

NAVIGATING LIFE EXPERIENCES: VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
PURSUING A COLLEGE DEGREE AFTER INCARCERATION

by

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ABSTRACT

APRIL CELESTE SMITH. Navigating life experiences: Voices of African American women pursuing a college degree after incarceration. (Under the direction of DR. SANDRA DIKA)

This study examined the experiences of African American women pursuing college degrees after incarceration despite systemic barriers. The conceptual framework used to ground the research was Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) through the lens of Black Feminist Thought (BFT). The participants of the study consisted of nine African American women who had been incarcerated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants that identified as African American, woman and enrolled in a two or four-year college. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, over the telephone, and through Google Hangout Video. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the approach used to provide insight to the lived experiences of the participants. The emergent themes of the participants, African American women who had experienced incarceration, were found through an inductive approach using manual coding and computer software. There were two main themes with three subthemes each. One of the main themes was perseverance of self with subthemes of agency, overcoming barriers, and support. The other main theme was affirmation of self with subthemes of accomplishments, aspirations, and faith. The findings of the study suggested that African American women who were formerly incarcerated were focused on their personal growth and development during pursuit of a higher education degree. The women took ownership of their lives to determine their future and did not place a

huge emphasis on what institutions were not doing for them but looking at what they need to do for themselves to have the opportunities they desire.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the nine women who allowed me into their lives to learn and understand their lived experiences. Thank you for trusting me with your stories to share across a broader spectrum of people. I am forever indebted to you for your strengths, your drive and passion. As each of you chose what your names would be for this study, I want to say to Tia, Nikki, Eve, Blue, Naomi, Kareema, Chrystal, Lisa, and Anna, thank you. Additionally, I want to dedicate this to those who have gone before me; my ancestors that paved the way for me to have a platform. This is our dissertation.

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“The race is not won to the swift but to the one who endureth till the end.”

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Navigating Life Experiences: Voices of African American Women Pursuing a College Degree After Incarceration

Over 700,000 men and women are released from state and federal prisons each year (Travis, 2005; West, Sabol, & Greenman, 2010), of whom about two-thirds will recidivate or have a relapse of negative behavior and return to prison (Grove, 2011). Given the barriers encountered by individuals upon reentry into society after incarceration, there is a growing national movement to identify which opportunities keep people out of prison. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals contend with mental health concerns, unstable family support, and lower levels of educational attainment (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). The opportunity for a stable income and a healthier mental and physical state is essential for holistic success after release from prison (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017), and education provides a pathway for individuals to reintegrate and assimilate successfully into society after incarceration (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008).

Current research promotes the positive impact of higher education on individuals who were formerly incarcerated. According to a RAND Corporation study (Davis et al., 2014), a individual who participates in any kind of educational program during or after incarceration is less likely to recidivate than individuals who choose not to further their education, which is supported by other studies (Gaes, 2008; Halkovic et al., 2013). In addition to lowering recidivism, higher education contributes to enhanced increased financial security, strengthened family units, and increased involvement in community concerns (Halkovic et al., 2013). While pursuing higher education provides an avenue for

individuals to be active citizens (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017), formerly incarcerated individuals face several barriers to accessing higher education.

Exclusions placed on individuals who have been incarcerated are collateral consequences that can hinder access to educational opportunities, such as denial of Federal Pell Grants and federal student loans due to convictions of drug possession or sale of illegal drugs (Berson, 2013). In addition to these barriers, women continue to face unique barriers to their success after incarceration such as limited access to substance abuse treatment, violence prevention programs, and health care while dealing with issues of post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health (Richie, 2001). African American women, who are overrepresented in the prison system, face increased barriers (Nellis, 2016). For example, Gurusami (2017) found that formerly incarcerated Black women are subject to following unwritten state practices that seek to control their transformation from incarcerated criminals to post-release workers.

...employment is subjectively policed by state agents and must meet three conditions to count as work: it should be reliable, in that it must produce consistent, long-term financial benefits, and therefore cannot be contract or insecure work; recognizable, in that it must be legible to state actors as employment in a conventional workplace setting; and redemptive, in that it must be perceived as contributing to the broader public good. (p. 433)

If Black women do not meet those subjective conditions governed by state agents, they may be labeled as not committed to rehabilitation, and therefore threatened by agents that they will return to prison (Gurusami, 2017). Rehabilitation labor emphasizes self-

reliance in the labor market as evidence of Black women's moral and criminal rehabilitation. However, because these women have felony charges, they struggle gaining access to jobs that meet the aforementioned conditions (Solinas-Saunders, Stacer, & Guy, 2015). Furthermore, Gurusami (2017) found that Black women who sought post-release educational opportunities experienced issues with their state agents accepting educational programs as recognizable employment. With limited educational training, finding reliable employment can be challenging (Rose, Michalsen, Wiest, & Fabian, 2008).

This study examined the experiences of African American women, formerly incarcerated, who pursue college degrees and provide further insight into the motivation of these women to pursue higher education, and how they navigate through systemic barriers. This chapter provides a summary of the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the methodology of the study, the theoretical framework, the assumptions of the study, the limitations and delimitations of the study, the significance of the study, and a summary of the study.

Research Problem

Mass incarceration has had a tremendous impact on the African American community (Traum, 2013); African Americans are incarcerated five times more than Whites (Nellis, 2016). Moreover, African American women are incarcerated at twice the rate of White women (Porter, 2015). While African American women represent only 13% of the female adult population in the United States, they have composed nearly half of the nation's female prison (federal and state) population (King, 2006), and about 30% of incarcerated women in all settings to include state or federal prisons and jails (Lapidus

et al., 2005) in recent history. Compared to a White adult female, an African American adult female is eight times more likely to be incarcerated for non-violent offenses (King, 2006). Additionally, African American women who are jailed have faced racial stereotypes because they have lower educational attainment (i.e., no high school diploma, high school equivalency, GED), unstable employment, and are typically living in poverty (Hutchinson, 2006). Racial disparities inundate the criminal legal system at a disproportionate rate, with the poorest neighborhoods having the highest incarceration rates (Crutchfield & Weeks, 2015; Halkovic et al., 2013).

Much of the existing theoretical and program development research on prisoner populations has been conducted using samples of adult males, both current and former prisoners, or male adolescents at risk of imprisonment (Johnson, 2001). Additionally, because men represent the overwhelming majority of the state and federal prison population in the US, the existing literature is predominantly focused on characteristics related to the life experiences of male prisoners (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009). Research examining formerly incarcerated women and their experiences with higher education is limited, and there is even more limited investigation on women's experiences once they transition from incarceration into society (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, & Solomon, 2009). Women who were formerly incarcerated must maneuver through obstacles that could put them back into prison, including securing a safe place to live, obtaining and maintaining employment, reuniting with their family and children, meeting parole requirements, receiving substance abuse and mental health treatment, moving past stigmas, and gaining access to education (O'Brien & Young, 2006). This study helped to

address the gap in knowledge through an examination of the experiences of African American women, formerly incarcerated, who are enrolled in college degree studies, as they navigate systemic barriers including racism and sexism.

Racism and sexism play a critical role in the lives of those who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated s. The majority of research, particularly in social psychology, examines African American men as a target of racism and White women as a target of sexism, disregarding other subordinate groups such as African American women (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The impact of the intersectionality of race and gender has been overlooked (Crenshaw, 1989), for example when the legal community narrowly measures gender as only White women and race as African American men. Consider the story of the late Ramona Brant, an African American woman pardoned by former President Barack Obama, who was convicted of conspiracy of a drug crime and sentenced to life. At the 2017 Race Matters for Juvenile Justice Conference in Charlotte, Ramona shared her story of being a first-time offender and serving 21 years in federal prison for a nonviolent crime. She compared her story to that of a White woman, with a prior record, who was convicted of the same crime at the same time and was given a year and a half probation. Indeed, data support Ramona's story of sentencing bias. A recent investigation by journalists at the Sarasota Herald Tribune examined sentences for crimes in Florida from 2004 to 2016, and found that across Florida's legal system, when a White and Black person have the same offense, the Black person receives a longer prison sentence by 60 percent (Salman, Le Coz, & Johnson, 2016). Similar to the experience of Ramona Brant, many women serve prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenses and are

charged with conspiracy because they may be aware that their significant other is a drug dealer (The Sentencing Project, 2017). Additionally, many of these women have been unable to safely escape situations of domestic and sexual violence, which is not taken into consideration when they are being sentenced (Ney, Ramirez, & Dieten, 2012).

In the 1980's, there was a significant increase in incarceration of African American women (Mallicoat, 2012). Among the most pertinent reasons for the rise in numbers of incarcerated African American women were The War on Drugs and the actions of state legislatures. The War on Drugs, coined by President Nixon in 1971, escalated the enforcement of drug offenses as criminal acts (Drug Policy Alliance, n.d.). According to the Drug Policy Alliance (n.d.), report, the Nixon campaign in 1968, and, subsequently, the Nixon White House, had enemies; antiwar left (hippies) and Black people. One of Nixon's top aides, John Ehrlichman was quoted saying, "...we knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Blacks, but by getting the public to associate marijuana with hippies and Blacks with heroin...we could disrupt those communities." The arrest of prominent leaders, the raiding of their homes, the dismantling of their meetings, and slandering them on the news caused Black communities to be condemned. This included the police practice of stop and frisk. The target was mainly in poor Black neighborhoods which contributed the increase of African Americans in the criminal legal system (Salman, Le Coz, & Johnson, 2016).

The arrests of women, specifically African American women, increased significantly because their communities were being targeted. According to Salman and colleagues (2016), African Americans convicted in Florida of felony drug possession

were sentenced to twice the time as Whites, even when their backgrounds were similar, in almost half of the counties. The War on Drugs combined with judicial bias have aided the United States to lead the world in the highest incarceration rate (Drug Policy Alliance, n.d.) and the longest sentences (Halkovic et al., 2013). With the African American population being targeted and placed in the criminal justice system, there access to higher education is limited.

Purpose of Study

Research shows that education is a key resource in lowering recidivism rates amongst incarcerated individuals. While there is a variety of research on educational programs in the prison setting, there is limited research that examines the impact of higher education on individuals who have been formerly incarcerated (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Furthermore, there are fewer studies that have explored the specific experiences of African American women that were formerly incarcerated and pursue higher education in the form of a college degree. The purpose of this study was to examine what motivates African American women, who were formerly incarcerated, pursue college degrees despite the systemic barriers of reintegration into society. Undertaking a study with this purpose promoted an authentic understanding of the experiences that African American women, who were formerly incarcerated expressed through their voice.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study included:

1. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their motivation to pursue a college degree?
2. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their academic, social, and personal experiences while pursuing a college degree?
3. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated maintain motivation and persist through challenges and systemic barriers?

The theoretical framework used in this study was Feminist Standpoint Theory understood through Black Feminist Thought (BFT; Collins, 2000). BFT emphasizes the unique voices of women and addresses the ingrained societal oppression of women.

Methods

This study was a phenomenological approach that utilized a brief demographic criteria survey and semi-structured individual interviews with African American women who were pursuing a college degree after incarceration, inclusive of those who participated and did not participate in reentry programs. I utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine the interviews and highlight the experiences of the participants that were working towards their college degree.

Subjectivity

While I am an African American woman who has been neither arrested nor incarcerated, I know that I could easily be one of the women in the population of focus for this study. I am guided by a personal belief that we all have a right to education to

better ourselves intellectually, to have lucrative and secure employment, to have a place that we can call home and care for our loved ones; thus, I feel a responsibility to understand and share voices of African American women who do not have the privileges that I have been afforded. At the same time that I am aware of my privileges, I recognize that all African American women face similar barriers due to structural racism. I believe that women, who have been formerly incarcerated, have served their time and should not continue to be convicted after prison. I believe that a college education provides African American women who have been formerly incarcerated, a way to rebrand themselves to have a better life, and to reflect on who they are and why their existence is important in society.

Research shows that formerly incarcerated individuals who continue their education are less likely to reoffend and be placed back in prison. I have a family member who is currently in prison. He is taking college classes and firmly believes that gaining an education is the way out of prison and the way for a promising future. I wanted to hear the stories of women who were once incarcerated and are now pursuing a degree. I was gratified and honored to listen to the women's stories and share them with those who do not recognize the motivation and persistence required to pursue a degree in the face of internal and external barriers. I believe that my interpretation and dissemination of these stories provide a basis for me to design a program that engages and empowers women who have been denied their freedom; before and after incarceration. I have been as authentic as I know how with the participants, letting them know that I do not have a background in the criminal justice system and that I know I

have a lot to learn about the phenomenon through their personal stories. While I did not share the experience of incarceration with them, I connected with them as an African American woman who has been stereotyped by the stigmas of society and the faith that many of them shared in acknowledging their help comes from a higher being.

Assumptions

During interviews with the participants, I assumed that each participant would provide candid responses to the questions presented, which provided me with rich data to analyze and interpret meaning. I also believed that since the individuals in my sample shared the common experiences of having spent time in jail or prison and being enrolled in a college degree program after release, there would be similarities in their stories. Furthermore, I assumed that women who were pursuing a college degree after prison had a desire to stay out of prison and help other women stay out of prison, thus they would provide authentic and relatable stories from which others who have similar experiences may learn. Lastly, I assumed the stories of these women would illuminate needs of the larger population that could inform educational and legal practice and policy.

Limitations

Some potential limitations in this study are related to methodology, including sampling and recruitment, and depth of interviewing. I recruited African American women who were part of reentry programs in different states (e.g., College and Community Fellowship in New York). This method of recruitment allowed me to access the population, however, the experiences of women who were pursuing higher education without affiliation with a reentry program was not a determining factor in the data

gathered. I conducted one primary interview with each participant, therefore, it was possible that the amount of time spent interviewing was insufficient for some participants to feel comfortable sharing their most difficult experiences and barriers in the pursuit of a college degree. This study was conducted with nine participants, however, the population of African American women who have been formerly incarcerated is greater than that. Therefore, the experiences shared by the participants of this study was not meant to portray the experiences of all African American women that have been previously incarcerated. The collected data was only of women who identified as African American women and not transwomen even though the study called for both. Because I did not have any of the participants identify as transwomen, their experiences were not represented in this study.

Delimitations

Many studies have focused on the barriers faced by men and women who have been imprisoned, however, this study was delimited to African American women who were formerly incarcerated and are now pursuing college degrees. The sampling frame was cast out to the population of African American women who self-identified as an African American woman or transwoman, formerly incarcerated, and was enrolled in college. This study emphasized the women's experiences that have motivated them to go to college but was not intended to focus on their experiences while incarcerated. Additionally, using Feminist Standpoint Theory through the lens of Black Feminist Thought was an important theoretical perspective used to emphasize the participants under study, African American women who have been formerly incarcerated.

Significance of the Study

This study focused on an understudied issue that could benefit a significant sector of the U.S. population. As of December 2016, African American women represented around 20 percent of the female prison population, and there are roughly 20,300 African American women in the federal and state prison system (Carson, 2018). While education has been tied to lower recidivism, there has been little attention to the experiences and outcomes for women who pursue higher education after release from prison. The qualitative, phenomenological methodology of this study has provided in-depth data and a description of the experiences of African American women, who were formerly incarcerated, who have chosen to pursue a college degree, with the aim to understand their motivations and how they navigate their personal and systemic barriers to persist toward that goal.

Terminology Used in Study

In this study, the terms African American and Black were used interchangeably. Many authors use Black to identify a racial group. Therefore, I alternated using the race/ethnicity term Black when it was noted in the literature. Although not all scholarly literature specifically states what encompasses the racial group Black, I used Black and African American for those who have origins of the Black racial groups of Africa. Furthermore, I chose to refer to the participants in this study as African American women in my research questions and methodology as denoted in the initial survey of participants. The demographic choice given stated “I identify as African American or Black”. Additionally, my identity as an African American woman, and my perception and

understanding is that African American acknowledges the origins of Black people from the continent of Africa that have lived on the continent of North America specifically in the United States of America.

Summary

In summary, mass incarceration has had a major impact on the African American community. Although much of the research on mass incarceration is focused on African American men, African American women's involvement in mass incarceration has doubled or tripled that of White women. The experiences of African American women have been marginalized in the research. As formerly incarcerated African American women reintegrate into society, they often do not have the experiences and educational background needed to stay out of the prison setting due to systemic barriers in the K-12 education system and the judicial system. Research indicates that education is a key component to reduce recidivism, and there has been insufficient effort to date on understanding what motivates African American women that were formerly incarcerated to pursue a college degree, and how they persist in an educational system that was not designed for them. There is a need to apply a critical framework that acknowledges the systemic oppression of African American women to study this issue, and to utilize methodology that permits women to tell their own stories. Thus, I, the researcher, have conducted a phenomenological study informed by Black Feminist Thought through the Feminist Standpoint Theory to examine motivation, experience, and persistence through challenges and systemic barriers among formerly incarcerated African American women pursuing a college degree. This study provided a basis for continued investigation with

the understudied population and can inform institutional programs and practices that are responsive to the unique needs and experiences of African American women that were formerly incarcerated.

This chapter provided a summary of the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the methodology of the study. Additionally, the theoretical framework, assumptions of the study, limitations and delimitations of the study, significance of the study, terminology used in the study, and a summary of the study are also included.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examined the experiences of African American women, who were formerly incarcerated, pursuing a college degree and seeks to understand:

1. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their motivation to pursue a college degree?
2. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their academic, social, and personal experiences while pursuing a college degree?
3. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated maintain motivation and persist through challenges and systemic barriers?

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) grounded in Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was selected as the framework of the study because of its particular fit with the phenomenon under study. In order to understand the framework of the study, FST and BFT are described individually and then together to show how Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) is informed through the lens of Black Feminist Thought (BFT).

The literature review is centered around understanding African American women's access to higher education, for the general population and specifically for the population of women under study (formerly incarcerated). This included an examination of historical and current issues related to access, emphasis on higher education and educational options available to women while they are in prison and after release. Lastly, the literature includes empirical studies on the factors associated with employment and educational attainment of African American women who were formerly incarcerated.

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST)

FST was developed by Hartsock (1983), after examining the work of German idealist and philosophers Georg Hegel and Karl Marx, who determined that their use of standpoints would be effective if applied to the relationship between Man and Woman. Unlike Hegel who examined relationships between enslaved persons and their Master, and Marx who studied the positionality of the worker; Hartsock examined gender relationships. Hartsock, along with other prominent feminist theorist such as Barbara Smith, Sara Harding, and Patricia Collins believe that feminist standpoint is essential for examining societal oppressions of marginalized groups of women (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1987; Collins, 2000). These women all saw that the lived experiences of women are different from the lived experiences of men due to differences in their roles; therefore, women's knowledge and view of the world are significantly different. According to Hartsock (1997) "Feminist standpoint theory privileges knowledge of the oppressed because it is more likely to offer possibilities for "envisioning more just social practices" (p. 373).

From Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Fairchild, 2011) oppressed groups are being empowered to share their reality in a way that resists the dominant male claims in society that do not embrace or share the knowledge of the differences between men and women based on the diverse roles they play. FST denotes that women have a different set of knowledge than men do. My study on African American women who have been formerly incarcerated shares an even more varied knowledge. The women in my study are triple bound because their identities are African American, a woman, and

formerly incarcerated (Figueira-McDonough & Sarri, 2002). Feminist Standpoint Theory provides a stance for the participants to share their lived experiences of being released from prison and the barriers they encounter in trying to build their lives toward personal and professional success. Feminist Standpoint Theory is necessary to hone in on the experiences of women who were formerly incarcerated because FST acknowledges the different knowledge and experiences women share that men do not.

FST is rooted in the assumption that knowledge is socially situated and based primarily on the lives of men in dominant races, classes, and cultures. Moreover, knowledge claims tend to depict women and members of other marginalized groups as "others" or outsiders. Since women's lives are distinct from men's, most knowledge does not reflect their realities. FST recognizes the differences between men and women's knowledge based on their epistemological perspective. FST focuses on liberating the differences of gender and works to uncover oppression while illuminating how it is covered up. FST provides a platform for the marginalized to discuss their lived experiences which highlights their voices in society (Piercy, 1973). This ability of FST to be a platform for marginalized voices provides a foundation to specifically discuss the experiences of African American women, one of many oppressed groups.

The paths of African American women are uniquely different and are rooted in the historical progression and ideologies of African American men and women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). This literature review addresses the effect of systemic racism on African American women's access to education before, during, and after imprisonment. Although education is granted to all individuals in the United States, systemic racism;

embedded in our social institutions, structures, and social relations; creates barriers for African Americans to access education (King, 1988; Manby, 2014; Feagin, 2006). These barriers exist within educational policies, practices, ideas and behaviors that give a disproportionate amount of power and resources to White people while denying the same resources to people of color (Cole, 2017). The paths of African American women who were formerly incarcerated are equally unique as African American women who never went to prison. The use of BFT; a collective voice of Black women's ideology; calls for these women to share the challenges they have faced as individuals working to have a better life for themselves and their family in the midst of systemic racism.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

BFT is an epistemology written by Patricia Collins that places the knowledge of African American women at the center of analysis (Collins, 2000). BFT explores the words and ideas of Black feminists that are within academia and those that are outside of academia. This epistemology is produced by Black women and articulates the diverse standpoints of their lived experiences. Historically, the description of a woman has been culturally constructed because of the ideological perspectives of dominant and mainstream cultures. In this study, the ideological perspectives are shared through the voices of African American women who were formerly incarcerated.

Too often, the voices of oppressed people are only heard if their experiences are framed in the thoughts and understandings of the mainstream culture, which suppresses the natural thoughts and meanings of the oppressed (Collins, 2009). BFT allows others to view the experiences of African American women through the expressions of African

American women and not through dominant culture expressions. Collins (1990) states “...Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women” (p. 22). It encapsulates the reality that Black women live within. In other words, Black women can relate to each other because there is a mutual understanding of what it is like to be an oppressed, based on their identity as Black woman and based on their varied lived experiences.

BFT suggests that the experiences of African American women are dissimilar to the experiences of women of other ethnic backgrounds (Collins, 2000). Specific to BFT are three key themes: a) BFT is shaped by the experiences Black women have encountered in their lives, which are their personal stories; b) Black women’s experiences are individually unique, however, there are experiences that connect them with other African American women; c) Black women’s experiences intersect through the diversity of their age, class, religion, sexual orientation, and other intersectional identities. The collective identity of Black women as articulated through BFT awakens their consciousness which provides a new meaning to their own identity inclusive of resisting ways they have been oppressed. In the context of this study, BFT applied to the African American women who have been formerly incarcerated and chosen to further their education to find empowerment through the awakening of their conscience. Since African American women’s lives have been told and shaped by so many external influences, BFT encourages African American women to develop, redefine, and explain their own stories through the lens with which they identify (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Furthermore, BFT provides a platform for the voices of African American women to be amplified; amplified within academia, and amplified in social spaces through songs and formal and impromptu speeches that allow their thoughts to be articulated through their identified struggles and challenges (Collins, 2000). BFT encompasses the thoughts of Black women who have been oppressed. Oppressions such as structural racism (i.e., laws, policies) that limit access based on race and sexism and reduce the value and worth of women's economic efforts. These are the reasons why BFT exists and is necessary. BFT provides a comprehensive knowledge of Black women that helps them survive, reflect, and be an advocate for themselves and other women who identify within this oppressed group.

Feminist Standpoint Theory through the lens of Black Feminist Thought

FST is used as a foundation to ground BFT because it emphasizes the knowledge and ideas produced by marginalized populations that goes beyond the dominant societal views. BFT specifically brings forth the insights of African American women by actively acknowledging the oppression of African American women.

African American women, among other women of color, face barriers of advancement in their work and income (Godfrey & Wolf, 2016). Furthermore, African American women who were once incarcerated face the barrier of having a criminal record, which can prevent them from gaining decent employment and income. The realities of the injustices faced by African American women are revealed only when their stories are told from their standpoint. Providing the platform for formerly incarcerated women to speak their truth; their lived experiences from their position; brings forth an

awareness of a population of women who are misunderstood, excluded, and silenced. BFT opens up a dialogue for African American female voices, and more specifically previously incarcerated African American women, to be heard and not oppressed. Throughout history, the United States has operated under a system that has oppressed people because of their race, gender, and other characteristics (Shields & Davis, 1982; Feagin, 2006). African American women have been oppressed based on their race, gender, and socioeconomic class. However, formal education has been an essential access point to lessen oppression. Although African American women have encountered closed and blocked doors to education, they have unique stories of what those experiences have felt like and what has motivated them to persist. The single voice stories of Black women assist in shaping the collective story of African American women's experiences.

BFT is grounded in multiple African American women's voices, which highlights the diversity, richness, and power of African American women's thoughts and ideas. The significance of multiple voices expounds on the idea that one person cannot speak to the experiences of all African American women and the complexities that exist within their lives; however, African American women can embrace and speak their own truths, particularly African American women who have been formerly incarcerated. The African American women in this study can provide knowledge to other women who identify with their voices and their experiences as they define who they are and how they persist within their educational journey.

Furthermore, Black Feminist Thought is used as an epistemology to amplify the voices of African American formerly incarcerated women. BFT is produced by the many

experiences and thoughts of Black women. Therefore, it is essential to use BFT because it further articulates the experiences of African American women; whereas previous work conducted by other feminist philosophers such as Gilligan (1982) and Chodorows (1978) primarily studied White middle class women; which omitted the experiences of African American women in their work. Without the voices of African American women, their lived experiences cannot be accurately produced. Therefore, the omittance of the experiences of African American women further demonstrates the silenced voices of African American women and the sovereignty of White women's experiences (Collins, 1990).

History of Access to Higher Education for African American Women

During the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War, African Americans demanded schools for their communities; however, that brought about multiple attacks on their community. African American schools were being destroyed and African Americans were targets of hate crimes due to racist ideologies (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, countless schools were closed when public funding for African American education was removed as segregation became law. However, that challenge did not stop African Americans from believing in the importance of education, and the pursuit of education.

Throughout history, education has served as a powerful catalyst in the African American community to empower and uplift (Collins, 1990). After the Civil War, African Americans started to gain more opportunities and saw education as a way to elevate the African American community (Perkins, 1982). Maria Stewart, the United

States' first African American political writer, challenged African American women to "Possess the spirit of independence...possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" (Stewart, 1987, p. 53). Even in the 1800's, Stewart recognized that self-identity was essential for African American women's survival. She wanted women to know their rights, and why they should be afforded to them, and persist in obtaining those rights (Stewart, 1987). Furthermore, Stewart empowered African American women to seek knowledge as power (Stewart, 1987).

African American women have been overlooked, invisible in society, and viewed as being less than competent (Howard-Hamilton, 2003) for centuries because of their race and gender. Although African American women experienced oppression because of their race and gender, they resisted oppression by going to college to gain more knowledge (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). During the latter part of the 19th century, many women worked post-college as teachers in primary and secondary schools while African American men were being educated in a variety of academic disciplines. Teaching positions were the primary careers presented to African American women, evidence of the double oppression of sexism and racism (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; King, 1988).

The disenfranchisement patterns of educational institutions also oppressed African American women. Lucy Slowe, a female educator and the Dean of students at Howard University in the late 1930s, observed how African American women entered college with many challenges, including difficulty letting go of their traditional gender role beliefs instilled through their gendered upbringing (Slowe, 1933). As a result, some of the women had adopted a self-defeating perspective on life (Guy-Sheftall & Bell-

Scott, 1989). African American women were denied literacy as an enslaved population, but were also relegated to segregated underfunded Southern schools that ensured a quality education was an exception and not a rule (Mullings, 1997). The present day reality that many young African American women, particularly in inner city and impoverished rural areas, continue to leave school before attaining a high school diploma continues the cycle of African American women's oppression (Collins, 2009). For centuries, the development and socialization of African American women has been molded and understood from the dominant society's perception, devaluing the genuine voices of African American women who are indeed the ones who should be able to share their own experiences.

Systemic Barriers to Educational Attainment for African American Women

The Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1954 declared segregation had deprived African American children of equal educational opportunities (Patterson, 2001).

Although the intention of the ruling was to open doors for African Americans to gain an equal educational opportunity, it was not the reality. While academic achievement of African Americans has dramatically improved since the landmark case of 1954, so has the academic achievement of White students, leaving a large achievement gap between the races. One of many factors that continue this gap is limited and insufficient resources (Strauss, 2014). Disadvantaged African American students are in need of greater resources such as after school programs, early childhood programs, and more skilled

teachers with smaller classrooms (Straus, 2014) to prepare them to further their education in post-secondary institutions.

Increases in access and attainment of education are evident, however, African American women still face systemic barriers to gaining a higher education. Racial and gender disparities undermine access to a quality education that can provide a successful career as well as minimize low academic achievement (Smith-Evans, George, Graves, Kauffman, & Frohlich, 2014). Across a broad spectrum of data, Morris (2014) found that African American women reported feeling overlooked and ignored in society, and attribute that feeling to others' perceptions of their race and gender. Thomas and Jackson (2007) assert that African American women are understudied and misunderstood, and face similar issues as African American males such as academic underachievement and resilience. Despite these barriers, there are some gains that have been made, but there is still more work to be done.

College enrollment rates and degree attainments have had a steady increase for African American women since the 1970s (Hoffman & Llagas, 2003). According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette, 2017), the percentage of college enrollment that was occupied by African Americans increased by four percentage points between 1976 and 2014, from 10 to 14 percent. When looking at completion rates, racial and gender disparities are evident. Musu-Gillette (2017) data from the 2013-2014 academic year showed that among African Americans, 64 percent of bachelor's degree earners were women, compared to 56% women among White degree earners. McDaniel and colleagues (2011) reported that

while African American rates of college completion have steadily risen over time, they have risen more rapidly for women than for men; and further, African American women have held a consistent advantage in college completion over men for more than 70 years.

Historically, the female advantage in educational attainment among African Americans was linked to more favorable labor market opportunities, and stronger incentives for employment for educated African American women (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). However, the stereotypes of African American women and girls have been shown to affect the way in which school administrators, teachers, and peers respond to and discipline this population of students (Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

“School to Prison” Pipeline for African American Girls

The report *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* found that stereotypes of African American girls may shape educators’ implicit bias, therefore causing their response to African American girls’ behavior to be harsher than White girls (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Additionally, Blake, Butler, Lewis, and Darensbourg (2010) study suggests that Black girls’ exclusionary discipline is overrepresented and the reasons behind their referrals differs amongst White and Hispanic girls. Behaviors of African American girls are often penalized because they exhibit behaviors; candidness, assertiveness, and expressive thoughts of what is fair and unfair; that do not fit into dominant stereotypes of what is appropriate female behavior (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Black girls are often affected by the stigma of being seen as “good” girls or “ghetto” girls due to the stereotypes of identity politics in society (Morris, 2016). For example, African American girls who are outspoken in class and challenge

people in positions of authority are disproportionately disciplined (Smith-Evans, George, Graves, Kauffman, & Frohlich, 2014).

Additionally, Smith-Evans and colleagues (2014) report that African American girls are more likely than girls of other race and ethnicity groups to be disciplined for dress code violations, as well as less severe behaviors like eating candy in class. While assertiveness can be valuable for African American girls, particularly in leadership roles, it is negatively interpreted in the K-12 school setting and can further inequitable discipline. The uniqueness of African American girls is silenced because they must conform to mainstream ideas of what girls should act like (i.e., quiet, passive).

With the disciplinary measures taken against African American girls, studies show there is a link between African American girls being punished due to zero tolerance policies and patterns leading to incarceration, known as the “school to prison pipeline” (Heitzeg, 2009). Zero tolerance policy refers to the criminalization of minor disciplinary infractions in schools by relying on suspension and expulsion of students. The theory behind zero tolerance policies is that small infractions will lead to more severe behavior (Morris, 2016). This led to police officers handling small incidents of misbehavior. Student Resource Officers (SROs) who are police officers, use their discipline techniques and practices to handle disciplinary issues that were previously the purview of school administrators, with such consequences as students being arrested at school (Morris, Epstein, & Yusuf, 2016; Heitzeg, 2009). This “School to Prison Pipeline” disproportionately impacts poor students, students with disabilities, and especially African Americans, who are suspended and expelled at the highest rates, despite

comparable infractions of other races (Redfield & Nance, 2016). For African American girls, these systemic biases are factors that could potentially cause them to be in the juvenile justice system or become incarcerated, further denying their access to education (Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

Black girls not fitting into the social norms defined by White middle class society causes them to be misunderstood and labeled as disrespectful. In turn, this leads to Black girls being punished and ultimately pushed out of school. The global perspective that education is the way out of poverty is no longer an opportunity for these girls. Therefore, leading Black girls to find ways to survive in the world which leads to incarceration (Morris, 2016).

Intersection of Educational Access and Imprisonment

The prison system includes many individuals who have been denied access to higher education opportunities, the majority of whom are from low socioeconomic communities of color that lack adequate resources (Freedom Education Project Puget Sound-FEPPS, 2016). Incarcerated women usually have children and have gone to prison for nonviolent offenses (Sabol, Couture, & Harrison, 2007). For many incarcerated individuals, the 1994 elimination of federal funding for college courses took away the only access they may have had to higher education. McCarty (2006) reported that in the late 1960s, people committed crimes because of the lack of access to legitimate means to acquire social resources such as status and wealth. Penologists, who believe that it is possible to suppress criminal activities, pushed for prisoners to have the opportunity to participate in a variety of programs, including higher education, and have increased

access to social resources. This philosophy, combined with the Pell Grant, a federal need-based grant for college study, gathered support for implementing higher education programs for prisoners in the mid-1970s (McCarty, 2006).

McCarty (2006) also reported that in 1965, Congress passed Title IV of the Higher Education Act permitting inmates to apply for Pell Grants to finance their college education. In 1982, 350 prisons nationwide provided college programs that served 27,000 people - about nine percent of the prison population. During this time, numerous studies found that these prison education programs reduced recidivism, as much as 55 percent lower than those not participating in college programs (McCarty, 2006). However, in 1994, Congress eliminated access to Pell Grants for prisoners, thus creating a shift in the number of prison education programs offered.

Provision of education within prison is a way to rehabilitate incarcerated individuals by providing transformative skills upon societal reentry (Prison Study Project – PSP, n.d.) Many women have taken advantage of prison education prior to their release (Prison Study Project-PSP, n.d.). While all federal prisons offer educational programs, there are some private prisons that offer educational programs as well (Harrison & Bec, 2003).

In 2000, the most prevalent prison educational programs were focused on incarcerated individuals obtaining a GED. The percentages for educational resources such as high school courses, special education courses, and vocational programs increased due to the greatest need of those in prison; however, college courses, decreased (Harrison & Beck, 2003). According to Gorgol and Sponsler's report (2011), 7 in 10 formerly incarcerated individuals will end up back in prison for a new crime within three

years of being released, primarily because people who did not participate in education programs while incarcerated were more likely to recidivate (Prison Study Project- PSP, 2013). Gorgol and Sponsler's report (2011) also reveals that even in the 1990s, 15 different studies found that postsecondary education in a correctional facility reduced recidivism long term and this finding still holds true today. Being that women are more likely to have a high school diploma, and there has been a decrease or limited college courses offered in prison (Harrison & Beck, 2003), higher education courses are needed in order to reduce recidivism. Nevertheless, despite the evidence that higher education in prisons reduced recidivism, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners which in retrospect caused the recidivism rate to increase (Civic Impulse, 2018). Systemic structures continue to play a major role in how education is accessed and even more so with the impact these structures have on formerly incarcerated women.

Women Transitioning Home after Incarceration

Women who have been formerly incarcerated are faced with multiple barriers to reintegration. While many formerly incarcerated men return home to a family, formerly incarcerated women often lose contact with their family and have to reestablish a home for themselves upon release (Cobbina & Bender, 2012). Some of the barriers faced by women who were formerly incarcerated are systemic and some are personal. As the women are released back into society, they are faced with unemployment issues, lack of housing options, substance abuse, domestic violence, and family issues (Runell, 2017).

Some women live with family upon release, however, a study completed by Mallik-Kane and Visser (2008) found that 56 percent of women that lived with family received social and some financial support, while the other percentage did not receive any support from family thus noting how critical housing is to successful reintegration.

According to Sullivan, Mino, Nelson, and Pope (2002), positive reintegration is due to having a stable home environment with social and emotional support. However, society ignores the negative impact low wage jobs has on women having insufficient salaries to be successful in providing for themselves and their family (Fine & Torre, 2006). In a recent study, women who had been incarcerated had much greater difficulty seeking and retaining employment compared to women who had never been incarcerated. African American women fared worst of all (Seville, 2008). In one experimental study, resumes of African American women who were formerly incarcerated were about half as likely as their White peers to get a positive response from employers (Seville, 2008). In fact, 4.5 percent of formerly incarcerated African American women were offered employment while 8 percent of formerly incarcerated White women were offered employment (Seville, 2008). With limited education, finding a job that will hire these women and provide them with a competitive salary is challenging so they need vocational preparation. All of these are barriers that can impact women released from prison. Furthermore, women who have been incarcerated are trying to balance the societal demands of financial stability, parenting, transportation, housing, appointments with various service providers that are a necessity and often times a requirement upon release (Cobbina, 2010; Doherty, Forrester, Brazil, & Matheson, 2014).

Many women who have been incarcerated were there for nonviolent drug related crimes (Lawston, 2008). Substance abuse has been a major issue for majority of formerly incarcerated individuals. Sometimes it has been women who are involved directly or indirectly of drug sells and some of them who may have been using drugs (Lawston, 2008). Some women who were formerly incarcerated suffer from substance abuse need access to resources that can guide them to making the best choices. Often times, these women are poor, African American, unmarried, and living in a community where drug access is prevalent (Richie, 2001). Some of these women have been sexually victimized extensively and experienced other forms of abuse. To suppress the violent experiences they faced, drugs were used (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). Moreover, in a study by O'Brien (2001) many formerly incarcerated women had abusive relationships with their mothers but maintaining and strengthening that relationship was essential for them.

As previously mentioned, existing research is centered around formerly incarcerated men, or a combination of men and women's reduced recidivism (Crenshaw, 2012; Bonta, Pang, & Wallace-Capretta, 1995). Although these studies provide salient points on decreasing recidivism, they exclude the specific needs of successful reintegration explicitly for African American women who have been formerly incarcerated which continues the cycle that African American women are invisible in society. There are extensive challenges to successful reentry after incarceration for African American women, including low level of education, sparse work history, and lack of supporting network. Along with that, there are systemic barriers that enable formerly incarcerated individuals from turning their lives around. These include

community prejudice and changing policy landscape (Ritter, 2014). Simply having a criminal record severely limits housing and employment options, which can be exacerbated by a lack of higher education prior to imprisonment (Solomon, 2012). This combination of disadvantage suggests a need to listen to the needs of African American women who were formerly incarcerated, but also understand how this population of women persists through these barriers to remain out of prison and getting their education.

Reentry Programs and Higher Education Access for Women After Incarceration

In 2008, the Second Chance Act (SCA) legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush authorized federal funding for state and federal reentry programs. Although this legislation did not help those incarcerated, it did help those who were leaving the prison setting and reentering society. Through SCA passing in 2008, the Bureau of Justice Assistance has authorized up to \$165 million through grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations to help formerly incarcerated individuals successfully reintegrate into society (BJA, 2016).

Reentry Programs

A study conducted by the National Institute of Justice (Ritter, 2014) evaluated 10 state and local governments that received funding from SCA, and found that reentry programs are changing their philosophy to be more rehabilitative using evidence-based practices. Three key factors were determined in the study: (a) partnership growth, (b) holistic services, and (c) cultural shift (Ritter, 2014). Partnerships are growing because the SCA funding became available, therefore creating an increase of new partnerships to deliver reentry services. The services being provided by reentry programs have more case

managers to handle the situations of large numbers of individuals that were formerly incarcerated, analyze the assessments used to determine what is best for the population being served, and the staff who work in the reentry program are better prepared to work with this population. Lastly, the cultural shift is about case managers and parole officers approaching their jobs with an open mindset which helps individuals effectively reintegrate into society after incarceration (Ritter, 2014).

Reentry programs, specifically those who have taken advantage of funds from the Second Chance Act 2008, can help provide opportunities and foster self-motivation and identity transformation that many formerly incarcerated individuals would not be able to achieve on their own. In an existing Participatory Action Research study completed by the Prisoner Reentry Institute of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, there was a significant impact of college on people who were formerly incarcerated as evidenced by positive effects on their income, civic engagement, family and personal health, and reduced recidivism (Halkovic et al., 2013).

In another study conducted by Scroggins and Malley (2010), a variety of reentry programs were available for women in certain metropolitan areas. However, at least one-third of incarcerated women have a high school diploma or equivalent, yet, most of the reentry programs were geared towards women who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, which leaves a large number of women with unmet educational needs.

Reentry programs that provide adequate resources can improve college access by assisting students with applying for financial aid, counseling students on how to manage their finances, how to get funding for books, and other expenses (Mukamal, Taylor, &

Silbert, 2015). College Initiative (CI), a Prison Reentry Institute Educational Initiative is a program that provides formerly incarcerated individuals assistance in enrolling in college and earning a college degree. CI has a model that provides:

- 1) engagement which helps students to see that college can be for them by showing them a path that allows for renewing of their identity and degree completion
- 2) access which helps students as mentioned earlier, mitigate the administrative and financial barriers that come with college enrollment
- 3) support which provides a variety of resources that enable students to persist successfully through college as well as withstand the challenges that come along (Prisoner Reentry Institute, n.d.).

Access and Attainment after Imprisonment

Halkovic et al. (2013) conducted focus groups of formerly incarcerated students and discussed their admission to college and the barriers they encountered, along with the successes they gained and provided from getting their education. This study found that women and men encounter copious obstacles when navigating admission policies into college and they have to manage aggressive behaviors of some faculty and peers who are aware of their criminal record. Therefore, having support services such as non-profit organization and community outreach programs can aid in student's success through emotional support as well as providing basic needs to the students. Additionally, Halkovic and colleagues (2013) found that formerly incarcerated college students have a variety of personal experiences, are enthusiastic about learning, and motivated to give

back to their community; however, they are apprehensive about sharing those personal experiences because they are worried that disclosure of their background may negatively affect their academic goals. Nevertheless, the educational engagement in college post-release enables students to acclimate to society, develop intellectually, and model the strengths of obtaining an education for their families and those who are still incarcerated. This educational opportunity shows others who are incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated that access to a better life through education is possible.

The impact of a college education for formerly incarcerated individuals encompasses many benefits not only for formerly incarcerated African American women, but also their families (Mukamal et al., 2015). As education is accrued, the cycles of having little to no education and living in poverty can be broken, as individuals serve as mentors to the younger generations after them (Mukamal et al., 2015). Additionally, formerly incarcerated parents who further their education are role models to their children. Formerly incarcerated African American women typically serve as primary caregivers of their children and can provide their families with greater economic stability with higher levels of employment, increased job status, and reduced chances of incarceration (Baum & Payea, 2005). Furthermore, this gives women an opportunity to be positive influences in their children's lives (Mukamal et al., 2015) alleviating the chance that the child will quit or be dismissed from school and get caught up in the criminal legal system (Crutchfield & Weeks, 2015).

It is essential that the systemic barriers experienced by African American women after incarceration do not hinder their opportunities to succeed. The position of being

formerly incarcerated, African American, and a woman, bring forth a uniqueness and specific position for this oppressed group to share their individual stories; allowing others to understand how their experiences motivate their intentions of gaining a degree. Black Feminist Thought centralizes the uniqueness of each woman's voice through their individual positions, and provides the platform for their experiences to be understood.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter described how access to higher education for African American women has been obtained and the different ways it is denied in the United States. Additionally, the literature found that discrimination of Black girls in K-12 schools is a pathway to criminalization, and Black women struggle with finding adequate employment that meets the standards of state agents after incarceration. Moreover, taking college courses was not encouraged by some state agents of formerly incarcerated African American women who wanted to go to college so they could have better employment opportunities. Although research has emphasized the systems put in place to allow and deny access to higher education, the current body of literature does not explicitly address the journey of African American women to higher education after incarceration. This study provided a framework that highlighted the authentic experiences of formerly incarcerated African American women who are pursuing a college degree. Carroll (1982, p. 115) noted nearly 40 years ago that, "the Black woman in higher education faces greater risks and problems now than in the past." This statement remains true today in 2019 because the Black woman is now in a place that was previously only occupied by the dominant group. In general, the African American woman has become

more visible throughout the centuries, despite the denials of education through systemic oppression. The current study prioritizes the voices of African American women who are pursuing a college degree despite systemic barriers after incarceration. Utilizing FST through the lens of BFT serves as the platform for the women in this study to be liberated and not overlooked because they are speaking of their own lived truths.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, I reviewed literature on access to higher education for African American women that were formerly incarcerated. Many barriers to education are due to systemic oppression. African American women's involvement in prison settings has increased due to the war on drugs, zero tolerance policies in school, and other issues. However, research indicates that with education, formerly incarcerated individuals are less likely to return to prison. With the limited empirical research addressing what can and has motivated African American women that were formerly incarcerated to pursue a college degree, this study captured how the degree seeking journey is perceived through the eyes of women who were once incarcerated.

In this chapter, I introduce the research methodology that examined the experiences of African American women, who were formerly incarcerated, pursuing college degrees. The purpose of the study and the research questions are reintroduced as well as the research design that includes a description of the data collection and analysis methods were discussed as well. Next, this chapter shares the setting of data collection, a description of the sample population, and a step-by-step process of how the data was analyzed. Finally, the chapter closes with the ethical considerations, and summary of the methodology.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine what motivates African American women who were formerly incarcerated to pursue college degrees. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their motivation to pursue a college degree?
2. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their academic, social, and personal experiences while pursuing a college degree?
3. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated maintain motivation and persist through challenges and barriers?

Methods

Research Design

For this study, I utilized a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Phenomenology is a methodology that focuses directly on the personal lived experience of an individual (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). Because IPA provides a detailed examination of a personal lived experience, it is an appropriate analysis to use in a study using a BFT lens for African American women that were formerly incarcerated and share their own realities and not the reality of someone who has not lived their experience. The philosopher, Husserl, encouraged phenomenologists to explore things in their natural state (Kockelmans & Husserl, 1994). The foundational principle of phenomenology is that things that are experienced should be examined consciously (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). Additionally, philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre developed Husserl's philosophy further by moving away from a more descriptive position to a more interpretative position in understanding how one's experiences intersect with the world (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). This

interpretative position is essential in hermeneutic phenomenology and significant in using IPA.

I chose a phenomenological method of study to explore the experiences and motivations of a group of African American women, that were formerly incarcerated, pursuing a college degree because it provided an in-depth analysis of human experience (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher of this phenomenological study, it was important to interpret the central meaning or essence of my participants' experiences. Listening to each participant share her lived experiences in the world allowed me to examine, comprehend, and interpret the impact of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Site of Research

The methods used to gain access to participants were through recruitment emails and social media. I sent out emails to individuals and organizations to distribute the email to others and I submitted recruitment email through social media. I chose to recruit African American women involved in reentry programs in various regions of the United States. These reentry programs for formerly incarcerated individuals focused on reducing recidivism, successful reentry into society, access to education, and self-sufficient living. Additionally, some reentry programs work specifically with my focus population - women who were formerly incarcerated. I recruited participants for a pilot study from College and Community Fellowship (CCF; New York), and recruited more participants from other programs which include, but were not limited to Changed Choices (Charlotte), Life Connections (Raleigh), and Post-Prison Education Program (Seattle).

Facebook was used as another avenue to recruit African American women, who were formerly incarcerated, to help secure the participants needed for the study. There were times that recruiting participants was difficult, thus I used the snowball method and asked those who had participated to refer other women who met the study criteria. Weiss (1994) discussed that it may be challenging to find participants for a study that is focused on a marginalized population, so using the snowball method was essential in getting additional participants.

Participant Sample

The purposive sampling criteria for participants in this study included:

- 1) Identify as an African American woman or transwoman
- 2) Have been formerly incarcerated in a jail or prison
- 3) Enrolled in degree program at a two or four-year college

While Smith et al. (2009) indicate that between three and six participants should provide a sufficient development of meanings amongst participants in a student project, Creswell (1998) recommends five to twenty-five participants in a qualitative study. I chose to interview nine participants for this study because I wanted it to be large enough to obtain data that would describe the phenomenon in detail by providing a more in-depth, well rounded and saturated dissertation study. Smith and colleagues (2009) note that "... it is more problematic to try to meet IPA's commitments with a sample which is 'too large,' than with one that is 'too small'" (p. 51). A sample is considered 'too large' when the researcher becomes overwhelmed by the amount of data generated versus a smaller sample where the development of meaningful components of the participants experiences

can be the focus. The detailed analysis of each participant's interview took an exceptional amount of time to capture the perceptions and understandings of the participants' experiences.

Research Procedure

For this study, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to modify and expand the existing approved pilot study and received final IRB approval April 16, 2018. I sent out my recruitment letter (Appendix A) via email to various reentry programs and individuals who are not part of reentry programs but worked with individuals who met the criteria or themselves met the criteria. Some of the recruitment letters were distributed by the reentry programs contact person, in which potential participants were instructed to contact me via email within a week's time. Other recruitment letters were sent directly from me, the researcher, to participants not connected to a reentry program. To ensure a suitable sample, the recruitment letter was sent out weekly to different organizations, individuals in the community, churches, and persons in academe for four months.

Participants that met the criteria based on their responses of the demographic survey were scheduled for an interview. I chose to collect data using the interview method because it aligns with IPA's review of the experiences told by the participants. Additionally, interviews are essential for observing feelings, behaviors and how different people interpret their world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing the participants gave emphasis to the African American woman's thoughts and ideas which is a hallmark of BFT. Furthermore, conducting interviews allowed for the participant to interact with

me, the researcher, and share their own story in their own words (Smith et al., 2009).

For the interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol was used (Appendix B).

The semi-structured interview allowed for pre-planned and extemporaneous probing questions when more detail or explanation was needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My goal was to interview each person face-to-face. However, there were some participants that lived in other cities and states and I was unable to travel to their location. Therefore, I conducted three participant interviews face to face, two participant interviews via phone, and four participant interviews via Google Hangout video. The two interviews that were done by phone started out through Google Hangout video, but there was spotty internet service, so we moved to using the phone to complete the interviews. All participants completed an informed consent, created through survey share, prior to participation in the study (Appendix C). The informed consent indicated what the participant could expect to take place in this study if they decided to participate and reminded participants that the study was voluntary and they could terminate their participation at anytime. Once participants read through the informed consent, they were required to enter their email address which was used as their signature of consent to the study.

After participants entered their email, SurveyShare directed the participants to the online demographic survey (Appendix D). This survey included questions about age, racial identity, gender identity, marital and parental status, as well as details about college enrollment (length of time and classification) and incarceration experiences (age at first incarceration, length of time and type of crime for each incarceration). The purpose of

asking these questions prior to main interview questions was to provide an additional confirmation that the participants met the criteria for this study. Furthermore, responses to these questions provided me, the researcher, a description of the women I was speaking with and what commonalities or patterns I could see among the participants. If participants met the criteria of the study based on their responses of online demographic survey, the participants were emailed individually to set up a time to interview with the researcher. The individual interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were digitally recorded. Each participant was sent a \$15.00 Amazon gift card as incentive for participating in the study. Along with the gift card, the I have continued to follow up with the participants in the study, and some have reached out to me asking for advice on financial literacy and completing cover letters and resumes.

Data Analysis

After each interview, I took notes on my initial thoughts on what was stated in the interview and what I saw or heard in the voices of the participants as they shared their experiences. Once I collected my last interview on September 25, 2018, I listened to the audio of the interview recordings and made sure I could audibly hear what each participant had said as I prepared to transcribe the interviews. A verbatim transcript was developed for each interview. Once I completed transcribing the interviews, I uploaded eight of the transcripts into the qualitative software program Atlas.ti 8 and one into the software Dedoose. The purpose of using two different software programs was to determine which one was more efficient to use. I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to describe and interpret the participant's viewpoint. IPA is an approach

that examines how people make sense of their experiences and draws upon many steps to analyze data, including reading through transcripts multiple times, initial noting, developing emerging themes, and searching for connections of themes within a transcript and across other transcripts of the participants (Smith et al., 2009).

I began my analysis of the data by reading through the transcripts. As the first step of IPA, this is done to ensure the participant's voice is the focus of interpretation along with the accuracy of transcription. In step two, I analyzed the transcriptions by examining the content of what the participant shared by highlighting important words and phrases line by line. This allowed me to become more familiar with the participant and how she identified with the content she shared (e.g. the use of certain words). Once I highlighted important words and phrases from the transcripts that were uploaded to the software, I exported the content into an Excel sheet. Beside each line, I began looking for words or phrases that categorized what the participant was saying in that line. I made comments in the notes section of Atlas ti 8 on what meaning I was interpreting from the participant's language. The written comments from the initial noting that describe what the participant was sharing further helped me analyze and interpret the meanings and explore the research questions. Furthermore, underlining parts in the text that I found to be important was another part of initial noting that was used. In step three, I began to seek commonalities or patterns that were emerging through the transcripts. I highlighted each commonality with a color so that I could go back and review that color to confirm there was a thematic pattern. This is where I looked for similar or shared information among participants and begin to connect those patterns. The patterns of the words and

phrases of the participants reflected themes (Smith et al., 2009). Those themes were written out and highlighted. After highlighting the themes, I reviewed what had been highlighted to determine a code name that represented the emerging themes of the participants. According to Weiss (1994), “the idea in coding is to link what the respondent says in his or her interview to the concepts and categories that will appear in the report” (p. 154). The coding established a direct connection with the voices of my participants, which kept their experiences as the central focus.

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure that this study was credible, there were a few techniques that were used. Triangulation is one technique. Patton (2002) states, “triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data, including using both quantitative and qualitative approaches” (p. 247). For this study, I utilized data triangulation. I performed a pilot study with two participants that met the criteria of the study, so as I expanded this study and interviewed more women, I was able to compare the preliminary analysis and findings with the newer participants viewpoints (Roulston, 2010). Additionally, I assessed the findings of my study in relation to previous research findings for congruency (Shenton, 2004). In the pilot study I conducted, I found that my participants had similar experiences and stories as other formerly incarcerated women in previous studies. Moreover, the pilot study gave me an opportunity to assess the interview questions and determine which ones needed to be revised to get an in depth understanding of what the participants stated.

Additionally, I used member checking and audit trail to establish trustworthiness. Member checking was utilized to make sure the researcher had captured the essence of what the participants shared in their interviews (Roulston, 2010). After I conducted and transcribed the interviews, I emailed the transcriptions to the respective participant and asked them to make sure I captured each word they stated. Having an audit trail of how I conducted my research; methods used, interview guideline, data analysis process; is another important factor in establishing the quality of the research. The more transparent I am as a researcher, the easier it is for other researchers and readers to duplicate the process with a population in which they are interested (Roulston, 2010). Furthermore, I chose to not share the preliminary findings with participants of the study, but I chose to share the findings of the completed dissertation prior to any further publications.

Risks and Benefits

Although the study population I worked with was no longer incarcerated, some of the women in this group were careful about certain institutions they named. I reassured the women that I would not name those organizations or institutions that we discussed. I assured the participants that they would be identified by their pseudonyms throughout the study. It was critical for me as the researcher to not reveal the participants' real names and locations, but to use pseudonyms for the participants and their respective programs. This was still a vulnerable population as they were reentering society and were at risk of stigmatization and discrimination. Furthermore, it was important for me to treat each participant as an individual woman. Although they all shared the experience of being

incarcerated, their backgrounds were different and I did not want to generalize their experiences while honoring their varied lived experience.

Although there were some potential risks for participants engaging in this study, there were also benefits. Participants gained more awareness of what truly motivated them to work towards a degree. Also, providing a gift card to the participants was a way to demonstrate that I valued the time they gave me. Furthermore, maintaining communication was a benefit because they saw me as an asset and someone with whom they could rely on. I believe trust was a huge factor and very important for Black women to trust in the work I am doing.

Ethical Considerations

Each participant that was willing to participate in the study reviewed the consent form on the SurveyShare demographic survey and entered their email address to confirm their participation. Participants were informed through the consent form that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I asked each participant prior to the interview if they had questions regarding their consent prior to beginning the interview. I made sure that participants understood each section of the consent before starting the interview.

Participation in the interview could have brought up negative memories and experiences for participants, so I had information about resources (e.g., professional counselor, financial assistance) on hand so I could refer them to a resource if needed. These resources were obtained from some of the reentry programs where participants came from as well as local resources not tied to a reentry program. In addition to having resources available, I provided each participant with a \$15.00 Amazon gift card as

incentive for participating in the study. I have made sure participants know I am available to help them with any roadblocks they may encounter which may include job applications, college admission applications, and if needed, resume review. I told each participant to let me know if there was anything that I could do for them to aid in their success on their journey. To date, four of the participants have asked me to help them with college admission applications, resumes, and cover letters for employment.

Summary

This chapter indicated that a qualitative phenomenological research design was used for this study. Additionally, data was collected for this study by using a semi-structured interview protocol, in line with the research questions and the use of the BFT lens. Participants for the study were recruited from reentry programs from different regions within the United States as well as through social media, and word of mouth. There were nine participants in this study. Interviews were conducted face to face, over the phone, or via Google Hangout Video for participants that identified as African American women and formerly incarcerated who were enrolled in two or four-year college degree programs. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the approach used to analyze the data and develop the themes of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presents the analysis of data collected for this study using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis approach to understanding and describing the motivation and persistence behind African American women pursuing college degrees after incarceration. As participants shared their stories prior to and after incarceration, the essence of their experiences illustrated their voices in the context of their lived experiences on the road to get a college degree. The phenomenon of the participants' pursuit of a higher education describes part of an individual experience while holding true to commonalities and meaning across all participants. Therefore, this chapter presents two main themes of the participants: perseverance of self and affirmation of self. Each theme contains several sub themes which are described in detail. Through an interpretive phenomenological methodology, I shared narrative portraits of the nine African American women participants in different parts of the themes.

In this chapter, I begin by introducing Figure 1, which consisted of the two themes and the three sub themes of each theme that tell the story of each participant's experience towards gaining a college degree. Within each theme, there were barriers that existed as described by the participants. Additionally, each theme and subtheme is described in detail along with quotes directly from the participants. These quotes illustrated the context of the themes. In Figure 2, I introduce each participant by the pseudonym they chose along with their self-identified demographic characteristics. The introduction of the participants provided a way into the lives of the women. This chapter concludes with a summary of the themes elicited from the data collection.

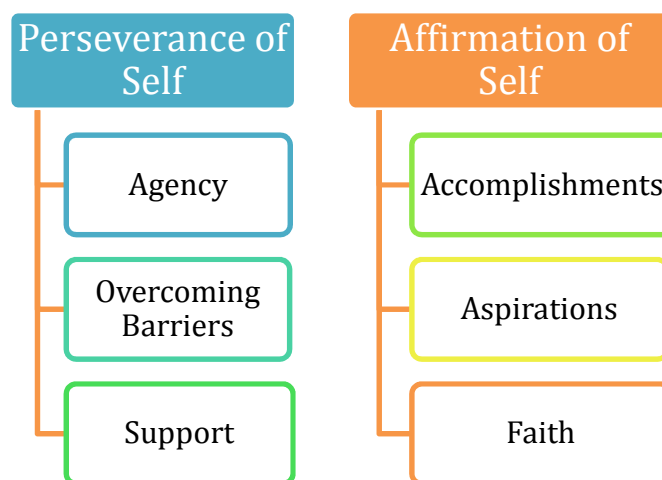


Figure 1. Major Themes of Study

Research Participants

In this section, I present a demographic table and brief narrative depictions of nine African American women-formerly incarcerated, from data gathered during their interviews and from their demographic survey. The narrative depictions allow me to discuss the phenomenon of African American women pursuing college degrees after incarceration. Some initial thematic coding (Saldana, 2013) helped to organize the narrative of each participant through a review and analysis of the demographic survey and interview transcripts.

Names	Age at time of interview	Type of college	Enrolled full time/part-time	Age range of first incarceration	Amount of time in jail or prison	Number of children
Naomi	24	2-year	Part	16-19	1 mos.(jail)	0
Eve	46	2-year	Full	20-30	6 mos. (jail) 84 mos. prison	4
Nicki	35	2-year	Full	20-30	30 mos. (prison)	0
Chrystal	24	2-year	Full	20-30	6 mos. (prison)	4
Tia	47	4-year	Full	20-30	6 mos. (jail) 42 mos. (prison)	2
Anna	52	4-year	Full	41-50	30 mos. (prison)	3
Blue	45	4-year	Full	20-30	15 mos. (jail) 24 mos. (prison)	3
Lisa	40	4-year	Full	20-30	1 day (jail)	2
Kareema	34	4-year	Full	20-30	96 mos. (prison)	0

Figure 2. Participant Information

Tia

Tia is a 47-year old mother of two daughters. Tia is very close with her daughters and her mother. She describes her relationship with them as very loving. Tia grew up in the projects and saw the financial struggles her mom experienced. Tia wanted to help her mother out financially when things were tough for their family which ended up playing a role in her incarceration. Tia served 6 months in jail and 42 months in prison for a felony conviction in her early 20's. At the time of Tia's incarceration, she was an expectant mother and gave birth while in prison. Although Tia grew up in a home of love from her mother, she witnessed her mother being physically abused by a man, but also saw that her mother survived that abuse. Tia has been out of prison for over 20 years and is the creator of an organization that educates and advocates for young girls and women that

have been impacted by the criminal justice system. She is currently completing her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice.

Naomi

Naomi is a 24-year old who grew up in a home with her mother, one older sister, and one younger brother. Her mother suffered from drug abuse and her father struggled seeing the vision and dreams Naomi had for herself. As a young girl, Naomi was challenged with low self-esteem because she was bullied in school due to the way she dressed and because her hair was not always combed neatly. As a middle child, Naomi often felt isolated because the attention in the family was not always given to her due to all the concerns others in the family were having. Although there were many family challenges in Naomi's life at an early age, she earned a high school diploma. When Naomi was in her late teens, she was convicted of a felony, but did not go to prison. She spent a little over 20 days in jail. Today, Naomi is enrolled in a 4-year college majoring in Psychology.

Eve

Eve is a 46-year old mother of four children. Eve described her early life as wanting to grow up and be an adult too fast. That caused her to get into some trouble along the way. In her early 20's, Eve was convicted of a felony charge. She served 6 months in a jail and 84 months in prison. Since Eve has been out of prison, she has taken every opportunity to get her life back on track. Eve believes in using all the resources that are afforded to her because it helps her develop into the best person she can be. She believes it is important to talk about how the criminal justice system impacts women in

prison but told from the voices of the women who actually experienced it. Eve is currently enrolled in a 2-year college majoring in Human Services.

Anna

Anna is a 52-year old mother of three children. Anna's orientation was different from the other participants in the study. She spoke about herself, but also spoke more about how she can be of service to others who have had experiences of incarceration. Anna discussed how she was raised with both of her parents in the home and was put in elite schools. Her father taught her to always ask questions because "no question is a stupid question." Anna graduated from high school with her diploma. In her mid-40's, Anna was convicted of a felony and served 30 months in prison. Anna decided to go back to school to complete her bachelor's degree because it was a personal goal of hers. Additionally, North Carolina passed the NC Promise in which certain UNC system schools pay \$500 per semester as undergraduates which was an added perk for Anna. Anna attends school online and her degree program is in Interdisciplinary Studies.

Nicki

Nicki is 35-years old and currently has no children. Nicki graduated from high school and started attending college, but she had to drop out for financial challenges in her family. For a time, Nicki and her family lived in a shelter and with family members because they were evicted from their apartment. Nicki shared that she was bullied in grade school for not having the most up to date clothing and shoes, but as an adult she engaged in criminal activity which gave her money to have the latest fashion. Nicki's criminal activities led to her serving 30 months in prison in her early 20's. Realizing that

she did not want a life of criminality, after she was released from prison, she decided to go back to a 4-year college and work on her degree to turn her life around and have a better future. Nicki wants to be a role model for her younger brothers by showing them going to college provides better opportunities in life. She is majoring in Business.

Chrystal

Chrystal is a 24-year old mother of four. Chrystal graduated with her high school diploma prior to incarceration. Chrystal shared that she had comprehension challenges during grade school but continued to work through those challenges. Chrystal always wanted to be a police officer growing up but because of her criminal record, she decided to give that dream up. Chrystal is now enrolled in a two-year college pursuing a degree in the medical field. Chrystal's shared how her main focus is her children, and she makes sure she is involved in all of their school activities and that they understand the importance of their education.

Blue

Blue is a 45-year old mother of three adult children who she is extremely proud of. As a teenager, Blue was kicked out of her mother's house just as she was getting ready to complete her college prep courses. She ended up living in shelters and spending more time with her siblings on her dad's side. It was during this time, Blue got into some trouble. Blue was in her early 20's when she was convicted of a felony and served 15 months in jail and 24 months in prison. Prior to incarceration, Blue received her High School Equivalency Diploma. Throughout my interaction with Blue, she shared that education has always been a desire of hers because she had great teachers and just loved

school. Today, Blue is enrolled in a 4-year college pursuing a degree in Sociology with a minor in Communications.

Lisa

Lisa is a 40-year woman with two children and is enrolled in a 4-year college. Lisa was convicted of a felony in her 20's and spent less than 30 days in jail. Although she spent a smaller amount of time in jail compared to the other women, she remains with a felony conviction on her criminal record. Lisa has learned that having a criminal record has kept her from certain opportunities, but she also recognizes how to use resources to get what she needs for a better life for herself and family. Lisa graduated with a high school diploma and is now working to finish her bachelor's degree in Human Services.

Kareema

Kareema is a 34-year old with no children. Kareema had a challenging childhood. She changed grade schools and stopped getting the attention she desired at her school and at home. Because Kareema received more attention from friends who were not in school, she started hanging out with them more and less time in school. She ended up getting involved in criminal activity and served 96 months in prison. During her time in prison, Kareema was reminded that her assistant principal once told her that she was going to be something great. For years, Kareema held on to the hope her assistant principal instilled in her. After serving her prison sentence, Kareema earned her GED and as of today has completed her bachelor's degree, but at the time of the interview, she was still pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice.

Themes

By building rapport, listening to each woman's experiences, recording her stated experiences, and analyzing her experiences, I learned about the challenges women faced, yet they continued their education that encouraged them to continue down the path of attaining their degree. These experiences that women shared were rich and detailed allowing for me to have a deep description of what their lives have endured. By analyzing this "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), I found themes and variations that are common in the participants' experiences. The ways in which these women have endured their nontraditional college experience was explored not only through their academic experiences, but their everyday lives. The following questions served to focus the study:

1) How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their motivation to pursue a college degree? 2) How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their academic, social, and personal experiences while pursuing a college degree? 3) How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated maintain motivation and persist through challenges and systemic barriers? I discuss the themes and the women in present tense in the following sections to illustrate their thoughts and perceptions as they shared with me in the moment.

Perseverance of Self

The theme *Perseverance of Self* was an illustration of the participants' experiences navigating through challenges they have faced throughout their lives pre-incarceration and post-incarceration. Participants shared their individual circumstances and realities and how they have taken the initiative to change their mindset about their

life's outcome through their self- determination and awareness of what helps them look forward for a better life. *Perseverance of self* was exemplified through the sub themes of agency, overcoming barriers, and support.

Agency

Agency in this context was the action portrayed by the participants to make their desires of a better life a reality. There were two actions that spoke to the agency exhibited by the women in this study.

Speech. The first was their speech. Some of the women engaged in action oriented self-talk. There were many times that women spoke saying, "I will... It is my... I have set..." They were actively stating actions that they do or have done in order to defy the odds of persons with criminal records. These women tell of how determined they are to make better choices, complete their college degrees, and use their experiences as developmental to have a positive holistic outcome.

Tia was a prime example of someone who uses self-talk. Tia's self-talk was, "write your own story. Life has no rules. There's not a rule book to life so write your own story and just make it happen." Tia was writing her story by being a voice for women who are still incarcerated and advocating to keep Black girls and women out of prison.

Another example of self-talk is from Kareema.

I'm not the same person I was, and things are not the same as it was, ...I'm two different people now, so it's like my old self merging with my new self, and then we getting to know each other in a way that has to function, has to work because that prison cell can never be my reality again. I would never give that to them

[criminal justice system] again. I knew in order to never make that my reality, I had to keep going and push myself to a higher education so that I could earn a decent living to the point I never have to even think about doing anything [criminal].

Kareema spoke of her reality that her old ways of what she knew before and while incarcerated were joining with what she knows now that she is out of prison. She was proclaiming never to return to prison because her new identity of herself brought positive changes so that she could be prosperous. Kareema defined prosperity by getting her education.

Educational consciousness. The second element that promoted the participants' agency was educational consciousness. Educational consciousness was the element that processed the importance of education that helped determine the actions needed for a better life.

Tia shared her educational consciousness in this excerpt.

So, I figured that if I go back to school, and be in law it's just something burning inside of me that's [sic] says hey, maybe I can make a difference. Maybe I don't have to be the criminal attorney that's going after the bad guy. Maybe I can be the person that's kind of helping represent the bad guy and let me see if we can do something differently.

Tia was actively processing what education could do for her and others. She was working towards a degree in criminal justice and with the knowledge she gained from that degree, she would be using it to help those who are facing criminal convictions make better

decisions. These are all positive ways of thinking that Tia was using to figure out how to help those in trouble with the law.

Another way that Tia utilized educational consciousness to persevere was through her understanding of what having a degree means. She placed a lot of value on what a degree means for her and can mean for others. She called the degree a token. For many people, a token, is something you can use to get a gift or prize. In this case, the token represented a better life; which is the gift.

Because I run an organization for young women and I always talk about how important your education is and how far it can take you in life. It is a token, whether we want to say it is or not. That degree is a token and I say that it's a token because it gives you avenues and opens up doors that you can't have without it...it is more than a piece of paper, that piece of paper becomes a token that opens doors to people who don't have the token; that don't have the piece of paper. There are some things I can't do right now without it.

Tia explained the importance of education and described it as a desire of hers because it not only opened doors for her but allowed other women in the criminal justice system to see the actions of Tia and know that they too have an opportunity. Tia wanted to model a life that could provide hope to women that are and have been incarcerated with criminal convictions.

My motto is education instead of incarceration...So if I am going to preach education instead of incarceration, and I've lived both sides of them, but I don't have my degree, I think if I'm actually going to be a model for the young women

and lead by example. And by getting my education, walking across the stage, holding that degree in my hand and saying I did it! It can piece the puzzle together for me.

Tia discussed how important education was to help her be a role model and advocate for those who are affected by the criminal justice system. She lives by example and shows others how education can increase their livelihood; that education is possible when you can envision it and take the steps to attain it.

Other women who participated in this study share similar sentiments as Tia on the importance of education. For example, Nicki stated, “I wanted to further my education and make my family proud.” Eve also shared that she knew she needed to make a change and do something different to have a better outcome in her life. “I wanted to do something different and I needed you guys [family] to be on board and be supportive.” Nicki and Eve wanted to further their education which was something they wanted their family to be part of. Eve not only wanted to go to school, which was her doing something different than she had done before, but she recognizes the importance of her support coming from her family. The importance of education and what it could offer was a driving force for the women in this study to push through any challenge to get what will aid in their success. In other words, no barriers should prosper because the self-efficacy of these women provided them the determination to persevere.

Determination. The third element that promoted the women’s agency was the mental action of determination. The determination they developed promulgated the desire for a better reality and inspired the action oriented self-talk. The mental determination of

a person can influence if they move forward, backwards, or remain stagnant. For each participant, their mindset was based on their determination to succeed because there was a time they did not succeed. Nicki for instance refuses to allow her past to define her future.

The factor that keeps me focused is that I don't let my past define my future and I also know that I can do anything that I put my mind to as long as I keep doing the footwork to achieve my goals. I learned that giving up is not an option and to keep pushing even if I keep falling back down.

Nicki's statement echoed with many of the participants. Some of the women kept pushing because they wanted to set a positive example for their kids and others. Having a criminal record and being incarcerated took a tremendous toll on women. The impact of having something better for their life is so much greater because they know what they have been through.

Nicki expressed her mindset as being one that says she was worthy of achieving her goals despite what she has gone through. She understood that self-initiative and perseverance were needed to push passed her past. Eve also understood the power of her past to create an impenetrable mental fortress. She developed an acute awareness of the role her past mindset and actions played in landing her in prison, so she needed to cultivate a different mindset to find a way to stay out of prison. "I just feel like whatever you were doing wasn't working so you have to be willing to switch mainstream and try something else."

The mindset that the women possessed is what kept them going. It is future-oriented not tethered to the past. The weight of conviction was a powerful factor that the women in this study carry as a burden. Tia, Kareema, Naomi, Blue, and Lisa spoke of the challenges they faced due to having a conviction from not getting a specific job or having to go through extra measures just to get into college. As Blue stated, "...on one hand I have this felony, what's going to tip the scale but a degree... you know, education. That's the only thing that tips the scale." Blue described education as the one thing that made her felony bearable to where she can have a better life than she did as a child. Even Naomi and Nicki discuss how going to college will give them a better life. Nicki stated, "The reason that I want to go back to school now is because I want to better my future and turn my life around so that I won't fall back into my old criminal behaviors."

Although the weight of a conviction has been draining to these women, the opportunity to get an education allowed them to dream and see a better life for themselves; making the conviction be truly part of their past and not their future. The women in this study recognized that even when faced with barriers, their drive to pursue an education and allow that to be part of their change in lifestyle gives them the hope needed to continue overcoming the barriers they face. Nicki said it best,

The factor that keeps me focused is that I don't let my past define my future and I also know that I can do anything that I put my mind to as long as I keep doing the footwork to achieve my goals.

The past in Nicki's mind was a reminder that she had a chance to make her future better no matter what challenges come her way. She works hard to achieve the goals she has for her life.

For so long someone else had decided their future, but these women are taking back their identity, defining who they are by exposing themselves to more education so that they can write the story they have for their life; from their own experiences. It is an opportunity for them to take back their life no matter what the circumstances are. While these women are determined to move forward with their lives in a positive way, it is important to note some of the barriers they have faced that have enhanced their perseverance or at times hindered it.

Overcoming Barriers

Overcoming barriers was another characteristic of the overall theme *perseverance of self*. Overcoming barriers was the ability to go beyond the things that deny access to resources that hinder ones' ability of hope. The women of this study had to overcome many barriers and are still working to overcome those barriers. Barriers resulted in part from the lack of opportunities and discrimination that existed.

Lack of opportunities. One challenge that these women faced was related to finances once released from prison. Kareema said, "the difference is that when a lot of us come out, and when I came out, I don't have nothing."

Kareema shared how she received a bus pass with \$40. She didn't have bras, panties, toothpaste, toothbrush or any personal items. She had to make a decision on what was a necessity out of what was already basic needs. Another way finances was impacted

is due to their inability to secure a good job. As a woman coming out of the prison system with a felony conviction on their record, no matter how much they want to have a better life, many employers will only see them as a felon. Hence, getting jobs with a conviction on their record left them struggling to find a job that would hire them and pay them enough money, so they could afford shelter, clothing, and food. Kareema offered this, “Whether you get out in 10 years, 20 years, you're still destroyed because it's hard to rebuild yourself up when somebody around you have a certain image of you.”

Another barrier is sufficient around completing a college admissions application. Having to answer the question on a college application regarding a criminal conviction, often deflates the hope of women who have been in prison because they see this as another barrier that will keep them from getting an education that opens doors for a better life for themselves and their family. Tia has been out of prison for more than 20 years for a non-violent crime, and is an advocate in the community, yet, she still had to answer the question on the college application, “...have you been convicted of crime...?” Or Lisa, who stated, “criminal background affected my internship as well.”

This phenomenon of “checking the box” leads to loss of opportunities. Lisa was denied an internship opportunity while in college because of her felony conviction. As a condition of release, some women had restrictions which resulted in loss of freedom even outside of prison. For instance, upon release from prison, some women were on probation and were required to be in their homes by a certain time each night. This meant they could not take certain classes at night or meet with their classmates at night for group assignments due to having to be in their house by a certain time. These are the challenges

that participants in this study face, yet the challenges do not stop them from continuing their journey towards something greater. In fact, it is these challenges that let the women in this study know they cannot give up.

Discrimination. Another barrier that participants in this study had to overcome was discrimination. Discrimination in this study is described as the racial and gender inequity due to being a formerly incarcerated African American woman. The participants in this study discuss how they experienced discrimination. There are two stories, one from Tia and one from Eve, that really describe the type of discrimination they faced. When it was time for Tia to go before the judge, she was pregnant, enrolled in college, and begging the judge to give her another chance. Tia even had a character witness, one of her professors, in the court who was ready to speak on Tia's behalf, but the judge would not hear her. She said:

I think some things are just set up as barriers for African Americans. To think when you are African American in this world we don't get the same opportunities as some of the other races, it's been a challenge to deal [with].

Tia believed because she was African American, the judge did not give her character witness a chance to speak. For Tia, she was judged before she was convicted and would now be sentenced to prison while pregnant and not being able to continue her college degree. Even now that Tia has been out of prison for 20 years, she discusses how she still gets discriminated against in the work environment.

Even now in the line of work that I am doing, some of my colleagues are presented with opportunities that I wasn't presented with because that's just the

way of the world. You don't have to accept it though because there will always be that person that wants to make a change.

Tia recognized that discrimination happens as a result of just being African American, but what was really essential was that Tia refused to accept how the world is. In this moment she is the person who will and is making a change for herself and those like her. In a different way, Eve shared the same sentiments of discrimination.

Yeah, race always plays I feel like a big part in everything... a big part in the criminal justice system, how I am sentenced. You know I have seen people with these same charges as mine get less time... I've seen people with the same charges as mine get more time. I just, it really depends but I feel like you know when you are African American, and you are a woman, it is kind of two strikes because you're fighting against a system that really needs to be dismantled. You are fighting against a system that's in my belief corrupt. I feel like as women especially as African American women we don't have some of the same opportunities as our counterparts and definitely not as men, you know, the best thing that we could ever do would be to educate ourselves to be able to compete in a market that says that we are certain; that we don't belong in that field or this is a male dominated industry and there's no room for you so the doors closed. I'm a true believer that it's time to kick down some doors. It's time to dismantle some systems and the only way to do that is from within. So, you have to learn the system so you can tear it apart."

Just like Tia, Eve believed race plays a major role in the opportunities provided to African American women. What was even more important was the message that an African American woman already had two strikes against her because she is a person of color and a woman. To add to it, Eve spoke as a woman who has a felony conviction which was technically three strikes against her. With all of these strikes, education still stood out as the best way to overcome and challenge a system that denied opportunities for this population of women. It was not just the criminal justice system Eve was talking about, but all systems that deny opportunities for African American women who were formerly incarcerated.

From a similar perspective, Chrystal shared a time when she moved to a new city and state to start a new life and experienced discrimination.

I started looking for a job in the fields that I have certificates in. A lot of people looked at me and like, you know you're a woman first of all. If such and such happen, how are you going to fix it? This may be too heavy for you. You are a woman and then the biggest thing was, African American don't take these kind of jobs seriously. They are here for temporary money. They'll come Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They are not gonna come all seven days... because I look young and black, I'm a female that I wasn't gonna take the position seriously so I didn't get the job because I was a female. If I would have been a white 6'1" man I probably would have bagged the job and been promoted by now.

The way Chrystal described her discrimination experience was not necessarily because she had a criminal background, but because she was a young female who is African

American. There was a stereotype of African American women not taking employment seriously or not really wanting to work. Therefore, she was not offered this particular job. In stating that a White male would have received this job because he is a male and is White, tells that Chrystal was aware of racial discrimination in the hiring processes, but also aware of continual racial and gender biases. Instead of Chrystal dwelling on how she was being discriminated against because of her identities which in the next excerpt she acknowledges of criminal background, she has worked to move forward in her life.

This happened 6 years ago... I was a kid making childish decisions... Everybody makes the same mistakes; some people just get caught... This could have been you; you know I just chose the wrong crowd. It happened... but as you can see, I am older now, since that incident... nothing's gonna happen... you won't see anything else on my background so since then now I kind of I am just settled. I know what I can and I can't go for.

Chrystal's words emphasized that no one is removed from making mistakes, but she has been able to grow up and make better decisions. Chrystal is aware that her race and gender have hindered employment, but she has also recognized that her criminal background also played a role in her not getting certain jobs. Now that Chrystal is making better life decisions, she is reminded that her identifiers as a woman, African American, and formerly incarcerated, have tried to keep her from advancing, but she knows what she can do to overcome the patterns that play against her advancement.

Labeling. Another characteristic of discrimination was labeling. Labeling is the placement of a name or title on someone that can be inaccurate or negative. Labeling can

challenge ones' view of their own reality when society constantly throws the negative and belittling terms their way. In the context of this study, some labels have been placed on the women named in this study, and then society sees them as that label causing the women to be discriminated against, but also causing women to believe that they are what others label them. Kareema discusses how labeling starts to become one's reality. "I think when you're labeled, you get tied in a lot of these labeling, "Oh, you're going to be bad. You ain't nothing." Kareema implied that those who do not know who they are outside of what they have been labeled, get sucked into believing negative characteristics about themselves. In other words, there is power in the words spoken if that person allows it to define who they are.

Along the same pattern, Naomi described how she had witnessed being labeled for employment. "They [employers] see it [felony conviction] on your record and they are instantly, nope...you are a liability." Naomi saw employers not giving potential employees and opportunity to work because the only thing that was being seen was if that person had ever had a conviction which continued the act of discrimination.

As the women in this study shared how they are labeled, it was important for them to know how society may put them in a certain box by a label, but it was even more important for them to realize their definition of who they are and what they represent. Knowing how to define who they are was what kept the women moving forward in rebranding their image that tells and shows their reality.

Colorism. Another form of discrimination that can also be a barrier was colorism, defined as discrimination based on the color of one's skin. Chrystal describes a situation

in grade school when she had trouble comprehending her work, and her teacher didn't try to help her.

I know this might sound a little bit crazy but I wouldn't even say black, I would say darker, darkest... It could have been other African American girls in there [classroom] but I am the darkest, so... of course, I am going to come, maybe not first [to receive assistance]

Chrystal viewed her dark skin as the reason her teacher did not provide her with help in school. She was comparing herself to other African American girls in the classroom who are not as dark as she.

In a similar situation, Naomi shares how she believes her darker skin played a role in how her step mother treated her.

when it came to my self-identity, I got affected by that. On my father's side of the family because his wife was White. So their side of the family was White. And I really felt like I was being mistreated when my baby sister was born because as soon as she was born, I did not exist... I always got in trouble over there for not doing something...My stepmom was really mean to me, no matter how much I loved] her, I love her to this day, she was just mean to me...she treated my sister with so much love and I just didn't understand it, and part of me felt like because I'm darker than her.

Naomi struggled with her self-identity being a darker skinned African American girl who believed she was being mistreated because of her skin tone. Naomi's discrimination took place within her family.

I didn't think I was pretty. I wasn't right or something. And I struggled with that until my adult life. And so I realized that my pretty was different from everybody else. So, it took a very long time and the race may not have an impact directly but it was definitely a factor.

Although Naomi struggled with colorism, she began to develop a self love that showed her that her pretty did not have to look like others' pretty; it was her own unique beauty. In this moment Naomi persevered by getting through a time in her life that she did not feel like she was important, and she continues to persevere through learning to love the skin she is in.

Support

The subtheme support was found to be another important characteristic of perseverance of self. The women in this study have actively pursued achieving more for their life, they have continued to navigate through barriers, and have now recognized what support looks and feels like. Support in this context was defined through various relationships, personal, and professional. These relationships included school teachers, professors, administrators, family, peers, and reentry organizations. It was critical to understand what relationships these women found to be supportive, and the relationships they found to be unsupportive.

Personal relationships. The support of family for some of the women is what got them through some of the toughest times in their lives. Chrystal shares a story of what her family did for her.

I was almost there. I swallowed a whole lot of bottle of pills. I had talked to my aunt previous to me who swallowed the pills...It was just like, you know I am so tired...I was just ready to... ready for all of it to just be over...And my doorbell just kept ringing... And I know this might sound crazy but I was just like, why can't I just die in Kareema...she [aunt] came to tell me that she loved me and that she didn't know what to do if something happened to me. It made me feel good that I was loved, and I was wanted. It would make a difference if I wasn't there. It opened my eyes because I wasn't being mindful of the people around me again I was hurt. Just imagine if something happens to you; there are so many people I am leaving behind that will be hurt, so she helped me come to about the decision I was going to make basically.

Chrystal felt alone and unloved at some point and because of her family, she realized how much she was loved. More importantly she was able to see that the love she needs during that vulnerable moment was her family letting her know she was not alone and they are always here for her.

The same type of family support is described by Tia. "There through the good, the bad and the ugly. That's the type of family that I come from." Tia shared pride in knowing she has a family that is there for her before she was incarcerated, there for her during her incarceration, and after her incarceration as she continues to pursue her goals. Many of these women have strong relationships with their family and know that without their family support, they would not be sitting in front of me having a conversation about

their lives of getting a college degree. However, not all of the women have the support they need from their family. Some support comes from other resources.

Blue and Kareema were participants who knew all too well that they lacked support from home. Kareema started off with a supportive family, but when drugs started to creep into the family dynamic, everyone had their own issues which left her without the support she needed. Kareema began to get attention in negative ways by seeking attention on the streets. Blue had a mother who did not invest in her education growing up and called her a derogatory name as a child. Whereas Kareema looked for attention she was not receiving at home through involvement on the streets at school by getting into trouble, Blue did not get in trouble at school, but found school to be her safe place away from the drama called home.

School was my outlet. The more I learned the better.” Blue knew at an early age that she didn’t want to live the life her mother had provided them. In fact, she states, “my experiences have molded me to be the person I am.

Blue was kicked out of her mother’s house when she was 16 years old and became homeless. Though support from her mom was lacking, she had administrators at her school that know about her situation of being kicked out of her house and works with her to come back to school and get her GED.

Another type of relationship that described these women’s perseverance of self was their peers. As has been mentioned, family was a big support for some of the women as well as educators, but peers of these women also helped them to keep going. These peers were in their colleges, reentry programs, on their jobs. Peer support was important

for some of the women because once being released from prison, it was often their peers who had been in the criminal justice system that could relate and understand what they were going through.

They [family] haven't lived this. They [family] don't know much about this. This is a real effect and I didn't know how to explain it in words at the time at all because I still wasn't understanding what the hell I was going through myself. Being in a room full of people that had went through and experienced a lot of the same challenges helps you to overcome that. You have somebody next to you say, "I experienced the same thing. I know exactly what that looks like, and this is how you get over that.

For Kareema, it was encouraging to see a group of women who had a similar experience as her come out on the other side and still stand despite the barriers they faced.

Additionally, this encouragement came from the teachers and administrators as well as programs that work with formerly incarcerated women.

Professional relationships. Blue expresses that “school was always a dream for me.”

Through this statement Blue highlighted how important school was to her but was also letting us know that she will fight for her dream. Because Blue had positive relationships with her school administrators (i.e. guidance counselor) prior to getting her GED, she could see school as a positive experience and not a negative one. The dream of gaining her degree continued after she is released from prison as well.

My whole time during my bachelor's I always had a job. And a lot of times, that was tiring to me like having cancer, I was tired, I was weak, but I still went on.

Like I'm determined to get my degree. Like I don't care what is happening and that was the thing, school is non-negotiable, I have to finish.

Sometimes because of generational patterns of undereducation, school support was even more of a necessity. This was not because family and peers were unwilling to help, but because they were unable to help.

I was a college bound student program so all of the teachers there were awesome and so they nurtured us because it was a college prep kind of program that I was in because...The only thing that I didn't get support in was in my house because my mom was illiterate; didn't know how to read and write, but she would be like "yo you better do your work" but it's not like she could help. But when I was with my dad then I would get help... But I would do what I had to do and if I had any questions, my teachers were really hands on.

Blue spoke of her mom's illiteracy noting that her mother could not help her with her academics. However, her mother telling her to do her school work could be seen as a way of reminding Blue that she needed to get her work done. Her dad, however, was able to help her with her academics. The hands-on experience she receives from her teachers spotlights the relationship she has with her teachers and the support they provide her.

Another important relationship for the women in this study is with reentry programs. More than half of the women have experience with a reentry program. These

reentry programs aided in providing women with access to housing, tools to finding jobs, education preparation. For example, Kareema said,

[Organization] also offered support, financial support for transportation. They offered financial support for books. And they offered financial support for school supplies. Getting a laptop through them... a book bag so you don't have to use your own money for, these are things that you need, so a lot of the things that other people may have accumulated, now this allows you to have that as well.

Now you're kind of like at the same stage. You don't have these same barriers. Kareema's words stood out because she does not have to stress about the things she needed for school because this organization provided her with the necessary supplies needed to be a successful student.

Another important characteristic regarding the support provided by reentry programs was that the women who were involved with the reentry organizations did not feel like a number as if they were in a prison. It is this notion of dignity that enabled their perseverance of self. Dignity in this context means to feel like you are worthy of being treated and seen as a human being. As Kareema stated,

they're [reentry organization] not treating you as if you're a fund [money making object for the organization]. You're a person. You're a person that deserves to reap the benefits of life just like anyone else. You messed up and we're going to help you to get your life back in order. That's how they function. Together, they were able to guide me through this process of getting back into school. I think that's essential for anybody because obviously before I was in prison, I was still

struggling. To have that guidance that comes from a real place is essential to anybody's success because we all needed it.

Reentry organizations provided women a fresh start; an opportunity to see themselves as worthy of having a better life after incarceration with a felony conviction. As Eve stated, "It makes you see life through brand new glasses and they are not rose colored so you're not naive to what's out there."

Support came in a variety of ways for the women in this study which helps build their self-esteem. Some of the participants took college courses while in prison and one of the things that stood out is that they felt humanized. In prison, being known as a number and not one's birth name has a way of making women feel less than human, like the slaves branded on the sale block. Women are not only humanized in the setting of a classroom by the professors while incarcerated, but this feeling was also critical for them also outside of the prison walls. Some women describe their personal feeling of having a job where no one is worried about their past. Naomi told of how being seen for who she is in the work setting makes her feel. "they [co-workers] never asked me about my background or anything... just based off my experience and how I work...see me as a person and it makes me feel so good."

Positive support allowed the women in this study to express how they persevere through the challenges of being formerly incarcerated. It was essential to understand how these women persevered through the actions they took to have a better life, to endure the challenges faced due to barriers, and the support that came from a variety of relationships. Perseverance for these women did not just happen, but it took place

because they were able to tell the story of how they were overcoming. Furthermore, women in this study continue their perseverance through the proclamations of their lives which will be known as affirmation of self.

Affirmation of Self

The next theme of this study was *Affirmation of Self*. *Affirmation of self* in this context was the ability to declare what has been done, what is being done, and how things will get done. There were three subtheme components that the women in this study described as ways that affirm their personal experiences. The subthemes included accomplishments, aspirations, and faith. The first subtheme, accomplishments, indicated what these women have done. Secondly, aspirations illustrated what is being done. Lastly, faith was the belief that things will get done.

Accomplishments

Many of the women that took part in this study shared their individual accomplishments from childhood into adulthood. These accomplishments held a place in the women's memories of knowing they have achieved things and can continue to achieve. One type of accomplishment was education. Throughout this study, education has been one of the primary focuses. During these women's educational experiences, some of them shared specific accomplishments that highlight their experiences in life.

After I got my GED ... that was an accomplishment...that was a big deal. I had a graduation on the inside [prison]. I never really placed my mind there. People were allowed to have their families come. It was like a big accomplishment. It made me think about going to college.

For Kareema, getting her GED was an accomplishment that allowed her to think forward on what other accomplishments she could have. This was her opportunity to start thinking that college was not a farfetched reality, but something that was attainable. Her accomplishment affirmed to her that she could further her education.

From a slightly different perspective, Blue accomplished a lot as a young girl which highlighted her love for school and what she wanted out of her life since she grew up with an illiterate mother who was controlled by her husband.

So school was my outlet. I currently write spoken word. I do um spoken word so writing was my escape. So I always enjoy reading and writing and I always knew that I wanted to be in school because I felt like the more I learned the better empowered I would be and no one could take that away from me.... So, I was a college bound student. I got skipped from 7th to 9th grade.

Education was essential in Blue's life because it gave her a chance to be free from what is happening at home. Where Blue's mother is more dependent and controlled by Blue's stepfather, Blue works hard to be independent of the type of control she witnessed in her home life.

Another description of affirmation of self through education was with Chrystal. Chrystal discussed having comprehension challenges in grade school and because of that, it took her a long time to decide to go back to school for her associate's degree, but what she discovered while working on her associate's degree helped to proclaim success.

At first I was nervous. I was extremely nervous. I felt like maybe I wasn't smart enough, maybe I wasn't ready, maybe it wasn't my time, but after the first class

[college class], we did our two hours and introduced ourselves. It was like, Oh okay, I could do this you know (Laughter) I could do this... my first paper [in college] I was extremely scared. I thought my grammar would just be I don't know... whack! My spelling, I don't know. I actually scored 57.84 out of 60. So, I was so excited! (Laughter) It means I am pretty good.

At the very end of this quote, Chrystal made the proclamation that she can handle college because she had tangible confirmation from the paper she had written. She affirmed her abilities to succeed in college.

Employment. Another characteristic of accomplishment found within this study is employment. Being employed was not something that came easily for this population of women. However, the ability to get a job and have that job reveal their life purpose was powerful. Sometimes the participants' jobs did not start off as paid positions but started out as voluntary. Blue explains how an unofficial job in prison while she was taking classes, led to her employment once released from prison.

[In prison] I became the student representative so if we had issues we would sign grievances. When officers were doing stuff they weren't supposed to. We would sign grievances. I would organize grievances in the jail so we could get what we needed to get. The women that didn't know how to read and write I would help them write letters to their families. I became like a really helpful inmate to my peers. And so out of that came the passion to help people less fortunate than I or more vulnerable than I and just kind of took that on... I guess that's my purpose in this life.

In this excerpt, Blue affirmed that through her experiences with helping those while in prison and being of service to those once she was out of prison guided her to work in criminal justice.

When I came home, I started volunteering at [organization]. I was with them from 2007 to 2013. For first year I was working as a Peer and I could only work 20 hours but then a job became available to be a Transitional Planner and I went from making \$8 to \$17 per hour. That was like a big deal to me. \$31,000 that was a lot for me. [laughs] And it was a great accomplishment and I stayed with them for 8 years...all of my jobs have consisted of working in criminal justice.

Blue shared her desire to help the women she was incarcerated with fight for their rights in the prison and she continued doing that with her position at an organization. Not only did she help others, but during this time she was financially stable; making more money through fulfilling her purpose.

Another participant, Lisa, had a passion to work as a dental hygienist, but after her felony conviction, it was hard for her to get into dental hygiene school so that she can be employed as a dental hygienist. One aspect of Lisa's story that stood out is a story she tells about being in one of her classes.

We had a particular assignment to where we had to... pick our agency like a non-profit agency to display and present. And I displayed one of our partners and I self-disclosed a little bit once I describe what our partner agency has done and about economic mobility and what they do. And I self-disclosed about criminal records so everybody was looking at me funny... I sat next to a girl in class. I am

just gonna share this experience because it kind of is an academic experience and she was saying the company that she works for, she has the hand in hiring and application process and I have a trash can that sits right next to my desk and when we get an application when they checked that box I have been instructed to just throw it in that trash can. And so from that day, I was like, okay... So now I know I just really need to just further my education, get all that I can so I can kind of move on and I know that I don't want to be in corporate America, that's one experience I had academically and it, the criminal background affected my internship as well where I can go and where I couldn't go. So, me ending up back at the agency though to work for them which we've worked with individuals who have criminal backgrounds; I fit right in. Some agencies would do background checks and you know they can qualify me or other students for that. Personally, there were several agencies that I didn't get to qualify for, for internship because of my criminal background.

Lisa's statement was not about her not being a hygienist, but affirmation that maybe that was not her purpose in life. She was building her resume and rebranding herself as someone who had experienced the challenges of employment and was a resource that could give back to the community; especially to those impacted by the criminal justice system.

Giving back. A couple of the women in this study have looked back over their experiences and have chosen to give back to the community by being a resource for those

who have a criminal background or provide proactive events and workshops to prevent others from going down the path of incarceration. Tia stated,

After the experience of my incarceration, I wanted to understand the law better. And be able to adjust to what they are doing as far as sentencing guidelines and different things like that. So, I said I'd go back to school on that side of the law, to be able to adapt it and bring it into the program [her non-profit organization] that I am doing now. So, I wanted to understand criminal justice, where they come from, how the law are [sic] orchestrated and how we can use them to help save our youth from going to the judicial system because that's something we can do.

Tia was adamant about preventing others from going into a criminal justice system by learning how the system works and preparing youth for a brighter future that does not consist of criminal convictions and incarceration.

Along with Tia, Lisa was also giving back to a population whose shoes they were once in. Lisa told clients with criminal backgrounds that,

Being aware of how you present yourself if you have charges from armed robbery or attempted or assault and battery or breaking and entering and someone sees you, someone sees your social media and you are acting like a person that has those charges, that's who they are gonna see, that's the person that society is going to see. What does society have to do with it? They associate what they see with what is on that paper, with your criminal background... if you are looking for a job and you are looking to rebuild yourself or rebrand yourself, be mindful of yourself, be mindful of the things you do and be mindful of your mouth. You

don't have to change who you are on the inside, but just be mindful of some of the things that you put out, you know, or the people that you surround yourself with.

Lisa gave back by giving those with criminal backgrounds the knowledge needed to move their lives forward. This advice she provided came from her own experience of having a criminal record and finding out how to rebrand herself in a positive way. She had taken time to explain to others her own affirmation that the advice she shared was given from her own experiences.

Aspirations

Another component of the overall theme *affirmation of self* comes from aspiration. Aspiration is the desire and hope for a better today and tomorrow for the women in this study. Aspiration came from their dreams of achieving a better life for themselves, their children, and others in their family. The types of aspirations that resonated amongst the women were to attain a college degree whether that be an associate degree or bachelor's degree. For some, their aspirations went beyond their personal goal of obtaining a degree, but being a role model and positive example for their children. One of the participants, Naomi, discussed her definition of aspirations during our interview and defined it as "just giving them [future family] a good way, giving them a foundation to achieve what they want to do and know that they can do it no matter what." Although Naomi does not have children, she talked about her aspirations for her future family.

Naomi explained that her declaration to get her degree and to have a better life provided a solid foundation for her future family. Her children will see that they have an

opportunity because their mother paved the way for them to have it. In the previous excerpt, Naomi is affirming for her future family, but also affirming herself that she will not stop working towards her dreams.

In a similar context, Blue talked about her children and how they will never go through the abuse she went through as a child because she aspired to be a better parent.

My mom like I said was illiterate and she had issues of her own which is why we're not close, but my mom would call me a Black B... you know the B word. like when she got mad. A lot of times she was very verbally abusive. And physically abusive too. She would throw brushes, hit us with wires. But believe me my upbringing was crazy, and I'm glad I was able to break that cycle. I have a great relationship with my kids. Yes, I'll get pissed off at them and I'll tell them just where I'm at but we're able to talk it through. When my kids were little we would have family night and family meetings.

Blue was proud that she was able to have a positive relationship with her kids where they can come and talk to her. That was what she missed from her own childhood but refused to allow her negative childhood relationship to transfer into her own children. She aspired to uplift her children and provide them a better life than what she had. Because of her involvement in her children's lives, all three of her children went to college. Blue stated, "schooling is something that I always wanted to do, and do for me." This desire to complete her education goes beyond Blue affirming her dream of getting her degree, but it also affirmed the desires she had for her children who have beaten the odds that she did not beat growing up.

The aspirations of these women confirm the types of dreams the women have as well as how those dreams affirmed who they are and the importance of the legacy they want to leave for their family. None of the aspirations that have been shared come without belief in ability to see them through. This is where the faith of these women shines its light.

Faith

The characteristic of faith in the context of affirmation of self was a powerful one. Faith was the belief that there was no need to worry about a situation when you turn it over to a higher being. For some of these women, that higher being was identified as the monotheistic God. These women spoke of their faith and what it meant to them through their individual journeys. Naomi provided a description of what faith meant to her.

Being a Christian woman helps me go through a lot because I'm mildly depressed and I have anxiety so I know that being aware of that I pray about it. Nobody showed me how to read the bible or how powerful it could be in my life, that being said, I could have used it a lot more when I was younger being a little bit more faithful that everything is gonna be okay. Because I let everything in my environment affect me in a negative way and keeping that... Keeping God close to me gives me purpose; it gives me motivation, peace. It helps me with struggles...and it makes me more focused on what I need...it's very influential to me.

Naomi shared how her faith in Christ has helped her through some of the challenges faced in her life. Faith had been her way of knowing who she is. By knowing who she is, her aspirations are being affirmed.

Tia also described how faith was an essential component in who she is. She described her faith as a spiritual bond.

My family has a strong foundation a long line of African American women who always had a spiritual bond, and that's definitely what kept us going. The days that I wanted to give up, the days that I didn't think I could go on, they gave me many reasons why I could live and you know, it's just made me the person that I am today, you know, it has been my foundation from day one. I stray away from it but the foundation has always been there. The foundation is solid.

Tia's spiritual foundation was a constant in her life because of the many African American women in her life that kept her grounded in her faith. Her spiritual foundation allowed her to push through those times when she wanted to give up because of the various challenges that came with being a person who had a criminal record. Just as Tia was covered by her spiritual family, Nicki was being covered through prayer. Nicki said during the interview, "I pray day and night and I also read my Bible to keep me spiritually grounded." Nicki defined her faith through building her relationship with God by reading her Bible and praying everyday which allowed her to know where her strength came from when she needed it most.

Anna described her faith as what is meant to be will be. She stood strong on the belief that everything happens in God's timing. She says,

I believe that all of us can do anything. And if it is in His plan for your life, no one could ever stop it. It doesn't matter what is on your record. It doesn't matter where you are from. It doesn't matter how much education you have, if it is God's plan, it's His plan.

Anna provided a no-nonsense description of faith as believing that God has the final say so. Anna is saying that the hopes we have for our lives may seem like they should go one way, but God provides a path that opens up your heart and mind to see what He is trying to do in your life.

Summary

Faith affirmed what these women aspire to be. When challenges came, faith was what kept them going because a higher being was taking care of them and guiding them along the way. Affirmation of self was defined through each characteristic of accomplishments, aspirations, and faith. The faith that these women have affirmed their aspirations. It was what provided hope for the present and future. Aspirations were the dreams and goals that women wanted to achieve. Accomplishments were what these women have done and wanted to continue to achieve with the aspirations they have for their lives. These were all components of how affirmation of self was confirmed in the experiences of these women.

The themes of this study, perseverance of self and affirmation of self were defined by the experiences that each of the women in this study shared and respond to the three research questions presented at the beginning of this chapter. The inductive approach analysis produced the themes and sub themes that describe the experiences told by the

participants. Although there were some components outside the scope of this study shared by each of the participants, it tells a more complete story of who these women are.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Previous research on women reintegrating into society after incarceration has typically emphasized numerous barriers that returning prisoners face when they transition into the community. While reducing recidivism is of essential importance, understanding the experiences of the participants in this study who are pursuing degrees further aids in the awareness of how society can engage in mitigating some of the barriers that currently exist. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine what motivates African American women to pursue college degrees after incarceration despite the systemic barriers of reintegration into society. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings, implications of findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

The theory that framed the experiences of the participants in this study is Black Feminist Thought through Feminist Standpoint Theory. The two themes that emerged from this study included: (a) perseverance of self, and (b) affirmation of self. Each of these main themes are described through subthemes that further capture the experiences of the participants. Perseverance of self, consisted of the subthemes: agency, overcoming barriers, and support. Affirmation of self included subthemes: accomplishments, aspirations, and faith. All of these subthemes answer the following research questions and are consistent with key characteristics of black feminist thought:

1. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their motivation to pursue a college degree?

2. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated describe their academic, social, and personal experiences while pursuing a college degree?
3. How do African American women who were formerly incarcerated maintain motivation and persist through challenges and systemic barriers?

Interpretation of Findings

Once I began analyzing and interpreting the data, I was surprised that the women did not highlight more of their experiences in the college classroom with their faculty or with staff. Although some of them shared a few experiences, most of the discussion was about their experiences as a child and adult overcoming systemic and personal obstacles that emphasize their goals. The women in this study emphasized who they are as individual women despite the challenges they have faced.

FST grounded in BFT provided a foundation that oppressed groups perspectives are seen, heard, and understood while viewing BFT through the lens of Black women. BFT was essential in this study because it provided a platform for the nine African American participants to share their experiences from their perspective. It was important to note that the participants experiences were unique to them. According to Collins (2000), African American women's experiences are different from women of other ethnic backgrounds. BFT emphasized some of the elements Black women encounter that those who do not identify as Black would not. While each participant differed in their demographics and personal background, the two common themes were prominent elements in describing the experiences of each participant and answering the research questions. There were subthemes that were developed from the themes based on how the

participants shared their experiences that led to them pursuing college degrees. What began to emerge within the findings was the intersectionality of the three different research questions, therefore providing a multidimensional story.

Perseverance of Self

In the theme perseverance of self, I kept hearing the participants discuss all of the things they were doing in order to have a better life for themselves and for their families. Although the participants did not always use the phrase, “better life” they did make reference to achieving beyond the challenges they faced in which I interpreted to represent a better life. It was like they wanted to prove that they could do something different and something better, which translated to pursuing and attaining a higher education. As Collins (1990) shared, education was powerful in the African American community to uplift and empower. As such, these participants saw education as a way to uplift and empower their community and themselves. Even throughout history, African American women have been persevering for their own survival and the participants in this study were no different. Perseverance is deeply ingrained in the history of African Americans because of the challenges they have faced throughout history (Kluger, 2004). Moreover, the women in this study have shown perseverance through their actions and determination. The participants saw an opportunity to elevate themselves through education because they recognized that knowledge is powerful. In addition to the historical perspective, the participants foundationally knew that with educational knowledge, their odds of returning to a criminal background decreased. Participants like Nicki and Eve stated how education was a chance for them to stay out of trouble and

have a better life which is consistent with the research that has found higher education increases employability therefore diminishing criminal involvement (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson, 2012). Furthermore, the participants saw hope within themselves as they persevered to gain their education. Many of the participants had a home life that lacked financial stability or family support. However, as the women shared their experiences, it became evident that their mindset was to build themselves up to be better than their home life provided. This aligns with Mukamal et al. (2015) findings that education breaks the cycles of poverty. Mukamal found that the poverty cycle is not just broken for these women who were incarcerated, but it breaks the poverty cycle for younger generations. This cycle is broken because individuals serve as positive mentors for the younger generation (Mukamal et al., 2015). The poverty cycle is not just broken for these women who were incarcerated, but it breaks the poverty cycle for younger generations. This is why some of the participants shared how they are showing others who have been impacted by the criminal justice system that they too can persevere; that they too can have hope because these women are examples of hope for a better life becoming a reality.

The support of family played a major role in their perseverance of self, which I view as instrumental to success of the participants. Their success did not come all on their own, but with the support of their family and reentry organizations. For many of the participants, family is what motivated them to desire more for their lives. It extended beyond just being a role model for those in their family, but the support of family was a sense of having someone to lean on and let them know that they can make it because they

have the love of their family. This aligns with existing literature which suggests that family support is perceived as a critical component to successful reintegration, coming in the form of financial assistance, emotional support, and childcare (Cobbina, 2010).

In addition to family support, reentry organizations were vital motivators for the participants in this study to pursue their degrees. These findings are consistent with the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (Halkovic et al., 2013) study, which found that the impact of college on formerly incarcerated persons decreases their recidivism and increases their personal health and financial stability. Although the participants in the current study were not asked if they were affiliated with a reentry program, those that were affiliated shared how the programs helped them to transition into society and into their degree programs. The support from reentry programs that the women described aligns with existing literature. National Institute of Justice (Ritter, 2014) found that more reentry programs were using evidence-based practices to become more rehabilitative agencies providing reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals to be successful. Because the reentry programs were a positive support for the participants, negative support networks could have caused them to fail or increased the barriers that already existed. If the women who participated in the current study had held on to lack of support, their motivation would not be as strong. These participants have gone through so much that they know getting through the barriers and seeing the progress they are making pushes them to persevere.

Another important factor that stood out in the experiences of these women is the fact that they had been overlooked and discriminated against in different settings.

Because of this type of discrimination of being isolated from others based on their race, gender, and criminal record, the cycle of oppression continued. Society's view of these participants was seen as unworthy, but the one thing that cannot be taken from these women is their education. Howard-Hamilton (2003) discussed how African American women are oppressed based on their race and gender, but they gained more knowledge when they went to college. Gaining more knowledge despite being discriminated against showed how the participants in this study viewed themselves. It was a view of self-confidence because the participants were working toward a goal in order to gain social capital through higher education attainment. Furthermore, a goal that provided awareness of what education can provide, awareness of the support they needed to persevere in a society that viewed them as unworthy, and an awareness of the challenges that they have overcome and continue to overcome became evident. This not only ties into participants' perseverance of self, but also their affirmation of self. These women are looking beyond the labels that society has placed on them and defining their own truths. Defining their own truths aligns with the main points of BFT. BFT articulates the ideas and thoughts of Black women, and because the Black woman's voice is centered in this study, they are seen as who they describe themselves as (Collins, 2000).

Affirmation of Self

The theme affirmation of self was all about the participants' pledge to themselves to recognize their accomplishments, the desires they have for themselves, and the belief that everything will be ok as long as one has faith. The participants in this study had various accomplishments and some of those accomplishments were being employed at a

place that ended up affirming what their future careers would be. The desires the women have of gaining their degree no matter what challenges come their way showed liberation. Furthermore, those desires or aspirations give the women a chance to be a positive influencer and role model for their family and the community. In Halkovic et al. (2013) the study aligns with the statement of being a positive influencer within their family. The study discusses how higher education enhances contributions to strengthening the family unit and being an involved citizen.

The faith that the participants spoke of was a reminder that they were not in control of their own destiny, but could turn over their thoughts and cares to a higher being to help them affirm what is for them. The participants' faith is what kept them focused on how to continue their path to a better life. Five of the participants; Blue, Nicki, Naomi, Tia, and Anna; discussed the importance of faith. Faith was an influencer, a motivator, and provided focus of what the participants needed to keep going (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Although there are similarities in the findings of this study and previous literature, the findings of this study emphasized the feelings and thoughts that the participants had about their survival in society. The existing literature discusses the societal demands placed on women coming home from prison (Runell, 2017), however, the inner thoughts of how these women feel regarding the demands is not as prevalent. The survival of the women is demonstrated through their perseverance and affirmation of their reality. With the women knowing what they have accomplished thus far is something they worked to attain, the dreams they have can be a reality, and trusting what should be will be, they

give hope for others who face similar challenges. It was vital for the participants in this study to have their voices amplified as African American women. The opportunity to participate in this study alleviated outsiders giving their perspective of the experiences of African American women who were formerly incarcerated. Furthermore, the participants of this study were a clear representation of the epistemology of an oppressed group of women (Collins, 2000; Hartsock, 1983).

Theoretical Understanding of Findings

Black Feminist Thought and Feminist Standpoint Theory

BFT is shaped by the experiences of Black women. The participants in this study shared their experiences not only as being formerly incarcerated women, but as African American women. In listening to the participants' experiences, I was reminded of the uniqueness of each participants' life story. A lot of the stories that participants shared are due to barriers they have faced as children and adults, but the outcome of those stories is how they have and are overcoming those barriers. The participants continued to push towards a higher education despite what their experiences would deem as negative. The participants' resistance to giving up when their experiences did not show a way out, is a pure example of them fighting through the obstacles that oppressed them. The reality is that the participants are cognizant of how their stories have meaning, which translates into the value the participants have for themselves to persevere.

Since BFT is shaped by the experiences of Black women, the participants in this study share their experiences not only as formerly incarcerated women, but formerly incarcerated African American women. They have reflected on their experiences and

activated those experiences into pursuing a college degree. Attaining a degree is how these women resist oppression (Collins, 2000). The women's resistance to being oppressed is a symbol of their perseverance.

BFT emphasized some of the elements encountered by Black women that those who do not identify as Black may not encounter. For example, when Chrystal and Naomi shared how they believed their darker skin is why they were treated with little support and love, it was a form of discrimination that is known as colorism. While colorism is a global phenomenon of discrimination against darker skinned people, what was liberating is that the African American women in this study who shared their colorism experience stopped allowing that type of discrimination to take control of who they were and allowed their purposes and affirmations of self to guide them.

One of the last components that provided an understanding of BFT within this study is the intersectionality of participant experiences with their faith. Having faith was essential for about half of the participants. These participants realized that with any hardships presented, they can pray about it and turn it over to God. The emphasis on the African American woman redefining her reality was evident in the experiences shared by the participants from their perspective. Collins (1990) states that there is power in Black women naming their own reality and not succumbing to labels or the reality others have of us. As BFT amplified the voice of African American women, Feminist Standpoint Theory emphasized the importance of oppressed groups of people to be heard. This study opened the door for formerly incarcerated African American women to share their experiences.

Not only did this study open doors for formerly incarcerated African American women to share their experiences, but it also provided me an opportunity to reflect on my own experiences. As I shared in my subjectivity statement, I do not have the experience of being formerly incarcerated, but I do identify with the participants of this study as an African American woman. I think it is essential to look at my own experiences and how I was able to persevere through some of the challenges I faced in life as well as affirm who I am. There have been times that I, just like the participants in the study, have been stereotyped or discriminated against. I remember a time during my educational trajectory, I was in an academic interview being asked about my math score on a standardized exam. The question that was asked put me into a box that said that African Americans are not good in math and in so many words, that was the statement shared with me. While those words were discriminatory in nature and made me feel as if I was not capable of progressing in that academic program, I had to remind myself that I was not the label that this person was trying to place on me. I had been persevering through many obstacles in life and this would not be one to stop me. I used my voice to share with the interviewer that I study to understand things that may be challenging for me and that is what I would continue to do. What I knew at that time and what I know today is that challenges are going to come, but knowing myself and my own drive is what allows me to persist. Today, I continue to persevere through challenges that I face because I am responsible for pursuing my purpose. Some of the women in this study, being grounded in my faith has kept me going and secure in myself, not others validation of me. If I do not write my story or share my personal experiences with others, my voice is silenced and alleviates

others gaining an understanding of my individualized perspective as a Black woman.

The experiences that each of the participants shared in this study are no longer muted, but have been defined as Black feminist thoughts.

Limitations

The scope of this study addressed the varied experiences of African American women who are pursuing higher education after incarceration. However, there were some limitations that were not addressed in this study that were discovered during the study process. The criteria called for formerly incarcerated African American women enrolled in college. Some participants were enrolled in college but had just started college courses. Therefore, they could not speak in depth of their experiences while pursuing a college degree on campus or online college experience. Another limitation was not asking specifically what the participants' experiences have been like in a reentry program. Although women discussed their experiences if they were involved in reentry programs, some did not talk about being involved with a reentry program. The impact of reentry programs on formerly incarcerated women could provide more evidence-based practices that can further develop the programs. This study was also limited to the amount of time the women were incarcerated. Some women were in jail for one month or less and others had years in prison which emphasizes the differences in their experiences. Additionally, the study called for not only formerly incarcerated African American women, but transwomen. There were no self-identified transwomen interviewed so their perspectives were not included in the study.

Future Research

This study addressed the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American women and their personal experiences pursuing college degrees. This study could have been interpreted multiple ways. As a result, there are several implications for future research, which include:

- **Impact of colorism:** Previous scholarly work and evidence shows how how Black girls are impacted in the classroom and how these effects extend into their adult lives. The participants in this study had positive and negative experiences as they worked towards their college degrees. Some of the women talked about the tone of their skin playing a role in their personal life. The role of colorism deals with appearance and could be a factor of the behavior of how young girls K-12 interact with authority and peers in that setting which may hinder their ability to thrive educationally and be removed from school. Further examining colorism and its potential impact regarding sentencing decisions for crimes as well as the experiences women have prior to serving time and after they serve time would be a significant contribution to the field.
- **Experiences of African American transwomen:** The criteria of this study included African American women who may identify as transwomen, however, I did not have any self-identified transwoman in the sample population. As our society is figuring out how to be more inclusive of those who identify as trans, it is vital that the challenges formerly

incarcerated transwomen face are heard so that their reintegration into society is successful.

- Use of evidence-based practices by higher education institutions: Reentry programs are growing in their usage of evidence-base practices to help those who have been impacted by the criminal justice system (Ritter, 2014). It would be essential to see how higher education programs utilize evidence-base practices to determine the best services they can deliver to students who have been formerly incarcerated. Additionally, if higher education institutions are not familiar with what laws and rights are in place for students with a criminal conviction, students are the ones who may suffer for lack of knowledge. Therefore, the awareness and utilization of evidence-based practices in higher education institutions could further show students that the staff and faculty of the institution want to see them succeed.
- Experiences of African American women who have completed their college degrees: While this study was about African American women who were pursuing college degrees, reviewing the experiences of African American women who have completed their degrees and their experiences of job searching would broaden the literature on the successes that attaining a college degree provides. Additionally, higher education institutions and formerly incarcerated students would be aware of the

specific types of careers that have been explored to be successful. and what it means once they complete the degree.

Summary and Conclusion

The voices of African American women who were formerly incarcerated are essential in a society that throughout history has silenced the African American voice through a variety of barriers. Collins (2002) looked to foster the empowerment of the African American woman. The participants in this study realized that there were those who believed they were nothing or that something was wrong with them because they were African American women with a criminal record. This type of mentality was meant to silence Black women. However, the participants persevered through the barriers that existed against them, and affirmed their reality. The motivation to not recidivate and the knowledge of knowing that higher education was the way to a better life was confirmed through hearing and understanding the experiences of the participants and their thought process.

Although there is limited research on how formerly incarcerated individuals achieve a meaningful and crime-free life, this study is a step in the right direction in understanding more about a population of formerly incarcerated African American women who see higher education as a key to avoiding crime. This study contributes to the need for higher education institutions, employers, and policy makers to be knowledgeable and open to making changes that meet the needs of those who have been oppressed and silenced. Moreover, this study contributes to the literature of diverse higher education and broadens the scope to focus on the attainment of higher education

for formerly incarcerated African American women and how they are empowered to be consistent in their pursuit of a better life. Overall, the results of this study open up the opportunity for discussion on how to eliminate some of the barriers that formerly incarcerated individuals face, what are the needs of African American formerly incarcerated women to be successful in their educational pursuit, and how to hear the voices of formerly incarcerated women as not just another story, but a story that shows I too am human and deserving.

Furthermore, the findings of this study inform college and university personnel to design supportive participant-centered programs and practices to assist with the transition to the college environment and ensure persistence and graduation of highly marginalized populations like formerly incarcerated African American women. Some of the ways higher education institutions can provide participant centered programs is making sure the language represented in the college application and orientation is inclusive of students of all backgrounds which includes those who were formerly incarcerated. Additionally, college admissions can review the necessity of having additional review process for potential students who have been formerly incarcerated, and if hearing about someone's past criminal justice involvement is an effective tool to determine if the student is a good fit for the institution. Considering the motivation behind each of the women in this study and how they pushed through the barriers, it is evident that getting an education is a priority for them.

Final Thoughts

Since completing the data collection, there have been some updates in the lives of the participants. Eve and I worked on updating her resume and cover letter for a new position she was applying to and she is now working in that new position. Kareema has graduated with her bachelor's degree, and Naomi has transitioned from a 2-year college to a 4-year college. Blue and Tia have been speaking at various conferences continuing to uplift and empower women and girls who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. Each of the participants in this study are continuing to write their own story and helping other women utilize their voices to write their own story. As demonstrated through the findings, all that is needed from these women is already within them through their perseverance and affirmation of self.

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APPENDIX A RECRUITMENT LETTER

Greetings!

My name is April Smith and I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in the Educational Leadership program. I am seeking eligible participants to take part in my dissertation research study related the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American women in college. Participants who are eligible to participate in and complete the demographic survey and research interviews will be compensated with a \$15.00 Amazon gift card. Participants will be asked to complete a demographic survey and participate in a 60-90 minute one-on-one interview. Interview times will accommodate your schedule. If you are interested in participating in this study and meet the minimal criteria, you may contact me at asmit547@uncc.edu or go directly to the link <http://uncc.surveymshare.com/s/AYA4XLA>. If you know of any women who meet the study criteria, please forward this email to them.

Participants in this study will be recruited based on the following criteria:

- 1) Identify as an African American/Black woman or transwoman
- 2) Have been incarcerated in a jail or prison
- 3) Enrolled in degree program at a two or four-year college

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,
April

April C. Smith
IRB Study #17-0392
Doctoral Student| Educational Leadership
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte NC 28223

CC:
Dr. Sandra Dika
sdika@uncc.edu
Associate Professor
Faculty Supervisor

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking time to speak with me. As mentioned before, I have some questions about you and your experiences going to college. I am especially interested in your understanding your experiences as an African American woman who has been previously incarcerated. If you do not understand a question, please ask me to restate it or rephrase it.

1. You indicated on the survey that you have been attending a college program for ____ semesters/years. Tell me about your program and your decision to go back to college.

Potential prompts

- a. What were the main reasons you decided to go to college
- b. Why did you choose that particular program?

2. What has your academic experience been like? or Tell me about your experience taking classes.

Potential prompts

- a. adjusting to schedule and format
 - b. studying and grades?
 - c. relationship with professors
 - d. relationship with peers
 - e. do your professors or peers know your background and how has that affected your participation in classes and college activities*
- *ask if they do not mention when talking about relationships

3. How has your personal and social life been affected by being in college?

Potential prompts

- a. relationship with family (e.g., own children, partner/spouse, parents, siblings)
- b. relationship with friends
- c. involvement in outside activities (e.g., community, church)

4. What are some barriers you have experienced while pursuing your degree?

Potential prompts

- a. during admission into college
 - b. barriers while in school system K-12
 - c. was there ever a time you wanted to give up
 - d. any barriers because of your race*
 - e. any barriers because of your gender/gender identity*
- *ask about race and gender if they do not bring it up earlier in the interview

5. In thinking back on the purpose of this study - examining what motivates formerly incarcerated African American women to pursue college degrees - what keeps YOU focused on this goal?

Potential prompts

- a. personal reasons (e.g., for family)
- b. personal practices (e.g., spirituality, exercise)

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM



Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Getting from Prison to College: Voices of Formerly Incarcerated African American Women Pursuing a College Degree

Principal Investigator: April Smith
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Charlotte, NC 28223
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Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sandra Dika
Associate Professor
College of Education
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Charlotte, NC 28223
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sdika@uncc.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this proposed study is to examine the experiences formerly incarcerated (FI) African American women have as they pursue a college degree. This study will provide (FI) African American women an opportunity to share their individual stories of what has motivated them to pursue a college degree despite any challenges or barriers that exist.
- I am asking African American formerly incarcerated women who are 18 and older and enrolled in college, to complete a demographic survey and participate in a 60-90 interview about your experiences pursuing a degree. I will ask you to complete the demographic survey through an

email I will send. In that email, there will be a link to the survey. Once you complete the survey, I will contact you via email to set up a time for our individual interview. Only you and I will be present during the interview.

- Some of the questions I'll ask you are personal. For example, I'll ask you about the types of challenges you faced once released from prison. These questions are personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question if you do not want to answer. You will not personally benefit from taking part in this research but my study results may help me better understand the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American women that pursue a college degree.
- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?

This study will provide (FI) African American women an opportunity to share their individual stories of what has motivated them to pursue a college degree despite any challenges or barriers that exist.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you identify as 1) African American or Black 2) woman or transwoman, 3) age 18 and older, 4) formerly incarcerated, and 5) enrolled in a college degree.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

Participants are recruited through email, social media, and word of mouth. As a participant, if you meet the criteria outlined in the recruitment component, you should respond to the contact person, April Smith, stating your interest. As the researcher, I will respond back to you asking for your availability to conduct an interview face-to-face, via video conference (Skype or Google Hangouts), or via telephone. Based on your availability, the date, time, and location of the interview will be emailed back to you to confirm. In that email, I will provide the demographic survey along with the consent form. As a participant, you should review the consent form and follow up with me by email if you have any questions regarding the consent form. If there are no questions and you still wish to participate in the study, completing the demographic survey will serve as your consent to participate. Your name on the survey and any identifying information about your college or re-entry program will be redacted and replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality and anonymity.

What benefits might I experience?

While you may not personally benefit from this study, there are potential societal benefits to understanding the pathways that make it easier for all formerly incarcerated individuals to get an education. This research also brings more awareness to the needs of African American women's thoughts of their own experiences so that institutions of higher learning can address policies that are not inclusive of nontraditional pathways to college.

What risks might I experience?

Risk is minimal in this study and not greater than daily life encounters.

There is minimal psychological risk as you may respond to questions regarding your former incarceration. Discussing personal experiences may bring up some upsetting feelings that are unforeseen.

This study will be as confidential as possible with pseudonyms being used in place of participant names and any specific institutions, organizations, or programs mentioned in the interview. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. If you do not want to continue to be in the study, you may stop at any time without penalty.

How will my information be protected?

For the purposes of this research study, your comments will not be anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning pseudonyms for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet or password-protected computer in the personal possession of the researcher.

As a participant, your data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

After this study is complete, study data will be used as part of publishing results. The data will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I be paid for taking part in this study?

You will receive a \$15.00 Amazon gift card via email for completing the demographic survey and the interview once your participation is complete.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance at (704) 687-1871.

If problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Researcher, please contact the supervising faculty member, Dr. Sandra Dika at sdika@uncc.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the UNC Charlotte Office of Research Compliance at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a

reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1) I identify as African American or Black	a. Yes b. No
2) I identify as a woman or transwoman	a. Yes b. No
3) I am enrolled in a degree program at a college or university (2 or 4 year)	a. Yes b. No
4) I was previously confined in a jail or prison on at least one occasion	a. Yes b. No
5) What type of college are you enrolled in?	a. 2 year college b. 4 year college
6) How many semester or terms have you been enrolled in your current college program (including the current semester/term)?	a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4 e. 5 f. 6 g. 7 h. 8 i. 9 j. 10 k. 11 l. 12 m. 13 n. 14 o. 15 p. 16 or more
7) Are you currently enrolled full time or part time in your program?	a. Full-time b. Part-time
8) Which type of high school diploma did you complete?	a. High School Diploma b. High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) c. General Educational Development (GED) d. None of the above
9) Did you receive your High School Equivalency Diploma, high school diploma, or GED while incarcerated?	a. Yes b. No
10) How old were you at the time of your first incarceration?	a. 16-19 years b. 20-30 years c. 31-40 years d. 41-50 years e. 51 years or above
11) What is the approximate amount of time that you have spent incarcerated in jail and/or prison?	a. Jail (total months) _____ b. Prison (total months) _____
12) For which categories of crimes have you been convicted. Check all that apply.	a. Violence b. Drugs c. Property d. Public order

	e. Other
13) What is your age?	
14) How many children do you have?	a. 1 b. 2 to 3 c. 4 to 6 d. 7 to 10 e. More than 10
15) What is your marital status?	a. Married b. Separated c. Divorced d. Single
16) Who lives with you in your current residence? Check all that apply.	a. live alone b. spouse or partner c. own children d. own parent(s) e. other adult family members f. other children g. other adults (not family)