THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS IN MID-LEVEL LEADERSHIP NAVIGATING THE SUPERWOMAN SCHEMA

by

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ABSTRACT

KIMBERLY D TURNER. The Experiences of Black Women Administrators in Mid-Level Leadership Navigating The Superwoman Schema
(Under the direction of DR. RYAN A. MILLER and DR. CATHY D. HOWELL)

This qualitative study examines how Black women mid-level leaders navigate the superwoman schema. The findings extend Woods-Giscombé's (2010) work by exploring the schema's impact on Black women working in mid-level leadership administrative positions at HWIs. A descriptive phenomenological study was employed to understand and describe the lived experiences of Black women mid-level leaders and how the superwoman schema impacts work, leadership style, and personal care. The research questions addressed were: (1) How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWIs?; and (2) How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Black women who identified with the characteristics of the superwoman schema, worked at a HWI, and served in a mid-level leadership role. Data were analyzed utilizing Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive, phenomenological data analysis process (Appendix F). Findings from one-on-one interviews indicate Black women mid-level leaders experience the exhaustion of misogynoir and use resistance responses focusing on their personal advocacy and joy. In relation to the superwoman schema, participants were aware of their emotions, exhausted from external pressures to succeed without the proper resources, and committed to the preservation of self and survival. There was consistent commitment to help others and preserve the Black community while also finding community for themselves.

DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad…To my Lucy, my bestie, my prayer warrior, Mattie Lucinda Grayson Turner and to my hero, my coach, my mentor, Dr. Wayne Michael Turner. This is for you. I hope you are proud of me. I want to continue your legacy of education and excellence. Thank you for instilling me with Black pride, the love of God, and the importance of education. Thank you for loving me unconditionally. Thank you for your love, guidance, and sacrifices that have shaped the person I am today. Not a day goes by that you don't cross my mind. May you continue to rest in peace, joy, and pride.

Proud to be the next Dr. Turner.

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To The Squad, we have been in the game together since 2020. While we have all been on our own journey, I could not have gotten through the past four years without you. Whether it was the group chat during class, an inside facial expression or joke, the post-semester gatherings, or just messages of encouragement, it saved me. Thank you to Ryan, Jamar, and Ashley. You all are the real MVPs. #2024

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This work would not be possible without all the strong Black women in my circle who show up every day and those who participated in the study. I also want to honor the Black women in higher education whose lives have been taken at the hands of being a Superwoman. I encourage you to find your freedom and liberation. Keep showing up and taking care of yourself.

God I am so grateful for this opportunity and gift. Thank you for the strength and endurance to get through this process. You have never left my side.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BFT	Black Feminist Thought
CRT	Critical Race Theory
HWI	Historically White Institutions
IRB	Institutional Review Board
PD	Professional Development
POC	People of Color
PWI	Predominately White Institution
RBF	Racial Battle Fatigue
RQ	Research Question
SWS	Superwoman Schema

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> 'Black Superwoman Syndrome' is different for every Black woman, but it is the universal feeling of feeling like you have to take on the world and all of its problems, while juggling your Blackness and womanhood, and a multitude of other roles. Being a 'Black Superwoman', your world is about doing more, and taking on more. Feelings of exhaustion, depression, and fatigue are skirted to the side as we prove that we can defy any and all expectations. The 'Black Superwoman Syndrome' has been romanticized over the years and has been seen as a badge of honor that Black women wear as they tackle daily life. The reality, though, is far more serious and not as honorable (Bayaa-Uzuri, 2020, para 6).

The strong Black woman/superwoman role is a phenomenon that impacts Black women's experiences and serves as a liability and benefit. The superwoman schema (SWS) is a conceptual framework used to explore descriptions of the superwoman role (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The SWS is described as feminine expectations for Black women, including "unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and caring for others," while dealing with racism and sexism (Liao et al., 2020, p. 84). The SWS characteristics include suppressing emotions, resisting vulnerability and dependability, manifesting strength, succeeding despite resources, and prioritizing others over self-care (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016).

SWS is also seen as a benefit through self-preservation and preserving the Black family (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). The SWS places unrealistic, superhuman expectations, both external and self-inflicted, on Black women. These can lead to assumptions that they are exempt from societal, professional, and personal challenges (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). Such assumptions can impact how Black women lead. Confining gendered and racialized roles,

expectations, and the need to maintain can cause depression, anxiety, stress, and other mental health issues for them (Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016).

Statement of the Problem

There has been limited research on how Black women administrators in mid-level leadership working at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) navigate the superwoman schema. Black women mid-level leaders in higher education experience the SWS personally and in their leadership roles. There is pressure to maintain their responsibilities and roles (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Balancing these obligations can lead to negative mental, emotional, and physical health outcomes (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Black women attempt to learn how to navigate a historically white, patriarchal environment, while having multiple roles including their gendered and racial identity, othermothering, and professional job-related duties (Collins, 2000; Mawhinney, 2011). Even though Black women leaders in the academy have different experiences, backgrounds, appearances, educational levels, demographics, occupations, and beliefs, they are all connected by the desire to be accepted and respected members of society with a voice that has multiple layers (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000). The connections and similarities Black women experience as a result of gendered racism, managing discrimination, and microaggressions are further related by their receiving lower pay than their White counterparts, particularly White women (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Despite challenges, Black women in higher education continue to enhance the culture of higher education (Chance, 2021).

Black women in mid-level leadership have an additional layer of roles to balance. They serve in mid-level administrative positions such as directors, assistant or associate deans, and program managers across various departments within higher education institutions, such as

academic affairs, athletics, external affairs, student affairs, facilities, and information technology (Whitford, 2020). In particular, mid-level leaders must strategize how to balance organizational vision and institutional politics, while being on the front lines with students, staff, and faculty, yet also navigate racism (Bazner, 2022; Mather et al., 2009; Mills, 2009).

Mid-level leaders may be responsible for managing teams and projects, while also navigating workplace dynamics and likely encountering discrimination and bias. Black women mid-level leaders must overcome multiple racialized and gender roles, as well as their positionality within higher education. The data on Black women in mid-level leadership positions in higher education is limited because most research has been done with Black women in senior-level leadership (Bazner, 2022; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Sobers, 2014).

Based on the research on the roles of Black women and those in mid-level positions, it is beneficial to add the impacts of the SWS to the literature. Managing multiple professional roles and identities, while assuming multiple roles within the superwoman schema can impact the success and well-being of Black women mid-level leaders (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Their achievements impact the leadership pipeline within higher education (Chance, 2022). Opportunities for PD, mentorship, and advancement are necessary to advance Black women in mid-level positions (West, 2019a). The complexity of how Black women make sense of their roles in conjunction with seeking help for physical and mental health is important to understand (Nelson et al., 2016).

Black Women Mid-Level Leaders in Higher Education and SWS

Black women have been historically underrepresented in positions of leadership in higher education and have similar internal and external pressures of womanhood to navigate systemic

gendered and racial oppression (Alexander, 2010). Gendered and racial oppression specific to Black women is a reality and experienced differently than Black men due to gender identity (Cook, 2020; Corbin et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Harris-Perry, 2011; Collins, 2000; Nelson et al., 2016; Wesley, 2018). Misogynoir is a recent term for gendered racism that is specific to Black women and illustrates the ways that they experience the perpetuation of anti-Black, racist misogyny (Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Cook, 2020).

Misogynoir is an encompassing concept within popular culture grounded in intersectionality and combines the terms misogyny and noir, the French word for Black (Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). Black women who work in higher education experience misogynoir at HWIs where hegemonic and dominant cultural practices negatively impact emotional labor, sustainability, mobility, and empowerment (Evans & Moore, 2015; Mitchell, 2021; Sobers, 2014; Wesley, 2018). It is essential to conduct research with individuals who work at a HWI to identify how systems of institutional racism impact the success of Black women in leadership (Evans & Moore, 2015; Smith, 2008).

Challenges and Benefits of Black Women Leaders in Higher Education

Black women face gendered racism in the workplace that impacts their leadership capabilities (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The limited representation of women of color overall in leadership, and particularly Black women, is due to inadequate career opportunities, stereotypes, and tokenism (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

BFT critiques major stereotypes embedded within gendered racism, including the mammy image, racial uplift, the strong Black woman, and outsider within (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000). The mammy image is an example of how even Black women leaders are seen as caregivers to students, faculty, and staff. However, the image professionally

contradicts the difficulties Black women experience when seeking to be seen as credible to their peers and having higher-level leadership responsibilities (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

There are particular challenges for Black women, including feeling visible but socially invisible, having a greater sense of pressure to conform, and being unable to make mistakes—while feeling isolated, having limited power and resources, as well as fewer opportunities for sponsorship (Turner, 2002). There are specific links between leadership and identity, as both reveal perceptions and expectations of Black women (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Black women are expected to display leadership competence, yet simultaneously conform to norms and behaviors of Whiteness (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Despite these challenges, Black women working in higher education have the knowledge, skill, and drive to be leaders (Bonaparte, 2016). Black women use the strength and resilience they have gained through adversity to succeed and develop the necessary skills for leadership (Chance, 2022). Black women in higher education demonstrate collegial orientation, interactive communication, and persistence as a result of challenges faced in the workplace (Bonaparte, 2016). Strength and resilience are a few of the benefits that affect Black women higher education leaders. These have been a part of the reasons for their career success and advancement in this arena (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Black women have been racially socialized through familial and parental practices to have high expectations, assume increased responsibilities, and have additional demands (Nelson et al., 2016). The socialization of resilience is an intergenerational response "to multigenerational exposures to the systematic trauma of chattel slavery and state-enforced racial discrimination" (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 4). When researching Black women and the impact of SWS, identifying the tensions of balancing the benefits and stressors of leadership is essential.

How Black Women Administrators Navigate SWS

Previous research has been done on how individuals who identify as POC in and outside of higher education experienced the SWS (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Liao et al., 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). There have been some studies on how SWS influences the leadership approach of Black women mid-level administrators in higher education. The scholarship related to the SWS originated within the medical and mental health professions, but has since been researched tangentially in the context of education and leadership (Abrams et al., 2014; Chance, 2021; Liao et al., 2020; Watson et. al, 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016).

Though there have been several names and iterations of the SWS, its conceptual framework is still used to describe the different dimensions of the strong Black woman persona and connections between stress and health implications for Black women (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Some characteristics and themes identified in SWS are displaying strength in multiple forms and possessing pride while dealing with misogynoir and embracing being every woman (Abrams et al., 2014).

There is also a juggling of race and positionality, as well as coping with the pressures and implications of the SWS. The SWS illustrates how strength and resilience for Black women in higher education is a double-edged sword (Chance, 2022). Black women who internalize the SWS tend to postpone self-care, prioritize others' needs, and suppress their emotions amid difficulties (Liao et al., 2020).

Adding SWS to the education field gives voice to Black women administrators who feel obligated to display strength, suppress emotions and vulnerability, succeed despite limited resources, and prioritize others over self-care, while also leading (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016).

Studying the SWS addresses the still unanswered question of how Black women mid-level higher education leaders lead while balancing the dichotomy within SWS, the higher education ecosystem, and working at HWIs (Bazner, 2022; Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2011; Sue, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016).

The racial and gendered tension Black women higher education leaders experience from SWS can have lasting impacts personally and professionally. Several studies on Black women and strength identify its impact on psychological and physical wellbeing, finding a need for self-care and healing which is often ignored (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Liao et al., 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). Love, care, and rest are forms of self-care needed to combat SWS. Ross and Kindelan (2022) shared that "the systems of grind culture, of capitalism, of patriarchy, of white supremacy, we can disrupt these systems by just being in these moments of joy and holding ourselves and space to love and care and rest" (para. 34). Hersey (2022) also reminds Black women the importance of rest as a form of resistance and liberation as a sense of self-care. Self-care and rest are essential to the success of Black women leaders.

Mid-Level Leadership in Higher Education

Studies focusing on mid-level leaders who identify as Black are important as they provide insight to better understand organizational conditions, interpersonal relationships, and navigating unwritten rules of the field (Bazner, 2022). Mid-level is defined as non-instructional support personnel or administrators who has been working in higher education for five years as a full-time professional, supervises at least one professional staff member or functional area, and reports to a senior-level administrator (e.g., dean, vice-president, senior student affairs officer, or above (ACPA, 2015; Bazner, 2022). In particular, mid-level leaders must balance the idealism of

organizational vision and realities of university politics, all the while being on the front lines with students and faculty (Mather et al., 2009; Mills, 2009). Encountering racism and institutional politics, in addition to supporting their faculty, staff, and students is something mid-level leaders must endure (Bazner, 2022).

When race is tacitly or openly added to their role, mid-level leaders also serve a critical function in creating more equitable campus environments by attending to students and staff concerns, while navigating discriminatory and racist work environments (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Black administrators reported they felt the need to work harder, while also receiving less investment in PD than their White peers (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). The racial identity of mid-level leaders adds to the mental and emotional labor of trying to gain agency within their institutions (Bazner, 2022). A focus on race, gender, and role of the population adds to higher education research and sheds light on how Black women in mid-level leadership handle multiple roles, while trying to lead at HWIs.

Historically White Institutions

This study allowed the stories of Black women who experienced race and gender oppression while working at four-year HWIs in the United States to be told. The role of HWIs is significant when creating the study's setting. Using the terminology of HWIs was deliberately selected instead of 'predominantly white institutions' to distinguish that a high percentage of white students at the institution has less to do with the majority population than with the historical and contemporary racial infrastructures and methods of exclusion that are in place (Jones, 2021).

HWIs benefit from the current campus racial ecosystem and the history, policies, practices, and ideologies that center on whiteness at the expense of Blacks and other groups of

color (Morales & Raible, 2021; Smith et al., 2011). White institutional spaces create a complex environment in which people must navigate racial narratives and ideologies and discourses while simultaneously attempting to achieve institutional success to reap the material rewards of working at often elite institutions (Evans & Moore, 2015). HWIs maintain structural barriers that deny access, promulgate a pedagogy of tolerance and diversity (Smith et al., 2011).

Black women must negotiate racist structures and daily microaggressions, yet work at places that deny racist dynamics exist within the dominant ideological, white institutional space (Evans & Moore, 2015). The emotional labor managing these challenges and still wanting to succeed is difficult, all the while being systematically and racially objectified and othered in the institutional space. Black women must choose between participating in their own marginalization or actively reacting against it (Evans & Moore, 2015).

Black women leaders navigate several issues when working in HWIs, including the burden of taking on additional work unrelated to their job functions, getting proper care for themselves, receiving support, and adverse treatment (Kelly et al., 2019). There have been several studies that recognize the challenges Black women face at HWIs. In Ramey's (1995) descriptive analysis of a survey of 80 Black women university administrators at the level of dean or higher, 53% of the women from HWIs listed racism as an obstacle. However, none of the women from historically Black colleges and universities listed racism as a barrier. HWIs remain embedded with racist behaviors and need to implement strategies that infuse an inclusive environment where equity is institutionalized and there are consequences for racist behaviors (Lee & Hopson, 2018). HWIs can play a major role in employing Black women higher education leaders and fostering their success.

The number of Black women in mid-level administrators in leadership positions who navigate SWS is a statement of the study's importance. The study addressed how negotiating unrealistic expectations, racism, sexism, white spaces, and positionality affects mid-level leadership. It also conveyed how the superwoman mystique has a major role in the lives of the participants.

Purpose

The purpose of the phenomenological, qualitative study is to investigate the lived experiences of Black women who work as mid-level higher education leaders and how they navigated SWS (Abrams et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016) while leading at four-year HWIs (Husband, 2016). The study focused on those in full-time positions and illuminated the strategies they used to lead others, while facing SWS.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWCUs?
2. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs?

Conceptual Framework Overview

CRT, BFT, and the SWS serve as theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study (Figure 1). CRT is positioned as an overarching worldview and BFT provides a way to focus specifically on Black women's unique needs, perspectives, and experiences (Collins, 2000; Hylton, 2012; Solorzano, 1998). SWS is a conceptual framework within BFT (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

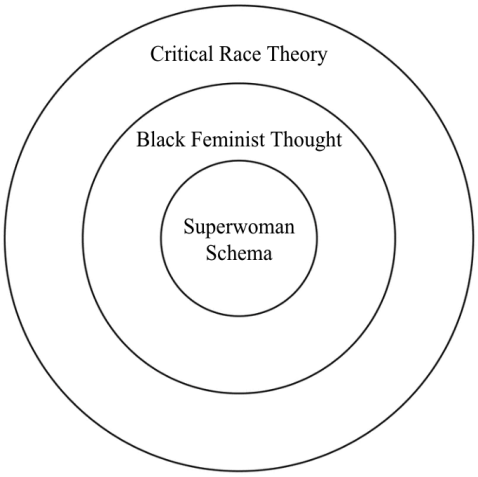

Figure 1: *Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of Study*

CRT highlights racism's existence and consequences within the reality of individuals who identify as Black or POC. It also challenges dominant ideologies and deficient perspectives and is committed to social justice (Pérez-Huber & Solórzano, 2015). CRT interrogates the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, experiential knowledge, and interdisciplinary analyses (Solórzano, 1998).

Using the theme of social justice, CRT could also be considered a praxis as it requires lived activism (Hylton, 2012). The theory challenges white-dominant discourse and examines the impact of race and racism from the perspectives and experiences of women of color providing a guide to transforming oppressive social conditions (Solórzano, 1998). Countering the stories of POC told in predominantly white spaces, CRT utilizes counter-stories to authenticate racialized and gendered voices (Smith et al., 2011). It also offers a lens through which to examine educational policies and give insight as to how Black women leaders deal with politicized policies at their institutions (Jones et al., 2022).

BFT adds to CRT by centering on the ways Black women define themselves in contrast to dominant ideological views and perspectives. It is the product of Black women who want to

own their distinct perspective on the world. Collins (2000) created BFT to "place African American women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences" (p. 228). The theory assumes Black women hold a unique viewpoint that cannot be dissociated from historical conditions that have impacted their lives (Collins, 2000). Four themes in BFT explain the experiences of Black women: lived experience as a criterion of meaning or knowledge; use of dialogue or establishing important relationships to avoid isolation; use of expressiveness, empathy, or emotions; and the ethics of personal accountability (Collins, 2000).

SWS is positioned as the conceptual framework within the two identified theoretical frameworks. SWS serves as a framework adjacent to BFT and provides rich discourse about the potentially negative impact of the superwoman ideal on the interpersonal, social, and emotional well-being of Black women (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Due to the nature of CRT, the researcher was embedded within the research process (Hylton, 2012). Misogynoir has systemic impacts on participants and the researcher through oppressive and resistant experiences as a Black woman. The intersection of the researcher's social identities, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives shaped how the researcher approached and interpreted data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Overview of Research Methodology

This qualitative study used a descriptive phenomenological method to illuminate the experiences of Black women mid-level, higher education administrators leading and having to confront SWS at HWIs. Phenomenology served as the methodological framework because the primary goal was to explore their lived experiences and obtain a deeper understanding of Black women mid-level leaders in multiple contexts within a white environment (Collins, 2000; Crotty, 1998). The descriptive approach explored and described participants' lived experiences at face

value without adding context. The goal was to give participants a space to serve as experts and share their experiences and the impact of the SWS on their leadership using in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interview questions (Jones et al., 2022). These questions aligned with the research questions.

Eligibility for the study included participants needed to self-identified as a Black woman, mid-level higher education leader/administrator, who worked at a four-year HWI, and had experienced SWS. Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used for the study through personal and professional contacts within higher education to allow for information-rich and detailed accounts of the specific population (Jones et al., 2022). Snowball sampling involved recruiting participants from individuals who know people who meet sampling criteria, including those in the study (Jones et al., 2022).

Colaizzi's (1978). seven-step strategy for descriptive phenomenology data analysis was used. Data collection intended to gather information from participants about their lived experiences and how they understood them (Giorgi et al., 2017). One goal of the study was to re-articulate participants' leadership experiences in ways that reflected their depictions of their experiences so that empowerment and new knowledge related to leadership were possible (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Black women mid-level leaders balance race, gender, positionality, politics, strength, and environment while leading, and is an area to study (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This study provided Black women in mid-level positions the opportunity to voice and document their personal leadership experience. It also sought to provide strategies for Black women experiencing SWS and who perhaps aspired to be a senior-level leader (Breeden, 2021). A

potential strategy was participating in a professional counterspace to increase wellness, and provide a space for mentoring, networking, and PD (West, 2019a). The goal of this study was to advance higher education scholarship by describing how gendered racism, positional power, and white-dominant environments impacted Black women in their work (Wesley, 2018).

This study added to current literature on Black women mid-level leaders. Descriptive phenomenology provided an authentic insight into the experiences of the SWS. The study gave an insider's perspective of the lived experiences from the standpoint of positionality and added the concept of SWS (Chavez, 2008). This layer added insight into how pressure from the schema enhanced or hindered their approaches to leadership. In the spirit of BFT, the study gave recognition and power to the voices of Black women mid-level leaders. This population is often overlooked (Bazner, 2022).

Supervisors and colleagues of Black women can use the outcome of the study to question their personal interactions and perspectives, as well as professional practices with their Black women colleagues. The study can also provide recommendations to Black women in higher education who aspire to be in a mid-level position. The study also informs retention and advancement practices of Black women professionals by informing institutional leaders of practices to utilize and make systemic changes.

Delimitations and Assumptions

There are several delimitations and assumptions related to the study. Participants were asked to self-identify as having experienced SWS based on confirmation of its characteristics provided to them. During the interview, the researcher asked them their definition of the schema and aligned their responses with the definition used by the researcher.

There were several reasons for intentionally selecting HWIs as the workplace for participants. These were navigating racial and white-dominant ideologies and the difficulties of career enhancement. A strength of Black women is being able to counter structures, practices, and ideals that are anti-Black and seen at HWIs. Also, recruiting from multiple institutions broadened participation. There are different types of four-year institutions and each provides their own experience. There are opportunities for future research on this topic at Hispanic-serving institutions and historically Black colleges and universities.

The study assumed respondents are truthful in their responses. This study consisted of the experiences of Black women working at four-year institutions and required a homogenous group. The study included Black women who identified within the Black diaspora, regardless of ethnicity or multi-racial status. The decision not to add Black women who worked at community colleges was made to keep the group within one type of higher education institution.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are used in this study:

Historically White Institutions (HWIs). HWIs, as opposed to predominantly white institutions (PWIs), are distinguished by the fact that their student population has less to do with them having a majority of white students than with their historical and contemporary racial infrastructures within them. These institutions still benefit from a campus racial ecosystem that emphasizes whiteness at the expense of Blacks and other groups of color (Smith, 2011).

Mid-Level Leader/Administrator. The term refers to non-instructional support personnel or administrators who have worked in higher education for five years as a full time professional, supervises at least one professional staff member or functional area, and reports to a senior level administrator (e.g. dean, vice president, senior student affairs officer, or above) (ACPA, 2015;

Bazner, 2022). Leader and administrator were used interchangeably within the study.

Misogynoir. A term coined by Bailey and Trudy in 2010 to identify gendered racism that is specific to Black women and illustrates the ways that Black women experience the perpetuation of anti-Black, racist misogyny (Cook, 2020). The term is based on intersectionality and combines misogyny and noir (French for Black) (Crenshaw, 1991; Bailey & Trudy, 2018).

Superwoman Schema. A race-gender schema that "prescribes culturally specific feminine expectations from Black women, including unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and caring for others," which can lead to depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Liao et al., 2020, p. 84).

Organization of the Study

Chapter One introduced this phenomenological, qualitative study of Black women having mid-level leadership positions in four-year higher education institutions who experience SWS. The study connects literature on Black women in these roles, Black women in leadership generally. SWS. CRT and BFT serve as theoretical frameworks for the research. The chapter also provided key elements (the research questions, the study's significance, assumptions, and operational definitions).

The study addressed the experiences of Black women mid-level leaders who identified as experiencing SWS and served as a guide to benefitting them professionally and personally. The following four chapters review the relevant literature, detail the research design and methods used, provide and analyze research results, and concludes with a summary of the study and its implications.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study investigated the lived experiences of Black women mid-level higher education leaders and how they navigated SWS (Abrams et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016), while leading at HWIs (Husband, 2016). The study illuminates the strategies Black women higher education administrators utilize to lead others, while dealing with the superwoman schema themselves.

The stereotype of the "strong Black woman" has become emblematic of Black culture to the point that Black women report pressure to tie on their superwoman cape, projecting themselves as strong, self-sacrificing, and emotionless so as to cope with the stress of gendered racism and racial battle fatigue from dealing with daily microaggressions (Abrams et al., 2014). SWS has impacted Black women leaders in higher education, and learning how they navigate experiences can significantly impact the population. Research on SWS and Black women mid-level leaders can provide PD to those who supervise the population, give insight to senior leaders on the vitality and importance of this population to the institution, and skills and strategies for career development to women who identify with this group. In alignment with the research questions, the study of the experiences of the SWS on Black mid-level higher education leaders has been limited (Liao et al., 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016); furthermore, there has been little research on how the SWS impacts how they lead others.

Chapter two reviews literature related to the challenges many Black women leaders in HWIs sometimes face, while navigating SWS and leading. The chapter also discusses CRT, BFT, SWS, gendered racism, the impact of leadership, and self-care. Table 1 gives the primary themes of the literature.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes from the Literature

Theme	Sub-Theme
Theoretical Perspectives	***Critical Race Theory***: Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Husband, 2016; Jones, 2021; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Smith et al., 2011; Solórzano, 1998
	Black Feminist Thought: Breeden, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Nelson et al., 2016 ***Superwoman Schema***: Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Chance, 2022; Davis and Maldonado, 2015; Knighton et al, 2020; Liao et al., 2020; Sobers, 2014; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016)
Black Women and Gendered Racism	***Historical Influences***: DeGruy, 2005; Hankerson et al., 2022; Nelson et al, 2016; Rosser-Mims, 2010; Woods-Giscombé, 2010 ***Gendered Racism/Misogynoir***: (Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Beal, 2008; Chance, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Cook, 2020; Corbin et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill Collins, 1990; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Pérez-Huber & Solórzano, 2015; 2007; Collins, 2000; Collins, 2022; Guiffrida, 2005; DeGruy, 2005; Mawhinney, 2011 ***Black Women in Higher Education*** (Blackhurst, 2000; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Dinise-Halter, 2017; Essed,1991; Franklin, 2016; Hartlep & Ball, 2020; Lee & Hopson, 2018; Mitchell, 2018; Mitchell, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al.;2020; Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013; Smith, 2008; Truehill, 2021; Wesley, 2018)

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes from the Literature

(continued)

	Black Women Higher Ed. Leaders and SWS: Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2022; Hartlep & Ball, 2020; Mitchell, 2018; Mitchell, 2021; Smith, 2008; Truehill, 2021; Wesley, 2018; Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Beal, 2008; Chance, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Cook, 2020; Corbin et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; 991; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill Collins, 1990; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Pérez-Huber & Solórzano, 2015
Black Women in Higher Education and Leadership	***Leadership in Higher Education***: Chance, 2022; Cherkowski et al., 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Niemi et al., 2021; Reed, 2021; Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013; Uusiautti, 2013
	Mid-Level Leaders: ACPA, 2015, Bazner, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Mather et al., 2009; Mills, 2009; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Thian et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2016 ***Black Women Leaders***: Breeden, 2021; Bonaparte, 2016; Chance, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Dinise-Halter, 2017; Hartlep & Ball, 2020; Fasching-Varner et al., 2015; Franklin, 2016; Husband, 2016; Miles, 2012; Mitchell, 2018; Mitchell, 2021; Ramey, 1995; Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Rosser-Mims, 2010; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Smith, 2008; Tevis et al., 2020; Turner, 2002; West, 2019a; West, 2019b; West, 2020
Self-Care & Healing	***Health Implications, Coping, Self-Care & Healing***: Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Blackhurst, 2000; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021; Chance, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000; Cook, 2020; Fasching-Varner et al., 2015; Franklin, 2016; Gorski, 2018; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2019; Quaye et al., 2020; Smith, 2004; West, 2019a; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016)

Theoretical Perspectives

Howard-Hamilton (2003) suggests CRT and BFT are two frameworks that apply to the needs and experiences of Black women in higher education in unique ways. These theories address the challenging and unique circumstances faced by Black women, specifically classism, racism, sexism, and microaggressions. Using a theory-to-practice approach in conjunction with traditional student affairs theories, CRT and BFT frameworks create space for Black women higher education administrators to enhance their opportunities for academic, personal, and professional success (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). These theories place SWS as a framework within BFT. CRT serves as the overarching worldview, while BFT provides a specific way to focus on Black women's needs, perspectives, and experiences.

Critical Race Theory

CRT served in this study as an overarching worldview by describing the role of race, analyzes racism's existence and consequences, and working toward identifying the challenges of dominant ideologies and deficient perspectives. CRT provided space for counterstories and the voices of racialized, gendered, and classed storytelling of Black individuals that rarely exist in white spaces. The framework highlights racism's existence and consequences for Black women's reality (Husband, 2016).

Initially beginning in legal studies to combat racism due to an awareness of failures to do so in the law and courts, the five tenets that form the perspectives, teaching, and research methods of CRT in education are centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, challenging dominant ideologies and deficient perspectives, primacy of experiential knowledge, interdisciplinary analyses, and explicit commitment to social justice (Solórzano, 1998). CRT

challenges white discourse on race, gender, and class and examines the effect of race and racism from the perspectives and experiences of women and men of color providing a guide to transforming oppressive social conditions (Solórzano, 1998). Utilizing counterstories, CRT focuses on the voices of racialized, gendered, and classed storytelling of people of color (POC) that rarely exist in white spaces (Smith et al., 2011).

In this study, CRT is the guiding framework in which gendered racism served as a baseline for learning about Black women's experiences. CRT adds a critical race-gendered epistemology, addresses intersectional issues of social inequity and social injustice, and identifies specific Black experiences that are not shared in a white dominant perspective (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). CRT was used to delve into participants' stories and experiences by investigating how sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination have impacted their leadership and strength.

Black Feminist Thought

BFT is under the umbrella of CRT and served as a guiding approach and framework that centers Black women's experiences due to their minoritized identities of race and gender (Breeden, 2021; Collins, 2000). BFT critiqued society's expectations of Black women and recognized the unique experiences and challenges they faced due to their intersectional identities (Breeden, 2021; Collins, 2000). It also emphasizes the importance of Black women's agency and self-determination in challenging oppressive structures and advocating for their own liberation.

The five tenets of BFT provided a valuable perspective to observe participant narratives and examine Black women's collective standpoint and lived experiences in the United States (Breeden, 2021; Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) considered the first assumption to be that Black women are a cultural and political group and demonstrated that their experiences are unique. The

second tenant explained that individuals' responses to oppression vary. Reactions to oppression change depending on intersecting identities of social class, ethnicity, region, age, sexual/gender identity, religion, and ability. Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) found experiences, backgrounds, appearances, educational levels, demographics, occupations, and beliefs differ in Black women, but connect as to their place in a racist society (Collins, 2000). The next two beliefs include connecting Black women's thoughts and actions through experiences and acts of resistance and claims Black women have a role in identifying and contributing to the theory, individually and collectively. As a theoretical framework and practice, BFT adapts as Black women's realities shift with the impact of society on them. The final tenet is commitment to social justice. In higher education, BFT can assist in explaining Black women's oppression to others (Breeden, 2021; Collins, 2000; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

BFT's tenets provided insight into the independent and intersectional experiences of being Black woman dealing with sexism and racism, as well as white supremacy culture and patriarchy. The tenets highlighted differing yet overlapping experiences of Black women mid-level administrators. BFT was also used to find if the participants had shown acts of resistance and/or a commitment to social justice. The principles were used to analyze transcripts to see if there are connections between courses and current actions and attitudes.

Several studies applied BFT in an effort to explain the phenomenon of Black women. Breeden (2021) studied specific views and strategies of Black women in student affairs leadership positions at HWIs and highlighted the various ways they resist oppression using elements of BFT and narrative inquiry, which helped highlight Black women's voices in interpreting data. Aspects of BFT were used in Clayborne and Hamrick's (2007) qualitative study of Black women holding mid-level administrative positions to analyze aspects of

respondents' experiences. Their study connected responses to negative images of Black women, resistance strategies, and empowerment for activism to address oppression to the theory.

Several narratives and images that emerged from BFT and affect Black women higher education leaders, including racial uplift, the strong Black woman, mammy, and *outsider within.* The narrative of racial uplift relates to the importance of leadership, mentorship, and how an individual's education and advancement serve to help others in the community (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000). The strong Black woman image has been attributed and rationalized to Black women since enslavement and continues without addressing the white dominant institutions that maintain racial inequity (Collins, 2000; Nelson et al., 2016).

The *outsider-within* concept identified where a historically marginalized individual sits within a historically white campus, but remained an outsider due to their various marginalized identities (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Howard-Hamilton (2003) wrote that:

> African American women in higher education have been invited into places where the dominant group has assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences. A sense of belonging can never exist because there is no personal or cultural fit between the experiences of African American women and the dominant group (p. 21).

The concept of caregiving and the image of the mammy connected with the outsider-within by portraying how Black women as invisible and never a part of the campus, despite claims of endearment or inclusion (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000). The mammy image exemplifies how Black women higher education leaders connect to their historical assignment as caregivers. It also shows the problems they encounter as they seek to be viewed and positioned as credible to their peers and capable as higher-level leadership responsibilities

Black women higher education leaders must also contend with and resist the images applied to Black women generally and themselves (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000).

BFT posits that Black women have a unique experience and has been used to analyze how these experiences are connected to the theory, especially through images and counter narratives. Both BFT and CRT are valuable frameworks to address how the strong Black woman narrative impacts Black women higher education administrators' ability to lead. Utilizing these frameworks were vital for this study.

Superwoman Schema

The study highlighted Black women and their leadership experiences through the lens of SWS with CRT and BFT. SWS is a concept within BFT offering a nuanced perspective into Black women's lives by emphasizing the sociopolitical context of their lives. Being a superwoman has been necessary for survival since the era of enslavement (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Throughout history, Black women have had to be *strong* to survive. The superwoman role has been both asset and liability. Black women have been pillars in their community and praised for their strength, resilience, fortitude, and perseverance (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). However, their strength must be re-evaluated as researchers have also examined its toll on their health (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Taking on the superwoman role has interpersonal and professional benefits, but has been related to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Liao et al., 2020). Although the foundation of SWS is Black women's strength and resilience, it is also connected to adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Abrams et al., 2014; Liao et al., 2020).

Nursing, sociology, and gender studies are several disciplines which have attempted to identify the various dimensions of Black women's lives under a "unifying framework to describe Black women's perceived roles, responsibilities, and experiences of intersectional oppression" (Abrams et al., 2014, p. 504). The result has been several different but overlapping constructs: SWS, the Sojourner Truth syndrome, Sisterella complex, and the strong black woman (SBW) schema (Abrams et al., 2014). SWS, used interchangeably with SBW, is a race-gender schema that "prescribes culturally specific feminine expectations from Black women, including unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and caring for others" (Liao et al., 2020, p. 84). Woods-Giscombé (2010) developed SWS to describe the different dimensions of the SBW persona and clarify its relationship to health among Black women. Woods-Giscombé (2010) utilized a qualitative method to propose SWS, a construct nearly identical to the SBW schema. According to her findings, a Black superwoman is characterized by perceived obligations to suppress fear and weakness, showcase strength, resist being vulnerable or dependent, constantly help others, and succeed despite limited resources.

When considering the attributes and characteristics of SWS, the notable themes identified are that Black women should embody and display multiple forms of strength, possess self/ethnic pride despite intersectional oppression, embrace being 'every woman', and be anchored by religion/spirituality (Abrams et al., 2014, p. 508). In a thematic analysis of focus groups with 44 Black women aged from 18-91, Abrams et al. (2014) discovered notable intergenerational messages emphasizing the importance of maintaining strength despite social injustices and inequality and the importance of media in shaping perceptions and attitudes surrounding the SWS construct.

When embracing and depending on strong Black womanhood, they received positive benefits of strength and resilience: lower levels of psychological distress, perceived higher quality of life, and more positive personal beliefs. However, depending only on resilience to overcome adversity suggests they consistently experience stress that requires regular and effective adaptations, particularly in white spaces (Abrams et al., 2014).

SWS is different for every Black woman. Some have received its positive benefits, though. In a quantitative study of 222 Black women, Liao et al. (2020) found those who internalize SWS tend to postpone self-care, prioritize others' needs, and suppress their emotions amid difficulties. In response to this internalization, participants identified being unkind to themselves, not being aware of their pain and emotional needs, and not feeling connected to others. These are characteristics that reflect low self-compassion and can lead to poor psychological and physical health. Collective coping and reaching out to others can assist loneliness, isolation, and self-reliance (Liao et al., 2020).

The idea of being strong can have health and stress-inducing implications. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) reviewed findings from an interview study on Black women's experiences of depression. Their review suggested always projecting strength may normalize a stress-inducing level of selflessness and powerlessness. The 44 Black women participants shared that, even in the presence of extreme pain and fear, an SBW should remain strong and have little room for emotions because they are considered signs of weakness and inadequacy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

Resistance to vulnerability and unwillingness to ask for help often led participants to handle the stress and hassles of daily life in solitude. As pillars of the family, community, and place of employment, strength increases as their support of others increases, leaving no personal

time and can create barrier by keeping up the appearance of meeting others' expectations. Due to the level of strength needed, emotional and physical symptoms are routine and understandable occurrences among SBWs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Knighton et al.'s (2020) statistical analysis of 243 Black women revealed educated, middle-class African American women who accept a duty to show strength and suppress emotions in the face of perceived racial microaggressions experienced increased psychological distress. The increased exposure to racism in predominantly white spaces increased dependence on culturally normative coping mechanisms (Knighton et al, 2020).

Strength is often accepted as an essential aspect of Black womanhood, even though it is associated with negative health outcomes. Considering the health liabilities and benefits of being strong, Watson and Hunter (2016) studied 13 Black women who experienced conflicting messages when internalizing SBW schema using a qualitative thematic analysis. The research identified three paradoxes that Black women experience: be psychologically durable, yet do not engage in behaviors that preserve psychological durability; be equal, yet be oppressed; and be feminine, yet reject traditional feminine norms. These tensions emphasized SWS and simultaneously its ability to create advantageous outcomes with respect to self-efficacy, but unfavorable implications for self-care (Watson & Hunter, 2016).

While little research has been done on SWS and the experiences of Black women mid-level administrators in higher education, there has been quite a bit of research on Black women in senior level roles. As mid-level leaders are in the pipeline for senior leadership, Breeden's (2021) research on seven Black women in senior-level positions in student affairs at HWIs found significant experiences of burnout and how unchecked exhaustion manifested mental and

physical health issues. The qualitative study described overwhelming need to serve as having an impact on their health and well-being (Breeden, 2021).

Chance (2022) suggested that overcoming adversity charged by resilience impacted the leadership development for Black women leaders in higher education. One of the sub-themes that emerged was the "I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman" motivation of the SBW/Superwoman (p. 16). Adopting the stereotypical role of the Black superwoman includes having a high work ethic, as well as the belief of having to work twice as hard to get half as far or being acknowledged as were their white colleagues (Chance, 2022). When exploring the intersectionality of race and gender for Black women in higher education senior leadership, Davis and Maldonado (2015) identified resilience as a primary factor in career success. Regarding their career advancement within the academy, participants reported demonstrating resilience, integrity, intrapersonal characteristics, and social skills, along with having the support of a mentor and/or sponsor were all skills they developed as leaders. While exploring four Black women in senior student affairs administration at HWIs, Sobers (2014) noted consistency in code-switching as a shifting technique when communicating with students, families, and colleagues to remain resilient in higher education. These studies showed how SWS has impacted Black women senior leaders in higher education institutions.

SWS impacted Black women in major ways. They balanced the disparities between the promises of SWS and lived realities of its results (Watson & Hunter, 2016). Another issue is demonstrating resilience while having to support a mentee. These tensions could have adverse mental and physical health effects on Black women (Abrams et al., 2014; Liao et al., 2020). Black women must decide if and how SWS impacted their leadership.

Black Women and Gendered Racism

Historical Influences

The history of Black women in the U. S. is an essential for understanding Black women higher education leaders. Black Americans have endured many years of multigenerational traumas stemming from centuries of enslavement, violence, and rape, followed by systemic institutional and structural discrimination, racism, and oppression (Hankerson et al., 2022). Rosser-Mims (2010) traced Black women's leadership to the era of enslavement. They wrote that the positive attributes that Black women now display as leaders (self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice, resilience, and spiritual grounding) were created during enslavement and later "exploit[ed] by a racist, sexist, oppressive patriarchal system of dominance" (p. 2). Black women's strength was developed through adversity and persevering through historical representations of enslaved Black women (Nelson et al, 2016). Black women have had to endure racial and gender oppression:

> The sociopolitical context of Black women's lives, specifically the climate of racism, race- and gender-based oppression, disenfranchisement, and limited resources - during and after legalized slavery in the United States - forces Black women to take on the roles of mother, nurturer, and breadwinner out of economic and social necessity (Woods-Giscombé, 2010, p. 669).

The double threat of racial and gendered oppression has impacted Black women for centuries. DeGruy (2005) developed the theory of post-traumatic slave syndrome to account for Black Americans having a survival mentality and behavior patterns such as low self-esteem, sensitivity to anger and violence, and internalized racism. Centuries of oppressive systems have had generational impacts on Black women (Woods- Giscombé, 2010).

Gendered Racism/Misogynoir

Gendered racism recognizes racism and sexism as interconnected systems of oppression that create an intersectional identity unique to Black women. The racist perceptions of gender roles are regarded as a cumulative phenomenon (Essed, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) highlighted that Black women's lived experience extends beyond individual concepts of race and gender, and includes interactions that reinforce one another and create a unique oppression. Black women are doubly impacted when adversity and challenges are rooted in race and gender, thereby creating a complex intersection of potential adverse experiences (Chance, 2022). Black women have two subordinating, or historically minoritizing, identities: being Black and a woman. They also have the double jeopardy of not being white and not being male (Beal, 2008). The concept of double jeopardy occurs in many components of Black women's lives, such as health, leadership opportunities, and workplace experiences (Beal, 2008).

Misogynoir was first used in a blog post in 2008 by Bailey (2021). Its original reference was to trans- and cisgendered Black women in popular culture. The word uses CRT intersectionality to illustrate how Black women experience the perpetuation of anti-Black, racist misogyny. Misogynoir exists at the intersection of anti-Black racism, sexism and misogyny (Cook, 2020). Although the term is relatively new, the interpersonal, social, and institutional experiences, histories, and stories of Black women are not. Misogynoir is an inclusive summation of how gendered racism appears in many aspects of Black women's lives (Bailey & Trudy, 2018).

The concept of misogynoir has been researched in various higher education studies. In a descriptive analysis of a survey of 80 African-American female university administrators at the level of dean or higher, racism and sexism was perceived as a barrier to success and many

participants could not differentiate between the two (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Cook (2020) noted the burden of internalizing misogynoir left Black women higher education professionals feeling exhausted and created a sense of hyper-awareness.

The study utilized an interpretative, phenomenological analysis with qualitative results that confirmed Black women have negative emotional responses to messages received about themselves and use various resistance and coping strategies. Black women have oppressive experiences, including microaggressions, that negatively inform and impact self-image (Cook, 2020). These messages about themselves manifest in five themes: SBW, Sapphire, not seen and not heard beauty, style and sexual objectification, and respectability politics (Cook, 2020; Pilgrim, 2008). Misogynoir plays a part in the internal and external perceptions of Black women.

CRT, BFT, and SWS are enhanced by the concept of misogynoir and further explains how the intersection of racism and sexism impact Black women by giving them a way to tell their story (Breeden, 2021; Collins, 2000; Cook, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Husband, 2016; Solórzano, 1998). Misogynoir is therefore a unique explanation of the experiences of Black women.

Othermothering

The concept of caregiving and othermothering have been present since enslavement began in America and was necessary to survival (DeGruy, 2005). These concepts have extended to holistic education, both academically and communally, related to the uplift and traditions of the Black community (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Guiffrida, 2005). Othermothers were defined by Collins (2000) as "women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (p. 178). Within higher education, othermothering is long-lasting, less structured, and has a holistic approach (Collins, 2000).

The type of othermothering Black women in higher education provide is important to successful relationships with Black students and the retention of these students (Guiffrida, 2005). The self-sacrificing nature of othermothering often includes lack of self-care (Mawhinney, 2011). Care deprivation and guilt often arise in Black women due to othermothering. Mawhinney (2011) suggested expanding the conversation about self-care. Othermothering is demonstrated in higher education by recognizing most Black women all had early and ongoing experiences with othermothering, its influence in shaping PD, and when engaging with Black students (Collins, 2022).

Black Women in Higher Education

Black women in higher education have had to face numerous challenges: gendered racism, combating stereotypes, the pressures of caregiving, underrepresentation, limited vertical mobility, the intersection of racism, sexism, tokenism, isolation, stereotype threat and microaggressions, particularly within HWIs (Blackhurst, 2000; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Experiences, backgrounds, appearances, educational levels, demographics, and beliefs differ, but their connection is their place in a racist society (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). They have had to navigate a level of *Black survivability* within white institutions (Okello et al., 2020). Most studies regarding Black women in higher education acknowledge the impacts of gendered racism and the need for self-care and community for success (Hartlep & Ball, 2020; Mitchell, 2018; Mitchell, 2021; Smith, 2008; Truehill, 2021).

In concert with how misogynoir impacts Black women holistically, race and gender discrimination also directly impact how Black women serve as administrators while experiencing oppression on various levels (Truehill, 2021). Wesley (2018) focused on the experience and racial identity status of eight Black women student affairs professionals working at a HWI. The

researcher found experiences of being stereotyped, devalued, silenced, ignored, and undermined, while having to contend with gendered racism in their work. The research also highlighted how their racial pride, sense of self, love and support from families, and strong commitment to the students they served all contributed to their professional success (Wesley, 2018).

Black women are underrepresented in administrative positions at HWIs and face greater challenges than their white female, Black male, and white male colleagues due to prevailing institutional ideology and systemic oppression (Mitchell, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). When considering empowerment and sustainability among Black women leaders, the burden of taking on additional work unrelated to their jobs, issues around accessing proper care and support, and adverse treatment are common themes (Mitchell, 2021). Okello et al. (2020) studied Black student affairs educators and determined they are familiar with code-shifting to negotiate their environment and roles.

Relational qualities are one of the changing forms Black women in higher education navigate when leading, mentoring, and supervising (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Applying content analysis, Rodgers & Cudjoe (2013) used photography and oral narratives to study Black administrators. In response to being asked to share two adjectives that best portray how they view their role in higher education, participants shared being Black pillars in higher education, and serving as educators, leaders, and mentors (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013). In the study, Black women leaders received gendered expectations, were more communal in their leadership, and sometimes assumed the mammy stereotype from fear of being perceived as an overly-strong superwoman (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013). Findings from Quaye et al. (2020) demonstrated the ubiquity of misogynoir and its effects on Black student affairs educators physically, emotionally, and mentally, even as they supported Black students on their campuses. Studies continue to show

that they are given a different set of expectations but are nonetheless able to have a positive impact Black women in higher education.

Black Women Leaders and SWS

Strength is a factor of resilience for Black women in higher education. Recognizing resilience must consider systems of power, privilege, and oppression that have impacted historically marginalized people's lives every day (Chance, 2022). In a study grounded in BFT that described seven Black women student affairs administrators and their everyday experiences, support networks, and barriers they faced in their roles at the intersection of racism and sexism, they shared their collective views as senior leaders at HWIs. Three themes emerged from the study:

> (a) we are better than they [white colleagues] are because we have to be: tales of Black women as chronic overachievers, (b) you don't need a mentor; you need an advisory board: find multiple streams of support, and (c) what do I do next?: hope, uncertainty, and reimagining the future (Breeden, 2021, p. 176).

These examples of being a strong Black woman, a caretaker, needing support, and a level of self-care are interdependent for the success of a Black woman higher education administrator and align with SWS.

Acknowledged gendered racism and the need for self-care through community were key concepts to achieving success (Hartlep & Ball, 2020; Mitchell, 2018; Mitchell, 2021; Smith, 2008; Truehill, 2021). Black women higher education administrators must navigate underrepresentation in the field, social responsibility, and having *other duties as assigned*, while feeling the need to display strength and resilience, racial pride, self-love, and a commitment to

the students they serve. There is a juxtaposition between how they are perceived and how they must maintain the perception.

The historical narrative of gendered oppression has had long-lasting effects on Black women. From othermothering to the superwoman schema, Black women in higher education administrative positions have had to remain strong in the face of microaggressions in their work.

Black Women in Higher Education & Leadership

Leadership in Higher Education

The higher education has been based on patriarchal issues of access and equity (Niemi et al., 2021). Women leaders within higher education have had to assimilate into a male-normed culture for their leadership to be accepted within the institution, which may include not showing emotions (Cherkowski et al., 2021; Niemi et al., 2021). Satisfaction, success, and leadership style were all important aspects of leadership. Cherkowski et al. (2021) conducted research with a group of educators who operated at a different level of energy, enthusiasm, and innovation in their work saw vitality when they were able to share the wholeness of themselves as part of the work they do together.

Constructive communication and cooperative collaboration were also key to a higher education leader's long-term satisfaction and success (Cherkowski et al., 2021). In a time of crisis and current societal challenges, being aware of personal well-being can assist with depression and decreased mental health. Leadership style and approach in a higher education workplace can impact turnover. In a correlational study to examine leadership effectiveness, leadership adaptability, and employee turnover intention, Reed (2021) identified leadership style as a key factor related to voluntary employee turnover. The study found a significant relationship between employees' voluntary turnover intentions and their supervisors' leadership effectiveness

and suggested that as leadership effectiveness increases, employee turnover intentions decrease. This finding is important as the study's population had to navigate mid-level leadership. The role of the participant's supervisor affects their ability to lead and in turn influence their retention.

The concept of caring leadership fits well with the characteristics of Black women and SWS, particularly othermothering. Caring leadership reduces turnover and increases engagement among leaders. In addition, it may be directly connected to productivity among those around them as a result of leaders creating a positive and encouraging working environment (Uusiautti, 2013). While caring leadership is important for others, it is also important for Black women leaders to care for themselves, declare their right to survival, and exist (Dillard, 2016).

Mid-Level Leaders

For the purpose of the study, a mid-level leaders are defined as non-instructional support personnel or administrator who has been working in higher education for at least five years as a full-time professional, supervises at least one professional staff member or functional area, and reports to a senior level administrator (e.g., dean, vice president, senior student affairs officer) (ACPA, 2015; Bazner, 2022). Senior-level administrators have decision-making responsibilities that impact many individuals at a higher education institution (Wilson et al., 2016).

Wilson et al. (2016) utilized the *Student Affairs Professional Identity Scale* and *Career Entrenchment and Commitment Measure* with 337 mid-level student affairs administrators to analyze the relationship of professional identities to their career commitment and entrenchment. The researchers determined that career contentment and commitment is a factor in student affairs administrators' retention and career satisfaction. Although mid-level administrators are key to higher education institutions, they are understudied in higher education (Wilson et al., 2016).

According to Rosser & Javinar (2003), mid-level administrators are a growing population, and are critical for higher education institutions. While they contribute to the ecosystem of the institution, their retention has been low (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Mid-level administrators are often passed over for advancement owing to where they are on the organizational chart (Mather et al., 2009). They are, however, responsible for managing personnel, departmental funding and programs, and increasing student retention. They also communicate within the organizational chart by decoding the vision of institutional leadership and communicating that vision to their departmental team (Thian et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2016).

Rosser and Javinar (2003) used structural equation modeling to examine the demographic characteristics and work-life challenges of 36 mid-level student affairs administrators. Personal and institutional perceptions influenced the morale, satisfaction, and ultimately retention of mid-level student affairs leaders. Results indicated the importance of building positive relationships, both internal and external, with mid-level administrators.

When considering leadership styles and approaches, Black women in mid-level student affairs administration described themselves as having intensely relational qualities associated with leadership, as well as leading, mentoring, and supervising. Those qualities included being deliberate and engaged leaders who led by example, partnering with their staff, leading from the heart, and adopting maternal and service roles with their staff and students (Clayborne & Hamrick (2007). These women are experienced and have aspirations for senior leadership roles, have more direct contact with students and more interaction with entry-level professionals (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

Mid-level student affairs leaders play a key role in achieving institutional goals by administering programs, services, and functions central to the institutional mission (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). They have been described as loyal, dedicated, hardworking, and committed to the profession (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). As an under-researched population in general and Black women in mid-level administrative roles, their study helped shed light on their importance.

Black Women Leaders

Black women in higher education have many leadership qualities, including exceptional productivity, strategic insight, are oriented towards details, and a caring ethic (Breeden, 2021). Their strength despite adversity is driven by their resilience based on motivational factors such as family and relationships, mentorship and sponsorship, as well as the support of cultural identity and diversity (Breeden, 2021).

Black women have needed to acquire leadership and power in non-traditional ways compared to their Black and white male counterparts (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Their power was acquired through a form of resistance and a feminist consciousness rooted in Blackness. During the abolitionist and civil rights movements, Black women activists fought for empowerment and agency from a white dominant culture that neither protected nor valued Blackness or womaness (Rosser-Mims, 2010).

There is a history of struggle to 'lift' the Black community out of racial, economic, and educational control from a White supremacy culture (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Adversity has impacted Black women leaders. Black women in higher education administrative positions experience adversity through the intersection of racism, sexism, and ageism, along with issues pertaining to identity, cultural diversity, belonging, resilience, and leadership callings (Chance, 2022; Ramey, 1995). In addition, some obstacles to senior leadership in higher education include

limited opportunities for networking, isolation, lack of authority, White colleagues, family, and perceived incompetence (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Dillard, 2016). There are also different definitions of leadership in the larger context of whiteness, which can also be a barrier (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

Black women in leadership have had to accept the stereotypical role of the Black superwoman, uphold a high work ethic, and live by the mantra of needed to work twice as hard to get half as far (or receive half the acknowledgement) as white colleagues (Chance, 2022). Using phenomenology to explore adversity and the lived experiences of Black women in higher education leadership, Chance (2022) found limited role models, a concrete ceiling, and the intersectionality of racism, sexism, ageism, and tokenism.

Often referred to as superwomen, Black women use adversity as fuel and convert negative experiences into developing the necessary skills for leadership (Chance, 2022). When considering gendered racism experienced by Black women in leadership, Rosette and Livingston (2012) confirmed Black women leaders were evaluated more negatively than Black men and white women if their organizations experienced failures. Black women leaders carry a burden of being disproportionately disciplined for making mistakes on the job.

Black women in higher education named receiving mentorship and being a mentor were rewarding experiences (Ramey, 1995). When asked how they would describe best practices for successful mentor-mentee relationships, Black women educators said support, respect, humor, active listening, boundaries, professional and personal experiences, and modeling (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013). Early memories of family members were important determinants for present mentoring styles and those early lessons helped in creating paths to leadership (Rodgers & Cudjoe, 2013). The style of mentorship is important for new professionals because mentorship,

resources, stability, being pushed outside one's comfort zone, advocacy, fostering growth, and surrounding support systems are considered necessary for success (Dinise-Halter, 2017).

When considering Black women administrators' rise to leadership, Tevis et al. (2020) developed suggestions for administrators to support Black women's trajectory to leadership through the concepts of lack-of-time capital and title-power. They found Black women did not own their time and energy was expended for the benefit of the institution, which did not acknowledge the multiple contributions and strengths used to advance it. The authors' suggestions included the institution addressing systemic conditions, inequities, and structural biases that created the need for Black women administrators to spend time on additional responsibilities, providing better control over their own time, and letting the, concentrate on their job duties (Tevis et al., 2020).

The concepts of time and capital further underscore the lack of title-power. The lack of authority in mid-level titles, along with marginalization from the institution led Black women to feel insignificant, underappreciated, stereotyped, and excluded (Tevis et al., 2020). Even though they were in administrative decision-making positions, the three participants in the auto-ethnography felt unprepared to deal with the personal toll associated with the loss of professional agency, while the institution only gave title-power based on inaccurate social depictions, such as the mammy, rather than earned professional titles (Tevis et al., 2020).

The authors used CRT and BFT to create a positive lens for leadership, Black women mid-level administrators, and the superwoman schema. Tevis et al. (2020) furthered the concepts that impacted Black female leaders' decision-making. Overall, strength and resilience were common denominators in Black women in higher education administrative leadership.

Self-Care and Healing

Navigating self-care is an important aspect of SWS. Mental and physical health outcomes associated with characteristics of SWS emphasize the construct's importance and the need for further exploration (Abrams et al., 2014). The emphasis on strength normalizes struggle, selflessness, and internalization strategies that compromise the health of Black women. Black women's perceptions and use of healthcare are influenced by SWS' perceived stigma, religious and spiritual concerns, and the desire for culturally sensitive providers (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) suggested that researchers should question what it meant by being strong and investigate whether (or under what circumstances) it becomes a productive way to manage life and emotional distress for Black women. The stress that Black women higher education leaders experience from racialized and gendered perspectives through the lens of strength can have lasting impacts personally and professionally.

Black educators may feel valued and empowered in the presence of their community, but experiencing racism daily and expending the emotional labor to protect white people's feelings at work can result in the negative health effects of SWS (Quaye et al., 2019). Developing self-care strategies is necessary due to the continuance of racism (Smith, 2004). Black educators, in "an effort to preserve one's existence," utilize strategies for practice self-care (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 96). These strategies push back against the concepts of resilience and grit, and are used so as to feel less isolated and diminish feelings of hopelessness and despair (Quaye et al., 2019). Some of the strategies include unplugging from the people and places that caused them harm, building community beyond work and with other Black educators via sister circles to avoid isolation, caring for their bodies for positive mindfulness by taking mental health days, finding

authentic identity-based safe spaces, and using counseling as a space to reflect and be heard (Quaye et al., 2019).

Safe spaces and support systems outside work are necessary to validate the truth of lived experiences, and for preserving and sustaining racial uplift (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000; West, 2019a). When seeking healing, it is important to consider community healing because spiritual connections and relationships serve as sources of support and affirmation and are needed to help process, eliminate, or release work-related concerns (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Okello et al., 2020).

There is the assertion that for Black women in administrators to lead they must be intentional about how they take care of themselves. Higher education leaders can use research on racial and gendered microaggressions, SWS, and campus racial climate to create race-conscious programs for white students, faculty, and administrators to address and dispel existing stereotypes that lead to racial microaggressions and SWS (Franklin, 2016). Black women higher education leaders have resilience and find motivation through relationships, mentorship, and the support of their intersecting identities (Blackhurst, 2000; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021; 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

Healing is a major addition to self-care. Strategies exist to resolve SWS, but also need to exist on *how* to heal, and recognizing healing depends on resources (Okello et al., 2020). Healing and self-care are not synonymous as one is temporary and the other actualizing. Okello et al. (2020) viewed self-care not an antidote to racism, but rather a temporary fix to larger structural issues. Healing is viewed as holistic and sustainable (Quaye et al., 2019).

Some difficulties around healing found in a study (Cook, 2020) of 35 Black student affairs educators included wearing a mask to sustain the desire to survive daily, whiteness as the

standard and having to deal with racism, resisting stereotypes, and being able to use survival tactics used by whites, self-care being regarded as consumption, avoidance and escape through consumerism, capitalism, and, escaping (Okello et al., 2020). Cook (2020) also noted Black women participants recognized the importance of holism in the healing process and being mindful of their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

The participants in Okello et al. (2020) wrote that *other duties as assigned* meant a battle that infused their daily existence and experience on HWIs. The concept of self-definition in healing is necessary to interrupt the 'rightness of whiteness' and to begin the process of decolonizing the mind. Affirmation of oneself when surrounded by whiteness must include forgiveness, controlling the narrative, being equipped with what is needed for survival and persistence, and dreaming of futures based on creativity instead of rationality (Okello et al., 2020).

Self-care, healing, and resilience in response to dealing with SWS have been essential to Black women higher education leaders. Navigating these spaces in predominantly white places has been difficult, yet important to disrupting oppression, microaggressions, and white dominance (Okello et al., 2020).

Conclusion

SWS and the ways Black women navigate mid-level leadership is presented in the chapter. While the literature provides extensive insight into these topics separately, there is minimal literature relating how mid-level leadership and SWS impact them. A main topic has been on SWS' negative health impacts and the importance of self-care and coping, but research has not addressed how SWS impacts their leadership. Further research is needed to understand

how mid-level leadership and SWS are connected, how Black women leaders navigate leadership, and how various coping and healing mechanisms assist them in their leadership role.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter reviews the methodological approach to the study, including research questions. The research design, participants, and positionality of the researcher are explained. The purpose of the phenomenological, qualitative study is to investigate the lived experiences of Black women mid-level higher education leaders and how they navigate the superwoman schema, while leading at historically white institutions. The study illuminates the strategies Black women higher education leaders utilize to lead others, while dealing with the superwoman schema themselves. The study also aims to increase knowledge on how Black women utilize SWS to make sense of the mid-level position and how it impacts their leadership style. Black women are faced with continuous issues that could become detrimental not only to their career in higher education, but their mental and physical health as well.

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWIs?
2. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs?

Methodology

Qualitative research "uses interpretive research methods as a set of tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences, themselves, each other, and the social world" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p.2). There are a range of approaches to qualitative research. For the study, a qualitative inductive approach seeks to describe and analyze the process and understand how people make meaning of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To explore the lived

experiences of Black mid-level higher education leaders, a phenomenological research approach was taken. Utilized by researchers to explore meaning about various topics, phenomenology is a discipline and movement that seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of phenomena (Vagle, 2018). The aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of Black women mid-level higher education leaders and their experiences with the superwoman schema.

Phenomenology serves as the methodological framework aligning with the primary goal to explore the lived experiences and get a deeper understanding of Black women mid-level leaders within a historically white environment (Collins, 2000; Crotty, 1998). Edmund Husserl, regarded as the founding father of the phenomenological movement, "asserted that the mind was always in relationship with the object of its consciousness" (Vagle, 2018, p. 7). The objective is to explore and discover meanings through individuals' lived experiences (Vagle, 2018). In the study, interpretations of the lived experiences of the participants allow the researcher to further understand the phenomenon from the point of view of Black women who have served in mid-level leadership roles at four-year higher education institutions.

A descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach was used to highlight the experiences Black women mid-level higher education leaders leading and dealing with the superwoman schema at historically white institutions. The approach assumes Black women mid-level leaders have an essence and the essence can be described (Vagle, 2018). Amedeo P. Giorgi (2017) created descriptive phenomenology as a modification of Husserl's philosophy by focusing on the essence of any phenomenon. Before Giorgi, a descriptive phenomenological data analysis was designed by Colaizzi and was enacted during the study (1978; Vagle, 2018). The form of exhaustive phenomenological analysis allows the researcher to retain the voice of the

participants at face value and specific quotes without abstracting their viewpoint through analysis (Giorgi et al., 2017).

Researcher's Role and Positionality

The benefits and liabilities of SWS impacted me personally. It has been the impetus to the advancing my career, but SWS has also negatively impacted me personally, emotionally, mentally, and professionally. I have a high level of excellence, maintain a "I will always get it done" attitude, and possess a caretaker spirit. SWS is infused into my identity and has been a catalyst to my career. The superwoman schema impacted how I navigated my role as a mid-level leader and had health implications for me as well. While these attributes have gotten me far in my career, I was overwhelmed with the lack of self-care and high levels of emotional distress. I understand the combination of my social identities, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives shaped the goals and insight on my epistemological, theoretical, and methodological approach (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I recognize my way of knowing comes from my oppressive and resistant experiences as a Black woman. The research on SWS and mid-level leadership validated my personal and professional experiences. My worldview also amplified the voices of Black women who were interviewed in the study. I am committed to understanding how mid-level leadership and the superwoman schema are situated within higher education, and the personal and professional impact they have on Black women.

As a former leader and administrator within higher education, I have experienced the balancing act and negotiations outlined in the literature review. I identify as a Black woman who has previously worked in a mid-level leadership position at a HWI for eight years. I experienced the pressures of the superwoman schema and middle management, balancing the university's political ecosystem and leading my team and supporting students. I was pulled in many different

directions and often had to choose one situation over the other. I had to choose my team or the university, my self-care or showing up for students, institutional politics or my personal values, and many other examples. Before my former position, I thought I would always stay in higher education and advance to a vice president position. However, in my role as a Black woman mid-level leader, I had a several negative experiences, which in turn led me to leave higher education. It was important for me to manage my perspective as a researcher and not assume that every participant would have had a similar or negative experience.

As an insider-researcher who shares multiple identities with her participants and has had a similar professional role, the degree of closeness or distance I have with the population within the study is important to note (Chavez, 2008). I identify as a cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, middle socioeconomic status, Black woman. These identities all shape my perspective. Some of these identities were salient and others not noticeable, and impacted how I navigate throughout the world. My current profession as a Black woman outside of higher education is an identity that may impact the study. I aim to make the study available to all mid-level Black women in and outside of higher education. In alignment of BFT, while Black women may share similar identities, we also are not monolithic and have different interpretations, viewpoints, and experiences. The identity of "insider" within the research is critical to the narrative and ways I articulate my direct connection to the research (Chavez, 2008, p.474).

My positionality had several advantages and complications (Chavez, 2008). Advantages associated with my positionality include awareness of participants' experiences to generate rapport, use of professional knowledge to prompt follow-up questions, and ability to understand colloquial and physical body language. There were some complications to my positionality as well. The disadvantage of being too close to the topic, participants potentially not explaining

experiences in detail due to an assumption of researcher knowledge, or participants not sharing sensitive information due to the potential of crossing paths again could impact the research (Chavez, 2008).

The delicate balance of race, gender, and positionality in a white dominant environment I had to hold created the desire to explore the complexities that other Black women mid-level leaders may also experience. Since I am grounding my work in BFT and CRT, there is a need to create self-reflective work that is set in social justice (Collins, 2000). I want to use the outcome of my work in my practice to give colleagues and supervisors tools to work with the population. I also want to give the population a space to share their voice and experiences.

As a qualitative researcher, I needed to consider my own assumptions. I specifically identify with the specific identities and potential experiences of the population so understanding my subjectivity and impact on the data was essential. My positionality could impact the data collection process, including interview question development, the way the questions are asked, and interpreting the data (Rajendran, 2001). For example, leading interview protocol (Appendix A) questions or sharing my opinion about the question before asking may influence how the participant responds. I was mindful when analyzing the data to minimize assumptions. Strategies for quality were put in place to address my personal opinions and judgements within the data, including reflective journaling, bridling, and using a descriptive approach.

As a researcher, my main role was to make formal decisions within the research process and make connections across theoretical framework, selected methodology, data analysis approach and the phenomena of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The role of the research participant was to describe their experiences as they experience the world and to follow the guided process of the researcher.

Protecting Participants

Ethical approaches to qualitative research were essential to achieving a valid study and critically examining every aspect of the research process. In order to protect participants, I submitted and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and conducted ethical research. I protected participants and maintained data confidentiality by having them sign informed consent forms and participation confidentiality agreements via Google Docs. I followed the principles espoused by IRB to maintain "confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, avoidance of deception, respect, privacy and to do no harm" (Jones et al., 2022, p. 237).

There is a possible psychological risk associated with the study. While the goal is always to do no harm, I collaborated with participants when potentially retraumatizing incidents related to microaggressions or pressures were introduced (Jones et al., 2022). As participants engaged in their storytelling, negative thoughts and feelings came up. As a researcher, I shared the possibility of these feelings with the participants on the front end and the option to pause or cancel their participation in the interview if they exhibited or felt distress during the interview. At the end of the interview, I provided a resource and networking opportunities for Black women in higher education. The resource included a list of networking opportunities, upcoming webinars, and professional development related to SWS and/or Black women in higher education, such as the African American Knowledge community and African American Women's Summit within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (West, 2019a).

To ensure data security in the transcription phase, there were several steps including intentional confidentiality and privacy of participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Jones et al., 2022). All data collected including that of the selected participants, institutions, and disclosed

events were associated with assigned aliases in reporting (Jones et al., 2022). There was secure storage of recordings, participant forms, and de-identified transcripts. The recordings and forms were erased at the end of the study when they were no longer used and the de-identified transcripts were held for potential future research use (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

As the study solely focused on Black women, I enhanced my responsibility to the individual and the community of Black women in fighting injustice and bringing truth to power, which aligns with the CRT framework. My responsibility includeed recognizing the power differences in the researcher-participant relationship from a human subject and relationship building perspective (Jones et al., 2022). I addressed individual autonomy in the consent form, but also to recognize the impacts of social and relational aspects. Even though as a researcher, I identified with some of the similar social identities as the participants, I did not want to assume ease in building trust with the participants. I followed the interview protocol (Appendix A) and asked questions to get to know the participants (Jones et al., 2022).

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants (Jones et al., 2022). Purposeful sampling is a specific component of qualitative inquiry and recognizes the importance of getting the appropriate participants to get the appropriate data (Patton, 2015). Purposeful and deliberate selection of participants for specific reasons allowed for information-rich and detailed accounts of the specific population. The acquisition of specific information needed to align with the research questions is a part of the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Marketing was shared in online communities where Black women network.

To qualify for the study, participants self-identified as a Black woman mid-level higher education leader who worked at a four-year historically white institution. Mid-level leaders were

selected as participants due to their prior professional experience, mid-manager dichotomy, as well as future career possibilities (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). The mid-manager dichotomy includes simultaneously maneuvering organizational hierarchies and intrapersonal campus relationships (Bazner, 2022).

I started the process by creating recruitment materials. The materials included a digital flier with the details, expectations, and overview of the study. The digital flier was distributed after IRB approval within various higher education networking forums for Black women who work in higher education, such as the Women of Color Directors Network, Black Women in Higher Education Facebook pages, and the Association of Black Women in Higher Education. The recruitment materials specifically asked for individuals who were mid-level leaders and worked at historically white four-year institutions. All four-year HWIs and mid-level leaders, including academic department chairs, were eligible. Even though the recruitment process of purposeful sampling produced enough participants, there was one participant who did not align with the criteria and passed the marketing materials along to other Black women in her network.

Participants responded to a link in the recruitment materials that had a consent form on the first page and demographic survey questions on the next page, which asked for race, gender, and had the option to include additional salient identities, their role, their supervisor's role, size of campus, and type of campus. On the last page, there was a list of SWS characteristics for the participants to select those that they aligned with or experienced. I chose individuals who selected at least five characteristics and whose role, supervisor role, and campus size and type vary on a first come, first serve basis. As a part of the recruitment materials, there was contact information for participants to engage if they have questions about the possibility of participation.

Once the forms (Appendix B and C) were completed, I contacted potential participants via email and Calendly to set up a date and time for a 60-90 minute semi-structured interview via video conference and recorded via Zoom for the purpose of analysis. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants over ten weeks, which began within one week after the flier was distributed. The interview was guided by the interview protocol, which included an overview of participants' experience with the SWS and was developed based on the literature. Participation in the study was voluntary and no incentives or monetary gifts were provided.

The study sought a sample size of 7-10 participants and achieved a sample of 10 participants. The consent and demographics form were completed by 21 individuals. However, seven did not qualify to participate, mainly due to their lack of supervision experience (n=5) or working in higher education for less than five years (n=2). Emails were sent to 14 individuals who completed the form. Only 10 responded with their availability and one-on-one interviews were coordinated. The goal is to specifically select individuals who can provide context-rich and detailed accounts of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The sample provided thorough and multi-layered insight into the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Data Collection Techniques

The semi-structured, video conference interview was guided by the interview protocol (Appendix A), which included steps taken during the interview such as introductions, explanation of the process, notification of the interview being recorded, as well as the 13 open-ended questions based on the research questions around mid-level leadership and the superwoman schema. The main topics of the interview protocol were their role as a Black

woman in higher education leadership, as well as their experience in mid-level leadership, dealing with the superwoman schema and its impact on how they lead.

While the expected time for the interviews was 60-90 minutes, the average time was 70 minutes. I utilized an interview protocol to guide interviews. The interview questions were designed for participants to reflect and recall experiences related to their experience as a mid-level leader. The questions included open-ended questions to examine their experience leading from a mid-level perspective, while navigating the superwoman schema. A sampling of protocol questions included were "how has the superwoman schema impacted how you lead?" and "what advice would you give to Black women aspiring to be in your position navigating the superwoman schema?"

To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that aligned with a strong Black woman historically or in my life personally. The selected pseudonym was connected to the interview recordings, transcripts, and interview notes. Once the pseudonym was selected, the participant's real identification was kept in a separate password-protected file. In alignment with the last step of Colaizzi (1978) descriptive phenomenological analysis, a member check was employed to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and accuracy. The participants were able to identify if the rich description represented their experiences. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were sent a list of resources for Black women working in higher education in mid-level positions, including videos, books, and conferences (Appendix H).

Data Analysis Procedures

The descriptive phenomenological analysis was utilized to explore Black women mid-level leaders and their experience with the superwoman schema. Ten participants engaged in the semi-structured interview guided by an interview protocol. Participants' stories were gathered to

saturation based on the overlapping experiences, thoughts, and statements. In the analysis process, the researcher introspected and recognized their own views toward SWS before engaging with the participant and the data collected. From recruitment to data analysis, the researcher approached positional reflexivity and was critical of what is known by reviewing the CRT and BFT, writing a memo about positionality and reflexivity, and a personal definition of the superwoman schema (Jones et al., 2022). Memo writing assisted the researcher to expand on thoughts and ideas throughout the process (Jones et al., 2022).

Descriptive phenomenological data analysis was used for the study. In phenomenology, the analytical focus asks the researcher to keep the shared experience of the participant at the forefront and to stay as close to the data as possible (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher used numerous steps and techniques to analyze the data. Colaizzi's (1978) Strategy for Descriptive Phenomenology Data Analysis includes seven specific steps within the data collection process (Appendix F). The steps are as follows:

Transcribe and Familiarize

Following Colaizzi's (1978) strategy for descriptive phenomenology data analysis, the first step of the data collection process is to review the transcript verbatim for completeness, including reading the quotations from the transcripts to familiarize with the data and to achieve general understanding (Colaizzi, 1978). I transitioned the audio recording to a qualitative data transcription software, Otter.ai, to create and review the transcript several times, line by line to get a broad view of the data (Jones et al., 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I listened to and read the transcript several times to gain a broad understanding of each participant's experience.

Extract Significant Statements

Step two is to extract significant statements from the transcripts. As previously stated ten participants engaged in 60-75 minute semi-structured interviews, which produced ten transcripts for review. The transcripts were reviewed at least three times to gain a holistic perspective of the participant's experience. While reviewing the transcripts, significant statements were extracted. Otter.ai provided a way to highlight and make notations next to quotations within the document. Each significant statement aligned with the protocol question. Approximately 500 statements were extracted, which aligned with the participants' experience with mid-level leadership and the superwoman schema. An example of the significant statement extraction process is identified in Table 3 The significant components of the transcript are highlighted and labeled quotations that were relevant to the participant's experience, then removed the statements from the transcript and labeled them in a descriptive way (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I removed approximately 50 statements per transcript, equaling approximately 500 statements. The statements were initially grouped by protocol questions. After reviewing the significant statements, several statements started to converge to form meaning. Some of the meanings were very clear, while others were hidden.

Formulate Meanings

In order to formulate meaning in step three, I analyzed and interpreted the transcript data by looking for certain phrases and emergent meanings in the participants' own words that lead to how participants interpret and interact with the superwoman schema (Jones et al., 2022). Codes were created and given alphabetical letters (Appendix E). They were then grouped into categories based on the meanings. Table 2 provides examples of how formulated meanings were created from significant statements.

Table 2

Significant Statements Translated to Formulated Meaning

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
"A lot of times we are only revealed and loved when our foot is in many, many paths and when we are making people happy doing what they need. And that isn't right." (Dorothy) *"You want my presents, but not my presence."* (Francesca)	Participants feel they are desired only for what they can provide to others F, M
"There I was the only Black woman in student affairs with a PhD and only 1 of 2 people period who had a terminal degree and being in a situation like that at my PWI. My experience was a lot of questioning. Some of that was because they had never seen someone who looked like me and had a level of education. They wanted to know like 'Was it real?'" (Sojourner) *"The questioning you know of my knowledge. I think that's the one thing that ticks me off. And it's like, I feel sometimes I constantly have to prove that I know what I'm doing. I know what I am talking about. ....It's hard because when you do those things where you feel like you're constantly on guard, having to prove yourself, that burns you out."* (Maya)	Participants are tired of having their knowledge, competence, and credibility questioned D, E
"I need backup, like-minded people who know my character." (Gabrielle) *"We have our Office of General Counsel and my partner in that office is just stellar. She's amazing, she understands what I'm dealing with. I use her in a lot of ways to sort of back me up. It is good to have another partner; to validate what I'm saying."* (Henrietta)	Participants needed support from other colleagues to navigate the HWI ecosystem. A

In translating formulated meaning out of a significant statement, I took a bridling approach, or being aware of and open to my thoughts and how the researcher and phenomena influence each other (Vagle, 2018). In descriptive phenomenology, researchers are aware of preconceptions that might influence the analysis. Bridling is a level of reflective attitude that requires the researcher to have an open posture towards the data (Vagle, 2018). I captured the reflective attitude of bridling through memos. During and after each interview, I would write notes on what I heard and how I felt. Due to the phenomenological approach as well as experiences of the researcher, bridling through intentional reflection of preconceptions of Black women mid-level leaders were necessary (Vagle, 2018). The traditional bracketing in phenomenology, or refraining from judgment, did not work in the traditional approach and strongly opposes the theoretical and conceptual approach.

Create Themes

In the fourth step in the process, I organized the formulated meanings into collections of sub-themes and themes (Vagle, 2018; Morrow et al., 2015). The themes created were connected to the designated research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Descriptive phenomenology is an inductive approach. I read the entire transcript for themes and patterns, which is different from the deductive approach that connected the data and concepts to prior research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The process included inductive, open coding, a brainstorming, inductive technique that allowed for spaciousness and exploration of common ideas. Since the study was a descriptive phenomenological qualitative research design, the codes are descriptive and connect to understanding instead of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Twenty codes identified with an alphabetical letter were created as several codes overlapped with various sub-themes and

themes (Appendix E). Examples of codes were self-care, fixer, more than what can produce, reassurance, mental gymnastics, and allyship.

The nine sub-themes were I Matter, Mirroring Matter, Who Tells Me I Matter, Tending the Soil (Soul), Planting Seeds without the Benefits of the Harvest, Armored Survival, Unraveling the Paradox, Collective Liberation, and Equity Emancipated. The nine sub-themes supported the creation of the three themes: Echo of Affirmations, Protect the Alchemist, and Kaleidoscope of Freedom. Table 3 below provides an example of how formulated meanings and codes were created from significant statements to create the main theme: Echo of Affirmations.

Table 3

Example of Creation of Main Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statements
Echo of Affirmations (Mattering) Description: In their identities of being Black, a woman, and a mid-level leader, participants identified a desire to manifest the feeling of being significant, heard, seen, and valued.	”I Matter”	Participants identified the exhausting, dualistic need to constantly reassure themselves and remind others that they are enough based on the pressures of the external environment, or HWI.	*“I wish there was an opportunity for organizations to understand what we go through. It’s so hard when you feel like in some ways, you’re going through it alone.”* (Henrietta: B) *“I have to constantly reassure people of myself, of my ability. You know certain spaces they have dropped off my credential.”* (Audre: D, O) *“But I think there’s been more strategy, the more I recognize how whiteness works, as I’ve navigated my career, so no longer is it, “I’m happy to be a black body in this room’. More of it is, ‘why am I the only black body in this room, and you will listen to me in my Black body in this room.’”* (Gabrielle: Q)

Table 3

Example of Creation of Main Themes

(Continued)

	Mirroring Matter	In mirroring their personal expectations, participants reminded and reassured others that they are enough through their supervisees and the next generation of Black women	*"I give my staff more because I don't want them to be that way. I talk about self-care. I remind them that they need to take care of themselves. I give them a lot of autonomy."* (Francesca: M, N, R, T) *"But again, no one's going to look out for you like you look out for yourself...you gotta be your own Trap Queen."* (Mattie: G, N, R) *"Sometimes for them, you have to be able to show them that I know what the system is gonna do. I can keep going, you know, we can keep doing this. And so you're trying to be the example, stepping into othermothering role."* (Audre: C, F, O)
	"Who Tells Me I Matter?"	Participants searched for a community to remind them that their work and person was needed and valued in a white, patriarchal society and HWI.	*"I think one thing that's been helpful for me, it's the relationships. I feel like I have a Sponsor and a Mentor. And the guy that recommended me for this position he's a sponsor....high level leader, in rooms that I'm not in, and I've seen him advocate for me. And he's a white guy from rural North Carolina."* (Rosa: A, O, R) *"But even they helped me when I'm starting to feel stressed, they'll be like, 'Hey, we haven't seen you in a while'' or I'll come in and there will just happen to be a cup of tea at my desk."* (Audre: O, R)

Exhaustive Description

In step five, the researcher wrote and described a full and inclusive description of Black women mid-level leaders in higher education experiences of the SWS through comparison of transcripts and themes. The researcher combined the themes to create an exhaustive description of statements that capture the essence of SWS and Black mid-level leaders in higher education.

Identify Fundamental Structure

The findings were used to create a clear description and statement of the phenomenon and to identify a fundamental structure. A fundamental statement of structure was created to describe Black women mid-level leaders by removing any unnecessary information to refine the essence of the phenomena by incorporating the themes.

Validation

The data analysis process concluded by seeking validation from the participants to confirm the description captures their experience. In the study, the exhaustive description was presented to participants for validation. The approach supported the literature related to the limited research of SWS and Black women mid-level leaders.

At the completion of Colaizzi's seven-step analysis, the researcher aligned the findings with the theoretical frameworks of BFT and CRT. Analysis the findings through the lens of BFT illuminated how race and gender intersected to shape participant's experiences and themes connected to the unique challenges and opportunities Black women face at higher education institutions. CRT was also used to accompany BFT and descriptive phenomenology by providing a framework for understanding how systems of power and oppression operate at the intersection of race and other social identities. CRT was utilized to highlight how structural inequalities and discriminatory practices contribute to the experiences of Black women. It also identified how

systemic racism and sexism within higher education institutions contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of Black women.

Trustworthiness

To create trustworthy research, several strategies of rich rigor, credibility, and dependability were implemented to achieve the essential component of qualitative research (Jones et al., 2022). Rich rigor focused on data collection to saturation and analysis to complex richness (Jones et al., 2022). As there are always opportunities for new data to emerge, saturation was achieved to the degree where the themes in data collection became redundant. Saturation was also identified in individual interviews and gaining a full understanding of the participants' lived experience (Saunders et al., 2017). To promote rigor, I was immersed and intentional throughout the data analysis process using Colaizzi's (1978) step-by-step data analysis strategy for descriptive phenomenology.

Credibility demonstrates how well the researcher dealt with the research complexities and interpretations related to the research design, instruments, and data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The transcripts were examined and checked for grammatical errors. I used pseudonyms for the participants and shared a copy of the interview transcript with them. Participants were asked to check for credibility, accuracy, and validity to ensure their perceptions and stories depicted their experience. Participation in the study was voluntary and no incentives or monetary gifts were provided for participation.

Dependability is the consistency and stability of data over time including reasoning for data collection and answering the research questions (Ravich & Carl, 2021). The data supported findings, interpretations, and conclusions. The qualitative phenomenological approach and using

a purposeful sample of Black women who have experienced the SWS provided a way for the researcher to gather data that was information-rich through semi-structured interviews.

Summary

The chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research design for the descriptive qualitative study. Theoretically framed in CRT and BFT, the study used semi-structured interviews via Zoom and reflections by the researcher to illustrate the experiences of Black women mid-level higher education leaders who work at historically white institutions. Data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) 7- step Strategy for Descriptive Phenomenology Data Analysis. Trustworthiness, limitations, and ethical considerations have all been examined and assessed, including researcher positionality. Overall, all aspects of the selected methodology were considered for the study.

Chapter four summarizes the data, data analysis process, and the results of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This qualitative phenomenological study of Black women in mid-level leadership and how they navigate the superwoman schema examined 10 Black women from HWIs of various sizes across the nation through semi-structured interviews. The study sought to understand how they experience the superwoman schema as Black women, in their roles, and at HWIs. It also sought to answer how the SWS impacts how they lead in their mid-level administrative leadership positions.

The research questions were:

1. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWIs?
2. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs?

Participant Summary

The study criteria included interviews of 10 Black women who worked in higher education for at least five years, supervised at least one full-time professional, and currently work at a historically white higher education institution. The participants came from various departments and divisions within their institutions, including student affairs, diversity and inclusion, human resources, development, and academic affairs. Half of the participants were in student facing positions, which primarily were in student affairs or diversity and inclusion.

In the demographic survey, participants were asked to self-identify and agreed to experiencing characteristics associated with the superwoman role. They were also asked to select characteristics that aligned with their experiences (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The list of characteristics includes contextual factors, perceived benefits, and perceived liabilities (Woods-

Giscombé, 2010). Determination to succeed despite limited resources and stress-related health behaviors were two characteristics that all participants identified with. Participants selected the superwoman characteristics as noted in Table 4: Superwoman Schema Characteristics.

Table 4

SWS Characteristics

Superwoman Schema Characteristics	Number of Participants Identified Agreement
Determination to succeed despite limited resources	10
Stress-related health behaviors (ex: emotional eating, smoking, dysfunctional sleep patterns, and postponement of self-care)	10
Obligation to suppress emotions	9
Historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression	8
Commitment to the preservation of the Black family/community	8
Obligation to help others	8
Embodiment of stress (ex: migraines, hair loss, panic attacks, weight gain, or depression)	8
Commitment to preservation of self and survival	7
Lessons from foremothers to be self-sufficient	7
Obligation to manifest strength	7
Identified strain in interpersonal relationships	7
Embody spiritual values	7
Resistance to being vulnerable or dependent	6
A past personal history of disappointment, mistreatment or abuse	6

The researcher selected and assigned aliases to participants' aliases based on strong Black women historical figures or significant role models in the researcher's life. An overview of each participant is listed below and Table 5.

Table 5

Participant Demographics

	Alias	**Salient Identities** ***(Identified in demographic survey and/or via interview)***	**Higher Education Area/ Department**	**Historically White Institution Type**	**Educational Level**
1	Audre	Married	DEI	Liberal Arts, Religiously Affiliated, Private, Small (<5,000)	Doctorate
2	Dorothy	Married, Mother	Student Affairs	Public	Doctoral student, 2 Masters
3	Francesca		DEI	Research, Large (15,000 <)	Doctorate
4	Gabrielle		DEI	Research, Religiously Affiliated, Private, Large (15,000 <)	Doctoral student
5	Henrietta	Married, Mother	Auxiliary Services/Human Resources	Research, Private	Doctoral student
6	Mattie	Married, Mother	Development/ Annual Giving	Liberal Arts, Religiously Affiliated, Private, Small (<5,000)	
7	Mary	Bi-racial, LGBTQIA	Business Development	Religiously Affiliated, Private, Medium (5,000 – 15,000)	
8	Maya	Married, Mother	Academic Support/DEI	Research, Public, Large (15,000 <)	Doctoral student
9	Rosa	Married	Academic Affairs	Research, Private, Large (15,000 <)	Doctorate
10	Sojourner	Single Mother	DEI	Research, Public, Large (15,000 <)	Doctorate

Audre

Audre is married and holds a doctoral degree. She worked in higher education for ten years. As a Black woman working in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at her institution, Audre has had experiences that taught her to be confident in her identity and resist expectations to alter her appearance. Audre has a student facing role and tries to be an example and source of strength for her students. As a mid-level leader at a HWI, Audre often felt she has to be the voice for any marginalized populations, which felt exhausting as she takes on many responsibilities without compensation. Professionally, Audre takes on superwoman schema characteristics by working long hours to support marginalized students and be a role model. While support and role modeling were important to her, the obligation to help others causes stress and there was a process of learning she could not always be "on," present or available. The schema impacted her leadership as she had to push back on expectations that she would work constantly. She tried to model work life balance for her staff.

Dorothy

Dorothy is a mother and wife. In the interview, she identified as being a high school dropout and a current doctoral student. She has worked in higher education for 15 years and is currently working in DEI. Her experience in higher education has been both positive and negative. Other colleagues and supervisors have nurtured and encouraged her, while others have tried to "keep her in her place," or maintain her unspoken subordinate position. At times, she feels underappreciated, despite her hard work and commitment. She struggled the most with some of the white women leaders who thought they understood her professional experience working as a Black woman in higher education when they did not. She has to be the "truth teller," as she often has to shed light on oppressive policies and practices within the institution.

She described having to fight for fair pay and title changes, feeling like she had to constantly prove her worth.

Francesca

Francesca has her doctoral degree and has worked in higher education for more than ten years. Currently working in DEI at her institution, she faced many challenges including having her credibility questioned, being talked down to, and dealing with attacks from different groups on campus. As a mid-level leader, Francesca tries to keep the focus on supporting students, while also maintaining good relationships with upper administration. She believes being authentic and transparent has helped her be successful. In leading while navigating expectations of strength, Francesca finds it exhausting trying to balance the production-focused view of leadership with her aim to liberate minds.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle has over ten years of experience working in higher education, is a current doctoral student, and works in DEI. Gabrielle became more strategic and vocal about her identity over time. She is no longer just happy to be a "black body in the room," but wants people to listen to her perspective as a black woman. Gabrielle resisted the superwoman schema through therapy, nutrition, exercise, allowing herself to cry, and being authentic even if there are consequences. As a mid-level leader, Gabrielle tried to lead with humanity, give staff "wellness days," or days off without taking paid time off, and build autonomy.

Henrietta

Henrietta has been in higher education for over 18 years and works in auxiliary services/human resources. She is a doctoral student and a mother. As a Black woman at a HWI, Henrietta has faced challenges in having to constantly prove her credibility and get buy-in from

leaders who don't initially respect her expertise. In her mid-level role, Henrietta aims to bring different groups together, understand all perspectives, and determine the best path forward rather than take sides, particularly between her team and leadership. However, she has felt pressure to always be fully prepared and on top of things. Henrietta discussed the superwoman schema as the exhausting expectation to always be ready, knowledgeable, and able to handle anything. She tries to give herself grace, but also wants to support younger generations.

Mattie

Mattie identified as a mother and an alumna of the institution where she works. She has been working in higher education for over 10 years and currently works in development and annual giving. As a Black woman at a HWI, she struggles to balance how she feels personally as a Black woman with how she needed to show up professionally. The hardest parts for her are "trying to divorce myself between how maybe I feel about a topic, and maybe how I feel as a black woman who is just existing in that topic." Mattie identified not receiving formal training for her mid-level position, which included a lot of "managing up." However, she had a supervisor who was receptive to her feedback. The schema impacted Mattie's leadership style as she has high expectations for herself and her team. She tells her team not to be too hard on themselves about mistakes since she knows the pressure she puts on herself.

Mary

Mary has worked in higher education her whole career at both HWIs and historically black colleges and universities in business development. She self-identifies as biracial and within the LGBTQIA community. As a Black woman at a HWI, Mary feels she is seen as a change maker and feels pressure to open doors for others. She supports her team directly, as well as other individuals of color in other departments. She has navigated leadership politics carefully as

a black woman in a position of authority. She shared, "'I'm legitimately now trying to figure out the best avenue to get that to the higher ups without stepping on toes, or rocking too many boats, because I've experienced that." Mary tries to achieve at a high level since she feels black women leaders cannot be seen as underperforming.

Maya

Maya is a doctoral student, wife, and mother. She has been working in higher education for 8-9 years and currently works in academic support/DEI. Maya has experienced microaggressions, having her authority and knowledge questioned, and feeling like she has to constantly prove herself. She feels the white dominant environment can be hostile, especially as she moves higher up the leadership ladder. As a mid-level leader, Maya talked about the challenges of "managing up," including advocating for her program's budget and pushing back against upper administration's questioning. The schema impacts Maya's leadership by creating an expectation that she will "show up and show out," or always giving more than 100%, even when she is not feeling her best. She tries to model and encourages self-care behaviors for her staff.

Rosa

Rosa has been in higher education, specifically academic affairs, for 14 years. She has her doctorate and is married. Throughout her life, Rosa has had to assimilate into white dominant culture and has seen how race impacts perceptions and opportunities. She feels she has been able to succeed due to mentorship and being given opportunities to take on new responsibilities. The superwoman schema shows up in Rosa's tendency to want to solve problems and "save the day," even when it may enable dysfunctional systems. She is working on setting boundaries and knowing when to let some things fail so the real issues can surface.

Sojourner

Sojourner has her doctorate and is a mother. Sojourner experienced having her competence questioned, even though she was one of the few individuals in her department with a doctoral degree. Despite questioning from colleagues, it is important for her to find joy in her work. Sojourner's leadership style consists of high expectations, the value of transparency and integrity, and also provides resources and grace. She finds balance working in a mid-level leadership role at a "volatile" HWI by the support from her students and team. As a mid-level leader, Sojourner feels she is constantly switching between being an advocate for the institution and a "co-conspirator" trying to create change without being noticed. She is often in the difficult position of being the connection between students and upper leadership and feels like it produces psychological warfare. Sojourner shared "I'm playing different roles that don't line up all the time. And the amount of intellectual dexterity it takes to manage that should be above my paygrade."

Data Analysis Following Colaizzi's Strategy for Descriptive Phenomenology

The study utilizes Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step strategy for descriptive phenomenology data analysis to analyze the data in alignment with research questions. It required a detailed method of identifying significant statements and themes and creating a validated description of the participant's experience. The ten participants' semi-structured interview transcripts were reviewed in detail, which produced approximately 500 significant statements. To gain comprehensive comprehension of the data, the researcher listened to and reviewed each transcript multiple times and highlighted the significant statements. The significant statements from each transcript were printed, cut, and categorized by protocol questions. The protocol categorization and overlap of significant statements was then utilized to create meaning and sub-

themes. The sub-themes were synthesized to create three main themes, which identified a description of the participant's experience. Positive feedback and alignment of accuracy from participants validated their experience and the study.

The final step of Colaizzi's data analysis was to acquire validation from the participants to confirm the description captures their experience (1978). Participants validation is a part of the member checking process and assists with trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Participants were emailed with the transcript, main themes, and the exhaustive description for their review of misalignment to their personal experiences or narrative navigating the superwoman schema. (Appendix G). Participants responded with validation of their experiences within the themes and description. One participant shared "Thank you for sending this to me. This description is spot on! The work you are doing is meaningful and needed. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of it." Participant validation supports triangulation in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

Findings

To develop findings, the researcher followed the first four steps of Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological data analysis process including familiarization, extracting significant statements, formulating meaning, and creation of themes. The last three steps of creating an exhaustive description, identifying a fundamental structure, and validation from participants were taken after the themes were created. The themes are accentuated and described by utilizing significant statements from participants, whose identities of being a Black woman, in mid-level leadership, experiencing the superwoman schema, and working at a HWI are intertwined. The findings section provides an overview of the themes, Echoes of Affirmations, Protect the Alchemist, and Kaleidoscope of Liberation, identified in Table 6.

Table 6

Overview of Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Echo of Affirmations: In their identities of being Black, a woman, and a mid-level leader, there was a desire from participants to manifest the feeling of being significant, heard, seen, and valued. **APPENDIX I**	**I Matter!?:** Participants identified the exhausting dualistic need to constantly reassure themselves that they are enough based on the pressures of the external environment, or HWI.
	Mirroring Matter: In mirroring their personal expectations, participants reminded and reassured others that they are enough through their supervisees, students, and the next generation of Black women.
	Who Tells Me I Matter?: Participants searched for a community to remind them that their work and person was needed and valued in a white, patriarchal society and HWI.
Protect the Alchemist: The need for Black women's mind, body, and souls to be protected as the trio are used to profit the institution. **APPENDIX J**	**Tending the Soil (Soul):** Participants discussed the lack of regard from the institution and how they battled internal approaches and responses through coping mechanisms.
	Planting Seeds without Benefits of the Harvest: Only desired for what they can produce and there is an expectation for them to go above and beyond without reaping the reward/benefit.
	Armored Survival: The need to build an armor to protect themselves from the system they are trapped in.
Kaleidoscope of Liberation: Liberation of self, others, and oppressive systems through resistance **APPENDIX K**	**Unraveling the Paradox:** Participants were intentional about finding ways to counter SWS and its liabilities, not only for themselves but for others as well.
	Collective Liberation: Participants recognized change and freedom will take a collective effort by Black women arming each other and the next generation, as well as support from their institution.
	Equity Emancipated: Participants shared a desire to change the culture of higher education and to have their voices heard.

Theme 1: Echo of Affirmations

The first theme, Echo of Affirmations, encompasses how, in their identification of being a Black woman and a mid-level leader, participants had a desire to manifest the feeling of being significant, heard, seen, and valued. Participants tell themselves they are important and they remind others of their importance, however they also searched for a reminder from others to tell them they are important. The sub-themes within the theme were I Matter!?, Mirroring Matter, and Who Tells Me I Matter?

Sub-Theme: I Matter!?

The exclamation point and question mark identified how "I Matter!?" was both a statement and a question that emerged in the participant's narratives. Participants identified the exhausting dualistic need to constantly reassure themselves and remind others that they are enough within the context and pressures of the HWI environment. Participants also questioned who they were if they didn't live up to the societal expectation. Participants' narratives explored experiences of being alone, being silenced, having their credibility questioned, the need to protect and reassure themselves, and how they utilize resistance tools to counter how they are more than what they can produce.

When describing the experience of feeling alone, Henrietta shared, "I wish there was an opportunity for [higher education] organizations to understand what we go through. Right? It's so hard when you feel like in some ways, you're going through it alone, right?" Even from the context of being alone from a mid-level perspective, Mattie stated:

> Right now, it's not really that they have resources for new managers, but like what if you have a question about how to handle something and.... Yeah, you can go to your supervisor, but it would be nice to be able to information share with other people at your

level. You know what I mean? So you aren't alone in that.

Mattie often discussed the lack of training she received entering her mid-level position. She shared that her institution did not have valuable training for mid-level leaders and also expressed a desire for an opportunity to learn from her other colleagues.

Participants identified the taxing feeling of being silenced. Francesca shared a story about her role and engaging with colleagues who complain about the resources she has for her office, but do not recognize her work responsibilities. In her defense, Francesca stated "you have all these resources. Would you like the oppression, too? Because this one, it comes with the same package, people telling you what you can and cannot say, what you need to do, or how you need to do it. It's a very deep thing." Sojourner's experiences aligned when she shared

> being asked for your opinion, but knowing that it doesn't take root, or not being asked at all. But having to be the person who creates the program or provides the open space to hear student concerns, and then report back on what we knew they was going to be mad about before you made the decision is sometimes also really taxing….So here we are. I'm your martyr.

Sojourner's use of martyr identified her level of sacrifice for the benefit of the institution. Mary also agreed "But it become difficult at PWIs, once I get to a certain point of trying to make changes, then there's gonna be people who are like 'yeah you're doing too much.'"

A part of the reason participants needed to reassure themselves that they matter was due to their credibility being questioned by colleagues and supervisors who did not trust their knowledge or skills. Francesca shared in relation to an experience with a former colleague, "there are still some microaggressions there. He still respects me. If I didn't have a doctorate. I wouldn't get his respect." Maya was upset at how she had to constantly prove and justify what

she is doing and what she is talking about., stating "I worked hard, if not worked harder to get where I am right now and I'm not gonna let you or nobody up in this piece do that." The underlying desire to convince colleagues and supervisors of their value was strong. They aligned what they could produce with who people respected them for their work outcomes.

Participants also questioned who they were if they don't live up to the societal expectation. The questioning often elicited mental gymnastics, another word for cognitive dissonance. Sojourner shared about senior leadership and their contradictory expectations and questioning of her competence. She shared "I find myself often like, 'Well which one is it? Am I smart enough and I should be here or I'm not because I feel like every other day, depending on how it serves you, I am either too good and not good enough.'" Some participants shared their experience particularly within the context of a white dominant environment and experiencing microaggressions. Audre discussed the intentional reassurance of herself and ability as several spaces have dropped her credential. She reminded colleagues that "'you need to put that doctor in front, put it back on the paper.' Folks get funny about it. They were like 'Oh you want to be called Doctor?' So I was like 'Yeah, because I've earned it." Maya questioned herself and needed support from a mentor before going to an interview with her natural hair. She was struggling with changing her hairstyle to a more acceptable style in a white dominant space. When her mentor asked why she would engage in that, Maya responded "you know, just seem more professional, things like that." Her mentor responded asking "would you really want to be in a place that will want to make you change and contort yourself something that they just want?" And Maya responded "hell no."

There were several resistance approaches including recognizing and utilizing the power and strength of their voice and bodies. The resistance approach aligns with the superwoman

schema characteristic of commitment to the preservation of self and survival. Overall, participants did not specifically identify stress-related health behaviors or embodiment of stress, both characteristics of the schema. However, two participants identified wanting to take better attention to their health and eight of the participants shared paying close attention to their mental health and having a therapist. Participants also identified the internal mental gymnastics of dealing with microaggressive tactics of silencing and having their credibility questioned. They all shared ways they resist white dominant expectations by intentionally advocating for themselves. Gabrielle shared her strategy for dealing with whiteness as she has navigated her career. No longer does she think, "I'm happy to be a Black body in this room," but more of it is, "why am I the only Black body in this room, and you will listen to me in my Black body in this room." Maya's resistance is through her voice, sharing "So if you really want to try it, you can go right ahead. I will give you the smoke you want." Mattie uses her voice as well stating "I am real comfortable saying 'I don't agree with that.'" Dorothy shared "I don't really do a whole lot of you embarrassing me in public or talking down to me in public, like I don't do those things. We are gonna stop that real quick." Participants were intentional about utilizing their agency and recognizing their worth.

Sub-Theme: Mirroring Matter

As participants engaged the desire and expectation to be seen as significant, heard, and valued, they also wanted to provide the same feeling for individuals in their ecosystem, including their students and their teams. In mirroring their personal expectations, participants reminded and reassured students, individuals they supervise, and the next generation of Black women that they are enough, while also expecting a high level of excellence. A part of reminding individuals they are enough included the importance of self-care and wellness. The Mirroring Matter sub-theme

aligns with the superwoman schema characteristics of the obligation to help others and a commitment to the preservation of the Black family/community.

Several participants had student-facing positions, specifically serving students of color. In those student-facing positions, participants were intentional about taking care of students and also providing tools on how to be liberated and free. Audre was very aware of her othermothering and caregiving role (Collins, 2000) and stated

> Sometimes for them [students], you have to be able to show them that I know what the system is gonna do, I know how it works. I know what you're feeling. But you can keep going. Because you can keep going, I can keep going, you know, we can keep doing this.

It was important for Audre to support students in navigating a system not made for them. She built relationships with students and taught them tools to support retention (Guiffrida, 2005).

Francesca was intentional about her goal to dispel the superwoman schema "foolishness." She wants to "liberate Black women, because (she) didn't get it" and not only Black women students but Black men too. Dorothy shared how she is impacted and the importance of supporting students, stating "I think where my frustrations lie is that I see students still going through a lot of stuff I was going through as a student, and, and that, you know, breaks my heart." The participants in student-facing positions fell into the othermothering role and held on to the importance of building relationships and maintaining community, particularly community with and for students of color.

In their mid-level leader role, participants were intentional about tailoring their supervision style to how they wanted to be treated. Participants wanted to make sure the individuals they supervise were valued and heard. In their personal narrative, some participants shared they felt they were not able to make mistakes. In their leadership role, they were

intentional about creating space for their team to make mistakes and turn it into a learning lesson. Mary shared a story about how her coordinator made a mistake and how she walked them through it. She shared, "I intentionally make sure that they can come to me with mistakes. We're human. If anything, I'll try to shelter them from that, or I'll take it on so that we can fix the problem." Mattie also shared a story about her team making a mistake and how she reminded them that "mistakes happen." She also shared she "has tried to reject….that (she) has to be perfect at everything." Mattie's insight gives another example of resistance to the superwoman schema.

The importance of self-care for their teams and how it is balanced with work responsibility was a recurring message. Eight of the participants discussed intentionally encouraging their team to take care of themselves. Francesca shared "I talk about self-care, often, I remind them that they need to take care of themselves. I give them a lot of autonomy, I do take a lot of this autonomy myself." When asked about how the superwoman schema impacts how she leads, Dorothy immediately stated "I am very intentional on teaching wellness and care, and how to embrace the word no. I also take into consideration people's time and I don't waste people's time, and I don't make them sit through things that could have been an email." Wellness was also important for Gabrielle as she provides wellness days for her full-time staff. She encouraged her staff to "get paid to be well in whatever that looks like for you. It is not a sick day, it's not vacation time." Mattie took it a step further and intentionally asked her staff "how is your mental health?" Self-care was an important component of the participants' leadership style.

While there was a desire for individuals they supervise to be valued and heard, there was also a level of excellence that was expected. Mattie shared "I have high expectations for myself and definitely have high expectations for my team." Maya and Francesca were intentional about

"modeling of behavior." Francesca was careful that her messaging "is not such that people are feeling like they need to work harder and run faster," however they understood the level of work required.

When given the opportunity to give the next generation of Black women mid-level leaders advice, the main focus was on self-advocacy. It was almost as if the participants were holding up a mirror to themselves, and telling themselves all the things they wish they knew or someone had told them. Mattie stated "No one's going to look out for you like you look out for yourself…you gotta be your own Trap Queen." Dorothy wanted the up-and-coming higher education administrators to be mindful of boundaries and non-negotiables, and "stop thinking that we have to battle out our worth." Henrietta recognized the juxtaposition between being authentic, giving self-grace, and having to do 20 times more than their white counterparts, while recognizing its limitation as "it could hold [young Black women] back from progress. Rosa also agreed with taking care of yourself. She shared "paying attention to yourself doing whatever you have to do to make sure that you're okay. Nothing else is okay if you're not okay."

Sub-Theme: Who Tells Me I Matter?

The sub-theme, Who Tells Me I Matter? explores how participants processed pouring into others, but not having anyone pour into them, particularly at HWIs. Participants searched for a community to remind them that their work and person was needed and valued in a white, patriarchal society and HWI. Participants leaned into their familial support systems outside of the higher education sphere.

When searching for community at their institutions, Rosa shared how relationships have been important, even with people who did not look like her. She has a sponsor who provides access at work and a mentor who provides guidance. Her sponsor recommended her for her

current position, he is a "high-level leader, in rooms that I'm not in, and I've seen him, you know, like, basically advocate for me….And I feel like that has been incredibly helpful. And he's a white guy from like, rural somewhere in North Carolina." Audre agreed, sharing how students have supported her when she is feeling stressed. Students will ask, "Hey, we haven't seen you in a while, where are you at?" or Audre comes in and there will just happen to be a cup of tea on her desk.

While some found a community within the HWI, others struggled to find it. Francesca shared "I didn't have and I remember asking for a mentor. I remember asking very early 'everybody else got a mentor? How come I can't have a mentor?'" The response given to Francesca from her supervisor was "nobody here can give you anything. You are already above what they are. So they can't mentor you like that." Francesca was disappointed and wondered "what does that mean for me? I can't even have someone help me." In relation to the superwoman schema and the historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression, Sojourner shared "How do I disrupt the notion that strong women need to be conquered, controlled, or that strong women don't need community. They don't need partners, right? They themselves just need to be on their own."

Several participants found their community outside of their institution, mentioning their partner, children, other Black women in their sister circles, and a few mentioned being grounded in faith. Maya shared a few instances where her husband reassured her because she had a breakdown due to being overworked and stressed due to her workload and reminded her that "you're not a bad mom." She was trying to balance work and home life and felt her role as a mother was falling by the wayside. Dorothy described being grateful for her husband and her friends to know when to tell her to "sit down." She felt "that's important that people around you

remind [you] to sit down and I tell them to sit down." Dorothy also shared the importance of touch and feeling comfortable sitting next to her husband. Rosa, Mary, and Audre also discussed how their partners were there to experience joy through travel and also to listen and support when they are tired.

The limited number of examples provides insight into the isolation experienced by participants. Participants had varied experiences of support or lack of support within the HWI, and those with partners identified how important they were to balance their experiences at Black women at their HWI.

Theme 2: Protect the Alchemist

The second theme, Protect the Alchemist, identifies the need for Black women's mind, body, and souls to be protected as the trio are used to profit the higher education institution. At HWIs, Black women are often asked to utilize their "magic" to transform the institution, but in return they are not protected, valued, or compensated. Francesca summed up the theme perfectly by boldly stating, "You want my presents, but not my presence." The sub-themes within the theme were Tending the Soil (Soul), Planting Seeds without the Benefits of the Harvest, and Armored Survival.

Sub-Theme: Tending the Soil (Soul)

Tending the Soil (Soul) elaborates on the sub-theme "I Matter!?" and dives into the lack of regard and support from the institution and how participants battled internal approaches and responses through various coping mechanisms. Participants navigated the mental gymnastics of checking their tone and masking with supervisors and colleagues, as well as not being developed professionally. Participants were intentional about protecting themselves mentally, emotionally, and professionally.

Several participants experienced misogynoir and did not want to be aligned with the "angry Black woman" trope, a caricature made popular in the media as a loud, rude, overbearing Black woman also known as Sapphire:

> The Sapphire caricature is a harsh portrayal of African American women, but it is more than that; it is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen" (Pilgrim, 2008, para 1).

They avoided the label by checking their tone when in predominantly white spaces due to perception of colleagues and supervisors. Oftentimes, how Black women are perceived impact how they are treated or doors that are opened for them. Their experiences aligned with the SWS characteristic of the historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression. Mary recognized her particular institution is very relational and she has to be mindful of how she talks in meetings. She recognized you cannot say "no, that's stupid. What are you doing? Because then you become an angry Black woman, right? Especially for me who tries to make change. So I have to, you know, find my alliances, work within that political system, navigate, manage up." Francesca experienced something similar as she was intentional about how her delivery and how she conveyed the message because she wanted to "make sure that [her message] didn't come across, in a way, in a tone that, that it would, it would misrepresent, you know, who I am or what I'm trying to do." Mattie was very aware of not living up to the preconceived notions recognizing that "sometimes as a Black woman, you know, people come in with preconceived notions or your tone is slightly maybe not as happy and people take it and run with it."

Masking was also identified by participants and aligned with the SWS characteristic of the obligation to suppress emotions. Mattie clearly stated "I put on a mask when things happen."

She shared a story about dealing with a trauma-inducing situation with a colleague. After the situation, Mattie wiped her tears, put on some lipstick, and went into a meeting with her team because she didn't want her team to see her upset. The ability to process and share emotions has been beneficial for Rosa. She recognized learning how to manage her emotions in relation to all that gets thrown at her every day is hard. Without it, she stated "I wouldn't be as effective of a leader as I am. There's just a lot of emotional management." Gabrielle also aligned with sometimes grieving not being able to get to her emotions because the world is hurried and rushed. She shared "I am at my core, deeply self-reflective person. Introverted at my core, super demanding of my emotions to celebrate who I am." She tries to find the joy and lean into her emotions and the essence of who she is.

Some of the emotional management of working at a HWI also aligns with the internal battle several participants identified with. Sojourner shared how her experience working at a HWI has been both emotionally and epistemically violent. She stated "It is psychologically violent at times where I am constantly questioning my own sanity." While working in her student-facing position, Sojourner also stated she is fighting "in, for, and against the institution all at the same time." Mattie's internal battle was a little different. She embodied excellence and the push for greatness and recognized it by stating "I definitely put it on myself, but I think that's because I want to be the best."

While navigating the personal internal battle of tone and masking within the institution, participants also recognized the additional lack of regard from the institution professionally. Several participants identified not being given specific professional development (PD) training to support their mid-level leadership role and also not being heard when invited into the "room." "The room" is synonymous with spaces at HWIs where decisions are made and are

predominantly white and predominantly male. When considering professional development, Sojourner addressed not only not being given limited professional development, but the type of professional development was not beneficial. She stated "We are often given limited PD dollars, but even in those PD dollars, we are relegated to doing things that most often don't feed our spirit right? Or feed our intellect." Audre agreed with Sojourner and wanted PD that feeds her spirit. Audre shared "I need to be able to do things that feed me professionally." The desire for a reimagination of professional development was valuable insight into how participants engage their mid-level leadership role.

In addition to PD that feeds their spirit, Mattie and Rosa shared the frustration of having to figure out mid-level leadership on their own. Mattie utilized LinkedIn learning courses and reading articles on how to supervise people of similar and different identities. She confirmed "there's no formalized training. And so, I feel like I did sort of a lot of, I guess a lot of just figuring things out on my own in terms." Rosa agreed stating, "nobody trained me… I'm learning on the job, so many things. It doesn't stop, there's always something new to figure out and be challenged by, you know, just, there's always new things to learn." Francesca was an outlier saying she got her last university to pay for her coaching training.

Several participants also talked about the few opportunities to be in "the room." They did not feel like they were there for their knowledge and skills, but rather for what they could do. Participants had ideas of how to make change, however it was met with disregard, disrespect, or silencing. Dorothy shared how being in "the room" made her nervous and nauseous. She describes feeling nervous because "somebody's gonna say something to me out of pocket. And that's the one room I can't, you know, I can't snap off, and I have to keep it together." Audre talked about how she is asked about what she is doing for students, but not asked about the

higher-level administrative work she is doing. She shared "I'm not supposed to be talking about partnerships, or pipelines, or recruitment or retention or any of that stuff," even though she actively works in all those areas in her DEI role. Henrietta also shared a narrative about how she felt when given the opportunity to share her ideas in "the room" without support from her boss. In the conversation, she expressed her concerns and shared:

> I was feeling very, like shunned or just feeling very small in the room, right? And so being able to explain it to her that this obviously could have been avoided had I just said something, but you know, that conversation needed to happen so that she can understand or realize that you need to do some things differently to make sure that all voices are being heard when we are in a space like that, where there is a power dynamic in the room.

Henrietta's experience was an example of the lack of support Black women mid-level leaders receive.

In response to the lack of support, participants shared the intentionality of protecting themselves mentally, emotionally, and professionally. Therapy was an important part of learning how to protect their mind, body, and soul. Rosa learned in therapy that she could not " just save the day and continue to do all these things," while Gabrielle also credited her growth to therapy. When navigating the superwoman schema, learning different ways to counter the schema felt necessary for survival, which leans into the third sub-theme: Armored Survival.

Sub-Theme: Planting Seeds without the Benefits of the Harvest

HWIs play an important role in the health and well-being of Black women leaders. Instead of feeling valued, participants perceived that their institution only cared about what they could produce or how they were a benefit; in other words, Black women leaders were seen as a

commodity. The commodification of Black women is related to the production expected from Black women during chattel enslavement. Participants also experienced an unspoken expectation for them to go above and beyond their mid-level role without expecting reciprocity in return. Sojourner eloquently shared, "whenever there is a problem or trauma, the Black woman can [lead], but when [HWIs] are stable, when we are successful, the Black woman is not necessary." The sub-theme aligns with SWS of historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression, as experiences were similar to experiences and expectation production of Black women during chattel enslavement.

The concept of production and commodification came up several times throughout the various narratives. Participants made the connection between how they are treated and what they can produce for the institution. Francesca was aware of the connection and stated "you know, either you are used or cherished. And a lot of that is based on how much you can produce, what you produce." Sojourner also felt this connection and tried to remind herself "that there is more to life than what I can produce for other people."

Participants also made the connection of production to enslavement, which indirectly correlated the HWI to a plantation. Francesca viewed strength and leadership differently from her leadership. She saw leaders looking at strength from a "production standpoint, which is rooted in slavery and the practices thereof." In relation to production and the superhuman thought that Black women can do anything, Dorothy recognized the thought as "slavery thinking. I can be pregnant and pick cotton and be harmed and assaulted and still do my job." Dorothy was making the connection between how during enslavement Black women were expected to show up despite challenges and Black women are expected to do the same currently in higher education. Maya also acknowledged the inhumane thought and expectation of Black women and

it being "a time and place where it was necessary for Black women to survive." Audre aligned with Maya from a different perspective and how the thought could be seen as power from generations of Black women and "our ancestors having to fight to stay alive during the slave trade."

There was a level of resistance to the pressure and expectation of production participants experienced. Audre felt pressure in her mid-level position at a smaller institution stating "it feels like I have to be the fixer or the speaker for all beings marginalized." Maya shared "I'm gonna get it done. We're (Black women) about getting our stuff done. Because again, for such a long time, we couldn't rely on anybody else." Even when getting it done, there was still a question of what is the boundary and what do I do about it. Rosa realized "you know what, I'm gonna let this thing crash and burn. It's not going to be saved today, not on my back. I had to learn that in therapy."

Participants did, however, feel an expectation from their institutions to be "superhuman," or as Mary poignantly stated, "superwoman or the super villain." Mary added, "white leadership eventually will lean on you as superwoman until you become the villain, and then you're the villain. But they'll still try to lean on you for more." Participants did not feel support as a valued asset from their institutions, only a commodity that was utilized for their benefit. Henrietta shared the pressure of the unsaid expectation "just feels greater. It just feels like I have to show up, you know, being the person who can be able to navigate whatever issues, whatever problems are, you know, sort of come my way." Audre shared about her experience of feeling the level of expectation and compared it to the Black Panther, stating "I like Black panther, but I am not Black Panther. So I cannot go all the time, I do not have the strength of the, you know, the heart-shaped herb." Sojourner identified a salient moment was "realizing how many people have this

expectation, not just of my brain, but of my physical body, being able to tolerate and do more." Participants repeatedly shared narratives of only being respected for what they can produce and provided examples of how the external expectations are exhausting.

The exhausting expectation to do more without recognition or compensation was a message heard from several participants. Mary stated "we just get tired of being that voice of reason, you know, what I mean, without any kind of actual compensation or care or, or being heard." There was also a level of resistance to this notion of continuing to work without compensation or getting opportunities at higher levels. Audre stated "someone in some of these PWIs, you know, there's a reason some of us are not at a certain level is because they're expecting us to go, go, go all the time, or we need to take on all this weight without compensation." Sojourner agreed and stated plainly, "we don't get the validation that we deserve. We don't get the compensation that we deserve, which puts all of that magic fuel out of context, right?" Participants did not see value in continuing to put forth greater effort for an institution that did not value them. While Sojourner and Mary both admitted to being recovering "workaholics," they both resisted the notion to always be working hard. Sojourner stated "I give myself permission to play and practice radical imagination." There was a level of resistance to the superwoman schema characteristics of determination to succeed without limited resources and an obligation to help others, particularly helping the HWI to succeed when participants received nothing in return.

Sub-Theme: Armored Survival

The sub-theme, Armored Survival, leans into the need for Black women mid-level leaders to build an armor to protect themselves from the historically white, patriarchal system that is higher education. The need is derived from navigating a system not made for them.

Participants identified arming themselves with knowledge and research, dealing with individuals who do not support them, and the importance of surrounding themselves with community. Dorothy identified navigating the system and the need to build the armor as exhausting. She shared "there's still so much of it that I just hate and dislike, and I think for me because I do have a voice that I choose to use; I'm either the enemy of the state or I'm loved."

Sojourner and Audre mentioned arming themselves with research to gain validation from others. They recognized that validation opens doors and is a tool to assist navigating a system not made for them. Sojourner referred to it as "high-level coping and relentless need to consume research." It was important for her to never metaphorically walk into a room alone. She could not stand on her "own intelligence, but could point to all these other people and say that's why I'm suggesting this because it's not just me, but all of these people would agree with me." Audre agreed on doing research and getting enough facts and using her academic background and scholarly nature. She used research to explain why it was needed, why it cannot be argued, and facts cannot be argued.

Navigating a historically white institution where Black women are questioned and silenced, they often had to deal with individuals who questioned their intelligence. Within the context of an HWI, participants shared narratives of individuals from various backgrounds; white men, white women, Black men, and other Black women; who challenged them. Dorothy had to deal with "specifically white men who want to overpower me or even when they're in positions lower than mine, they still feel like they have a right to tell me what to do." She explained this narrative in a way that was infuriating. She also explained that while the questioning came from white women, white men, and Black men, some of her deepest hurt is "when Black women do some things to me, my soul is hurt. And some of my deepest hurt has been at the hands of Black

women who feel in competition or who feel like there's only a place for one of us." Audre cosigned as she told a story about her supervisor who is a Black man, "it very much taught me the lesson of 'all skin folk ain't kinfolk.'" Within the context of a HWI, Black women leaders found challenges from supervisors and colleagues across all identities and searched for a community for validation.

Some participants find community, support, and validation at their historically white institution. A few shared how supportive supervisors made the difference. The race of the supervisor did not make a difference. Both Mattie and Audre both shared positive experiences with their white male supervisors. While Mattie felt like she had to manage up quite a bit, she gave her supervisor a lot of credit as he was open to her ideas. Audre appreciated how her supervisors constantly checked in with her professionally and personally. In particular her white male supervisor supported her personal style. In a verbal exchange, she was scared to ask him about wearing her headwrap to work. She asked him "how do you feel about head wraps? Uh, he was like, is it gonna stop you from doing the work? I was like, no, but some days I just don't wanna do my hair. He's like, Oh, then I don't have a problem with it." This level of support gave Audre what she needed to feel confident in the workplace.

Protect the Alchemist gives further insight on the need to protect Black women holistically and honor the value they bring to higher education. Even though they are faced with silencing, expected to do more with lack of compensation, and challenges from colleagues and supervisors, they still need support from the institution as they continue to pour into others.

Theme 3: Kaleidoscope of Liberation

The third and final theme, Kaleidoscope of Liberation, describes the intentional liberation of self, others, and oppressive systems through resistance. A commonality throughout all of

themes was freedom and liberation. Participants wanted to intentionally resist the challenges of the superwoman schema. The sub-themes within the theme were Unraveling the Paradox, Collective Liberation, Equity Emancipated.

Sub-Theme: Unraveling the Paradox

Unraveling the Paradox addresses participants' varying approaches to responding to the superwoman schema. Participants employed levels of resistance to interrogate white patriarchal definitions of who people want and expect them (as Black women) to be and reassure themselves of their unique power. Types of resistance included attire, hairstyles, speaking out, and self-care.

Audre and Sojourner, both holding doctorates, leaned into their authenticity and pushed back against societal norms of professional attire. Audre wore T-shirts to work that validated her Blackness and academic achievements and were also conversation starters with students. She shared:

> So yeah, I wear my Black Research-Her T-shirts, or you know, et al cite hat, you know, not sight, like, s-i-g-h-t, but c-i-t-e, like cite me. Or you know, I have locks, I pierced my nose, I wear the funky glasses, sneakers to work, because they are conversation starters with my students, then I'm stepping into who I am, my assuredness of who I am as a Black woman.

This statement was poignant in the intentional defiance of the historically white institution. Sojourner agreed regarding her intent to resist using attire, "Like I'm, I am wearing lime green, like I'm pushing back on this notion that wearing lime green was ghetto, like, I'm coming in here and I'm wearing my big door knocker earrings." There was a sense of pride when both women were sharing their stories.

When participants were asked about their definition of the superwoman schema, they

mentioned several traits related to the strong Black woman. They also wanted to identify those parts of themselves that align with the superwoman that cause harm mentally, physically, emotionally, etc. Henrietta shared "we have to realize what is happening. How it's (SWS) manifesting within us to make sure we can do right by ourselves and take care of ourselves." Francesca noted how Black women will continue to fight the patriarchal system, where in comparison white women will find another job. Audre found it was important to realize what is fueling their superwoman schema, and then "realize part of being a superwoman is to stop."

A part of learning to stop was incorporating various measures of self-care, including therapy, travel, mental health days, and setting boundaries. Mary shared the importance of taking her weekends and making sure she took "time off in the slow season to travel and eat good food." Rosa agreed with travel, listening to music, and taking time to reset, process her thoughts and emotions. She recognized and stated "if I wasn't doing that, I'm sure I wouldn't be as effective of a leader as I am. There's just a lot of emotional management." These self-care measures were not limited to themselves as participants shared the same methods with their teams. Mary shared having a hybrid schedule and being "flexible with virtual" for her team. While they had a high level of excellence for their teams, they also wanted them to experience freedom and liberation as well. Gabrielle shared she often asked her team if "they want to be free?" from the notion of being a human being at work and wanting her team to thrive as individuals in their world and in their life.

Sub-Theme: Collective Liberation

Throughout the interviews, participants often discussed the importance of engaging the next generation of Black women leaders and the pressures of previous generations. Participants recognized change and freedom will take a collective effort by Black women arming each other

and the next generation, as well as support from their institution. The significance of Black women working together to resist the strong Black woman trope and to lean into self-care was shared by participants.

It will take the collective collaboration of Black women to shift the SWS culture. Francesca asked "how do we as a community unravel the messaging of SWS?" Sojourner agreed that the "power of our community" and her connection to a lot of other super Black women was essential to her growth. Educating the next generation of Black women in higher education and Black women in general was a necessity. There was a desire for Black women to feel freedom and liberation as they have struggled, been silenced, and undervalued for so long. Gabrielle poignantly shared "Black women know survival before they know liberation." Henrietta found meaning in supporting and helping the next generation. She shared "and that to me would be very meaningful in my life, right, to, to yeah, just to educate those who are moving up, right, our generation or future generations." Maya worried about the superwoman schema and hopes the next generation of Black women will not learn about it. She described "once you learn it, it takes a lot to unlearn it." She also encouraged Black women coming into higher education to "get off the exit ramp now." She works hard to leave things "exponentially better" than what (she) found to make sure the people coming behind her don't go through the same thing she went through and let them know "it doesn't have to be this way."

Participants provided several strategies and advice for the next generation including setting boundaries; caring for their mental health; knowing your worth; remembering their why, and finding love, joy, and community. When working as a mid-level leader at a HWI specifically, there was a desire for Black women to find all the ways to look out for and care for themselves, get grounded, find their roots, and find their sacred community. Sojourner

poignantly stated the need to care for themselves is,

> so no matter which plantation aka PWI you find yourself on, you can always hear the sound of the A bang (drum), so you can connect with your roots so that you don't lose sight of who you are and why you are here.

Sojourner's statement simply combined the thoughts of all the advice from the other participants. There were two outliers who mentioned finding faith, religion, or spirituality as a source of strength and power.

Participants also wanted the next generation to know that in taking care of themselves, they may push up against some individuals' expectations of them. Audre recognized the comfortability in herself, and the space would be taken away if she had to continue to "keep changing bits and pieces of herself to pacify people." Francesca also wanted to remind them of the historically white context stating they will "either be used or cherished." Even though there may be some push back, Francesca wanted them to know never to "stay in a place that is harmful to you."

The support and advocacy from others, including supervisors, colleagues, institutions were essential to Black women's success and are considered a part of the collective. In the sub-theme Armored Survival, Both Mattie and Audre both shared positive experiences with their white male supervisors and others shared about white women colleagues who all used their voices to support and advocate for them. There were no narratives about how the university had a system or policy in place to protect Black women.

The sub-theme identifies the need for Black women to work together to take care of themselves, especially with limited support from the institution. Maya shared the "building (institution) has been around for 100 years, and it will be around for another 100. It is not going

anywhere." Black women currently in or coming into mid-level positions at HWIs must do what they need to do to feel safe, cared for, and validated. While the assistance from others within the institution would be beneficial, Black women must start with themselves.

Sub-Theme: Equity Emancipated

Participants shared a desire to change the culture and to have their voices heard within their historically white institutions. The role of their institution in creating equity and liberation of Black women in their mid-level leadership role is necessary to their survival and progress within the HWI.

When describing the exhausting dualistic nature of love or hate from the institution, Dorothy shared "they love me until I talk too much, they love me until I dont challenge." Francesca identified with the way she was treated from the institution. She stated "people (within the institution) do not see you as feminine. They see you as a mouthy Black woman who always has something to say, unless it's to their benefit then you are awesome and amazing." While dealing with experiencing the ambiguity, there was also an expectation from the institution to support them. Sojourner found herself attacking barriers that she felt she should have institutional support from. She expressed how harmful it is stating, "I wasn't able to harness the weight and power of the institution that I was working on behalf of."

Participants questioned institutions to look at why there are so many barriers to senior leadership and why there are so many Black women in mid-level positions. Maya identified the few who have taken the step to senior leadership, but recognized "in the mid-level range, we (Black women) all seem to be right there. I wonder why that is." Francesca also recognized that in the industry of higher education, "Black women make up a large part of mid-level leaders."

The lack of support from institutions may be resulting in a possible culture shift. Maya

shared “this is a pivotal time for Black women to be selfish” about their health, jobs, and bodies. She does not know if it has happened on a full-scale movement. Gabrielle was on the same page wanting liberation in both her personal and professional life. She does not want to hang on to her job to survive. She clearly stated, “if you want me to be less of a Black woman in order to do this job, you should find someone else.” Liberation and freedom was a constant message that did not necessarily align with the current ecosystem of higher education for Black women.

Participants shared a desire to change the culture and to have their voices heard. Participants also provided several tips to higher education institutions on how to support Black women. Some of the tips came through frustration of their experiences. Maya shared “I rather deal with you (the institutional leadership) upfront knowing that’s not what you want, then for you to sit up here and make these grand gestures that are really about nothing” indicating that oftentimes institutions are not direct with what they want or do not walk the talk. Gabrielle was also frustrated by the institution’s approach asking the question, “isn’t the goal to advocate, create visibility, and care. Are we all there? That seems like the more liberating thing, not who did it, how, and why.” Working in the context of HWIs, Black women mid-level leaders found it frustrating to do their jobs and navigate a suffocating system that was not open to change.

Participants were also direct about fair compensation and higher opportunities. Gabrielle directly stated “run as a check, run us the money,” recognizing the additional labor Black women give to their institutions. Sojourner also discussed compensation as financial reparation that was overdue. She shared

> I think the level of contribution that Black women have made to the advancement of higher education is just astronomical. And the ways in which we have not been elevated to boards, Board of Regents, Board of Trustees, in terms of upper-level leadership for

> higher education, compared to the impact that we have made on these campuses is just astounding.

Sojourner was referring to the work, labor, energy, and time Black women give to their institutions. In order for Black women to be successful, they suggest higher education to listen, be open to change, and fairly compensate for the additional labor.

Exhaustive Description, Fundamental Structure, and Validation

Steps five, six and seven required a full, comprehensive and inclusive description and statement of Black women mid-level leaders in higher education experiences of the superwoman schema through comparison of transcripts and themes, and validation from participants.

For far too often and too long, Black women's voices have been dimmed, invalided, or duplicated without credit. Over the decades of research, narratives of Black women in higher education have remained the same. Several of the participants have leaned toward countering the expectation to walk with their head down, to do a lot with little, and to "be seen and not heard," a narrative rooted in chattel enslavement and historical misogynoir, with using their voice and a commitment to self-care. Participants captured the essence of othermothering and were intentional about creating a liberative environment for their teams and the next generation of Black women in higher education. They, however, questioned where their support came from and sought out a supportive community, both inside and outside of the HWI. As several Black women in academia are dying at the hands of the superwoman schema (Graham, 2024), there was an overwhelming desire to reclaim and demand protection of their mind, body, and soul in an educational ecosystem, not created for them, that often dismisses their experiences, needs, and at times cries for help.

The participants referred to being mindful of their bodies, recognizing internal mental gymnastics that kept them from speaking up, or advocating for their needs. They had strong perspectives on speaking up, asking for what they needed, and respecting their mind, body and souls in a white dominant atmosphere. An atmosphere that viewed them as a commodity who is valued only for what they can produce, how much they can produce, and not compensated for what they produce. They went against the commodified environment and showed up as their authentic selves by wearing their natural hair, Black-centric T-shirts, brightly colored clothing to work, all in an attempt to maintain their true identity and to do what brings them joy in a place where they often feel unwelcome or invalidated. Participants also mentioned the importance of using their voice to hold their supervisors, colleagues and teams accountable to using their agency to support their needs. However, participants also mentioned they could not do it alone. They need the collective voices of administration, supervisors, peers, and students to disrupt the superwoman narrative and provide a space of liberation for Black women in higher education institutions. Higher education institutions should pay special attention to mid-level leadership and do what needs to be done to make Black women feel wanted, supported, and needed, which may include a reimagining of their purpose, professional development, and compensation. In order for higher education institutions to not see a great reckoning from Black women leaders or a significant impact on senior-level leadership, they should consider a movement toward equity and care.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The descriptive phenomenological study utilized meanings of statements to create three main themes: Echo of Affirmations: I Matter?!, Mirroring Matter, and Who Tells Me I Matter?; Protect the Alchemist: Tending the Soil (Soul), Planting Seeds without Benefits of the Harvest,

and Armored Survival; and Kaleidoscope of Liberation: Unraveling the Paradox, Collective Liberation, and Equity Emancipated. The three themes were created by following the robust and comprehensive steps within Colaizzi's (1978) data analysis process. The findings provided a framework for the exhaustive description of Black women mid-level leaders and their experience navigating the superwoman schema. Chapter four provided an overview of the data analysis process and its results. The results will guide the overview of findings in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Chapter Five gives the findings of the research derived from the data analysis highlighted in chapter four. The chapter provides a discussion of the research in light of prior literature and the conceptual framework, identifies the limitations and implications, and provides recommendations for future research. Chapter five is the final chapter ending with an overview and conclusion.

The purpose of this study was to explore Black women mid-level leaders and how they navigate the superwoman schema. The research was led by two research questions: how do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWIs? and how do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs? This study makes unique contributions to research on Black women and SWS. First, the study indicated participants had similar experiences to other higher education research with Black women as the phenomenon. Participants identified feeling visible but socially invisible, unable to make mistakes, questioning their thoughts, isolation, having limited power and resources, and fewer opportunities (Turner, 2002). The study also connected mid-level leadership within administrative positions to SWS. Participants identified with all SWS characteristics with misalignment to obligation to suppress emotions and determination to succeed despite limited resources. Prior research showed Black women who internalized SWS tend to postpone self-care, prioritize others' needs, and suppress one's emotions amid difficulties (Liao et al., 2020). However in this study, participants identified with the characteristics of SWS through the demographic survey and narratives, and also were intentional about their self-care. The unique finding of levels of resistance and need for self-care in the study is highlighted. The

intentionality of self-care is important to note as the success and well-being of Black women mid-level leaders impacts the leadership pipeline within higher education (Chance, 2022).

Finally, the study identifies potential implications for higher education institutions and the attrition of Black women into senior-level leadership positions. Nine out of the ten participants identified seeking other industries for career advancement. Participants were not interested in senior-level leadership within the field of higher education; yet they identified seeking for consulting roles, teaching positions, and unique roles that brought them joy.

The setting of the study at a historically white institution is critical to understanding the experiences of Black women mid-level leaders at institutions navigating a racial ecosystem that centers whiteness through policies, practices, and ideologies (Morales & Raible, 2021; Smith et al., 2011). Within the white spaces, Black women must dualistically navigate racial narratives, while simultaneously attempting to achieve institutional success (Evans & Moore, 2015). The participants came from various large, small, public, research, and private institutions. Participants had varying experiences based on the type of institution they worked. The individuals at small institutions had greater responsibility and connection to upper administration, while those at larger institutions dealt with more levels of hierarchy.

Discussion of Findings

The present study provided an extensive overview of the experiences and responses of Black women mid-level leaders working at historically white institutions and navigating the superwoman schema. There was an interplay between an experience and a response; if there was an experience, there was a response, and if there was a response, there was an experience. Based on the research questions, experiences and responses to the superwoman schema have been differentiated.

The exchange between experiences and responses included characteristics of the superwoman schema. Woods-Giscombé (2010) developed the SWS as a conceptual framework to describe the different dimensions of the strong Black woman persona and to suggest the connection between stress and health disparities among Black women. The current study utilized the characteristics within the framework to highlight experiences of Black women mid-level leaders in higher education. While the study did not highlight stress and health disparities, it did focus on self-care.

In participants' narratives, there was some significant alignment with the SWS characteristics of historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression, commitment to the preservation of the Black family, obligation to help others, and a commitment to self and survival. Participants made statements related to countering the external expectation of Black women to be strong, while internally not wanting to be aligned with being an "angry Black woman" (Pilgrim, 2008, para 1). There was a strong desire from participants to support students and staff of color, whether those individuals were directly connected to their department or not. Participants also shared alignment with preservation of self and survival by utilizing resistance approaches including recognizing and utilizing the power and strength of their voice and bodies. Gabrielle expressed "I'm happy to be a Black body in this room," questioned "why am I the only Black body in this room?," and stated "you will listen to me in my Black body in this room." Gabrielle provided an example of intentional resistance and self-survival.

While there was alignment in some characteristics, there were several experiences and responses shared that did not align with the SWS. There was a strong level of resistance that occurred personally and professionally in their mid-level roles. Some of the inconsistencies were with the characteristics of obligation to express emotions and resistance to being vulnerable or

dependent. Audre, Dorothy, and Henrietta specifically referred to wanting to and have found spaces to be vulnerable, comfortable, and in their "soft space," the opposite of being strong. Most participants shared being open to expressing emotions and being dependent on their staff and others, specifically sharing times when they have cried at work and were okay with sharing their emotions. Gabrielle shared, "I am at my core, deeply self-reflective person. Introverted at my core, super demanding of my emotions to celebrate who I am." Gabrielle showed her intentionality of finding her emotions, even when the world makes it difficult. Despite participant's significant mention in the demographic survey, there was limited mention in participants' narratives about stress-related health behaviors and embodiment; identified strain in relationships; a past history of disappointment, mistreatment or abuse; and embodiment of spiritual values.

RQ1: How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience SWS at HWIs?

The research study revealed the complex intersectionality of experiences that form the professional landscape for Black women mid-level leaders at historically white institutions. The population is expected to personify strength and resilience, both personally and professionally (Abrams et al., 2014; Chance, 2022, Liao et al., 2020; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Within the context of working at a historically white institution and the superwoman schema, the experiences Black women mid-level leaders encountered ranged from isolation to questioning of self to lack of opportunities. These findings aligned with Wesley (2018) who also found Black women student affairs professionals at HWIs who experienced being stereotyped, devalued, silenced, ignored, and undermined, while navigating gendered racism in their professional work. Misogynoir and gendered racism played a role in participant's experiences (Bailey & Trudy,

2018; Cook, 2020). The overlapping experiences of the Black women participants signified how their intersecting oppressive identities impacted their mid-level role (Collins, 2000). The findings were also in alignment with the superwoman characteristic of historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression.

Many of the experiences participants shared aligned with the sub-theme, I Matter!? One significant experience was isolation within their professional settings, particularly within their mid-level role. Isolation was felt individually and professionally. Sojourner shared "How do I disrupt the notion that strong women need to be conquered, controlled, or that strong women don't need community. They don't need partners, right? They themselves just need to be on their own." Sojourner recognized that the isolation came from external expectations for Black women to be strong. Participants reported having their voices and perspectives silenced, particularly when trying to make change in support of equity and liberation. A part of the isolation was also feeling like they were only needed for what they can produce or provide to the institution, which created an experience of feeling undervalued. Francesca was aware of the connection of Black women's worth and production. She stated "either you are used or cherished and a lot of that is based on how much you can produce and what you produce." Within the I Matter!? sub-theme, participants also experienced an internal declaration and a question. In the context of historically white institutions, Black women have not been valued or respected, however Black women continue to lead and affirm themselves (Dillard, 2016). The experience of production in sub-theme, Planting the Seeds without Benefits of the Harvest, also aligned with Tevis et al. (2020) who found Black women's energy was used for the benefit of the greater institutional community without the acknowledgment of the multiple strengths and contributions they brought to the advancement of the organization.

Participants also experienced an unspoken expectation to be a fixer, to have it all together, and to not make mistakes. The role of the strong Black woman was an external expectation from individuals within the university put on participants. Prior research showed that Black women leaders are evaluated more negatively and tend to be disproportionately disciplined than their counterparts (Rosette and Livingston, 2012). Participants often internalized the unspoken expectation, while simultaneously attempting to resist the external pressure. Sojourner eloquently shared, "whenever there is a problem or trauma, the Black woman can [lead], but when [HWIs] are stable, when we are successful, the Black woman is not necessary." While prior research suggested Black women who internalize SWS tend to postpone self-care, prioritize others' needs, and suppress one's emotions, the participants in the current study were intentional and took specific steps to address their self-care and emotions (Liao et al., 2020).

While participants did not specifically mention behaviors or embodiment of stress identified in the schema, they did mention the emotional and cognitive stress. In the intersection of participants' gendered and racialized identities, maintaining the balance of their roles and expectations can lead to depression, anxiety, stress, and mental health issues (Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). Several studies on Black women and strength identify its impact on psychological, mental and physical distress and the need for self-care and healing (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Liao et al., 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). In comparison to their counterparts, participants felt a higher level of emotional and cognitive taxation, particularly as it related to gendered racism. One component of cognitive taxation was the questioning of their knowledge and skill set. Participants expressed several instances where supervisors and colleagues challenged their qualifications and expertise. Sojourner shared about senior leadership and their

contradictory expectations and questioning of her competence. She shared, “I find myself often like, ‘Well which one is it? Am I smart enough and I should be here or I’m not because I feel like every other day, depending on how it serves you, I am either too good and not good enough.” They also experienced the cognitive dissonance of mental gymnastics and balancing their thoughts on responding to negative experiences. Participants also reported experiencing microaggressions, or slight insults based on race and gender, that actively contributed to a hostile working environment.

The study also noted a lack of opportunities for professional development. The lack of opportunities aligns with Clayborne & Hamrick’s (2007) study where Black administrators reported they felt the need to work harder, while also receiving less investment in professional development than their white peers. Participants shared limitations with professional development funding, types of professional development, and internal institutional resources to support success in their mid-level roles. Participants challenged institutions to be creative and innovative in what professional development looked like for Black women, and in this instance, for mid-level leaders. Sojourner expressed “we are often given limited PD dollars, but even in those PD dollars, we are relegated to doing things that most often don’t feed our spirit right? or feed our intellect.” Most professional development creates space for presenting or learning versus the need for Black women to seek sister circles and healing spaces as professional development (West, 2019a; West, 2019b). At the completion of the interview, the researcher sent higher education professional development opportunities, specifically for Black women, to each participant.

When navigating the higher education ecosystem, participants expressed experiencing a blend of challenge and support. Some participants shared intentionally being challenged by

supervisors and colleagues. Race was not a factor in the lack of support and being challenged as participants mentioned white men, white women, Black men, and Black women were all adversaries. Participants aligned with the assertion of having to work twice as hard to get half as far or acknowledged than their white colleagues (Chance, 2022; Watson & Hunter, 2016) to add lack of support was difficult. The lack of support included not serving as an advocate, undermining their expertise, not using their social agency to serve as a voice for change, or even competing with them. Henrietta had a challenging and direct conversation with her supervisor stating "you need to do some things differently to make sure that all voices are being heard when we are in a space where there is a power dynamic in the room." However, some participants shared support from supervisors and colleagues, where race was also not a factor. They experienced advocacy, sponsorship, and mentorship. Key motivation factors within an institution for Black women higher education leaders include support, relationships, and mentorship (Breeden, 2021). Black women higher education leaders also have resilience and find motivation through relationships and mentorship (Blackhurst, 2000; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021; Chance, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

The findings of the study's participants' experiences were similar to previous studies (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Liao et al., 2020; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016; West, 2019a; West, 2019b); however it is important to continuously research and gain a comprehensive understanding of the SWS and how it connected to Black women in mid-level leadership positions within HWIs. Institutions can utilize the experiences of Black women to intentionally create positive outcomes for the population, such as positive well-being, promotion, inclusion, etc.

RQ2: How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to SWS at HWIs?

Participants engaged in several approaches in response to their experiences and the superwoman schema. A major finding was the intentional and strategic responses to navigating their roles and adjusting to their HWIs successfully. Strategic responses included awareness of and adjusting their communication style, arming themselves with positive self-talk and knowledge, self-care, various resistance tactics, and a deliberate leadership style (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2016; Hersey, 2022).

One of the first responses noticed was an awareness of and adjusting of participant's communication style. Some participants also mentioned that they were aware of checking their tone, even when they chose to speak up or challenge, as they knew the message would not be received well. Participants identified primarily checking their tone with supervisors and colleagues, not students. Mattie was very aware of not living up to the preconceived notions recognizing that "sometimes as a Black woman, people come in with preconceived notions or your tone is slightly maybe not as happy and people take it and run with it." Black women in higher education demonstrate communal orientation, interactive communication, and persistence through the challenges faced in the workplace (Bonaparte, 2016). Participant's communication also included arming themselves with knowledge in response to the questioning of their intelligence by colleagues. Participants noted backing their suggestions or statements with research and facts to convince colleagues of their truth and competence. Audre researched pertinent information before going into meetings, getting enough facts, and using her academic background and scholarly nature. She used research to explain why her point "was needed, why it cannot be argued, and facts cannot be argued." A few participants discussed putting on a mask

to hide their emotions, particularly from their team and in their leadership positions. The responses were outliers to the SWS of feeling an obligation to suppress emotions. This finding is not surprising as it also aligns with Liao et al. (2020) who found Black women who internalize SWS tend to suppress their emotions despite challenges. Okello et al. (2020) also identified the necessity of Black student affairs educators to wear a mask, or to hide their feelings to survive daily within the HWI. Eight out of the ten participants had their doctorate or were in the process of obtaining their doctorate, particularly as a way to counter stereotypes and the questioning of their credibility. The participants did not specifically share why they received their doctorate, but may have also been a way to achieve self-sufficiency, social mobility, and liberation. When considering the SWS characteristic of historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression, Black women must negotiate dominant white structures of HWIs and navigate daily microaggressions (Evans & Moore, 2015), which may include adjusting their communication.

While participants are intentional about their external communication and commitment to preservation of self and survival, they are also mindful of their internal communication and arming themselves with positive self-talk and knowledge. In response to experiencing mental gymnastics, participants often had to reassure themselves of their worth. There was a sense of the need to balance institutional and external expectations, while managing their personal well-being.

Well-being, self-care, and a commitment to preservation of self and survival were a constant message throughout the study. Participants were focused on their mental, physical and emotional self-care, which aligned with the theme, Protect the Alchemist (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Hersey, 2022; Mawhinney, 2011; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). Protect the Alchemist highlights the need for Black women's mind,

body, and souls to be protected as they are used to profit the institution. Participants recognized their mind, body, and soul was important to them personally and not necessarily connected to the institution, as the institution does not protect them or are mindful of their wellness. Francesca boldly stated, “You want my presents, but not my presence.” The participants’ self-care approaches were utilizing therapy, taking paid time off, and spending time with family. Rosa learned in therapy that she could not “just save the day and continue to do all these things” in alignment with SWS. Within the confines of a HWI and feeling and experiencing isolation, the participants strategies are common and in alignment with other research. Some of the participants in Quaye et al. (2019) identified unplugging from the people and places that caused them harm, building community beyond work and with other Black educators via sister circles to avoid isolation, caring for their physical bodies for positive mindfulness by taking mental health days, finding authentic identity-based safe spaces, and using counseling as a space to reflect and be heard. In this study, participants also responded to the external pressures by not reciprocating the same external pressures on to their staff. Francesca shared “I actually give my staff more…..I talk about self-care, often, I remind them that they need to take care of themselves.” As mid-level leaders, all participants encouraged their team to take wellness days, to find joy and liberation, and to take care of themselves.

As aforementioned, eight participants had a doctorate or were pursuing a doctoral degree. According to Woods-Giscombé (2010), strong Black women with terminal degrees identify as having the highest level of self-care postponement who embody the SWS characteristics. In this study, most participants were focused on their self-care, except for one outlier who mentioned the need to focus more on their self-care. With the recent passing and academic misogynoir of several Black women senior-level leaders (Graham, 2024), participants have a heightened

awareness of the need to take care of themselves and to be mindful of their health. This finding was heightened by Breeden's (2021) research on Black women in senior-level positions in student affairs at HWIs naming significant experience of burnout and how unchecked exhaustion materialized into both mental and physical health issues.

Resistance to discriminatory practices and systemic barriers, as well as advocating for equity and positive change within their institutions, was a common response to the superwoman schema. Participants showed various levels of resistance to external pressures and expectations at their HWI, including selecting clothing that intentionally pushed back against the professional norm to utilizing their voice to challenge disrespect and inequities to drawing professional boundaries. The sub-theme Unraveling the Paradox addresses participants' varying approaches to responding to the superwoman schema. Participants employed levels of resistance to interrogate white patriarchal definitions of who people want and expect them (as Black women) to be and reassure themselves of their unique power. Audre shared "I wear the funky glasses or sneakers to work because they are conversation starters with my students. Then I'm stepping into who I am, my assuredness of who I am as a Black woman." There was a level of resistance to the SWS characteristics of determination to succeed without limited resources and an obligation to help others. The SWS characteristics pointed toward helping their HWI to succeed when participants received nothing in return. Participants recognized their worth and did not want to continue to give effort without reciprocity. Cook (2020) noted the burden of internalizing misogynoir left Black women higher education professionals feeling exhausted and created a sense of hyperawareness. In alignment with research on Black women in higher education, one protocol question intentionally asked about self-care (Hersey, 2022). Participants were intentional about self-care, resting, taking vacation days, and caring for their mental health.

Participants were done feeling exhausted and wanted to do something that made them feel reassured, authentic, and brought them joy.

In participants' resistance responses to the superwoman schema, there may be a decline in Black women filling senior leadership positions. The limited role models, the concrete ceiling, and the intersectionality of racism and sexism, tokenism (Chance, 2022) and the need for self-care are keeping this population from considering higher education as a next step professionally. Eight out of the ten participants identified no desire to apply to or seek out senior leadership positions; four are currently doing consulting work and are interested in engaging in that work full-time and four mentioned the desire to engage the next generation through teaching or in the nonprofit sector. The desire to prepare the next generation with self-advocacy and self-care tools contradicts with the SWS characteristic of lessons from foremothers to be self-sufficient. Participants often discussed the desire to challenge SWS and the notion of being strong for the next generation.

A part of the message and response to the next generation of Black women leaders was the importance of finding community and joy, which aligns with the sub-theme: Who Tells Me I Matter? Participants discussed how they intentionally found community with students, advocates and mentors inside the institution, while gaining support from family outside of the institution. Previous research highlighted how racial pride, sense of self, love and support from families, and their commitment to the students they served contributed to their success of Black women as professionals (Wesley, 2018). A part of their joy and success is also identifying their personal worthiness. Dillard (2016) utilizes an endarkened epistemology to explain how Black women must claim, declare and recognize their worthiness and lives matter. For their well-being, it was

essential for Black women mid-level leaders to celebrate successes, foster positive relationships with colleagues, and actively pursue moments of fulfillment within the professional journey.

Participants were deliberate about their leadership style. Othermothering and serving as a caregiver to their students and team was a common response to helping them navigate the HWI (Guiffrida, 2005; Mawhinney, 2011). Prior research identified othermothering from Black women in higher education as important to successful relationships with and retention of Black students (Guiffrida, 2005). Mawhinney noted the self-sacrificing and lack of self-care that comes with othermothering (2011). However, participants in the study did not mention the lack of self-care, instead participants who had student-facing roles shared interacting with students was a part of what brought them joy to their role. Engaging with and commitment to the success of students aligns with the SWS characteristic of the commitment to the preservation of the Black family and community.

As it related to individuals the participants supervised, the concept of caring leadership fits into the characteristics of Black women and the obligation to help others within the superwoman schema, particularly othermothering. Caring leadership may be directly connected to productivity among those around them as a result of leaders creating a positive and encouraging working environment (Uusiautti, 2013). Participants also discussed the adoption of leadership styles that integrated authenticity, autonomy, and liberation. In Clayborne & Hamrick's research on leadership styles of Black women in mid-level student affairs administration, participants described relational leadership qualities, such as leading, mentoring and supervising (2007).

Participants mentioned adjusting their leadership style by having to "manage up" and develop a relationship with their supervisor where they can be authentic, influence decisions, and

align on communication styles and preferences. It did not matter supervisor's race as long as they supported participant's needs, advocated for Black women participants, and recognized their contributions. Participants utilized the "managing up" leadership approach as a means of navigating hierarchical structures within HWIs.

The strategies to experiences identified in this study illustrate how Black women mid-level leaders respond to the superwoman schema at predominantly White institutions. By acknowledging and understanding these diverse responses, institutions can work towards creating inclusive environments that support the professional growth and well-being of the study's population contributing to greater diversity and equity in higher education institutions.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the phenomenological study were critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and the superwoman schema. As identified in Figure 1, the SWS as a conceptual framework within CRT and BFT. CRT served as the all-encompassing worldview, BFT focused on the unique oppressive intersections of Black women, and SWS provided a specific view into Black women's experiences.

The findings within each theme were situated in the conceptual framework of SWS and validated or challenged in the theoretical frameworks of CRT and BFT. As the framework of CRT highlights racism's existence and consequences for Black women's reality (Husband, 2016), the findings identified a significant connection to misogynoir, the historical legacy of enslavement, and how the concept of production is still alive in present day higher education institutions. While the leadership qualities of self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and resilience were created by Black women during enslavement due to misogynoir, participants

recognized the additional external pressures put on them by their institutions (Nelson et al, 2016; Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Participants shared several counterstories about their experiences at their HWI, which is a tenet aligned with CRT. Participants in student-facing positions shared how their students were a part of their community. While most research on othermothering and interacting with students impacted their self-care, participants in this study shared a different perspective. Also, prior research has highlighted the negative impact of white colleagues on Black women's experience (Chance, 2022), several participants shared how supportive white supervisors listened and gave space for authenticity (Smith et al., 2011). The study's findings highlighted the racialized and gendered voices and perspectives of Black women mid-level leaders and provided insight to transforming their experiences (Solórzano, 1998).

The tenets of BFT were woven throughout the findings. The tenants are recognizing Black women's experiences are unique, their responses to oppression varies, there is a connection between Black women's experiences and acts of resistance, Black women's experiences play a role to identify and contribute to the theory, and a commitment to social justice (Collins, 2000). The first two tenants highlight how Black women are similar yet have different backgrounds and intersecting identities (Breeden, 2021; Collins, 2000). The tenets were emphasized through the variations of responses to core themes and interdependence of experiences. Participants shared very similar yet different experiences in their mid-level roles. One important example of the similarities yet differences was how the mothers referred to how they intentionally engage with their daughters as related to the SWS. Henrietta, Dorothy, and Sojourner talked about spending more time with their daughters, role modeling self-care, and dispelling the schema. Participants also discussed their experiences with other Black women

colleagues and in some cases supervisors. Dorothy shared some of her "deepest hurt has been at the hands of Black women who feel in competition or who feel like there is only place for one of [Black women] there." The collaborative experiences were essential to validating Black women's adversity and strength (Dillard, 2016, p.34). In the study, while there was an expectation of collective alignment and liberation (Liao et al., 2020), several participants discussed being hurt by other Black women who were in competition with them, challenged them publicly, and/or made the work environment hostile. Liao et al. (2020) found connection with others and collective coping helped with loneliness, isolation, and self-reliance. BFT recognizes the experiences of Black women are not monolithic, while simultaneously recognizing their connection (Collins, 2000).

There are several images emerging from BFT that align with SWS and impact Black women higher education leaders, including racial uplift, the strong Black woman, outsider within, and othermothering. Racial uplift aligns with the SWS characteristic of commitment to the preservation of the Black family/community. Several participants were intentional about taking care of their students and team who shared similar racial backgrounds. Racial uplift also connects to leadership and how an individual's education and advancement serves to help others in the community (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000). Participants did not specifically mention their journey to a doctorate as a part of racial uplift, but it may be indirectly related.

All of the participants were familiar with the strong Black woman (SBW) image and often correlated it with the schema. SBW has been attributed to Black women since enslavement and continues on without addressing the white dominant institutions that maintain racial inequity (Collins, 2000; Nelson et al., 2016). The *outsider within* concept (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000) was indirectly several times in the participant's narratives and aligned with the

sub-theme, Planting Seeds without Benefits of the Harvest. The concept and study's sub-theme identified how Black women are positioned within a historically white campus, but remain outsiders due to their various marginalized identities (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007, p. 137). Participants shared feeling like a commodity and only being desired by their institution for what they can produce. The outsider-within concept also aligned with the expectation for Black women to go above and beyond for the institution without reaping the reward or benefit from the institution.

The concept of othermothering and caregiving connects with the *outsider within* by portraying how Black women are invisible, even though the HWI claims inclusion (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000, p. 281). In the sub-theme, Mirroring Matter, participants were intentional about reminding and reassuring their students, supervisees, and the next generation of Black women that they were enough. In particular, to pass lessons to the next generation of Black women, Black women must share the "collective wisdom of Black women's experiences" (Collins, 2000, p. 256).

Resistance was a consistent theme throughout the findings and a significant tenant within BFT. Participants shared how they intentionally attempted to address misogynoir in their lives. The final BFT tenant of commitment to social justice. There was a strong desire from participants to make the world a better place, especially for the next generation of Black women.

Limitations

There were several limitations of the study. First, the participants self-selected into the study based on their perceived experience and identification of characteristics within the superwoman schema. I used their responses to determine the appropriate participants based on those who choose varying characteristics. However, Black women have varied experiences with

oppression (Collins, 2000) causing the findings to not extend directly to individuals beyond the study.

A majority of the participants identified having their doctorate or currently enrolled in doctoral programs. The doctoral perspective provided a different insight and reasoning for participation. Approximately half of the participants work in a student-facing office. Their experiences were different as they had the additional challenge of speaking on behalf of, but simultaneously had the support from students.

There was also a general age range of participants. Most indirectly identified their age to be between 33 and mid-40s. There were no questions asked about age, however many disclosed their age in relation to what they were willing to deal with or how their age impacted how they were treated by administration and colleagues.

The 13 SWS characteristics were listed in the demographic survey, however there were not specific questions in the interview protocol that aligned with each characteristic. Participants were asked general questions about SWS that aligned with research. There was limited mention in participants' narratives about stress-related health behaviors and embodiment; identified strain in relationships; a past history of disappointment, mistreatment or abuse; and embodiment of spiritual values. The limited mention may be due to the lack of specific questioning during the interview.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Implications

The study provides an understanding of Black women mid-level leaders who are navigating the superwoman schema. Findings from the research study have implications for higher education institutions, its senior leaders, Black women at various levels within the

academy, supervisors of Black women mid-level leaders, as well as higher education professional networks and associations. Participant narratives provided insights and guidance on how to support the population.

DEI initiatives in higher education are currently under scrutiny in conservative states. Black women predominately serve in mid-level leadership roles and support DEI departments, as highlighted by half of the study's participants serving in DEI roles (Lu, n.d.). Higher education institutions can adjust processes and support for the population of Black women. The first step is as noted in the theme Equity Emancipated, it is going to take the individuals across the whole institution to listen to Black women's voices and their ideas for change, adjust policies and systemic issues, and actively advocate for the success and well-being of Black women. It will be important for higher education institutions to recognize and validate the additional verbal and nonverbal expectations placed on Black women mid-level leaders to achieve at a high level in numerous roles, both professionally and personally (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Liao et al., 2020). Institutions can intentionally seek research on the population, hold forums, or send surveys asking for feedback.

The research findings identify a potential mass exodus of Black women from higher education, which will greatly impact student retention and in turn the fiscal bottom line at colleges and universities across the country (Guiffrida, 2005). The study also deduces how Black women are focused on the preservation of their mental, physical, and spiritual health and they are willing to exit the higher education to invest in themselves. The investment in Black women mid-level leaders is of utmost importance. Institutions should offer more mentoring programs, be intentional promotions, provide creative professional development resources, and examine patterns in retention from climate surveys and listening sessions to create policies and report

publicly to protect Black women. Institutions can also have an ombudsperson specifically trained to support Black women, and be available for reporting of bias-related incidents and to advocate for Black women's well-being.

The research findings also suggest the importance of senior leadership to seek professional development on the impacts of the superwoman schema and the vitality of Black women, including entry-, mid-, and senior-level administrators (Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021). Participants often dealt with isolation, misogynoir, lack of support, feeling like a commodity, and constantly having their credibility questioned (Blackhurst, 2000; Breeden, 2021; Chance, 2021, 2022; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007, DeGruy, 2005), while providing support to their students and staff; in response they wondered Who Tells me I Matter?

The research is essential for cabinet members, board of governors or regents, institutional senior leaders, and others who are responsible for selecting a diverse pool of candidates for high-level higher education positions. Indicated by participants' resistance responses to the superwoman schema, there may be a decline in Black women filling senior leadership positions. The attrition of Black women from mid-level leadership to senior-level leadership may be greatly impacted in the near future. There are a few ways senior leaders can recruit and retain Black women leaders including engaging in intentional data collection and research on Black women in higher education, creating employee resource groups or counterspaces specifically for Black women (West, 2019a; West, 2019b), implementation of wellness programs such as stress management workshops and addressing work-life balance through work policies and accommodations such as remote work and flexible hours, and more therapist of color offered through the university (Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). Senior leaders can also provide nuanced opportunities for professional development focused on support and healing

versus the typical presentation style, skill learning professional development (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Okello et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2019). In order to retain Black women, it will be important to also provide leadership programs that engage the needs of Black women mid-level leaders, including mentorship programs, leadership training, and networking opportunities to help them advance professionally. Research notes the importance of leadership, mentorship, and how an individual's education and advancement serves to help others in the community (Breeden, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2000).

While the study is focused on Black women in mid-level administrative leadership positions, Black women in entry-level and senior-level positions also should be supported. The study provides important insights to Black women who are seeking mid-level leader administrative positions or those already in mid-level positions who are seeking senior-level leadership positions. The participants provided enlightenment and specific guidance to entry-level Black women on how to survive at a HWI as a mid-level leader. The main recommendation was to put yourself first, advocate for yourself, and take care of yourself. The intersection of leadership, mid-level administration, and wellness are essential to the recruitment and retention of Black women. Black women will select positions and institutions where they will be supported, heard and valued; and will leave institutions where they do not feel supported, heard, and valued. As Black women graduate students are entering higher education programs, it will be important for them to understand the challenges they may face as professionals. It will also be important for educational leadership and higher education graduate programs to understand the data regarding Black women. It will be important for graduate programs to educate all students of the needs of Black women entering the field and provide resources to the Black women in the program.

Supervisors of Black women mid-level leaders may find the study helpful to guide them on the experiences of Black women and how they can support them. As the Black women participants in the study experienced SWS, it is presumed that other Black women they may supervise will experience SWS as well. Supervisors can ask specifically about SWS, check-in with their mid-level leader regularly, connect them to advocates and sponsors within the higher education ecosystem, ask them what their goals and next professional steps are and provide ways for them to achieve those goals.

While senior leaders, supervisors, and Black women play a role in the protection of Black women, everyone on the campus plays a role. Students, colleagues, cabinet members, and more should all understand the magnitude of the Black woman's role at a higher education institution.

One of the ways to support the next professional steps is to connect Black women to professional associations and networks, such as NASPA, ACPA, and other cohort groups focused specifically on supporting Black women in the academy. There are counterspaces and pre-conferences at NASPA, specifically for Black women (West, 2019a; West, 2019b). Higher education professional associations and networks should be intentional about creating spaces and connections for Black women to feel validation and community.

Several of the participants mentioned their next step was outside of higher education. The research may have benefits for industries outside of higher education. Supervisors in other industries can take advantage of some of the steps to support Black women as well.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research study yielded several recommendations for future research. Many of the topics came from participants themselves based on the interview and the complexities of their

experiences. The areas for future research concentrated on three main themes: the multilayers of mid-level leadership, the multilayers and needs of Black women, and positionality.

The first recommendation focuses on the multilayers of mid-level leadership. Research on Black women is typically shared from a deficit perspective. In the research study, participants also shared their experiences with misogynoir, but did not share their experiences from a perspective of joy and adequacy. The superwoman schema framework provides characteristics, inclusive of perceived benefits and liabilities, and contextual factors (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2016). There was an opportunity to lean more into the perceived benefits of SWS and areas that bring satisfaction to the mid-level leadership role. Another area of mid-level leadership to consider for future research is supervision and how race or age may play a role in how the superwoman schema shows up. Several participants in the study identified how the age or race of the individual they were supervising impacted their leadership style, particularly if the supervisee identified as a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC).

The second area of future research addresses the multilayers and needs of Black women; not only those in higher education. Not only could a perspective of joy and adequacy been studied from a mid-level perspective, but it also could have been studied from the perspective of Black women. Participants can be asked their experiences with joy personally and professionally. Researching and identifying the generational differences in how Black women approach the superwoman schema in higher education could provide ways to support the population. It could provide insight into how Black women mid-level leaders from different generations approach their role. Many participants discussed what they learned from previous generations, about how their age and essentially their generation impacted their approach, and how they view younger generations, which aligned with the superwoman characteristic of lessons from foremothers to be

self-sufficient. Unfortunately, the ages of the participants were not revealed in the study, but could be a part of the demographics collected in future research. It would be compelling for the field to study the differences in how the superwoman schema impacts approach between Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Furthermore, examining ways for Black women at various leadership levels, from entry-, mid-, and senior-level, to find and/or create supportive sister circles and mentorship programs responds to the participant's expressed need for supportive networks throughout their careers. Sister circles and mentorship programs are innovative perspectives to professional development for Black women. Higher education institutions could consider financially supporting an unorthodox approach to professional development.

Future researchers can utilize the data gathered from the research study to examine how positionality, or where the participants are located within the institution, can impact the superwoman schema. The research study was open to Black women in mid-level leadership in any area within higher education; narrowing the scope to one specific division or general area could be beneficial. Approximately half of the participants worked in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and had overlapping stories with similar themes. Future research can investigate whether Black women in DEI administrator roles working at HWIs share similar narratives concerning the SWS. The investigative approach could also be used to explore mid-level positions that are student facing. Participants who had student facing roles shared more stories about joy and feeling validated. Students played a factor in participants' experiences related to othermothering and the SWS characteristic of obligation to help others. On the aspect of joy, most research focuses on the deficiency of Black women in higher education. It would be beneficial to research what aspects of higher education and what components of their mid-level role brings them joy. There is also an opportunity to identify the impact of the superwoman

schema and mid-level leadership outside of the realm of higher education, particularly in nonprofit and corporate settings. The research would provide insights into the transferability of experiences and relation to the SWS characteristics across different industries. The study focused on Black women working at historically white institutions, however Black women at minority serving and historically Black institutions may also experience the superwoman schema. The focus of this study was on HWIs and exploring SWS in other unique institutional contexts is an opportunity for future comprehensive research of Black women within various academic settings. There may also be opportunity to research the applicability of the superwoman schema in a cross-cultural context, particularly with women of color who identify as non-Black.

The collective of recommendations provide a guideline for potential future research, including solutions to areas about Black women mid-level leaders that still need to be addressed.

Researcher Reflection

My role as a researcher was intentional and deliberate. I recognized how my proximity to the participant's personal and professional identities played a role. Throughout the data collection process, I was aware of instances when my mid-level leadership experiences and social identities intersected with the participants' narratives. The overlap of experiences provided space for me to ask additional questions. I also made notes and memos where a participant's story aligned with mine. I recognized after the interviews that there may have been some mirroring as I had been in an eight-year mid-level leadership position and I was still healing from institutional harm.

The mirroring and social proximity may have been the catalyst to the researcher's omission. As I was framing the findings within the theoretical framework, I had a moment reflecting on CRT counterstories and the concept of joy. I missed the moment to ask the

participants what brings them joy personally and what parts of their job bring them joy. So often we hear the negative components of leadership and the superwomen schema; hearing the positive components could have been captured. I also recognize I have been struggling with finding joy in my personal life. I am in a place where I am prioritizing myself, similar to the participants, and finding resources to support finding joy. The opportunity to share professional development resources with the participants was important as they all sought community and validation.

Conclusion

The research study confirmed prior research related to Black women in higher education, connected mid-level leadership within administrative positions to SWS, identified unique findings of levels of resistance and need for self-care in the study, and emphasized the potential implications for higher education institutions and the attrition of Black women into senior-level leadership positions. The superwoman schema was evident throughout the narratives from the participants. Overall, the superwoman schema impacted participants' experiences and responses within the context of historically white institutions. While there were some characteristics within the schema that were not addressed in participant's narratives, a majority of the characteristics were addressed and were highlighted throughout the themes and subthemes. Participants identified feeling insignificant, silenced, ignored, and undervalued. In their identities of being Black, a woman, and a mid-level leader, participants were intentional about using resistance methods to counter the superwoman schema. Participants were aware of their emotions, exhausted from external pressures to succeed without the proper resources, and committed to the preservation of self and survival. There was consistency in their need to help others and they had a commitment to preserve the Black community, while also finding community for themselves.

Eight out of the ten participants had obtained or were pursuing terminal degrees. While participants did not specifically share in their narratives why they pursued their degrees, they did utilize research to invalidate the questioning of their credibility and identified the degree provided respect from colleagues. The education of Black women counters the stories told about Black women in predominantly white spaces (Smith et al., 2011).

The White-dominant, patriarchal higher institution served as a backdrop for participants' experiences and had an impact on participants' resistant responses as there was emphasis on the liberation of themselves, others, and oppressive systems. Institutions will need to be a part of the collective effort to support, protect, and liberate Black women in higher education institutions. In order for higher education institutions to not see a great reckoning or exodus from Black women leaders, they should consider a movement toward equity and care.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Questions

1. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWIs?

2. How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs?

RECORD

Interview Questions

Rapport Building

- Introduction Question: Please tell me about yourself. How long have you been in higher education? What is your current role in higher education? What were your previous roles?

Role as a Black woman in higher education

- Tell me about your experience as a Black woman in higher education.
- What has been your experience being a Black woman working at a historically white institution?

Mid-Level Leadership

- What is your experience as a mid-level leader in a historically white higher education institution?
    - Elaborate on any organizational decision-making negotiations/choices you had to make in your current position.
    - How do you perceive your role as a mid-level leader in a HWI?

Experience with Superwoman Schema

- What is your definition of Superwoman Schema?
    - How did you learn about it?
    - Please describe ways it is beneficial and ways it may be a liability.
- Can you tell me an example of when you have experienced SWS at work? How did you manage it?
- What are your thoughts on or the use of the term superwoman schema? beneficial or hindrance?
- Are there resistance tools that you utilize?

Experience with Superwoman Schema, Responses, and Leadership

- How has the superwoman schema impacted how you lead? your leadership approach?

- In the context of mid-level leadership and working at a historically white institution, can you describe ways the expectations and assumptions of SWS impacted how you lead?
- What did it feel like to have to navigate both strength and leadership?
- What do you do for self-care as you are managing the superwoman schema?

Summary Question

- What else would you like to share that would help me understand Black women in mid-level leadership positions and the Superwoman Schema?
- What advice would you give Black women aspiring to be in your position and navigating the superwoman schema?
- At this point, what does career advancement look like to you and what steps are you taking?
- What advice would you give to HWI upper administration on how to engage Black women mid-level leaders?

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: "The Experiences of Black Women Administrators in Mid-Level Leadership Navigating the Superwoman Schema"
Principal Investigator: Kimberly D. Turner, University of North Carolina Charlotte
Co-investigator: Dr. Ryan A. Miller, Associate Professor of Higher Education; Dr. Cathy D. Howell, Clinical Assistant Professor
Study Sponsor: N/A

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 study is to explore the lived experiences of Black women mid-level higher education administrators/leaders and how they navigate the superwoman schema.

- We are asking participants to self-identify as Black, a woman, in a mid-level higher education administrative position, and works at a four-year historically White institution. They will respond to interview protocol questions about their experiences and response to dealing with the superwoman schema.
- Participants will engage in a demographic form, which should take about 15 minutes, to determine eligibility. Once participants are selected, they will be contacted via email for a 60-90 minute interview via Zoom. At the conclusion of the participant interviews, you will be sent the transcript for confirmation of accuracy.
- Some of the questions we'll ask you are personal and sensitive. For example, we'll ask you about times when you have experienced the superwoman schema at work or times you have experienced racism, sexism or gender discrimination. These questions are personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. You will not personally benefit from taking part in this research, but our study results may help us better understand how Black women in mid-level positions lead while navigating the superwoman schema.

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?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of Black women mid-level higher education administrators and how they navigate the superwoman schema, while leading at historically white institutions.

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

You are being asked to be in this study because you self-identify as Black, a woman, in a mid-level higher education administrative position, and works at a four-year historically white institution.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to participate, you will complete this consent form and demographic survey asking for race, gender, an open space to add additional salient identities, their role, their supervisor's role, size of campus, type of campus, and a brief description of the superwoman schema. On the last page of the demographic survey, there will be a list of superwoman schema characteristics for participants to align with by checking off the ones they have experienced. This information will be utilized to determine the participants who best fit the study. The researcher will choose individuals who have selected at least five characteristics and whose role, supervisor role, and campus size/type vary on a first come, first serve basis. The researcher's contact information will be available if you have questions about the possibility of participation.

If you are selected, you'll receive an email inviting you to take part in the interview part of this study. The email will include several interview days/times for you to select from. Once a day/time is selected, you will be sent a Zoom link. The interviews will be approximately 60-90 minutes and will be recorded. Your total time commitment if you participate in this study will be 120-150 minutes (approximately 2 hours); 20 minutes for the demographic survey, 60-90 minutes for the interview, and 40 minutes to review the transcript for validation.

What are the benefits of this study?

You will not benefit directly from being in this study. Others might benefit because it is important to understand the associations between Black women mid-level leaders and the superwoman schema to help their supervisors interrogate their personal interactions and perspectives, as well as professional practices with their Black women colleagues. The study can also be used to provide tips to Black women in higher education who aspire to be in a mid-level position. The study will also inform retention and advancement practices of Black women professionals by making institutional leaders aware of tips to utilize and make systemic changes.

What risks might I experience?

The questions we'll ask you are personal and sensitive. There is a possible psychological stress associated with the study. For example, we'll ask you about what it feels like to navigate both strength and leadership or advice would you give to upper administration on how to engage Black women mid-level leaders. You might experience some mild emotional discomfort when answering these questions. We do not expect this risk to be common and you may choose to skip questions you do not want to answer.

While the goal is always to do no harm, the researcher will collaborate with you when potentially retraumatizing incidents related to microaggressions or pressures arise. As you engage in storytelling, negative thoughts and feelings may come up. If you were to exhibit distress during the interview, I will stop and ask if you would like a moment or to cancel your participation in the interview. At the end of the interview, I will provide a resource and networking opportunities for Black women in higher education. The resource will have a list of networking opportunities, upcoming webinars, and professional development related to the superwoman schema and/or Black women in higher education, such as the African American Knowledge community and African American Women's Summit within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).

How will my information be protected?

You are asked to provide your email address as part of this study. We will use your email address to contact you to set up interviews. To protect your privacy (identity), we'll assign a study ID code to your interview responses. Once we do this, we'll delete the email address from the interview responses so the responses will only have the study ID code. While the study is active, all data will be stored in a password-protected University drive that can be accessed by the primary researcher. Only the research team will have routine access to the study data. However, other people with approval from the Investigator, may need to see the information we collect about you, including people who work for UNC-Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

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

After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?

You will not receive an incentive for taking part in this study.

What other choices do I have if I don't take part in this study?

If you express a desire to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time, your request will be respected. You will not need to provide a specific reason.

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?

For questions about this research, you may contact Kim Turner, <email address redacted>, <phone number redacted> or Dr. Ryan Miller, <email address redacted>.

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 Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

_____

Name (PRINT)

_____

Signature Date

_____

Name & Signature of person obtaining consent Date

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study is to investigate the lived experiences of Black women mid-level higher education administrators and how they navigate the superwoman schema (Abrams et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombe et al., 2016), while leading at historically white institutions (Husband, 2016).

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. Do you self-identify as a Black woman? Yes or No
2. Please add any other salient identities: _____
3. Position/Title: _____
4. Position of your supervisor: _____
5. How long have you worked in higher education? More than 5 years / Less than 5 years
   Enter number of years
6. Do you supervise at least one professional staff member? Yes or No
7. Is your institution a four-year, historically white institution? Yes or No
8. Institution Type: *Select all that apply*
   a. Liberal Arts
   b. Research
   c. Arts college
   d. For-Profit
   e. Single-Sex College
   f. Religiously Affiliated
   g. Public
   h. Private
   i. Small (<5,000)
   j. Medium (5,000-15,000)
   k. Large (15,000>)
9. Do you self-identify as experiencing the superwoman role? Yes or No

NEXT PAGE

10. Check which characteristics align with your experiences.

- Obligation to manifest strength
- Obligation to suppress emotions
- Resistance to being vulnerable or dependent
- Determination to succeed despite limited resources
- Obligation to help others
- Historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping or oppression
- Lessons from foremothers to be self-sufficient
- A past personal history of disappointment, mistreatment, or abuse
- Embody spiritual values
- Commitment to the preservation of the Black family/community
- Commitment to preservation of self and survival
- Identified strain in interpersonal relationships
- Stress-related health behaviors (ex: emotional eating, smoking, dysfunctional sleep patterns, and postponement of self-care).
- Embodiment of stress (examples: migraines, hair loss, panic attacks, weight gain, and depression)

APPENDIX D: LINKS AMONG RQS, FRAMEWORK, AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, and Protocol Questions

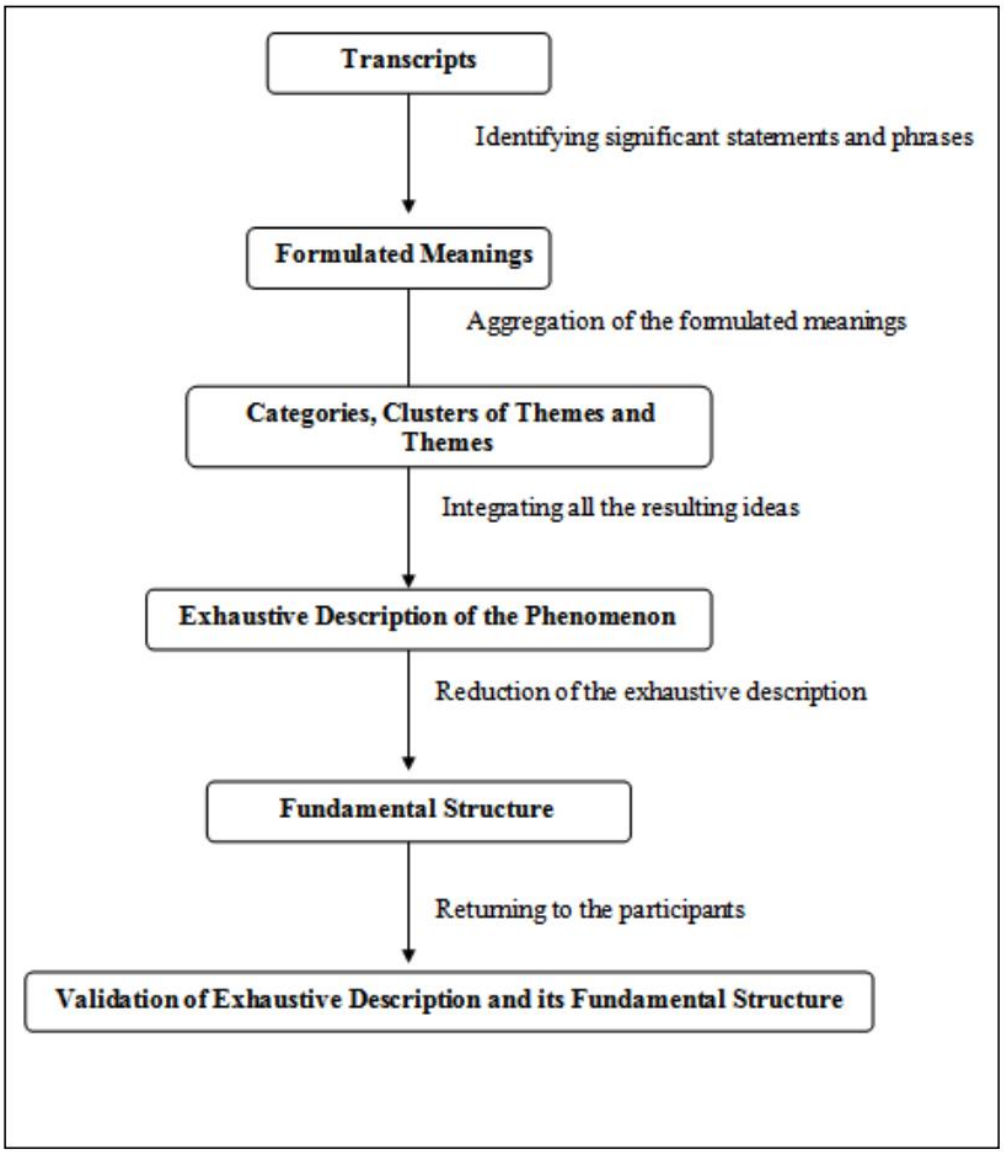
Research Questions	Theoretical Framework	Interview Questions (how do your RQ's align?)	Data Analysis (how will you analyze that speaks to your theoretical framework?)
How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators experience the superwoman schema at HWIs?	Black Feminist Theory Critical Race Theory	What has been your experience being a Black woman working at a historically white institution? What is your experience as a mid-level leader in a historically white higher education institution? What is your definition of Superwoman Schema construct? Black Feminist Theory: What are your thoughts on the use or term superwoman schema? Is it beneficial or a liability?	Identify codes and themes that speak to specific experiences of Black women BFT: identify different but overlapping experiences based on Black women's salient identities; experiences with community CRT: review for counterstories, identify systemic racism and sexism in stories
How do Black women mid-level higher education administrators respond to the superwoman schema at HWIs? **Table** (cont'd.)	Black Feminist Theory Critical Race Theory	How do you make organizational decision making negotiations/choices you had to make in your current position? Can you tell me about a time when you have	Identify codes and themes that speak to specific responses of to SWS BFT: images that emerge from BFT; advocating for their

		experienced SWS at work? How did you manage it? CRT: Are there resistance tools you utilize regarding SWS? In the context of mid-level leadership and working at a historically white institution, can you describe ways the expectations and assumptions of the superwoman schema have impacted how you lead? What did it feel like to have to navigate both strength and leadership? What do you do for self-care as you are managing the superwoman schema?	own liberation; resistance CRT: making the connection to rest and resistance; connection to historical enslavement and oppression; how systems of racism impact Black women in success in higher education

APPENDIX E: CODES USED IN THE STUDY

A. Allyship/Advocacy from Others
B. Alone/Isolation
C. Being everything for everyone/Othermothering
D. Questioned/Convincing credibility/Trust me/Listen to Us
E. External pressure – Former Generations, HWI
F. Fixer, More than Job/ Job Never Done, Can't make mistakes
G. Generational Freedom: Next Generation, Expectations of Former Generations, Community with other Black women
H. Internal pressure – Imposter Syndrome
I. Layered Identities
J. Mental Gymnastics – Check Tone/Masking
K. Opportunities – No professional development trainings, Not given higher level opportunities; Not at Table, Lack of Compensation; Put us in the Room, Leaving Higher Ed
L. No feelings: Can't be soft
M. Production; More than what can produce
N. Protection of Self – Speak Up/Voice, Release of SWS/things that do not serve Reassurance/Reminder
O. Resilience
P. Resistance – Clothes, Bodies, Saying No, Voice, Hair, Time, Health, Change the Culture
Q. Self-care: Therapy, Find Community, Joy
R. Silenced; Try to Change culture
S. Supervision Style: Expect excellence, transparency, wellness and care

APPENDIX F: DESCRIPTIVE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS



Source: Colaizzi (1978).

APPENDIX G: MEMBER-CHECKING EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Subject: Superwoman Schema Post-Interview Validation and Transcript Check

Dear Study Participant,

I hope this message finds you well. I would like to send sincere appreciation for participating in my dissertation study. I know it has been some time, however, to ensure credibility I would like to have your feedback on the interview result.

I have attached the transcript of your interview. To protect your identity and to ensure confidentiality, I assigned you a pseudonym that aligns with a strong Black woman historically or personally to me. I have also included an exhaustive description of the study. Please review and let me know if it seems to be accurate. Feel free to make corrections, suggestions or comments as you see fit. Please respond by Thursday, February 22, 2024. If I do not hear from you by then, I will assume that the transcript and description correctly reflects what you shared with me.

I have also attached a list of resources that may be beneficial on your journey within higher education. It includes conferences, books, and videos specifically for Black women in higher education and navigating the superwoman schema.

I truly appreciate you for everything.

Best,

Kim Turner
Doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

APPENDIX H: RESOURCES

Webinars/Videos:

- Therapy for Black Girls - Session 293: Black Women & The Superwoman Schema
- What is the Superwoman Schema? | It's Dangerous to be a strong black woman?

Books:

- "I'm Not Yelling: A Black Woman's Guide to Navigating the Workplace": Elizabeth Leiba
- #BLACKOUT - Real Issues and Real Solutions to Real Challenges Facing Black Student Affairs Professionals - Quiana Stone
- The Table: Stories from Black Women in Student Affairs

Conferences:

- NASPA Ujima Institute: Designed for African American and Black higher education professionals who aspire to senior student affairs officer roles and faculty positions. Dates: October 3-5, 2024
- Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE): Support for Black women in the higher education community who need a variety of resources and networks to foster their professional development and advocacy of their presence and prosperity in the academy.
    - Previous National Conference: October 11-13, 2023, Philadelphia, PA. The theme is "Forty-Five Years of Reflections: Unlimited Lessons for the Future."

Support Groups:

- NASPA Black Diaspora Knowledge Community

APPENDIX I: EXAMPLE OF THE THEME: "ECHO OF AFFIRMATIONS"

"Echo of Affirmations"

Theme	Sub-Themes	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statements
Echo of Affirmations (Mattering) Description: In their identities of being Black, a woman, and a mid-level leader, participants identified a desire to manifest the feeling of being significant, heard, seen, and valued.	"I Matter"	Participants identified the exhausting, dualistic need to constantly reassure themselves and remind others that they are enough based on the pressures of the external environment, or HWI.	*"I wish there was an opportunity for organizations to understand what we go through. Right? It's so hard when you feel like in some ways, you're going through it alone, right?"* (Henrietta: B) *"I have to constantly reassure people of myself, of my ability. You know certain spaces they have dropped off my credential, and I'm like 'you need to put that doctor in front.'"* (Audre: D, O) "So if you really want to try it, you can go right ahead. I will give you the smoke you want." (Maya: L, N, S) *"But I think there's been more strategy, the more I recognize how whiteness works, as I've navigated my career, so no longer is it, "I'm happy to be a Black body in this room,' More of it is, 'why am I the only Black body in this room, and you will listen to me in my Black body in this room.'"* (Gabrielle: Q)
	Mirroring Matter	In mirroring their personal expectations, participants reminded and reassured others that they are enough through their supervisees and the next generation of Black women	*"I actually give my staff more. You know, because I don't want them to be that way. I talk about self care, often, I remind them that they need to take care of themselves.* (Francesca: M, N, R, T)

			"But again, no one's going to look
			out for you like you look out for yourself...you gotta be your own Trap Queen." (Mattie: G, N, R) *"Sometimes for them (students), you have to be able to show them that I know what the system is gonna do, I know how it works. I know what you're feeling. But you can keep going. Because you can keep going, I can keep going, you know, we can keep doing this. And so you're trying to be the example, literally, you know, stepping into that othermothering role."* (Audre: C, F, O)
	"Who Tells Me I Matter?"	Participants searched for a community to remind them that their work and person was needed and valued in a white, patriarchal society and HWI.	*"I think one thing that's been helpful for me, I mean, it's the relationships, right? Like I feel like I have a Sponsor and a Mentor."* (Rosa: A, O, R) *"But even they (students) helped me when I'm starting to feel stressed, they'll be like, 'Hey, we haven't seen you in a while', 'where are you at', or whatnot. Or I'll come in and there will just happen to be a cup of tea at my desk, or whatever".* (Audre: O, R)

APPENDIX J: EXAMPLE OF THE THEME: "PROTECT THE ALCHEMIST"

"Protect the Alchemist"

Theme	Sub-Themes	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statements
Protect the Alchemist Description: The need for Black women's mind, body, and souls to be protected as the trio are used to profit the institution.	Tending the Soil (Soul)	Participants discussed the lack of regard from the institution and how they battled internal approaches and responses through coping mechanisms	*"I make sure that the delivery and how I convey the message, you know, I even though even if I, you know, if I wanted to convey. I have to make sure that doesn't come across, in a way, in a tone, in a way that, that it would, it would misrepresent, you know, who I am or what I'm trying to do."* (Henrietta: H, J)
	Planting Seeds without the Benefits of the Harvest	Participants expressed only desired for what they can produce and there is an expectation for them to go above and beyond without reaping the reward/benefit.	*"You want my presents, but not my presence."* (Francesca: M) *"Some of these PWIs, you know, there there's a reason some of us are not at a certain levels is because they're expecting us to go go go go go all the time, or whatnot, or we need to take on all this weight without compensation or whatnot."* (Audre: F, K)
	Armored Survival	Participants described the need to build an armor to protect themselves from the system they are trapped in.	*"There's still so much of it that I just hate and dislike, and, and I think, for me, because I do have a voice that I choose to use, I'm either the enemy of the state, or I'm loved, you know, and so that is an exhausting thing to navigate."* *(Dorothy: E, N)*

APPENDIX K: EXAMPLE OF THE THEME: "KALEIDOSCOPE OF LIBERATION"

"Kaleidoscope of Liberation"

Theme	Sub-Themes	Formulated Meaning	Significant Statements
Kaleidoscope of Freedom/ Liberation Liberation of self, others, and oppressive systems through resistance.	Unraveling the Paradox	Participants were intentional about finding ways to counter SWS and its liabilities, not only for themselves but for others as well.	*"So yeah, I wear my Black, you know, Research-Her T-shirts or, you know, et al cite hat, you know, not sight, like, s-i-g-h-t, but c-i-t-e, like cite me or you know, I have locks, I pierced my nose, I wear the funky glasses or whatnot, sneakers to work, because they are conversation starters with my students, then I'm stepping into who I am, my assuredness of who I am as a Black woman."* (Audre: O, Q) *"And that to me would be very meaningful in my life, right, to, to yeah, just to educate those who are moving up, right, our generation or future generations I want to, I want to support and help them where I can."* (Henrietta: G)
	Collective Liberation	Participants recognized change and freedom will take a collective effort by Black women arming each other and the next generation, as well as support from their institution.	"*Black women know survival before they know liberation."* (Gabrielle: F, G)
	Equity Emancipated	Participants shared a desire to change the culture despite institutional resistance and to have their voices heard.	*"It's the goal to like, advocate, create visibility, and care. Are we all there? That seems like the more liberating thing, not who did it, how, and why."* (Gabrielle: N, Q)