

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: BARRIERS TO  
HIGHER EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE RURAL  
SOUTH

by

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## ABSTRACT

STACEY Y. BARBER. Social Capital and access to higher education: Barriers to higher education for African-American women in the rural South. (Under the direction of DR. LISA R. MERRIWEATHER)

The researcher conducted a qualitative interview study that identified barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South. The research questions were (1) What is the role of social capital in the accessibility of higher education for African-American females in the rural South? (2) How does social context impact accessibility to higher education? Eight African-American women ranging in age from 18-30, residing in rural southern communities in South Carolina who had some college credits but were no longer pursuing a post-secondary degree or had not completed any college credits leading to an associate's or bachelor's degree participated in the study. Three themes representing commonalities of barriers to higher education for African-American women living in the rural south were developed from the data. The commonalities were (a) sense of belonging: familiarity and "not a good fit"; (b) nature of relationships; and (c) isolation and lack of opportunity: neighborhood/environment and self-identity/self-esteem/self-awareness. Social capital played a significant role in access to higher education for the participants. The findings of the study revealed decreased higher education social capital impacted access to higher education. Positive and influential social connections were imperative to increasing social capital and access to higher education. Rurality created a sense of spatial and psychological distance leading to decreased social capital that in turn limited opportunities for accessing college.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

I grew up in a rural southern community where K-12 level education was somewhat of the norm but higher education was rarely, if at all, viewed as an option. Working in the textile industry or as a manual laborer was commonplace. My family's story illustrates this. Though my father, a WWII veteran and honorable Buffalo Soldier of the 92nd Infantry, born in 1921, successfully obtained a Master's degree, none of his eight siblings attended school beyond the seventh grade, which was the highest level of education offered in the rural area where he grew up. To obtain a high school education, students had to go to the city. However, public transportation was not available and the city was too far away to walk or go by wagon each day. Fortunately for my dad, his older brother lived in the city and offered him the opportunity to attend high school in the city and live with him. My grandparents supported my dad's move to the city because they recognized in the long run his education would benefit the entire family. Opportunity and desire contributed to my dad's opportunity to obtain his high school diploma and further his education in spite of the barriers.

My mother, born in 1932, also desired to seek an education beyond seventh grade, yet she confronted even more barriers to obtaining her goal: poverty, farm work, lack of educational support, and gender. My mother was born during the Great Depression. She had 12 siblings. Poverty defined their upbringing. Survival, meeting basic needs, was the priority of her family. Education was last on the list of priorities. For the early part of my mother's life, sharecropping, picking cotton, and/or harvesting tobacco, was the only means of survival. All, including the children, were expected to use their hands—not their heads—to do work, to help sustain the family. Nothing took precedence when it was time to pick cotton or harvest tobacco, not even education. My mother and all of her

siblings had to pull their weight on the farm to enable the family to survive. Wanting or needing an education was never important enough to excuse any of the children from their duties on the farm, which typically lasted from sun-up to sundown. My mother, like her other siblings, would be so far behind when they did return to school that after a while the feeling of never being able to catch up resulted in all of her siblings including herself eventually quitting school.

Perhaps because neither of my mother's parents or grandparents graduated from high school, there was a lack of educational support for my mother to do so. The highest level of education obtained by her parents was third grade and no education was received by her grandparents. Unlike my father, my mother was never encouraged to go to school to make a better living for herself because the short-term need for food outweighed the long-term benefits that an education could bring my mother later on in her life. This coupled with my mother's female gendered identity created insurmountable challenges. African-American females were viewed and treated as socially and culturally insignificant, especially in the South. African-American females in the rural South continue to exist within a unique socio-cultural context. It is this context that frames my interest. This dissertation seeks to better understand the barriers to higher education within the rural African-American community for women.

#### Subjectivity Statement

I have always desired to make a difference in the world and have aspired to make a difference on a consistent basis. I have a Bachelor's of Arts degree in Sociology and a Master's degree in Community and Adult Programs in Education. The history of my parents, family, and ancestors provided my motivation to seek out and attain higher levels of education. Additionally, my family instilled the importance of an education and

encouraged me to go to college to make a better life for myself. Encouragement was key. I was never forced to do anything that I did not have the desire to do. My parents encouraged me by outlining the advantages to furthering my education and the consequences and potential struggle that may exist if I did not go to college.

I appreciate that not everyone receives encouragement and support to pursue higher education. My concern is that this and other barriers still exist for many within the rural African-American female community. Some face similar barriers to education that my parents who were born in 1921 and 1932 did. This chapter outlines the problem of inaccessibility to higher education for African-American women in the rural South that was explored in this study.

#### Statement of the Problem

Throughout US history, there has been a significant presence of African-Americans in the South. According to Kusimo (1998), demographic data indicate that at the end of the 20th century 53% of the African-American population lived in the South. 91% of this population lived in the rural South; particularly the Black Belt South where poverty is more common than any other US region. This is a trend that has continued in the 21st century. According to the 2010 Census, 55% of African-Americans in the US reside in the South. One hundred and five counties in the South have an African-American make-up of 50 % or greater. Across the southern landscape, the Housing Assistance Council (2012) reported that 9 out of 10 African-Americans live in rural areas in the South, particularly the Black Belt, which includes the states of North Carolina and South Carolina.

Kusimo also reported that the 1990 census showed that 54% of all rural African-Americans age 25 or older living in the Black Belt South did not have high school

diplomas. The 2010 Census reports that 87% of African-Americans between the ages of 25-34 received high school diplomas, 52.9% received some college, 32.4% acquired an associate's degree or higher and 22.5% obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. When compared to the statistics from the 2010 Census regarding educational attainment for whites, there is a clear disparity. Ninety-three percent of Whites received a high school diploma, 59.2% gained some college, 42.8% earned an associate's degree or more and 32.8% graduated with a bachelor's degree or more. Africans-Americans continue to lag in educational attainment in comparison to whites. In viewing the state of educational attainment in former years,

Rural African-Americans age 25 to 34 had the least educational attainment in both 1980 and 1990 when compared with urban Blacks and both urban and rural whites....They had the lowest proportion of college graduates (6.1 percent, down nearly 2 percentage points from 1980), and the highest proportion of young adults who had not completed high school [29.4%]. (Butler, 1997, p. 1)

Koichich (2014) found that students in rural areas were less likely to enroll in college than students in metropolitan areas. In addition, longitudinal analyses demonstrate that rural areas fall behind urban areas in adults attending college and receiving college degrees. According to the Economic Research Service (2015), adults living in urban areas, who had obtained at best a bachelor's degree, increased from 26 to 33 % from 2000 to 2015. In contrast, for rural areas the percentage for adults obtaining bachelor's degrees had less growth, from 15 % to 19 %.

Historically, the job market for the rural South consisted of manual labor, such as tenant farming or the textile industry, which was the better paying trade and led to a better quality of life. Generations of African-American families living in the rural south

worked in the textile industry. As a result, they were able to take care of and provide for their families. Limited education nor formal education was necessarily needed to acquire jobs in the textile industry. The manual labor areas of the textile industry were routine and physical. If individuals were able to follow the routine and physically keep up with the work, jobs in the textile industry were readily available (Wimberley, 2010). However, due to change in the textile industry, jobs were lost resulting in families, particularly African-American families, struggling to provide for even the most basic needs. While many jobs disappeared completely as manufacturing jobs were automated and shifted overseas, new opportunities emerged. The job industry shift, which included clerical, banking, or office administration jobs, required additional education and attaining a high school diploma or higher education became a necessity (Wimberley, 2010).

The shift in the job industry impacted many across the rural South requiring occupational adjustments and need to participate in the job market differently. As a result, the roles of women in the rural South, changed from homemakers, stay-at-home mothers, childcare providers, and volunteering to that of gainful employment (Lease, 2003). The change in the textile industry shifted women from the traditional role of being home to acquiring jobs in the city or in the area because the primary source of income through textile work often held by the males in the household were no longer viable. This was particularly the case for African-American women (OECD, 2015). The options for rural women included working in a nearby town or city, or acquiring domestic jobs such as housecleaning to assist with economic resources for the family. Jobs in the city required transportation and could become expensive for families. Because public transportation was not readily available in rural areas, working in a nearby town or city was not a viable option for most. Leaving the area and moving to the city became one

option for families, which resulted in migration from the rural South to more urban areas (Harrison, 1991). The other option was to remain in the rural area even though jobs in the rural areas increasingly required some form of higher education such as technical education or a college degree. Often times when jobs are lost or a career ends, many have no choice but to return to school.

The African-American women who opted to stay in the rural area faced unique challenges: finding work and childcare options, health concerns, low educational attainment and a lack of public infrastructure such as transportation all of which resulted in increased poverty. According to *Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative for Economic & Social Injustice* (SRBWI) (Mason, 2015), “the poverty rate for households headed by single, Black mothers in the rural counties studied is three times higher than households headed by white women with children, at 61 percent and 20.6 percent respectively” (p. 6). In addition, among the women studied by SRBWI, black women were three times less likely than white women to complete high school. For instance in Clay County, Georgia, Mason, 2015 found that 36% African-American women had not acquired a high school education in comparison to 8% of white women in the county.

Further due to these working class families working varied shift hours in rural areas or commuting long-distances to work, parental involvement in regards to academics was impaired. Parental involvement is essential for academic success (NEA, 2008). Having parents and families involved in the overall health and academic achievement of students helps to ensure a path to higher education. It helps to build social capital, which is a system of connections relative to networks between people who reside together and have jobs together in the same area, which attributes to their level of function within society (Putnam, 2000). However, low social capital can have the opposite effect on

accessing higher education. Given the pivotal role African-American women play as caretakers to their children and given the known correlation between mother's educational attainment and their children's (Baum & Payea 2005), it is critical to better understand what impedes African-American women in the rural South from entering higher education. Low social capital in the Black Belt South, inclusive of limited opportunities for network and sufficient paying jobs, has contributed to slow or little progress and economic advancement for the area (Gibbs, 2003).

Acknowledging the present state of the education of African-Americans, a trend of under education continues. For many African-Americans in the rural South returning to school or completing high school was elusive. For some, the opportunity to be educated never existed, was never offered, or was offered in the poorest and most mediocre form. Returning to school or going back to school as an adult was not thought of or not easily accessible. Accessibility refers to not only getting to the building, but developing the mindset and identity of being an adult learner. Social capital can be a facilitator for breaking down barriers. Putnam's (2000) concept of bridging social capital refers to social interactions and connections outside of a person's normal day-to-day social interactions. Bridging social capital enhances opportunities that propel favorable circumstances to acquiring success (Clopton, 2011). While we know about completion rates, Benshoff (2006) states little is known about the experiences in higher education of African-Americans in the rural South. Further because African-American rural women are not a highly researched group, even less is known about their experiences.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South. The research questions for this study are:

- 1) What is the role of social capital in the accessibility of higher education for African-American females in the rural South?
- 2) How does social context impact accessibility to higher education?

### Significance

This study has theoretical and practical significance. There is limited research on African-American women in the rural south and their access to higher education. This study adds to the literature on access to higher education and the barriers that may prevent access to higher education for this population. Providing insight to further access of higher education to African-American women living in the rural South and an understanding of why access is not present are unique contributions of this study. In addition, this study highlights the value of increasing social capital in rural communities. Increase in social capital affords the possibilities of stronger networks and venturing outside of rural isolation to further enhance the desire to attend and increase accessibility to resources to obtain access to higher education.

This study seeks to provide a voice to the needs of African-American women from rural areas in the South for higher education administrators by providing contextualized knowledge of this population. By identifying individual perceptions of barriers held by African-American women in a rural context, colleges and universities will have a clearer understanding regarding what their specific needs are, which can lead to the development of intentional institutional strategies for recruitment and retention.



The goal of this exploration of barriers to obtaining higher education for African-American women in the rural South is to support work to reduce such barriers and open doors for the opportunity to successfully overcome these barriers by supporting college and university diversity offices to create action plans to reduce barriers for this population of potential students. Reducing barriers will support women from the rural south access opportunities to go to college and prepare their children and future generations to do the same. Because higher levels of education are linked to financial success and a better way of life (Baum & Payea 2005), understanding more about barriers to higher education for African-American women in the rural south has the potential to improve their socio-economic outcomes. Furthering the education of parents and providing access to higher education significantly impacts the education of their children, which can improve the overall education for the community.

#### Theoretical Framework

As stated by Jewel Amoah (1997) the importance of theory should not be dismissed for theory is the key to growth and development in any discipline (p. 85). Black Feminist Thought is the theoretical framework for this study. Black Feminist Thought was used as a catalyst to provide insight and purpose regarding the experiences of African-American rural women and their plight to accessing higher education.

#### Methodology

This qualitative study uses a phenomenological approach, conducting interviews to study the phenomenon of experiencing barriers to higher education faced by African-American women that live in the rural South.

#### Limitations of the Study

1. Generalizability.

2. Participants may not understand the questions.

#### Delimitations of the Study

1. Participants resided in the rural South from birth.
2. Participants identified as African-American women.
3. Participants' ages were between 18 years old - 30 years old.

#### Assumptions

1. It was assumed that participants would honestly respond to the interview questions.
2. It was assumed that all participants would answer the interview questions.
3. It was assumed that participants would be able to clearly identify their barriers to higher education.

#### Summary

There is limited research on access to higher education for African-American women living in rural communities in the South. Further research is needed to clearly identify barriers and perceptions of barriers to higher education. The researcher completed a study to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South. By identifying individual perceptions of barriers, colleges and universities will have a clearer understanding regarding the needs of this population relative to accessibility of higher education.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature referencing African-American women and higher education. The literature review will include a discussion of the history of African-American women in higher education, African-American women's motivation to attend college, barriers to higher education faced by African-American women, and social capital in higher education. The purpose of the study is to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South. The research questions for this study are:

- 1) What is the role of social capital in the accessibility of higher education for African-American females in the rural South?
- 2) How does social context impact accessibility to higher education?

### Theoretical Framework

This research study utilizes Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework for this inquiry. Black Feminist Thought will be used as a catalyst to provide insight into the experiences of African-American women and their plight to access higher education.

The concept of Black Feminist Thought is attributed to Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) describes Black Feminist Thought as professing the progressive influence of African-American women as ambassadors of intellect and awareness. Intellect is described by Webster's Dictionary (2018) as capability of the mind and is the consumption of various forms of information with the skill set of deciphering truth from propaganda. As ambassadors, African-American women provide an intelligent perspective of learning and understanding events and situations. As African-Americans in a European -American culture, African-American

women embody a historical perspective and rationale when resolving issues and raising awareness. The key components Collins uses to describe Black Feminist Thought are outsider-within, intellectual activism, matrix of domination, controlling images, and self-definition.

Outsider-within is a term uniquely characterized by Collins (2010) to describe the experiences of black women who worked domestic jobs. These women had an exclusive and inside view of first-class White Americans. Outsider within also provides an exclusive outlook surrounding social, political, intellectual, and economic truths as experienced by black women (p. 12). Intellectual activism (p.3), a term coined by Collins, is essential to the progression of Black Feminist Thought. She further propels that reclamation of “black feminist intellectual traditions” (p. 17) is the main component in the foundation of intellectual activism, which Collins defines as the numerous approaches that people can partake in by using the influence and effectiveness of their ideas in service to social justice.

Matrix of domination is used to describe how the junctions of oppression are systematically arranged. Collins (2000) identifies the matrix of domination in four domains: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The structural domain focuses on formulation of power and oppression. The disciplinary domain regulates oppression in an effort to maintain it. The hegemonic domain operates to justify oppression and the interpersonal domain rules persons’ communications and awareness. Despite the fact that black women are embedded in the matrix of domination, the variation in the avenues of oppression provide different perspectives and experiences. According to Collins (2000) in the United States and Western society, theories of knowledge within social institutions establish the prevalent knowledge validation process

through two interrelated parts. Collins (2000) states scholars and professionals place emphasis on distinct interests and credentialing processes, where their proposed expertise must satisfy the contextual basis of the theoretical framework. Collins (2000) indicates that this group's interests are reflected by the knowledge validation processes of elite White men, as they are often in control of, or major contributors to, this enterprise. Collins (2000) further interjects that while these processes and epistemologies are designed to establish and protect the interests of White men, they do not necessarily need to be managed by White men. Other groups of individuals, such as White women or African-American men and women, can be enlisted to accomplish making the connections between the power relations and establishing true factors. Furthermore, some White men do not accept these power relations and revolt against suggested ideals (Collins, 2000).

The focal point of controlling images is negative stereotypical portrayals and images of black women (Collins, 2000). The fight to dispel images hurtful to the reputation of African-American women is imperative. The persistence of Black feminists is driven by the desire to rid society of deplorable perceptions and stereotypes of African-American women such as the Mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire (Collins, 2000; King, 2015). "The power to name one's own reality" (Collins, 2000, p. 300) is the description used by Collins (2000) for the term self-definition. Defiance of controlling images by black women is a major facet of embracing self-definition.

The aforementioned is inclusive of intersectionality in reference to negativity that African-American women face. Intersectionality is a term that is unfamiliar to many, however, it focuses on how multiple forms of discrimination exists and intersect for individual people (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1989) explains that intersectionality is a

merger of discrimination of African-American women on the basis of race and sex. That is, discrimination against African-American women is not based just on race or just on sex. It stems from the intersection of both parts of their identities. Crenshaw further elaborates that references to race or sex discrimination is inclusive of all groups; not just a particular group.

Black Feminist Thought provides a platform for black women and centers the perspectives of black women (Collins, 2000). Black Feminist Thought is empowering and additionally provides an outlet and view of Black women's perceptions and commonalities that cross different characteristics of the individual and collective struggle. Black women have been oppressed for a long time. Black women encounter similar challenges despite age, sexual orientation, social class, region, or religion. They have been denied the opportunities or have had the opportunity to educate themselves weakened or stolen; particularly with the issue of higher education and institutions of higher learning (Zamani, 2003). Voices of strength, power, and intellect are needed to overcome the institution of oppression (Branch, 2011).

#### African-American Educational History

John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom* (1994) makes a compelling case that since its inception in 1821, public education in the United States of America has never been equal. African-Americans throughout time experienced educational disparity across all levels of education. During enslavement, African-Americans were denied the right to learn to read and write and it was against the law to formally educate them because education would have threatened the institution of slavery. Slaves were not considered human; they were property. Their basic rights as human beings were non-existent. In 1865 slavery was abolished throughout the United States, yet the right and

privilege to freedom as an American citizen was a far cry from reality for African-Americans. Being educated and knowing how to read was a dream for former slaves. A college education was a mere fantasy and out of reach for most.

In 1865, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands was established during the Reconstruction Era by Congress to assist former slaves in the South by providing food and shelter and establishing schools. The Bureau later became known as the Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau was not able to be as successful as intended due to lack of financial resources, racism, politics, and subversive efforts. The Bureau was dissolved in 1872 by Congress due to tension and demands from the South (Lowe, 1993).

#### African-Americans and the Law

The 1869 State of Virginia Constitution provided for the first public school education system. The schools were segregated by class. Black students and poor white students attended school together. Although inadequately funded, it provided a means of education for newly freed slaves and poor whites who did not have access to formal education. Post Civil War, according to Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009), of the four million freed slaves only 28 held a bachelor's degree from colleges within the U.S.

Reconstruction ended in 1877 and a mass exodus of African-Americans to the North occurred in the following decades (Franklin, 1994). African-Americans were seeking to escape Southern racism and venture into a better life in the North. Although the constitutional law recognized African-Americans as citizens, implementation of the law required additional attempts and progression towards justice. In 1896, the US Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* determined that Jim Crow laws did not violate the rights of African-Americans and the practice of separate but equal was legal. This

legislation also resulted in most states requiring segregation based on race, not class, in public schools (Anderson, 1988)

Change in legislation and laws surrounding segregated practices required voting however, voting rights and privileges for African-Americans faced extreme challenges such as the 1898 Grandfather Clause, which was implemented to keep African-Americans from voting. The Grandfather Clause was developed in the southern state of Louisiana. Men whose fathers or grandfathers were registered voters by January 1, 1867 were naturally qualified to vote. African-American men had to adhere to education requirements and land ownership requirements. As newly freed slaves with little education and little wealth such requirements were nearly impossible to achieve. They were denied the right to vote because of their race. All women, including African-American women, were denied the right to vote due to their race and gender until 1920 with the inception of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution, which gave women the right to vote. The Grandfather Clause was later rescinded in 1915 by *Guinn v. United States* (Volney-Riser, 2010).

The issue of unequal education has always been a part of the American way of life because the laws of the United States were not intended to ensure equality among all citizens regardless of race and gender. The intent of the law referred to equal administration of the laws (Franklin, 1994), meaning the law was interpreted as being followed by providing equal access for students to attend school, even if it was segregated. As long as African-Americans were given access to attend a segregated school, then the law was being applied “fairly”. Access to equitable schools was not required to fulfill the law.



## Integrating Education

In 1902, public schools were required to be racially segregated according to the Virginia Constitution. As a result, black children were further deprived of adequately funded and sufficient education. Major legal victories, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), proved instrumental in creating the conditions for parity but it was not as effective as many hoped it would be (Franklin, 1994). In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* determined that segregation in public schools was unlawful, which dissolved the separate but equal policy established in *Plessy vs Ferguson* (*Brown v Board of Educ.*, 1954).

Social unrest and racial discrimination issues have encroached on the accessibility of higher education for African-Americans. Segregation, in particular, continued to result in lack of acquiring higher education and access to higher education. African-Americans were disenfranchised throughout history and remained this way even after the Civil Rights Movement. For example, the University of South Carolina was a constant figure in the South during the Segregation Era of 1877-1963. Discrimination and protest to African-Americans being admitted to the University were beyond doubt. During segregation, visibility of African-Americans on campus consisted of custodial staff or cafeteria staff. African-American applicants were constantly denied admission to the University. Charles Bruce Bailey and John H. Wrighten, both African-American men, were denied admission to the University of South Carolina Law School in 1937 and 1946, respectively (Edgar, 1998). Wrighten sued the University on the grounds of the law that allowed for separate but equal opportunities. As a result, the state of South Carolina created an all-black law school at South Carolina State University in the town of Orangeburg to bury the issue. In 1954, the issue continued at the University of South

Carolina Law School. The Dean of the Law School, Samuel Prince justified why African-American law students were charged \$100 per semester hour rather than \$17 per semester hour charged for white students. He stated, “Gentleman, well I’ll tell you. The price of prejudice is very high” (p. 528)

Legalized segregation existed in the United States until the late 1960s when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination of any kind based on race, color, religion, or national origin. In 1965, the Higher Education Act of 1965 was signed by President Johnson. By 1970 support for legal segregation had dissolved (Franklin, 1994).

After the WWII era, parents had an increased desire for equal facilities, curricula, and instructional materials for their children (Kusimo, 1998). They understood that education would open doors to financial success and a better way of life, however, tackling racism and oppression from society made this task rather difficult. According to Katz, Stern, and Fader (2005) in 1940 racial discrimination prevented blacks with a college education from earning as much as whites with a high school education. This trend continues in our contemporary society (Long, 2017). With such racial divides and inequality, the constant fight for better education and a fair share of higher paying career opportunities took a toll on motivation to obtain higher education (Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein, & Hein, 2015).

#### Higher Education, African-American Females, and Their Barriers

Early history in the United States tells the story of African-Americans being prevented from accessing basic education. Being taught to read and write was prohibited and tactics were utilized to suppress the learning of African-Americans and continue their enslavement. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when educating African-Americans was forbidden and

dangerous in the South, higher education institutions in the North were opened to meet their educational needs and further their vocational success (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). The movement towards equal opportunities for education has been significant yet the impacts of discrimination, lack of support and limited available information are still prevalent (IHEP, 2010). In spite of historical struggles and prevalent obstacles in accessing schooling experienced by African-Americans, many in the African-American community placed significant value on education.

#### African-American Females and Higher Education

African-Americans as whole have been disenfranchised educationally and African-American women have experienced their fair share of struggle in this area. In *African-American Women in Higher Education*, Bartman (2015) references that for the first two hundred years of the establishment of America, girls were not provided with proper education within the education structure. While there was a significant gap in literacy among men and women by the time of the Civil War, educational strides with reading and writing were being made with middle- and upper-class white girls through the urbanization of the Northeast. However, African-American men and women and rural white women were not able to benefit from the same educational advances (Bartman, 2015).

According to Thomas and Jackson (2007), former slaves advocated for their education as well as for their children, following the Civil War. The fall of Reconstruction was devastating for African-American schools and students as they became victims to racism, prejudices, and physical and mental attacks. Nonetheless, African-Americans continued the plight for education. Positive advances have been made in educating African-Americans, however, undeniable challenges and obstacles continue

to exist, particularly for African-American girls. Numerous studies (Chen, Miller, Brody, & Lei, 2015; Matthews-Armstead, 2002) have shown that such challenges faced by African-American girls have a devastating effect on academic endeavors, which include dropping out of school, academically falling behind in critical areas such as math when compared to white students, and being exposed to violence (Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

The number of African-American females traveling on the path of school to prison has also been increasing in recent years as many are stuck on the school-to-poverty pathway where poor educational opportunities limit job prospects (Graves, 2014). Nationwide, 24% of public school students are African-American, yet 48% of suspended students and 49% of the students expelled in public schools are African-American. According to Smith and Harper (2018), of all US public schools, 1.2 million African-American students were suspended in a single academic year. Fifty-five percent of these suspensions took place in 13 southern states. Further African-Americans accounted for 56% of girls suspended and 45% of girls expelled.

Such challenges are evident of the long struggle for African-American girls and their plight to be educated. Being able to identify with surroundings and environment would increase the motivation and self-identity of African-American girls and move them towards a goal of higher education, despite the challenges they face (McCluskey, 1989). A qualitative study by Sealey-Ruiz (2007) examined the response of African-American women regarding curriculum with which they could identify. The findings of the study revealed three themes, “language validation, fostering a positive self-identity and group identity, and self-affirmation or affirmation of goals” (p.52).

In spite of the historical struggles, research has shown that African-American women tend to access to higher education more than African-American men but still less

than White men and women (Schwartz & Washington, 1999; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Thomas and Jackson (2007) stated that two-thirds of all African-Americans enrolled in college are African-American women. Nationally, 63% of all African-American women are enrolled in college. At a rate of 43%, African-American women are more likely to graduate in comparison to African-American men. Thomas and Jackson also reported that “in 2001, African-American women received 70% of all master's degrees and 64% of all doctorate degrees awarded to African-Americans” (p. 367).

### Barriers to Education

African-American women in the 21st century are earning more degrees (Thomas & Jackson, 2007) but have historically been underrepresented among those educated in postsecondary institutions. Given the history of African-Americans and women in the system of postsecondary education, it is important to identify and examine barriers for African-American women. Many identified barriers surround lack of exposure, financial concerns, and race (IHEP, 2010).

The American Council on Education (ACE) has long played a role in shaping the education of minority groups in the United States and has been actively involved in the fight for educational equity and access (American Council on Education, 2018). This organization has advocated for legislation in support of expanding educational opportunities for underrepresented groups such as minorities and women (ACE, 2018). Lack of access to education of African-American women is a significant obstacle for this group. While in secondary schools, African-American females often do not get the foundational courses needed for college- or career-readiness and therefore have limited competitiveness with the global economy (Westervelt, 2014). Student experiences from K-12 have an impact on the motivation to learn and continue to learn as adults

(Sungunro, 2014). According to the Center for American Progress (2018), African-American students are more likely to attend a high poverty school. Data reported show 47.5% of African-American students attend schools where at least 75% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Financial need is a common barrier for students seeking to pursue higher education (Evelyn, 2003; Glenn, 2007; Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2016). Unfortunately, for students living in poverty or in situations where they are one paycheck away from extreme poverty, the lack of financial support can be a debilitating factor. Evelyn (2003) states that due to such cuts, it is expected that the rate of minority students enrolling would be the same rate for minority students that would be shut out or denied the opportunity to attend college.

Another barrier is race. Harris (2007) contends women and minority students who pursue higher education are faced with obstacles that hinder progression due to personification of being identified by race or gender. Peterson (1999) references adult education for African-Americans and the history of adult education as it relates to African-Americans. Peterson also references the Civil Rights Movement and its relevance to adult education. The Movement's focus was social justice and adult education played a significant role. It was believed that if racism was no longer an issue, it would end all problems. Peterson's article, *Creating a Culturally Relevant Dialogue for African-American Adult Educators*, indicates racial preference became prevalent as a result of the movement. Peterson states that whites and people of color cannot share occurrences of race so differences must be mediated through education. There is a lack of research about education disaggregated by race and gender and more research is needed

that is specific to the challenges of African-American females in the education system (Westervelt, 2014).

### Rural Learners

Barriers associated with access to higher education, which is education past graduation from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, for rural students typically consist of more heightened barriers than those faced by their urban counterparts. According to a study by Michael Koich (2014), students in rural areas are less likely to enroll in college than students in metropolitan areas. While community college is not the only viable pathway to higher education, they are one of the more accessible pathways to higher education for rural students and spotlighting them can provide a sense of the issues faced by rural learners seeking to pursue higher education. The community college is a critical part of extending educational opportunity.

Evelyn (2003) highlights the role of finances as a barrier.

Community colleges have long prided themselves on taking in all of the students who come through their doors. Now, however, administrators across the country complain that with state budget cuts continuing, they can't offer enough courses to meet growing demand. The applicants left out in the cold tend to be low-income students, many of them members of minority groups, who have trouble pulling together tuition until the last moment, and who are often unfamiliar with navigating the financial-aid bureaucracy. (p. 3)

Sherry Glenn (2007), former Associate Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs at York Technical College, which is located in Rock Hill, SC, concurs that a primary obstacle of students at York Tech is insufficient financial resources to cover the cost of tuition. Glenn attributes the success of York Technical College to the location of the

college and the cost. The school is convenient and the cost of tuition is cost-effective for the students. Private donors and the state lottery assist students with tuition cost (Glenn, 2007).

Another barrier for rural learners is rurality. Rurality refers to life within areas or settings of a rural area (Kelly, 2009). Education is a significant factor in establishing gainful employment and furthering employment and educational opportunities (OEDC, 2015). Many of the students attending community colleges attend part-time and work full-time and are attending college in hopes of procuring better job opportunities or an improvement for their current career or field (Fain, 2017). But in rural areas, these opportunities are scarce (Chen, Miller, Brody, & Lei, 2015). Relationships with business and industry help to mitigate this scarcity. Glenn (2007) states that there are close ties within the rural community to the area and local businesses and industries help meet the needs of students within the workforce (Glenn, 2007). It is essential for the community college to form partnerships with area businesses and network throughout the community as this supports further education and employment for the rural learner. Partnerships help to keep the students within the community, which will in turn contribute to benefiting the economy of the community. The partnerships with area businesses and industry assist students with overcoming some of the obstacles that are presented to them.

Students attending rural community colleges are confronted with other barriers related to rurality such as limited social networks that can create childcare issues and contribute to racial discrimination as well as lack of transportation to shuffle between institutions of learning, work, and home (Bell, Rowen-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). Some studies (Chen, Miller, Brody, & Lei, 2015; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Koicich, 2014) have looked specifically at the experiences of rural learners. The most significant barriers



identified in a study by Scott, Miller, and Morris (2016) were financial, internet or home computer access, academic performance, and owning a computer. The study also proposed that students from rural areas were uncomfortable with the commute to college locations in town and the cost to travel to the college areas was a challenge.

This discomfort might be related to the experiences, beliefs and mindsets of rural students. Valdez (2000) discusses “habitus” in describing barriers to higher education. According to Valdez (2000), “Bourdieu defines habitus as a strategy-generating principle that drives all the thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions enabling individuals to decide about diverse tasks in their daily lives” (p. 4). Personal experiences and influences, such as religious or church affiliations, social clubs and affiliations, family, and friends are drivers of thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions. These influences can help to shape the minimum or maximum expectations for success. These influences shape the height of one’s personal goals. If the standard of influence is set low, the aim will be low and if the standard is high, the aim will be high regardless of circumstances. Valdez (2000) uses the term “habitus” to explain her observations of rural African-American women seeking to change the outcomes of their lives through the services of a work education program.

Slack (2011) also found that influence and motivation proved to be barriers to higher education. Coker (2003) found inspiring the women of the study through aspects of development fueled motivation to learn among African-American women. In addition, development consisted of three entities: self-development, family development, and community development. Self-development involves accomplishing the personal educational objectives, which is instilled in the way of life for African-American women. Family development involves the notion of improving the quality of life for the family

while taking on the quest of a college education. Community development incorporated personal success that would impact African-Americans within the community.

Adult Learning Theory suggests that adults are motivated to learn based on Malcolm Knowles (1984) principles of andragogy. Andragogy focuses on the learner and provides an alternative instructional design perspective, which is centered on the methodology as opposed to the individual (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012).

Psychologists attempted to explain learning behaviors, but from 1960 onward, educators established ideologies about adult learning and how it differed from childhood learning (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012). As such, a multifaceted understanding of adult learning has developed, which is reflective of the richness and complexity of the phenomenon of learning (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012). In looking at andragogy in practice, it is suggested that adults learn based on the principles of learner's need to know, self-concept of the learner, prior experience of the learner, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012).

Motivation is a key factor for adult learners (Sogunro, 2014). A more detailed view of the six principles of andragogy, as referenced by theorist Malcolm Knowles are:

- 1) The need to know: Adults need to know why they are learning something.
- 2) The learners' self-concept: Adults have a need to make their own decisions and decide what they want to learn.
- 3) The role of the learners' experiences: Adult learners have a more in depth and different quality of experiences than that of younger learners.
- 4) Readiness to learn: Adults become ready to learn when they experience a life situation where they need to know.
- 5) Orientation to learning: Adults enter learning situations as a tool for problem-solving. Learning is perceived as an avenue to learning a task for dealing with everyday life or problems that come about during everyday life.
- 6) Motivation: Adults are

motivated to learn by external and internal motivators. The most pressing motivator is internal.

Many adult learners are motivated to advance their education by their desire to become more marketable in the competitive workforce and they view this advancement as essential to improve their socioeconomic status (Luke & Justice, 2016), which is inclusive of the concept and role of social capital. Chester County is a rural southern county in upstate South Carolina. Its Superintendent, Dr. Thomas Graves, stated that: the [rural] community didn't always value education because years ago the area thrived on a booming textile industry. It wasn't uncommon for people to leave schooling early and live comfortably working in mills. Those days are gone, but the mindset that education wasn't important remained (p. 1). Research suggests adult learners are significantly influenced by motivation and there is a connection between learners' motivational levels and educational success in classroom environments (Luke & Justice, 2016). Motivational aspects of one's learning experiences not only influence their propensity toward lifelong learning but also enhances their learning during instruction (Luke & Justice, 2016).

### Social Capital

Social capital has been described in varying ways. Pierre Bourdieu (1986), one of the early scholars and chief thinkers of social capital, describes social capital as the advantages obtained from connections to a particular group. Bourdieu also references that the amount of social capital that an individual obtains relies on how large or small the connections circle is and the individual's ability to work within the connection. Bourdieu pointed out the disparities of social capital as it pertain to social networks and connections (Ehlen, 2015). Social capital is defined by the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (2015) as “networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups (p. 103). Social capital is commonly captured in three parts, which are bonding, bridging, and linkage. Bonding refers to connections to people established by mutual characteristics like family, friends, or people of the same race or culture. Bridging entails connections outside of familiar characteristics such as co-workers or teammates. Linkages describe connections to people based on social status within the group (Claridge, 2013).

Robert Putnam (2000), another key figure, explains that the basic fundamental tenet of social capital is that social connections are beneficial. Social capital encompasses shared benefits of commonality and familiarity with a group of people, which Putnam refers to as social networks and the propensity to care for each other that results from these social connections. According to Robert Putnam since 1950, there has been a downfall in social capital within the United States. Putnam used bowling, a popular family activity from former years, to describe the effect of social capital. Bowling was considered a popular networking and community involvement activity in the mid-20th century, bowling now is practically non-existent. According to Putnam, this is a result of low social capital.

Bonding, bridging, and linkages all reference the connections developed during bowling and speak to the relational dimension of social capital. Social capital is the process and product of the networking and longevity of getting to know each other and communicating. The relational dimension of social capital embodies the benefit and value of actual communication through social connections (Claridge, 2013). Claridge (2013) states that “the key factors of the relational dimension of social capital are trust and trustworthiness, norms and sanctions, obligations and expectations, and identity and

identification (p. 3). The key factors give further clarification of Putnam's (2015) description of social capital. Putnam reflects on how close connections with family and the community relationships helped him personally during economic downfall in his hometown. The relational dimensions of the social capital within his network helped ease the burden.

For purposes of this study, Putnam's framing of social capital will be used to ignite the awareness of social capital and its role in access to higher education for African-American women residing in the rural South. Putnam (2015) explains that "equality of opportunity and social mobility pose an altogether more momentous problem in our national culture" (p.31). He focuses on future generations in saying "whether young people from different backgrounds are, in fact, getting on to the ladder at about the same place and, given equal merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it" is the measure of the likelihood for achieving equality of opportunity and social mobility.

Social capital is one of the most important aspects of growth and development within a society and it is a traditional norm in that it allows individuals to follow their personal interests through a devotion to social projects (Tonkaboni, Yousefy, & Keshtiaray, 2013).

Studies surrounding social capital have resulted in major theoretical products in sociology, but this concept has also entered into other humanities such as higher education (Tonkaboni et al., 2013). In all aspects of society, the training of a skilled work force and the growth of individual capabilities is produced within the educational system (Tonkaboni et al., 2013). Human capital is essential to national growth and economic development and the educational system is key in sustaining that skilled workforce (Tonkaboni et al., 2013). Advances in science and technology require that educational

systems maintain an appropriate level of training and supply of skill to ensure the societies' investments are fruitful (Tonkaboni et al., 2013). In order to increase human capital, education must be used as the main instrument of investment, and making improvements upon education and human capital have a substantially positive effect on the main components of social capital (Tonkaboni et al., 2013).

Studies entailing barriers to higher education convey that obtaining social mobility is difficult for students from impoverished or lower socio-economic status households. These students are faced with a myriad of challenges and minimal opportunities for increase in social capital (Chen, Miller, Brody, & Lei, 2015; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Putnam, 2015). Overcoming these challenges requires direct assistance and influence. Research suggests that influences such as connections and relationships between family and school directly influence the educational aspects and surroundings of students and that school environments influence motivation while attending school (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).

Society recognizes that academic goals achieved by students in institutions of higher education are dependent upon the academic and professional identities r gained during studies. Research (Jenson & Jetton, 2015) suggests that an individual's socio-economic status (SES) and social capital prior to entering the educational institution directly impact one's ability to obtain these identities in a beneficial way. What is less known is whether the social capital obtained during the educational process affects the development of these identities and if it does, in what way (Jenson & Jetton, 2015). Jenson and Jetton (2015) aimed in part to examine if a student's ability to develop academic and professional identities and social capital while in an institution is influenced by their SES (Jenson & Jetton, 2015). They conducted a qualitative study

examining possible exchanges between different forms of social capital and identify formations (Jenson & Jetton, 2015). Their findings suggest that the formation of social capital for students within an institution is an ongoing process that develops as they complete their education and can be difficult process across different groups (Jenson & Jetton, 2015).

The role of social capital in higher education is gaining recognition in society. The process of K-12 education and acquiring education beyond high school provides numerous opportunities to increase social capital and sets the pace and parameters to navigating or seeking social capital through social networking and connections (Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater, 2006). It is important to note that for students from rural areas, attending college and being familiar with the settings and operations may be uncomfortable and a disconnect from the norm of the social capital from home or the neighborhood. Increase in social capital prior to attending college will assist with these students being successful in their college aspirations (Chen, Miller, Brody, & Lei, 2015). In addition, institutions of higher learning have the opportunity to be impactful on society by making calculated efforts to connect with potential students, build a rapport, and develop an understanding of the level and assistance needed to increase social capital for students who are just not comfortable or aware of college life and expectations (Cortese, 2003).

It is imperative that school systems become more resourceful in academic endeavors of students to succeed within and beyond high school to attain higher education. The need is more urgent for African-American students in areas where resources are limited. Increase in social capital will assist in accessing higher education

and motivating students and parents of these students to seek educational opportunities beyond what they see (Perna & Titus, 2005) In addition, making the connection for student in rural areas will require the same, if not more effort. Research suggests that the community college is generally offered as the attainable option for students in rural or less affluent areas. The community college is a connection within social capital for these students, however, is not necessarily an avenue out of the normal network and familiar connections within the community (Putnam, 2015). Putnam (2015) states, “when students enter a community college, 81 percent say they plan to get a four-year degree, but only 12 percent actually do” (p. 186). It is important to note that community college is a productive tool to access to higher education beyond high school graduation. A quantitative study by Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater (2006) sought to identify factors that contributed to the social capital in various US counties. The findings of the study revealed that education is most pertinent and effective ingredient of social capital.

Research continues to show staggering equity and equality issues for African-American parents in reference to education and socio-economic status. African-American parents continue to reside in impoverished areas and fall behind others in regards to levels of education, thus establishing a clear disadvantage for their children as the result of societal inequities and inequalities (Putnam, 2015). According to Putnam (2015), regardless of the socio-economic status of African-American parents, their children still reside in less affluent neighborhoods and areas than white children within the same socio-economic status. This astonishing research reveals a clear disadvantage for African-American children and a decrease in opportunity for upward mobility (Putnam, 2015).



### Summary

It is imperative that the identified and perceived barriers to higher education for African-American females in the rural south are explored to ensure fair and equal opportunity for the pursuit and successful completion of higher education. Historically, barriers and limited access to higher education for African-Americans in the rural south, especially Black women, have been considerable. Motivation to be successful in life and achieve educational goals is contingent upon support and resources.

There is limited research on access to higher education for African-American women living in rural communities in the South. Further research is needed to clearly identify barriers and perceptions of barriers to higher education. In Chapter Three, the methodology and research design used to execute this study will be described.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study seeks to explore the barriers to higher education as identified and perceived by African-American women living in the rural South. The research questions for this study were:

### Research Questions

1. What is the role of social capital in the accessibility of higher education for African-American females in the rural South?
2. How does social context impact accessibility to higher education?

This chapter provides rationale for the qualitative interview research design used for this study, a description of phenomenology and how it applied to this study, and the research design and procedures, which includes participants and eligibility requirements. This section also includes the researcher's methods for data collection and a section on data analysis.

### Research Design

Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Newman & Benz, 1998) defines qualitative research as:

multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials--case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactions, and visual texts--described routine and problematic moments and

meanings in individual' lives. (p.16)

Qualitative research recognizes that reality is always bound by social context and that a relationship exists between the interviewer, the interviewee, and the subject under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research is applicable to any field or topic. It often takes the form of storytelling, which helps other people to see the connections (Glesne, 2009). Maxwell (2013) suggests that qualitative research is a naturalistic process. It is an iterative as opposed to linear method that involves alternating between segments of the research design to inform the next step. Qualitative research does not proceed through a fixed arrangement of procedures; rather because it is context dependent, it must be flexible. Most qualitative research is designed to be empathetic, intentional, and meaningful.

### Methodology

Phenomenology is a methodology commonly used in qualitative research. Phenomenology was “first given a systematic form by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Lewis & Staehler, 2010, p. 2). This research method derived from a combination of philosophy and psychology. According to DeMarraiss and Roulston (2001), phenomenology focuses on lived experience and explores the essence of a phenomenon. It describes what is given in immediate experience without being obstructed by pre-conceptions and theoretical notions. It strives to understand the structure of experience through the perspective of those who lived it. Lewis and Staehler (2010) state phenomenology refers to “the ways things manifest themselves, and hence it tries to describe the nature of appearance as such” ( p. 1). It is the individual's experience and the way they interpret the experience. In order to better focus on the individual's experience, Sutton and Austin (2015) and Christensen, Welch, and Barr (2017)

recommend the use of bracketing. Bracketing is intentionally setting aside of the researcher's perspective to have a clear view of the participant's viewpoint.

In reference to this inquiry, the phenomenon studied was the experience of barriers to higher education faced by African-American women that live in the rural South. The phenomenological research method was used to capture the subjects' personal experiences. Moran (2005) states "Phenomenology wants to clarify the concepts of the original intuitions in which they are experienced in a living way" (p. 6). Researchers using this research method strive to comprehend the subjects' awareness, mindset, and viewpoint regarding a specific circumstance.

Sutton and Austin (2015) contend that views and consideration of the researcher is needed within qualitative research. Reflection prior to and amid the course of the research was an avenue to reveal background and consideration of the researcher's bias. Bias during reflection is inevitable, therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to be forthcoming and open regarding her stance and viewpoint. This provides an improved comprehension of information and context that was used to determine the questions that were developed, method for collecting data, and results of the collected and examined data. To safeguard against bias, bracketing techniques were used.

#### Recruitment/Participant Selection

This study used a purposeful sampling technique for participant selection. Participants consisted of eight African-American women from rural southern communities in South Carolina who had some college credits but were no longer pursuing a post-secondary degree or had not completed any college credits leading to an associate's or bachelor's degree. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30. Participants were recruited from adult education programs and local African-American churches

within North Carolina and South Carolina. A recruitment flyer (Appendix D) was distributed at these locations. The researcher's personal social network, word of mouth, and snowball sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) were also used as recruitment strategies. An email (Appendix C) was sent to those within the researcher's social network requesting volunteers and requesting those in the network to refer women that might be eligible. Women who agreed to the study were also asked to refer women they might know (snowball sampling). The eight women who met the criteria comprised the sample and completed the interview.

NAME	OCCUPATION	AGE	HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION	COLLEGE ATTENDANCE
RUTH	OFFICE MANAGER	23	DIPLOMA	ONE YEAR
NEFERTITI	GROUP HOME WORKER	28	DIPLOMA	NONE
ESTHER	PAYROLL ASSISTANT	30	DIPLOMA	TWO YEARS
QUEEN	DAYCARE TEACHER	27	DIPLOMA	ONE YEAR
KENYA	TEXTILE WORKER	30	DIPLOMA	ONE SEMESTER
EVE	FAST FOOD WORKER	21	DIPLOMA	NONE
MARY	CONVENIENCE STORE CASHIER	24	DIPLOMA	NONE
HANNAH	CALL CENTER MANAGER	27	DIPLOMA	ONE SEMESTER

Figure 1: Participants

## Data Collection

The interview method is frequently employed in phenomenology as it provides participants an opportunity to directly share their experiences. Interviews are one the most effective methods used to collect data in qualitative research. Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008) state “qualitative methods, such as interviews, are believed to provide a “deeper” understanding of social phenomena... Interviews are, therefore, most appropriate where little is already known about the study phenomenon or where detailed insights are required from individual participants” (p. 292). Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions. According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick, “Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (p. 291). In comparison to structured interviews, it is suggested that the flexibility in this method permits the exploration of data that is deemed relevant to the subjects of the study but not initially considered significant by the researchers (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). One on one conversations with participants provided insight to the participant’s own personal experience and perceptions regarding barriers to higher education. Interviews were an effective way to discover patterns and themes that informed the research questions. The semi-structured interview questions for this study were:

1. Tell me about where you grew up.
  - a. What was your neighborhood like?
2. How did you learn about college? Tell me about the people who helped you learn about college.

- a. Did your parents attend?
  - b. Did your sibling, close friends, or significant other attend?
  - c. Did your guidance counselor talk to you about college?
3. Tell me about your educational experiences growing up.
  - a. What did you like about school?
  - b. What did you dislike about school?
  - c. What school activities were you involved in?
4. Think back to when you were graduating from high school. What were your plans after high school?
5. What prevented you from going to college or completing college?
6. What challenges do you believe you experienced living in the rural south that impacted your decision to go to college or not go to college?
7. What difference would a college education make in your life?
8. At this point in your life, do you desire to go to college?
  - a. If so, what factors impact that desire?
  - b. What factors impact your ability to go to college at this point in your life?
9. What did I not ask you about your experience that you would like to talk about before we end the interview?

The interviews took place at the local libraries, convenient to the participant. Each participant was asked to participate in one 45-60 minute interview that was recorded and transcribed. Each participant was also provided the opportunity to review and comment

on the completed transcript. This served as a member check. The audio and transcription were stored on a password protected laptop. Any hard copies or portable storage devices used such as the USB drive were stored in the office of the researcher.

### Data Analysis

Powell and Renner (2003) state that “qualitative data consist of words and observations, not numbers” (p. 1). Data were analyzed with a constant comparative data analysis using the coding method. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), the initial step with analyzing the data is determining crucial topics and trends, which is determined by coding. Coding was used by the researcher to solidify and clearly identify repetitive areas and sequences. Glesne (2006) suggests that the process of coding consists of a continuous method of constantly and repeatedly filtering and identifying the relevant data that has been compiled, thus constructing “an organizational framework” (p. 152). Constant comparative data analysis strategies include negative case analysis. Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, and Coleman (2000) describe the four steps to clarify the constant comparative method. The four steps are 1) correlating circumstances that are relevant to each grouping 2) consolidating the groups and the parts that make up the group 3) determine the hypothesis and 4) scripting the hypothesis. With data analysis, it is imperative that researchers pay close attention to details and remain organized.

In using this constant comparative process, the researcher began by reading the transcripts multiple times, then looked for keywords in the data for coding. The coding process involved the researcher regularly reviewing the data for similarities to categorize. Once the categories were solidified, the researcher conducted several reviews to find and determine developing themes.



### Strategies for Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential component of examining the value of a research study according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba offer four components to be considered for trustworthiness: credibility, which is the assurance of accuracy of the data; transferability, which entails the data has relevance or pertinence to other areas of framework; dependability, which is inclusive of persistent, repetitive data, and confirmability, which entrust that the researcher's biases did not unduly interfere with data received from the subjects.

A variety of steps and procedures are explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure trustworthiness for the study. In this study the following steps were used to obtain credibility: use of triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member-checking. According to Shenton (2004), triangulation can be achieved via using different people as sources of data such as in an interview study. Triangulation was achieved by interviewing eight women regarding their experiences. Analysis was conducted in consultation with the researcher's dissertation chairperson who served as a peer debriefer. Negative case analysis was conducted from the data collected to determine if there was contradiction to the overall consensus of the participant interviews. For example, it was determined that one participant did not have a desire to attend college and no aspiration to attend, which is the opposite of the views from the other participants. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher replayed the audio-recording as a form of member checking. Rich descriptions were provided to increase transferability. Dependability incorporated an outside examination of the findings conducted by an outside researcher and review of the study and the steps that were followed for the study. Dependability also consisted of repeating the interview questions and paraphrasing

throughout the interview to determine a correct understanding of the participants' statements and comprehension by the participant. Confirmability procedures included researcher reflexivity, an audit trail, and triangulation.

### Ethical Considerations

Prior to the interview, the interviewer reviewed the informed consent with the participant. After answering questions, the participant signed the informed consent form, in alignment with the university's requirement of privacy and anonymity of human subjects. Pseudonyms were used and no identifying information was used throughout the study. This research study was deemed to present minimal risk to participants of the study. Participants understood that participation in the study was completely voluntary and anyone desiring to no longer participate could have withdrawn at any time.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter Four provides an overview of the results from the current study and the themes that were developed from the data analysis. The purpose of this study was to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South that did not graduate from college. The research questions that guided this study and orchestrated the development of the themes were:

1. What is the role of social capital in the accessibility of higher education for African-American females in the rural south?
2. How does social context impact accessibility to higher education?

Three themes were developed from the data: *Sense of Belonging*, *Support Relationships*, and *Isolation and Lack of Opportunity*.

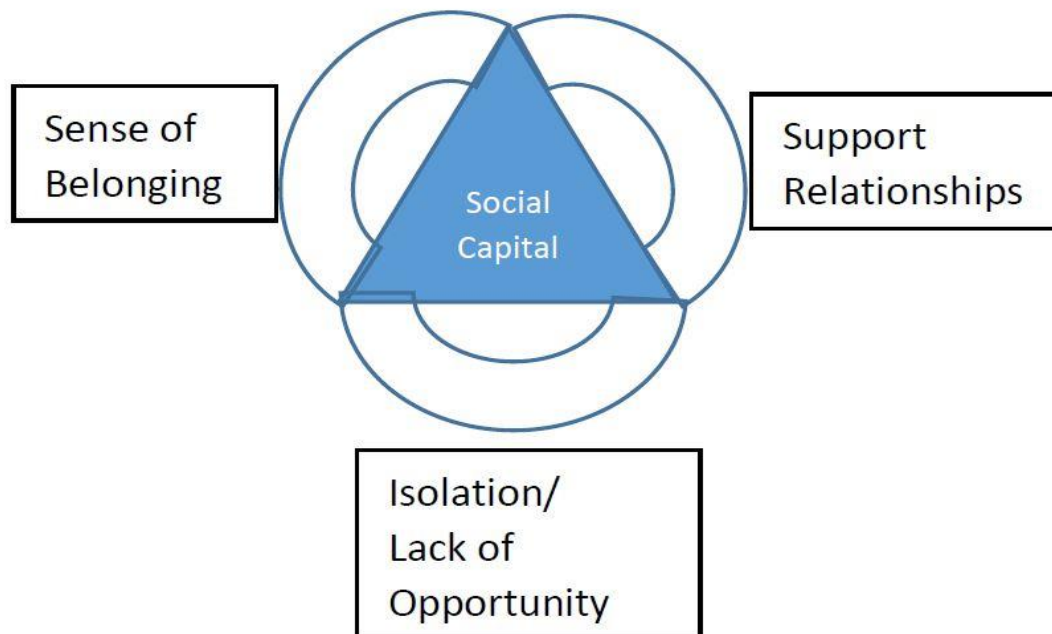


Figure 2: Themes

### Sense of Belonging

In this study sense of belonging refers to personal and social acceptance and feeling included. Belongingness - is an innate desire for many. When people embrace this sense of belonging, they are acknowledging affiliation with a person or group. This affiliation gives them insights, direction, and anchoring that helps them to better understand their purpose in life and to make decisions about their life. Sense of belonging promotes encouragement, well-being, and high-spirits and creates the conditions through, which individuals feel comfortable and confident in themselves (Hall, 2014). This sense of comfort is a result of knowing that there are others that feel like them and share the same experiences and confidence results from the acceptance and confirmation received from others. Sense of belonging was seen through the sub-themes of familiarity and “not a good fit”.

#### Familiarity

The participants discussed familiarity as being key to accessing higher education. Familiarity references learning about college, knowing what college is and how to approach or access college and was largely contingent upon their sense of belonging. Sense of belonging impacted their familiarity with college, their level of comfort and interest in college and how their environment and surroundings shaped their awareness of college. Knowledge of college seemed to be greater among those who felt like they belonged or who felt accepted by persons who had access to knowledge of post-secondary education. For example, knowledge of scholarships and financial aid for instance was contingent upon being accepted as an individual who had the potential for success in college by the guidance counselor. The more they were seen as that type of

individual, the more likely it was that they were familiar with the specifics of how to navigate college admission and attendance. For several respondents there was a low sense of belonging in schooling spaces during their childhood. In discussing her school experiences, Brianna stated “Seem like everybody was just like goody goody. Um, and that wasn’t me. Just, I don’t know, just never saw nothing there for me.” There were a variety of spaces though where sense of belonging was stronger in their childhood experiences. Family was identified as one of those spaces and it increased their awareness of college. For instance, family was a source of awareness for four participants. Ruth, a serious and stoic 23-year-old that attended college but did not finish, is the oldest of two from a single parent household. She stated that college had always been a topic of discussion at home. Consequently, she had been made aware of college her whole life. Another way familiarity was evidenced was through word of mouth. The social network of friends and community members in addition to family promoted sense of belonging for the women in this study. Because they were included and accepted within that network, information about college via word of mouth reached the participants. Word of mouth is common in informal and formal social networks and typically results in people intentionally or unintentionally gaining knowledge regarding a particular topic. Nefertiti also grew up in a single parent household. She is a 28-year-old who is quite jovial and passionate about knowing her history and her roots. She reported a happy and supportive childhood during, which she found out about college through word of mouth by talking with friends, the school guidance counselor, college recruiters, family members and just paying attention.

Even though those community and family networks were sites of inclusivity and confidence building, with some opportunities for becoming familiar with college, this

was not the case for all respondents. For those women, growing up in a rural area limited their awareness of college in spite of feeling like they belonged to their intimate community. For these participants pathways to becoming aware of college were circumscribed. Sense of belonging through familiarity was not present in those interviews, lack of familiarity due to lack of exposure was present. Lack of exposure played a key role in the participants' limited awareness of college and opportunities beyond high school. Nefertiti indicated technology was not readily available to her. Limited access to technology contributed to her lack of exposure. She stated:

The closest internet I got while I was at school was at school and that was to complete assignments, not to actually, you know, experience the Google life. Um, I didn't even know anything about Google, as you know, but, you know, just doing assignments or whatever. But yeah, the Internet, the way it has evolved, you can just basically look up anything that you want to do, you know, and reading, reading is a key factor.

Mary, a 24-year-old, shy and expectant mother of her first child, reported that no adults talked to her about college. Her peers did not discuss college. Many talked about going into the military. Others talked about what they would do after graduation, such as getting a job at the local textile plants, moving away from home to get a job, or getting married. Mary reported challenges that impacted her not going to college and not being made aware of or informed about college:

I think the lack of knowing stuff. I don't know if that came from just living in the rural, but like I say, just the lack of knowing. Um, as far as knowing that, okay, there is help out there to help people go to school. There is assistance. Um, and

then when you don't know anything, you can't get to where you want to get. This almost becomes being in a rut. Um in despair.

Another participant, Hannah, a 27 year old single mom of two children, was expressive and frustrated regarding her lack of support. She indicated that learning about college was presented to a group of students in the school library or in the gym during assembly. She did not feel well connected to that group. She stated, "so I didn't really get involved with all of that because I wasn't informed or motivated to do it."

"Not a good fit"

Spaces of belonging not only impacted if the women developed familiarity with college but they also impacted how they experienced learning. "Not a good fit" further described the participants' sense of belonging. "Not a good fit" reflects the participants' comfort level and interest in school. Participants' comfort level was a lens for filtering their educational experiences. For Ruth, a participant that attended college but and did not finish, one of the very few classes she enjoyed in school was chorus because "it wasn't a hostile environment." Schools were sites of discomfort for many of the participants and thus were not safe spaces for learning. They were sites of struggle that discouraged continuing beyond high school. Ruth stated, "I feel like it's more opportunities now for people who might struggle a little bit. It's a little easier. They have more stuff now where it's a little easier to at least get started." Ruth also indicated, in reference to a college education, that she now has a better understanding of college than she previously had while attending college. Even though Nefertiti was aware of college, she did not attend. According to Nefertiti, "I was scared. I didn't think I was going to know anything." Fear drove her decision-making. In each instance, the women in this study suggested that they felt they did not belong in college because of experiences in

high school. In high school, they felt like academic outsiders in spite of being enveloped in their own surroundings. Such feelings enhanced negativity and bred an attitude of retreating back to their comfort zone that enabled isolation and discouraged motivation to reach further. College by extension represented an uncomfortable environment.

Continuing with the discussion of educational experiences and a sense of belonging, the participants reported their interest, or lack thereof, regarding school. “Not a good fit” gives a description of the participants’ fitting in at school. Ruth reported the subject of math was “not for her”. Eve, an apathetic and disengaged 21-year-old, stated the only area she liked about school was lunch. Eve did not like attending school. Eve gave further elaboration, “school is just not my thing. I never wanted to go. Never wanted to participate.” In addition, Eve stated;

I don’t think I like to take tests, seem like everybody was just like goody, goody and that wasn’t me. Just, I don’t know, just never saw anything there for me. I just wanted to get out and make money.

The participants discussed areas in their high school educational experiences in, which they were not interested. Ruth reported that due to her experiences, she no longer likes going to school and school was no longer interesting to her. She stated that she also did not want to go to college. She referred to her attending college being “this thing you had to do.” As previously stated Eve never wanted to participate in high school and she was not interested in college. Eve stated

It’s just certain things that you have to do and I think school was just a have to, so once I got through it, I just never wanted to continue. Um, my mom said I didn’t have to go. My dad didn’t go. Nobody in my immediate family went. So it wasn’t something I really wanted to do.



Eve further stated, in reference to college, that a person should be able to choose. The women's sense of belonging was influenced by familiarity and not fitting in. Their sense of belonging had a direct impact on their awareness and access to higher education.

### Support Relationships

Support relationships reference social connections of the participants and the shaping of their awareness and perspective on their future and higher education. Social networks and opportunity for networks in the rural South are smaller but denser than in an urban or more populated area. Social networks included both individual and institutional relationships. Individual relationships are often family and community-based.

Institutional relationships are generally relationships outside of family such as church and school. The church is one of the strongest and most influential examples of institutional relationship in rural area (Krause, Shaw, & Liang, 2010).

The participants' indicated family support and school personnel support, or lack thereof, as having a direct impact on their decisions to attend college. Though Ruth indicated that her guidance counselor was not helpful or supportive, she shared that her family was quite supportive of her attending college and being aware of college. She reported that her mom, aunts, and cousins were constantly discussing college and its importance. Kenya, a 30-year-old hardworking single mom, stated she too had support from family in addition to some from school:

Well, basically, I'm going to say my cousins, but my dad mostly was one of biggest supporters on college and some of my teachers. [my parents] They didn't attend [college], but wanted us to attend. They always supported our dreams and goals.

In contrast Mary reported that no adults really talked to her much and did not talk to her about college. Her dad had a 6th grade education and her mom went to a cosmetology school for a little while. That was the only exposure she had to being made aware of college. Mary stated she did not receive any support from her guidance counselor “because I don’t think that she looked at me as one of those people that would really go on to school.”

Regardless of the source, supportive relationships were recognized as providing backing and positive reinforcement, which yielded to aspirations of attending college and moving beyond high school. The participants who attended college reported at least one positive influence that inspired them to think about college and succeed beyond their comfort level. For instance, Queen was taken on college tours and indicated her guidance counselor and teachers wanted them to be involved and set goals in the right direction. Queen stated, “you know, that kind of encouraged me to get out of [the area] and venture off and go to school, as well.” Supportive relationships through the guidance and backing to attend school from teachers and school staff was available to Queen.

Supportive relationships, however, were not always enough though. Circumstances shaped by finances and competing factors often outweighed the power of those supportive relationships. Esther, a 30-year-old divorced mom of two, reported being “a great student” in high school, however, home was dysfunctional and finances were limited. Esther indicated a lot of arguing and fights in the home, which made her nervous. She stated there was broken English in the household, which she attributes to fueling her to excel in school. She shared:

Basically, I had to learn from my own experiences and I try to model myself from some of the people that I saw in church and some of my school teachers. Wasn’t

really too much education in my household. Um, it was like broken language, you know, they didn't speak well so I didn't have none of that at home. But what I saw at school and other places, I wanted to better myself and to, you know, be a better person.

Because of her life circumstances and growing up poor, she was inspired to go to college and gain a better life for herself. Esther had plenty of support from school, which included motivation from her teachers and coaches to do well, positive friendships with students at school, and the encouragement of teammates. Esther attended college for two years but unfortunately did not finish.

Esther, similar to Mary and Hannah, had children and was not married. All three respondents were single parents and had the responsibility of taking care of their children. Completing college required ongoing support in the form of encouragement but it also required support in handling the day to day responsibilities as caretakers in their own and extended families, which most of the women in this study lacked. Queen, a 27 year old shy, yet seemingly ambitious woman, who had influential experiences with her teachers at school discussed having support from home and school. Queen shared in the responsibilities at home due to her mom being a single mom. She helped to support her mom and siblings financially. Queen had the responsibility to bring in money to help out at home. Queen's mom and siblings did not attend college. Even though Queen did well in school, enjoyed her time in school, made good grades and developed positive social relationships, she did not reach her goal of finishing college. Queen noted her disappointment in not being able to complete her college education:

I think the hardest thing was having to drop everything. The people I met in college and having to put that on hold to just help out my mother and my little brother. So

that was kind of like the hardest part. Like I didn't want to put my life on hold just to help my mother and brother but I just felt deep down inside I didn't want them to struggle either. So I kind of had to make choice that wasn't so selfish.

Support relationships swung both ways on the pendulum toward college access and success. The women in this study described how they were both the recipient of support, which was helpful but they also assumed the responsibility of supporting others, which detracted from their ability to enroll and matriculate through college. This combined with limited finances created a barrier to accessing higher education. Low levels of education, lack of transportation, and limited job opportunities in the area were both a symptom and by-product of financial challenges. The participants' discussion of educational experiences in reference to high school experiences and college aspirations yielded dialogue of various relationships and how those relationships influenced their future.

#### Isolation and Lack of Opportunity

Isolation and lack of opportunity entails the participants' reflection and view of themselves in relation to their environment and educational experiences. It also evokes the participants understanding of their own value, how they see themselves and recognizing what they bring to the table and exposing their unique place in the world, as well as meaningful and positive purpose. The sub-themes extracted from this theme are neighborhood/environment and self-identity/self-esteem/self-awareness.

#### Neighborhood/Environment

The social context of rurality was in part geographically bound with ramifications for the material, psychological, and social conditions for those living within it.

Participants reported a sense of cultural isolation within the rural community. This had an

impact on their neighborhood and surroundings and shaped them socially. Kenya referred to where she grew up as out in the middle of nowhere. Her interactions with others primarily consisted of kids that lived at a neighbor's house, her siblings, and cousins. Nuclear and extended family lived in the same house with a few cousins living in a couple of houses on the same road. Kenya gave insight that mirrored similar feelings of the other participants:

living in the no man's land where i grew up that it seemed more like isolated; that you were all to yourself, that you really did not like engage with the other children or other kids because we was always there. Just us and siblings. So I felt that had an impact, like lot of impact. We didn't really know how to go out there and interact with other students. I think that had the biggest part on my personal experience; on my experience.

Mary reported that her neighborhood was also just family members that all lived on the same road, which further reiterates the limited opportunity to connect with others outside of the neighborhood or community. Hannah also indicated that her neighborhood was mostly family. In rural areas, social networks are limited to the same people on most occasions. The social network was limited by geography.

Ruth referenced her neighborhood being surrounded by richer neighborhoods. It is relevant to note that Ruth's county has seen significant real estate development and economic development particularly in her area. Her neighborhood though was mostly lower class and a tough neighborhood. She reported that her neighborhood made her tough, which carried on into school. Like most rural areas, everyone in the community attends the same school. School was not a site for demonstrable expansion of one's social

network. School became a mirror of the neighborhood with the issues and elements of the neighborhood, often times becoming the issues and elements of the school.

The participants reported various issues and elements within their neighborhood and surroundings. Hannah recalled there was a lot of drug dealing on the streets because there were no jobs in the area and nothing to do. Kenya described her neighborhood as no man's land and being out in the middle of nowhere and could only see a neighbor's house because the homes in the area were widely scattered. Esther indicated that in her neighborhood there wasn't much to see or do. Mary discussed a great deal of lack in her life:

Having one car was kind of hard living kind of spread out was kinda hard. So I really wanted my own car. I wanted to have my own money, just wanted to be more independent. The lack of knowing how to get money to pay for school or get money to stay in school [prevented going to college]. The lack of having a way to get to school. It was just a lack of basically the lack of basic needs, you know? No dependable way to get there with us having one vehicle. Because at the time, no one really talked about getting a scholarship or you know, filling out this paperwork to do this. So it was just a lack of, a lack of a lot of things.

Living in such an isolated area and being without enhances the urgency to do something quick to make money and not wait any longer. College offered the possibility of a payoff down the road. With few examples of this payoff from others who grew up as they did, college did not even offer the promise for a better life. Living in lack for so long and not receiving guidance or modeling to other opportunities further supports the decision of some to stay with what was considered the norm. Life within the confines of rural

poverty was all many of them knew. This had an effect on their self-esteem, self-awareness and self-identity.

#### Self-esteem, Self-Awareness, Self-Identity

Understandings of self are often derived from one's environment and surroundings (Catmur, Cross, & Over, 2016). These can impact self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-identity. Nefertiti reported enjoying living in her neighborhood. Although there was not much to do, she made the best of her surroundings and had positive reinforcement in the household and at school. Limited resources, such as a library and transportation to attend workshops or meetings discussing college, impeded the knowledge needed to be aware and make decisions regarding college. Nefertiti states:

If it were meetings held for students who would attend to learn more about college, you know, the transportation, we wouldn't have no one to come pick us up to, actually take us to that meeting and then we just miss out and it would be a group of us. And I'm speaking of African-Americans and then you know, a handful of Caucasians and we never got that same opportunity to, to even hear and to even know what step to take next to even trying to, you know, receive scholarships or you know, financial aid, things like that.

In spite of the constraints of the neighborhood, Nefertiti had a positive self-identity and high self-esteem and self-awareness. She wanted to learn about herself and her history and proactively sought out books to enhance awareness of who she is and her roots.

Although Nefertiti's experiences in her rural neighborhood were positive, they were limiting resulting in her fear of attending college and being away from home. She was not secure in knowing enough about the "outside" world to maneuver college and being away from her family.

Relationships and networks are key factors in developing a positive self-identity (Horowitz, 2012). The neighborhood impacted the relationships and networks accessible to the women in this study. Those relationships, when positive, influence ability to having a positive outlook aspire to move beyond the perceived norm, and set goals to aim higher. Positive influences further enhanced feelings of self-worth and a sense of belonging. Esther's home life made an impact on her self-esteem and self-awareness. She described her home life in her discussion of why she wanted to attend college:

One other thing, which I can, I hate to say it, but I was just really wanting to go to school just to get away from home because there was nothing to do at home and then the household, um, as far as my parents, they were always bickering and fighting and arguing and it just wasn't good and it made me, you know, a little agitated and nervous. So I just, that's another reason why I really wanted to go to school. It was just a lot of, um, you know, back and forth arguing with them. It was just negative things.

Esther's home environment was not positive so opportunities for networking outside of home were important but boundaries imposed by the rural context made making those connections more challenging.

The participants' further discussion of education experiences yielded conversation of relationships and interactions that influenced self-identity. Ruth referenced being teased and bullied while growing up in her neighborhood and attending school. She stated:

I had to learn to have like a thick skin because I got picked on a lot and then picked on by the kids in the neighborhood. I mean my neighborhood filled up our school bus so it was a lot of my neighborhood school so it was just carried on



from there, I guess. Um, once I got to high school it started affecting me more than anything else.

Conversely, Nefertiti shared a positive upbringing and displayed a desire to continue learning more about her history and roots. She was passionate regarding learning her history, which is a pertinent part of self-identity. Nefertiti stated she did not enjoy history class at school by noting:

I just think that if they going to tell the history, they should tell everything being that now I have grown up and now that I can actually pick the books that I want to pick and read, you know, I just think that they should, you know, um, expand actual history lessons. Um, as far as um, you know, from I'm an African-American, you know, as far as when, when we, when we got off the ship and became slaves to where we are now and how, you know, it's still the racism and things like that in, in society and whatever. But I think that the more of the schools now should teach the kids; like it's still going on. It's [racism] just not gone but it's still going on. But you know, teach them how to deal with it and teach them that everybody's equal now.

Findings from respondent interviews indicate that it is imperative to have some form of self-esteem, self-awareness and self-identity to succeed in post-secondary educational aspirations, particularly attending and successfully completing college. Developing these aspirations can sometimes be a challenging task when the opportunities accessing social networks that may help support such aspirations is limited. Rural areas tend to consist of smaller communities with isolated social networks that consist of family on most occasions and school networks during the school year. Hannah

references her educational experiences in school, which impacted her self-identity, self-esteem, and self-awareness. She stated:

It was a small school so everybody knew everyone. So basically you had to be more academic in order to get somewhere. But I did see when I was in school that athletics, athletes got more attention than you know, regular students. So if you, if you didn't play sports or if you wasn't smart in class, you didn't really have anything.

Social activity in rural areas is limited. High school football games and other high school sports typically close down the business of the area and community members pack the stadium or gym to attend and support the games. High school sports are a significant social and economic activity and significant resources and attention are given to excelling in these sports but little attention, resources, and support are given to thinking beyond the high school graduation or gymnasium for these same students or their classmates.

Popular sports figures in high school athletics develop a strong sense of self-identity and the community nurtures that sense of self. Being smart is an added bonus for athletes and other students. Both help you to be recognized as a prospect for college, which reinforces your sense of worth. Students who did not excel in either sports or academics were often overlooked. The support and resources were targeted to the students viewed as exceptional. The option by default for most other students was to stay at home and settle for the opportunities available in the circumscribed space physical, psychological and social space of the rural community.

Typically, if the environment and surroundings were positive, this created higher self-esteem and self-awareness. These findings suggest that those traits are survival skills and a technique needed to think beyond the current circumstances and environment and

focus on greater aspirations. Lack of positive interactions and a positive environment imposes a less favorable outcome and impact on moving beyond the current situation. Positive and influential guidance further develops self-identity, self-esteem, and self-awareness.

### Summary

Chapter Four highlighted the results of the current study. A brief overview of study participants, themes and sub-themes, and supportive content were also provided. The surroundings are a part of the participants' make-up, which embarks on their sense of belonging, support relationships and sense of self-worth. The themes and findings are a direct reflection and evidence of the role of social capital and its impact on the accessibility of higher education for African-American women in the rural South. Chapter Five will highlight the interpretations of the findings.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South. The research included interviews with eight women who resided in the rural South who were not successful in attending or graduating from college. The research questions in this study were: 1) What is the role of social capital in the accessibility of higher education for African-American females in the rural South and 2) How does social context impact accessibility to higher education? Chapter Five will include a summary of the findings and discussion, limitations of the research, and implications of the study.

### Summary and Discussion of Findings

Three themes were developed from the data analysis: Sense of belonging, support relationships, and isolation and lack of opportunity. The sub-themes that were compiled within two of the themes were: familiarity and “not a good fit” for sense of belonging and neighborhood/environment and self-identity/self-esteem/self-awareness for isolation and lack of opportunity. The most interesting theme was isolation and lack of opportunity, which provides a staunch reminder of the remnants of the Great Depression. From a historical perspective, rural areas have been severely affected economically and continue to be isolated. The depression during the 1930’s significantly impacted the lives of Americans. It did not discriminate or leave any particular group or certain persons out of its path. It, in some form or another, affected each person. African-Americans, in particular, were impacted (Sustar, 2012). Both during the Great Depression and currently, the rural community was and remains affected by the downfall in the economy (Bindas 2007), which in turn influenced higher education opportunities for this community. The findings that emerged from this study resonate with what the existing literature (Mason,

2015; Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Valdez, 2000) has discussed as major challenges faced by rural students as a whole.

### Sense of Belonging

The first theme, sense of belonging, focuses on participants' perceptions of acceptance and inclusion. Areas of acceptance and inclusion were included in the spaces of family households, neighborhoods, and school environments. Various levels of familiarity with college and concerns or not fitting in were reported by the participants. Some participants were not fully familiar with the day to day aspects of college and were concerned with not fitting in. They were not around people who attended college, were not involved in discussions with others about college, and did not have an understanding of how to go about the actual process of learning about college. Some participants were not seen by others as smart enough to be accepted or included. Such instances regarding concerns of not feeling accepted or included, impacted participants' decisions to attend or apply to college. These findings mirror studies on rural learners who reported similar challenges of access to higher education (Evelyn, 2003; Mason, 2015; O'Donnell & Logan, 2007).

It should be noted that the participants' negative schooling experiences, such as bullying, lack of interest in school subjects, low self-image and low self-esteem, were significant factors for their reluctance to consider higher education. Negative school experiences decreased social capital for these individuals. Consistent with Blad (2017), sense of belonging is fundamental component in the endurance of students. Participants described their school experiences as impactful regarding their desire to attend college. Participants indicated negative relationships and feelings of not belonging by school staff. In particular, the guidance counselor stifled their desire or impeded a desire to attend

college. Participants stated they were not properly informed or given information needed to make a decision on their own regarding college. The decision was indirectly made for them. This may be different from other students who might have more positive experiences in school and with school staff, such as a guidance counselor. Scholars (e.g., Luke & Justice, 2016) have highlighted that students' learning experiences influence their propensity toward lifelong learning. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the participants' negative schooling experiences made them reluctant about going to college.

#### Support Relationships

The second theme, support relationships, highlights social connections and how they impact awareness of college. The majority of participants mentioned the lack of information about college education provided to them. This included information such as area colleges, college admission policies and requirements, financial aid and awareness about college majors, out-of-state colleges, and typical college life. In particular, participants lacked awareness and information regarding how to access higher education. This is a predominant theme throughout the extant literature (Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2016; Valdez, 2000). It appeared that this lack of knowledge in part was due to the type and nature of social connections to which the women had access. Social capital highlights the importance of relationships developed through social connections (Putnam 2000). Cuddy and Reeves (2015) suggest that such relationships are key to igniting the slim hope of effectively moving toward future endeavors. This study, similar to the work of Hossler, Ziskin, and Gross (2009), found that relationships at home and school were the gateways or gatekeepers to knowledge about college. School staff and their subsequent relationship with students played a significant role in shaping post-secondary plans for the women in this study when they were high school students. Often, guidance counselors

are the primary gatekeepers to knowledge regarding college entrance (O'Donnell & Logan 2007). Several women in this study discussed the pivotal role of guidance counselors as opposed to teachers in shaping their ability to see or not see themselves as a future college student.

Literature (Dewitt, 2012) identifies an interpreted hierarchical power structure among school staff in terms of authority on post-secondary options. Teachers are responsible for teaching while guidance counselors are responsible for educating about opportunities after high school. Guidance counselors are perceived as being the most knowledgeable and thus are viewed by students in some cases as being the authority on college. Teachers in essence prepare students for life after high school, but guidance counselors determine how narrow or wide the aperture of opportunities is for such students. Even though teachers tend to have the most interaction with students through frequency of contact and more in depth interactions through one-on-one conversations with student, they are often not the “go to” staff for concretizing post high school plan. This occurs in spite of the teachers having a more direct relationship with students and acquiring the most knowledge about the students and their aspirations. Both within this study and in the literature (O'Donnell & Logan 2007), the gatekeepers of next steps were consistently the guidance counselors. Guidance counselors have a direct influence on students' attending or not attending college or an institution of higher learning after college.

Social capital suggests that the quality of social connections is a matter of type and nature. That is, who is in your social network matters but the role of the relationship also matters. Sungunro (2014) indicates student experiences from K-12 have an impact on the motivation to learn and continue to learn as adults. The students' perceived

experience and relationship with the guidance counselor, whether positive or negative, have a direct impact on the students' goals and life after high school. Plagens (2011) references how the role and nature of relationships with school staff such as guidance counselors work to either increase or stymie the development of higher education social capital. The amount and depth of awareness about college resulting from social connections and the women's social network impacted their access to college, often serving as a barrier. While the women spoke frequently and positively about familial social connections, those connections themselves had limited knowledge relative to accessing college. Lack of information about college education was symptomatic of the low social capital possessed by women in rural communities. Social capital plays a vital role in student participation in higher education beyond high school and impacts movement and next steps for students.

#### Isolation and Lack of Opportunity

Isolation and lack of opportunity is the final theme, which encompasses perceptual views of environment and the reality of rurality, consisting of insufficiency, low-paying jobs, and limited access to resources. Additional findings of the research suggest limited life experience in a small, rural neighborhood as a powerful geographical, psychological, and social constraint.

Understanding how isolation and lack of opportunity functions were two ways instrumental for the participants. A majority of the participants enumerated many constraints derived from their living in a small, impoverished rural neighborhood. Constraints included lack of transportation or no transportation, minimal financial means, lack of public resources such as a library, informative support regarding education from family and school staff. These constraints limited their chance for mobility, gainful



employment, and information about college and alternative life beyond the isolated rural community. Kim (2018) suggest that lack of industrialization and developmental progress in rural areas stifles opportunities to enroll in college and limits advancement in the area. This area of lack is inclusive of high school graduates in the area.

The majority of participants confessed discomfort, anxiety, and even fear about the world outside of their rural community. They expected that they would be “lost” and they would not be able to survive in the outside world. Booker-Drew (2017) references the impact of social capital for impoverished areas by stating “the value of relationships [and] recognizing that many children of color might not have access to opportunities not because of their intellect but due to the limited availability of social networks of power and influence” (p. 1). Sense of belonging is important for students to matriculate through college especially when they are coming from smaller, tightly knitted communities such as those found in rural areas.

It should be noted that spatial boundary and mobility constraint created by geographical isolation have translated into psychological boundaries and barriers in building new social relationships beyond the existing kinship and church-based network. Sense of belonging connects to spatial boundary and mobility constraint. One of most important and disheartening findings in this study was the arduous struggles that some of the very self-motivated participants faced when trying to pursue college education. They ultimately failed in some cases to do so due to financial constraints and competing responsibilities as a primary care-taker at home. Social capital assists in the development of students beyond high school and the development of supportive relationships that help in managing day to day responsibilities and in encouraging a positive sense of self. Decreased social capital or the mere absence of social capital impacts the educational

outcomes of students, particularly African-American students, residing in rural and impoverished areas. Increased social capital models opportunity for impactful networks and relationships, which enhances the goal of networking and social connections beyond the familiar realm and imposition of the responsibility to take care of family by foregoing opportunity for financial and educational stability.

### Implications

There are several implications from the findings of this study. These are implications for systemic changes for high schools, institutions of higher learning, public policy, and future research.

#### High Schools

It is imperative that a positive experience is provided for students attending high school. In the rural South, this experience can be limited due to isolation, lack of opportunity, and cultural mismatches however, there are creative measures that can be taken to assist and further assure a positive and successful experience. A cultural mismatch occurs when the racial and cultural identity of the school staff is not the same as that of the students and families of the community. To combat these issues, additional guidance counselors and better prepared counselors will ensure a more positive and equitable experience for the student. For guidance counselors, training on diversity, cultural, and sensitivity of rurality and students from rural areas will further increase the opportunity for success and increase the motivation and success rate of African-American women.

In addition, it is recommended that school districts explore the implementation of home visiting to not only increase social capital for students, but their parents and household members, as well. Home visiting could be an effective way to increase family

capital to facilitate mindset shifts and interactions within the community and school. These interactions will be a productive tool to implementing mobile education, which would bring the education to the community. Research suggests that such interactions are productive and effective (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Putnam, 2015). A conscientious effort to intentionally recruit teachers who look like the students and share common interests and cultures will offer resolution to the mismatch of teacher to student and will be impactful on the future of rural students.

#### Institutions of Higher Learning

It is recommended that institutions of higher learning implement stronger recruiting and outreach efforts and various forms of communicating with potential students from the rural South. This will entail a grass root effort of physically visiting the area and developing a rapport with families and students to grasp a concept of what is needed and what may be preventing students from applying or attending college.

Programmatic solutions regarding outreach to African-American women in rural areas could assist with rural students becoming more familiar with college life and the process of applying to college and receiving information on financial resources. Accessibility to higher education remains an issue for rural areas and more steps need to be taken to ensure a better opportunity for all who wish to pursue a college education.

#### Public Policy

Sociological forces have the potential to reshape opportunities creating gender parity, racial parity, and socio-economic parity. More proactive strategies are needed to address these various forms of inequity. One way to address this issue is to bring exposure through public policy with an emphasis on larger sociological forces that drive programmatic concerns.

## Future Research

Research is needed that further outlines the impact of living in a rural area on educational outcomes; particularly educational experiences of African-American students and their interaction, or lack thereof, with high school guidance counselors. Future studies that explore the mismatch of teachers and guidance counselors to students would be impactful. Finally additional research in brain science is needed that addresses the impact of scarcity on decision-making and educational outcomes.

## Limitations

This study intentionally selected eight participants, which limited generalizability due to the sample size being small. As the focus was on the individual narratives as guided by the individual participants and what they felt was most important to convey. Consequently, the narratives provided limited information about the local community's cultural, social, and economic context. As a result, it was hard to properly situate the participants' experiences and major findings in the unique local context of their rural community. Insufficient contextual information about the community context and lack of context-embedded analysis limited to scope of the study.

Further this study did not seek to examine racialized experiences directly. Therefore, little probing on racial experiences and racial dynamics in their school/community was done. To the extent that there were raised on issues by the participants, they were included in the analysis. Since the overall interview process and analysis focused on the concept of social capital and access to higher education, the structural aspects of the participants' racial experiences and unsupportive relationships at school and in the community were not fully probed in relation to their triply marginalized status as Black females living in a poverty-stricken rural community.

Following the general guidelines of phenomenological research, this study highlighted common threads that cut across the majority of participants' experiences. As a result, some subtle, yet still important variations noted in a few limited cases were not further probed or examined. Conducting a deeper and case-specific analysis could generate some valuable points that complement the thematic findings reported in this study. This is also relevant to the last limitation. This study was conducted in a unique regional context, the rural South. While its geographical uniqueness adds a great value to this study, the transferability of findings to different geographical contexts could be limited. The findings would be most transferable to similarly situated rural contexts.

### Conclusion

There is limited research on this African-American women in the rural South and their experiences accessing higher education. This study sought to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural South. The findings of this study sense of belonging, support relationships, and isolation and lack of opportunity have implications for high schools, institutions of higher learning, public policy, and future researchers of African-American women of the rural South. The findings of this study propose perceived barriers to accessing higher education for African-American women living in the rural South. The findings suggested negative education experiences, isolation, and lack of opportunity as perceived barriers for this group.

It is relevant that identified and perceived barriers to higher education are explored to ensure a fair and equal opportunity to the pursuit and successful completion of higher education for African-American women living in the rural South. Resolution includes administrators, educators, mentors, and volunteers that are dedicated to the cause

of exposure to higher education as well as elevate, encourage and foster increase in social capital and access to higher education.

As previously stated, there is limited research on African-American women in the rural South and their access to higher education. This study adds to the literature on access to higher education and the barriers that may prevent access to higher education for this population. A unique contribution of this study was developing understanding of the role of social capital and access to higher education for African-American women living in the rural South. This study provides purpose of increasing social capital in rural communities. Increase in social capital affords the possibilities of stronger networks and venturing outside of rural isolation to further enhance the desire to attend and increase accessibility to resources for higher education.

The study of African-American women in the rural South is a worthy and bountiful investment. White men must relinquish feelings of intimidation and the perceived loss of power as a result of the powerful impact these women will make on society if they gain access to higher education. This is an urgency. African-American women of the rural South have a profound purpose. These women have a spirit of resiliency that is rooted in the power and strength of overcoming adversity. The study and awareness that additional research of the experiences of African-American women in the rural South will bring forth is immeasurable.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about where you grew up.
  - a. What was your neighborhood like?
2. How did you learn about college? Tell me about the people who helped you learn about college.
  - a. Did your parents attend?
  - b. Did your sibling, close friends, or significant other attend?
  - c. Did your guidance counselor talk to you about college?
3. Tell me about your educational experiences growing up.
  - a. What did you like about school?
  - b. What did you dislike about school?
  - c. What school activities were you involved in?
4. Think back to when you were graduating from high school. What were your plans after high school?
5. What prevented you from going to college or completing college?
6. What challenges do you believe you experienced living in the rural south that impacted your decision to go to college or not go to college?
7. What difference would a college education make in your life?
8. At this point in your life, do you desire to go to college?
  - a. If so, what factors impact that desire?
  - b. What factors impact your ability to go to college at this point in your life?
9. What did I not ask you about your experience that you would like to talk about before we end the interview?



## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER



Greetings! My name is Stacey Barber. I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership Program in the College of Education at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. I am searching for possible participants for a qualitative, interview-based research study regarding access to higher education, which focus on identifying barriers to higher education for African-American women in the rural south.

The purpose of this study is to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural south; thus, I am recruiting African-American women between the ages of 18-30 years old from rural southern communities in South Carolina who have some college credits but are not longer pursuing a post-secondary degree or have not completed any college credits leading to an associate's or bachelor's degree. I am interested in your perceptions and experiences.

Your participation in this study would include one audio-recorded interview that will take approximately 60-75 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed. Your identifying information will be kept confidential by keeping the data secure and only the researchers will have access. Light refreshments will be available at the interview,

Your invaluable participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. If you feel that you meet the study criteria I previously mentioned and you are interested in participating, please contact me via phone at (704)488-7657 or email at [staceyybarber@gmail.com](mailto:staceyybarber@gmail.com) Additional information for you regarding this project: IRB approval UNCC IRB #17-0322. The faculty advisor is Dr. Lisa Merriweather (email: [lmerriwe@uncc.edu](mailto:lmerriwe@uncc.edu)).

I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Stacey Barber

## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL



Dear Participant:

I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership Program in the College of Education at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. I am interested in interviewing African-American woman who live in rural areas of South Carolina for a research study regarding access to higher education, which focuses on identifying barriers to higher education for African-American women in the rural south.

The purpose of this study is to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural south; thus, I am recruiting African-American women between the ages of 18-30 years old from rural southern communities in South Carolina who have some college credits but are no longer pursuing a college degree or have not completed any college credits leading to an associate's or bachelor's degree. I am interested in your perceptions and experiences.

Your participation in this study would include one audio-recorded interview that will take approximately 60-75 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed. Your identifying information will be kept confidential by keeping the data secure and only the researchers will have access. Light refreshments will be available at the interview,

Your invaluable participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. If you feel that you meet the study criteria I previously mentioned and you are interested in participating, please contact me via phone at (704)488-7657 or email at [staceybarber@gmail.com](mailto:staceybarber@gmail.com). Additional information regarding this project: IRB approval UNCC IRB #17-0322. The faculty advisor is Dr. Lisa Merriweather (email: [lmerriwe@uncc.edu](mailto:lmerriwe@uncc.edu)).

I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Stacey Barber

## APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT FLYER

**SISTAHS**

**OF THE**

**SOUTH**

SEEKING YOUR PARTICIPATION  
IN A RESEARCH STUDY DESIGNED  
TO IDENTIFY OBSTACLES TO  
ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION.



**MY SISTAHS! DO YOU  
MEET THE  
FOLLOWING:**

**\*Identify as a Black or  
African-American woman?**

**\*Between 18-30 years old**

**\* Reside in a rural area in  
South Carolina**

**\*Have some college credits  
but no longer pursuing a  
degree or never attended  
college**

**Contact Stacey**

**704-488-7657**

**[staceyvbarber@gmail  
.com](mailto:staceyvbarber@gmail.com)**

**Faculty Advisor:**

**Dr. Lisa  
Merriweather**

**[lmerriwe@uncc.edu](mailto:lmerriwe@uncc.edu)**

## APPENDIX E: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL

Dear Participant Name:

I want to thank you for willingness to participate in the interview for my research study. Your interview time is scheduled for <date> <time> at <location>. The purpose of this study is to identify barriers to higher education experienced by African-American women living in the rural south. You will be asked questions related to your education experiences.

Attached is a copy of the informed consent form that you will be asked to sign prior to the start of the interview. The informed consent form outlines the process of the interview. We will review the details of the form to make sure you have a clear understanding of the information and receive answers to any questions you may have regarding the process.

Light refreshments will be provided. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me at 704-488-7657 or email me at [staceyybarber@gmail.com](mailto:staceyybarber@gmail.com) Additional information regarding the project: IRB approval UNCC IRB #17-0322. The faculty advisor for this project is Dr. Lisa Merriweather (email: lmerriwe@uncc.edu).

Your participation and time are greatly appreciated.

Best,

Stacey

## APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



Department of Educational Leadership

9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

Title of the Project: Access to Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Stacey Barber, Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership at UNC-Charlotte

Co-investigator: Dr. Lisa Merriweather, Faculty Advisor in the Department of Educational Leadership at UNC-Charlotte

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**

You are being asked to participate in a research study titled, "Access to Higher Education: Barriers to higher education for African-American women in the rural South." The purpose of this study is to identify barriers to higher education. The study involves research that will be collected through interviews.

You are invited to participate in this study if you are:

- **African-American women between the ages of 18-30 and did not graduate from college**
- **Reside in the rural south**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer interview questions compiled by the investigator. Your participation will require 60-75 minutes. The project may involve risks that are not currently known. Participants may feel some mild emotional discomfort while discussing and reflecting on past or current experiences. Participants are encouraged to answer questions that fit their level of comfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. Benefits to you as a study participant may include motivation to return to college for a degree and/or receive clarification regarding barriers to higher education. Benefits to society may include increased college enrollment of African-American women.

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 identify barriers to higher education for African-American women living in the rural South.

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

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an African-American female, age 18 -30, and living in the rural South.

**What will happen if I take part in this study?**

If you choose to participate you will complete one individual interview for 60-75 minutes. The interview will be recorded using a digital recorder. The interview will also be transcribed. You will be provided the opportunity to review and comment on your completed transcript. The audio and transcription will be stored within secure Google Drive and only research team members will be given access privileges to the Google Drive folder(s), wherein the research data are saved. Any hard copies or portable storage devices used will be stored in the office of the researcher.

**What benefits might I experience?**

Benefits to you as a study participant may include motivation to return to college for a degree and/or receive clarification regarding barriers to higher education. Benefits to society may include increased college enrollment of African-American women.

### **What risks might I experience?**

The project may involve risks that are not currently known. Participants may feel some mild emotional discomfort while discussing and reflecting on past or current experiences. Participants are encouraged to answer questions that fit their level of comfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer.

### **How will my information be protected?**

Data collected will be stored within secure Google Drive and only research team members will be given access privileges to the Google Drive folder(s), wherein the research data are saved. Six months after the research is complete, the data and any identifiable information will be deleted. Any identifiable information collected as part of this study will remain confidential to the extent possible and will only be disclosed with your permission or as required by law.

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

The data collected will NOT be shared, however, findings may be disseminated at conferences or in journals.

### **Will I be paid for taking part in this study?**

You will not receive pay to participate in the study.

### **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 Dr. Lisa Merriweather (704-687-8740, lmerriwe@uncc.edu)

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other

than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 704-687-1871 or [uncc-irb@uncc.edu](mailto: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.

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Name (PRINT)

---

Signature

Date

---

Name & Signature of person obtaining consent

Date