Black Women's Perceptions of K-12 Experiences that Influenced their Preparation for College

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ABSTRACT

This critical phenomenological inquiry explored the college preparation experiences of ten high-ability, Black, women who grew up in poverty to identify influences from various family, school, and community environments contributing to their college readiness. I used a conceptual framework informed by both Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality and Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to frame this study and critically examine their responses. This specific paper reports 5 of the 9 themes that yielded from the inquiry: (1) prophetic excellence: family and friends support and expectations; (2) it takes a village: community culture and resources; (3) from chaperone to mentor: exploring the depth of K-12 academic relationships and experiences; (4) preparing for a home away from home: college exploration and preparation; (5) demystifying the process: I don't know what I do or don't need to know. Implications for anti-racist perspectives to inform the practices of counselor educators, school counselors, and school communities are discussed.

Keywords: Black women/girls, high-ability, college and career readiness, anti-racist college counseling

Preparing high school students to successfully enter post-secondary educational spaces (i.e., colleges, universities, vocational training) or the world of work increasingly gains the attention of K-12 educators, national laws, and state-level policies (Bryant, 2015; Castro, 2020; Mayes, 2020). College readiness is narrowly defined as a high school students' acquisition of basic knowledge and skills that adequately prepare them to succeed in credit-granting, non-remedial, courses within a postsecondary institution (ACT, 2018; Conley, 2014). Typically, quantitative markers such as a student's grade point average (GPA) and performance on college entrance exams (i.e., ACT and SAT) guide the perception of preparedness for college and is still the dominant metric used to formally assess a student (McFarland et al., 2019). Conley (2014) suggested four constructs guide our understanding of a student's preparedness for college and careers: (1) cognitive strategies; (2) content knowledge; (3) learning skills and techniques; and (4) transition knowledge and skills. As illustrated by these concepts, college readiness as defined assumes all students exist in academic spaces with the same cultural experiences, equal access to opportunities, void of oppression, and inherently places the burden of success on the individual student without holding the inadequate preparation environments accountable (Castro, 2020; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

The varying constructs used to define college readiness perpetually fail to uniquely triage the tools used to prepare Black girls for colleges and careers. Notably, these constructs

do not acknowledge the social/political realms Black girls and women traverse (i.e., racism and sexism) (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Additionally, these ideas support the illegitimate notion of meritocracy, the idea that one's aptitude and persistent efforts solely determine their success (McCall, 2013; Mijs, 2016; Porter & Byrd, 2021; Porter et al., 2018). Constructs that uphold the one-dimensional definition of success and ignore the role of systemic oppression are incomplete (best) and systemically violent (worst). These paradigms of success do not provide room for student-driven conceptualizations and center White-ideals about achievement (Castro, 2020; Porter & Byrd, 2021). Additionally, they do not align with an anti-racist epistemology. Being anti-racist is to consciously, systematically, and continuously confront racism and any inequalities, discrimination, and prejudices based on race (Kalin, 2002; Ohito, 2016). Therefore, maintaining a narrow, culturally-deficit lens of college readiness upholds a faulty construct that continues to render the process of understanding the college preparation needs of Black girls and women insufficient and maintains systemic racism.

The career development efforts facilitated by school counselors, school-based career counselors, and other K-12 educators are naïvely grounded on the assumption that Black women are academically successful because of college enrollment and graduation statistics when comparing them to their racial counterparts. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported that during the 2017-18 academic year, approximately 11% of the Bachelor's degrees conferred to women were granted to Black women. These statistics, however, do not consider the stories of Black girls stereotyped to certain career paths/college choices because of biased school counselors and K-12 staff. Additionally, these statistics do not account for the emotional and mental anguish experienced across their lifetime when being made to feel inadequate in high school or ignored in college (Byrd & Porter, 2021; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter & Byrd, 2021; Zamani, 2003). Scholars have and continue to highlight the influence of non-academic conditions such as motivation (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015), high school culture (Roderick et al., 2011), and social-emotional health (Bryan et al., 2015) on a student's college preparedness and retention. These non-academic characteristics are more prevalent for Black girls and women and warrant more attention in the research and by K-12 staff when preparing them for college and the world (Porter & Byrd, 2021; Porter et al., 2018; Russell & Russell, 2015). Higher education scholarship exploring the experiences of Black women on college campuses has documented that misguided and incomplete college preparation in K-12 settings greatly influences all facets of development (e.g., academic, personal/social, and career). Notably, college and career development activities that do not acknowledge the social/political realities Black girls will face in their acquisition of

college/career success will negatively influence their development across their lifetime.

Overview of Experiences of Black Undergraduate Women

Across several decades, scholars have explored the experiences of Black undergraduate women to provide language and context to shed light on the impact these overlooked nuances have on their social, emotional, and academic development (Banks, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Commodore et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2008). While there are scholars devoted to this work, there is still limited understanding of the unique influences of gendered, racialized, and anti-Black realities on how they grow, see themselves, and how others see them (Dumas, 2016; Patton & Croom, 2017; Patton & Haynes, 2018). Notably, these experiences impact all facets of their development and are frequently overlooked because tropes/characterizations (i.e., strong Black woman, angry Black woman, Black girl magic) have historically shrouded our ability to understand the damage caused. Black women are assumed to be "okay" because strength and success from a western lens is an accomplishment and because these characterizations render them as individuals undeserving of help; invisible (Corbin, 2018; Thomas, 2015; West et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2020). However, scholarly explorations of these nuances have uncovered the need to

acknowledge Black undergraduate women's identity intersections (Patton & McClure, 2009; McGuire et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2020); mental health needs (Byrd & Porter, 2021; Jones et al., 2016; Hotchkins, 2017; Roland & Agosto, 2017); and their academic/career development experiences (McPhereson, 2017; Porter et al., 2018; Storlie et al., 2018). Additionally, few studies (Brown et al., 2017; Corbin et al., 2018; Szymanski et al., 2016) have explored the experiences of Black undergraduate women navigating racial battle fatigue (Corbin et al., 2018) and gendered racism on college campuses which uncovers how their experiences are different from Black men and White women (Patton & Njoku, 2019). Despite being categorized as social, emotional, or academic, these experiences (coupled with how they experience marginalization at the intersections of their identities) are intertwined with a Black girl or woman's preparation for college and careers. The present study expands the limited scholarship focused on the career development of Black girls and women and notably highlights the non-academic characteristics that prominently influence their sense of career readiness. The overarching research question was: How do Black women at PWIs who are high-ability and low-income perceive their experiences as contributors to their college readiness?

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Ecological Systems Theory

The theoretical framework undergirding this study incorporated Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) intersectionality and Urie Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979). I purposely chose both to inform the lens for all aspects of the study for specific reasons. Intersectionality allowed me to understand the unique ways Black girls and women experience oppression, and the ecological systems theory illuminated all the environments and interactions they traverse. Together, these theories created a comprehensive theoretical framework that guided me to critically examine the college preparation experiences of high-ability, Black women who grew up in poverty. Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the term intersectionality to illuminate the intersections of racialized and gendered prejudice, discrimination, and violence faced by Black women and women of Color. Crenshaw's (1991) "intersectionality" provides language to describe the peculiar structural oppression Black women and women of Color described across many decades of fighting for gender and racial justice (Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 1982; hooks, 1981; Truth, 1851). Grounded in critical race and Black feminist epistemologies, intersectionality is a theoretical framework, or lens, that unearths the complexities of the oppression

experienced by marginalized people within U.S. systems and structures. Harris and Patton (2019) stated, "Rather than an additive approach that frames multiple identities as isolated and resulting in summative inequalities, an intersectional approach allows for a focus on how interdependent sociohistorical systems influence interdependent identity-specific experiences" (p. 348).

Crenshaw (1991) described three levels of intersectionality - structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality explains the inner workings of how systemic oppression is embedded throughout power structures that create inequitable treatment and experiences for historically marginalized persons. Political intersectionality scrutinizes procedures, practices, and policies fail to fully acknowledge parts of the discrimination faced at one axis (i.e., single-axis examination of gender as oppose to the intersection of gender, race, and class) versus another which ignores the totality of the experiences of the person marginalized. Representational intersectionality considers how manifestations of historical and current tropes negatively position Black women in various ecological spaces. When one contests these images, Black women are rendered either more invisible or hypervisible.

Notably, within the context of college readiness, or broadly college success, an intersectional lens helps to clarify the nuances present in the success stories of Black girls

and women in educational spaces. These stories refrain from acknowledging that Black women do not navigate these spaces unscathed and are frequently viewed as outsiders in systems that are foundationally laced with white supremacy and sexism (Commodore et al., 2018; Patton & Hayes, 2018). An intersectional lens provides the social/political context to identify and dissect how oppression is perpetuated across all facets of life for Black girls and women (Patton & Hayes, 2018; Porter et al., 2018) and hypervisible (Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2016).

Ecological Model

Urie Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory, also known as the social ecological model, is a theoretical framework initially introduced as an ecological theory in the 1970s. Due to limited scopes used by developmental psychologists at that time, the ecological systems theory was created to expand the ways psychologists examined the social conditions that informed the development of children (Brofenbrenner, 1979). This theory, used in social sciences, explores the relationships between individuals and their social environments and delineates a series of nested systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) (Brofenbrenner, 1979).

Researchers exploring students of Color's educational and health experiences have used Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore the varying influences on their academic and personal/social development (Derlan & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Graves & Sheldon, 2018). Broadly, an ecological lens afforded me the language and framing to acknowledges the experiences outside of the educational building (i.e., familial, mentorship, community) that influences a student's identity, academic, and career development. Additionally, it affords researchers and K-12 staff a lens that acknowledge the cultural uniqueness of students and how these differences, if recognized , can inform a strengths-based academic or career development approach (Albritton et al., 2020; Emdin, 2016; Ford, 1994; Williams et al., 2020).

Methods

A phenomenological inquiry approach with a critical lens was chosen to answer the research question: How do Black women at PWIs who are high-ability and low-income perceive their experiences as contributors to their college readiness? Phenomenology seeks to uncover the nuances of universally lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty & Crotty, 1998). Davis (2020) stated:

The phenomenological method is an attempt to offer prescriptive descriptions of the world in which we live. It involves the transformation of the way we understand our world such that we can be astonished before it — the attempt to see our world as if for the first time, through unjaded eyes (p. 16).

A phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the college preparation experiences of Black women within the current study context. Limited research has explored the contextual influences of the relationship between one's race, gender, and educational achievement with college readiness (Mayes & Hines, 2014), so phenomenology provides the autonomy needed to understand the phenomenon broadly. Additionally, qualitative research greatly encourages an atmosphere where the experiences of Black women can be 'made real' (Crenshaw, 2016), and it supports the alignment of all facets of the research process with the cultural needs of the participants (Bhattacharya, 2017; Evans-Winters, 2019). Next, I describe my positionality, data collection, and data analysis.

Positionality of the Researcher

I am a cis-gender Black woman and a counselor educator. I am middle-class but grew up in rural poverty and my positionality is grounded in a critical political standpoint (Prilleletensky, 1994). My subjectivity is situated within intersectional, critical, and Black feminist epistemology. This lens informs my teaching, service, research, and how I make meaning of power and oppression (Evans-Winters, 2019). Being a Black woman who shares personal experiences with those I mentor, teach, and research influences the framework from which I make meaning of the voices of Black girls and women. My goal is to center and expound on how Black girls and women navigate anti-Black, sexist, and oppressive educational spaces (Love, 2019; Venus-Winters, 2019) and explore how K-12 educators can better meet their career development unique needs.

Participants and Data Collection

Ten Black undergraduate women in their second semester at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest comprised my sample and their demographics are reported in Table 1 (see page 77). The inclusion participant criteria included: (a) cis-gender woman, (b) Black/African American or of mixed racial heritage to include Black/African American, (c) high-ability, (d) currently enrolled, full- or part-time in the undergraduate program at a predominantly White college or university, (e) grew up in a low-income household, (f) 18–19 years of age, and (g) attended high school in the United States and graduated within the past 12 months. A research-informed criteria were created and vetted by gifted education scholars to determine the inclusion criteria "high-ability." To meet these criteria, participants confirmed at least two of the following statements were true: (1) participated in gifted and talented, (2) graduated with a 3.5 GPA or higher, (3) graduated in the top 10% of their class, (4) scored at or above a 28 on the ACT or 1880 on the SAT. Either receiving free or reduced lunch identified a low-income household at any point in high school.

Data collection began following Institutional Review Board approval. Black women across the campus were made aware of the study by email listservs, flyers, and targeted visits to student-led organization meetings. I collected various forms of data by way of a demographic questionnaire, one-hour long semi-structured individual interview, and an invitation to a one-hour long focus group. Each interview protocol was reviewed by a researcher who previously engaged in similar work and piloted with a similar-aged participant before use. Once participants emailed me to demonstrate interest in the study, I sent the informed consent document and a demographic questionnaire. After which, a date and time was established for the individual interview where we reviewed the informed consent and the participant chose a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Individual interviews were chosen because they allowed me to engage the participant with pre-specified, open ended questions, but provided the flexibility and scope to probe beyond the surface of the initial response (Patton, 2002). This approach aligned with the purpose of the inquiry and the critical nature of the theoretical framework informed by intersectionality and ecological systems theory which influenced the pre-specified and follow-up questions (Bhattacharya, 2017). Similarly, focus groups were chosen to provide a space where the realities of Black women could be centered through engaged dialogue while building community with one another (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Each individual interview lasted at least one hour,

was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Once all of the individual interviews were completed, the ten Black women were invited to participate in two focus groups. Of the ten, six volunteered to engage in dialogue in two separate focus groups about their college preparation. Similar to the individual interview, each focus group lasted at least one hour, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Trustworthiness was supported throughout the research process but namely through researcher notes, member checking, and utilizing a peer reviewer (Stahl & King, 2020). I wrote notes throughout the research process and especially after facilitating individual or focus group interviews. Oftentimes, participants would remain after the interview to convey how the interview made them feel which was seemingly cathartic. For some who remained after meeting, I felt they saw me, a Black woman, as someone for whom they could connect with in the isolated spaces they experienced at the PWI (Johnson-Bailey, 1999). My notes conveyed what I observed and how it made me feel to fully face how it influences the data analysis process. Each participant was invited to review all interview transcripts and provided an opportunity to evaluate the final themes. Across all solicitations for member checking, one participant provided suggestions for the final themes and the others responded with agreement as to how their experiences were represented. Finally, I met with two peer reviewers twice throughout the data analysis

process to discuss how I was making-meaning of the data. They offered suggestions and most importantly challenged my analysis to ensure I was not interpreting the experiences of the Black women as my own.

Data Analysis

I utilized a modified data analysis method (Moustakas, 1994) to examine the data within the qualitative analysis software, Atlas Ti. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) state phenomenological analysis, "Emerges from a philosophical tradition; examines how a participant experiences and later describes a particular phenomenon" (p. 146). Each interview transcript was read individually multiple times and I focused on common words and phrases to be coded. From the verbatim transcripts, each statement was considered within the context of the experience (i.e., college preparation) and the theoretical lens (i.e., intersectionality and ecological systems theory). I highlighted and assigned an initial code, or preliminary codes, for all relevant statements using Atlas Ti. These initial codes were discussed with the peer debriefers before the next step to increase trustworthiness. Eventually, I generated a list of initial codes and then analyzed them to create a list of non-overlapping and non-repetitive statements to generate themes that described their experiences with the phenomenon, preparing for college. Each theme was described and assigned a meaning incorporating participant language. I shared the final themes with the peer debriefers and participants. Feedback was incorporated to

yield a total of 9 themes. The dissemination of these findings are separated into two manuscripts based on audience – K-12 educators and higher education faculty/staff. Separating the themes into these two broad groups allows me to tailor the results to the audience who may best be able to integrate what was learned. The current paper provides insight for K-12 educators and highlights 5 of the 9 themes in the Findings section from the study.

Findings

The findings from this critical phenomenology answered the question: How do Black women at PWIs who are high-ability and low-income perceive their experiences as contributors to their college readiness? The 5 of the 9 total themes represented in this paper are: (1) prophetic excellence: family and friends support and expectations; (2) it takes a village: community culture and resources; (3) from chaperone to mentor: exploring the depth of K-12 academic relationships and experiences; (4) preparing for a home away from home: college exploration and preparation; (5) demystifying the process: I don't know what I do or don't need to know.

Prophetic Excellence: Family and Friends Support and Expectations

Participants described, throughout the individual and focus group interviews, familial, peer, cultural – related relationships that helped them prepare for college. These relationships were described as external

motivation and as sources of support while traversing internal and external conflicts and they described college-going as a destiny or prophecy regardless of circumstances. When discussing familial influences, participants emotionally recalled the crucial role families played in motivating them to succeed and regardless of familial education attainment, attending college was an expectation. Green captured this overall feeling when she stated, "I feel it was something that you just did after high school …is just, if you got into a college, you went, you know, no matter if it was community college or a university." Ashely remembers her grandmother when she stated, "but my grandmother has always just basically expected me to go to college because she also didn't—um, I don't think she finished high school." Magenta was born on a Caribbean island and moved here at a very young age. She reflected often upon strict expectations from the family to perform well in school. She noted many of them did not attend college and some did not complete high school yet they seem to always have high hopes and remain positive. She stated:

I came to the country, a really young age, so, my parents — they were obviously strict and everything, and they were really sheltered... they would always protect me from certain things. And they would always say school was super-important.

Some participants described observing parents sacrificing resources (i.e., time and money) to create more opportunities for them.

Aubrey stated, "She (her mother) …would form relationships with our school counselors and really get us into…or have us talk to our older cousins or her-her coworker's sons and daughters that are already in college." Others reflect upon parents investing in their child's interests. Nova stated, "I always had a fascination with how the human body worked, and I loved kids. Um, so my father, he took me to a science museum down in the city of Chicago, and he, you know, looked for specific exhibits for me to study."

When discussing peers, participants expressed the people around them also motivated them to work harder and they did the same for others. Nova shared, "I hung out with a majority of people who took honors and advanced placement courses, so there was always kind of that mindset of having to constantly study and make sure that our grades were sufficient." This sentiment was echoed by Mary and Magenta. Notably, Nala added:

And we'd just all go to the computer lab and help each other write our essays, bounce ideas back and forth between each other…So I had a little mini support group, and we just made sure that we were kind of on it with each other.

Some participants such as Nala and Aubrey critiqued their peers' level of maturity and motivation. Aubrey:

The neighborhood kids on the other hand, were nothing…we were definitely on, we're ten levels ahead of them. And you could just tell…but it's not their fault. They were just products of their environment.

This theme highlights the positive influence of familial and peer support on one's sense of readiness especially with regards to motivation. The next theme extends these thoughts but considers community culture and relationships.

It Takes a Village: Community Culture and Resources

This theme illuminates the relationships and experiences participants had, or wish they had, within their communities to prepare them for college. Many expressed they wished their communities were more involved in their preparation process by providing more resources (i.e., time, people, money). Broadly they discussed the community expectations, involvement of faith-based organizations and financial resources and opportunities. Across participants there were varying experiences in their communities around expectations to attend college. Ashley stated, "as far as my neighborhood, I would say that there isn't a great—it may vary from family to family, but overall, there probably is not a great emphasis on going to college." Green, on the other hand, conveyed it was "frowned upon" if you did not go to college, and stated, "I feel like the whole community influenced my situation or to go to college because, pretty much…if

you don't go to college, you're, you know, gonna be—like you just have your diploma."

Others specifically acknowledged community programs that helped them prepare for college. Notably, Aubrey described her experiences at an afterschool program, "I went to a daycare until I was 13 years old but they had us do our homework before we got to play with anything." Ashley shared the Boys and Girls Club helped her explored careers and reiterated that not all pathways lead to college. Melissa wished her community had more role models outside of school which connects with the next theme focusing on K-12 experiences and relationships.

From Chaperone to Mentor: Exploring the Depth of K-12 Academic Relationships and Experiences

This theme evolved from very lengthy discussions about the participant experiences in K-12 settings preparing for college. The Black women reflected upon what they perceived to be effective and ineffective practices in high school now that they have completed one semester of college. These reflections involved discussions about school college-going culture, relationships with school counselors, connections with teachers, and academic rigor. Most participants felt their high school embodied a college-going culture. Ashley stated of her school:

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I mean our school heavily influence — I mean heavily emphasized that you have to apply to a college… our principal even was talking about making it mandatory in order for you to get your diploma. That you had to at least apply and get accepted to a college.

Aubrey and Victoria recalled it being an unspoken expectation and heavily stressed. The participants also offered a critique when observing the disparities in college preparation approaches among high schools. Aubrey felt her brother's high school offered more resources to support his development compared to her own. She specifically noted a lack of opportunities to attend college fairs or visit colleges. Ashely, Melissa, and Aubrey noted high school "choice" played a major role in the opportunities and resources you had and acknowledged some peers who did not have access to what they perceived as better schools had worse outcomes. Victoria, on the other hand, admitted the resources were there but she did not take advantage of all the opportunities. Nala felt her high school did not let Black girls know there is more to life than high school and stated, "There's nothing that's too high that you can achieve so if you want to be astronaut, okay, let's make a plan. Let's do it." Olivia broadly felt her high school did not support students. She stated when asked what her high school could do more of:

Support. Just basically caring about the wellbeing of someone… not supporting somebody because you have to, but supporting someone because you want to…I don't know…just being genuine and support.

Finally, participants discussed how their relationships with school counselors and other school staff influenced their preparation for college varied. Some discussed positive relationships with school counselors. When reflecting upon what she perceived as a meaningful relationship, Aubrey described her school counselor as being proactive by advising her of personalized opportunities. Aubrey conveyed, "she would always, uh, definitely help me…she would always call me out of class and stuff and be like …'Hey, this is what I found.' Cuz we had a really good relationship." Aubrey shared she not only felt her school counselor was there for her academically but demonstrated compassion when Aubrey was injured by checking in and ensuring her homework was completed. Additionally, Aubrey observed her school counselor taking the time to get to know her family. Similarly, Magenta spoke positively of her school counselor when she stated, "So, I feel he really motivated students to just be themselves and everything, especially. And he was just accepting of whatever." Melissa and Ashley also conveyed positive relationships with their school counselor and felt they were patiently supported and provided with details they did not know they needed to know. Mary, on the other hand, felt discouraged by her school counselor and recalled:

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I remember one day we were talking about my ACT score…I was like, 'Oh, yeah, I got a 23.' And she …'What schools are you looking at?' I was like, "Oh, University of Joe, University of Jane" and some other school I named off. And she goes, "You probably have to retake the ACT because that score isn't good enough.

Similar to Mary, Olivia felt her school counselor was unapproachable and Green felt hers was absent and not "very nice."

Others described teachers who helped them prepare for college. Most participants positively reflected upon teachers who challenged them. Olivia stated:

Most of my teachers were sticklers, if that makes any sense…they were…real hard to the point. But, I mean, I think that helped… prepare me, cuz I feel as if somebody's being too soft on you won't know how to get through stuff, when things get hard.

Aubrey reflected upon being challenged by her Black literature teacher and felt they was invested in their success and felt there was an kinship. Aubrey described:

And she always was like a mom to all of us. So we-we were always like, oh my God….we never liked to disappoint her. If we made her angry, it was like, oh my god…I'm so sorry. We would always…literally would like bring this woman… food and stuff like that just because I loved her so much. She was just so — she really pushed us outside of our boxes and stuff.

Ashley and Nova both described teachers they did not care for but felt what they learned helped in college because they were challenged. Others reflected upon negative experiences with teachers and viewed them as disengaged. Nala, for example, stated:

A lot of teachers I know from personally my high school; they didn't care about a good half of the students. They just went, got their paycheck and went home…If a teacher doesn't like you just for a simple fact that you're of maybe a race or sex or something, they're not going to help you. They're just not. They're going to grade your work, they're going to talk to you and engage with you in class but when it comes to getting that extra one-on-one help they're not going to help you. My problem is why are you a teacher? We definitely need more teachers that want to help students.

In the focus group, Aubrey agreed with Nala and recalled teachers stating, "It looks like you're never going anywhere in life anyway."

Overwhelmingly, participants felt taking advanced placement (AP) and honors courses helped prepare them for the academic rigor of college. However, many of them discussed in retrospect, they wished they learned more about time management and study skills. Notably, Mary described juggling multiple assignments in high school helped her prepare for college.

The relationships highlighted in this theme reflect the ways K-12 environments encouraged and discouraged students as they prepared for college. These reflections connect

well with the next theme discussing the college exploration process.

Preparing for a Home Away from Home: College Exploration and Preparation
Across many of the other themes, participants described relationships, experiences, and social conditions they felt prepared them for college. This theme focuses on the specific task of preparing for the transition from high school to college in the areas of college choice, entrance preparation, and financial literacy.

Participants discussed what influenced their college choice. These thoughts varied from how they felt on campus, money, to family influence. For example, Ashley stated:

This university was the cheapest option for me, but it was like I didn't want to go to John Doe University. I wanted to be in a big city. I wanted to be in a big — a really large city. I wanted to be far away from home…so distance, and then the size of this school is really intimidating for me, cuz I was planning to go to a small university… 10,000 or less.

Of the participants, Ashley was the only Black woman in the freshman class of the honors college at the time. At the end of the interview, Ashely cried, revealed some mental health challenges to include suicidal ideation, and conveyed she asked her mom if she could leave because she was so unhappy because she felt isolated and tired of being the only. Her mom advised her no, because the tuition was so low. Despite being mentally

exhausted, Ashley still completed her first semester with a 3.6 GPA.

Others discussed the entrance exams. Most participants took the ACT and fifty percent of the participants reported scoring at least a 28 on the ACT or 1880 or higher on the SAT. Some participants described experiencing anxiety because of entrance exam scores. Magenta shared, "I was really nervous about my ACT score 'cuz I'm not a good test-taker. So I was one of those people whose worried I wouldn't get into any school or anything."

Finally, participants discussed their strategies to financially prepare for college. Many discussed a lack of financial resources in their families motivated them to do well in high school to secure scholarships. Mary stated, "I think my parents just basically told me, 'Just keep your grades up, and hopefully you'll get the funding from that. And hopefully it'll either be all of it or enough where we can pay without going into debt".

The discussions highlighted in this theme reflect the ways anxiety about college entrance exams, financial resources, and college choice look different for Black, high ability women who experience financial scarcity. The concerns presented within this theme, in some ways, was addressed by relationships or experiences described in the final theme highlighted next.

Demystifying the Process: I Don't Know What I Do or Don't Need To Know

The final theme evolved from conversations about relationships or experiences the participants described as navigators who demystify the college-preparation process. This theme intertwines with previously described themes. Notably, participants described navigators being school staff or mentors. Green shared of one of her AP teachers:

I guess the most where I learned about college was my AP class with my teacher… it was kinda scary. She made it seem like it wasn't so bad, and she just kinda walked through the process with everyone in applying and stuff. So it was nice.

Similarly, Melissa reflected upon the limitations with understanding college preparation among family members and how school counselors and teachers helped her decide on a career path because she was unsure what to do and stated, "They told me everything they knew about college. They—I still talk to them now, even in college, because, like I said, my parents can't give me much information. But I text them all the time." Nala added that her godmother was also a person who demystified the process by sharing stories about when she was in college. Aubrey conveyed mentorship is something she still seeks as an undergraduate student because, "you need somebody there to make sure that you're going in the right direction with your college experiences and stuff."

This theme connects all the previously discussed themes because in many ways all the experiences and relationships described by the participants demystified something they were unsure or unaware of, college.

Discussion

The experiences represented in the 5 themes discussed in this phenomenology provide insight into how Black women, after one semester of college, reflect upon their preparation within their families, communities, and K-12 settings. To make meaning of their experiences across these settings, I situate the discussion section in Crenshaw's (1991) three dimensions of intersectionality (e.g., structural, political, and representational) because this lens connects to the framework used to underpin the study and it provides a structure to delineate the different ways intersectionality can aid in understanding the experiences of Black undergraduate women.

Structural Intersectionality

Even at a young age, Black women are socialized to navigate educational structures, policies, and practices to achieve what they define as success against various odds (Patton & Hayes, 2018; Porter et al., 2018). Throughout the themes presented, participants discussed ways they circumvented barriers (policies, people, and internal/external thoughts of value) and identified ways to get their needs met as they prepared for college. Bryan et al. (2009) stated

Black girls are the group most likely to reach out to school counselors for college information. This is not by chance; it is a direct result of the social/political structures Black women have learned to negotiate for centuries. For example, Aubrey conveyed her mom would connect her with anyone who could provide insight about the college preparation process. Aubrey, similar to other participants, observed her mom making use of her networks and resources to create connections to support the success of her daughter.

Additionally, the structures represented in the current findings are best categorized as familial, community, and academic. When discussing these structures, participants directly and indirectly described what they recall as expectations related to college which were overwhelmingly positive even if their family did not attend college and most of them discussed their parents. Holcomb-McCoy (2010) examined the beliefs of parental involvement among 22 high school counselors in high-poverty and schools heavily enrolled by Black and other students of Color. Many of the school counselors noted consulting with parents is a major part of their job, but only a few conveyed inviting parents to volunteer or conferencing with parents. As illustrated in the current study, parents want to help their children, but if they have not attended college, they may feel powerless. Bryant (2015) expressed Black parents are less likely to have completed college and may need more information. This phenomenon is not

reflective of a low value in attending college among Black parents, but a reflection of barriers created by structural racism that have over generations impacted college-going culture in Black communities. School counselors can help by sharing resources with parents and creating informational sessions that align with their schedules.

Political Intersectionality
Political intersectionality appears in many instances throughout the participant responses. Notably, the anxiety experienced around performing well on college entrance exams comparable to the ACT or SAT. McFarland et al. (2019) described affluent White students consistently score higher on the ACT. Bryant (2015) highlighted a similar sentiment and stated, "African American students are far less likely to be ready for college, with those in high-poverty schools being the least prepared" (p. 1) is too often reflected in much of the college and career readiness research, but it does not adequately antagonize the root of the cyclical issue Black students face. Black students are not inherently inept to being college ready but the way we measure college readiness fails to address the insidious role of systemic racism (Castro, 2020; Stewart, 2007). Castro (2020) expressed, "By focusing solely on individual students, the larger racialized and classed context of educational opportunity is ignored and as a result, individual students become targets to be fixed." This is apparent in the tools used by school counselors to prepare students for colleges and careers. Notably, the

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student (ASCA M & B) (2014) aligns with the myth of meritocracy because the standards supports the assumption all students have access to the same opportunities, resources, and are treated equally in educational spaces (Washington et al., in press). Therefore tools used to evaluate Black students on a daily basis (i.e., ASCA M & B), yearly basis (i.e., school report cards and standardized tests), and for college entrance (i.e., ACT and SAT) systemically and repeatedly characterize Black girls as inherently flawed and deficit (Castro, 2020).

Representational Intersectionality

Representational intersectionality provides a lens to critically illustrate the stereotypical characterizations that shape how Black girls and women grow to see themselves and others characterize them. The oppression faced by Black women at the intersection of race, gender, and class contributed to the manifestation of historical images, or tropes, such as mammy, matriarch, welfare mother/ queen, jezebel, and sapphire (Collins, 2000, 2009). Presently, these tropes are expanded to include the angry Black woman, strong Black woman, and superwoman (Ashley, 2014; Corbin et al., 2018; West et al., 2016). The participants in the current study are beginning to reflect an internalization of the strong Black woman (SBW) characterization. SBW trope is a stereotypical controlling image that portrays Black women as sacrificially resilient and autonomous and is mentally and

physically harmful (West et al., 2016). Many of the participants described working relentlessly, but notably Ashely described experiencing mental health challenges to include suicidal ideation and, in the midst, she still performed well academically. This misaligns with what the literature states about college age students and suicidal ideation. De Luca et al. (2016) reported among college age students there is a correlation between low GPA and suicidal ideation but there is little research exploring what this looks like among students of Color. SBW offers some context to help make-meaning of Ashley's case. Donovan and West (2014) suggested Black women use SBW as their shield to ward off or cope with the varying forms of oppression faced (racism, sexism, classism).

Implications for High School Counselors

The current study yields implications for many individuals who work with Black girls in K-12 and other academic settings to include administrators, gifted education coordinators, and teachers. However, school counselors are the navigators in schools charged with assisting students with demystifying the college preparation process (ASCA, 2014; Hines et al., 2011). The current study conveys results to help school counselors increase their anti-racist practices when facilitating college preparation with students. These implications include: (a) anti-racism begins within you, (b) collaborate with Black families and community partners, and (c) disrupt racist college preparation practices.

First, for school counselors to actively work to be anti-racist, the journey begins with an admission that racism is real and permeates all facets of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and an understanding that the journey is for a lifetime. Anti-racism has quickly become the new buzzword in educational practices. However, it is not a professional identity or tool one may try to 'see' if it works because it takes commitment (Williams et al., in press). Educational spaces institute school-wide practices like social-emotional learning or restorative justice to see if it works in their communities. However, to genuinely practice anti-racism one cannot isolate it to one aspect of one's life (i.e., at school/work) or use it in one setting (i.e., career development) to see if it helps when working with students of Color. "Anti-racism is an approach one embodies across all facets of their lives that involves actively identifying, challenging, and changing the values, institutional structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic oppression" (Williams et al., in press). So, one must begin, continue, and persist throughout the journey to eradicate thoughts and actions that perpetuate racism. One may start by integrating Black, notably Black feminist,

> **"The current study conveys results to help school counselors increase their anti-racist practices when facilitating college preparation with students. These implications include: (a) anti-racism begins within you, (b) collaborate with Black families and community partners, and (c) disrupt racist college preparation practices."**

perspectives in your growth toolkit (i.e., books, webinars) and surround yourself with people who challenge your bias.

Second, school counselors are encouraged to avoid viewing Black families from the deficit lens, which is reinforced by representations on television, in the media, and shared by others. Additionally, school counselors should collaborate with Black families and community partners to expand college preparation awareness beyond the school building. As mentioned previously, collaborating with families to create a college-going culture and visiting community agencies (i.e., The Boys and Girls Club, church) to support their college preparation efforts demonstrates you value the community and the knowledge they hold. Third, school counselors must actively work to disrupt racist college preparation policies and practices in your school, region, and nationally by addressing disparities related to standardized tests and college preparation examinations (Castro, 2020). Additionally, school counselors are encouraged to utilize postmodern career development tools which provide a culturally responsive approach to help Black girls identify careers and colleges

(Albritton et al., 2020). Notably, school counselors should also antagonize data related to disparities that may exist if Black girls are represented in gifted, advanced placement, and honors courses (Mayes & Hines, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

The present study offers transferable empirical evidence to support the need for more qualitative explorations of the college and career preparation experiences of Black women. The limitations of the current study include: (1) all the participants were recruited at one large public PWI in the Midwest, (2) the criteria to determine low-income status was solely dependent on the participants memory of obtaining free and reduced lunch in high school, and (3) the interview protocol should have allowed participants the space to share about other cultural identities that have influenced their college readiness. To mitigate these limitations, researchers are encouraged to qualitatively explore the college preparation experiences of Black women across institution type (i.e., private, public, historically Black colleges), region (i.e., West, South), and identify participants who attended different types of high schools (i.e., rural, suburban, urban). Additionally, to acquire a more accurate understanding of a participant's socio-economic status, researchers are encouraged to learn more about financial aid reporting which provides more details about an individual's economic standing.

To expand upon the current topic, future research should delve deeper into the role of relationships in a Black girl's perception of preparedness for college. For example, participants mentioned mentors, navigators, and individuals they viewed as mothers and mother-figures. Exploring the connection of such relationships with a Black undergraduate woman's motivation to complete college would extend the current study in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

Over the past decades, scholarship exploring the unique experiences of Black girls and women has grown, but more work is needed to deeply understand how they prepare, navigate, and make-meaning of their career and college preparation. To do this effectively, school counselors and school-based career counselors are encouraged to actively create anti-racist environments where Black girl's academic, career, and personal/social development is not disrupted. Additionally, they are encouraged to create spaces where Black girls are made to feel accepted, supported, and are encouraged to explore careers and colleges without stereotypical confines. To do this well, school counselors and other school personnel facilitating college readiness are encouraged to focus on unpacking their own bias on an ongoing bases and to genuinely connect with their student's families and communities. (JCA)

Table 1.

Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Female	African American/ Black	AP	Dual Enrollment	IB	GATE	GPA 3.5 or higher	HS Class Rank Top 10%	ACT 28 or higher; SAT 1880 or higher	Low-income household	18-19 years old	Graduated HS w/in the past 12 months
Victoria	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Melissa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nala	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nova	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ashley	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mary	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Green	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Magenta	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aubrey	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Olivia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

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