2019

Experiences of African American Lesbians Who Attended a Historically Black College or University

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

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Who Attended a Historically Black College or University

by

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MA, Argosy University-Atlanta, 2009

BA, Pace University, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

August 2019

Abstract

The lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have not received sufficient empirical attention; therefore, this study was conducted to understand and describe their experiences. The study followed a qualitative phenomenological approach. The multidimensional identity model, developed by Reyolds and Pope, was used as the framework through which to understand the participants' experiences. Semistructured, 40 to 60 minute interviewes were conducted with 6 women who identified as African American lesbians and attended HBCUs. Initial hand and subsequent NVivo coding of interview data led to the development of the following 7 themes: (a) either African American women or African American lesbian, (b) fear of rejection, (c) chosen kin, (d) no benefit of being an African American lesbian at an HBCU, (e) love for the African American community, (f) women who love women, and (g) the road not taken. The findings suggest African American lesbians often shift between identities, depending on the situation or setting. The results of the study provide suggestions for counselors and counselor educators who will be able to increase their understanding of the unique needs of individuals who identify with at least 3 marginalized communities. African American lesbians who attend HBCUs may benefit from this inquiry as HBCUs can use the information in this study to help create and sustain a more inclusive campus environment. Additional implications for social change and future research are included at the end of the study.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Barbara Outlaw Barmore. Mom, you know me and more importantly, you SEE me. Your never-ending support, your unwavering belief in me, and your unconditional love are everything to me. You know how challenging this journey has been and when I thought I could not do it, you always knew I could. Thank you for showing me what a strong determined woman could do.

"Where's my Kimmie?" Here I am mommy, here's your Kimmie!!!!

I would also like to dedicate this to all of the other strong women in my family. I am because of you.

Acknowledgments

Completing this dissertation has truly been a collaborative effort. “My soul sits back and wonders,” I want to thank God from whom all blessings flow. God has always made it possible for me to get through life’s storms and challenges. I am thankful to God for all the people He has placed in my path.

I thank my dissertation committee. I actually had two chairs, twice the blessing! Dr. Jason Patton, you were with me since the inception of this project. I want to thank you for all of your work and supportive words. I was sad to see you go, however, the blessing that replaced you was in the form of Dr. Theodore P. Remley, Jr. Dr. Remley, you were a Godsend. Never in my years would I have believed that I would be mentored by someone of your reputation and experience. Thank you for taking the torch and providing me with the continued guidance and support that I had become accustomed to. Thank you, Dr. Geneva Gray. Your consistency and feedback have been comforting and much needed throughout this process. Many thanks to Dr. Linwood Vereen who completed the team as the URR. I appreciate all of your comments and work towards helping me reach my goal.

Mom, thank you, love you, thank you, LOVE YOU!! THANK YOU!!

There have been many classmates who were encouraging and supportive. Thank all of you!! Julie Forrest-Lytle, thank you for our weekly calls. You have been there for my ups, downs, and then some. You made the process not so lonely. Thank you!!!

Mary! You have been a bright star in my life since we met. Everyone should have a friend like you. I am truly blessed and thankful for you. Our friendship has meant

more than I can say. If anybody looks up a “real friend” in the dictionary, your wonderful face will be right there. Thank you for making me a better me

My acknowledgments would not be complete without calling the names of loved ones who are no longer on this earth, but who will always be in my heart: My father, John M. Barmore, Sr.; my brother, Raymond C. Barmore; my grandmother, Naomi Abraham; my godmother, Susan Summerville; and my cousin, Marie “Ree” McCauley. *Gone but not forgotten* does not begin to describe my feelings for each of you. Miss you!

Finally, thank you to the six participants who were brave and trusting enough to share their experiences. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Understanding, exploring, and supporting diversity are examples of the main tenets of the American Counseling Association's (ACA; 2014) mission. Both the ACA and Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) have mandated that the leaders in counseling programs ensure that counselors and counselor educators demonstrate multicultural competencies so they will be equipped to provide the most appropriate services. For researchers, this includes empirical contributions related to the experiences and perceptions of marginalized communities. The research focused on the impact of identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) in an educational setting has increased over the last 20 years (Evans & Broido, 1999; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Rhoads, 1997; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012). In particular, the extant literature related to the experiences of individuals who identify with at least one marginalized identity (e.g., LGBT) has mainly focused on the experiences of LGBT White individuals at predominately White institutions (PWIs) (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, & Moradi, 2010; Love, 1997). African American lesbian students face multiple stressors due to their identification with a combination of marginalized identities (i.e., ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender) while navigating their college experience (Bowleg, 2008).

Despite an increase in empirical inquiries regarding persons with marginalized identities, the literature is limited when it comes to the college experiences of individuals who identify with three (or more) marginalized identities. Furthermore, there is relatively

little known about the experiences of African American lesbians who attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Previous research has supported the need for counselors to have a better understanding of individuals who identify with marginalized communities (Malebranche, Fields, Bryant, & Harper, 2009; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993). Counselors and counselor educators are ethically bound to provide a voice for those communities that have historically been silenced. In this study, I provided such a voice. In this chapter, I present the background of the study, the problem statement, the research question, and the theoretical foundation that was used in the study. This chapter also contains the overall framework for the study, including definitions, methodology, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study.

Background

The college experience is a complex process that includes significant relearning as well as new social, emotional, and psychological encounters that lead to an increase in both knowledge and personal growth (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Being away from family and friends catapults the college student's transition into emerging adulthood while negotiating and renegotiating their identities (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013). Learning to adjust to academic requirements is coupled with the opportunity to develop a sense of identity that will carry the young person through her or his adulthood and beyond. For students who have a sense of belonging to their new college environment, the transition can be somewhat less challenging. Mattarah, Ayers, and Brand (2010) reported on the importance of the perception of social support in reducing the stress for

college students, finding that students who have the perception that they are supported by staff, faculty, peers, and institutional policies and procedures tend to have a more positive college experience than college students who perceive that they are not supported.

For students who identify as LGBT, the college experience includes not only the adjustment to new surroundings and situations but also the adjustment to potential experiences of discrimination and oppression due to their identification as a member of the LGBT community. Students who identify as heterosexual tend to have different perceptions of the college experience than their LGBT counterparts (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004). The college experience can be challenging to all students but students who identify with a marginalized group often have additional challenges that include a lack of peer, faculty, and institutional support comparable to those in the dominant group (Hu & Kuh, 2003).

Students who identify with more than one marginalized identity are significantly impacted by their college experience. Mitsu (2011) explored the college experiences of nine Asian American students who identified as members of the LGBT community and how multiple marginalized identity traits (i.e., race and sexual identity) influenced their educational experiences and identity formations. The author discussed the struggle faced by LGBT Asian Americans students when trying to decide whether to reveal their sexual identities. In another inquiry, a three-phase, mixed-method study was conducted to assess the unique forms of microaggressions experienced by LGBT persons of color (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011). In their study, 112 LGBT-persons of color responded using an 18-item, 5-point Likert microaggressions scale that included

three subscales: (a) racism within LGBT communities, (b) heterosexism in racial/ethnic minority communities, and (c) racism in dating and close relationships that are theoretically consistent with prior literature on racial/ethnic minority LGBT communities. In terms of experiencing racism, an ANOVA in their study revealed significant differences among African American, Latina/o, and Asian American participants on the overall scale. Their results also indicated that there is a perception of racism in the LGBT community and heterosexism in ethnic minority communities. Other results included rejection by other LGBT-persons of color, problems with dating, and concerns about immigration status (Balsam et al., 2011). Their study did not elaborate on the concerns about immigration status from within the LGBT-persons of color community.

African Americans are motivated to attend HBCUs because of their ability to receive peer, faculty, and institutional support there. This motivation is likely to stem from the racial similarities that make African American students feel more comfortable. Stewart, Wright, Perry, and Rankin (2008) discussed the historical significance of the HBCUs and stated that one of the unique experiences offered on these campuses includes a high percentage of African American faculty members (i.e., 58.2% of all faculty members) who act as role models and mentors. There are approximately 104 HBCUs in the United States, and each has an important role in the African American community (Albritton, 2012). HBCUs have a rich history and tradition of providing cultural affirmation for thousands of African American students (Stewart et al., 2008).

African American lesbian students face triple jeopardy due to their multiple identities (Patton & Simmons, 2008). The literature related to this specific population is

scarce; however, studies have shown that the identification with multiple identities can lead to higher instances of depression and other mental health issues. Patton and Simmons (2008) examined the experiences of first-year, HBCU, African American students who identified as lesbians, using a reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity and the multidimensional identity model to explore how the participants made sense of their identity internally and in relation to external expectations and influences. They also used the multidimensional identity model to explore how the participants negotiated the complexities of their multiple identities in college. The students in their study discussed dealing with the existence of loneliness or the existence of ridicule and violence.

This current study was necessary to fill the gap in the literature and to provide counselors and counselor educators with information related to the experiences of individuals who identify with at least three marginalized groups. The data in this study can be used to inform the faculty, staff, and administrators at HCBUs and those from other institutions on strategies to improve the overall college experience for students who identify with multiple marginalized communities. The increase sense of belonging and acceptance could only increase students' performance both socially and academically.

Problem Statement

The importance of an individual developing a positive attitude and perception regarding their own racial, ethnic, and cultural group has long since been documented (Hraba & Grant, 1970; Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith, & Demo, 2015; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The experience of being socially

accepted is crucial to the psychological development and social well-being of those who experience oppression due to their race (Gushue, 2006). For African Americans, the feeling of belonging, pride, as well as a strong sense of group membership has traditionally been found on the campuses of HBCUs (Albritton, 2012).

HBCUs were created in the United States in the era of segregation and oppression, not only to address the educational and social needs of the African American community, but to also provide a safe haven in a racially demoralizing society (Brown II, Donahoo, & Betrand, 2001). Cheng (2004) stated that the quality of campus social life could affect students' feelings of community. However, for African American LGBT students, the HBCU college campus can be an environment filled with discrimination (Dolan, 1998; Lewis & Erickson, 2016; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). African American lesbians face distinct challenges, including exposure to several forms of microaggressions (Balsam et al., 2011). For example, African American lesbians are exposed to heterosexism in the larger community, alienation from within their own racial and ethnic communities, and racism within the LGBT community and society. Furthermore, African American lesbians who *come out* are at risk of losing the support of the African American community, which usually serves as a significant buffer against racism in the dominant culture (Demo & Allen, 1996). This can leave African American lesbians feeling as if they are required to identify with only their race or their gender or sexual orientation to be accepted by a culture (Bridges, Selvidge, & Matthews, 2003). They may also feel compelled to hide one identity (i.e., lesbian) for the sake of another (i.e., African American). Social identities, such as race and gender, tend to be visible and

often provide markers for identification by others (Alcoff, 2006). This can make other identities, such as class and sexual orientation, less visible or many times, completely invisible. The ability for an African American lesbian to *pass* or be categorized as heterosexual solely based on race and gender can lead to her lesbian identity being overlooked, dismissed, or rendered nonexistent.

African American students attend HBCUs with a high expectation that they will be engaged in experiences that will enhance their racial identity (Van Camp, Barden, & Sloan, 2010). These experiences include joining one of the many Black Greek organizations on an HBCU campus. Black Greek organizations were created with the purpose of offering both civic and academic support for their members and leadership and service to their respective communities (McKenzie, 1990). The homophobic climate of an HBCU often extends to the Black Greek organizations, and the lesbian student can find that she is unwelcomed should she attempt to join a Greek organization (Welter, 2012). Hughey (2011) stated that Black Greek organizations offer a network of supportive sisterhood, brotherhood, and friendships; however, this network is often made unavailable to the African American lesbian student at an HBCU. Discrimination, homophobic intolerance, and an atmosphere of exclusion have been directly correlated with African American lesbian students' poor academic performance and consequent withdrawal from HBCUs (McMurtrie, 2013).

After an exhaustive review of the relevant literature, I found relatively no studies that examined the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. The scarcity of literature on the aforementioned phenomenon, specifically the

lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU, presents a challenge for counselor educators and counselors. The unique needs of individuals with several marginalized identities cannot be met without pertinent information. Without sufficient information about this community, appropriate and culturally relevant interventions cannot be applied. The results of this study could also be used as a reference for counselors to add to their understanding of the experiences of African American lesbians who attend an HBCU. This understanding may be used to help transform the climate of the HBCU campus to one that provides kinship bonds for all of their students, not just the sexual majority (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011).

The findings of this study increase the knowledge base for the counseling profession. Understanding the experiences of African American lesbians while attending college will allow counselors to develop appropriate and effective techniques for engaging and assisting the population. Counselor educators could use the information in this study to train future counselors to work effectively with clients who identify with at least three marginalized identities.

Finally, the outcomes of this study not only add to the literature but can be used as a tool for further research. Future researchers will be able to replicate this study, using the same population and marginalized identities or others with different identities. The themes developed from this study could also be tested with later quantitative studies.

Purpose

The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. The results of

this study have added to the limited information on this topic. As this study provides an addition to the literature, counselor educators could use the results to teach counselors in training to meet the unique needs of African American lesbians while attending HBCUs. This exploration of the lived experiences of African American lesbians could lead to counselor educators and counselors developing a better understanding of the experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities.

Most, if not all, African American lesbians have experienced some form of racist and heterosexist messages (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). African American lesbians are likely to internalize these limiting and negative messages about identifying both as an African American and as a member of a sexual minority (Schwartz, & Meyer, 2010). Cross (1971) suggested that the negative beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that a person has about themselves as a member of a minority group can be directly correlated to poor self-esteem and psychological functioning. The findings of the current study could provide counselors with an understanding of this phenomenon and provide them with the skills to work directly with those who seek counseling services.

HBCU faculty and staff can be trained to create a more inclusive and safer environment on the HBCU campus for African American lesbians and other members of the LGBT community. The results of this study could help the counseling profession, both on and off the HBCU campus setting, by providing evidence-based information that will increase the knowledge and skill set of counselors who work with the African American lesbian population. Counselor educators could be better able to support their

trainees who are working with African American lesbians and others who identify with at least three marginalized groups.

An individual's acceptance by their own ethnic culture can be empowering (Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Myers, 1975). The lack of acceptance can lead to poor self-esteem and psychological functioning (Brown et al., 2004). Poor self-esteem and emotional functioning have been linked to poor school performance and eventual departure from higher learning (Kingston, 2008). Information from this study could help HBCUs retain the students who identify with multiple marginalized identities, specifically LGBT students. The enrollment numbers have significantly decreased at the various HBCUs (Van Camp et al., 2009); this trend could be reversed with a change in the HBCU campus culture. An agenda of social change via inclusion can be promoted not by forcing a lesbian agenda but by concentrating on the cognitive reframing of thoughts towards the benefits of equality (Gregg, 2010).

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU?

Theoretical Framework

For this study, I chose a theory that was appropriate for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of the participants. Given their identity with three marginalized groups, I selected Reynolds and Pope's (1991) multidimensional identity model (MIM) to explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended HBCUs. The MIM addresses the issue of multiple oppressions and their impact

on the identity development process. Multiple oppressions occur when an individual is a member of two or more oppressed groups (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). This aspect made the MIM appropriate for use as the theoretical framework of this study.

Nature of the Study

To explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU, I used a qualitative design, specifically a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach (see Crowther, Ironside, Spence, & Smythe, 2017). I chose the hermeneutic, phenomenological perspective as the design for this study because it allowed me to answer the research question (see Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003). This approach requires the researcher to obtain a thorough description and analysis of the lived experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 2014). The data for the study were collected via individual interviews. Hermeneutic researchers focus on the subjective experiences of the participants allowing the researcher to bring previously undocumented experiences to the forefront (Crowther et al., 2017). The hermeneutic approach allows the perspective of the researcher to form part of the development of meaning and enables meaning to be discovered within the data as a whole (Fleming et al., 2003). Van Manen (2014) further stated that the researchers who choose the hermeneutic, phenomenological approach do not attempt to reveal absolute truths about a phenomenon; rather, they provide a glimpse into the experience of the participants. For these reasons, the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective was the most appropriate design to illuminate the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended a HBCU.

Definitions

The following operational definitions were used throughout this study.

The following operational definitions were used throughout this study:

African American/Black: An ethnic group marked by being descendent of enslaved Africans in the United States (Williams, 2012). For the purposes of this study, the terms *Black and African American* are interchangeable. Black is another socially constructed term to racially classify persons with a history of slavery in the United States (Sigelman, Tuch, & Martin, 2005).

Cisgender: A term for people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth (Broussard, Warner, & Pope, 2018).

Discrimination: The unjust treatment of an individual or group based on a social construct. Discrimination includes but is not limited to race, gender, and sexual orientation (Bialer & McIntosh, 2016).

Ethnic identity: A person's identification with a racial or ethnic group (Wade, Tavris, & Garry, 2015).

Gender identity: The sense of being female (or male), somewhere in between, or neither. It is not dependent on whether the individual conforms to social or cultural expectations regarding gender (Wade et al., 2015).

Homophobia: The fear of homosexuality (Collins, 2000).

Marginalized Community: Those individuals or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical or mental

ability, etc., have historically been placed on the outer edge of the accepted social and economic hierarchy (Cross & Atinde, 2015).

Oppression: Domination and subordination in which the dominant group uses their power to limit or completely restrict resources from the group designated as subordinate. Oppression also includes the implanting of self-deprecating views onto the subordinate group by the dominant group (Holmes, Facemire, & DaFonseca, 2016).

Predominately White institution (PWI): Any college or university in which over 50% of the student population is identified as White (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011).

Stigma: A sign or symbol of disgrace associated with a group or particular circumstance (Bialer & McIntosh, 2016).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions regarding the design of this study. I assumed that I would be able to secure the necessary sample for the study. Another assumption was that all of the participants were truthful in their identification as a lesbian. There was no verifiable method to determine if this was false. I also assumed that the participants' experiences would be shared-enough such that I could achieve saturation. Given my identity as an African American lesbian who attended an HBCU, it was assumed that I was perceived as a safe and understanding agent who accurately described the participants' experiences. It was also assumed that the participants would be able to clearly articulate their experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The sample in this study was confined to African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. African American women who identified as bisexual or who were of Caribbean descent were excluded. The choice of excluding participants who were considered Afro-Caribbean and African was made due to the historical relevance of HBCUs in the United States. This study was limited to the fact that it did not include African American lesbians who attended a predominately White college or university.

The expectation of transferability in qualitative research is distinctly different than in quantitative inquiries. In quantitative studies, there is an expectation that the findings from one study can be applied to a larger population (Shenton, 2004). In qualitative research, it is expected that the findings may only be applicable to a small number of participants (Shenton, 2004). This study may lack transferability as the aim was to describe the experiences of a relatively small number of individuals.

Limitations

There are approximately 104 HBCUs (Gaskins, 2010). Due to the chosen sample size, there were a small number of HBCUs represented. In this study, I explored the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. This could limit the transferability of the study, including limitations due to exclusion of bisexual and transgender women. I used both criterion and snowball sampling processes to secure participants for this study. This could be perceived as a limitation due to the chance of researcher bias because as the researcher, I ultimately decided who was selected for the study. The snowball sampling process also tends to produce very like participants. This

was both a risk and a benefit because saturation was achieved sooner; however, there is a potential that it was at the cost of diverse ideas. When HBCUs were first established, newly freed slaves were referred to as *Negroes*. The term Negro, therefore, was directly connected to those individuals who are descendants of slaves in the United States. As the political climate changed and the sense of self-pride became evident, the term Negro was viewed as outdated and insulting and the new term *Black* became relevant (Anglin & Whaley, 2006). In the 1980s, the term *African American* was chosen as a more politically correct term to use when identifying persons who have a history of slavery in this country (Sigelman, Tuch, & Martin, 2005). Although persons who are from the Caribbean or the West Indies also descended from Africa, they were not considered minorities in their nation or country of origin (Anglin & Whaley, 2006). For this reason alone, only those individuals who met the criteria of African American, as it was defined in this study, were appropriate as participants. This exclusion of other ethnic identities can be viewed as a limitation.

Researchers can establish credibility for their study by providing their connection to their qualitative study; this would include divulging any personal or professional information that could potentially influence the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Crowther et al., 2017). In the appropriate section of this study, I disclosed my personal experience and connection to the topic. If I did not expose my connection to the study, the interpretation of the data could be questioned.

Transparency in research can increase the credibility of a study. Researchers work to ensure the quality of a proposed study by not using their biases and values to

shape the findings from the data (Crowther et al., 2017). I attempted not to insert my opinion or views into the data received by the participants. During the interviews, I was engaging but not intrusive when the participants were describing their experiences.

Significance

Counselor educators and supervisors have the responsibility to contribute to the profession's knowledge base (ACA, 2014). The results of this study not only add to the body of literature as it relates to the lived experiences of African American who attended an HBCU but could also lead to a better understanding of the experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities. At the time of this dissertation, the literature on the experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU was scarce. This study has provided a voice to a community that has been traditionally silenced. This inquiry also has the potential of inspiring further exploration into the unique needs of this community. Researchers will be able to either replicate or build upon the information in this study.

The information produced by this study could bring awareness of the unique needs of this community and improve the services provided by mental health professionals. Counselors who work within HBCU institutions will be better able to meet the needs of the students who will utilize their services. The information gleaned from this study could also assist in the training of faculty, staff, and students to create a more inclusive and safe environment, both on and off campus, for African American lesbians and other members of the African American LGBT community. This could spur an

increase in tolerance and acceptance of African American lesbians within the African American community.

Ultimately, African American lesbians and other LGBT students' experiences may be improved by this study. This level of social change includes empowering a group that has been historically silenced, as was the focus of the founders when establishing the HBCUs. By working toward an increase in awareness of African American lesbians and other marginalized groups, the HBCUs can continue their tradition of empowering a community.

Summary

In this chapter, I focused on the background of the research problem. Counselors, counselor educators, and researchers are ethically bound to increase their multicultural competencies (CACREP, 2016). Illuminating the experiences of individuals who identify with three marginalized groups has not only served to fill the gap in the literature, but it has provided a base for further exploration of the experiences of individuals who identify with multiple oppressed identities. In Chapter 2, I will provide a more in-depth discussion of the literature relevant to this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Counseling professionals strive to understand the experiences of individuals and how those experiences influence or shape their perceptions (Rivera, Wilbur, & Roberts-Wilbur, 1998; Roysircar, 2009). Researchers have a responsibility to explore the experiences of individuals who traditionally have not had their voices heard. African Americans have an extensive history as a marginalized group in the United States. Slavery, discrimination, and inequality are just a few of the experiences of African Americans in this country. HBCUs were created in part due to the discrimination against African Americans, which included prohibiting the pursuit of an education (Albritton, 2012). These institutions were an essential response to society's view that it was unnecessary to educate African Americans due to their inability to appreciate, much less obtain a formal education (Albritton, 2012).

Not only did the HBCU train Black men and women to be politically prepared to become leaders in the fledgling civil rights movement, but the campus grounds insulated African Americans against the racism and discrimination found in mainstream American society. HBCUs have been environments that have traditionally been viewed as buffers against societal racism for African American students (Van Camp et al., 2010). In the beginning, HBCUs were viewed simply as the *college for Negroes* (LeMelle, 2002). The question became how HBCUs could directly relate to the social, economic, and political environment in which African Americans were living. African American leaders of the time felt that the focus of the HBCU should be the same as other institutions of higher

learning: to prepare its students for life, not only as it is, but how it should be (LeMelle, 2002). HBCU leaders understood that if African Americans were to make progress in the United States, they had to become knowledgeable and equipped to change not only the conditions they were living in but the position they were in. Early HBCU campuses became places of resistance, empowerment, and racial uplift (Williamson, 2008). African Americans who attended these institutions gained the skills necessary to assist them in their fight for equality and social justice; descendants of slaves were taught how to fight the oppression of the post construction laws of the time (Williamson, 2008). This catapulted African Americans into the political arena and strengthened their ability to fight for the enormous social change that came with the 1960s civil rights movement (LeMelle, 2002). The atmospheres on HBCU campuses tend to create elevated feelings of racial pride, which in turn, instills higher levels of self-esteem (Albritton, 2012). Many political groups, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were created at an HBCU to combat inequality and the unjust treatment of African Americans (LeMelle, 2002). However, for LGBT students, these campuses can be intimidating, hostile, and unwelcoming (Henry, Fuerth, & Richards, 2011). Due to their identification with the LGBT community, African American LGBT students who attend HBCUs rarely experience the same level of support given to their heterosexual peers (Henry et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. Understanding these experiences serves to enhance the advancement of current information. This addition to the current

literature was necessary in order to provide culturally-appropriate treatment and interventions for individuals who identify with more than two oppressed identities (see Lovell, 2014).

In the first chapter, I detailed the purpose of this study. In this chapter, I provide a succinct but comprehensive summary of the relevant literature, which serves to provide a rational understanding of why the chosen population needed further exploration. This review also gives context to potentially emerging themes that were found while conducting the study. Most of the literature reviewed in this chapter was published within the last 5 years; however, to address historical concepts, dated information was also presented. In this chapter, I also discuss the literature search strategy used in this study. The discussion includes the keywords and phrases, databases, and theoretical orientation used. Finally, I present the literature that supports the chosen theory and the rationale for the study.

Literature Search Strategy

Internet search engines have become one of the main sources for obtaining information (Frydenberg & Miko, 2011). I secured the literature reviewed for this study primarily through the electronic library databases and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a land-based research library located in Harlem, New York. The Elton B. Stephens Company system was used to access the following databases: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SocINDEX with Full Text, LGBT Life Dissertations & Theses Full Text, ProQuest Central, Dissertations & Theses at Walden University, as well as the Google Scholar search engine. All works cited originated from peer-reviewed

sources. Key word search terms included *African American, Black, college campus, college experience, counselor, counselor educator, double jeopardy, ethnicity, gender, historically Black college and university (HBCU), intersectionality, lesbian, LGBT, marginalized, Multidimensional Identity Model, multiple identity, oppression, predominately White institutions (PWI), race, sexual minority,* and *triple jeopardy.*

In my initial search, I found little on the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. Due to the scarcity of literature, the search was expanded to include overall college experiences, including the LGBT student experience. A search on the significance of the HBCU resulted in a number of articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

Theoretical Foundation

In this study, I used the multidimensional identity model (MIM) as the framework to explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. The MIM was developed to address the complexities of identifying with more than two marginalized communities (Reynolds & Pope 1991). Sue and Sue (1971) suggested that it was imperative for the field of psychology to expand the focus and include the unique experiences of people of color. Later, the focus further expanded to include the experiences of women and the LGBT community (Cass, 1977; Downing & Roush, 1985; Heath, Neimeyer, & Peterson, 1988). For example, Atkinson, Morton, and Sue (1993) created the minority identity development model as a lens to view the experiences of individuals who identified with a minority group. Although this model allows a person to address the unique experiences of minority groups, it does not specify the particular

group (i.e., race, gender, or sexual orientation) or does it allow an individual to address the intersection of these identities (Atkinson et al., 1993). The MIM was inspired by these earlier models.

In the United States, the dominant culture is represented by the following attributes: White; male; middle socioeconomic class; Christian; heterosexual; English speaking; young; and mentally, physically, and emotionally unimpaired (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The users of the MIM subscribe to the concept that individuals can have myriad socially constructed identities and that those identities are associated with oppression and marginalization as well as with power and privilege (Jones & Abes, 2013). Reynolds and Pope (1991) stated that multiple identities are interrelated; however, an individual can choose to suppress one identity depending on the circumstances. These researchers stated that identities can be fluid and dynamic and should be considered in tandem rather than distinctly. The inequality associated with the aforementioned identities are woven together, each reinforces the other and cannot be totally disconnected from one each other (Veenstra, 2011).

Reynolds and Pope (1991) stated that an individual can choose to be passive and allow circumstances or community setting (e.g., an HBCU campus) to determine which identity to highlight (i.e., race: African American) and which one to suppress (i.e., sexual identity: lesbian). Another choice is to be active in the decision of which identity to highlight (i.e., female) and which to suppress (i.e., African American) depending on circumstance (e.g., participation in a national organization for women's rights; (Patton & Simmons, 2008). The third option is to identify with multiple identities in a segmented

manner (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). For example, an African American lesbian can decide to embrace her racial identity by joining the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); at the same time, she can join a woman's group, and lastly an LGBT organization. Finally, the individual can combine all her identities and join an African American lesbian organization. Anyone of the four aforementioned choices is explainable when using the MIM.

I chose the MIM as the theoretical framework for this study because it was found to be the best fit for understanding the lived experiences of persons who identify with three marginalized identities. Patton and Simmons (2008) found the MIM to be appropriate when working with students who identify as Black, female, and lesbian. The MIM provided me with the framework to understand how students were able to move fluidly among identities. Henry et al. (2011) stated that a student who identifies as LGBT faces oppression from several directions, and the MIM provides the lens for researchers to better understand those experiences.

The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. Given the focus of this study, the MIM was found to be a relevant theory. The MIM recognizes the effects of oppression in the United States and how this oppression has fueled the construct of a dominant culture as well as minority identities (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Furthermore, the MIM allows professionals to trace the movement between identities for either external or internal reasons and situations. Reynolds and Pope (1991) recognized that to deny any aspect of a person's identity can have negative consequences for the individuals. Those who identify

with several marginalized identities need counselors who understand that each marginalized identity has its own history. Counselors may have to consider the systems perspective when working with these individuals. Persons with multiple marginalized identities are often faced with an either/or choice when it comes to embracing their identities (Walker, 2008). These unique challenges and experiences need to be understood by members of the counseling profession, both on and off college campuses.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

African American Experience in the United States

The African American experience in the United States began with a forced migration from Africa to a *new world* that was unfamiliar, cruel, and a direct path into centuries of enforced slavery. The Portuguese first introduced slaves from Africa to the Americas in 1460; however, it was not until 1641 that slavery came to the shore of what is now the United States (Marbley & Rouson, 2011). For over 200 years, Africans and their descendants were forced into an unspeakable form of human bondage (Lomax, 2006). From the moment their feet set upon the shores of Massachusetts, Blacks were chained, beaten, raped, and had fewer rights than the animals of that time (Marbley & Rouson, 2011). Racism and racial discrimination are synonymous with the Black experience (Drake, 1980). Racism is a social construct created and enforced by those in power to maintain the privilege and power of various resources; examples of resources include, but are not limited to: financial, health, educational, real estate, and housing (Link, 2014). Slavery in the United States was the law of the land from 1641 to 1865 (Arenson, 2013). In 1863, *Proclamation 93* or the *Emancipation Proclamation* was

issued by then President Lincoln; this proclamation was an executive order that changed the legal status of African Americans from slaves to free (Arenson, 2013).

Once slavery ended and Black slaves were emancipated, a new set of laws were developed to continue the discriminatory practices against African Americans. The post-Civil War era was the setting for the creation of the *Jim Crow* laws, the name given to laws that enforced and promoted racial segregation and unjust practices, particularly in the South (Graff, 2016). These laws were officially enforced from 1865, the end of the reconstruction period, until the 1950s, which signified the beginning of the civil rights movement in the United States (Graff, 2016). These laws made it illegal for Blacks and Whites to intermarry, to share the same water fountain, to attend the same schools, to share the same bathroom, to live in the same community, and to be served in the same room of a restaurant (Graff, 2016). Black corpses were not allowed to be in the same hearse used by Whites or were Black people able to vote (Graff, 2016). Under Jim Crow, Blacks were lynched at alarming rates, often with Whites posing near the hanging corpses (Litwack, 2009). The treatment and perception of African Americans were that they were inferior because of the color of their skin (Litwack, 2009). This perception appeared to be the rationale for the oppression of African Americans, despite their legal status.

African Americans are considered a marginalized group in the United States. Marginalized populations are subjected to inequalities in society based on one (or more) social constructs (Williams, 2012). For example, African Americans are marginalized due to their race, women are marginalized due to their gender, and persons who identify

as LGBT are marginalized due to their sexual orientation. Williams (2012) stated racism is embedded in most institutions in America and institutionalized racism can be found in most social structures. These structures include medical, economic, educational, political, and religious practices and policies.

African Americans have spent over 200 years in a society that has oppressed them both socially and economically (Hines, 2016). The pursuit of education was one of the main tools used to provide financial advancement to the Black community. Jim Crow laws made it illegal to operate any school, college, or institution for both African Americans and Whites (Graff, 2011). For African Americans, the HBCU has been a direct path to education, especially at a time when Blacks were not permitted to share a classroom with their White peers (Albritton, 2012).

Segregation and the Educational System

African Americans were legally excluded from receiving an education in the United States for centuries. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 freeing slaves and giving them the rights afforded to Whites, African Americans were still denied the right to receive a formal education. In fact, in 1896 the United States Supreme Court maintained the practice of racial segregation in the case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (Hoffer, 2014). Although the original case involved the refusal of a Black train passenger to sit in the designated *Black only* section, it was a landmark case due to the fact that it upheld the premise of *separate but equal* and was used to keep schools segregated. In many states, the enforcement of Jim Crow laws meant it was illegal to operate any school, college, or institution where Blacks and Whites attended together (Malczewski, 2011). Separate but

equal was a misnomer. Black schools were not supported politically or financially. Whites received 95% of the monies, whereas Black schools received the remaining 5% (Miletsky, 2017). It was this continued disregard for the education of African Americans that made the HBCU instrumental in the education of Blacks in the United States.

HBCU Significance to/for African Americans

HBCUs have a long-standing history in the United States. The first HBCU was founded in 1837, prior to the end of the Civil War and it functioned as the only avenue to educate African Americans, as well as those who were in support of educating slaves and freed Blacks (Albritton, 2012). HBCUs were established after the end of the civil war with two exceptions: Cheyney University (1837) and Lincoln University (1856). The first two HBCUs were established in the north, specifically in the state of Pennsylvania. These HBCUs were created as a direct response to the condoned climate of discrimination and racism in the United States (Albritton, 2012). Slaves, freed Negros, and White sympathizers who supported the notion of equality and attempted to become educated were confronted with threats, physical violence, and even death (Bettez & Suggs, 2012). HBCUs have been defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 as "accredited institutions, established prior to 1964, whose primary mission is the education of Black Americans" (Higher Education Act of 1965, sec 1061, p 3).

The following are just a few of the HBCUs and their dates of establishment: Howard University (1867) – Washington, D.C.; Simmons College of Kentucky (1879) – Kentucky; Elizabeth City University (1891) – North Carolina; Fort Valley State (1895) – Georgia; Southwestern Christian College (1948) – Texas; and Mississippi Valley State

(1950) – Mississippi. The purpose of the HBCU was threefold: to provide education to African Americans who were newly freed, to provide a culturally relevant and specific educational experience, and to strengthen the African American community and the United States by participating in the development of African American leaders (Owens, Shelton, Bloom, & Cavil, 2012).

HBCUs have their roots in resistance, empowerment, and the social uplifting of African Americans (Albritton, 2012). Initial students attending an HBCU were charged with acquiring the skills needed to fight for justice and equality in an era that was laden with discrimination and prejudice. HBCUs continue to produce major contributors and noted African American scientists and scholars. HBCUs produced noted political activists. The following activists attended HBCUs: Booker T. Washington (Hampton); Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Morehouse); Langston Hughes (Lincoln); Thurgood Marshall (Lincoln & Howard); and Nikki Giovanni (Fisk). These institutions have also been responsible for over 40% of the degrees awarded to African Americans in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Owens, Shelton, Bloom, & Cavil, 2012).

For over 179 years, African American parents have encouraged their children to attend HBCUs. Parents send their children to these cultural resources as a way to reduce and cope with the effects of racism (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Van Camp et al. (2010) conducted a study to assess the reasons for African Americans to choose an HBCU. The study examined the reasons 167 undergraduates chose to attend their HBCU. A factor analysis identified two reasons for the choice of an HBCU; both were related to race.

Students reported that they wanted to engage in race-related behavior, such as participation in a social organization and they were attracted to the race-focused intention of the HBCU (Van Camp et al., 2010). African American students at HBCUs have more access to African American professional role models than their peers at PWI (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009). This connection increases the sense of belonging for students on HBCU campuses.

The issue of belonging and acceptance was at the root of the creation of the HBCU. Studies show that HBCUs provide racial socialization which acts as a buffer against racial experiences (Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; Crewe, 2017; Van Camp et al, 2009). African Americans students reported a significant benefit from attending a university in which they were not the minority (Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). Early HBCU students were provided with the tools to help build and sustain African American communities. A focus on earning potential, land and home ownership, education, and the creation of self-sustaining financial institutions were just some of the benefits afforded African Americans students who attended HBCUs (Gallo & Davis, 2008). In addition, racial identity and Afrocentric worldview have been shown to have racial-ethnic protective factors (Jones & Neblett, 2016). African American students who attend HBCUs have a stronger sense of belonging and connectedness compared to the counterparts who attend PWIs (Mwangi, 2016).

HBCUs strive to provide students with valuable relationships, culturally relevant support systems, and an overall sense of being valued and accepted. Researchers have provided evidence that the sense of belonging and acceptance in college is associated

with positive outcomes, both academically and psychologically (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008). Affirmation of the African American racial identity and both meeting and addressing the needs of marginal populations has been the mission of the HBCU. HBCUs create safe spaces by exposing students to constant micro-affirmations that originate from relationships with peers, faculty, and alumni. This experience can be in direct contrast to that experienced by African American students who attend PWIs (Darrell, Littlefield, & Washington, 2016). The legacy of educating historically marginalized students includes those students who are from lower socio-economical communities. Many institutions of higher learning view these factors as less than desirable traits when recruiting potential students (Gasman, 2011). One of the contributions to the HBCUs' success with African American students includes transforming the classroom into a supportive and accepting academic environment (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). This environment increases the students' perceptions of being able to achieve academic success.

I chose HBCUs for this study due to their historical significance and specific goal to educate African Americans (Albritton, 2012). Arum and Roska (2011) acknowledged the struggle for success faced by all college students. This struggle is experienced by every race and ethnicity regardless of college or university (Tinto, 2012). For African American students the struggle for success is particularly challenging and the race-based success margin is still extreme (Harper, 2013; Jett, 2013). Equal access to institutions of higher learning, overall development while in college, and subsequent graduation are just a few of the challenges noted by researchers (Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012).

From their inception, HBCUs educated poor White students who were not given the opportunity to go to schools with their more affluent peers as well as freed Blacks, and refugees (Palmer, 2010). Continuing with this notion HBCUs continue to provide education to African Americans and others who have been historically underrepresented such as students who are from low-income families and those who are the first-generation college students. To date, the primary mission of HBCUs is to provide education for African Americans and other historically marginalized populations regardless of racial or ethnic origins (Bettez & Suggs, 2012).

Lesbian Identity

The United States is a predominately heterosexual society. Institutions such as religion, education, employment, and family tend to perpetuate the patriarchal and heterosexual philosophy. The assumption of heterosexuality as the norm allows lesbians to be placed in a category that makes them targets for prejudice, discrimination, and oppression due to their identification with a group considered to be a sexual minority. In many ways, the lives of lesbians parallel those of heterosexual women. While both live in a sexist society, lesbians also have to navigate institutionalized heterosexualism and homophobia (Barnard, 2009). The male-dominated structure of the United States assumes that heterosexuality is the norm; therefore, lesbians are considered a marginalized group because of their noncompliance with the expectations of society (Duffy, 2011). Often viewed as the last acceptable prejudice, persons who identify as sexual minorities have historically been subjected to blatant discrimination (Gerdo, 2006). Whereas many of the laws that were viewed as discriminatory towards women,

racial minorities, people with disabilities and older persons have long since been repealed, it was not until 2015 that the Supreme Court nullified the law banning the recognition of same-sex marriages. The unique experiences of those who identify as lesbian must be understood by counselors and counselor educators.

Lesbians have higher instances of mental disorders and distress than those who identify as heterosexual (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003). The exposure to direct or indirect prejudice can increase the stressors for women who identify as lesbians. Much of the literature related to the LGBT community has been dedicated to the experiences of White gay males. The research focused on the effects of discrimination and oppression of sexual minorities rarely distinguished among lesbians, gay males, and bisexual individuals (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, West, & McCabe, 2014). For those who identify with more than one marginalized group, the levels of mental distress are multiplied.

Dual Identity of African American LGBT

My review of the literature suggested that racial and ethnic minority members have higher levels of depression and overall stress (Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei, 2012). Individuals who identify with the LGBT community also have higher rates of mental health distress and depression than their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; Marshall et al, 2011). The literature offers limited research on the lived experiences of individuals who identify as African American and LGBT. Counselors must be careful not to assume that the experiences of White LGBT individuals will automatically translate directly to those who identify with a racial-ethnic minority group (Santos & Van Daalen, 2016).

There have been studies that suggest that African Americans have a more negative view of the LGBT community than other ethnic groups (Morrison, 2013). This sentiment against the LGBT community may have its roots in the Black community's tie to religion (Ledet, 2017). Religion, religious faith, and the religious community are important to the African American community. For centuries the church has been the cornerstone of the African American culture in this country (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2012). Negative messages about same-sex relationships often dictate the choice of African American LGBT individuals to hide their sexual orientation from family and friends. The negative messages can, in turn, create turmoil within the LGBT individual, which contributes to depression, isolation, and internalized homonegativity (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). In one study, 787 LGBT individuals and 492 individuals who identified as heterosexual completed the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI). The BSI was designed to assess mental health problems. A linear progression was conducted with sexual identity as the predictor for mental health issues. The results indicated that symptoms related to higher levels of mental health distress were positively associated with identity with the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community (Sattler, Zeyen, & Christiansen, 2017). This study is relevant as it relates to the unique experiences of identifying with a marginalized group.

Kertzner, Myer, Frost, and Stirratt (2009) hypothesized that the added status of being an ethnic minority is associated with an increase in depression and a decrease in well-being in 396 participants who self-identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB). Transgender individuals were not included in the study. The researchers also

hypothesized that an individual's positive perception of their sexual identity reduces stress levels. The participants were diverse with 67 LGB White men, 67 LGB White women, 67 LGB African American men, 64 LGB African American women, 64 LGB Latino men, and 67 LGB Latina women. A multiple regression analysis was used, and the researchers proved their hypothesis. The results supported the researchers' original hypotheses. Positive self-identity reduced stress and depression. This research applies to my study as it highlights the importance of a positive self-identity. Positive self-identity can reduce levels of stress, which can in turn decrease symptoms of depression and mental distress as well as increase feelings of belonging and self-worth (Kertzner et al., 2009).

African Americans who are also members of the LGBT community may face dual levels of discrimination and maltreatment that contribute to higher levels of stress, depression, and emotional distress (Kertzner et al., 2009). Studies that examined the experiences of LGBT persons of color usually compare one ethnic group to another (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Huang et al., 2010). Huang et al. (2010) stated that rarely is the focus solely on the examination of African American LGBT individuals. For Black LGBT people, negotiating dual identities becomes a way of life. For example, Hunter (2010) reported that many African American gay male clients who enter into therapy often try to understand which, if any identity comes first, Black or gay. Binary options like this can be disempowering (Walker, 2008). Individuals who identify with more than one marginalized identity can feel as if their identities are being pitted against

each other for significance. The continual negotiation of multiple identities can lead to increased levels of mental distress (Hunter, 2010).

Bartone (2017) examined the experiences of five African American gay males, ages 19-24. A qualitative methodology, specifically a narrative inquiry, was chosen in order to explore the lived experiences of the participants. The participants each met on three separate occasions and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each individual. All participants identified as gay and Black/African American. Critical race and intersectionality theories were used to analyze and interpret the data. Five themes were identified. The first was *racial shelving* which is in mostly Black environments, the person's race is put on a *shelf* and their sexual identity is highlighted. In one case, the participant reported that he was told "nigga, you are not Black, you're gay" (Bartone, 2017, p. 322). The second was *thick skin*, which is the ability to confront and conquer challenges based on experiences of past challenges. The third was *self-determination* which is taking the initiative to seek relationships and information about one's sexuality. The fourth was *defying/transcending stereotypes* which is the refusal to adhere to accounts of African American men. The fifth was *an experiential revolution* which is the knowledge that experience can translate into personal growth. The participants lived experiences described how each came to secure acceptance and love for their dual identities (Bartone, 2017). This work was salient to my study in that it speaks to the way individuals with more than one identity navigates this unique experience.

Triple Identity of African American Lesbians

African American lesbians face a form of triple jeopardy due to their identification with three marginalized groups. African American lesbians' experiences can be found at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (Walsh, 2016). There is little known about this specific population as much of the race-related research focuses on heterosexual African Americans (Henry et al., 2011). African American lesbians are faced with oppression due to their race, gender, and sexual orientation (Calabrese, Meyer, Overstreet, Haile, & Hansen, 2015). They experience oppression from the dominant culture due to their race, gender, and sexual orientation. They also experience oppression from their racial community based on their sexual orientation. In addition, as women, they face social stigmas due to their gender in both the Black and LGBT communities (Jones, Cross, & DeFour, 2007). Being an African American lesbian is often equated with the rejection of the Black man. Another stigma is that some believe that in a relationship between two women, one must act in the role of *man* in the relationship (Walker, Golub, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2012). In general, the lesbian identity is viewed as a negative reflection on the Black community as a whole. The challenge of dealing with racism, sexism, and homophobia is worth empirical attention in order to understand the experiences of the community.

Homophobia has been defined as the fear of homosexuality (Collins, 2000). Homophobia creates a social system that ostracizes, demonizes, and stigmatizes any form of identity, relationship, and community that does not adhere to the heterosexual standards. Like the *isms,* homophobia can be obvious or subtle, and even unintentional

(Walsh, 2016). As with their gay, bisexual, transgender counterparts, African American lesbians face social isolation, verbal assaults, and physical violence (Hill, 2013). Furthermore, African American lesbians are prone to experience internalized homonegativity. Whicker, de St. Aubin, and Skervenc (2017) defined internalized homonegativity as the endorsement by a lesbian (or any individual who identifies as a sexual minority) of the negative attitudes and feelings from the overall society of towards herself. Due to their identification as Black, lesbian, and female, African American lesbians may feel as if they had to choose among their LGBT identity, their gender, and their racial identity as a Black person.

One study that elucidates the lived experiences of 12 African American lesbians focused on the experience of Black lesbians who lived in the Southern states, so all participants lived in the state of Florida (Walsh, 2016). Each participant was recruited by a gatekeeper, an African American lesbian, who also resided in Florida. Researchers conducted 30 to 90-minute semi structured interviews with each participant. A constructivist perspective in grounded theory was used to analyze the data. The results produced themes that spotlighted the challenges participants had with homophobia in the African American community in general and specifically in the Black church (Walsh, 2013). For the purposes of the study the Black church was defined as a "cultural experience involving ethnicity (African American), region (having had some orientation to the South), socioeconomic status (working class), and sociopolitical ideology (conservative)" (Schulte & Battle, 2004, p. 130). The major themes that evolved from the study acknowledged that although the exact experiences are different, all agreed on

the importance of the Black Church to the African American community. This is the case even for those who do not attend regularly or at all. The common message received by the participants from the church was that homosexuality is evil and it is sin. Another theme was the consensus that the experiences of homophobia were more intense within the African American community compared to the White community (Walsh, 2017). This study was relevant to my study as the participants shared their experiences as lesbians as it relates to the African American community. It also used a qualitative method which produced several common themes.

The above findings come in the context of yet another study (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003). Calabrese et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to identify the difference in frequency of discrimination outcomes by race among lesbian women and gender among African American sexual minorities. The researchers hypothesized that African American lesbians face discrimination at higher frequencies than White lesbians and African American gay men. There were 198 participants (67 White lesbians, 67 gay Black men, and 67 Black lesbians) in the study. An ANCOVA was utilized to assess between-group differences in the frequency of discrimination. The hypothesis was proven that Black lesbians experienced discrimination at a greater frequency than White lesbians and Black gay men. Thus, this research study supports the need for an increase in the literature as it relates to the unique experiences of African American lesbians. My study served to address the scarcity of empirical inquiries.

Research examining the relationship of oppression among lesbians has mainly utilized White sample populations. When individuals with multiple identities were

studied, usually, there is only one form of oppression examined as the only source or the most important source of psychological distress (Moradi & Subich, 2003). Szymanski and Meyer (2008) conducted one of the few studies examining the relationship between the experiences of racism and heterosexism of African American lesbians and bisexual women. Ninety-one African American women (85% who identified as lesbian, 11% who identified as bisexual, and 4% who reported being not sure) participated in a survey. The results indicated that the frequency of racism and heterosexism are related to greater psychological distress for African American lesbian and bisexual women than for their Caucasian counterparts. These results support the need for research that could aid counselors and counselor educators in their work with African American lesbians.

Young African American lesbians are also impacted by their triple identity as African American, lesbian, and female. Reed and Valenti (2012) explored the experiences of 15 African American lesbians, ages 16-24. Consent was provided for all participants under the age of 18. Semi structured interviews were conducted in a community-based center. Each participant was interviewed for 60 to 115 minutes and each was given $25 as compensation for their participation in the study. The participants discussed their experience with heterosexism, racism, and homophobia. Results suggested that all of the participants had many unwelcomed experiences of prejudice from family, friends, society at large, and within the lesbian community (Reed & Valenti, 2012). Participants reported trying to hide their sexual orientation or they minimized their sexuality. Reed and Valenti stated that the participants tended to rely on their lesbian *families* and social support from within the lesbian community to mitigate

prejudice and discrimination. Lesbian families are members of the lesbian community that serve as mentors, *mothers, fathers, and godmothers*, to other African American lesbians (Reed & Valenti, 2012).

African American lesbians' experiences with sexism occur both in the dominant culture and within the African American culture. Sexism has been historically fueled and maintained by the status quo and this allows for the continuation of male privilege and the oppression of those whose lives do not conform to the dominant culture (Hill, 2013).

The stress of identifying with a minority group can attribute to greater instances of mental health issues. One of the contributing factors to an increase in mental health issues is the social stigma regarding the LGBT community (Meyer, Schwartz, & Frost, 2008). Experiences with prejudice, the anticipation of rejection from loved ones and society in general, and the constant feeling of having to hide their sexuality all increase the likelihood that LGBT individuals experience higher levels of mental distress than their heterosexual counterparts (Kuyper & Fokkema, 2011).

Intersecting Identities

Twenty years ago, researchers began to study socially constructed identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Cross (1995) focused on racial identity; McCarn and Fassinger (1996) highlighted sexual identity; while O'Neil, Egan, Owen, and Murry (1993) concentrated on gender identity. The theoretical foundation for the concept of *intersectionality* has its roots in the Black feminist movement. In the early 1970s, Black feminists addressed the lack of recognition of race and social class by the overall feminist movement. Crenshaw (1989) has been credited with the introduction of the term

intersectionality to describe the intertwined experiences and challenges of women of color, who participated in feminist and antiracist causes. African American women were drawn to the social issues related to gender and class, however alone, neither movement addressed the specific needs of the Black woman. The need for empirical information related to persons with more than one marginalized identity prompted additional research on the intersection of dual identities. McCall (2005) suggested that intersectionality is one of the most important theoretical contributions to women's studies. Studies have indicated that women report higher instances of anxiety and mood disorders than men (Rodgers, 2017). Unlike their Caucasian counterparts, African Americans have been found to experience higher instances of negative self-images (Hughes et al., 2015). For sexual minorities, the fear of being outed or rejected can be associated with an increase in depressive symptoms up to and including suicidal ideations (Dibble, Eliason, & Crawford, 2012). For African American lesbians, being buried under a triple layer of oppression can create a unique experience that does not equate with the experiences of Africans Americans, sexual minorities, or women. (Bowleg, 2008).

Intersectionality acknowledges the inherent reciprocal relationships among various social identities (Shield, 2008). Socially constructed identities are not stagnant; they are fluid and often depend on social location. On HBCU campuses the predominant social identity is African American. Heterosexuality would also be the norm, which would mean African Americans who identify as lesbians would become a marginalized group. Due to their sexual orientation, African American lesbians may be made to feel invisible on HBCU campuses or if visible they might be a victim of prejudice in the form

of verbal and physical assaults. This creates power relations that mirror the overall society. According to Shields (2008), intersectionality creates both opportunity and oppression. In one social setting, an individual may have an advantage while simultaneously having a disadvantage in another setting. For example, White lesbians might be at a disadvantage due to noncompliance with heterosexual norms, while simultaneously enjoying racial advantages and privilege relative to lesbians from minority backgrounds (Shield, 2008).

Intersectionality can be associated with both the individual and socio-structural levels (Warner & Shields, 2013). On the individual level, intersectionality can affect the person's experience in her own social domain. At the socio-structural level, the person's resources, needs, and status can be an advantage, or it could be oppressive (Warner & Shields, 2013). At its core, intersectionality encompasses the reality that systems of inequality are related and depend on each other (Choo & Ferree, 2010). The early formation of intersectionality focused on the experiences of individuals with multiple subordinate statuses, for example, the experiences of and the specific disadvantages for African American women (Crenshaw, 1991). Cross (1990) was critical of this early formation of intersectionality as it was thought that the attempt to identify who is most disadvantaged can nullify the very nature of privilege and oppression.

The current use of intersectionality can be applied to all identities. Furthermore, it emphasizes that no single intersectional position experiences privilege or oppression (Choo & Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005). Systems of inequality create unique experiences. As framework intersectionality serves as a reminder that any identity, such as sexual

orientation, must include an understanding of the ways that other identities (race and gender) interact with and change the experience of the sexual orientation (Syed, 2010). Calling attention to the interaction of multiple systems of inequality acknowledges the social justice problems that are continuously overlooked or perceived as equal (Warner & Shields, 2013). In addition, the interconnectedness both among and within systems of oppression such as gender, race, and sexual orientation can call attention to the possible collaboration between race, gender, and sexuality-based social justice movements. Another reason to highlight the use of an intersectional perspective is the potential to discontinue the use of terms like *people of color* since terms like this tend to deemphasize crucial differences within marginalized groups (Warner & Shields, 2013).

Parent, DeBlaere, and Moradi (2013) emphasized the need for empirical attention to be given to the experience of individuals with multiple marginalized identities. Experiences related to race, gender, and sexual orientation have been studied, however, significantly less attention has been given to the combination of identities (Bowleg, 2008). Scholars have the responsibility to provide a better understanding of the experiences of individuals who identify with three (or more) marginalized identities in a way that does not simplify their experiences. There are two main tenets to the complexities of multiple marginalized identities. The use of historical references is instrumental to this study and although dated, this research demonstrates the progression of understanding related to the intersectionality of socially constructed identities. Vernon (1999) argued, "One plus one does not equal two oppressions." In other words, a person does not experience one form of oppression (racism) in one setting and another form

(homophobia) in another. Reynolds and Pope (1991) did not totally agree with this concept arguing that an African American lesbian at an HBCU more than likely would not experience racism but could in the same setting experience homophobia due to her sexual orientation.

Understanding one marginalized experience (gender) does not necessarily transfer into an understanding of another (racism). For example, a White woman might understand the experience of oppression due to gender, but this does not automatically translate into an understanding of the experience of her African American counterpart. The historical significance of slavery combined with gender oppression makes the experiences of the African American lesbian in the United States unique (Miller, 2011). Counselors are obligated to understand issues related to diversity and this includes understanding the impact of having multiple marginalized experiences and how these identities shape experiences. Jones and McEwen (2000) conducted a qualitative study with 10 undergraduate women at an east coast university focused on the self-perceived identities of the participants and the influence of multiple dimensions on their sense of self. The participants ranged in age from 20-24 and were from diverse backgrounds. Five of the participants were White, two were African American, one identified as African, one as Sri Lankan, and one as Asian. A purposeful sample was used to obtain the first five participants and a snowball sampling method was used to secure the remaining participants. Researchers used in-depth, open-ended interviews ranging in length from 30-75 minutes. The participants provided descriptions and perceptions of the interrelations of social and personal identities. The themes that emerged were *ways that*

race matters, *participants' current experiences, multiple layers of identity*, and *the intertwining of gender* (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Implications included the development of an appropriate methodological approach for empirical studies on intersectionality.

Ferguson (1995) conducted a quantitative study of 181 African American lesbians to examine the relationship between race, gender, sexual orientation, and self-esteem. The findings suggested that the participants retained some connection with all three identities and with each community, however, the degrees vary. Understanding how individuals from marginalized populations experience the transition into adulthood, including the college experience, is crucial for establishing supports and policy to increase awareness of the unique issues facing this population. Although this study is dated, it was included to provide an example of the sparseness of the literature on African American lesbians' experiences.

College

Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, and Bryant, (2014) suggested that most high school students begin their college experience shortly after their graduation. Students anticipate the change in academic requirements; however, the adjustment to college is more complicated than negotiating the academic requirements (Sharma, 2012). The college experience introduces students to new people, concepts, values, and a new found freedom that comes with the realization that they are actually on their own (Pleitz, MacDougall, Terry, Buckley, & Campbell, 2015). Young adults have to adjust to the change in their environments. Students transition from the familiarity of their former living conditions to the unknown college residential setting.

The college experience can be perceived as a major milestone for young adults. Given that many young people enter college directly after high school, the college experience can be viewed as a launching point into adulthood (Conley et al., 2014). Erickson (1968) addressed the psychosocial development of young adults who are leaving the ego-identity vs role confusion stage and entering the intimacy vs isolations stage. The former stage ends at 18 and the latter begins directly after (Erickson, 1968). As noted by Tesch and Whitbiourne (1982) the main tasks of the two previously mentioned developmental stages are the formation of personal identity and the development of close relationships. Young people are negotiating this developmental change with the newness of the college experience. Experiences, like living away from home, negotiating schedules, and developing relationships, are crucial to the college experience. The importance of the college experience cannot be underestimated. Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, and Kjellgren (2008) reported that the transition to college and subsequent experiences are significant as a successful transition can have an impact on future success. Yau, Sun, and Cheng (2012) conducted a study with 265 college students from five Hong Kong universities to determine the important factors for a positive college experience. The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between the following: social and academic adjustment; psychological and academic adjustment; and social and psychological adjustment (Yau et al., 2012). This was relevant to my study due to the findings related to the importance of social, academic, and psychological adjustment for college students.

The change in familiar surroundings has been associated with mental distress for first-year students. Luadi and Van Schalkwyk (2014) conducted a quantitative study with 210 students who lived in campus housing. The study examined the connection between perceived university support and the academic, social, and psychological adjustment of students. Results indicated that the students' perceptions of university support correlated with their level of homesickness (academic adjustment; social adjustment; and psychological adjustment. This was relevant due to the indications for an increase of effective adjustment to programs to meet the social, psychological, and academic adjustment of students in higher education.

Awang, Kutty, and Ahmad (2014) conducted a qualitative study focused on the significance of social support on students' well-being. The authors explored 16 first-year college students' ability to adjust to the college environment through the use of social support. Participants were interviewed twice via a semi-structured format, once during the first semester and once during their second semester. The positive adjustment was linked to social support. Social support included socio-educational support, peer attachment, mentoring, and positive adaptation to university culture (Awand et al., 2014).

Peer attachment usually begins with the experience of living with a roommate in campus housing. Erickson's (1968) stages of development address the importance of a young adult's ability to form healthy relationships. These relationships are crucial to the psychological development of young people (Erb, Renshaw, Short, & Pollard, 2014). Campus housing connects students with others, which provide a greater opportunity for social involvement (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011). Roommates, for example, usually

are not chosen by students. This is usually the first non-familiar individual with whom the student lives. The roommate relationship offers the young adult the opportunity not only to share space but to negotiate newly forming personal attributes (Erb et al., 2014). These personal attributes include but are not limited to teamwork, flexibility, communication, and the ability to compromise. These attributes will benefit the student who is attempting to adjust to the campus environment.

For college students, it is crucial that they adjust to the social culture of their college. Learning to manage their emotions and then managing to express those feelings appropriately is considered a major developmental task (Sharma, 2012). For example, students who live on campus and are experiencing issues or have concerns about their living situation are encouraged to speak to their resident advisor (Porter & Newman, 2016). Managing the relationship with college roommates is only one aspect of integrating into the social climate of college.

Social organizations on college campuses are another manner of integrating students into the social climate of college. For examples, Greek sororities and fraternities are social organizations that have longstanding traditions in colleges and universities (Routon & Walker, 2016). Studies have shown that the social connections developed in a Greek organization can last a lifetime and add to the overall satisfaction and success during the college years (Walker, Martin, & Hussey, 2015). Many students attempt to join Greek organizations with the hope that the coveted affiliation will lead to greater access to social support and potential relationships (Torbenson & Park, 2009). Atkinson, Dean, and Espino (2010) conducted a qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of

persons who were associated with a Greek organization. Five participants (two males and three females) discussed their experiences with Greek organizations. The participants reported that their initial motivation for joining the Greek organization was to develop significant relationships (Atkinson et al., 2010). Members of Greek organizations reported that the relationships developed in these sororities and fraternities were instrumental when it came to fostering personal growth and development (Torbenson & Park, 2009). College is when young adults gain a sense of self-definition, self-acceptance, considerations of identity additives, and confidence in their future (Waterman, 1982). The success of the adjustment often relies heavily on social support. Students' ability to form meaningful relationships with other students leads to gains in multiple dimensions of psychological well-being, including environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Bowman, 2010).

Research related to college diversity has been historically focused on issues involving race relations (Chang, 1999; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Lige, Peteet, & Brown, 2017). Individuals who identify with at least one marginalized identity are more likely to struggle with aspects of the transition into adulthood. The lack of information regarding the lived experiences of persons with multiple marginalized identities can be a factor in why this population is underserved and misrepresented.

Experiences of African American LGBTs at HBCUs

Despite the diversity within the African American culture, Blacks in America have been undeniably tied together due to their African heritage, the impact of slavery, and the ongoing exposure and involuntary involvement with racism and discrimination

(Hill, 2013). The undeniable tie can be observed in the interactions of most of the African American students on an HBCU college campus. HBCUs were established to provide a welcoming, safe environment for African Americans, while at the same time providing a high level of education in the United States at a time when other institutions denied access (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Since their inception, HBCUs have had a significant role in the African American community and almost 170 years later, they remain a crucial resource for African Americans and other minorities. Much has gone into creating an atmosphere at HBCUs that is safe and welcoming to Black students (Albritton, 2012). Although the HBCU may be equipped to deal with racial discrimination, other individuals who identify with multiple marginalized identities may be open to higher rates of mental and physical distress due to their HBCU experience (Jackson, Williams, & Vanderweele, 2016).

Two of the groups most targeted for research related to college experiences of minorities have concentrated both on the African American and the LGBT experiences (Henry et al., 2011). Most of the literature separates those experiences and when they are combined, the setting is, more often than not, at a PWI (Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007). While there are some similarities in the college experiences of LGBT and non-LGBT students, there are several noted differences. Both groups have to learn to navigate their new surroundings and academic expectations, however, LGBT students have to deal with issues like homophobia. A study examined the experiences of 1,669 self-identified LGBT students at various colleges across the United States. Rankin (2003) reported that LGBT students found the college environment less welcoming than

their heterosexual peers. LGBT students reported the following negative experiences: harassment (36%), demeaning comments (89%), receiving threats (39%), and incidents of anti-LGBT graffiti (39%). In addition, 38% of the participants felt it was necessary to conceal their sexual orientation. This study, although dated, highlights the additional challenges for LGBT college students. In a more recent study, Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, and Hope (2013) conducted a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of the college climate by sexual minorities. Seventy-five students were given a 58-item survey and the results indicated that 53% experienced unfair treatment by other students, 38% had experienced harassment, and 26% considered leaving school. This study indicates that although there have been some improvements, there is still much work to be done to create inclusive college campus environments.

LGBT college students experience discrimination across many venues on campus. They experience prejudice in the residence halls, the classroom, and other social settings (Evans & Broido, 1999). In a study of LGBT college students' perceptions of the college climate, Rankin et al. (2010) found that LGBT students continue to report the following: being harassed on campus due to their identity as an LGBT person (25%); being uncomfortable on campus (30%); and contemplating dropping out of college altogether (30%).

The HBCU experiences of African Americans who also identify as LGBT are usually very different than the heterosexual students. HBCU studies have asserted that the HBCU campus fosters environments that allow students to integrate successfully into the academic and social aspects of college life through faculty contact, leadership

opportunities (both on and off campus), and positive peer interactions (Van Camp et al., 2009). However, HBCU leaders have not been as aggressive when addressing inequality as it relates to the LGBT student experience. Historically, there have been very limited opportunities for the creation and support of LGBT student organizations or university-sponsored LGBT events. Due to the HBCU climate, many LGBT students feel compelled to suppress their sexual orientations (Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2015). The perceived negative atmosphere of the HBCU may have its roots in the institution's creation. Many HBCUs were established by a variety of religious organizations. The Presbyterian, Catholic, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and the Baptist Churches are just a few examples of those founding religious organizations. The leaders of these churches often condemned LGBT persons as sinful and immoral and have openly discouraged any display of non-heterosexual behaviors (Valera & Taylor, 2011).

Greek Organizations are equally as important to the college on the HBCU campuses as they are at the PWIs. Atkinson, Dean, and Esposito (2010) argued that the social and personal connections made within a Greek fraternity or sorority not only add to students' overall satisfaction with their college experience but the affiliations can lead to long term bonds of friendship and support. For an LGBT student, attempting to join a Greek organization could lead to instances of rejection and humiliation. Stereotypes within the Greek organizations regarding the LGBT community often fuel the negative views toward the LGBT community and potential LGBT pledges (Worthen, 2014). Greek organizations typically adhere to heterosexual, sexist expectations of society.

Weltzer (2012) conducted a study to explore the lived experiences of LGBT students who joined a Greek sorority or fraternity at a small Midwestern university. A snowballing sampling method was used in order to secure the 11 LGBT student participants who were also members of sororities and fraternities on campus. The researcher explored the lived experiences of the participants through interviews. Each interview lasted no more than an hour and all interviews were audio recorded to ensure that the researcher captured the participants' every word. There were several themes that emerged from the data. Themes included the impact of sexual orientation on the decision to join the Greek organization and the gender norms and perception of sexuality within the Greek organizations (Weltzer, 2012). Despite the positive experiences, participants reported a general atmosphere of homophobia which left them with a negative perception of Greek organizations (Weltzer, 2012).

Empirical inquiries that specifically seek to examine the experiences of LGBT students who attend an HBCU are limited. Most of the research related to the LGBT student experience at HBCUs has focused on the experiences of African American gay and bisexual males (Henry et al., 2011). Research indicated that the experiences of LGBT HBCU students are complex due to their multiple identities (Ford III, 2015). While there are those who may persist in the unfriendly atmosphere, other LGBT students submit to the verbal and physical assaults against them. Much of the research related to the LGBT experience focus on the gay male experience.

Ford (2015) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study examining the lived experiences of African American gay male students at an HBCU. Participants were 10

self-described gay African American males who had obtained an undergraduate degree at an HBCU. A snowball sampling process was used to obtain the participants and there were a total of four HBCUs represented in the study. Each of the 10 participants was interviewed individually on 10 separate occasions; each interview lasted approximately a half hour. Data generated from the coding of the interviews produced four themes: Masculinity Revered, Effeminacy Othered described the celebration of hyper-masculinity and the banishment of effeminate men within the HBCU community; Valorizing Violence described the experiences that each participant had with homophobic harassment, with the effeminate males receiving the harassment more frequently; Gay Men Are Supposed to be White described the notion within the African American community and HBCUs that being gay is distinct to Caucasian males; and finally, Significance in Attending an HBCU described how the HBCU experience helped participants become more comfortable with their gay identity (Ford III, 2015). The researcher reported that one of the limitations of the study was the fact that only four HBCUs were represented in the study.

African American LGBT students are expected to conform to the cultural expectations regarding the Black male: they love sports, they do not cry, and they spend most of their male bonding talking about women (Harper & Gasman, 2008). Being silent and adjusting their LGBT identity in certain settings is one of the common experiences among LGBT students who attend HBCUs (Mobley & Johnson, 2008). Several HBCUs go so far as to create strict dress codes which parallel traditional gender norms (Harper & Gasman, 2008). For example, Morehouse College, which is an all-male HBCU located

in the South, established a dress policy which prohibited the wearing of female clothing. This policy allows the university to control the expression of gay and transgender students.

HBCUs have lagged behind PWIs in providing a safe, inclusive, and affirming environment for their LGBT students. There are 104 HBCUs in the United States and only 21% had some form of LGBT organization in 2017. Only three had formal LGBT resource centers and offices on the campuses (Lenning, 2017).

African American Lesbian Experience at HBCU

Women's studies, especially the studies on women of color, have made room for and continue to pave the way for empirical inquiries related to sexual studies. Black feminists have had the longest engagement with the issues of African American sexuality (Williams, 2013). Relatively little is known about the African American lesbian's experience at historically Black colleges and universities. As previously indicated, HBCUs have had a long investment in helping to shape African American intellectuals and have educated men and women who would later advance the plight of Black people in the United States (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). For African American women, this tasked called for them to be silent politically and to exude an air of respectability to counter the racist perception that African American women have excessive sexuality (Williams, 2013).

Consequently, the early years of the HBCU sheltered African American females, producing policies that were designed to control and maintain their behavior. It was believed that in order for Blacks to be viewed as decent and moral people, both the

HBCU community and the overall Black community favored the traditional heterosexual values of the dominant culture (Williams, 2013). African Americans had to conform to the rules if they had any chance of being treated with respect and equality. Thus began the tradition of obliterating the variety of African American expressions of sexuality.

HBCUs can be considered safe environments for African Americans; however, for African American lesbians the intersectionality of race, sexuality, gender, and homophobia within the African American community can make the HBCU environment anything but safe. The dominant culture of heterosexism makes the African American lesbian marginalized within her racial sanctuary. The culture of the HBCU is one that adheres to strong Christian values (Valera & Taylor, 2011). These values are perceived to be in contrast to those who identify with the LGBT community (Mobley & Johnson, 2008). African American lesbians who attend HBCU tend to be cautious about exposing their sexual identity (Patton & Simmons, 2008). African American lesbian students are wary about disclosing their sexuality for fear of isolation and potential negative consequences regarding their ultimate academic goal of graduating. Howard (2012) reported her experience at an HBCU as one of always negotiating her sexual identity. It was viewed as risky to be true to self and risk offending those who had the power to alter her plans for a doctoral degree (Howard, 2012).

Patton and Simmons (2008) examined the experiences of first-year HBCU African American students who identified as lesbians. The five participants self-identified as African American or Black, a woman, a lesbian, and each participated in a face to face interview with the researchers. The results of the data produced three themes

that encompassed the participants' experiences. Coming In referring to the participants' coming to terms with their internal comfort and their lesbian identity in response to or in spite of external resources (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Triple Consciousness referred to how participants juggled their three marginalized identities of being African American, a woman, and a lesbian. Lastly, Sister/Outsider referred to the participants' experiences on the HBCU campus (Patton & Simmons, 2008). The participants stated that their racial identity made them an insider on the HBCU campus, but their sexual identity as a lesbian made them an outsider at the time. The study highlighted the recognition participants had for their three oppressed identities.

African American lesbian students must determine if it is safe to reveal their sexual orientation. These students live with the potential risk of losing the support of the African American community both on and off campus due to their identification as lesbians (Woody, 2015). At any given HBCU, heterosexual cultural norms are the status quo. Therefore, it is not unusual for African American lesbian students to constantly have to monitor the expression of their sexual identity. Because of the homophobic climate of the HBCU campus, it is not uncommon for students who identify as lesbians to move between identities to fit the situation.

African American Lesbian Resilience

Despite the challenges that accompany the navigation of multiple identities, many African American lesbians have demonstrated resiliency. Resiliency may be defined as the process in which a positive modification occurs within substantially adverse conditions (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2012). The experiences of African American

lesbians can be considered adverse. As their lives reside at the intersection of sexual orientation, race, and gender discrimination, their experiences with social injustice happen at a higher rate (Patton & Simons, 2008). Despite the complex relationship with religion, many in the African American LGBT community view their ties to the Black Church as a significant contributor to resiliency (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2012). The development of social networks has also been found to have to be a substantial contributor to resiliency within the African American LGBT community (Bartone, 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

African Americans lesbians may need to seek therapeutic guidance to help navigate their way through the unique challenges of being identified with three marginalized groups. Counselors must increase their knowledge of multicultural issues related to gender, race, and sexual orientation. African American lesbian women often face a society that includes unjust discrimination and prejudice related to their race, gender, and sexual status (Bridges et al., 2003). Although African American lesbians have a variety of experiences based on their personalities, backgrounds, and overall environments, they are bound by one common thread. They live in a society that fuels racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The HBCU campus mirrors the larger African American community. The college experience can be viewed as a major milestone, a time of personal growth and stress (Turna-Musa & Wilson, 2006). HBCUs have a responsibility to address and change the homophobic atmosphere that traditionally is associated with HBCU campuses. The current literature is scarce as it relates to the experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. The literature is

limited and the few articles that exist use a sample population of first-year students (Howard, 2012; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Williams, 2013). The current study will help close the gap by providing data exploring the experiences of Africa American lesbians who attended an HBCU.

In the next chapter, I present the methodological strategy for this study. I discuss the implementation of the qualitative study to address the lack of empirical inquiry regarding the experiences of African American lesbians who attended HBCUs. I also present descriptions of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and issues of trustworthiness. I include a detailed discussion regarding the recruitment of participants, data collection, and a plan for the data analysis. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of African America lesbians who attended an HBCU. This study was approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB); the approval number is IRB # 01-10-19-0317165, and the expiration date is January 9, 2020**.** In this chapter, I describe my choice of methodology, which informed this study. I also explain the chosen research design, the data collection, and the method of analyzing the data. Finally, I provide information related to trustworthiness and other ethical concerns related to the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question I developed to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU? In this study, I employed the qualitative approach with a phenomenological focus. A qualitative method, like the chosen hermeneutic, phenomenological approach, was the most appropriate for this study because the goal was to describe the meaning of lived experiences related to a chosen phenomenon (see Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The existing literature was scarce regarding information on the lived experiences of individuals who identify with three marginalized communities (i.e., African American, lesbian, and female). The chosen research design is rooted in 20th century philosophy and calls for an exhaustive description of experience and subsequent analysis of the description of the experience (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This made a phenomenological design appropriate for this study.

In order to attain a better understanding of the experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU, I used a hermeneutic approach to interpret the data collected in this study. The hermeneutic approach allowed for the fusion of the perspective of the specific phenomenon as well as that of the researcher (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Hermeneutic researchers use an approach that does not stem from preconceived notions; rather, the aim is to get to the core of the participants' description of the experience as they have and are living it (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Furthermore, researchers using this approach are not allowed to put aside any personal history with the phenomenon being studied (Hein & Austin, 2001). Researchers are expected to acknowledge their own experiences, while at the same time assuring the participants' experiences remain the focus (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). For all of the aforementioned reasons, I chose the hermeneutic approach for this study.

Role of the Researcher

My role in the study was that of participant-observer. When conducting a qualitative study, the researcher is typically the key instrument used to observe, collect, and analyze the data collected (Postholm & Shorovset, 2013). In addition, I created the interview protocol that was used with each participant. There was no prior professional relationship between myself and any of the participants in the study, so there was no need to manage power relationships.

As an African American lesbian who attended an HBCU, I have a personal history of the phenomenon that was studied. I used my connections with the population to secure two gatekeepers who connected me to individuals who had experienced the

phenomenon being studied. Given the nature of the recruitment procedure, it was possible that potential participants would be known to me. To increase objectivity, none of the participants were classmates of mine when I attended an HBCU. Due to my familiarity with the phenomena being studied, potential researcher bias had to be controlled for. To control for potential bias, I transcribed each interview verbatim and I applied member checking throughout the interview to ensure that I was capturing the participants' experiences. I used other methods to avoid bias which are summarized in the subsection on trustworthiness found later in this chapter. I also relied on the feedback from my committee to address any suspected bias on my behalf.

Methodology

Participation Eligibility Criteria

The population for this study was six African American lesbians who attended an HBCU for at least 2 years. The participants in the study (a) identified as Black or African American (the terms are interchangeably used in this study), (b) were cisgender females, (c) identified as lesbian, and (d) attended an HBCU for at least 2 years. Participants completed a brief demographic form consisting of four identifying questions (see Appendix B). The participants did not include anyone who identified as a Caribbean American because of the historical significance of HBCUs to the descendants of slavery in the United States. All participants reported that they were at least 18 years of age or older.

Sample Size

Qualitative studies are concerned not with making generalized hypotheses but with making meaning (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, researchers tend to use a smaller sample size in qualitative studies than with other research methods (Crowther et al., 2017). When using a phenomenological approach, researchers seek participants who have experienced the specific phenomenon being studied (Crowther et al., 2017). In qualitative inquiries, sampling continues until data saturation is achieved (Creswell, 2013). There are several opinions regarding the number of participants needed for a phenomenological inquiry. Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggested that the sample size for a phenomenological study can range from one to 10, while Englander (2014) stated that five to 10 would be sufficient.

Adhering to the small sample size typical of the chosen approach and following the suggested range of sample sizes for phenomenological research, I used six participants in this study. I determined the sample size by saturation. Data saturation refers to the point when the collection of new data yields redundant information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I used as many participants as was needed to attain saturation. If saturation had not been achieved after six interviews, additional interviews would have been conducted. The goal was to gather sufficient data of the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU and to determine if there were any themes, differences, or similarities in the lived experiences of the participants. A small number of participants who had experienced the particular phenomenon being studied was sufficient to reach saturation (see Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

The procedures for securing participants for an empirical study depend on the specific approach chosen. The plan for this study was to gather data from individuals who had experienced a specific phenomenon; therefore, I recruited participants using a nonprobability sampling method. Specifically, participants were recruited using both criterion and snowball sampling methods. Rudestam and Newton (2015) described criterion sampling as the selection of participants who match the predetermined criteria of a study. Criterion sampling was the most appropriate method for identifying African American lesbians who attended an HBCU in this study. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit additional participants. Noy (2008) defined snowball sampling as the method chosen to provide the researcher with access to a population via a trusted gatekeeper. For this study, two trusted insiders (i.e., African American lesbians who attended HBCUs) distributed an information flyer to individuals who met the criteria for the study. The flyer included details regarding the study and my contact information. All interested and eligible persons contacted me directly. The flyer is included in Appendix A. This process suggests an element of repetitiveness as participants can then provide information to others who might be interested in participating in the study (Noy, 2008). The process was ultimately successful in obtaining eligible participants for the study.

Participation

There were six participants who were interviewed for the study. Four of the six participants initially contacted me by telephone, while the other two sent me an e-mail

indicating that they were interested in participating in the study. To be sure that the participants understood why they were chosen, I provided each with a four-question demographic form to be completed prior to their participation. Participants had to meet certain criteria (i.e., be at least 18, be a cisgender female, identify as African American and a lesbian, and had attended an HBCU for at least 2 years). All forms were completed and e-mailed back to me. Each of the eligible individuals who were willing to participate in the study was provided with a consent document. In the consent form, I clearly explained that all participation was voluntary and that the participants could leave the study at any time without consequence. The form detailed the reason for the study and provided the main research question that fueled the interview. The participants were aware that they would not receive monetary compensation for their involvement in the study.

Participants were also aware that they were expected to participate in at least one interview and that they would be notified should another interview be needed. The consent form included the potential benefits as well as the possible risk. The form also included a telephone number that they could call to access counseling services should it be needed due to their participation in the study. A copy of the consent form is located in Appendix C. All participants were aware of my role as collector, analyzer, and interpreter of all data collected.

Data Collection

The strength of qualitative research can be found in the use of the interview, which enables the researcher to conduct an in-depth investigation (Aborisade, 2013). The

interview is one of the most accepted methods of collecting data in a qualitative inquiry (van Manen, 2014). Different qualitative approaches use different types of interviews; the type of interview is determined by geographical considerations, the number of participants, and the number of interviews conducted (Aborisade, 2013).

Face-to-face interviews are the preferred method of collecting data; however, computer-assisted interviews were necessary for this study as scheduling and geographical distance became an issue. Over the years, the use of technological aides has infiltrated the research field. Social media outlets, like Facebook, and e-mailing have not only enabled researchers to reach a larger pool of potential participants, it has made it possible to conduct real-time visual interviews even when the researcher is not physically in the same location as the participant (Aborisade, 2013).

Prior to the interviews, I confirmed that each participant had the necessary capability to access and comfort to use the technological sources of communication. I asked the participants if they had the Zoom, Skype, or video phone feature. The use of audiovisual interviews via Zoom was instrumental in collecting data for this study. The participants were able to access Zoom either from a desktop or portable device. All six used a laptop, and each participant was sent the link to access the Zoom interview. Zoom has a recording feature; however, I used only audio recordings (not video) to capture the interviews. The video recording feature was suspended during the interviews.

I used the Sony ICD B600 for the audio recordings. The Device has up to 300 hours of recording time on the built-in 512MB digital voice recorder. The Sony ICD uses batteries and I made sure I had extra batteries to avoid any delays due to battery drainage.

The ICD-B600 enabled me to focus on the participant's experiences without being distracted by constantly taking notes or asking the participant to repeat herself (see Rudestam & Newton, 2015). This would have interrupted the natural flow of conversation and possibly the participant's train of thought. The participants were shown the recording device and were reminded of its purpose. All of the participants consented to the audio recording.

Before the start of each interview, I asked the participants if they had any questions or concerns. Once all questions (if any) were asked and answered, the interview began. In order to allow the participants to share their experiences, the interviews were semi structured. Semistructured interviews allowed questions to be asked that kept the focus on the research topic. An interview protocol was created in order to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions, in the same order. As part of the protocol, I also developed open-ended questions that enabled the participants to provide their own responses without direction or influence (see Creswell, 2013). The interview protocol used in this study is included in Appendix D.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU? I also used 12 subquestions to elicit a more detailed description of the participant's experiences if they were not addressed by the participants when responding to the main research question. The subquestions were as follows:

1. Please describe your experience and perceptions of being a lesbian and African American attending an HBCU; these experiences and thoughts can include, but are not limited to, discussions and encounters with friends, bystanders, peers, students, and university personnel.
2. What was your reason for attending an HBCU?
3. What years did you attend the HBCU?
4. Tell me about your perception of the environment on your HBCU campus?
5. How did you manage your identities while at the HBCU?
6. How would describe the impact of your attendance at an HBCU on your identity?
7. Where there any benefits or drawbacks to being an African American lesbian student attending an HBCU?
8. What, if anything, would have improved your experience at the HBCU?
9. How do you continue to manage your identities?
10. How has the very participation in this study impacted the reflection of your experiences?
11. Why did you participate in this study? What are you hoping to gain or contribute by participating?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

The participants were encouraged to supply any additional data that they felt would add to the expression of their experiences. Other forms include but were not limited to journals, drawings, and poems (Aborisade, 2013). No artifacts had to be

mailed. Each participant was interviewed once; the interview lasted approximately an hour. The participants were aware that an additional interview would occur if needed. All agreed to be interviewed at least twice. Additional interviews were not required. Two of the participants sent additional data via e-mail. After the initial interview, they thought of a few more comments they wanted to be included in their interview. At the end of each interview, a brief discussion was had to highlight the next steps for the study. Each participant was asked if they had any questions or concerns. The expectation was that the participants would not be harmed either physically or emotionally. All participants were provided with referrals for free or low-cost mental health services, should they require the services due to the participation in the study. All data was protected by encryption and were stored in a file accessible only to myself.

Analysis

In qualitative studies, analyzing the data can be challenging. Therefore, it is prudent for researchers to have a sequential method outlined in order to interpret the data in a manner that retains the authenticity of the participants' experiences (Giorgi, 2009). The analysis for this study began with the participant response to the main research question what are the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU? The analysis was driven by the participants' shared personal experiences, feelings, and reflections. Throughout each interview and after they answered each question, I would check with participants to make sure that I understood their experience. Although the interviews were recorded, researcher notes were taken at several points

throughout the interview and later analyzed. This helped me reflect on the process while giving the participants my undivided attention.

After completing each interview, I immediately transcribed the data with the use of my laptop and the recording device. The repetitive nature of verbatim transcription allowed me to increase my familiarity with the data. Each participant was e-mailed a summary of their transcription for review. This was done to ensure that I accurately captured the experiences. In three cases, participants added some more information that they thought about after the initial interview. All additional data were included in the final transcription. Once the transcriptions were complete, I read, and reread each line of each interview. Once I had a better understanding of the data, I was able to see similarities and differences in the participants' experiences. I initially used hand coding to break the data down into large descriptions and then into smaller chunks and eventually themes.

Hermeneutic phenomenology studies do not focus on predetermined expectations but on capturing the essence of the experiences of the participants (van Manen, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenological researchers ultimately use the data collected to highlight meanings within the phenomena, thus providing new understandings of the shared experience (Crowther et al., 2017). It is important to note that in order to properly interpret the context; hermeneutic researchers must be able to understand the context. NVivo was eventually used to provide more thorough and rigorous coding and interpretation assistance. I used the interpretive analysis. The interpretive analysis

involved another repetitive induction process (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The codes were analyzed for patterns, and then those patterns were organized into themes.

Data maintenance included storing the data in a file with a secure password for 5 years. To ensure confidentiality, the consent forms will be kept in a separate secured file. All data has been stored in a secure location.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a study alludes to the level of confidence in the data, methods, and interpretation of the study (Pilot & Beck, 2014). Due to its subjective nature, qualitative studies have been subjected to a higher level of scrutiny. Issues related to credibility, bias, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of a study must be consistent and transparent for a study to be considered trustworthy.

Credibility

Credibility or confidence in the findings is one of the most important criteria of an empirical inquiry (Polit & Beck, 2014). Issues of credibility were addressed via clarifying the bias I brought to the study, peer-debriefing, the use of rich, thick description, and member checking. Credibility was also established by sharing any flaws of the study, for example, the subjective nature of qualitative inquiries.

Bias

The credibility of the researcher is extremely important in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). As the researcher, I was the key instrument that collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data. Given the reality that researchers come to the research process with their own worldview and perceptions, it is important that safeguards be put in place

to limit researcher bias. One method to limit researcher bias is for the researcher to disclose any personal and professional information related to the study (Shenton, 2004). I have personal experience relevant to the phenomenon being studied. I am an African American female who identifies as a lesbian and I attended an HBCU. I employed safeguards to limit the influence my experiences had on this study. To further limit any bias, I engaged in self-reflection and provided information that explained how my experience could have influenced the interpretation of the data (Aborisade, 2013). Ultimately, I avoided imposing my own perception and believed in the data.

Discuss your research method here. Refer to the appropriate dissertation checklist for guidance on the content of sections in this chapter.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of data over time (Polit & Beck, 2014). To establish dependability, I was clear and concise when I stated the design, procedure, data collection, and analysis of the study. Researchers are encouraged to keep a written account of the research process (Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016). Detailed notes often referred to as process logs were maintained throughout the life of the study. The notes included facets of the inquiry such as decisions on whom to interview and what was observed (Connelly, 2016). Safeguards also included feedback from my research mentors (chair and committee member).

Member Checking

Member checking began with the initial interview. At several points during the interview, I would paraphrase the participant's experience and check to see if I was

understanding what they meant. When the participants confirmed my accuracy, it was clear that one of the goals of the study was met. I understood the lived experiences of the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to review the themes generated by the data for accuracy (Connelly, 2016). Each participant was provided with a summary of their interview. The participants were asked if the summary was accurate. There were no additional interviews needed. I sent the participants the themes I developed and an explanation of those themes. Participants had the opportunity to review the themes and comment on them. Other methods of ensuring credibility included a thorough examination and reexamination of all the data collected.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the likelihood that the outcome or findings of a study are realistic and authentic to the participants' views and not based on the bias on behalf of the researcher (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I sent each participant paragraphs that summarized their particular interview each was encouraged to tell me whether it was accurate. I also sent the participants themes as they developed. I was transparent about any bias I brought to the table, which included my own experience with the phenomenon being studied.

Transferability

Transferability is the likelihood that the findings from a study can be applicable in other settings (Polit & Beck, 2014). I addressed this aspect by adhering to the chosen design of the study. I obtained rich, thick, and descriptive data that were necessary to allow readers to determine if there is any similarity to their own experiences. When

discussing transferability, it is crucial to remember the overall aim of a qualitative inquiry. The goal of the study was to provide a comprehensive description of a phenomenon as it related to the lived experience of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU, not to provide a general description that can be applied to a large population (Polit & Beck, 2014).

Discrepant Information

Given the subjective nature of qualitative inquiries, it is imperative that researchers objectively report on all themes, including any different perspectives or alternate explanations. Being transparent about discrepancies in the data adds to the trustworthiness of the study. Therefore, I revealed any contradictions to the themes I discovered.

Ethical Procedures

Considering the ethical issues in research should occur at the beginning of the process. Qualitative researchers often ask individuals to reveal very personal information. Developing respectful relationships, avoiding prejudice or stereotyping participants is the first ethical responsibility of the researcher (van Manen, 2002). Ethical behavior includes being sensitive to vulnerable populations and not placing participants at risk. Researchers conducting research on sensitive issues with marginalized populations such as African American lesbians must acknowledge the effects that invisibility, silencing, and oppression have on the lives of such research participants (Lewis, 2011). I followed the ACA ethical standards and avoided causing any emotional harm to the participants (ACA, 2014). I prepared for the possibility that recalling some

of the events might lead to an increase in emotional distress for some of the participants. I identified and provided each participant with a phone number that will enable them to receive free or low-cost counseling services. Participants will be able to obtain services regardless of the time.

I conducted a study with members of a marginalized population (African American, female, and lesbian). Special attention was taken so the participants did not feel victimized or pressured. Prior to contacting individual participants this study was approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board and the reference number is IRB # 01-10-19-0317165 and the expiration date is January 9, 2020. Once permission was obtained from the IRB, I began the sampling process for the study. Everyone who agreed to participate in the study received a consent document and also received a copy. Each participant was over the age of 18, therefore parental permission was not needed (ACA, 2014). Participants were informed that they could leave the study at any time without consequence. The purpose of this study, including any benefits or possible risks, and confidentiality issues were disclosed prior to the interviews. I was careful not to influence the participants' responses and I was warm, yet neutral during the interview process.

As a researcher conducting a study on a group in which I belong, I was prepared to manage my own emotions and reactions to the past (i.e., recalling unpleasant memories, sadness, frustration, exhaustion; Lewis, 2011). I relied on my dissertation committee to help me stay attuned to my responses and ensure the limitation of bias in analysis and reporting. I was prepared to develop an excellent rapport with the

participants and was also prepared to spend some quality time discussing the subject or other issues related to the African American lesbian community after the interview. These suggestions were especially applicable to African American lesbian researchers who conduct research with African American lesbians (Lewis, 2011). These behaviors might have been expected of me, as the researcher, by African American lesbian participants once they realized that I was a member of their own cultural group. The participants expressed curiosity about my motives for being interested in their lives as students in the HBCU context since the LGBT community has been enculturated to being rendered invisible. This was negotiated carefully and any contact was made after the completion of the collection of the data to avoid compromising the study and the results.

Data maintenance included storing the data in a file with a secure password for 5 years. The data were collected and will be stored in a file, with a secure password for 5 years, in accordance with the procedure recommended by van Manen (2014). Any external devices are secured in a locked container, and I have the only key. To maintain the confidentially of the participants, the actual names of the participants were not used. All participants chose a pseudonym that was used throughout the research process. Once the study was complete, all identifying information will be properly stored or discarded. Permission was obtained from participants to keep their information for possible follow-up studies.

Summary

This chapter was dedicated to discussing the methodology that will be used in this study. I discussed the design and rationale for the study, my role as the researcher, and

other specific information about the methodology for the study. Qualitative research requires a detailed report on issues of trustworthiness, the dependability of the study as well as safeguards to ensure that the study follows ethical procedures (Aborisade, 2013). The next chapter is dedicated to a thorough discussion of the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic, qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. In order to understand these experiences, I used a main research question and several sub-questions. The sub-questions were asked only if they were not answered by one or more previous questions. The main research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU? The 12 sub questions were as follows:

1. Please describe your experience and perceptions of being a lesbian and African American attending an HBCU; these experiences and thoughts can include, but are not limited to, discussions and encounters with friends, bystanders, peers, students, and university personnel.
2. What was your reason for attending an HBCU?
3. What years did you attend the HBCU?
4. Tell me about your perception of the environment on your HBCU campus?
5. How did you manage your identities while at the HBCU?
6. How would describe the impact of your attendance at an HBCU on your identity?
7. Where there any benefits or drawbacks to being an African American lesbian student attending an HBCU?
8. What, if anything, would have improved your experience at the HBCU?

9. How do you continue to manage your identities?
10. How has the very participation in this study impacted the reflection of your experiences?
11. Why did you participate in this study? What are you hoping to gain or contribute by participating?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

In this chapter, I describe the method of collecting the data, including demographic information and the setting for each interview. I provide a detailed explanation of the data analysis, which includes the themes that emerged from the data. This chapter also includes issues related to trustworthiness as well as any discrepancies with the data. Finally, I provide a summary of the study and an introduction to Chapter 5.

Setting

Technological advances have made it possible for researchers to collect data in a timelier manner, especially when geography and time become an issue (Aborisade, 2013). All of the interviews for this study were conducted using the Zoom meeting application. Zoom (2019) allows video communication in real time, and Zoom meetings can be accessed with a desktop or portable device. All six participants were able and willing to use the Zoom site to conduct the interviews. There was no cost for any of the participants to access Zoom. Each participant was given a link and phone number to use for the interview.

During each interview, I was stationed in a private room. I was able to ensure that no interruptions were made on my end. Five of the six participants were also in a private

setting; however, one was in the room with her partner. During one interview, I had to ask the participant to turn down the television as the sound was interfering with my ability to hear what was being said. All the other interviews were conducted without interruption.

Demographics

Given that the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of African American lesbians, every participant was African American, had attended an HBCU, and was a cisgender female who identified as a lesbian. I provide a demographic overview of the participants in Table 1. The age of the participants was not a factor in this study, so they never provided their actual age; however, each went to college immediately after high school, and I have provided the years they attended the HBCU. The years of attendance ranged from 1982 to 2014. All of the participants chose their own pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. I will use those pseudonyms throughout the report of this study. No HBCU was named in the study to increase the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1

A Demographic Overview of Participants

Participant	Years attended HBCU	Graduated
Sterling	2007 to 2008 & 2011 to 2014	Yes
Klugh	1994 to 1999	Yes
Pam	1990 to 1995	Yes
Lena	1982 to 1986	Yes

Parker	1982 to 1985	No
Tonya	1984 to 1988	Yes

Data Collection

I recruited participants for the study using the snowball and criterion sampling methods. Criterion sampling allows the researcher to recruit participants who meet certain criteria (Creswell, 2013). Snowball sampling occurred when two trusted insiders (i.e., African American lesbians who attended an HBCU) sent the invitation to participate in the study to women they knew who fit the eligibility requirements. The invitation had my contact information and all of the participants contacted me directly. The participants sent me confirmation of their interest in the study and were then sent a demographic form (see Appendix A). After I received the completed demographic form, the participants were sent the detailed informed consent document. Participants indicated their willingness to participate by e-mailing me with the subject line "I consent." Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. Each participant was open to meet as soon as I was available; therefore, the interviews were completed within 1 week. I stopped collecting data after interviewing six participants because I believed the data had been saturated and I was not hearing substantially different information from the last participant I interviewed.

All six participants participated in at least one semistructured interview. I recorded each interview to ensure that every word was captured. The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour in length. Interviews were recorded using a Sony IC-ICD-B600 device. The use of electronic devices can be beneficial, but it can also be an issue

should the device fail to work or stop functioning during the interview or at any other time of the data collection process (Aborisade, 2013). I made sure that I had extra batteries in the event that they stopped working due to continued use. None of the interviews were disrupted due to technical issues.

I employed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) with each participant. During the interviews, I took a few notes related to nonverbal communication and any other observations, including my reactions to the data. Occasionally, I asked a follow-up question if I was unclear or needed additional information. The recording device allowed me to give my full attention to the participants as they were sharing their experiences. All notes and transcripts were saved onto a flash drive that was stored in a secured location. I am the only person who has access to the data.

Data Analysis

My analysis of the data began immediately after the first interview. Once the interview was completed, I started the transcription process. I decided to transcribe the data myself in order to increase my familiarity with the participants' experiences. The data were transcribed verbatim. Although this was a lengthy and tedious process, it allowed me to reflect and analyze every sentence (see Mosor & Kortjens, 2018). I included all nonverbal communication, such as laughing, smiling, and body language, in the analysis.

Once the transcription was completed, I read and reread each word of the interviews. As I read each interview, I made certain notations to include any phrases and reactions (both verbal and nonverbal) that occurred during the interview. For example,

there were times participants would laugh nervously during their responses. When asked, at least two indicated that the laugh was not due to humorous thoughts but at their feelings about not sharing their lesbian identity. The inclusion of all forms of communication was done in order to capture the whole experience of the participant as she lived it (see Aborisade, 2013). I read the transcript again to capture anything that I had missed. This process assisted me in creating a summary of each interview, which was sent to the participants for their review. This form of member-checking ensured that I did not include my own biases in recording participants' responses. Member-checking was completed for all six participants. Once I received confirmation that the summaries were accurate, I reviewed the interviews and made note of the similar colors that connected one participant's experience to another. Color coding each emerging theme allowed for visual recognition of similar experiences between the participants.

Once all of the interviews and transcriptions were reviewed and I was sure that I had captured their experiences, I began the next phase of the analysis process. The chosen hermeneutic approach involved analyzing how each part of the study connected and linking the data in each transcription to the phenomenon being studied (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). I looked at each of the categories that were created and created another document that listed the common thoughts and experiences shared by the participants. The color coding of the statements during earlier analysis allowed for easier data recognition and grouping. I also made note of the differences in experiences. I then began the final coding process with the assistance of the NVivo software. I uploaded the interviews, memos, and research notes into Nvivo and again went through the data line

by line. I used NVivo to separate the data into various nodes that later became the six major themes for the study (see QSR, 2019). Once I had established the themes, I sent them to the participants for confirmation that they were congruent with their experiences. The following are the seven themes, including the extensions: (a) either Black woman or Black lesbian; (b) fear of rejection (this includes three extensions: hush, hush; seamless shelving; and invisible in plain sight); (c) chosen kin; (d) love for the African American community; (e) no benefit to being a lesbian at an HBCU; (f) road not taken; and (g) women loving women. I will discuss the themes in detail in the results section of this chapter.

Discrepancies

I found two discrepancies as it related to the literature. I included these cases in the study and in the analysis of the data. The first discrepancy was the overwhelming perception of positive experiences that five of the six participants had at their HBCU. The other discrepancy was the preference of the term *women who love women* over the term *lesbian*. These discrepancies were significant enough to become themes. Both are discussed in the results section of this chapter

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers must be transparent for a study to be considered trustworthy. The subjective nature of qualitative studies can hold put this form of inquiry at a high level of scrutiny (Connelly, 2016). Clearly created protocols and procedures can increase the trustworthiness of a study (Connelly, 2016). In the following

subsections, I list the several methods used, including credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, member checking, and reflective journaling.

Credibility

Issues of credibility were addressed by discussing and addressing any biases that I brought to the study as the researcher. The use of rich, thick descriptions; reflective journaling; and member checking increased the credibility of the results of this study (see Connelly, 2016). I also conducted a thorough literature review and included information that both supported and contradicted the results.

Researcher Bias

One method of limiting a researcher's bias is for the researcher to disclose any professional or personal information related to the study, in this case, the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU (see Shenton, 2004). I am an African American lesbian who attended an HBCU. My experience was painful due to the instances of homophobia I encountered. I was outed by a person who was close to me, and the reaction of the students was extreme. I did not receive support from administrators; in fact, I received various forms of microaggressions in the form of suggesting that the way I was dressed was the cause of my problems on campus. Due to my own experiences, it was important to have safeguards in place to limit the influence of my experiences on the study.

I engaged in self-reflection after each interview and throughout the analysis process. To further limit the influence of my bias on the study, I turned to my dissertation committee who had the task of helping me see how my negative experience

could influence my interruption of the data. Member checking also limited any biases from adversely affecting the process and outcome of the study.

Transferability

The overall aim of this qualitative inquiry was to provide a comprehensive description of the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. Unlike quantitative research, the goal was not to provide a general description that could be applied to a larger population (Polit & Beck, 2014). Transferability was also achieved through the use of rich thick descriptive data which will allow readers to determine if there are any similarities to their own experiences.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative studies allows the researcher to clearly explain the steps taken during the research process (Patton, 2015). Other researchers should be able to duplicate the study, either with a different or the same population. To ensure dependability, I revealed each step taken in order to carry out the study (Connelly, 2016). For example, the interview protocol (see Appendix D) outlines each step of the data collection process.

Confirmability

Trustworthiness can also be determined by the confirmability of a study. Confirmability refers to the assurance that the outcome of the study is realistic and true to the participants' lived experiences (Miles et al., 2014). At several points throughout the data collection and analysis phases, I sent each participant a copy of her transcript summarizing the interview. Each participant was able to review the themes as well as the

meaning behind the themes. I remained transparent regarding any bias related to my own experience at an HBCU.

Member Checking

Member checking occurred at several points during the study. I recorded each interview in order to capture the participants' entire experiences as they shared it. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and a summary of the interview was sent to each participant to confirm accuracy (van Manen, 2014).

Reflective Journaling

Another tool used throughout the study was a journal. The journal captured my thoughts, ideas, and struggles during the dissertation process. Writing in the journal on a regular basis helped me process the data and reflect on my own biases.

Rich and Thick Description

The study revealed a detailed account of each participants' experiences. I provided detailed descriptions of setting and what the participants said. I included direct quotes from the participants which provide a voice to a community that has historically been silenced. This helped the increase the realism of the results (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

The participants in the study all shared the same demographic information in that they were all African American, they identified as a lesbian, cisgender, and they attended an HBCU for at least 2 years. The participants' real names were not used and there was no specific HBCU mentioned. This was done to adhere to the expectation of confidentiality as explained in the informed consent document. Each person chose her

own pseudonym. The ages of participants were not included as this was outside the scope of the study. The descriptions may appear redundant as each of the six participants had to share certain criteria to be eligible for this study.

Participant Description

Sterling is an African American lesbian who attended two HBCUs. She first went to college in 2007, but due to her experience, she left school after 1 year. In 2011 she attended a different HBCU to continue her education. She graduated in 2014 and is currently working on her master's degree in sociology. She works as a case manager in the southern region of the United States.

Klugh is an African American lesbian who attended an HBCU from 1997 to 2002. She is currently working as a physical therapist and resides in the northeast United States. Pam is an African American who attended an HBCU from 1990 to 1994. She is currently employed as a lawyer and she resides on the West Coast.

Lena is an African American lesbian who attended an HBCU from 1982 to 1986. She is employed as a registered nurse and she lived in the southern United States. Parker is an African American lesbian who attended an HBCU from 1982 to 1995. She attended college for 2 ½ years. She is currently employed in as a medical billing specialist.

Results

The main research question asked in this study was what are the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU? Data were collected from six participants. The participants all attended an HBCU, but they did not attend the same

college or university nor did they attend the HBCU at the same time. There are seven HBCUs represented in this study, one participant went to two HBCUs.

I answered the main research question using direct quotes from the transcripts. There were 12 sub questions also used to obtain rich thick descriptions of the experiences by the participants. Responses to the main research question and the sub questions produced 7 themes. The themes are as follows: (a) either Black woman or Black lesbian; (b) fear of rejection which included three extensions (hush, hush; seamless shelving, and invisible in plain sight); (c) love for the African American community; (d) no benefit to being an African American lesbian at an HBCU; (e) road not taken; (f) chosen kin; and (g) women who love women. I will address each of these themes using direct quotes and summarizations based on the experiences of the participants.

Theme 1: Either African American Woman or African American Lesbian

Shield (2008) stated that identity is the socially constructed category in which people either claim or are placed. When discussing issues related to identity, all of the participants referred to their two identities, either African American woman or African American lesbian. None of the participants mentioned gender as a separate identity. Gender was either paired with their race or their sexuality, hence the theme African American Woman <u>OR</u> African American Lesbian.

Pam's response to how she manages her identity:

> Shit, my identity is all tangled up with each other. I am a Black female at times and I am a Black lesbian. Let me explain when I say at times. I know that I am always a Black woman, but there are times, like when I was in college, now at

> work, and always at church, I am a Black woman. For example, I took a girl I was dating to church with me, well actually with my family. When I introduced her, I said that we work together, because I was at church. As soon as we left, we went to brunch with some friends, and I got to be myself or at least my Black lesbian self.

Klugh also discussed how she managed her identities and similar to the other responses she provided two main identities:

> That's an interesting question. I embraced my African American womanhood simply by attending an HBCU. There was a group of us sisters that would hold meetings monthly to see how we can empower Black women within the city and state we were in. We really did not consider meeting with other women, for example, White women, because they always have their goals and marches, but it seems like they do not consider how hard and how different our struggle is, you know? I don't think the gay and Black thing mixed. Now I focus on my efforts supporting Black women of African Ancestry.

Sterling felt that she was identified as an African American lesbian. She said that she really never thought of her identities as separate pieces, but she was treated as if all she brought to the HBCU was being a lesbian. She made a few comments that indicated having or being made to have to choose, similar to an *either-or* decision:

> Before school began, I was connected to my roommate via telephone. It was thought that this would help us bond before we got to school so it would be less stressful on the first day. At first, I and my future roommate talked about how

> excited we were to be going to our HBCU. She was as excited as I was. I remember talking to her about the upcoming election and how we were going to work to get African American women to come together. We talked a lot about Black women's issues but all that came to a halt when she actually met me. It was like I could not be both a lesbian and a woman who was passionate about political issues related to Black women. I guess because I am not into feminine stuff, like makeup and long hair. Made me think she was not really in touch with her African roots. She saw me and figured I could not be into women's issues because I am gay. It was like I had to be either or but could no longer be one because I am the other. Crazy!

Lena, Parker, and Pam did not have a lengthy conversation about this concept. Tonya spoke about the sisterhood she felt on the campus and with the sorority she joined. She stated "I love the sisterhood I saw and was a part of. They did not know what I do, so it was ok." Lena stated that she was "an African American woman, with a lesbian lifestyle." She continued to refer to herself as either an African American woman or in terms of her lesbian lifestyle.

Parker also did not make a direct statement, however, she made statements like "I found a grove being with other African Americans. It was cool to connect with others and embrace my African American identity." She spoke of going off campus to get with "others like her" which was her way of describing her lesbian identity as there were many other African Americans on campus.

> Well definitely, the benefits of being an African American female just in that entire environment, the culture, learning about it, being exposed to just a whole lot of stuff that I did not get growing up and in high school…just the exposure like to jazz…that is how I got into jazz hanging out at the center on campus. Just seeing so many different walks of life. I mean how many shades we come in as African American. And um and just the whole religion thing. Getting exposed to so many different religions, authors, the conversation of struggle, of our struggle form the past to the current time. You know even at that time I thought that all kids grew up with both of their parents. Like that was mind-blowing and a culture shock thing for me. So just the exposure of who we are and where we came from, our history.

Theme 2: Fear of Rejection

All of the participants' experiences included the fear of being rejected due to their identification as a lesbian. Each spoke about the climate at the HBCU as being unfriendly for the lesbian and gay students. The fear of rejection led to three categories: hush hush, seamless shelving, and invisible in plain sight. Figure 1 provides a visual description of the theme and accompanying extensions (see figure 1).

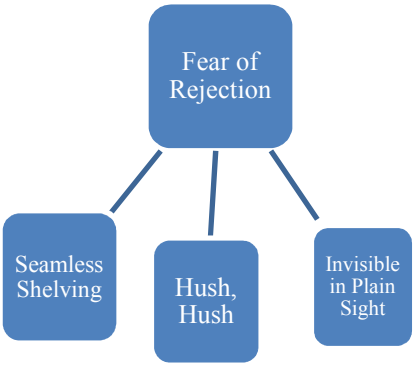

Figure 1. Fear of Rejection.

Five of the participants shared their fears of being "found out," but all six participants related to the fear of being rejected by the other students on campus. At least three discussed the fear of having their identities revealed to their families. The African American identities are supported and embraced, but only if one is willing to keep their lesbian identity quiet. It appears that there was no overt discussion of being a lesbian within the community. This appears to be an unspoken agreement. When the participants spoke of the fear of being rejected, they often included the secrecy of their sexual identity and how they worked diligently to keep who they "really were" a secret, hence the "hush hush" extension. The conversation also would branch off to discussions of how invisible the lesbian community was on the HBCU campuses. There are often no LGBT clubs or organizations, no literature in the library, and no recognition of sexual diversity on campus (Patton, 2011).

Many of the participants also spoke about the automatic shelving of their lesbian identity in order to fit in and be accepted. Automatic shelving is when a person with multiple identities highlights one identity while denying another. This study used the theoretical framework of the MIM. The MIM speaks to the fluid movement between identities. Reynolds and Pope (1991) stated that multiple marginalized identities are interrelated, however, one can choose to suppress one for the other. In this case, the suppression of the lesbian identity for the African American identity. It was evident that all six participants knew others on their HBCU campus who identified as lesbian, but at least five of the participants felt that they were rendered invisible as nobody really ever talked about the LGBT community unless they were making jokes. All six shared the experience of feeling like they were discouraged from openly embracing their sexual identity as a lesbian. The participants revealed incidents of either being rejected or hiding their lesbian identity for fear of being discriminated against, rejected, and isolated. At least two shared that they purposely did not associate with other women who were assumed to identify as lesbian.

Sterling discussed her experience with rejection regarding her roommates. Sterling attributed the incidents of rejection and anger to the fact that she did not "conform to society's ideal of femininity." She remembered her experience related to her roommates:

> I actually had two roommates at the first HBCU. The first came in and within a week I requested a transfer. The other roommate couldn't stand the fact that I was a lesbian. When I moved in, she announced out loud how she didn't want to be in

> a room with me. For three weeks, she made my life miserable. I wanted to tell her that she was the last thing I wanted, but I just tried not to be there when she was. This meant I really did not study or get good sleep. Eventually, she moved in with some other people directly across the hall. Stuff like that made me cut my time at the first school. By the time I got to the other school, I was more defiant. I felt like I was on my own. I mean I hung with the other women that were gay, but it was still kind of lonely.

She went on to tell of the rejection she faced on campus. While she was sharing her experience, she had a solemn look on her face. She later admitted that there were many instances where she was verbally assaulted:

> I was told that I was known as *the big dyke*. They didn't know me or my name (unless they looked at the chain on my neck) but I was just *the big dyke*. I didn't really pay attention to what people called me, especially if they did not know me, but I had hoped that they would at least get to know me for who I am versus that small knowledge of me. Yea, that was tough to deal with. My own damn people. (She sucked her teeth and was silent for a moment.)

Tonya shared her experience of feeling nervous about people finding out that she was a lesbian. She said that only one person knew that she identified as a lesbian but she kept it quiet. She stated that she tried not to identify herself as a lesbian due to the negative responses of other students and the African American community in general. She shared her thoughts:

> But I think, me, I was more afraid of people being in my business. People probably automatically assumed that I was because I played basketball. So you know, I think I tried a little bit extra hard not to show that side because there was a stereotype for female basketball players anyway. You know we did have some lesbians on the team but I really did not hang with them too tough because they just were…well, they were too…they were just too cocky…some of the ones that were on the team. I was a little nervous about that (associating with the ones who were gay) so I wouldn't…that is why I wouldn't do that. Because you know people, depending on what they think they know…this will go to how they would treat you. Even though there were some people who tried to be cool, you know like they were ok, but I think people judge you.

Pam also only had a few people that she told about her lesbian identity. She was scared that she would lose her friends if they found out she identified as a lesbian. She expressed sadness but relief that LGB students were pretty much like a ghost. She addressed the atmosphere on campus as being one of "feeling invisible" on her campus. She made several comments about the gay students on campus that no one talked to. She made comments that indicated that it was not safe to be open about her sexuality. Pam felt that she had to hide who she was in order to avoid the homophobic slurs and rejection. The experience in college has shaped how she manages her identity in the present:

> I managed by hiding my lesbian identity. It was not so hard to do. I think it also confirmed how Black people feel about gay people. I saw how the out people

were harassed. I was popular I guess, and I did not want to mess that up. I guess nothing has changed, I am, still hiding in plain sight.

Lena stated that she did not share her lesbian identity with the housemates she lived with in college. She said that she went to extremes to keep her identity hidden:

> My experiences as an African American woman at an HBCU college, with a lesbian lifestyle? Um, it was kind of difficult at the college that I attended. I found myself doing things like ushering a girl out of my window so she would not have to go back through the front door and pass other people in the lobby of the house that I lived in. It was like a "hush, hush." Because of it being a predominately Black college, I felt that and the rest of us felt that people of color did not understand that there could be a serious love or interest in the same sex. I just not think that it was right, but I guess I was scared of being put out. I was also scared, because, you know my parents are educators and were very involved in the church.

Lena spoke about how poorly openly gay students were treated on the HBCU campus. Due to her identity being hidden, she was exposed to many instances of discrimination. She stayed silent, and the treatment strengthened her resolve not to be open about her sexuality:

> I did find that it seemed, and I do not know this personally, but when you would find a male…you know a gay Black male, for instance, most of the males had charisma, you know flamboyancy, and some really didn't, but those were the down low dudes. But the ones who were flamboyant people would look at them

> and go "faggot" or whatever they would say, but it didn't bother them. It seems like it was more so the women who were very like low key and not as out there as the guys.

Lena did her best not to be associated in the open with the other lesbian students at the school:

> Oh yeah, there were other lesbians at the school. Some of them would even talk to me, everybody would just tell me their business. I was that girl. But you knew who not to really surround yourself with…you know there were some people you could not hang out with…or else you can end up on blast. I was scared, you know my parents were educators and were very involved in the church, so you know. My father actually made it very clear to me and my siblings that there were certain things that would not be tolerated. He said that if any of us got pregnant or became involved in drinking and drug use or got caught up in "funny business" he would cut us off. Funny business meant gay stuff. So that was that.

Klugh said that she would always hear other student making cruel jokes about gay students. She would never say anything because she did not want bad things said about her. Klugh said that she tried to keep away from the drama:

> I know that they were not gay-friendly. I could tell at the jokes made about people that were suspected of being gay. It just was everywhere, I mean the jokes and comments. The campus was very hetero. My experience was not bad, I mean, not everybody, well hell nobody knew that I liked girls unless they liked girls. Being a Black woman was easy. Nothing much to think of. It was the

> sneaking around and going off campus all the time to the clubs that was hard. Lying about where I was going or where I had been, I had a few close calls. I think that I managed pretty well. Does being undercover mean the same thing as managing an identity? I guess I really did not think about it much.

Parker reported that it was clear that the gay and lesbian students were not the popular crowd at her HBCU. She stated that it was almost like those type of students did not really exist. Parker said hearing some of the negative things others were saying opened her eyes to how African Americans feel about being gay:

> Well, it made me aware of how our people (meaning African American) would judge you. As for me, I just kept in my circle. As far as on campus itself, there was not a lot going on, as far as gay groups, especially in the era in which I was on campus and all of that. It was like everyone just went on with things. There really was not that much conversation or places to hang out or things to do on campus for students who were gay. The thing about college is that everything is kind of, well everyone is moving, going in whatever direction and no one is ever really totally paying attention to the other person. You can almost be invisible. I just went along with the day and see who was having the most fun. It was not...it was like you were one person among many, so I just…I mean that was just a day to day thing. I mean I do not know it was so much how to manage it.

Two of the participants talked about the invisible nature of their lesbian identity even within their own families. Lena shared that she had told her parents at one point but her family was dealing with the chronic illness of her mother. Although Tonya has not

disclosed her identity as a lesbian to her family, she has feelings about the fact no one even bothers to inquire about her love life.

Lena shared a few examples as a lesbian of being invisible in plain sight. She said that she felt she could not be true to someone else if she was not true to herself:

> I finally told my parents. I did not know how it was going to go. Which for my mom it was probably harder on her than my dad. Because she was at the beginning stages of Alzheimer's but we did not know. As for my dad, it is out of sight, out of mind. He does not even think or relate to it or any of that…at all. But yet he does not go "where is your boyfriend?" He has been to our house many times. That's right! He might say stuff like "well Geraldine might be the cause of you not being able to sleep at night since you all sleeping in the same bed."

Tonya shared her thoughts about her invisible lesbian identity. She stated that she was close to several people in school, but they did not ask and she did not say. She said that she feels disappointed that it seems to be the same way with her family:

> I want to add that there are times when I feel that I am frustrated with how my family just does not want to even ask me about my personal life. I think Black people do not care as long as they do not have to see it.

Parker seemed not to be bothered so much as curious about why there was nothing to indicate that students who identified with the LGBT community were on campus:

> I will say for that time and the period I was at college. It could have been more, should have been more open to saying that this, you know, we have a home… for… uh, I guess organizations for whatever, for lesbians. But I think with that whole campus that thing…none of that was really talked about. You did not…there was nothing to let a person know that, you know there is a family or a group of people that you know…you can turn to or whatever.

Theme 3: Chosen Kin

A strong sense of group membership has been the staple of the HBCU (Albritton, 2012). For African American lesbian students (and other members of the LGBT community) this option might not be available. They often face rejection from other students, faculty, staff, family, and friends. If they choose to hide their identity they are at risk of higher mental health issues than their heterosexual counterparts (Evans, Nagoshi, Nagoshi, Wheeler, & Henderson, 2017). The sense of being rejected and the need for close ties and support leads African American lesbians to choose or be chosen to be that alternate family for one another. This group often becomes the family that is needed to celebrate the good things in life as well as to be supportive during life's challenges. This concept is not unfamiliar to the African American community. This is not necessarily self-segregation, it is a need for unconditional acceptance of one's gender, racial, and sexual identity (Poynter & Washington, 2005).

The participants in this study all had experience with having a select group of friends, mostly African American lesbians, who are like family, and in some cases closer than family. Many of the connections were made in college. Spending time with other

African American lesbians on and off (mostly off) campus appeared to impact both the lesbian and African American identity development for all of the participants.

Klugh said that she had some friends on campus but she always had to be guarded. The African American lesbians she met during her college years helped her to deal with the fact that she has to hide who she is most of the time. She said that she cherishes those friends and feels like they are her real sisters:

> I feel that my experience with people who were mean or close-minded or just intolerant, yea, and that includes many members in my family, made me have a greater love for the people who helped me get through college. You know, we are all still friends to this day. We take a vacation together once a year in August. I was not out like I would have liked to be, but other than that, those ladies helped make me strong.

Lena was more conservative with who she shared her sexual identity. She had friends from home who also identified as African American lesbians with whom she would often hang out with. She would often drive out of state to hang out with her "real friends." Lena shared that she was particularly with who she shared her true self with:

> Things were pretty lonely until I found that group of women. It was then that I started feeling a little better but I was still hidden. I picked and chose when and where and also whom I was around. I still do. But even now I have a great group of friends, many of them I have known for over 35 plus years, and we still hang out and have the best time. Between that and my partner of 22 years, I feel blessed.

Pam reported that she liked the friends she made in college, but she always felt like she was holding out, not giving them her entire self. The few lesbian friends she had in college were not comfortable being themselves when in "mixed" company:

> I had a few friends at the school that was also gay, but we really did not hang out too much on campus. You know now that I think about it, I only had one friend that was also a lesbian and hung out with me and the straight people. We never talked about it but it was just understood that what we when we were with the school people, we kept our other life to ourselves. I had a bunch of friends from high school that also identified as lesbians, so I waited until breaks and weekends and I went to hang with them. Or they came to hang at my dorm. That is when real fun happened. Nothing dirty, just being able to be. We are all still friends today. When we get together it is like a family reunion, without the drama (laughs).

Tonya stated that she had a lot of friends on the HBCU who identified as heterosexual. Her best friend and her sorority sisters are still an important part of her life, but she still feels like she could only be her true self when she is with her "family." She recalled looking forward to being with her friends:

> Being myself? Not on campus! I had one friend that knew and so we were cool, we could talk about anything. I could talk about what was going on but when I went home for the holidays I hung out with my real friends. Or when my friends came down…like my friends, if they came down on the campus, then they came down. But most of the time, it was, you know, when I went home. Like during

the holidays, all of our friends would hang out. I do not see many of them due to location and work, but when we get together, it is the best.

Theme 4: No Benefit in Being African American Lesbian at an HBCU

African American lesbian students who attend HBCUs are at a higher risk to be harassed, bullied, and isolated than their heterosexual counterparts (Lewis & Erickson. 2016). The lack of peer, faculty, and administrative support can lead to internalized homophobia, depression, other mental distress for the African American lesbian at her HBCU campus. When asked if there were any benefits to identifying as a lesbian at an HBCU, all participants said there were none.

Klugh:

What a question! Benefits? Hello no! Did anyone say that there were benefits? I sure did not see any. Drawbacks? Plenty! It was scary as hell to thinks of being out on campus. I did not want to lose the few straight friends I had. My school was located in a very conservative type of town. We had to sneak around, that was a drawback.

Lena stated "I could not see any benefits at the time".

Pam:

Benefits? I am not sure if there were any as a lesbian. I was not out so I guess that says it all. As for drawbacks, it did not feel like that would have been a good thing to expose. I really never thought about my lesbian identity as it relates to college. That's wild. I guess another drawback was being scared someone would

out me. I did not want any trouble, I saw how they treated others who were perceived to be gay. I did not want that to happen to me.

Tonya:

I don't know if it was a benefit during that time, to be honest. I think the drawback was that in the 1980s it wasn't…I think a lot of people…they judged you back in the 80s… even though there were some people who tried to be cool, You know like they ok but I think people judge you. Or the straight girls think like "oh they trying to mess with me" or they think you want them, but you really do not want them. I think that was more of the drawbacks. So I never really gave them a chance to even know me like that because that is not something that they knew. But I think that people hinted around or try to be nosy to find out, but I never would never say yes or no.

Sterling:

Benefits to be gay at an HBCU. Hell no! There were definitely benefits of going to an HBCU. The good stuff, like parties, homecoming, and other social event were great, for those who were willing to play the game and act as if they are straight or not interested in anyone. I did not see any benefits, not at either HBCU. I did not play the game, which made my time a little more difficult. Drawbacks were too many to say. One of them being it took me two schools and many years to get my degree. Benefit? I repeat hell no! Watch your back. Find some good people you can roll with. But benefit? Nah!

Parker:

> I will say for that time and the period I was at college, it could have been more. Should have been more open to saying that this, you know, we have a home… for… uh, I guess organizations for whatever, for lesbians.

Theme 5: Love for the African American Community

The level of racial identity affects African Americans' self-attitudes and wellbeing. The more African Americans identify with their racial identity, the more positively they evaluate it (Hughes et al., 2015). Identifying as a lesbian on an HBCU campus can present unique challenges (Barton, 2017).

The participants in this study all had a strong sense of their African American identity. The data collected for this study indicated that all six individuals attributed much of their connection to the African American community to their experience at their HBCU. This theme was a surprise as the limited studies on LGBT HBCU experiences indicate that there are feelings of harassment and isolation of LGBT students (Barton, 2017; Lewis & Ericksen, 2016). The participants in this study acknowledged the negative climate for the lesbian population at their HBCUs, however, they still had a strong connection to their racial identity and they credited time at an HBCU as solidifying their African American female identity.

Klugh:

> I liked being a part of the community, well the Black community. It made me more aware and stronger in my Afrocentricity. I think it made me feel empowered as a Black woman to have so many professors and faculty that looked like me. I enjoyed being around so many different Black people. We were all

people of color but we were so different. I also feel that it made me have a greater love for the people who helped me get through college. I think going to the HBCU made me who I am today.

Lena:

I am very happy to have gone to an HBCU. To experience tradition actually. Traditions when it came down to not only just football, band, or music but tradition as in jazz. Also going to church at the chapel on campus. One thing about the HBCU I attended, well the state alone has a lot of history, but with us learning about how the school began and knowing that my parents went there in the 1940s and 1950s. And then I had another family member who was there in the 1930s and 1940s, so just tradition, that had a big impact on me.

Parker:

Initially, it was somewhat of a culture shock for me because I had never been around (laughs) so many Black people…I mean it was just being around totally all African American people, which I found uh quite interesting uh and uh the whole Black power movement. Just the whole culture and history of who we are. Yea, I got a chance to learn about my people, my history. Because you know, it not just based on my attendance at the HBCU, but when you are going to the AU center, you are really interacting with four other schools. I forgot the name of that school. But you are dealing with four black colleges in one.

Pam:

I have a lot more knowledge about African Americans in this country. I was able to see Black professors and deans, so that influenced my later occupation. I have a high level of racial pride and I think that was strengthened by the HBCU and my family. I think going to an HBCU made me feel more responsible for my race. I always try to help and give back and so I think this came from seeing things on and off campus.

Tonya:

I am an Afrocentric woman. I enjoy wearing clothes and jewelry that highlights my connection with the African American community. I think pledging also helped solidify my love for Black people and pride in the community. My friends are the same way. Whenever we get together you can just see it and feel it (laughs). It does not matter which set either (lesbian or straight).

Sterling:

The classes kind of helped me grow. I think that was a benefit, looking back. I think Biblical Studies challenged me to rethink my place in society, believe it or not, and what I'm comfortable with doing. Not only that, it made me re-think my view on religion, that had a large impact on me. I think I became close to spirituality and African culture. This good only has happened because I went to a Black school at least that is my story. Black teachers. Soul food. (Laughs). That why I might teach at one someday.

Theme 6: Women Who Love Women

The history of racism and discrimination has had a significant impact on the relationship between African Americans and White Americans in the United States (Hughes et al., 2015). The lack of trust and the social disconnect between the two races are also evident within the LGBT community (Van Daalen & Santos, 2017). The perceived racism from within the LGBT community may lead to the rejection of labels created by the dominant culture, for example, the very label of lesbian. While collecting the data, I noticed that only one of the participants referred to herself as a lesbian. All of the participants agreed that the definition of the term lesbian is accurate, but the very title is something that they are not necessarily comfortable with. Lena was the first one to express her discomfort with the actual term of lesbian. She discussed the negative feelings toward the term lesbian. Lena shared that she prefers the term women who love women. She spoke of the perception that women loving women sounds more direct.

This new data allowed me to reflect on the previous interviews. I checked my research notes and noticed that I had made several comments about nonverbal communication when participants were discussing their lesbian identities. I became aware that the participants used the actual term lesbian to describe general identity but not when discussing their experiences. This revelation compelled me to ask the other participants which term they preferred. Each participant reported that she really did not like being called a lesbian, although all agreed the term is the most accepted term currently available. They seemed relieved to have an option of being associated with

another term besides lesbian. Sterling did not seem to care either way as she felt that others identify her based on her appearance.

Lena stated that she is an African American woman who loves women. She says that she might live a lesbian lifestyle but stated that she really does not like labels. Lena said, "I recognize who I am and who I love, I just do not like the word, lesbian."

Sterling:

> I don't really like the term lesbian. I mean I like women, I am a woman, and I am attracted to women. White girls like lesbian and other labels, but shit I really don't. You know you got me thinking about that. It might make a great conversation. I think I am going to ask my network. Now that I think about it, none of the invitations to parties use the word lesbian. I appreciate whoever spoke up about that.

Tonya stated "I do prefer the term women loving women. I think that is what it's all about. I thought about this since you asked me and I feel better when I hear that term, I do not think people should have an issue. It just sounds better".

Klugh:

> That sounds like the capture they put on the flyers for the clubs. I like it much better than lesbian. Lesbian always seems so White women at the Cape, you know? Every time I look online for something to do and put the word lesbian into the search engine, it always leads to pictures and events that highlight White women. That is why I have never really looked at those places as a social place. Black women are not that complicated to need a name for who we are. But if I

had to choose, it would not be the term lesbian, it would be a woman that loves women.

Parker said "I really prefer that term, *women who love women*. I guess I really did not mind the word lesbian, but I think the women that love women sound better, sexier, more accurate".

Pam:

(Laughs) I am just thinking I never used the word lesbian so many times as I have in this interview. I do not like labels. I feel labels are never created by the folks that will fall under it. We talked about that word African American, but as for lesbian, I would welcome something else. Or just call me Pam. Straight people do not have to be identified as straight, everyone else who does not has to have a label. Ridiculous!

Theme 7: The Road Not Taken

Five of the participants expressed overwhelming positive experiences at their HBCU. They acknowledged that their experiences were so positive due to the shelving of their sexual identity. Sterling had more direct experience with homophobia and discrimination, however, all perceived that their very identity as a lesbian had an impact on both their experience at the HBCU and the management of their identities. This reflection led to the last theme for this study, the road not taken. This theme represents the participants' thoughts about how their experience at the HBCU would have been if they had taken a different path regarding their identity as a lesbian.

Lena:

My senior year was crazy at one point. It might have been different if I could have shared my story. Maybe I could have trusted people probably a little bit better. Whereas when I eventually told someone, cause I needed to tell someone, they were like "its ok. Girl, we love you. You are funny, we love you." They would say they could care less, you know. And that reception was like nice. You know if I was getting ready to pledge, would I have said anything? Probably not.

Parker:

I wish I would have finished. I do wonder what would have happened if I kept going. I was just so ready to live my life and get from under my parents and that meant getting a job and my own place. So I left school. Maybe I should have just gone all the way. But again, I really wasn't ready for that. Maybe it will wake me up to, you know, take other steps. I will probably reflect more on myself. You know as far as where I am now, today as I sit at this moment. I would add that.

What if?

Pam:

I guess if I could have come out. Really brought my friends to games and other stuff. I think it would have also been good to be able to be myself at the HBCU. I mean I was myself, but not my whole self, does that make sense? I think my experience was pretty good overall, I do not want to sound like I hated it. I had plenty of friends, I attended a lot of parties, and I graduated with honors. I made my family happy so I guess that was good, but I guess I wish I could have just been me.

Klugh:

Maybe not feeling like I was going to be exposed. Maybe feeling like I could be myself. I had a pretty good time but it was always doing the straight thing. I wish there was like a club or group on campus. But then I do not know if I would have gone. Depends on where it was, I guess. Still, probably would have been a little nervous.

Sterling:

I guess my experience would have been better if I was not harassed and made to feel like I did not belong. I wish there would have been more tolerance. That would have changed my path. I went to school only a few years ago. That is crazy to be treated like a bad person because of who I love. My road could have been easier. It was hard enough learning how to be on my own, I could have been finished earlier if I was made to feel like I was supposed to be there.

Tonya:

Well, I had a good experience, to be honest, but I guess if…well I probably would have had a different experience had I…come out as a lesbian. I probably would have had…I don't know how my experience would have been, to be honest…because I do not know on a day to day basis how people would think about you, but I know when I was at home, with the people I grew up with…you know it was not a problem. But I don't know. Going to another state, North Carolina, which is the South, I really don't know how that would have been.

Summary

This chapter was dedicated to providing a detailed summary of the analysis process. The findings of this study were extracted from the data collected from my transcriptions of interviews of the six participants, all who had experience with the phenomenon being studied. Seven themes ultimately emerged from the data. The seven themes are as follows: (a) either African American woman or African American lesbians; (b) fear of rejection, which has three branches (hush, hush; seamless shelving; and hiding in plain sight); (c) chosen kin; (d) love for the African American community; (e) no benefit to being an African American lesbian at an HBCU; (f) women who love women; and (g) the road not taken.

The main finding of this study was that African American lesbians who attended an HBCU feel as if they have to hide a part of themselves. This is usually done without conscious thought, almost automatically. The fear of being identified as a lesbian in college has continued for many of the participants. Much of their identity management in college is still have an effect on their lives. During the interviews participants openly discussed their fear and frustration at having to hide their lesbian identities.

In Chapter 5, I present the interpretation of the results, the implications of the study, and my recommendations. I also will discuss implications for counselors, counselor educators, HBCU staff and faculty, and possibly the African American community at large. I also will provide suggestions for future research on the topic.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

My purpose for this study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. I used a qualitative, hermeneutic, phenomenological approach to analyze the participants' meaning of their lived experiences. Included in the analysis was my interpretation of their experiences. In this final chapter, I summarize the major findings of the study using the MIM developed by Reynolds and Pope (1991).

The theoretical framework used for this study was Reynolds and Pope's (1991) MIM. The MIM was used as a lens through which to view the experiences of the participants because each identified with at least three marginalized groups. When using the MIM, the researcher views persons with multiple identities as having identities that reinforce each other and none can be totally disconnected from the others (Veenstra, 2011).

The main finding from this study was that African American lesbians who attended an HBCU experienced hiding or shelving their lesbian identity while highlighting their African American identity. Of the seven themes that will be discussed in the next section, two were not found in the literature. The participants also made suggestions on how to improve the experiences of African American lesbians who attend HBCUs.

Interpretation of the Findings

The phenomenological approach allowed me to understand the meaning of the participants' lived experiences as African American lesbians who attended an HBCU. The seven themes (one with three extensions) emerged from my attempt to summarize the participants' descriptions of their experiences (see Giorgi, 2010). The use of the MIM as the theoretical framework was supported by the data. All six participants had experience with being passive and allowing circumstances to determine which identity to highlight and which to suppress (see Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

Pam, Lena, Tonya, Parker, and Klugh spoke of suppressing their lesbian identity while on the HBCU campus or when involved in activities such as pledging a sorority. Sterling's experience was different in that she was presumed to be a lesbian and, therefore, felt as if she had little choice in how she was identified. Parker, Lena, and Tonya spoke of actively deciding to suppress one identity (usually their lesbian identity) depending on their circumstances. Those circumstances included pledging in a sorority and living in campus housing. The literature supports this interpretation.

Alcoff (2006) suggested that race and gender tend to be visible and often provide markers for identification by others, while other identities, such as class and sexual orientation, are less visible, or many times, completely invisible. Tonya and Lena shared their experiences of actively avoiding other students who were identified as lesbian. All were active in suppressing their lesbian identity when interacting with their respective families.

The MIM also addressed how individuals who identify with marginalized identities can manage their multiple identities in a segmented manner (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). For example, Tonya embraced her racial identity while on the HBCU campus, but when she pledged a sorority her focus was on her identity as an African American female. Pam, Klugh, and Sterling each had times and circumstances when they identified with race or sexuality, depending on which organization they were focused on at the time. It should be noted that the only time five of the participants spoke of identifying with all three identities was when they were spending time with their friends. This will be further discussed later in this section.

Theme 1: Either African American Woman or African American Lesbian

As the participants were sharing their experiences, they spoke about themselves as African American women or African American women who identified as lesbians. They continually connected their race when speaking about their gender and sexual identity, but only Parker spoke about being a woman independent of race and sexuality. Speaking of themselves as African American women or African American women who identified as lesbians was constant throughout the data collection process. There were several times during the data collection process that I was tempted to ask the participants why they did not describe themselves in terms of the three identities, but my objective was to describe the experiences as the participants lived them, not to judge or change those experiences.

The analysis of the data reminded me of the term *womanism*. This term was coined by Alice Walker (1983) to address the balancing of the competing demands of various cultural communities (Williams, 2005). Womanism is also referred to as a

theoretical approach when providing counseling for African American women; however, it was not used as a theoretical approach for this study because it does not address sexuality. It appears that for many African American women, the sense of wholeness is related to their identification with their race (Williams, 2005). The current literature does not address this.

Theme 2: Fear of Rejection (Hush, Hush; Seamless Shelving; and Hidden in Plain Sight)

African American lesbians face multiple stressors, microaggressions, and traumatic experiences (Datta, Bialer, & McIntosh, 2017). These experiences can encourage African American lesbians to keep their sexual identity a secret from friends, family, and other persons who will possible discriminate and ultimately reject them (Datta et al., 2017). Lena stated that she was told as a young person that if she were ever to identify as a lesbian she would be cut off from her family. The literature supports Lena's fear that she would not be accepted by her family (Rodgers, 2017). Parker also feared that if her family knew that she identified as a lesbian, she would be treated differently. The fear of rejection made it possible for the participants to have their sexual identity hushed instead of acknowledged. Tonya, Lena, Parker, and Pam discussed suppressing their lesbian identity without even thinking about it. Pam stated that she put her identity on the shelf when she was in college. She also continues to shelve her lesbian identity during her contact with her family. Pam stated, "Every holiday I have to leave my lesbian self outside and go into whoever's home and give my family the side they want to see." Pam described the concept of "passing" as straight by suppressing an

identity that is not visually recognized (see Datta et al., 2017). This sense of invisibility is common among the majority of lesbian women on HBCU campuses as there are no LGBT organizations. In addition, there is scarce if any literature related to the LGBT community in HBCU campuses either in course curricula or in campus libraries (Patton, 2011).

This sense of invisibility can lead to higher levels of distress and anxiety as well as internalized homophobia. This was evident with Lena and Tonya purposely avoiding others who were presumed to be part of the LGBT community (see Whicker et al., 2017). It was interesting to hear Tonya refer to the basketball players who were comfortable with their lesbian identity as being "cocky." The negative perception of the LGBT community appears to be internalized by Tonya and others who hide their lesbian identity. The other students who did not hide their sexuality were deemed extravagant and cocky instead of expressive and confident.

Theme 3: Chosen Kin

This theme is supported by the current literature related to the African American community. African Americans' sense of family has traditionally included others who have no biological connection (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014; Rodgers, 2017; Taylor, 2010). Each participant in this study had a group of friends that were considered family. Chosen kin are often individuals who share similarities, such as race or sexual orientation (Rodgers, 2017). Tonya, Lena, Pam, Sterling, and Klugh developed their set of chosen kin during their college years. These chosen kin were other African American women

who identified as lesbians who not only supported the participants' sexual identity, they provided guidance, love, and friendship that is still treasured to this day.

Members of the LGBT community often surround themselves with people who can acknowledge and accept their identity as a sexual minority, and this acceptance and sense of kinship can act as a buffer in the face of adversity, trauma, and stress (Follins et al., 2014). Counselor educators and counselors could use this information when creating a treatment plan for their clients. Counselors should inquire about the support systems that are in place for African American lesbians when providing mental health services. This would not only demonstrate cultural awareness but provide a proven support network for clients. This inclusion is one level of social change as it recognizes others who are not biologically related but are just as important (and in many cases, more important) to the client.

Theme 4: No Benefit to Being an African American Lesbian at an HBCU

Like most colleges in the United States, the campus of an HBCU is historically heterosexist. Researchers have supported the participants' perceptions that HBCU campuses can be unfriendly and hostile environments for students who identify as LGBT (Datta et al., 2017; Means & Jaeger, 2013). Students who identify as LGBT have experienced a homophobic environment that can be passive and subtle or overt and violent (Patton, 2011; Poynter & Washington, 2005). When directly asked, all of the participants in this study expressed the sentiment that there were absolutely no benefits to identifying as a lesbian on an HBCU campus. Participants appeared to be resigned to accept the condition as a part of "how it goes." This feeling was also extended to the

African American community in general. Feeling as if there are no benefits in identifying as a lesbian at an HBCU impacted the willingness for at least three of the participants to associate with others on campus who were members of the LGBT community.

Students who feel that they are supported and welcomed have a more positive adjustment to their college experiences (Mattarah, Ayers, & Brand, 2010). Those who feel that they are not welcomed or who have to constantly negotiate their identity in order to fit in might continue this pattern as many of the participants in this study reported they have done. Although 5 out of the 6 participants in this study completed their education at their HBCU, all except Sterling felt compelled to hide their identity for the entire college experience. Sterling experienced name-calling, isolation, and harassment, both in and out of the classroom, primarily due to her identification as a lesbian. All colleges and universities have the responsibility of keeping their students and faculty safe, and this has to include LGBT students and students who identify with other marginalized communities.

Theme 5: Love for the African American Community

HBCUs were created due to the chronic discrimination and racism in the United States at a time when the country did not allow African Americans to be educated in the same manner or institution as White Americans (Van Camp et al., 2010). Historically, since the inception of HBCUs, African American parents have sent their children to those institutions to provide them with an education that is culturally relevant (Albritton, 2012). This was another theme that was evident in each participant's experience. Family history

and a strong love and connection for the African American community was instrumental in each participant attending their respective HBCU. The racially supportive environment was important to each participant. Each participant expressed the importance of getting an education in an institution that had African American role models in the form of faculty and staff. All six participants reported that their reasons for attending an HBCU were family connections, racial pride, and an opportunity to be taught by African American professors (see Albritton, 2012).

The participants continued to feel a strong positive connection to the African American community despite the fear of rejection and frustration felt about the reaction of African Americans to the LGBT community. In fact, all of the participants expressed the sentiment that can be found in several studies: a strong sense of group membership with their racial identity (see Gushue, 2006). Ford (2015) stated that African Americans have stronger disapproval for the LGBT community than their White counterparts. The participants' strong sense of racial identity was in spite of the feelings of African Americans for the LGBT community. The strong connection to the African American community could act as a buffer for African American lesbians when dealing with discrimination due to their identification as a sexual minority.

Theme 6: Women Who Love Women

This theme was created as a result of my in-depth interview with Lena. Lena was not the first person interviewed, but her response to the label *lesbian* was significant. When answering the main research question she stated, "I am an African American woman with a lesbian lifestyle." She went on to say that she is aware that the term

lesbian is used to describe her sexual orientation, but she prefers to say that she is a "woman who loves women." She explained that she feels that the term *lesbian* is a White term and when allowed she uses her own label.

The chosen methodology for this study allowed me to reflect on the previous interviews with Lena's comments in mind. As I reviewed each interview and my notes, I became aware of a pattern that seemed to indicate that the other participants also did not favor the term *lesbian*. Although the participants acknowledged that the term was used to identify and determine if they were eligible for this study, they did not often refer to themselves as lesbians. Given this discovery, I contacted the participants who were previously interviewed and asked them if they had a preference between the term *lesbian* and *women who love women.* Resoundingly all of the participants chose the latter. When asked why, three said they never liked the term or label of lesbian. They indicated that lesbian is a name that was accepted by White women and given to all other ethnicities. I then reviewed several invitations to social events for Black lesbians and I found that none used the term lesbian. The invitations had the name of the group organizing the party or gathering and that was the only indicator that the event was for women who identified as lesbian.

This theme was found only in the data collected for this study. I did not find any literature that focused on African American women's rejection of the term lesbian. One study on African American racial self-labeling concluded that individuals who engage in self-labeling reported more racial socialization experiences emphasizing cultural survival (Anglin & Whaley, 2006). It is possible that self-labeling is perceived as empowering for

persons who identify with one or more marginalized identities. This topic could be explored in a quantitative study with a larger sample of African American women who identify as lesbian. This level of social change may be seen as global. The results of any future studies could change who provides labels for marginalized communities.

Theme 7: The Road not Taken

The last theme was developed from analyzing the various statements from the six participants who volunteered for this study. Every one of the participants contemplated what their experiences might have been in college had they felt visible, empowered, and openly supported in their identification as a lesbian. Five of the participants, who were not able to openly embrace their lesbian identity, recognized the impact on both their college experience and how they currently manage their identity. Sterling felt as if she had no choice of being identified as a lesbian due to her choice of gender expression. Sterling shared that she often thinks about how different her experience would have been if she was not isolated. She also reflected on what might have been if she was not rejected and felt compelled to leave the first HBCU.

The participants in this study did not express a high level of emotional discomfort, but they did express sadness at having to constantly hide or shelve their sexual identity from people and circumstances that they otherwise feel close to. When reflecting on their college experiences, several participants commented that they had never thought about college and its impact on their identity. Pam, Parker, Tonya, and Klugh stated that they were hopeful that their participation in the study would help change things for future

HBCU students. Sterling stated that her decision to be a mentor at her last HBCU was due solely to her own experience.

Limitations of the Study

There are over 102 HBCUs in the United States and only seven were represented in this study. The participants' experience at the HBCUs in this study does not transfer to the larger African American lesbian population. The sample size of six could be viewed as a limitation. Phenomenological studies can have as little as three or as many as fifteen participants (Creswell, 2013). The six participants in this study were all that was needed to reach saturation, which indicated that no new information would be discovered with additional participants. Again, this could be considered a limitation.

Another limitation is the exclusion of Caribbean or African lesbians who attended an HBCU. This means the experiences of this population was not included. This exclusion was done due to the history of slavery in the United States and its impact on African Americans. The HBCU was created at a time when it was illegal and often times dangerous to educate slaves and freed Blacks. The first HBCU was founded prior to the end of the civil war as the only avenue to educate African Americans, as well as those who were in support of educating slaves and freed Blacks. For this reason, there is a significant connection to HBCUs for African Americans that might not be the same for Africans and Carribean populations. This exclusion could limit the transferability of the study (including limitations due to exclusion of bisexual and transgender women).

The choice of sampling method was chosen after a review of the literature and after noting that most of the qualitative studies that focused on African American LGBT

community used both criterion and snowball sampling when recruiting participants (Ford, 2015; Lewis & Ericksen, 2016; Means & Jaeger, 2013). The chosen sampling method could have led to interviewing participants who were similar, and this could be viewed as a limitation. I hope that the limitations of this study will inspire future research.

Recommendations

My recommendations include the replication of this study with the same population. This would not only add to the literature regarding African American lesbians, but the results could also be used to inspired future qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method inquires. Additionally, a similar study could be conducted with individuals who have three or more different marginalized identities. For example, persons who identify as African or Caribbean will have lived experiences that will add to the knowledge base of counselors and counselor educators who serve diverse populations. This study provided data on six participants' experiences at seven HBCUs. Due to this limitation, it is recommended that a quantitative study be conducted which will include a larger number of participants with a greater number of HBCUs being represented.

Another recommendation is for counselors not to assume that a person who has same-sex attractions will automatically identify with the LGBT labels. The participants in this study overwhelmingly rejected the term lesbian. Each preferred the term *women who love women*. When working with LGBT or any marginalized population, it is important to remember the effect of oppression on the mental health of clients. It might

not be evident, so it is important that mental health professionals be aware of the subtleties of discrimination and oppression which includes the assignment of labels.

Implications

The results of this study have several implications for positive social change. Participants in this study spoke of inner dialogue and self-awareness that began with their participation in the study. None of the participants previously reflected on how their experiences at an HBCU and their identity as an African American lesbian has impacted the management of their multiple identities. The six women who participated in this study were able to share their experiences and thoughts and they had their voices heard. At least four of the women commented on how their participation in this study will affect their future. They appreciated having a safe space to reflect and openly talk about their identities. Three said they were going to share this experience and conversation with a few of their friends who also attended an HBCU. This could spark an awareness of the impact of hiding, denying, or shelving an identity. Awareness is the first step toward change.

The literature supports the perception that persons who identify with the LGBT community feel as if they must hide or deny their sexual identity for the sake of their African American identity in order to be accepted and supported by their ethnic or racial community (Datta et al., 2017). Studies also suggest that a person's level of mental distress can be correlated with social acceptance or rejection. Any improvement in the acceptance of LGBT African Americans on the HBCU campuses could transfer to the African American community as a whole. Persons who identify as LGBT would be

comfortable serving as positive roles models in their capacity as faculty, staff, and other HBCU administrators. This could lead to the perception that HBCUs are accepting of LGBT members.

African Americans have a history of mistrust and thus have underutilized mental health services (Campbell & Long, 2014). The results of this study could be used to develop a stronger therapeutic alliance by arming counselors and counselor educators with the culturally relevant information necessary to provide appropriate services and interventions. For example, counseling professionals could begin the shift from monoculture techniques to multicultural interventions that acknowledge and address the unique identities of persons who identify with at least three marginalized groups. This could result in an increase in the numbers of African Americans who seek out mental health services.

Finally, this study could be duplicated in its entirety or with different marginalized identities. A quantitative or mixed method study could explore this topic from a different perspective. A quantitative approach would allow for a much larger sample of both participants and HBCUs. Results from this study and results from any future inquiries could increase the dialogue and potentially lessen the perception of invisibility experienced by African American lesbians who attend an HBCU.

Reflections

Researchers who conduct studies on their own population or who have experiences with the phenomenon being studied must engage in safeguards to decrease bias and researcher influence as well pay attention to self-care to regulate any emotions

that may occur during the research process (Lewis, 2011). When I began this process, I was unsure what emotions would be aroused. The use of memos and researcher notes allowed me to reflect on any feelings that I might have had. I was constantly surprised that each of the participants had experiences that were the polar opposite of my own.

I shared my experience with the participants after all of the data were collected. I explained that I went to an HBCU in 1985. I experienced the rush of racial pride like many students who step on the HBCU campus for the first time. I made friends and my first year was uneventful in many ways. This was primarily due to the fact that I hid my identity from most students and staff at the HBCU. Unfortunately, the one person I shared my identity with revealed it (without my permission or knowledge) to enough people and by my second year, I was targeted and treated as a traitor to my race. I was ostracized by the other students. I had to move three times in 2months due to the fear and discrimination of the other students. I went to the dean for assistance and I was blamed for the behaviors of others due to my choice of clothing. At the end of the second year, I left the HBCU and finished my undergraduate degree at a PWI. The experiences were painful and still are to this day. I did not share my experience before the interviews because I did not want to influence the participants. I consistently used the tools that were in place (member checking and feedback from the committee) which ensured that I would recognize any instances where my experiences would influence the data, analysis, and interpretation of the participants' experiences.

I was very surprised that the participants did not share my own experiences. Sterling's experience was similar to my own in many ways, yet she was able to return to

an HBCU to finish her undergraduate education. It seemed that being connected to this study initiated many thoughts and feeling not only for the participants but for me as well.

Conclusion

This process and the results of the study are inspiring. It was interesting that the participants had the perception of having a positive college experience. However, their subsequent reflections of the experience revealed the fear, anxiety, and frustration that women who identify with the African American lesbian community feel when having to choose which identity to suppress or when they feel compelled to lie or deceive loved ones for fear of rejection. In searching for the concluding words, I decided to end with a quote from one of the participants, Tonya:

> I just think hopefully now that it is 2019 that things can be different than they were in the 1980s...that African American women who identify as a lesbian can be comfortable. Because you know as Black women we carry a lot. We worry about what other people think about us. We try to live our lives for somebody else. Whether our parents think this or that, whether we are on a college campus or not. Sometimes we judge each other harder than other people judge us. So hopefully by doing this study, some women who identify as African American lesbians and who may not be able to come out to their families know that they have support. I hope there can be support systems in place for students coming into college. You know because college is already scary itself. Students should be comfortable. You know like, "I can be myself without worrying about people disliking me or shunning me away because of my sexuality." So hopefully this

study will help people understand that we are just like everybody else. We are still the same, we are women, Black woman and that is what we should be treated like…we should not be treated as just this ***gay Black woman.***

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Appendix A: Demographic Questions

1. Are you 18 years old or older? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format*)
2. Do you self-identify as a lesbian? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format*)
3. Do you self-identify your ethnicity as African American? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format*)
4. Did you attend a Historically Black College or University for at least two years? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format*)

If a "yes" response is provided to all of the four questions, the participant will continue informed consent. If the participant provides a response of "no" to one or more items, they will be asked to confirm the responses. If the "no" response stands they will be thanked for their time and participation. The participants will be informed that they will not be asked any further questions due to incompatibility with the research criteria.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

My interview with participants will consist of a brief introduction and a review of the consent document. Once the initial procedures are completed, I will remind the participants of the purpose of the study and immediately begin the interview by asking the central question. The central question will be followed by several additional questions. Should the participant provide information that answers an interview question, that question will not be asked.

I. Initial Procedure

a. Brief Introduction-Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am a doctoral student in the dissertation process and your voluntary participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

b. Review Completed Forms (Informed Consent and Consent to Record Interview (Audio only)

- Demographic Information – participants will be asked if they have any questions.

II. Introduction

a. Counselors and counselor educators are ethically bound to provide a voice for communities that have historically been silenced. This study will provide such a voice by exploring the experiences of African American lesbians who attended HBCUs.

III. Central Question

- Please describe your experience and perceptions of being a lesbian and African American attending an HBCU; these experiences and thoughts can include, are not limited to discussions and encounters with friends, bystanders, peers, students, and university personnel.

IV. Additional Interview Questions (if necessary):

- What was your reason for attending an HBCU?
- What years did you attend the HBCU?
- Tell me about your perception of the environment on your HBCU campus?
- How did you manage your identities while at the HBCU?
- How would describe the impact of your attendance at an HBCU on your identity?
- Where there any benefits or drawbacks to being an African American lesbian student attending an HBCU?
- What, if anything, would have improved your experience at the HBCU?
- How do you continue to manage your identities?
- How has the very participation in this study impacted the reflection of your experiences?
- Why did you participate in this study? What are you hoping to gain or contribute by participating?

V. Closing

a. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your time and participating in this interview. You will be provided by email message with a summary of this interview to review. This is to ensure that you were quoted correctly. I will make all the necessary corrections. I will also contact you by email message once I have developed some themes regarding this topic based on my interviews with you and other participants. I will ask you to react to the themes I have developed. Again, thank you for your participation in this interview.