, 2024). These events may have heightened participants' reflections on their own experiences of race, identity, and professional development within PWIs, influencing their sense of advocacy and urgency to address systemic inequities in their educational and professional environments. These conditions provided essential context for understanding participants' narratives and must be considered when interpreting the findings.

Demographics

To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. These pseudonyms are used throughout the discussion of findings to protect their identities while ensuring clarity in analysis. Participants in this study were all Black women who were either currently enrolled in or recent graduates (within the past 5 years) of a doctoral-level CES program at a PWI. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 49 and represented diverse professional backgrounds and educational experiences.

Participant 1: Ember (Age 41)

A doctoral graduate with a background in clinical mental health counseling, Ember's journey into counseling was shaped by personal experiences of emotional neglect, leading her to pursue a career focused on advocacy and healing. She found

strength in a supportive Black community, which reinforced her professional identity and resilience. Her experiences align with themes of impact of racial and gender identity and community support in the context of PID.

Participant 2: Victory (Age 29)

Currently enrolled in a doctoral CES program, Victory's experience has been marked by feelings of isolation and discrimination, particularly in multicultural counseling courses. She has found support through mentorship from Black faculty, which has been instrumental in her professional development. Her engagement with mindfulness and cultural affirmation reflects mentorship and guidance as well as adaptive strategies in navigating her academic and professional environment.

Participant 3: Freedom (Age 35)

A recent doctoral graduate with a background in marriage and family therapy, Freedom encountered systemic inequities throughout her CES program. She relied on peer mentorship for support and developed self-care strategies, such as exercise and meditation, to maintain her well-being. Her commitment to inclusivity in counseling aligns with cultural competence and social justice.

Participant 4: Triumph (Age 49)

With extensive experience as a licensed professional counselor and clinical supervisor, Triumph has navigated a long academic journey, earning her master's degree in 2003 and completing her PhD in 2024. Her professional identity is deeply rooted in authenticity, community, and self-care, emphasizing the importance of bridging the gap between academia and real-world counseling practice. Triumph highlighted the role of

mentorship and community connections in overcoming systemic barriers, exemplifying leadership and advocacy and community support.

Participant 5: Radiance (Age 34)

Radiance, a doctoral student who transitioned from industrial-organizational psychology to counseling psychology due to her passion for addressing trauma, has faced cultural dissonance in predominantly White academic settings. She navigates cross-racial mentorship with support from a white female professor and a Black male supervisor, developing resilience through culturally sustaining practices and physical activity. She relies on culturally sustaining practices and advocacy for institutional change, aligning with adaptive strategies and recommendations for institutional change.

Participant 6: Valor (Age 37)

Currently completing her dissertation, Valor's journey has been shaped by microaggressions and systemic disparities. She has developed self-advocacy strategies and mentorship has played a key role in her ability to navigate these challenges. Through documenting her experiences, she works to inspire others and advance equity, aligning with mentorship and guidance and self-advocacy.

Participant 7: Courage (Age 32)

A doctoral graduate who transitioned from early childhood education to counseling, Courage reflected on the role of faith and culturally responsive mentorship in shaping her resilience. She actively works to create more inclusive spaces for future Black women counselors, aligning with mentorship for future generations and personal resilience.

Participant 8: Spirit (Age 39)

Now a faculty member in counselor education, Spirit used her experiences with systemic barriers as motivation to advocate for inclusive mental health spaces. She relied on culturally congruent mentorship and effective coping strategies to navigate challenges and maintain balance. Committed to fostering equity in counseling, Spirit emphasizes mentorship and leadership to create opportunities for Black women in the field and address systemic barriers.

Participant 9: Honor (Age 40)

A recent doctoral graduate, Honor's experience in predominantly White academic spaces shaped her passion for institutional reform. She advocated for culturally responsive mentorship, faculty accountability, and equitable policies. Her professional identity centers on equity, community connection, and mentoring Black women counselors, aligning with leadership and advocacy and strengthening institutional initiatives.

Data Collection

I collected data for this study through virtual semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom, a secure video conferencing platform that ensured accessibility, privacy, and convenience for participants across different geographic locations. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, allowing flexibility to explore participants' PID experiences in depth. With participants' consent, I audio-recorded the interviews to ensure accurate transcription and analysis, and I took real-time notes to capture nonverbal cues and immediate insights. To enhance the accuracy and credibility of the findings, I employed

member-checking procedures, reaching out to participants twice: first to provide a summary of their responses for confirmation or clarification, and second to share emerging themes, ensuring their voices were authentically represented (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were no variations in the data collection process, and no unusual circumstances occurred outside the expected parameters of the study.

Throughout the data collection process, I integrated reflexivity, iterative analysis, and insights from earlier interviews, creating a dynamic and interconnected approach to reflexivity, data collection, and analysis (see Saldana, 2016). This research weaving approach aligned with the hermeneutic phenomenological design of the study, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs (Finlay, 2022; Smith et al., 2020). I completed data collection over 5 weeks, allowing ample time to schedule interviews, transcribe recordings accurately, and integrate participant feedback into the research process. I did pause interviews when participants became emotional while recounting deeply personal experiences, allowing them time to process their feelings. This sensitivity ensured participants felt supported and respected throughout the process.

Minor technical difficulties, such as connectivity issues, occurred with three of the nine participants. These included temporary disruptions in video or audio quality, which I addressed by pausing interviews to reconnect. This adjustment ensured participants had an uninterrupted opportunity to share their experiences. By addressing these challenges with flexibility and clear communication, I upheld the integrity of the data collection process while ensuring participants felt accommodated and valued.

Data Analysis

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I used IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2020) to explore the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. IPA allowed for a rigorous, systematic exploration of participants' meaning-making processes while contextualizing their experiences within relational, institutional, and systemic frameworks. By engaging iteratively with the data, I uncovered insights into the PID of this population, ensuring alignment with phenomenological principles (Finlay, 2022; van Manen, 2017).

Step 1: Data Immersion

The analysis began with an immersive engagement with the data through repeated readings of interview transcripts. During this phase, I made exploratory notes to capture key reflections and emerging insights, such as participants' accounts of systemic inequities, cultural isolation, and the pivotal role of mentorship in shaping their PID. This step was critical in fostering a deep, idiographic understanding of each participant's narrative while remaining grounded in the principles of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Smith et al., 2020).

Step 2: Identifying Initial Codes

In the next phase, I used NVivo to perform a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts, generating initial codes for further analysis. These descriptive and conceptual codes emerged directly from participants' words and reflected experiences such as navigating microaggressions, mentorship gaps, feelings of isolation, and strategies for resilience. Reflexivity was central to this process. I maintained an audit trail and critically

examined my positionality to minimize bias and ensure the integrity of the analysis (see Finlay, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). This phase provided a foundation for identifying meaningful patterns while preserving the authenticity of participants' voices.

Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes

Using the hermeneutic circle, I engaged iteratively with the data to uncover patterns and connections, clustering related codes into emergent themes. Themes such as navigating PID, barriers to success in CES programs, resilience and coping strategies, contributions to the counseling profession, and recommendations for institutional change began to emerge. This process revealed both shared and distinct elements of participants' experiences, offering nuanced insights into their meaning-making processes (see Finlay, 2022; Smith et al., 2020). For instance, codes related to microaggressions, feelings of isolation, and systemic inequities were grouped under the broader theme of barriers to success in CES programs. Similarly, reflections on mentorship and advocacy were consolidated within navigating PID to capture participants' strategies for growth.

Step 4: Refining Themes Through Iterative Analysis

I revisited the transcripts and compared them with the emergent themes to refine and validate the findings. Overlapping subthemes were consolidated to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. For example, subthemes such as feelings of isolation and disconnections between institutional initiatives and lived realities were combined under navigating PID to capture the broader context of participants' experiences. The iterative nature of IPA allowed me to ensure that the themes were reflective of participants' lived realities while remaining comprehensive and contextually

grounded. This approach helped refine the themes into a structure that authentically represented the participants' meaning-making processes and the complexities of their PID (see Smith et al., 2020; van Manen, 2017).

Step 5: Interpreting and Naming Themes

After refining the data, I named the themes to accurately reflect participants' lived experiences and the interpretative insights from the analysis. The final themes are:

- Navigating professional identity development: Highlighting the intersection of race, gender, and professional roles, this theme explores participants' challenges with stereotypes, marginalization, and reclaiming identity in predominantly White academic spaces.
- Barriers to success in CES programs: Capturing systemic, social, and institutional obstacles, this theme emphasizes microaggressions, tokenism, financial constraints, and cultural incompetence in program structures.
- Resilience and coping strategies: Reflecting participants' adaptive mechanisms, this theme explores the use of personal resilience, community support, and self-care to navigate systemic challenges and foster professional growth.
- Contributions to the counseling profession: Highlighting participants' leadership, mentorship, and advocacy, this theme emphasizes their role in promoting cultural competence, supporting future generations, and advancing social justice in counseling.
- Recommendations for institutional change: Addressing systemic inequities,

this theme underscores the importance of tailored support structures, fostering inclusive communities, and advancing ethical and equitable practices to improve outcomes for Black women in CES programs.

Step 6: Synthesizing Themes and Producing the Report

In the final step, I synthesized the themes into cohesive narratives supported by verbatim quotes to amplify participants' voices. These narratives highlighted systemic, relational, and personal factors shaping participants' PID, providing actionable insights for fostering inclusivity and equity within CES programs at PWIs (see Creswell & Poth, 2021; Smith et al., 2020). This synthesis ensured that the findings not only reflected the participants' lived experiences but also contributed to broader discussions on institutional reform and culturally responsive practices in counselor education.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness is crucial in qualitative research, particularly in studies exploring deeply personal and context-specific experiences like PID. Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, each contributing to the study's overall quality and integrity (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Without trustworthiness, research risks losing credibility and failing to contribute meaningfully to the knowledge base, potentially hindering future scholarship and practice (see Lewis, 2015). To uphold the integrity of this study, I implemented several strategies designed to enhance trustworthiness throughout the research process.

Credibility

To ensure the credibility of the study, I implemented strategies outlined in Chapter 3, including member checking and triangulation. Member checking involved sharing summaries of transcript data with participants to confirm accuracy and alignment with their experiences (see Birt et al., 2016). Additionally, triangulation was achieved through participant review of transcript summaries to confirm data accuracy and validate identified themes, ensuring their experiences were authentically represented (see Birt et al., 2016). This process helped identify consistent patterns and themes, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings (see Nowell et al., 2017).

Transferability

Transferability was addressed by providing rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences to allow readers to evaluate the applicability of findings to other contexts. Chapter 3 outlined the importance of contextualizing data, which was achieved by documenting participants' unique cultural, academic, and professional environments. Detailed narratives about the challenges of PID among Black women at PWIs were included to illuminate shared and unique aspects of their experiences. Congruent with Forero et al. (2018), these detailed accounts were supplemented with verbatim quotes, ensuring that the findings could resonate with other researchers and practitioners in similar fields. Adjustments included focusing more on nuanced descriptions during data analysis to enhance the richness of the narratives and enable potential transferability to broader settings.

Dependability

To address dependability, I followed the consistency strategies outlined in Chapter 3, including maintaining an audit trail and incorporating feedback from my dissertation committee members. The audit trail documented all research decisions, including coding processes, adjustments to interview protocols, and rationale for changes in the data collection plan, ensuring transparency throughout the study (see Connelly, 2016). I sought feedback from committee members, who are experts in qualitative research, during key phases of the study to ensure the rigor and depth of the IPA process. This feedback provided critical insights to validate interpretations and identify potential areas of bias, enhancing the rigor of the research process (see Creswell & Poth, 2021). Adjustments were made to incorporate committee suggestions, such as refining thematic categories and ensuring alignment with the research questions. These iterative reviews by the committee strengthened the dependability of the findings by ensuring that the analysis was consistent, thorough, and grounded in the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability was ensured by prioritizing reflexivity and maintaining neutrality throughout the research process. As outlined in Chapter 3, a reflexive journal was used to document my positionality, personal biases, and potential influences on data interpretation, aligning with best practices for qualitative research (see Finlay, 2022). This journal helped distinguish between participants' perspectives and my own, particularly when analyzing themes such as marginalization and resilience that resonated with my experiences.

Results

Through a detailed process of iterative review, member-checking, and coding, five main themes with fourteen subthemes emerged, offering insights into the PID experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. The first theme, *Navigating Professional Identity Development,* encompasses three subthemes: (a) *Impact of Racial and Gender Identity,* which highlights participants' challenges with stereotypes, experiences of dual marginalization, and efforts to reclaim their identities through personal and professional alignment; (b) *Role of Academic Environment,* revealing the lack of representation among faculty and peers, disconnects between institutional practices and lived realities, and strategies for addressing isolation; and (c) *Mentorship and Guidance*, underscoring disparities in culturally aligned mentorship, reliance on peer mentorship, and the complexities of cross-racial mentorship relationships.

The second theme, *Barriers to Success in CES Programs,* explores the systemic and social challenges participants faced, organized into three subthemes: (a) *Institutional Barriers*, including financial difficulties, inequities in higher education policies, and limited institutional accountability, (b) *Social Barriers,* such as microaggressions, tokenism, imposter syndrome, and cultural incompetence within curricula; and (c) *Systemic Barriers,* reflecting insufficient programmatic support, racial disparities in resource allocation, and inadequate culturally responsive faculty training.

The third theme, *Resilience and Coping Strategies*, focuses on the approaches participants used to navigate challenges, with three subthemes: (a) *Personal Resilience*, which involved drawing strength from spirituality, establishing emotional boundaries,

and building professional self-confidence; (b) *Community Support,* emphasizing solidarity among Black women, informal support networks, and advocacy within professional organizations; and (c) *Adaptive Strategies,* highlighting self-care practices, strategic advocacy, and the role of long-term career aspirations in maintaining motivation.

The fourth theme, *Contributions to the Counseling Profession*, reflects participants' dedication to advancing the field, captured in three subthemes: (a) *Leadership and Advocacy*, highlighting their roles as leaders, role models, and advocates for systemic change; (b) *Mentorship for Future Generations*, focusing on fostering culturally aligned mentorship opportunities and engaging in reciprocal mentorship relationships; and (c) *Cultural Competence and Social Justice,* emphasizing efforts to promote diversity, elevate marginalized voices, and encourage inclusivity in counseling practices.

The fifth theme, *Recommendations for Future Change*, provides actionable insights for fostering equitable and supportive environments, with three subthemes: (a) *Enhancing Support Structures,* advocating for increased financial aid, mentorship opportunities, and policies that prioritize student success; (b) *Fostering a Sense of Belonging*, emphasizing the importance of peer networks, community-building, and creating inclusive spaces; and (c) *Strengthening DEIBA Initiatives*, which includes revising curricula to reflect diverse perspectives, aligning institutional policies with measurable outcomes, and ensuring accountability among faculty and administrators. Together, these themes and subthemes illuminate the systemic challenges, resilience, and

advocacy efforts shaping the PID experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. These findings offer a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences and inform strategies for fostering equity and inclusion in counselor education.

Table 1

Themes Experienced by Participants

Theme	Subtheme	Number of participant responses
Navigating professional identity development	Impact of racial and gender identity	8
	Role of academic environment	8
	Mentorship and guidance	9
Barriers to success in CES programs	Institutional barriers	8
	Social barriers	6
	Systemic barriers	6
Resilience and coping strategies	Personal resilience	9
	Adaptive strategies	7
Recommendations for future change	Enhancing support structures	7
	Fostering a sense of belonging	7
	Strengthening DEIBA initiatives	8

Theme 1: Navigating Professional Identity Development

The first theme, Navigating Professional Identity Development, captures how participants' identities as Black women shaped their professional trajectories and self-concept within CES programs at PWIs. Participants described experiencing both hypervisibility and invisibility, which influenced their confidence, professional engagement, and sense of belonging. Eight participants expressed how racial and gender identity shaped their professional development, frequently facing stereotypes, dual marginalization, and the need to reclaim their identities in predominantly White academic spaces. This interplay between personal and professional identity often served as a source of strength but also presented significant challenges. For example, Spirit reflected on how

she felt pressure to regulate her tone and expressions to avoid being perceived as aggressive, which led her to initially hold back in academic settings. Over time, she embraced her identity, recognizing that self-censorship diminished her confidence and authenticity. Similarly, Victory described the challenge of balancing strength and vulnerability, feeling the weight of expectations to demonstrate resilience while navigating environments where any display of struggle was perceived as weakness. Honor shared how she initially attempted to assimilate into predominantly White academic spaces but later realized that embracing her cultural identity strengthened her professional confidence and deepened her connection with clients.

The academic environment also shaped participants' PID, particularly through experiences of underrepresentation and isolation. Eight participants highlighted the lack of faculty and peers who shared their backgrounds, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. Freedom described the isolating experience of walking into classrooms where she was the only Black woman, constantly feeling like she had to prove her worth. Triumph critiqued institutional DEIBA initiatives, explaining that while policies existed on paper, they rarely translated into meaningful change. Spirit took an intentional approach by cultivating her own network of support through mentorship and peer connections, emphasizing that creating a sense of belonging outside of institutional structures was crucial for her persistence.

Mentorship played a critical role in shaping professional identity, serving as both a source of support and a challenge depending on its cultural alignment. All nine participants emphasized the importance of mentorship in their professional growth,

though disparities in access to culturally responsive mentors affected their experiences. Triumph shared how a Black female faculty member provided not only academic guidance but also cultural affirmation, helping her recognize her value in the field. Victory found confidence through culturally aligned mentorship, stating that having a mentor who shared her experiences made her feel seen and valued. However, Freedom described the necessity of peer mentorship due to the lack of culturally responsive faculty, emphasizing that Black students had to create their own support networks. Spirit also discussed the complexities of cross-racial mentorship, acknowledging both the challenges and the potential for growth when mentors demonstrated a willingness to learn and support underrepresented students.

Resilience strategies helped participants navigate systemic challenges, including self-advocacy, community support, and personal agency. Radiance, for example, relied on culturally sustaining practices and physical activity to counteract the stress of navigating predominantly White academic spaces. Valor developed self-advocacy skills to challenge microaggressions and systemic disparities, using her experiences to inspire others. Courage emphasized faith and culturally responsive mentorship as key factors in her resilience, shaping her commitment to creating more inclusive spaces for future Black women counselors.

Participants' narratives revealed that PID was not a linear process but rather an ongoing negotiation influenced by institutional climates, mentorship, and resilience strategies. While systemic barriers created obstacles, participants leveraged their intersecting identities to cultivate a sense of purpose, contribute to the field, and advocate

for greater inclusion in counselor education. Honor, for instance, turned her experiences with racial bias into advocacy for institutional reform, pushing for faculty accountability and equitable policies. Spirit used her personal challenges as motivation to advocate for inclusive mental health spaces and mentorship opportunities for Black women in counselor education.

Subtheme 1:1 Impact of Racial and Gender Identity

Eight participants' experiences highlighted the challenges of navigating stereotypes, dual marginalization, and heightened scrutiny as Black women in predominantly White academic spaces. They described the added pressure of representing their race and gender while contending with assumptions about their abilities and belonging. Despite these challenges, participants shared how these experiences shaped their resilience, self-advocacy, and commitment to redefining their professional identities. Spirit reflected on how stereotypes affected her confidence and interactions with peers:

> People often assumed I was angry or overly aggressive if I voiced a strong opinion. It felt like I had to soften my tone or choose my words carefully just to be heard without being labeled. This constant self-monitoring was draining and made me feel like I couldn't fully be myself. Eventually, I realized that holding back only diminished my confidence, so I started embracing my passion and standing firm in my truth.

Victory shared how navigating dual marginalization influenced her identity:

> Being both Black and a woman meant carrying the weight of double expectations.

> On one hand, I was expected to represent strength and resilience, but on the other, any sign of vulnerability was seen as a weakness. It's like walking a tightrope where every misstep is magnified. I started to reclaim my identity by focusing on what truly mattered to me—breaking these stereotypes and showing up authentically.

Honor discussed the conflict between personal values and professional expectations:

> Walking into academic spaces, I often felt like I had to prove myself twice as much—not just as a student, but as a Black woman. There was this unspoken expectation that I should assimilate, tone down parts of who I am to fit the mold. But every time I tried, it felt like I was losing a part of myself. It wasn't until I embraced my identity—my cultural background—that I truly started to thrive. Bringing my full self into my counseling work allowed me to connect more deeply with my clients and find confidence in my expertise. Owning my identity instead of shrinking it gave me a strength that no institution could take away.

Ember described the process of reclaiming her professional identity:

> I struggled with imposter syndrome for a long time because I internalized the messages that I wasn't good enough. But as I grew in my career, I started to challenge those thoughts. I realized that my unique perspective as a Black woman was a strength, not a limitation. Reclaiming my identity has been empowering—it's allowed me to bring authenticity and depth to my work.

In each interview, while participants discussed the impact of racial and gender identity, there was a notable emotional undertone. Five participants paused frequently

when reflecting on experiences of marginalization, often taking deep breaths or hesitating before continuing their narratives. These moments of silence and reflection emphasized the toll that navigating dual marginalization had on their PID. This pattern reinforced the depth of their experiences and highlighted the pervasive challenge of carrying both the visibility and invisibility of their intersecting identities in predominantly White academic spaces.

Subtheme 1.2 Role of Academic Environment

Eight participants shared their encounters with the academic climate at PWIs and its influence on their PID. They emphasized a lack of representation among faculty and peers, a disconnection between institutional DEIBA initiatives and their lived realities, and the strategies they developed to cope with isolation. These themes highlight how the academic environment shaped their challenges and resilience.

> Freedom described the isolation she experienced in predominantly White spaces: Walking into a classroom where no one looks like you is isolating. You feel the eyes on you, questioning your presence there. It's not just about being the only Black woman—it's about how that translates into feeling excluded from discussions, decision-making, and informal networks. I had to build my own support system outside of the institution just to feel seen and valued.

Triumph reflected on the limitations of institutional DEIBA initiatives:

> The institution had plenty of policies and programs that looked great on paper, but they didn't translate into meaningful change. It felt performative, like they were checking boxes without addressing the systemic issues that made us feel

> excluded. We need more than workshops and statements—we need representation, accountability, and real action.

Spirit described her approach to navigating isolation in academic spaces:

> I knew I had to take matters into my own hands, so I started building connections with people who understood what I was going through. Whether it was forming study groups with other Black students or seeking mentors outside the program, I was intentional about creating my own community. Those relationships gave me the strength and support I needed to keep going. Without that sense of belonging, I don't think I could have made it through. It wasn't easy but carving out that space for myself became the foundation of my success.

Ember highlighted the emotional toll of underrepresentation and its impact on her motivation:

> It's draining to always have to explain your perspective to people who don't understand—or who don't care to understand. The absence of representation among faculty made it hard for me to see what my future could look like in this field. Still, that same struggle became my motivation. I knew I wanted to be part of changing that narrative, to pave the way for others coming after me. It's about creating the representation I wish I'd had, so the next generation doesn't have to feel as alone as I did.

Participant experiences highlighted the significant influence of the academic environment on their PID, emphasizing the impact of underrepresentation and isolation while calling for more meaningful support structures in CES programs at PWIs.

Subtheme 1:3 Mentorship and Guidance

All nine participants emphasized the critical role of mentorship and guidance in shaping their PID. Participants detailed their experiences with culturally aligned mentorship, peer mentorship as a survival strategy, and the complexities of cross-racial mentorship relationships. This theme was consistent across all participant interviews, underscoring the importance of mentorship in navigating the challenges of CES programs at PWIs.

Triumph reflected on the transformative impact of mentorship from a Black female faculty member:

> Having someone who understood my background gave me the strength to keep going. She wasn't just a mentor—she was a role model who showed me that I belonged in this space. Her guidance wasn't just academic; it was personal and cultural. She helped me see that my voice mattered and that I could make a difference.

Victory described how culturally aligned mentorship fostered her confidence:

> When I connected with a mentor who shared my experiences as a Black woman, everything changed. It wasn't just about academic advice; it was about being seen and valued. She taught me how to navigate the unspoken rules of academia and how to advocate for myself in spaces that often felt unwelcoming.

Freedom emphasized the importance of peer mentorship in her journey:

> With so few culturally responsive faculty members, peer mentorship became essential for me. We built our own support networks, relying on one another when

> the program felt like too much to handle. It wasn't just about getting through—it was about lifting each other up and finding ways to thrive in a space that often felt unwelcoming. Those connections gave me strength and reminded me that we didn't have to face these challenges alone. Together, we created a sense of community that the institution failed to provide.

Spirit shared the challenges and rewards of navigating cross-racial mentorship:

> Having a mentor who didn't share my background was tough at times. There were moments where I felt misunderstood, and we didn't always see eye-to-eye. But that experience also taught me resilience. What mattered most was their willingness to learn and support me, even when it wasn't easy. It reminded me that building bridges takes effort on both sides, but those connections can lead to meaningful growth and understanding. Despite the difficulties, that mentorship showed me how powerful it can be to work through discomfort and find common ground.

Mentorship played a pivotal role in fostering resilience and shaping professional identities, though disparities in access to culturally aligned mentors underscored the need for better support for underrepresented students.

Theme 2: Barriers to Success in CES Programs

The theme of Barriers to Success in CES Programs highlights the multi-layered challenges participants faced, including institutional, social, and systemic obstacles. Through an in-depth IPA process, I identified recurring issues such as insufficient DEIBA efforts, financial strain, microaggressions, tokenism, and imposter syndrome,

which collectively shaped participants' academic and professional trajectories. Institutional barriers, including financial difficulties, inequities in higher education policies, and a lack of accountability for DEIBA initiatives, amplified the isolating effects of being underrepresented in predominantly White spaces, creating significant challenges for participants. Participants like Victory and Triumph described experiences of constant scrutiny and academic hazing, underscoring the emotional and professional toll of these environments. Despite these challenges, participants employed self-advocacy, peer support, and external resources to persist, as Spirit emphasized: "We lean on each other, we find mentors, and we keep going."

Subtheme 2.1 Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers such as financial difficulties, inequities in higher education policies, and limited accountability for DEIBA initiatives emerged as significant challenges for eight participants, often intensifying feelings of isolation and marginalization. Although all participants described institutional barriers, eight explicitly referred to the systemic inequities embedded in higher education policies. For instance, financial struggles were a common thread, with Victory describing her experience:

> Balancing work, family, and finances was a constant battle. I had to take on multiple jobs just to make ends meet, and that left me with barely any time or energy for my studies. There were moments when it felt like the system was designed for people like me to fail, especially for those of us who don't come from privileged backgrounds. It was overwhelming, but I kept pushing forward because I knew what was at stake—not just for me, but for the people I wanted to

serve.

In addition to financial strain, inequitable institutional practices created barriers to success. Triumph highlighted these disparities:

> There were so many unspoken rules about how things worked, and if you weren't part of the right circles, you missed out on key opportunities. It wasn't just about having access—it was about the assumptions faculty made about who they thought was 'worthy' of mentorship or funding. Those biases weren't just frustrating; they were impossible to ignore. It made me realize how much gatekeeping exists in spaces that are supposed to be about growth and inclusion, and it pushed me to advocate for myself and others even more.

Limited accountability for DEIBA initiatives compounded these challenges, leaving participants feeling unsupported in their academic environments. Honor reflected on her frustration with this lack of follow-through:

> Institutions love to talk about diversity and inclusion, but when it's time to take action, there's not much to show for it. They have policies in place, but no one is actually held accountable for making sure those policies lead to meaningful change. It's frustrating because it leaves people like us feeling forgotten—like all the talk is just for show. It's hard to feel valued in a system that doesn't back its words with real effort.

Navigating institutional systems that often felt obstructive was another pervasive experience. Spirit's reflection highlighted this ongoing struggle:

> The rules always seemed to change, and I was left scrambling to figure out what

> was expected of me. Whether it was unclear policies or limited guidance, it felt like the system was intentionally difficult to navigate. I had to rely on sheer determination and a few supportive peers to push through. It shouldn't be this hard just to get the same opportunities as everyone else, but I learned to advocate for myself every step of the way.

All participants highlighted institutional challenges, emphasizing how systemic obstacles affected access to mentorship, resources, and equitable opportunities, ultimately shaping their academic and professional experiences in CES programs.

Subtheme 2:2 Social Barriers

Six participants shared their encounters with social barriers, including microaggressions, tokenism, imposter syndrome, and cultural incompetence in curricula, which significantly impacted their experiences and PID. These barriers created a pervasive sense of exclusion and reinforced the challenges of navigating PWIs. Developing subcodes for social barriers required careful analysis, as participants described a range of nuanced experiences These themes were consistently present across the interviews, reflecting shared experiences of systemic and social inequities. Freedom described the impact of microaggressions, sharing: "It wasn't always the overt racism—it was the small comments that chipped away at me. Things like, 'You're so articulate,' or being asked to speak on behalf of all Black people in class. It was dehumanizing and made it clear that I wasn't seen as an individual."

Similarly, Courage reflected on the challenges of tokenism, stating: "There were times when I felt like I was only there to fill a quota. It wasn't about my skills or

potential—it was about making the program look diverse. That kind of tokenism makes it hard to feel truly valued."

Radiance detailed her experience with imposter syndrome, which added to the emotional toll of these social barriers:

> Every time I raised my hand or spoke up in class, I second-guessed myself, wondering if I was good enough or if I even belonged in the program. I'd compare myself to others and convince myself they were more prepared, more deserving, or just better suited for this field. The feeling of being an outsider was constant, especially in spaces where my identity wasn't reflected or acknowledged. Over time, I realized these doubts weren't about my ability but about the systemic barriers that made me feel invisible—and I started working on validating myself instead of waiting for others to do it for me.

Ember highlighted the lack of cultural competence in the curricula, explaining:

> Most of the coursework ignored the realities faced by marginalized communities. When we touched on multicultural counseling, it felt like an afterthought, glossing over the deeper systemic issues that shape people's experiences. It was frustrating to sit through lessons that didn't equip us to fully understand or support diverse clients. I often left class feeling like my community's stories and struggles were invisible.

Social barriers, including microaggressions, tokenism, imposter syndrome, and cultural incompetence, strongly influenced participants' experiences and PID. These challenges often contributed to participants experiencing feelings of isolation and the need for

greater institutional support.

Subtheme 2:3 Systemic Barriers

Six participants attributed significant barriers to success in CES programs to systemic challenges, which included insufficient programmatic support, racial disparities in resource allocation, and inadequate faculty training. These issues compounded the difficulties participants faced and highlighted systemic inequities within their academic environments. Participants consistently emphasized the lack of programmatic support tailored to their unique experiences as Black women at PWIs. Triumph reflected on this gap, stating: “There was no roadmap for navigating the challenges unique to Black women. The resources that existed didn’t address our needs, and we were often left to figure things out on our own. It felt like an uphill battle with no end in sight.”

Racial disparities in resource allocation emerged as another critical issue, with participants highlighting unequal access to opportunities. Valor explained:

> Even things like access to study materials or guidance on navigating program requirements seemed uneven. I’d hear about resources from classmates who happened to be in the right conversations, while I was often left out of the loop. It felt like there was an unspoken hierarchy of who deserved support. The frustration of always having to advocate for myself just to get what others seemed to receive so easily was exhausting.

Inadequate faculty training also presented a recurring challenge. Victory shared her perspective on how this deficiency impacted her academic experience:

> There was a moment when I brought up how systemic racism impacts access to

> mental health care, and the professor redirected the conversation back to 'neutral' examples, avoiding the topic entirely. It felt dismissive, like the lived experiences of marginalized communities didn't matter.

These instances made it clear that some faculty weren't prepared to have these critical conversations, which left students like me feeling unsupported. Faculty need training that not only builds cultural competence but also encourages them to address these issues head-on.

> Spirit underscored the cumulative impact of these systemic barriers, noting: Every step forward felt like climbing uphill with added weight. Whether it was dealing with a lack of resources, navigating microaggressions, or trying to find support that understood my perspective, it all added up. It wasn't one major roadblock—it was a series of small barriers that collectively made the journey feel exhausting. Sometimes, I wondered if the system was set up to push us out rather than help us succeed.

The systemic challenges participants faced in CES programs at PWIs highlight enduring disparities and the critical need for structural improvements to foster fairness and support for all students.

Theme 3: Resilience and Coping Strategies

Participants highlighted the role of resilience and adaptability in navigating the challenges of their CES programs. They described a variety of strategies that helped them persist, including leveraging personal resilience, drawing on community support, and implementing adaptive strategies. These coping mechanisms enabled them to maintain

their emotional well-being, advocate for themselves, and remain committed to their professional development despite systemic and social barriers.

Subtheme 3:1 Personal Resilience

All nine participants shared how their internal strengths, including spirituality, faith practices, emotional boundaries, and professional self-confidence, played a critical role in fostering resilience. These personal tools allowed them to manage stress and maintain focus on their long-term goals. Honor reflected on how her faith kept her grounded during difficult times:

> I relied heavily on prayer and my spiritual practices to navigate the challenges I faced. Whenever I felt overwhelmed or doubted my abilities, I would remind myself that I'm walking in my purpose. My faith gave me the strength to keep going, even when it felt like the odds were stacked against me.

Ember described how setting emotional boundaries was essential for her well-being:

> In the beginning, I took on too much emotionally—whether it was dealing with microaggressions or feeling the weight of representing my entire community. It felt overwhelming, but over time, I learned how to set boundaries to protect myself.
>
> I realized that protecting my peace wasn't just good for me—it made me a better counselor, a better student, and a better version of myself. Learning to prioritize my emotional health gave me the strength to show up fully for others without losing myself in the process.

Freedom shared how self-confidence grew through perseverance:

> I used to feel overwhelmed by the thought of everything I had to accomplish, and it made me question whether I could make it. I started breaking things down into smaller goals, and each time I achieved one, it reminded me of my ability to push through. It wasn't about proving anything to others—it was about proving to myself that I was capable. Over time, those little wins added up and gave me the confidence to keep going, even when the path felt impossible.

Radiance explained how resilience was rooted in her sense of purpose:

> I always reminded myself why I started this journey. Knowing that I was working toward making a difference for people who looked like me kept me motivated. That sense of purpose helped me push through the hard days and see the bigger picture. Even when I felt like giving up, I'd think about the impact I wanted to leave behind, and that kept me moving forward.

Therefore, resilience through faith, emotional boundaries, self-confidence, and a strong sense of purpose emerged as a central element in participants' ability to navigate challenges and sustain their professional and personal growth.

Subtheme 3:2 Adaptive Strategies

Seven participants shared that a significant aspect of their ability to manage challenges involved implementing practical coping mechanisms. These strategies included engaging in mindfulness practices, setting firm boundaries, and prioritizing self-care to maintain emotional and psychological well-being. By intentionally developing these adaptive strategies, participants were able to navigate systemic barriers while preserving their sense of self and professional purpose. Freedom shared how self-care

became a cornerstone of her routine:

> I started prioritizing things like exercise and meditation to help me manage the stress of the program. Taking care of myself wasn't just about feeling better in the moment—it was about building the stamina to keep going in the long run. Self-care became a non-negotiable part of my life.

Valor described how strategic advocacy helped her navigate systemic barriers:

> I realized that I had to be intentional about advocating for myself and others. Whether it was speaking up in class discussions or pushing back against unfair policies, I made it a point to use my voice. It wasn't easy, but it was empowering to know that I could create change, even in small ways.

Spirit reflected on how her long-term goals gave her a sense of direction:

> When things felt overwhelming, I broke my goals into smaller, more manageable steps. Instead of focusing on how far I had to go, I celebrated small victories, like mastering a concept or building a stronger connection with a client. I also leaned on tools like journaling and mindfulness to stay grounded and clear-headed. Adapting my approach not only helped me navigate the challenges but also strengthened my confidence as a future counselor supervisor. It taught me that flexibility and self-compassion were just as important as resilience.

Radiance explained how adaptability became a strength:

> I learned to pivot when things didn't go as planned. Whether it was finding new resources, changing my study habits, or adjusting my expectations, being adaptable helped me stay on track. It was a reminder that setbacks weren't

failures—they were opportunities to learn and grow.

As such, the use of adaptive strategies was a clear factor in participants' ability to navigate the challenges and sustain their progress in CES programs.

Theme 4: Contributions to the Counseling Profession

All nine participants shared how their experiences shaped their dedication to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the counseling profession. The majority of participants provided more in-depth reflections on their contributions to fostering inclusivity and representation within the field compared to other aspects of their journey. The subthemes of contributions to the counseling profession include leadership and advocacy, mentorship for future generations, and the promotion of cultural competence and social justice, all of which emerged as integral aspects of the participants' professional identities.

Subtheme 4:1 Leadership and Advocacy

Seven participants expressed a strong desire to lead and advocate for systemic change within the counseling field. They described their efforts as role models and leaders within their academic and professional communities. Valor shared how she stepped into leadership despite the challenges:

> I didn't plan to take on leadership roles, but I realized how important it was to have someone who looked like me in those spaces. It wasn't easy balancing everything, but I knew I was paving the way for others. Leading by example became my way of showing that we belong here, even when it felt like the odds were against us. The pride in knowing I could inspire others made the hard work

worth it.

Radiance discussed her commitment to advocacy:

> Advocacy has become a central part of my identity as a counselor. Whether it's speaking at conferences or mentoring students, I see every opportunity as a chance to push for change. It's about leaving the field better than I found it.

Courage shared how she led by example in her program:

> Being the only Black woman in my cohort meant that I had to set an example, not just for myself but for those who would come after me. I took on leadership roles, even when it was exhausting, because representation matters.

Ember described her motivation to advocate for systemic change:

> When I look at the counseling profession, I see so much potential for growth. My goal is to challenge outdated practices and advocate for policies that center inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. It's not just about doing the work—it's about changing the system.

Participants emphasized leadership and advocacy as pivotal to their professional identity, using their roles to challenge systemic barriers, mentor others, and push for transformative change within the counseling field.

Subtheme 4:2 Mentorship for Future Generations

Eight participants emphasized the critical role of mentorship in supporting the next generation of Black women counselors. Many of them spent considerable time reflecting on their experiences and the significance of fostering culturally aligned mentorship and reciprocal learning relationships. They viewed mentorship as a means of

breaking systemic barriers, ensuring that future Black women counselors receive the guidance and affirmation they often lacked in their own journeys.

Triumph reflected on how mentorship became a cornerstone of her professional identity, highlighting the importance of giving back:

> I see mentoring as a way to give back. So many people poured into me when I needed it most, and now it's my turn to do the same. I want to create spaces where young Black women feel supported and valued. Mentorship isn't just guidance; it's about building confidence and fostering a sense of belonging. It's not just about helping them through challenges—it's about empowering them to see their own potential. I want them to know they belong in this field and that their voices matter. If I can help someone feel seen and capable, then I know I'm fulfilling my purpose.

Freedom described her approach to mentorship as deeply personal and validating:

> Mentorship isn't just about giving advice—it's about listening, validating experiences, and sharing the lessons I've learned. I've had mentees tell me that just knowing someone understands their struggle makes all the difference. I want to be the person I wish I had when I was starting out, someone who sees them, hears them, and believes in them.

Spirit shared how the process of mentoring others enriched her understanding of herself and her role in the profession:

> Mentoring others has taught me so much about myself. It's a two-way street—I learn just as much from the people I mentor as they learn from me. Together,

> we're building a legacy of resilience and excellence. It's an incredible feeling to know that the work we're doing now will benefit future generations.

Victory highlighted the necessity of culturally responsive mentorship and its impact on creating meaningful connections:

> There's something powerful about being mentored by someone who truly understands your experiences. That's what I strive to offer—mentorship that's rooted in shared understanding and a commitment to growth. It's about helping them navigate challenges but also showing them that they belong here and that their voice matters.

These findings show that mentorship for participants is a deeply personal and transformative process, reflecting their commitment to fostering inclusion and support within the counseling profession. By mentoring others, they not only provide guidance but also challenge systemic barriers that have historically excluded Black women from leadership and professional growth. This cycle of support reinforces their own professional identity while creating a more equitable and affirming space for future generations in counselor education.

Subtheme 4.3 Cultural Competence and Social Justice

Eight participants shared their dedication to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusivity within counseling practices, emphasizing their efforts to elevate marginalized voices and address systemic inequities. Their reflections highlighted the profound influence of their experiences in shaping their commitment to cultural competence and social justice. Participants actively worked to incorporate culturally responsive

frameworks into counselor education, advocating for curriculum changes, inclusive training programs, and mentorship opportunities that center the experiences of underrepresented communities. For example, Honor collaborated with faculty members to revise course syllabi, ensuring that counseling theories and case studies reflected diverse cultural perspectives and addressed the unique mental health needs of marginalized populations.

Radiance described how cultural competence became an integral part of her professional identity:

> As a counselor, I see it as my responsibility to ensure that my clients feel seen and heard. That means continuously educating myself and advocating for practices that reflect the diversity of the communities we serve. It's about being intentional—acknowledging where gaps exist and committing to filling them with understanding and action.

Ember reflected on the importance of addressing broader societal issues through her work:

> Counseling isn't just about individual change—it's about societal change. I use my platform to highlight issues of equity and push for systemic reforms that address the root causes of mental health disparities. If we don't address the systems that perpetuate inequities, we're only putting a bandage on a much larger wound.

Spirit shared how her personal experiences informed her advocacy efforts:

> Having faced so many barriers myself, I'm deeply committed to ensuring that

> others don't have to go through the same struggles. My advocacy is rooted in a desire to create a more inclusive and just counseling profession. It's not just about removing obstacles—it's about building pathways for others to thrive.

Honor emphasized the need for intentional efforts to amplify marginalized voices in the counseling field:

> The counseling profession needs to do better at amplifying the voices of those who have been historically excluded. That's where my focus lies—making sure that everyone has a seat at the table and that their experiences are valued. It's not enough to just talk about diversity; we need to take action to make it a reality.

Participants leveraged personal experiences and professional platforms to advance equity and inclusivity, highlighting the vital role of cultural competence and advocacy in fostering a representative and equitable counseling profession.

Theme 5: Recommendations for Institutional Change

All nine participants provided actionable recommendations to create more equitable and supportive CES programs. They stressed the need for institutions to improve practices that enhance student success and well-being while actively addressing systemic barriers to PID. Participants also highlighted the importance of transparency and accountability in institutional policies to drive sustainable change. Their recommendations centered on three key areas: enhancing student support structures, building inclusive communities, and advancing ethical and equitable practices.

Subtheme 5.1 Enhancing Support Structures

Seven participants consistently identified the need for enhanced financial,

academic, and emotional support to address the challenges of CES programs. Seven participants noted that insufficient resources often compounded the stress of doctoral studies, emphasizing the importance of accessible funding, mentorship opportunities, and structured support systems. Victory reflected on the financial challenges she faced:

> The financial burden of a doctoral program is overwhelming, especially for someone like me who doesn't come from wealth. I had to make countless sacrifices just to stay afloat, and there were times I wondered if it was even worth it. Institutions need to step up and offer more scholarships and grants so talented students aren't held back by money. Without that support, many of us are left struggling to balance our dreams with basic survival.

Spirit highlighted the critical role of mentorship:

> Having mentors who truly understand your experiences can make all the difference. I remember feeling completely lost at times, unsure of how to navigate the program or advocate for myself. The mentors who stepped in gave me not just guidance, but the confidence to keep pushing forward. Too often mentorship is left to chance, leaving students without the support they need to succeed. Programs should implement structured mentorship initiatives that pair students with faculty and professionals who can provide culturally responsive guidance. Beyond academic support, mentorship should also foster a sense of belonging, helping students feel valued within in their programs and profession. Institutions need to be intentional about creating those connections because no one should have to figure it all out alone.

Freedom described the significance of institutional policies:

> It's not enough to just have policies on paper—they need to actually support students in tangible ways. I've seen how access to resources and clear academic pathways can make or break someone's experience. What really stands out, though, is when faculty are properly trained to understand and address the unique challenges we face. When the institution shows they're genuinely invested in your success, it makes you feel like you belong and that your goals truly matter.

Honor summarized how support structures could have changed her experience:

> Navigating my CES program felt like constantly trying to stay steady in an environment where one misstep could set me back, and there was no support to catch me when I needed it. If there had been a dedicated support system—like culturally aligned mentorship or faculty who prioritized understanding the unique challenges, I faced—it could have helped me develop my professional identity with greater confidence. Instead, I often felt like I was figuring it out on my own, which made it harder to focus on honing my skills as a future counselor educator and supervisor. Having those structures in place would have shown me that my development mattered, not just as a student but as a professional preparing to make an impact in the field. It's not just about easing the journey—it's about empowering growth.

Enhanced financial, academic, and mentorship support structures are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by Black women in CES programs at PWIs, creating an academic environment that fosters their PID, resilience, and overall success.

Enhancing these support systems may empower Black women in CES programs with the resources, mentorship, and opportunities necessary to excel in their professional journeys.

Subtheme 5.2 Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Seven participants emphasized the need for initiatives that promote connection, reduce isolation, and ensure all students feel genuinely included within CES programs. They highlighted how community-building and addressing performative diversity were critical to fostering a sense of belonging. Courage discussed the isolation she felt:

> Being one of the only Black women in my program was incredibly lonely—it's a kind of isolation that weighs on you every day. There needs to be intentional efforts to create spaces where students can come together, connect, and support one another.
>
> It's in those spaces that you finally feel like you belong, like you're not navigating it all alone. Those connections are what help you find your strength and remind you that you deserve to be here just as much as anyone else.

Radiance shared her frustration with tokenism:

> Tokenism isn't the same as inclusion—it's exhausting and disheartening. When institutions focus on optics rather than meaningful representation, it makes you feel used, not truly valued. Inclusion has to go beyond surface-level diversity; it's about creating spaces where everyone feels seen, respected, and empowered. Too often, diversity initiatives fail to translate into meaningful change, leaving those who are underrepresented to navigate these changes alone. Institutions must move beyond gestures and commitment to structural changes that foster equitable

> opportunities for growth, leadership, and professional advancement. This requires intentional efforts to recruit, retain, and support diverse individuals while valuing their contributions and ensuring meaningful contributions. Without genuine efforts to address systemic barriers, the sense of being tokenized becomes a constant weight to carry.

Triumph reflected on the importance of community:

> Being part of a strong community changes everything—it's like a safety net that catches you when things get tough. It gives you the confidence to face challenges because you know you're not alone in your journey. That sense of belonging doesn't just make a difference; it's what keeps you going on the hardest days. It reminds you that your experiences matter and that you have people who truly understand and support you.

Valor elaborated on the need for genuine inclusion:

> True inclusion isn't just about tolerating people—it's about truly valuing them. Institutions have to take a hard look at the systemic barriers that keep people feeling excluded and actively work to break them down. It's about creating spaces where everyone feels seen, heard, and like they truly belong. If we don't make these efforts intentional, people like me—and others with similar experiences—will keep feeling like we're fighting uphill battles just to be recognized.

Fostering genuine inclusion and meaningful community-building within CES programs is essential for reducing isolation, addressing tokenism, and ensuring all students feel valued and supported in their academic journey.

Subtheme 5.3 Strengthening DEIBA Initiatives

Eight participants emphasized the importance of revising curricula, holding faculty accountable, and implementing practices that reflect the diverse realities of students' experiences. As part of strengthening DEIBA initiatives, participants continued to emphasize the need for intentional policies that move beyond performative efforts to create tangible, lasting change. These initiatives were seen as critical for promoting fairness, cultural awareness, and equitable practices within CES programs. Spirit underscored the importance of curriculum changes:

> The curriculum needs to reflect the diverse world we live in. It's not enough to just skim the surface of counseling—we have to dig deeper and include a variety of perspectives while addressing the systemic issues that shape our world. When representation is missing, students leave unprepared to truly connect with or advocate for their clients. But when we bring in diverse voices and experiences, we're not just preparing students for their careers—we're setting them up to make meaningful change in the lives of the people they'll serve.

Honor highlighted the need for institutional accountability:

> It's easy for institutions to talk about fairness and inclusion, but words don't mean much without measurable follow-through. We need to see real action—track the progress, hold faculty accountable, and make sure policies are actually making a difference. Without clear goals and regular check-ins, these efforts can end up feeling more like empty gestures than real change. Building trust takes transparency and a commitment to keep improving, and that's what will make a

lasting impact in academic spaces.

Freedom discussed the influence of faculty on student experiences:

> Faculty play such a crucial role in shaping how students navigate their programs. It's not just about teaching—it's about showing real cultural awareness and genuinely caring about their students' success. The environments they create can either lift students up or make their journey so much harder. When faculty are intentional about fostering inclusivity and equity, they empower students in ways that go far beyond the classroom. Their commitment to culturally responsive teaching and mentorship sets a standard, inspiring lasting change not just in the program but in the counseling field as a whole.

Radiance emphasized the far-reaching benefits of equitable practices:

> Commitments to fairness and inclusion don't just help marginalized students—they make the entire learning environment stronger. When students feel truly valued and supported, it creates a sense of belonging that allows them to thrive academically and professionally. Preparing all students to navigate a diverse world ensures they're ready to succeed not just in counseling but in life. These efforts also mean we're building a counseling workforce that's better equipped to serve and advocate for diverse communities, creating lasting change far beyond the classroom.

Participants collectively stressed that revising curricula, holding faculty accountable, and embedding ethical, culturally aware practices are fundamental steps in fostering equitable learning environments. These changes not only promote fairness and

inclusivity but also enhance educational experience, preparing students to effectively address the diverse realities of the counseling profession.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of my qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis study on the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. The results revealed the multifaceted experiences of participants, highlighting systemic challenges such as microaggressions, racial stereotyping, and exclusion. These barriers significantly shaped their PID but also motivated participants to develop strategies for resilience and advocacy. Key themes included the critical role of mentorship, the impact of intersecting identities, and the importance of fostering inclusive and equitable academic environments.

The findings of this research provide insights into the central research question and will be further discussed in Chapter 5, where I will interpret the study's results through the lens of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology and SCCT, integrating existing literature to provide a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. In Chapter 5, I uncovered the study's limitations, offer recommendations for future research, and explore the implications for driving systemic change in higher education. I conclude the chapter by presenting actionable strategies to promote culturally affirming mentorship, foster inclusivity, and support the professional growth of Black women in CES programs.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I described the PID experiences of Black women enrolled in CES programs at PWIs. I explored how systemic barriers, mentorship, and personal agency influenced their professional growth as they navigated challenges related to their intersecting identities. By conducting this research, I aimed to highlight their experiences, expand the limited literature on their presence in higher education, and provide insights into how institutions can better support underrepresented groups. The findings establish a foundation for actionable strategies that improve mentorship, foster inclusivity, and address systemic inequities in counselor education.

I used a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and IPA to conduct semistructured interviews with nine participants enrolled in CES programs at PWIs. I designed the interview guide to gather detailed narratives about their PID focusing on the systemic challenges they encountered and the strategies they used to navigate them. I manually analyzed the data and identified five overarching themes and fourteen subthemes. These themes included navigating PID, barriers to success in mentor programs, resilience and coping strategies, contributions to the counseling profession, and recommendations for institutional change. The findings illustrated the complex interaction of systemic challenges, resilience, and advocacy efforts, offering a deeper understanding of how these experiences shape professional identity.

In this chapter, I interpreted the findings by connecting them to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Using a hermeneutic lens, I contextualized the lived experiences of participants and provided insights into their professional journeys. I also

discussed the study's limitations, proposed recommendations for future research and outlined implications for practice and policy in counselor education. Finally, I uncovered how this research can contribute to positive social change by offering strategies to create equitable and supportive environments for Black women in CES programs at PWIs.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, I explored the PID experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs in a comprehensive manner. These findings confirm, challenge, and expand existing knowledge in the field. By integrating recent literature, I gained a deeper interpretation of the data and identified critical insights into systemic barriers, mentorship, and resilience. The alignment between my findings and recent research highlights the importance of examining the unique challenges and strengths of Black women in counselor education. In this section, I analyze how my findings correspond with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Confirmation of Existing Knowledge

I designed this study to illuminate systemic barriers and microaggressions that Black women face at PWIs while providing firsthand insights into their experiences. My findings align with prior research that highlights the prevalence of racial and gender-based microaggressions, including being dismissed, stereotyped, or tokenized in academic spaces (Brown et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2023). The intersection of race and gender further intensifies the emotional and professional challenges Black women encounter in predominantly White academic environments (Collins, 2019; Harris et al., 2021). Participants described navigating feelings of isolation

and hypervisibility, reaffirming the systemic inequities that persist in these settings (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Their responses also reflected patterns identified in previous research, demonstrating how systemic undervaluation manifests in classroom interactions (Collins, 2019; Griffin, 2020; Harper, 2022; McCoy et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022). My findings support Nowell et al.'s (2017) argument that microaggressions undermine confidence and increase the emotional labor required of marginalized individuals.

Mentorship played a pivotal role in fostering resilience and shaping professional identity among participants, aligning with the findings of Ladson-Billings (2021) and Sheu and Lent (2020). Participants described culturally responsive mentorship as transformative because it provided both academic guidance and emotional validation. Their experiences illustrated how mentorship addressed systemic inequities, reinforcing research by Brown et al. (2020) and Harris et al. (2021), which highlighted its impact on professional self-efficacy and career satisfaction for underrepresented groups. My findings also built on Creswell and Poth's (2021) work by demonstrating that mentorship not only mitigated systemic barriers but also supported long-term professional development. These accounts further validated Sue et al.'s (2019) argument that representation in mentorship is essential for fostering belonging and reducing alienation in PWIs.

Resilience played a critical role in participants' ability to navigate systemic challenges, reinforcing existing literature. Participants described using self-care, community networks, and advocacy to sustain themselves in their programs, aligning

with findings by Creswell and Poth (2021). Their experiences illustrated resilience as an active process of reclaiming agency amid adversity, supporting Harris et al.'s (2021) assertion that resilience in marginalized groups often stems from community support and cultural affirmation. Several participants highlighted the necessity of setting firm boundaries to protect their mental and emotional well-being while managing academic and professional responsibilities.

All nine participants identified self-care practices as essential for maintaining mental well-being and academic performance. My findings support Sheu and Lent's (2020) conclusion that self-care functions as a protective factor. Additionally, participants described advocacy as a proactive resilience strategy, aligning with Brown et al.'s (2022) findings that advocacy serves as a tool for systemic change and empowerment among underrepresented populations. Their experiences illustrate how Black women in CES programs resist systemic barriers and actively advocate for equity in their academic and professional environments.

Challenging Existing Knowledge

Prior research often emphasizes the advantages of mentorship without fully addressing its variability or limitations (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Diggs et al., 2009). My findings highlight the shortcomings of generalized mentorship programs that fail to meet the specific cultural and professional needs of Black women (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Harris et al., 2021). Participants reported that many mentorship programs lacked intentionality in aligning resources with their unique challenges, leaving gaps in guidance and support (Brown et al., 2020). Ember's experience illustrated the need for mentorship

initiatives to go beyond surface-level efforts and adopt strategies that actively consider intersectional identities and lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2021). These findings align with broader research advocating for mentorship approaches that recognize the complexities of identity and systemic barriers faced by marginalized individuals (Sheu & Lent, 2020; Smith et al., 2023).

My findings challenge the assumption that Black peer networks inherently provide support. Although most participants found peer networks empowering, some described feelings of isolation even within these groups. Their experiences highlight the diversity of perspectives within marginalized communities and challenge homogenized assumptions about community support (Smith et al., 2023). These findings align with Harris et al. (2021), who caution against overgeneralizing the experiences of marginalized groups, noting that intragroup dynamics can sometimes replicate exclusionary behaviors. Additionally, Jones and Stewart (2022) identify intersectionality as a factor that shapes differing experiences of inclusion within peer networks, influenced by overlapping identities such as socioeconomic status or professional roles. My findings support Creswell and Poth's (2021) argument that qualitative studies must account for variability within seemingly homogenous groups to fully capture the complexity of lived experiences.

Extension of Knowledge

This study expands the understanding of PID by demonstrating how intersectionality uniquely shapes the experiences of Black women in CES programs. While previous research acknowledges intersectionality as a theoretical framework

(Collins, 2019), I provide specific examples of how race, gender, and professional roles interact to influence participants' experiences. My findings illustrate the dual pressures of hyper-visibility and invisibility, which complicate PID. These insights extend intersectionality frameworks by revealing the psychological and professional consequences of navigating these dynamics over time. Crenshaw (2020) emphasizes that intersectionality involves not only the convergence of identities but also the structural and interpersonal outcomes they create in specific contexts. Participants' experiences align with Harris and Patton's (2021) findings that intersectionality amplifies challenges in PWIs, leading to heightened scrutiny, tokenism, and the erasure of individual contributions. Additionally, my study contributes to the field by documenting the long-term impact of these dynamics on professional aspirations, supporting Jones and Stewart's (2022) research on the cumulative effects of intersectional oppression on career trajectories. These findings highlight the need to address intersectional challenges in academic environments to foster equity and inclusion in professional development (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

The results of this study expands the current literature by identifying advocacy as an emergent theme in PID. Participants described how systemic challenges motivated them to advocate for equity and inclusion within their field. Their experiences demonstrated how adversity fostered leadership and a commitment to systemic change. This builds on Lent and Brown's (2019) exploration of advocacy in career development by connecting advocacy to the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in higher education. These findings also align with Collins and Bilge's (2020) argument that

experiences of oppression often drive individuals toward activism and institutional reform. Additionally, participants' narratives support Harris and Patton's (2021) conclusion that advocacy functions as both a survival strategy and a transformative tool for challenging systemic barriers. By linking personal resilience to broader systemic change, my study highlights advocacy as an essential component of PID, reinforcing Creswell and Poth's (2021) perspective. These findings offer a valuable framework for understanding how adversity can foster both personal and professional growth within marginalized communities (Smith et al., 2023).

Further, the results of this study confirm the persistence of systemic barriers and the transformative impact of mentorship while challenging assumptions about the universality of peer and mentor support. This extends existing knowledge by highlighting the role of intersectionality and advocacy in PID. These insights deepen the understanding of Black women's experiences in CES programs at PWIs and emphasize the need for systemic reforms and culturally responsive practices. Harris et al. (2020) argues that effective institutional changes require an acknowledgment of the nuanced needs of intersectional identities, aligning with my findings on the importance of tailored mentorship.

Additionally, the results support O'Neal et al.'s (2022) conclusion that advocacy functions as both a coping strategy and a pathway to professional empowerment within marginalized communities. Situating these findings within current research underscores the importance of creating inclusive academic environments that address the diverse needs of underrepresented populations (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Smith et al., 2023). This

aligns with Carter and Frazier's (2021) call for equity-focused practices in higher education that prioritize the voices of marginalized students and promote systemic accountability.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Social Cognitive Career Theory

I used hermeneutic phenomenology as the conceptual framework, and SCCT as theoretical framework for analyzing and interpreting data in this study. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes exploring participants' lived experiences within the historical, cultural, and social contexts of their environments (Heidegger, 1962; Smith et al., 2022). It is grounded in the concept of *Dasein*—"being there"—which situates individuals' experiences within the broader realities of their social worlds (van Manen, 2016; Willis et al., 2021). The hermeneutic circle guided the iterative process of data analysis, allowing me to uncover the deeper meanings in participants' narratives by revisiting and contextualizing their reflections. This approach enabled me to refine my understanding of the data, ensuring a comprehensive interpretation of the participants' experiences. Furthermore, this approach was particularly valuable for exploring how participants interpreted and constructed their professional identities within the structural and interpersonal dynamics of PWIs.

Social cognitive career theory complemented my phenomenological framework by exploring the cognitive, interpersonal, and contextual factors that influence career development. Bandura (1986) identified self-efficacy Bandura (1986) identified self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports as key factors shaping professional trajectories (Lent et al., 1994; Sheu & Bordon, 2017). Social cognitive career

theory was the lens through which I analyzed how mentorship, self-advocacy, and community support influenced participants' PID (Lent & Brown, 2019). Participants described culturally responsive mentorship as transformative, as it provided academic guidance while also validating their intersecting identities. This support helped them navigate systemic barriers in their academic environments.

These frameworks provided a comprehensive lens for exploring the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. I used hermeneutic phenomenology to capture participants' lived experiences and contextualize their challenges and successes, while SCCT structured analysis of how individual agency and environmental factors influenced their professional trajectories. This approach allowed me to explore how participants navigated challenges such as microaggressions, racial stereotyping, and exclusion. I also interpreted how participants used strategies like community networks, self-care, and advocacy to support their development.

Integrating hermeneutic phenomenology and SCCT added depth and nuance to my study. This combination allowed for the exploration of both the systemic barriers participants encountered and the personal resilience they demonstrated in navigating their programs. This dual perspective emphasizes the need for equitable mentorship, culturally responsive practices, and systemic reforms to create inclusive academic environments. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions about expanding access for underrepresented populations in higher education and provide actionable recommendations for improving institutional support for Black women in CES programs (see Haskins et al., 2023; Lent & Hackett, 2022).

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study resulted from the chosen approach and methods, which relied on my interpretation and participants' self-reporting. Conducting virtual interviews increased accessibility to observe nonverbal cues and emotional expressions. Technical disruptions occasionally interrupted the flow of conversations. Using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences in detail, but the quality of the data depended on their willingness and ability to articulate complex emotions and experiences. These factors may have constrained the depth of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2021).

The small sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the generalizability of my findings and may not fully represent the experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. Additionally, recruiting participants through specific networks introduced potential selection bias, as individuals with particularly strong experiences may have been more likely to participate. My shared cultural and academic background with participants posed a risk of bias during data collection and interpretation. Although I mitigated this risk through reflexive journaling, an audit trail, and member-checking, my interpretations may still have been influenced by personal perspectives. Self-reported data also indicate the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have tailored their responses to align with perceived expectations. While these limitations reflect the complexities of qualitative research, it is also clear that there are opportunities for refining future studies. Expanding the sample size, incorporating diverse data collection methods, and triangulation of data with additional sources can

strengthen the trustworthiness and depth of understanding regarding the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs.

Implications for Positive Social Change

This study explored the PID of Black women in CES programs at PWIs, addressing a documented gap in the literature. By emphasizing the importance of culturally congruent mentorship, community support, and resilience-building strategies, I identify actionable approaches to improving the academic and professional experiences of Black women in these programs. The results indicate that fostering supportive environments and implementing targeted interventions can enhance belonging, self-efficacy, and professional growth.

Moreover, this study has the potential to drive positive social change by informing institutional policies and practices that prioritize equity and inclusivity. Strengthening mentorship programs, diversifying faculty, and creating affirming spaces can enhance support for underrepresented students, ultimately improving their academic success and career satisfaction. Empowering Black women in CES programs also contributes to systemic change by advancing representation and equity within the counseling field. These efforts not only improve counselor education but also prepare professionals to serve diverse communities with cultural sensitivity and care.

Methodological, Theoretical, and Empirical Implications

In this study, I applied hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the nuanced and context-specific experiences of marginalized groups, particularly Black women in CES programs at PWIs. The iterative process of the hermeneutic circle facilitates an in-depth

analysis of how systemic and individual factors influence PID. Reflexivity and participant-centered methodologies serve as essential tools for identifying these dynamics. Future research can expand on this approach by using longitudinal designs to assess changes in PID over time and evaluate the effects of systemic changes in higher education.

The findings also contribute to the theoretical discourse on intersectionality and SCCT. By providing concrete examples of how race, gender, and professional roles intersect, this study extends intersectionality frameworks to emphasize both systemic barriers and sources of resilience. It further expands SCCT by illustrating how contextual factors, such as microaggressions and culturally responsive mentorship, influence self-efficacy and career outcomes for underrepresented populations. These insights deepen our understanding of how identity intersections impact career trajectories, particularly within academic environments.

In this research, I illuminate systemic challenges that Black women in CES programs encounter, including microaggressions, limited mentorship, and feelings of exclusion. It also documents the role of resilience, peer networks, and culturally affirming mentorship in professional development. This study establishes a foundation for developing targeted interventions and emphasizes the need for further research across diverse institutional contexts and disciplines. The methodological, theoretical, and empirical implications provide practical recommendations for promoting equity in CES programs at PWIs. Addressing systemic barriers and implementing inclusive practices can enhance support for underrepresented populations and contribute to systemic change

within counseling education and higher education as a whole. Greater collaboration between institutions, faculty, and policymakers is necessary to implement meaningful reforms that support the success of Black women in CES programs. Efforts to dismantle exclusionary structures should be paired with proactive strategies that amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized students. Culturally responsive learning enriches Black women in CES programs and fosters diverse, socially conscious counselor educators. Long-term commitment to equity-driven policies will be essential in fostering sustainable change within CES programs and the counseling profession.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological study provide critical insights into the PID experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. These insights underscore the need for actionable changes within institutional structures, mentorship practices, and support systems. I designed the following recommendations to address the systemic barriers, isolation, and inequities identified in this study while fostering a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.

CES programs administrators should establish structured, culturally responsive mentorship initiatives. Pairing students with mentors who share similar cultural backgrounds or expertise in supporting underrepresented populations can provide critical guidance. Faculty and peer mentorship programs should include regular check-ins, goal setting, and mentorship training to ensure these relationships are effective. Additionally, institutions should diversify their faculty to reflect the student population and provide professional development on cultural responsiveness practices.

To reduce isolation and foster belonging, programs should create affinity groups and spaces for students to build community, share experiences, and collaborate. Hosting culturally relevant events and facilitating discussions on intersectionality can strengthen networks and improve the overall academic experience. Institutions must also revise curricula to integrate diverse perspectives, include contributions from underrepresented groups, and address systemic inequities in the counseling profession. Additionally, providing mentorship programs that pair Black women with faculty and professionals who share similar backgrounds can enhance guidance and career development opportunities. Implementing these strategies can help create a more inclusive learning environment that supports PID and long-term success in the field.

Financial support is essential to alleviate the strain experienced by Black women in CES programs. Increasing scholarships, assistantships, and emergency funding, along with offering flexible payment plans, can help students focus on academic and professional growth. Institutions should also conduct regular equity audits to assess policies, resources, and practices to ensure they are effectively addressing systemic barriers and fostering an equitable academic environment.

The responses from the participants in this study help to illuminate the importance of targeted interventions and support systems in shaping the PID of Black women. Culturally aligned mentorship programs that connect students with mentors who understand their unique experiences foster professional confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging, mitigating isolation and exclusion. Peer support networks and community-building initiatives further strengthen students' academic and professional

journeys by providing safe spaces for collaboration, advocacy, and mutual support. Resource centers offering counseling, career guidance, and tailored services should also be prioritized to address systemic challenges and enhance students' experiences. Additionally, institutional commitment to recruiting and retaining diverse faculty members can create more representative learning environments where students see themselves reflected in leadership. Financial assistance, including scholarships and research funding, can further reduce barriers that disproportionately impact Black women in CES programs. Long-term, these efforts can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive field, ensuring that Black women are supported throughout their academic and professional trajectories. A sustained focus on these initiatives will not only benefit Black women in CES programs but also enrich the counseling profession by fostering a more diverse, culturally competent, and socially responsive workforce.

Long-term professional impacts of these interventions can be transformative. Providing adequate support during training equips Black women with the resilience and self-efficacy needed to excel in leadership roles within counseling, academia, and supervision. Increased representation of Black women in these spaces fosters a ripple effect, inspiring future generations and advancing equity within the field. In these recommendations, I highlight the importance of institutional accountability, such as revising recruitment practices, diversifying faculty, and ensuring equitable access to resources. By implementing these strategies, CES programs can create a more inclusive and culturally responsive academic environment, empowering Black women to thrive professionally and contribute to systemic change in the counseling profession.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the PID experiences of Black women in CES programs at PWIs. I explored a critical gap in the literature by examining how systemic barriers, mentorship, and personal resilience shape the professional journeys of Black women in these academic spaces. By amplifying their voices, I highlight the challenges and opportunities they encounter, offering valuable insights to foster inclusivity and equity in CES programs.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine participants, whose narratives revealed the intersectional complexities of navigating academic environments often marked by microaggressions, racial stereotyping, and exclusion. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the study identified five key themes: *Navigating Professional Identity Development*, *Barriers to Success in CES Programs*, *Resilience and Coping Strategies*, *Contributions to the Counseling Profession*, and *Recommendations for Institutional Change.* These themes revealed the systemic challenges participants encountered, including underrepresentation, microaggressions, and inequitable support, while also highlighting the strategies they employed, such as culturally aligned mentorship, community support, and adaptive coping mechanisms, to navigate their experiences and foster professional growth.

This chapter included an interpretation of the findings through the lens of intersectionality and SCCT, providing deeper context for understanding the lived experiences of Black women in CES programs. The findings align with and extend existing literature, emphasizing the critical role of culturally responsive mentorship and

the importance of addressing structural inequities within higher education. Limitations of the study were also discussed, including reliance on virtual interviews and the specific focus on PWIs, along with recommendations for future research and practice.

Finally, the implications for positive social change underscore the importance of creating equitable and affirming academic environments that empower Black women and other underrepresented groups. By implementing actionable strategies, such as fostering culturally aligned mentorship and revising institutional policies, CES programs can advance systemic equity while promoting the professional growth of diverse counseling educators. These findings serve as a foundation for transformative change, offering a blueprint for building more inclusive and supportive academic spaces.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Before each interview, participants will have signed an informed consent. Each participant will be informed that the interviews are to remain anonymous. Initially, I will attempt to establish a rapport by explaining the interview process. There will be one interview, lasting approximately 40 minutes. Following is a template for the interview introduction, questions, and closing statement:

Interview Guide: Professional Identity Development Among Black Women in CES Programs

Introduction

Hello, my name is Demetria Burleson, and I'm delighted to have the opportunity to speak with you today. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this important study.

I am a doctoral student in Walden University's Counselor Education and Supervision (CES) program. This qualitative hermeneutic study aims to explore the challenges that Black women face in developing their professional identities within CACREP-accredited Predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Our conversation today will be audio recorded for transcription purposes, and the interview will take approximately 40 minutes. We will discuss 11 questions focusing on your experiences with professional identity development in your CES program.

Please know that:

- You can choose to stop the interview or withdraw from participation at any time.

- Your responses will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in any published materials.

Before we begin, do you have any questions? Also, may I take notes during our interview?

1. Personal Background and Motivation

- Can you share your journey to entering the Counselor education and supervision (CES) program?
- What inspired you to pursue this field, and what has kept you motivated?

2. Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

- How would you describe your sense of belonging during the program?
- Were there specific moments that made you feel particularly included or excluded?

3. Intersectional Challenges

- How do you think your experience as a Black woman in a predominantly white academic setting compares to that of others in the program?
- Have your thoughts on this evolved over time?

4. Experiences of Microaggressions

- Can you describe specific instances of microaggressions you encountered in the program?
- How did these incidents make you feel, and which aspects of your identity do you think they were directed toward?

5. Impact of Intersectional Microaggressions on Professional Identity

- How have these microaggressions shaped your professional identity?
- As a counselor, supervisor, or leader, how do you navigate these influences in your work?

6. Code-Switching and Identity Management

- Did you feel the need to code-switch or adjust your behavior when interacting with peers and faculty?
- How does this affect your authenticity and developing professional identity?

7. Mentorship and Support Networks

- Did anyone provide guidance or support during your program?
- Have you found mentors who share similar backgrounds?
- How has mentorship (or the lack of it) influenced your experience?

8. Coping Mechanisms and Stress Management

- What strategies have you used to cope with stress during the program?
- Are there any methods that have been particularly helpful?

9. Development of Coping and Resilience Skills

- Have your experiences in the program helped you develop resilience?
- How has this resilience influenced your perspective on your professional identity?

10. Perceptions of Marginality and Empowerment

- How would you describe your position within the academic and professional community—do you feel empowered, marginalized, or somewhere in between?

- How has this positioning influenced your professional growth?

11. Future Goals and Aspirations

- How have your experiences shaped your career goals?
- What impact do you hope to make in the field moving forward?

Conclusion

- Thank you for your valuable insights and for sharing your experiences with me today.
- Before we wrap up: Could you please confirm your **email address** by typing it in the chat so I can send your **$10 Amazon gift card** as a token of appreciation?

If you have any further questions or thoughts, please feel free to reach out to me at XXXXXX.XXXXXX@XXXXX. Thank you again for your contribution to this important research.

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Email

Subject Line:

Interviewing Black Women in CES Programs and Recent Graduates (within 5 Years) at PWIs – $10 Amazon Thank You Gift Card Included.

Email Message:

The researcher is conducting a new study to understand the experiences of Black women studying to become counselors at predominantly white universities. Your participation can help improve the support and development of future counselors.

About the Study:

- One 40-minute interview via Zoom that will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
- You would receive a $10 Amazon gift card as a thank you.
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.

Volunteers Must Meet These Requirements:

- Identify as female.
- Identify as Black.
- Be currently enrolled in or a recent graduate (within the past 5 years) of a Counselor education and supervision (CES) program.
- Be or have been enrolled in a CES program at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).
- Be 18 years old or older.

- Be fluent in English.
- Be willing to provide informed consent and participate in all study-related activities, including interviews and a summary review.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Demetria Burleson, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during August.

Please complete the attached demographic questionnaire and survey, and email me at XXXXX.XXXX@XXXX to let me know of your interest:

Demographic Questionnaire

Professional Identity Development Survey

Appendix C: Advertising Flyer

"Are you a Black woman in a CES program or recent graduate within the past 5 years? Share your story!"

Are you a Black woman currently enrolled in a CACREP-accredited Counselor education and supervision (CES) program at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?

I'm conducting a study to explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black women in CES programs, with a focus on professional identity development. By sharing your insights, you can help improve understanding and support for Black women in similar programs.

Study Details:

- One 40-minute Zoom interview: Flexible scheduling to fit your availability.
- Privacy protected: No names or identifying details will be shared in the published research.
- In Appreciation: Participants will receive a $10 Amazon gift card as a thank you for their time.

Who Can Participate?

- Black women, age 18 or older.

- Currently enrolled in or recent graduates (within the past 5 years) of a CACREP-accredited CES program at a PWI.

This research is part of a doctoral study conducted by Demetria Burleson, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

If you're interested, please complete the attached demographic questionnaire and survey, then send me a private message or email at XXXXX.XXXX@XXXX to share your interest or ask any questions.

Demographic Questionnaire

Professional Identity Development Survey

Thank you for considering being part of this important study!