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THE VOICES OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHERS AS
POTENTIAL AGENTS FOR CHANGE: EDUCATION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE
LEARNING

by

Heather Suzette Bonds

A Dissertation

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Abstract

Many African American single mothers have embarked on an academic journey, which oftentimes symbolizes the desire of these mothers to fight against structural and personal forces that have prevented them from achieving life goals, one of which is moving beyond poverty. Despite their efforts, this population continues to encounter barriers to access, retention, and completion of their educational endeavors. There is much literature documenting public and political discourse surrounding poverty policy and the dominant imagery created by this discourse that influence policy decisions. However, is this discourse taking space from individuals who most need to talk? Historically, this is a population that has been greatly affected by poverty policies and associated discourse. The purpose of this study is to describe how ten African American single mothers experience transformative learning while participating in a post-secondary education program in the era of welfare. The single mothers' narratives speak to their personal experiences and ways of knowing that are unique to their positionality in American society. Their voice can serve as a bridge that connects their experiences and needs to policymakers and leaders and assist in designing policies and programs that will effectively address the barriers encountered by this population. This is a qualitative study using a phenomenological methodology and the theoretical framework of Transformative Learning, Race-centric Transformative Learning, Critical Race, and Black Feminist Thought to inform the study. Data will be collected using semi-structured oral history interviews. Life change/transformation in the context of welfare is the phenomenon of importance for this study. The following research question will guide the study: *What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare?*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is an inherent drive for all humans to make meaning of their daily lives. Lindeman (1989) asks the question, “In what areas do most people appear to find life’s meaning?” (p. 8). He then answers that “meaning must reside in the things for which people strive, the goals which they set for themselves, their wants, needs, desires and wishes” (p. 8). People want to feel valued and want their talents to be valued; people want their experiences to be meaningful; people want to improve the quality of their lives; and finally, people want to change the social order, resulting in a more democratic society in which their aspirations can be expressed (Lindeman, 1989).

One group of people with a desire for a more meaningful, quality of life for their children and themselves and are low-income, African American single mothers seeking a way out of poverty (Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2012). This study sought to share the experiences of ten African American single mothers who lived in Tennessee and chose to pursue education as a possible means to improve their quality of life.

Currently, according to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR, 2017b), the number of single student mothers are increasing as a segment of the college population although they often encounter crucial barriers that prevent them from persisting to graduation. More specifically, the number of single mothers pursuing college more than doubled in the twelve school years between 1999 and 2012 (IWPR, 2017a). Women of color pursuing postsecondary education are highly likely to be single parents. In fact, two in five African American women, or 37 percent, are raising a child alone while in college, compared with 19 percent Hispanic women, 14 percent White women and 7 percent Asian/Pacific Islander women (IWPR, 2017b).

Lee and Oyserman (2007) assert that although this trend appears to be promising, one

segment of society may still be excluded from campuses: African American single mothers who are transitioning from welfare to work. These mothers have frequently achieved low levels of education, have minimal workplace skills, and encounter barriers that may hinder their educational pursuits. For example, obligations such as childcare and work often restrict the time for low-income African American single mothers to pursue education, which has not been an objective of the welfare system (Child Care Aware, 2016; King, 2002). However, pursuing adult educational opportunities for poor single mothers can mean the difference between living a lifetime in poverty and having the opportunity to achieve true economic self-sufficiency (Bidwell, 2014).

Granted that postsecondary education can contribute to higher incomes, creating policies that support increasing African American single mothers' economic well-being and college access, retention, and completion rates can have large-scale, multi-generational effects on families, communities, and the United States as a whole (Johnson, 2010). In fact, completing a postsecondary program can be instrumental in not only boosting the incomes of single mothers, but also increasing the expectations of their children's achievement, and inspire their children to set and reach their own educational goals (Johnson, 2010). However, this particular population, significantly affected by certain economic and educational policies, does not have a seat at the table when policy decisions are being made (Krumer-Nevo, 2008).

Participant Selection

This phenomenological narrative study aimed to capture the lived experiences of ten low-income African American single mothers while receiving public assistance and prior to, during, and post-education. Network selection was the criterion-based strategy I used to select my participants. Network selection is described as the strategy in which a researcher locates one

participant who fits the study's criteria and that participant, subsequently, refers the researcher to others who fit the criteria (deMarrais, 2004). I was provided with the names of four prospective participants from people who were aware of the topic of my study. My initial contact with the African American single mothers interviewed for this study occurred via a telephone conversation. Each participant, then, recommended someone they knew who fit the criteria and might be willing to participate. After contacting those participants, four other participants were recommended. During each telephone conversation, I introduced myself and I read the solicitation script which contained the pertinent information regarding the study. The prospective participants and I engaged in dialogue, developing a rapport as we talked. Each was outgoing, encouraging and eager to be a part of my research concerning the topic of welfare; each was eager to share her story. I felt very relaxed with each participant and even suggested the option of interviewing in my home. Recalling the interview process, the feeling of comfort was reciprocated on the part of each participant as they told their story with vigor.

Only one of the twelve single mothers who was contacted declined to participate in the study. Although this single mother was excited about telling her story, her rigorous work schedule would not permit her to do so. Consequently, she declined to participate. Another prospective participant did not meet the study's criteria because she had received public assistance for more than twenty years. I saw her story as one to be told in a different study related to long-term welfare use.

In this chapter, the following sections can be found: Problem Statement, Research Purpose and Question, Theoretical Framework, Significance of the Study, Delimitations, Definition of Terms, Assumptions Underlying the Study, and Organization of the Study.

Problem Statement

According to the 2016 U. S. Census Bureau, poverty rates were especially high for women of color (23.1 %), compared to white, non-Hispanic women (9.6 %). Moreover, the poverty rate for female-headed households with children was 36.5 percent compared to 22.1 percent for male-headed households with children and 7.5 percent for married-coupled households with children. Still, African American single-mother households fared much worse. Approximately 39.9 percent of families with children headed by women of color lived in poverty (Tucker & Lowell, 2016).

DeNavas-Walt and Proctor (2015) reveal that the level of educational attainment can impact high poverty rates. For example, in 2014, the poverty rate for people with a high school diploma but no college was 14.2 percent, while those with some college but no degree were at a poverty rate of 10.2 percent. Comparatively, the poverty rate of individuals with at least a bachelor's degree was 5.0 percent.

In 2010, the South had the lowest percentage of the population in the country that had completed college. Even more alarming is that the southern region of the United States had the greatest percentage of individuals, age 25 or older, with less than a high school diploma—approximately 17 percent. In comparison, the Northeast had nearly 12 percent, the Midwest 12 percent, and the West nearly 16 percent. Furthermore, families living in this region, are more likely to be headed by a female of which approximately 38 percent live in poverty. In fact, the poverty rate among African American female-headed households in some southern states is 40 percent or greater (Mattingly & Tupcotte-Seabury, 2010). African American single mothers generally have less education, less income, and higher poverty rates than other adults. In light of these statistics, what do single mothers regard as a possible solution for their disparaging

conditions?

Many adults enroll in educational programs with a personal goal of improving or transforming their lives for the better, subsequently enhancing the lives of those they care about (Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2012). Research indicates that this population acknowledges education as an avenue to advance their economic and social lives and assist them in improving their own feelings of confidence and self-worth, which could encourage them to proceed further in other educational opportunities (Haleman, 2004; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Sheared, 1999). However, marginalized students, such as African American single mothers on welfare who seek educational opportunities for upward mobility, face barriers to education such as the lack of childcare and transportation that prevent their access, retention and completion (Bergerson, 2003; Jones-DeWeever, 2014).

In fact, the history of African American women in the United States is filled with disconcerting and painful realities. The physical and emotional injustice that this population endured within the institution of slavery continued far beyond emancipation, which validates any examination of African American women's identity to be positioned within a historical context. A historical context is necessary since the past gives rise to future experiences and realities. History is narrative and knowledge of the past is grounded in the stories that are transmitted and repeated until their validity is considered as fact (Roper, 2012).

During the 1970s, the narrative of African American women as "welfare queens" manifested. This account described many poor African American women as lazy, promiscuous, and greedy. This image of the Welfare Queen was troublesome to the well-being of the economy in the United States and was the basis for the public and political discourse of welfare reform (Roper, 2012). There is much literature documenting the public and political discourse

surrounding welfare reform, the dominant imagery created by this discourse, and its influence on poverty and policy decisions (Easton, 2016; Johnson, 2010; Schram, 2005). In comparison, there is limited data documenting the inclusion of the narratives or voice of those whose well-being is greatly affected by poverty policy--impoverished, African American single mothers (Krumer-Nevo, 2008). These are women of color who are “disproportionately represented within the ranks of the people living in long-term poverty due to limited labor-market opportunities, racial and gender discrimination...and inadequate educational opportunities” (Corcoran, 2001, p. 2). These are women who have experienced times when negative depictions and pre-conceived expectations of single motherhood and welfare use are imposed on them (Easton, 2016; Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004). For these reasons, the voices of impoverished African American single mothers should be heard. These women must be given space to renounce the experiences of Whites as standard and use their narratives to expose, challenge, or deconstruct racial and social constructs (Bell, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

Research Purpose

This phenomenological narrative study aims to capture the lived experiences of ten adult low-income African American single mothers who received public assistance while enrolled in a post-secondary education program in Tennessee. The following research question was used to guide this study:

Research Question: What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare?

To assist in answering this question, interviews were conducted following an oral history approach (Ritchie, 2003) and using an interview protocol to assist interviewees to recall lived experiences. An oral history is a conversational narrative; it is a conversation related to past

experiences. The goal of oral history is to encourage individuals to talk about lived experiences and events to discover what these experiences and events mean to the individual who recall them (Grele, 1985).

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) was used as a relevant lens to understand the experiences of these single mothers. TLT seeks to explain how adults' expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and beliefs, directly impact the meaning individuals glean from their experiences. Experiences are viewed as socially constructed and therefore, can be deconstructed and influenced (Taylor, 2000).

Central to the process of transformative learning is critical reflection and rational discourse. Critical reflection relates to questioning the validity of assumptions and beliefs established on past experiences. Rational discourse is the channel through which transformation is fostered (Taylor, 2000). Transformative learning can be emancipatory and liberating both at the individual and social levels. "It can also provide individuals with a voice, with the capacity to name the world and, in doing so, construct for themselves the interpretation of the world (Dirkx, 1998).

The ten stages of Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning theory (TLT) was used as the study's primary theoretical framework and to answer the research question. However, since TLT is not a political theory, it falls short of being an effective framework for examining political systems, institutions, and organizations that promote transformation (Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

Therefore, the Race-centric perspective of transformative learning, which is central to the transformative experiences of individuals of African origin and uses a political framework such

as activism or consciousness raising (Taylor, 2008), were used to complement Mezirow's theory.

Race-centric scholars, Sheared (1994) and Wimmer (2015), were used in the study. In addition to the Race-centric perspective, Critical Race will complement TLT as it addresses dominant discourse and imagery associated with Welfare Reform. Critical Race also promotes the use of narratives to expose, challenge, and deconstruct racial and social constructs that may have influenced the views of this study's participants. I drew from the work of Critical Race scholar Bell (1992; 1995; 2009) for this study. Finally, Black Feminist Thought will inform the study since it describes the shared historical resistance of African American women to their own oppression. Black Feminist scholar Collins (1989; 1990; 2000) informed Black Feminist Thought in the study.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for several reasons. First, this study described how ten low-income African American single mothers living in Tennessee described and made sense of their lived experiences prior to, during and after completing their educational program and in the context of a larger society that commonly judges them negatively. Secondly, this study created a space where the voices and perspectives of these single mothers could be heard without marginalization. Finally, acknowledging the voice and interests of impoverished African American single mothers and understanding their experiences could reveal to Tennessee policymakers, leaders, and adult educators the need for legislation and economic programs to be inclusive of the knowledge and experiences of this marginalized population. This study can fill a gap in the existing welfare literature, which predominantly focuses on objective measures of economic progress, such as lower unemployment rates and decreasing welfare rolls rather than the narratives, counter-stories and cultural wealth of knowledge and experiences of the

impoverished African American single mother.

Delimitations

One of the criteria for the study participants was to have enrolled in and completed a post-secondary education program. Any reference to a post-secondary education program, including any non-degree certification/diploma program beyond the high school diploma or equivalency.

Definition of Terms

African American – refers to a non-Hispanic, Black American

Dominant Discourse – written or spoken communication containing particular ideological beliefs created by those in power and becomes the accepted way of viewing a particular topic or issue

Dominant Imagery – descriptive language and dispositions consisting of racial stereotypes and cognitive scripts and images used to categorize, exploit and dominate non-whites (Wimmer, 2015)

Hamburg Declaration – the document that emerged from the 1997 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference held in Hamburg, Germany (Nesbitt & Welton, 2013). The Declaration contains “a preamble of 27 statements and ten themes organized to provide a visionary framework for all UNESCO member states to promote adult education as an integral part of a system of learning and ensure that lifelong learning will become a more significant reality in the early twenty-first century” (UNESCO, 1997, p. 1).

Marginalization – “the silencing of lived experiences in discourses constructed through legislature and policies created by the dominant culture, which...negates the political, economic,

historical and social realities of those living in the margins of society” (Guy, 1999, p. 73)

Non-traditional Students – individuals who are independent and have dependents of their own, did not pursue postsecondary education after high school, and may be employed while enrolled in school (Ekowo, 2015)

Poverty – calculated based on the national income thresholds for different family sizes; “The most commonly used measure of U. S. poverty is the rate, the percentage of Americans living below the defined income threshold for the number of people in their family” (Rose & Baumgartner, 2010, p. 33). The *income deficit* is also useful to determine the depth of poverty. For example, if a poor family is close to the poverty line, it would not require as much to bring them out of poverty; however, for those further below the income threshold, the deficit is more significant (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013).

Public Assistance – includes cash payments to poor families or individuals such as TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), and/or non-cash benefits from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as Food Stamps (Irving, 2014), and low-income housing. In Tennessee, rent for low-income housing is based on the participant’s total income.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) – Public assistance income that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The TANF program is state-designed and controlled, time-limited and requires participants to work a certain number of hours per week. Tennessee’s TANF program, *Families First*, requires unemployed TANF recipients to provide regular documentation of employment searches.

Assumptions Underlying the Study

Adult learners enroll in educational programs for different reasons. Some enroll for job advancement. Others enroll seeking a new career. Still, other adult learners pursue post-secondary educational programs perceiving them to be the route to becoming economically self-sufficient and to improve their quality of life (Dirkx, 1998).

There were two assumptions related to the African American single mothers' participation in a post-secondary education program. One assumption was that the African American single mothers would bring to their learning environment a plethora of real-world experiences. These experiences could range from inauthentic (formal schooling) to the authentic (work, family, community member) (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, & Bradley, 2000). The second assumption was that the single mothers' participation in a post-secondary education program facilitated the process of transformative learning.

There were also other assumptions related to the study's participants. First, the sample that I chose for this study would be representative of low-income African American single mothers who were residing in Tennessee and receiving public assistance while enrolled in a post-secondary education program. Secondly, the participants would provide accurate information during the interviews. Further, the desire of the study's participants would be to share their stories with other African American single mothers in order to inspire them to move beyond welfare. Finally, it would be the desire of the study's participants to become advocates for other African American single mothers and for effective policy design that would support marginalized populations who encounter barriers that prevent social mobility.

Organization of the Study

Following the abstract summarizing the contents of this research and Chapter One, Chapter Two includes a review of the literature and theories pertaining to disenfranchised African Americans single mothers. The following subtopics, respectively, are also included in this section: African Americans, Welfare Reform, and Poverty; Welfare Reform, Poverty, and Dominant Imagery; African American Single Mothers, Welfare Reform, and Education; African American Single Mothers, Welfare, and Societal Stigmatism; African American Single Mothers and Acts of Resistance; African American Single Mothers as Potential Agents of Change; Adult Education for Transformative Learning; and Transformative/Race-centric Transformative Learning, Critical Race, Critical Theories, Black Feminist Thought.

Chapter Three begins with a description of phenomenology followed by the methodology procedures that was employed for sample selection, collecting and analyzing the data, and establishing validity and trustworthiness. Chapter Three concludes with a summary of the pilot study on the topic of this study. Chapter Four, beginning with brief summaries of the participants, includes the research findings. This chapter presented the combined findings that answer the research question, followed by the presentation of findings from responses to interview questions. Finally, Chapter Five includes an overview of the study, a discussion of key findings, a description of strengths and limitations of the study, and implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature and theories pertaining to disenfranchised African Americans single mothers and is situated within a socio-cultural, political, and historical context. The chapter begins with a review of the impact of welfare and poverty on African Americans in general. Next, reviews are provided describing the dominate imagery associated with welfare reform and the relationship between welfare reform and educational opportunities for African American single mothers. Also included is a historical account of African American single mothers' encounters with and responses to societal stigmatism, along with reviews discussing the potential of African American single mothers as agents for change and of post-secondary education for transformative learning. Finally, the following theoretical frameworks for this study are reviewed: Transformative Learning Theory, Race-centric Transformative Learning, Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminist Thought.

African Americans, Welfare Reform, and Poverty

In 2016, there were 40.6 million people in the United States living in poverty, of which 22 percent were African Americans (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). Further, there were 28 percent of children who lived in female-headed households; this type of family structure comprised 60 percent of all families living in poverty. Astoundingly, the poverty rate for single mothers in the United States during this time was more than five times the poverty rate for married families (Anderson, 2016).

The southern region of the country is distinct as it relates to poverty “risk” factors, such as family structure and education levels. For instance, having more minorities, the South has a legacy of slavery and racial discrimination that invariably impacts minority families (Mattingly

& Turcotte-Seabury, 2010).

In fact, more children live in poverty in the rural South than in any other region in the United States (Mattingly & Turcotte-Seabury, 2010). As of 2017, there were more than 6.7 million people living in Tennessee, of which 15.8 percent were living in poverty, and 7.2 percent were female-headed households with children under 18 (Tennessee Families First, n.d.).

In 1996, more than two decades earlier, the United States government enacted welfare reform, placing emphasis on those living in poverty and receiving public assistance to take responsibility for moving beyond public assistance through employment (Alfred, 2007). The poverty rate for families in the United States at that time was 12.2 percent, with many of these individuals living in families in which the heads of household were single mothers who either did not work or worked less than full-time and were consequently dependent on welfare (Adair, 2001). These women living in poverty constituted a marginalized group, many of whom were affected by the culture of welfare reform in the United States. This new culture began with the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which took a significant step to transform the nature of economic support for impoverished women and children throughout the United States (Alfred, 2006).

Poverty policies concerned with stability and income support are generally thought of as a prerequisite to economic mobility for families living in poverty. Conversely, endeavors to encourage economic mobility must acknowledge the significant structural barriers that certain populations—such as people of color and women—must conquer to move out of poverty (Alfred, 2007; Bogle, Acs, Loprest, Mikelson, & Popkin, 2016). Poverty policies are often associated with the Clinton administration, referred to as the period of “welfare crackdown.” The former president fought to “end welfare as we know it” with the passage of the 1996 PRWORA.

The guidelines of the legislation called for additional work as one condition of welfare receipt, lifetime welfare assistance limited to five years, and increased state involvement concerning program administration (Easton, 2016).

Baldwin (2010) contends that a social and historical analysis of African American women's representation within poverty policy and discourse discloses that "social constructions of race and gender have consistently informed welfare reform policies that rationalize inequitable distributions and unrealistic visions of the social world" (p. 5). For example, welfare reform was built on two approaches: departure from welfare dependency and economic self-sufficiency through workplace participation. In other words, the concept of the welfare reform is universal participation, which assumes that everyone receiving public assistance has an equal opportunity to become economically self-sufficient if he or she becomes employed outside the home. The value embedded in this reform proposes that impoverished African American single mothers will attain economic self-sufficiency by working a minimum wage job for less than forty hours a week, with education taking a backseat to employment (Alfred, 2010). Conversely, the economic challenges, such as low-wage employment, that many (especially single mothers) experience are heightened by a lack of education that invariably ensures sustained poverty (Haleman, 2004) and the need for public assistance. In fact, the 2012 American Community Survey revealed that eighteen states and the District of Columbia had higher welfare participation than the national average of 2.9 percent. Tennessee was named as one of the states, having a welfare participation rate of 3.4 percent (Irving, 2014).

Families First is Tennessee's (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) welfare reform plan which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. This temporary cash assistance program places emphasis on work, training, and personal

responsibility. Participants in the Families First program are required to follow a Personal Responsibility Plan and develop, follow, and complete a work plan. The work plan is relative to the participant's needs and skills. To qualify for Families First, a child under the age of 19 must be residing in the home of a parent or other relative who is within a determined degree of relationship to the child. The child must be lacking parental support as a result of absence, death, incapacity, or unemployment of one or both parents. The prospective participant is also required to cooperate with child support (Tennessee Families First, n.d.).

TANF seemed to assist poor families only minimally in meeting their needs. For example, the value of the cash assistance dropped in nearly every state. Unfortunately, TANF never raised a family above the federal poverty line nor met basic needs. In all 50 states, TANF benefits keep families below half of the poverty line. In 2016, the average TANF family of three received \$432 per month. Although nearly 85 percent of TANF families also receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to supplement the TANF benefits, both SNAP and TANF assistance still fall below 75 percent of the poverty line in every state excluding Alaska and New York (Abramovitz, 2018).

In her study, Alfred (2007) sought to explore the experiences of African American women who were transitioning from welfare to work and those of their employers to identify the extent to which working recipients were becoming self-sufficient due to their labor force participation. The participants for the study included six employers in the Milwaukee area and 15 employees whose ages ranged from 21 to 43. These employees had received public assistance ranging from 2 to 20 years. Data was collected via focus groups and open-ended, face-to-face interviews. The study's findings revealed three integrated systems of barriers that deterred the participants' progress to self-sufficiency: 1) welfare reform policies and practices; 2) employer

practices and labor market processes; and 3) personal characteristics and responsibilities.

While there are many factors that contribute to poverty, low-education attainment is one characteristic that is common to individuals who experience challenges securing higher paying jobs and heightens their chances of living in poverty (Anderson, 2016; Bogle et al., 2016; Rank, 2001; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013; Semega et al., 2017). In addition to educational attainment, gender serves as a barrier to higher-wage jobs. For example, when examining prime age earners (30-59), 32 percent of females are distinguished as low-earners, compared to 12 percent of males of the same group (Carnevale & Rose, 2001). Moreover, race is considered a factor in earnings. In 2016, the median income of White households was approximately \$25,000 more than the median income of African American households (Semega et al., 2017).

While poverty is generally viewed as a brief experience (one to two years) when income drops below family survival needs or the poverty line, some households experience chronic poverty. Chronic poverty can typically be credited to the presence of consistent harsh disadvantages experienced by families with multiple children and headed by females (Rank & Hirschl, 2002). In fact, Corcoran notes (as cited in Bogle et al., 2016, p. 2) that women and people of color are disproportionately characterized as people experiencing chronic poverty resulting from restricted employment opportunities, racial and gender discrimination, and educational opportunities.

African American Single Mothers, Welfare Reform, and Dominant Imagery

“The way in which the American public sees and talks about any population affects policy directed toward the group in question” (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013, p. 24). In 1999, scholar Martin Gilens published a popular study investigating certain images associated with poverty and welfare in news media articles (i.e., *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U. S. News and World*

Report) from 1950-1992 in the United States. He argued that the media both encouraged and generated certain inaccurate depictions of welfare and poverty pertaining to race. Oftentimes, White welfare recipients were described as “deserving” clients who truly were incapable of moving beyond poverty due to circumstances beyond their control. Comparatively, African American clients were labeled as “undeserving” of welfare benefits and characterized as scamming the government to support their laziness. Gilens contends that racial stereotypes are instrumental in promoting opposition to welfare in the United States and that the news media’s “inaccurate and racist perceptions of welfare recipients in the United States affects real, implemented policy decisions” (Easton, 2016, p. 3). Interestingly, approximately 66% of the time, public policy is tailored to public opinion regarding a particular topic (Easton, 2016).

Clawson and Trice’s (2000) study likewise examined media depictions of poverty between 1993 and 1998, surrounding the inception of welfare reform act that prompted a surge in the amount of news articles and television coverage on welfare stories. These researchers examined the same articles as Gilens but added *Business Week* and *New York Times*. Similarly, they found images of African Americans as disproportionately highlighted (49 %) in media depictions of the poor, while in truth, only 27 percent of African Americans were living in poverty during this period was African American. Further, African Americans during this period were shown specifically in news stories related to unpopular topics on poverty such as pregnancy, public housing, and welfare cycle of dependency rather than sympathetic topics on impoverished children, childcare, and job training. Similar to Gilens, Clawson and Trice conclude that the stereotypical and distorted portrayal of poverty leads to negative assumptions about the poor, opposition toward African Americans, and minimal support for welfare initiatives.

The findings from Van Doorn's (2015) study corroborates those of Clawson and Trice. In his study, Van Doorn analyzes 474 news articles on poverty between 1992 and 2010 using the same sources as Gilen and finds that the news media consistently depicts African Americans as disproportionately impoverished and portrayed in articles related to the unsympathetic poor. Although only 25 percent of poor people between 2000-2010 were African American, 52.3 percent of the individuals shown in the articles were African American. Van Doorn concludes that despite the significant changes in the appearance of welfare policy since Gilen's research due to changes in governmental administrations, there is minimal difference in the degree of overrepresentation of African Americans.

Conversely, Easton's (2016) investigation of the portrayals of welfare and poverty in the news media for the time period after 1992, between 2001-2007, reveals some different conclusions. The purpose of Easton's study was to determine whether the unsympathetic portrayals of welfare receipt and poverty were still associated with African American recipients. Easton identified 13 relevant articles in *Time Magazine* between 2001 and 2007 in which 62 individuals were portrayed as poor. Of those, 48 percent were identified as African American and 52 percent as other (often White). Findings from this study conclude that the portrayal of African Americans in poverty and benefiting from welfare receipt continues to be disproportionately large, considering that during this period only approximately 24.2 percent of African Americans were actually living in poverty, a mere 3 percent of the U. S. population. However, the articles and images that were analyzed revealed somewhat more compassion, "as deserving poor and as victims of unjust larger systems out of their control, compared to their unsympathetic depictions in previous years and in previous studies" (p. 1), revealing 77 percent of the articles portrayed them sympathetically.

In 2002, under the H. W. Bush administration, a change occurred in the 1996 PRWORA. There was a shift from providing welfare assistance through welfare checks to providing assistance through social service programs that supported work activity. Welfare recipients were required to seek employment for 30 hours per week to maintain welfare eligibility. Also, under this administration, there were more stringent work participation requirements and an increase in state-level discretion, resulting in a reduction in the percentage of families eligible for public assistance, declining from 82 percent in 1993 to 48 percent in 2002 (Easton, 2016).

Easton (2016) declares that one implication of these policies is that a service-based welfare system shifts the causes of poverty from structural to characterize poverty primarily as an individual-level issue, in which those living in poverty must take individual responsibility to improve their quality of life. This implication suggests major consequences for how the discourse, narratives, and images of the media depict the poor and indirectly influence public policy.

African American Single Mothers, Welfare Reform, and Education

Mattingly & Turcotte-Seabury (2010) declare that low education attainment results in high rates of poverty. As an example, the South has approximately 17 percent of individuals, age 25 and older, who have not earned a high school diploma and are living in poverty. In fact, more than 25 percent of individuals in the South with less than a high school diploma live in poverty, compared with 13 percent with a diploma and 8.5 percent with a four-year college degree. Additionally, females in the South with no high school diploma have the lowest median earnings of any region, at \$14,082.

While the American dream is “the belief that the United States is the land of opportunity where, through hard work, individuals and families can achieve prosperity, success, and upward

mobility regardless of the circumstances into which they are born” (Bogle et al., 2016, p. 1), this hopeful declaration has not always been evident (Anderson, 2016; Haleman, 2004). For instance, thirty-four percent of Americans raised in the lower fifth of the income bracket remain there as adults. In truth, the rates at which individuals progress regarding opportunity have remained notably consistent over the past few generations (Anderson, 2016).

Nonetheless, education has been perceived as the key component to achieving the American dream. In addition, the notions that education is the fundamental route to economic success and that educational ambitions can be influential inter-generationally are other essential components of the American Dream (Haleman, 2004). Alfred (2006) argues that “the purpose of education should be to situate the individual in a stronger position to compete for better employment opportunities while promoting equity and justice for a more tolerant society” (p. 114).

Even government officials have expressed the importance of education. For example, in 1995, prior to the inception of the PRWORA, former President Bill Clinton (as cited in the Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002) declared that “a good education is key to unlocking the promise of today’s economy in the 21st century. Without it, people are at an ever-increasing risk of falling behind” (p. 5). Likewise, former President George H. W. Bush stated that “It [the American dream] means the opportunity to go as far in life as your abilities will take you. Anyone in America can aspire to be a doctor, a teacher, a police officer or even...a president. But you can’t get any of those important jobs if you don’t have the opportunity to acquire the skills you need...And that’s why I believe that the key to the American dream is education” (Bullock & Limbert, 2003, p. 263). More recently, former President Barack Obama supported the American dream, advising that “We have an obligation and a responsibility to be investing in our students

and our schools. We must make sure that people who have the grades, the desire and the will, but not the money, can still get the best education possible” (Moore, 2018, p. 1).

Since the earliest establishment of public education, education has been viewed as a common avenue to long-term economic self-sufficiency in the United States (Haleman, 2004; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Sheared, 1999; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). However, in contemporary society, attaining a high school diploma or equivalent may not be enough to position impoverished students on the road out of poverty and into middle class. On the other hand, education beyond high school is a critical strategy for reducing poverty and facilitating economic mobility. For example, the median income for earning associate degrees are almost 25 percent more than with high school diplomas, and income for four-year college graduates is approximately 68 percent greater and increasing (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

Regrettably, in spite of inspiring affirmations by government officials concerning educational provisions for all and confronting decades of systemic inequality for certain populations, legislation has not supported a commitment to educational opportunities for women welfare recipients (Johnson, 2010). In fact, this poverty policy is in direct contrast to one of the aspirations from CONFINTEA VI that states the following:

“There can be no exclusion arising from...gender, ethnicity...or poverty...” (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2009, p. 40). Likewise, Theme 4 of the Hamburg Declaration specifically admonishes that “We commit ourselves to promoting the empowerment of women and gender equity through adult learning by: a) recognizing and correcting the continued marginalization and denial of access and of equal opportunities for quality education that...women are still facing at all levels; b) by ensuring that all women...are provided with the necessary education to meet their basic needs and to

exercise their human rights; g) by removing barriers to access to formal and non-formal education...by promoting a gender-sensitive participatory pedagogy which acknowledges the daily life experiences of women...; j) by taking adequate legislative, financial and economic measures and by implementing social policies to ensure women's successful participation in adult education through the removal of obstacles and the provision of supportive learning environments" (UNESCO, 1997, pp. 18-19).

Prior to welfare reform in 1996, tens of thousands of poor single mothers were enrolled in postsecondary education to become attorneys, educators, medical professionals, social service employees, and business and community leaders. Along with becoming valued contributors to their communities, these women transformed how they negotiated their value and life's meanings (Adair, 2001).

However, suddenly education took a backseat to a work-first approach to economic self-sufficiency (Alfred, 2010). In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). PRWORA emphasized the need for welfare recipients to take responsibility for detaching themselves from government dependency and to move into the labor market as quickly as possible (Alfred, 2007). In effect, this act terminated welfare recipients' option for postsecondary opportunities (Johnson, 2010).

Unfortunately, this legislation did not account for individuals who lacked the necessary job skills or education to attain and sustain adequately-paying jobs to become financially independent; thus, the system created a revolving door through which those dependent on public aid frequently access. In addition, welfare reform limited educational opportunities for poor single mothers, and instead TANF imposed a work-first approach to attaining self-sufficiency. As

a result of time limits and sanctions imposed by the PRWORA, many single mothers dropped out of educational programs, and the fact that not all of these women were able to maintain employment after welfare, the percentage of women who neither worked nor were able to maintain employment after welfare benefits increased (Abramovitz, 2018; Blank, 2007; Haleman, 2004).

Unfortunately, single mothers have low rates of college degree completions. As of 2015, only 31 percent of single mothers ages 25 and older attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 54 percent of comparable married mothers and 40 percent of comparable women as a whole (IWPR, 2017e). Only 28 percent of single mothers who enrolled in college between 2003 and 2009 earned a degree or certificate within 6 years, compared with 40 percent of married mothers, and 57 percent of female students with no children (IWPR, 2017f). Often, single mothers encounter significant financial difficulties that can hinder degree attainment. For example, 89 percent have low incomes, and 63 percent live at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (IWPR, 2017c). Besides financial challenges, dependent care consumes a major amount of single mothers' time, which can also hinder academic success (Miller, Gault, & Thurman, 2011).

African American Single Mothers, Welfare Reform, and Societal Stigmatism

Despite legislation and policies supposedly meant to offer equal opportunity, African Americans still encounter racism at individual, structural, and institutional levels (Bergerson, 2003). Unfavorable conditions of low-wage employment, along with the added stress of discrimination, make it challenging for some families to exit poverty (Bogle et al., 2016; Williams, 1997; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).

Moreover, society has imposed negative perceptions and expectations upon single

mothers living in poverty and participating in welfare programs. Arguments concerning whether impoverished individuals are responsible for their own poverty-stricken conditions have been prevalent in the United States since the 14th century (Easton, 2016; Tiarniyu & Mitchell, 2001). Consequently, single mothers who are recipients of government assistance in the United States have been the objects of punitive welfare reform that has drastically limited their educational and financial opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes of these individuals (Haleman, 2004; Johnson, 2010).

Welfare recipients in Alfred's (2007) study declare that their welfare participation and situation as poor women have dominated their existence even more than their race, resulting in society imposing negative perceptions and expectations upon them. For example, in the 1980s, those women who were receiving government assistance were commonly referred to as "Welfare Queens," "Welfare Chiselers," and "Lazy" (Cazenave & Neubeck, 2001; Easton, 2016; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). "Welfare Queen" was initially used in reference to a welfare recipient named Linda Taylor, who scammed the Illinois welfare system. Accounts of Taylor's fraudulent acts claimed that she had assumed 100 aliases in 12 different states and had received more than \$200,000 of illegal funds. However, Taylor was only charged with using four aliases to cheat the state of \$8,000. Although Taylor had been charged with numerous other illegal activities, "welfare queen" was the infamous label by which she was known (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007).

Interestingly, even employees of social service agencies whose purpose is to assist clients in receiving government aid were included with those who imposed stereotypes on these women. Reinforcement of these perturbing images, combined with limited economic opportunities can serve as deterrents for this population to adequately and independently support their families and attain the quality of life desired (Haleman, 2004).

Haleman's (2004) study examined the educational experiences of 10 single mothers using in-depth interviews and abbreviated life histories. The study explored the ways stereotypes of single motherhood are both supported and challenged in the lives of the study's participants who were both welfare recipients and higher education students. Haleman (2004) shares one stigmatizing experience of a welfare client, who contends that her experience is typical of most women seeking government assistance:

I know that a lot of women feel intimidated about goin' down there [to social services], bein' it's right there downtown. They're like, 'Who's gonna see me goin' in here, what are they gonna think of me?' I think it hurts your self-esteem more than anything to go down there and ask for help. And their attitudes. It's like, we're givin' you this money out of our pocket.' And that's not the case...They don't have to sit there and talk to me like I'm some dog out on the street. And they will try to do that. Me, personally, I don't let 'em talk to me that way (p. 773).

Freire (1970) labels the subjugating behavior of societal stigmatism encountered by Haleman's participants as a form of *banking education* and questions the psychological effects of this phenomenon. Banking education is defined as a form of socialization used to maintain an oppressive status quo of groups of people such as impoverished single mothers, while instilling in this marginalized group, specific oppressing attitudes and behaviors (Rachal, 1998). One strategy that some single impoverished mothers use to counter the stigmatism they face for having to depend on government aid is holding on to their personal aspirations and educational experiences. The findings from Haleman's (2004) study revealed that many of the single mothers perceived higher education as both instrumental and transformational. These single mothers saw postsecondary education as a means to exit welfare, as a route to upward mobility, and as a path

for personal growth. These women maintained that although they shared negative experiences of stereotyping, they “contested these depictions and challenged the negative appraisals they encountered” (p. 774).

African American Single Mothers and Acts of Resistance

Analyzing dominant cultural stereotypes and replacing them with empowering personal stories has assisted many who are oppressed make sense of their experience and work to transform their social conditions (Rappaport, 2000). Critical Race scholarship highlights the necessity of experiential knowledge shared through personal stories and counter-stories, maintaining that the knowledge of marginalized groups such as impoverished African American single mothers is legitimate, relevant, and crucial to assimilating, examining, and teaching about racial subordination (Solorzano, 1998). This knowledge is often described through the use of counter-stories, or narratives that confront the dominant account of reality, and thus, challenge the status quo. The method of using counter-stories is grounded in a social constructivist worldview, which contends that reality is constructed by individuals. Based on this paradigm, an individual’s standpoint and experiences are necessary to understanding the reality of that particular individual (Bergerson, 2003).

Lindeman (1989) explains that humans who recognize that knowledge and power are equal never succumb to the pessimism—never lose hope, and never fully relinquish the struggle to become vessels through which circumstances are created. As an example, Haleman (2004) provides an assertion from a respondent in her study who was determined not to be consumed by pessimism:

When you get pressured with the negative attitudes—and I have experienced it— you start to question, ‘Okay, who am I? Is this what I am like?’ and you realize, ‘No, that’s not

who I am. I'm not like what these people are saying'' And you become more confident in a way. Sometimes, if you are not a strong person, you can let it bring you down. But I think it just makes me question more who I am and what I'm doing. Because it's okay; it's a good thing (p. 774).

In her study, Goodban (1985) interviewed 100 African American single mothers in Connecticut who were receiving welfare concerning their explanations for and responses to receiving welfare. Participants' ages ranged from seventeen to forty-nine and had received welfare for more than five years. Forty-six percent of the women had completed high school. Most of the women in the study believed that their need for public assistance was only temporary and was the result of uncontrollable circumstances rather than personal characteristics or societal implications. Unfortunately, these respondents had negative self-images and felt stigmatized. In comparison, the few respondents who perceived their welfare dependency as controllable and the result of personal deficiencies felt less stigmatized.

Indeed, in response to oppression, some individuals view their social position as out of their control (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005), while others see the need to resist incorporating negative assertions pertaining to their social identities into their self-concepts (Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2001). The latter group, through acts of resistance, eventually develops a critical perspective of their oppression and seek to transform that reality (Freire, 2001). This course of liberation demonstrates a process of critical awareness and transformation (Freire, 2001; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

African American Single Mothers as Potential Agents for Change

Ceballos (2010) affirms that neoliberal policies and practices of rich countries control the life of poor people and influence their loss of capacity over the economic, cultural and political aspects of their lives. When the voices of those who are marginalized continue to be silenced, we

run the risk of spreading the same old cultural and political baggage and the same old worldviews. Moreover, when the perspectives of marginalized individuals are omitted, the outcome is that there is minimal difference in the level of knowledge (Guy, 1999) considered when developing poverty policies.

Edmonds-Cady (2009) states that any analysis of or work with poor women should begin from these women's lives and to understand their viewpoint. When women's standpoints are examined, others are able "to see the ways in which hierarchical power relations work, rather than viewing these relations through the obscured and privileged lens of men, and those of power" (p. 15).

Maruatona (2010) contends that access to limited opportunities such as education can be attained if individuals at the grassroots level are included in the policy-making process. African American single mothers can serve as agents to effect change, acting collectively to "raise consciousness of fellow citizens, educate others, and work toward changing the status quo" (Baumgartner, 2010, p. 196). Alfred (2006) concurs, stating that "collective action is required to influence social policy" and that marginalized populations who collectively "examine common and shared experiences, identify common meanings, and engage in the struggle to transform those meanings" have the potential to transform their communities.

As a community connected by common struggle, African American single mothers can be agents of change that are grounded in their transformative experiences and used as an effective way to promote community empowerment. Johnson-Bailey (2006) defines empowerment as "a process of acquiring greater authority or control over one's situation, at the individual or community level" (p. 309). The essence of empowerment requires acts of resistance and the capacity to act in a way that produces change. As a community, it is presumed that African

American women “can use their place along the margin of society as a basis for their transformative learning” (Johnson-Bailey, 2006, p. 309). Teasley and Ikard (2010) argue that “if people feel their perspectives and actions matter, there is a high probability that they will be more inclined to get involved in reshaping their communities for the better (p. 418).

The following two strategies of Theme 4 of the Hamburg Declaration call for a commitment to promoting the empowerment of women by: l) “encouraging women to organize as women to promote a collective identity and to create women’s organizations to bring about change”; and m) “promoting women’s participation in decision-making processes and in formal structures” (UNESCO, 1997, pp. 18-19).

There is a greater probability now compared to any other time in history that African Americans believe that they have agency because “Barack Obama broke through not only a glass ceiling insofar as ascending to the highest office in the country but also a collective psychological racial barrier” (Teasley & Ikard, 2010, p. 418). This could result in a renewed energy for African Americans to confront social disparities regarding race (Teasley & Ikard, 2010).

Education for Transformative Learning

Many adults enroll in educational programs with a personal goal of transforming their lives. Indeed, the desire for enhanced self-esteem and feelings of self-worth also plays a factor in adults participating in formal learning opportunities. Seventy-eight percent of adults taking basic skills/GED classes reported doing so to improve their self-concept. Fifty-five percent perceived the the classes as an avenue to transition to another job. Additionally, 45 percent saw participating in this program as a way to attain an increase in pay or promotion, and 28 percent thought the classes would assist them in helping their children with schoolwork. These data indicate that adults acknowledge education as an avenue to advance their economic and personal

lives and assist them in improving their own feelings of confidence and self-worth, which could encourage them to proceed further in other educational opportunities (Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010).

In her study, Jennings (2004) gathered data using participant observation, face-to-face interviews, and focus group interviews to examine how women on welfare negotiated culture-of-poverty discourse and the images associated with this discourse. The women participating in adult education courses saw education as a path of resistance to the negative depictions of dominant welfare imagery that were imposed upon them. Lindeman and Dewey believe that individuals, such as single mothers on welfare, pursue education as it pertains to their life circumstances, seeking to make adjustments. These theorists contend that adult learning then starts at this point (Elias & Merriam, 2005).

Table 1 summarizes the four studies reviewed from the literature that serve as a foundation for the current study. The methodology employed in this current study is most similar to Haleman's (2004), who interviews a sample population of 10 African American single mothers who are both welfare recipients while enrolled in higher education. Interview questions will determine why their particular program was pursued to identify any structural barriers participants may have encountered as literature suggests. This research is similar to Jennings's (2004) study as interview questions will determine whether participants experienced social stigma while receiving public assistance and how they responded, as well as their perceptions and assumptions regarding education. Goodban (1985) also documents participants' responses to social stigma although this study does not primarily seek to determine who participants feel may be responsible for their welfare use. Finally, Alfred's (2007) study is less similar to this study since the participants were transitioning from welfare to work and not enrolled in an education

program. Alfred's study was used to compare and contrast the perceptions and experiences of African American single mothers who pursued education as a route to self-sufficiency (Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004) and those who followed the welfare-to-work approach as outlined in welfare reform.

Table 1 Comparisons of Studies on Single Mothers and Welfare Use

| Authors | Methodology | Focus | Key Findings |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p>Goodban, N. (1985). The psychological impact of being on welfare. <i>Social Service Review</i>, 59(3), 403-422</p> | <p>Qualitative study Data collected through interviews (using open-ended questions) Sample: 100 black single mothers receiving welfare</p> | <p>Documents participants' reasons for and responses to being on welfare</p> | <p>Most participants: saw welfare use as temporary and uncontrollable; Other participants: believed strongly in the dominant ideology of equal opportunity; blamed themselves for welfare use; low self-esteem Participants with self-perceived higher social class: believed they were to blame for welfare use; did not feel stigmatized; Blaming oneself for welfare use was contributed to being less confident about one's rights as a welfare client.</p> |
| <p>Haleman, D. (2004). Great expectations: Single mothers in higher education. <i>International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</i>, 17(6), 767-784.</p> | <p>Qualitative ethnographic study Data collected through interviews and focus groups Sample: 10 African American mothers who were both welfare recipients and higher education students</p> | <p>Situates 10 single mothers' educational experiences in the economic and social context of welfare reform</p> | <p>Identified 3 themes: Participants: 1) experienced stereotypes regarding family structure, welfare use, and race; 2) actively contested stereotypes; 3) saw educational experiences/goal as a Mechanism for contesting and transforming stereotypes of single-motherhood Participants: higher education 1) Instrumental opportunity to move beyond welfare and poverty; and 2) transformational avenue for personal growth</p> |

Table 1 Continued

| Authors | Methodology | Focus | Key Findings |
|--|---|--|--|
| <p>Jennings, P. K. (2004). What mothers want: Welfare reform and maternal desire. <i>The Journal of Sociology & Social Work</i>, 31(3), 113-130.</p> | <p>Qualitative study</p> <p>Data collected through participant observation, face-to-face and focus group interviews:</p> <p>Sample: 10 mothers: 6 Black/4 White, 7 instructors: 2 Black/5 White, and the program director: White;</p> | <p>Documents how 1st group of young single mothers (ages 18-23) attending an alternative high school and 2nd group of young single mothers (early to mid-20s) enrolled in college negotiate welfare reform discourse and the dominant imagery created by this discourse.</p> | <p>Participants saw education as a path of resistance for both groups of participants; motivated to attain their education; seeking a better life for their child; their identities as students were positioned in a form of oppositional thinking</p> |
| <p>Alfred, M. V. (2007). Welfare reform and black women's economic development. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i>, 57(4), 293-311.</p> | <p>Qualitative study</p> <p>Data collected through focus groups and open-ended, face-to-face interviews</p> <p>Sample: 15 African American women and their 6 employers (in the Milwaukee area)</p> | <p>Explores the experiences of African American women who were transitioning from welfare to work and their employers to determine the extent of participants' self-sufficiency as a result of their work force participation.</p> | <p>Identified 3 connected systems of barriers to hinder participants' progress to self-sufficiency: 1) Welfare reform policies/practice; 2) employer practices and job market situations; and 3) personal characteristics/responsibilities</p> |

What is Transformative Learning Theory? Although more than one formulation of transformative theory can be found in the literature, one which is foundational within the field of adult education is Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation. The theorist's conception of transformative learning theory emphasizes an individual's experiences can facilitate an awareness, examination, and re-assimilation of deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions, which can result in change. Below are the ten stages of perspective transformation that Mezirow (1991, pp. 168-169) proposes an individual should transition through during transformative learning and that this study will employ to determine whether the study's participants experienced transformative learning:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of option for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Transformative learning theory (TLT) proposes that individuals construct knowledge through informal logic, beliefs, natural dispositions, and skills from experiences, culture, parents and education prior to reaching adulthood (Mezirow, 1998). This system of beliefs, assumptions, perspectives and worldview determines how a person thinks in specific situations (Brookfield, 2012).

Transformative learning theory explains the process of reframing these discriminative, flawed perspectives with a more inclusive, permeable, rational, and reflective epistemology

(Ettling, 2006; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Mezirow, 1998, 2000). Mezirow (2000) asserts that individuals transform frames of reference through critical reflection of the assumptions which their interpretations, beliefs, or perspectives are based.

Mezirow (1991) defines perspective transformation as the “process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectations to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (p. 167). An emotionally-charged or traumatic situation in the life of a person, such as death, sickness, divorce, or the loss of a job can launch the process of a perspective transformation.

To make meaning of the new experience and to incorporate it into one’s meaning perspectives, an internal change is necessary. For this change to occur, testing the validity of currently held perspectives must be completed. Validity testing, achieved through critical reflection and public discourse, involves assessing the reasons and supporting arguments for one’s perspectives and to gauge whether those perspectives are still warranted under the current situation (Mezirow, 1991).

Theory informs how researchers identify and describe African American women’s unique experiences. Therefore, it is essential to employ a theory that reflects African American women’s social position as well as that of others with whom they interact in their world (Stephens & Phillips, 2005).

What is Race-centric Transformative Learning? Taylor & Snyder (2012) argue that because transformative learning theory is not a political theory, it falls short of being an effective framework for examining political systems, institutions, and organizations that promote transformation. There is a need for a deliberate and conscious approach to use a political

framework such as activism or consciousness raising within transformative learning theory. Accordingly, this study will employ the race-centric perspective of transformative learning, which is central to the transformative experiences of individuals of African origin (Taylor, 2008).

Race-centric transformative learning, similar to Freire's (1970) emancipatory view, underlines the social-political aspects of learning and centers on African American learners' lived experiences within a sociocultural, political, and historical context. Further, as race and social outcomes are analyzed, the race-centric perspective not only informs economic and structural barriers that impact the life course of African Americans but also the historical factors that have transcended generations in the oppression and marginalization of particular ethnic groups (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). A political foundation (i.e., consciousness raising, activism, cultivating a safe learning environment) is necessary to foster transformative learning in the race-centric view, anticipating the possibility that self-reflection and transformation may occur (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2008). Paramount to fostering race-centric transformative learning is advocating inclusion by giving a voice to those who have been notably silenced, by advocating empowerment, and by developing an ability to negotiate between and across cultures (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2008). Since critical and emancipatory research takes on a critical posture that desires to understand an individual as well as examines the power dynamics of a situation to confront the status quo, seeking to empower individuals to transform, TLT researchers contend that a race-centric perspective can be effectively employed in TLT (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Tisdell, 2012).

Winant's (as cited in Wimmer, 2015, p. 2197) reviews the history of the modern world through the lens of the race-centric perspective. Winant describes the beginning of the idea of race to the "age of discoveries, shows how it then developed into the major legitimizing ideology of the slave trade and the European colonization of the Global South in the nineteenth century, how

it becomes enriched with biological postulates later on, informs the Holocaust and South African apartheid, and then transforms after the civil rights revolution into a neo-conservative and then neo-liberal colour-blind ideology or the various newly emerging anti-immigrant nationalism in Europe” (p. 2197).

What is Critical Race Theory? Critical Race Theory (CRT) argues that racism is widespread and systemic (Peterson, 1999) due to policies and structures centered on ideas of merit and colorblindness that perpetuate the dominance of whites (Bergerson, 2003). Derrick Bell (1995), one of the most significant proponents of CRT, defines this tradition as “a body of legal scholarship...a majority of whose members are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law” (p. 888).

The philosophy of Critical Race Theory declares that African Americans are widely oppressed on the basis of race and that any program or research of emancipation should primarily be centered around the question of race. CRT attempts to understand the connections among race, racism, power, privilege, and oppression in order to confront and transform these connections (Bell, 1992). According to Bell (1992), racism has not been eliminated through legislation; rather, legislation has created “no more than temporary peaks of progress” which become inconsequential when “racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance” (p. 12).

CRT holds that “Without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members), it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). The “voice” component of CRT offers a platform for the African American single mothers in this study to express their experiences and realities. One of the five primary tenets of Critical Race Theory *The centrality of experiential knowledge* places emphasis on the voices and experiences of African

American women (Delgado, 2009a; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, 2006), which are highlighted in this study. CRT theorists assert that oppression is best understood from the experiences of the oppressed (Leonardo, 2009).

By renouncing the experiences of Whites as standard, many CRT scholars use first-person storytelling, narratives, autobiography, science fiction, illustrations, anecdotes, allegories, humor, sarcasm, and parables to expose, challenge, or deconstruct racial social constructs (Bell, 2009; Taylor, 2009). For critical race theorists, social reality is constructed by forming and exchanging stories pertaining to individual situations. Members of marginalized groups internalize stereotypical depictions that specific constituents of society have constructed to preserve their power. Historically, story-telling has been a remedy to cure the pain precipitated by racial oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

A predominant theme often repeated in CRT research is the *myth of a post-racial society*, which suggests that so much has been done in civil rights laws and educational reforms that race is no longer an issue in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Ladson-Billings (1998) affirms that though most Whites believe that things are much better for African Americans today, few of them would exchange societal places with African Americans. In the same vein, Smiley and West (2012) quote Robert F. Kennedy, “If any man claims the Negro should be content...let him say he would willingly change the color of his skin and go to live in the Negro section of a large city. Then and only then has he a right to such a claim” (p. 59).

What is Black Feminist Thought? Black Feminist Thought manifests from both feminist and critical race theories and authenticates the experiences of African American women in the construction of knowledge (Stephens & Phillips, 2005). While some traditional theories provide frameworks that can accommodate realities of any group’s development, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) more specifically integrates, validates, and centers around African American women’s

realities (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003). BFT originates from critical scientific inquiry that proposes men and women to be possible active agents in the construction of their social world and their personal lives. Central to BFT are the historical, economic, political, and social experiences that have influenced the viewpoints of African American women and others concerning who and what African American women epitomize (Stephens & Phillips, 2005).

BFT was modified by Collins (1989) to engender scholarly awareness of African American women's collective experiences. Black feminists maintain that African American women possess a shared historical reality and, consequently, a common worldview of historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization. The marginalization of these women of color as constituents of a particular group distinguished by their gender and race creates a shared experience (Stephens & Phillips, 2005).

According to Collins (1990), historically, African American women's experiences have been considered meaningless; in effect, she has focused her research efforts in bringing recognition to the African American women's historical oppression that have considered them to be inferior. This oppressive status resulted from the African American woman's race, gender, socio-cultural position within society, and is referred to as intersectionality. Intersectionality proposes that race, gender, and class are not discreet social positions; rather these systems of oppression are mutually integrated and work cooperatively to produce inequality.

Collins (1989) also notes that BFT supports a perspective that illustrates African American women's experiences as a collective group and confronts two aspects of an oppressed population. First, Collins (1989) confronts the claim that an oppressed individual or population would prefer to assimilate than challenge the status quo. Secondly, Collins confronts the notion that those who are oppressed are less intelligent and inept in challenging the status quo of the dominant ruling class since they are perceived as subhuman. Collins contends that these claims are based on

generalized and marginalized scholarly data and cannot be viewed as conclusive for African American women's experiences. According to Collins (1989), this misinformation is fashioned from the scholarly perspectives of those who are White, African American males and White women who have attributed all African Americans and women to one group. For example, most scholarly research has assigned African American women into the generalized categories of oppressed and dominated. Furthermore, these scholars have ineffectually explored the true essence and experiences of African American women through their own distinctive perspectives. Collins (1989) declares that "their shared experiences as a group allowed them to have a different worldview or reality that is not reflective of the dominant group's realities" (p. 747) and other women's and/or the African American man's realities.

In the same vein, other feminist theorists contend that as African American women have determined not to be oppressed, they re-define their African American womanhood, their identities while collectively changing their perspectives of themselves and their perceptions of other African American women (Collins, 2000). Moreover, these theorists assert that all women have similar experiences that unite them as women; however, the African American woman's viewpoint is unique to the African American woman's unique perspective. The BFT theory asserts that African American women distinguish their own standpoint according to their realities (Collins, 1989; 2000).

Collins (1989; 2000) argues that African American women often find themselves struggling to choose between their racial background and gender-ascribed identities. Conversely, to challenge these conflicts between their socio-cultural ascribed identities, African American women categorize themselves as original and separate, indicative of their unique identity: that of the African American woman. This identity embodies African American women's unique essence, experiences, and a composite of their racial, gender, and cultural identities. The African

American woman has redefined her identity that is separate of the African American man's experiences and that is separate of the White woman's experiences. Although those who are not African American and women argue that they understand African American women's experiences, only the African American woman is capable and justified to make their own claims about their experiences.

As shown in Table 2, the theoretical framework used to inform this study will be Transformative Learning (TLT), Race-centric Transformative Learning, Critical Race (CRT), and Black Feminist Thought (BFT). CRT and BFT will be used to address the participants' socio-cultural factors and positionality and the influence these components have on the participants' learning and meaning-making. CRT also advocates storytelling and narratives to expose, challenge, and deconstruct racial and social constructs that have influenced the views of African Americans. Moreover, BFT is specific to the historical realities of the study's participants and will complement the theories that do not specifically address the social systems of gender and class, while TLT is relative to the methodology as it provides the criteria to be used to determine whether transformative learning has occurred and, consequently, answers the research question that guides the study.

Table 2 Summary of Theoretical Frameworks

| | Transformative (TLT) and Race-centric Transformative Learning | Critical Race Theory | Black Feminist Thought |
|-----------------|--|---|--|
| Theory Overview | <p><i>TLT</i> contends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an individual's experiences can facilitate an awareness, examination, and re-assimilation of deeply held values, beliefs, assumptions through critical reflection; <p><i>Race-centric Transformation</i> informs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context • giving voice to the silenced • empowerment by developing an ability to negotiate between and across cultures • informs economic and structural barriers that have transcended generations | <p><i>CRT</i> argues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racism is widespread and systemic due to policies and structures centered on ideas of merit and colorblindness • connections between race, racism, power, privilege, oppression to confront and transform these connections • racism is not eliminated through legislature; rather has created only temporary peaks of progress that maintains white dominance • oppression is best understood from the experiences of the oppressed | <p><i>BFT</i> argues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American women possess a shared historical reality of a historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization • African American women's experiences considered meaningless • race, gender, class are systems of oppression mutually integrated and work together to produce inequality • against the claim that the oppressed would rather assimilate than challenge the status quo • centers around African American single |

Table 2 Continued

| | Transformative (TLT) and Race-centric Transformative Learning | Critical Race Theory | Black Feminist Thought |
|--------------------|--|---|---|
| | | | women's realities |
| Gaps/Limitations | <p><i>TLT</i>: is not a political theory</p> <p><i>Race-centric</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> no established criteria for determining transformative learning; does not specify gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus is primarily centered around race/racism, rather than other social systems; does not specify gender | |
| Theory Complements | <p><i>TLT</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mezirow's 10 phases of TLT used to answer research question <p><i>Race-centric</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> informs phenomenology to examine participants' lived experiences informs economic and structural barriers of participants that have transcended generations advocates the silenced "voice" empowerment by developing ability to negotiate between cultures | <p>informs the power dynamics of dominant discourse, imagery, and legislature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> influence the development of interview questions proponent of storytelling and narratives to expose, challenge, deconstruct racial social constructs that have shaped the views of African Americans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theory used to inform the descriptions of African American single mothers; influence the development of interview questions contends that African American women, determined not to be oppressed and re-define their African American womanhood identities while changing their self-perspectives |

Table 2 Continued

| | Transformative (TLT) and Race-centric Transformative Learning | Critical Race Theory | Black Feminist Thought |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|
| Relative to Methodology | <i>Race-centric</i> informs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interview/research questions; phenomenology; data collection | <i>CRT</i> informs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interview/research questions; phenomenology; data collection | <i>BFT</i> informs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interview/research questions; phenomenology; data collection |

Note. References: *TLT*: Mezirow, 1991. *Race-centric*: Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Teasley & Ikard, 2010; *CRT*: Bell, 1992; Bergerson, 2003; Leonardo, 2009; Peterson, 1999; *BFT*: Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003

One significant factor and implication of the study is that the acknowledged voice and interests of impoverished African American single mothers and understanding of their experiences could reveal to Tennessee policymakers, leaders, and adult educators the need for poverty legislation and educational programs to be inclusive of the knowledge and experiences of this marginalized population. Race-centric transformative learning theory will inform this piece as well as inform advocating empowerment through developing the ability to negotiate between cultures. Since this phenomenological narrative study seeks to document the lived experiences of its participants, race-centric transformative theory is further relevant since it centers on the lived experiences specific to African American learners. CRT will inform the power dynamics of the dominant discourse of welfare reform and its associated dominant imagery. Finally, while BFT will be used to inform the descriptions of the study's participants, all three frameworks have served to develop the interview questions.

Summary

Today, the American public regards poverty and welfare as African American problems and issues such as welfare and poverty have become discreetly “racially coded” without blatantly producing the “race card” (Easton,2016). Those receiving public assistance have been criticized, stigmatized, and blamed for their poverty-stricken conditions (Alfred, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013; Schram, 2005; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). Moreover, impoverished African American single mothers have been the objects of high poverty rates in the South that are embedded in many factors. For example, historically, the South was central to racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans that persists in many forms. In effect, poverty rates for female-headed households with children are even higher than those of other family structures (Mattingly & Turcotte-Seabury, 2010). Not only does race-centric transformative learning inform the lived experiences of this population within a socio-cultural, political and historical context, this theory also addresses the economic and structural barriers that have transcended generations.

As the literature indicates, this population is aware of their victimization as it relates to race and the more complex methods of racial inequality that can lessen their ability to engage in autonomy (Teasley & Ikard, 2010), including those that are discreetly obscured in public policy toward the poor (Anderson, 2016; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013; Schram, 2005). Accordingly, African Americans, in general, desire to see an end of racism and racialized thinking in the United States and to be subjects of their own experience and destiny. For this reason, marginalized populations such as impoverished African American single mothers need to experience an increase in structural changes in American society through legislation that provide opportunities such as greater support for college access, retention, and completion. Critical race theory argues that

racism is widespread and systemic due to poverty policies and structures. CRT further contends that instead of racism being eliminated through legislature, policy only creates temporary peaks of progress that preserves white dominance.

Conversely, many low-income African American single mothers in the literature perceive education as a path of resistance to structural forces and dominant imagery as well as a valuable tool for achieving upward mobility (Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010) but encounter many barriers to attainment, retention and completion (Bergerson, 2003). Consequently, poverty and education legislature targeting this population should be a priority. Mattingly & Turcotte-Seabury (2010) contend that policies affecting marginalized populations “may be most effectively developed and implemented at the community or county level through locally developed programs well-tailored to suit the needs of the poor in that area” (p. 3) but must also be inclusive of the African American voice (Anderson, 2016). Black Feminist Thought centers around these African American single mother’s realities as it speaks to the historical resistance of their oppressive state and to a challenge to the status quo through seeking education. Education has the potential to facilitate the development of the ability to negotiate between cultures as Race-centric Transformative Learning asserts.

Although discourse surrounding economic and policy decisions significantly impacts African Americans (Reese, 2005), the voice of this population has not been heard with much significance and is oftentimes rendered silent (Anderson, 2016). Such policies intended to foster self-reliance have only pushed more women and children deeper into poverty, with limited options for education and training to facilitate an upward move (Johnson, 2010; Reese, 2005). Critical Race informs the power dynamics of dominant discourse, imagery, and legislature.

The intent of this study is to offer legislators and leaders in Tennessee a deep and authentic

understanding and expertise of a sample of impoverished African American single mothers living in Tennessee through the narratives of their lived experiences and perspectives. Race-centric Transformative Learning advocates the silenced voice of these single mothers while Critical Race of using their narratives to expose, challenge, and deconstruct racial and social constructs that have influenced the perspectives of this population.

Consequently, decisions regarding future economic and educational policies, programs, and reforms should be grounded in the lived experiences of impoverished African American single mothers, and thereby will be better informed and can have a greater impact on this population and future generations. Johnson (2010) affirms that a college education not only has the potential to alter the quality of life of these mothers, “it will also give them a chance to have a positive impact on future generations of African Americans through their children and therefore to have a positive impact on the American community” (p. 1049).

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Because of the primary focus on the lived experiences of this study's participants, a phenomenological study was conducted. I believed this approach to be the most appropriate choice in answering the following research question: *What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare?*

Phenomenology was chosen as the theoretical perspective for this study since its approach has the potential to permeate deep into the human experience, perceive the essence of a phenomenon and describe the phenomenon in the form that was experienced by the individual (Kafle, 2011). For the purpose of this study, transcendental phenomenology was employed, and life change/transformation in the context of welfare was the phenomenon of importance that I chose to study. This phenomenological narrative study told the participants' stories of their educational and lived experiences and the meanings and feelings associated with these experiences. The participants used their positionality as low-income African American single mothers to tell a different story than that of the dominant ideology, revealing transformative experiences and how these experiences related to their educational endeavors and welfare use.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as a school of philosophy, was initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Phenomenology is the way of access to the world as individuals experience it pre-reflectively—that is, the common experience that individuals live in and through for almost all of their daily existence. Some examples are driving a car, eating, reading, or talking (van Manen, 2014). The aim of phenomenology is description of phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Two

types of phenomenology are identified in qualitative research, hermeneutical and transcendental phenomenology. Hermeneutical phenomenology involves restrained reflection on the fundamental structures of the lived experiences of human existence (Moustakas, 2014).

Descriptive phenomenology, which was used for this study, is referred to as transcendental phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology involves the association between consciousness and objects of knowledge, giving attention to the objects themselves. Husserl's objective was to develop a science of phenomena that would explain how objects are experienced and present themselves to human consciousness (Husserl, 1983).

Husserl's descriptive phenomenology calls for the observer to transcend the phenomena and meanings being examined to take a comprehensive perspective of the essences and phenomena being examined. In descriptive phenomenology, the researcher has the ability of 'bracketing off' effects surrounding a phenomenon to get to the essences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Husserl (1983) asserted that the only means by which an individual can arrive at a clear understanding and perception of reality is by transcending the 'natural attitude' and leaving behind all assumptions and placing the receptive, unobstructed mind in contact with the phenomenon to be studied. Husserl further posited that the human consciousness has the most in-depth connection with that of which it is conscious (i.e. 'essences' or 'the things themselves'). Consequently, to truly know, individuals must reconcile themselves to this region of pure subjectivity, using intuition. Husserl defined this approach using intuition 'epoche' or phenomenological reduction. Moustakas (1994), puts it this way: "in the epoche, daily understandings, judgements, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena is revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (p. 33).

Phenomenology focuses on an individual's perception of the world (Langdrige, 2007) and assists researchers in examining day-to-day human experiences in close, detailed ways. This form of query strives to reveal the meaning individuals place on their lived experiences (deMarrais, 2004). van Manen (1997), contends that phenomenology is a response to the way one adapts to lived experience and investigates how the individual experiences the world.

Sample Size and Selection

Ten low-income African American single mothers who pursued and completed a post-secondary education program while receiving public assistance participated in this study. A purposeful sampling method was used for participant selection and to obtain information-rich cases that provided insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Creswell (2013) notes that a purposeful qualitative sampling offers an approach in which researchers can intentionally select individuals who can help us understand a phenomenon. More specifically, I used criterion sampling, seeking participants who met the following criteria: low-income adult African American single mothers who resided in Tennessee, assumed head of household, received welfare assistance during the time they were participating in a post-secondary education program, and expressed a willingness to participate in this research.

Network selection was the criterion-based strategy I used to select my participants. Network selection is described as the strategy in which a researcher locates one participant who fits the study's criteria and that participant, subsequently, refers the researcher to others who fit the criteria (deMarrais, 2004). I provided a contact telephone number for women who met the criteria and were interested in participating in the study.

Following participant screening, the selected participants were given a confidentiality consent agreement to sign which specified my intent as researcher to keep the participants'

identity private and to only use information gathered for the specified research purposes. Each participant was asked to sign and date two copies of the consent form—one for the participant to keep and one for the researcher’s files. As part of the informed consent process, I outlined measures for the protection of identity with the use of pseudonyms.

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to describe the experiences of African American single mothers as learners while participating in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare. Life change/transformation in the context of welfare was the phenomenon of importance. The following research question guided the study: *What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare?*

Ten low-income African American single mothers were selected and interviewed. The focus of the interviews was on the time prior to and while receiving public assistance and participating in a post-secondary education program. Moreover, the interviews focused on the impact of these experiences in the lives of the participants and their children. The final focus of the interviews was on the potential impact of the study participants’ experiences of low-income African American single mothers and on future policy and decision-making efforts that could affect the lives of other African American single mothers receiving public aid.

Interview Process

I was provided with the names of four prospective participants from people who were aware of the topic of my study. My initial contact with the African American single mothers interviewed for this study occurred via a telephone conversation. Each participant, then, recommended someone they knew who fit the criteria and might be willing to participate. After contacting those participants, four other participants were recommended. During each telephone

conversation, I introduced myself and I read the solicitation script which contained the pertinent information regarding the study. The prospective participants and I engaged in dialogue, developing a rapport as we talked. Each was outgoing, encouraging and eager to be a part of my research concerning the topic of welfare; each was eager to share her story. I felt very relaxed with each participant and even suggested the option of interviewing in my home. Recalling the interview process, the feeling of comfort was reciprocated on the part of each participant as they told their story with vigor.

Only one of the twelve single mothers who was contacted declined to participate in the study. Although this single mother was excited about telling her story, her rigorous work schedule would not permit her to do so. Consequently, she declined to participate. Another prospective participant did not meet the study's criteria because she had received public assistance for more than twenty years. I saw her story as one to be told in a different study related to long-term welfare use.

The interviews took place at the time scheduled and location designated. Four interviews took place in the researcher's home; two interviews were conducted in the participants' homes; three occurred at the participants' jobsites; and one interview was conducted in a hotel conference room. Follow-up interviews were conducted in the same locations.

Each participant was cooperative and willing to participate in a follow-up interview. All of the participants stated that they enjoyed the interview process, which lasted approximately one hour per session. Participants willingly answered all the questions even though some questions reminded them of stressful times in their lives. The following are brief profiles of this study's participants.

Participants' Profiles

Nicole is a 43-year-old licensed cosmetologist who is now married with three children. She grew up in a home with her mother, aunt, and grandmother. They all worked and did not receive public assistance. However, when Nicole was 19 years old, she and her first two children moved into subsidized housing and received food stamps for seven years. Nicole found the process of applying for public assistance invasive, which motivated her to pursue post-secondary education to improve her potential of exiting welfare. Adults like Nicole often perceive education to be the key route to advance their economic circumstances (Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010)

Carla is a 33-year-old public school teacher who is single and has two children. She grew up in a single-parent household, where her mother temporarily received public assistance while Carla was growing up. Carla and her first child received Families First, TennCare, and lived in subsidized housing for four years. She was the first in her family to earn a college degree. Carla admitted that initially she had been embarrassed when she became pregnant while in college. However, Carla stated that she felt no embarrassment for having to receive public assistance because she knew that it was only going to be temporary and help her “get to the next step” in her life.

April is a 32-year-old licensed practical nurse who is married with four children. She grew up in a two-parent household. When she was 22 years old, April and her first child received food stamps and lived in subsidized housing for five years. April stated that almost everyone in her family had at one time received public assistance, which she described as an “extra push” of help.

Frances is a 51-year-old licensed cosmetologist who is single and has two children. She was raised in a two-parent household until the age of eight when her dad died. When she was 31 years old, Frances with her two children left an abusive relationship. She then applied for and received food stamps and lived in subsidized housing for four years. Frances shared that although mostly everyone she associated with had received public assistance. However, she had been the only female in her family that had to receive public assistance, which she described as “a step up to help you get ahead.”

Candice is a 32-year-old licensed cosmetologist and licensed practical nurse who has two children. Although she was raised in a single parent home, Candice’s dad helped support them financially. At the age of 18, Candice and her first child received Families First for five years and food stamps for ten years. Though receiving public assistance had not been her first option, Candice asserted that public assistance had allowed her access to childcare services that she needed as long as she was working or in school.

Lisa is a 43-year-old chief counselor at a state correctional facility. She is single and has one child. Lisa’s mother was 15 years old when Lisa was born, and she grew up in a household in which her grandmother, who had eight children, received food stamps. When Lisa was 20 years old, she became pregnant while enrolled in college. Lisa moved back to her hometown where she received food stamps, TennCare, and WIC (Women, Infant, Child) food vouchers for one year. Lisa’s mother saw public assistance as “begging for something.” However, Lisa did not see public assistance as a “crutch” because she knew where she was headed.

Tracy is a 38-year-old licensed medical assistant and phlebotomist who is single and has two children. Tracy grew up in a single-parent household with public assistance. When Tracy was 21 years old, she and her two children received TennCare and lived in subsidized housing

for four years. Tracy stated that she had used public assistance to help get her to where she wanted to be in life. It provided a means for her to go back to school and to have a better my life.

Earnestine is a 59 years old mother and has been a licensed Registered Nurse for 31 years. Earnestine is married with two children. Earnestine grew up in a two-parent household where she was the only one of her mother's children who graduated college. When she was 29 years old, Earnestine and her first child received food stamps and lived in subsidized housing for the last six months that she was enrolled in her nursing program. When Earnestine went back to school to complete her nursing degree, she made the sacrifice not to work because "my degree was my way to a better life for me and my child." Consequently, Earnestine sought assistance for that temporary time to help get her through school. Earnestine viewed public assistance as a "steppingstone."

Rita is 33 years old and has been a public schoolteacher for seven years. She grew up in a single-parent household with temporary public assistance. When she was 18 years old, Rita and her first child received food stamps and WIC food vouchers for five years. Rita found out that she was pregnant right before her mother dropped her off at college. Shortly afterward, Rita's mother died. Rita sought public assistance to ensure that "I had the best nutrition possible."

Teresa is a 40-year-old licensed educator with a background in social work. Teresa has experienced both spectrums of public assistance: as a recipient and as a social service employee. She is married with three children. Teresa grew up in a single-parent household after her mother divorced when she was five years old. Her mother received food stamps and Medicaid until Teresa was about 16 years old. When she was 21 years old, Teresa received Families First and TennCare and lived in subsidized housing for approximately two years. Teresa was just entering

her junior year of college when she had her first child and found childcare to be very expensive. Teresa declared that “when I sought public assistance, it was to assist me with childcare.”

Data Collection

Once written consent was obtained from each participant, I began collecting data via semi-structured interviews using an open-ended interview format. Each participant was interviewed twice, and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using two different recording devices: a mini voice-recorder and a portable cassette voice recorder. The interviews were conducted with each participant individually and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The recordings allowed me the opportunity to focus on each participant’s verbal and non-verbal language. While focusing on the participants, I was able to engage in a conversation-like interview, which provided an atmosphere in which we freely examined topics as they emerged, and I asked for clarity as needed. The questions were initially broad; however, I included prompts and focused questions to gain more specific details and examples pertaining to participants’ experiences.

The purpose of the initial interview allowed me to attain a rich and deep description of the lived experiences of each participant while allowing flexibility for the participants to explore the meaning of their own experiences as they saw fit (van Manen, 1990). The researcher also transcribed each interview. The data provided the participants’ accounts of past and present life history that identified a perspective transformation and change within the context of the participants’ journey during participation in a post-secondary education program, while receiving public assistance.

The phenomenological aspect of the interview served as a way of gathering information that permitted the researcher to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon

being studied. It also allowed for the development of a conversation between the researcher and the participant about the meaning of the experience in question (van Manen, 1990). Finally, employing a phenomenological study using open-ended interviews created a means for the participants to expand upon their individual notions and corroborate others in rich detail about ways in which their lived experiences came together to assist them in determining pertinent recommendations for policymakers and leaders.

Interview questions were developed and informed by the following theories:

Transformative and Race-centric Transformative Learning, Critical Race and Black Feminist Thought. See Appendix A for Interview questions. Table 3 shows an alignment of the theoretical framework with the four topic areas under which the study's interview questions were grouped. The table also shows how each theory informed each of the four topic areas. The first topic area focused on the study participants' life experiences and events that necessitated their participation in public assistance. The focus of the next topic area was the participants' making meaning of learning beyond their education program's curriculum followed by the third topic area, focusing on the participants' self-perception after completing their program. The final topic area concentrated on the participants' future hope for their children, other African American single mothers and future poverty policy.

Table 3 An Alignment of the Theoretical Framework with Interview Questions

| |
|---|
| <p><i>How have various life experiences and events contributed to the low-income African American single mothers' need to participate in a public assistance program?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Topic Area 1 is informed by:</p> |
| <p>TLT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mezirow's perspective transformation Stages 1-3 <p>Race-centric:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context • informs economic and structural barriers of participants that have transcended generations |
| <p>CRT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racism is widespread and systemic due to policies and structures centered on ideas of merit and colorblindness • racism is not eliminated through legislature; rather has created only temporary peaks of progress that maintains white dominance; narratives used to expose, challenge, deconstruct racial and social constructs • oppression is best understood from the experiences of the oppressed |
| <p>BFT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American women's experiences considered meaningless • race, gender, class are systems of oppression mutually integrated and work together to produce inequality • centers around African American single women's realities |
| <p><i>How do low-income African American single mothers who are participating in an adult education program while receiving public assistance make meaning of learning beyond the adult education program's curriculum?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Topic Area 2 is informed by:</p> |
| <p>TLT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mezirow's perspective transformation Stages 4-8 • an individual's experiences can facilitate an awareness, examination, and re-assimilation of deeply held values, beliefs, assumptions through critical reflection; <p>Race-centric:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context • giving voice to the silenced; empowerment by developing an ability to negotiate between and across cultures |
| <p>CRT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racism is widespread and systemic due to policies and structures centered on ideas of merit and colorblindness • connections between race, racism, power, privilege, oppression to confront and transform these connections • narratives used to expose, challenge, deconstruct racial and social constructs • oppression is best understood from the experiences of the oppressed |

Table 3 Continued

| |
|--|
| <p>BFT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American women possess a shared historical reality of a historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization • race, gender, class are systems of oppression mutually integrated and work together to produce inequality • against the claim that the oppressed would rather assimilate than challenge the status quo • centers around African American single women’s realities |
| <p><i>How do low-income African American single mothers participating in an adult education program view themselves differently than prior to enrolling in the program?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Topic Area 3 is informed by:</p> |
| <p>TLT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mezirow’s perspective transformation Stages 9-10 • an individual’s experiences can facilitate an awareness, examination, and re-assimilation of deeply held values, beliefs, assumptions through critical reflection; <p>Race-centric:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context • giving voice to the silenced empowerment by developing an ability to negotiate between and across cultures |
| <p>CRT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • racism is widespread and systemic due to policies and structures centered on ideas of merit and colorblindness • connections between race, racism, power, privilege, oppression to confront and transform these connections • racism is not eliminated through legislature; rather has created only temporary peaks of progress that maintains white dominance; narratives used to expose, challenge, deconstruct racial and social constructs • oppression is best understood from the experiences of the oppressed |
| <p>BFT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American women possess a shared historical reality of a historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization • African American women’s experiences considered meaningless • race, gender, class are systems of oppression mutually integrated and work together to produce inequality • against the claim that the oppressed would rather assimilate than challenge the status quo • centers around African American single women’s realities |
| <p><i>What is the participants’ hope for the future?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Topic Area 4 is informed by:</p> |
| <p>Race-centric:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context |

Table 3 Continued

| |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• giving voice to the silenced; empowerment by developing an ability to negotiate between and across cultures |
| <p>CRT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• racism is widespread and systemic due to policies and structures centered on ideas of merit and colorblindness• connections between race, racism, power, privilege, oppression to confront and transform these connections• racism is not eliminated through legislature; rather has created only temporary peaks of progress that maintains white dominance• narratives used to expose, challenge, deconstruct racial and social constructs• oppression is best understood from the experiences of the oppressed |
| <p>BFT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• African American women possess a shared historical reality of a historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization• African American women's experiences considered meaningless• race, gender, class are systems of oppression mutually integrated and work together to produce inequality• against the claim that the oppressed would rather assimilate than challenge the status quo• centers around African American single women's realities |

The interview process began by addressing the participants' lived experiences prior to applying for public assistance, including childhood experiences, and perceptions and attitude about receiving public assistance. These questions were informed by Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation stages one through four. Race-centric transformative learning addressed the participants' lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context and informed the economic and structural barriers of participants that transcended generations. CRT informed systemic racism due to welfare reform and other social structures and the participants' narratives to expose, challenge and deconstruct racial and social constructs that have shaped their views. BFT, centered around the participants' realities, informed the three social systems of oppression (race, gender, class) working together to produce inequality through welfare reforms, suggesting that these women's experiences are meaningless.

The second set of questions addressed the participants' meaning making beyond the curriculum that led to their decision to enroll in an education program, the challenges and experiences they encountered, and their responses to those experiences. These questions were informed by Mezirow's perspective transformation stages five through eight; Race-centric transformative learning addressed the participants' lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context and informed the economic and structural barriers participants acknowledged facing prior to and after enrolling in their education program. Further, by enrolling in an education program, participants were given a platform for their voice and engaging in the process of empowerment. CRT informed systemic racism due to welfare reform and other social structures and barriers these women faced before pursuing or engaging in their education program. Also, the participants' enrollment in education served as a way for them to confront oppression; further, CRT informed participants' narratives to expose, challenge and

deconstruct racial and social constructs that have shaped their views. BFT informed the participants' realities as they used education to resist their oppression and challenge the status quo.

Thirdly, participants were asked questions that allowed them to reflect on their present perception of themselves compared to their self-perception prior to enrolling in their education program. These questions were informed by Mezirow's perspective transformation stages nine and ten; Race-centric transformative learning informed the participants' lived experiences within a socio-cultural, political, historical context. By completing their education program, participants believed that they now have a voice and have acquired the skills and capacity to become empowered to negotiate between and across cultures. CRT informed participants' narratives to expose, challenge and deconstruct racial and social constructs that shaped their views. Also, the participants' completion of their education served as a way for the participants to confront oppression. BFT informed the participants' realities as they used education to resist their oppression and challenge the status quo.

Finally, participants were asked to share their hope for the future—for themselves, their children, and other low-income African American single mothers. Race-centric transformative learning informed the participants' voice as potential agents for change, empowerment and capacity to negotiate between and across cultures. The final interview question was a hypothetical one, asking the participants to share their recommendations to policymakers and leaders, based on their lived experiences, if they were given the opportunity to provide input into future initiatives that would support low-income African American single mothers in their efforts to attain a better quality of life for themselves and their children. CRT informed participants' narratives to expose, challenge and deconstruct racial and social constructs that shaped their

views. Also, the participants' completion of their education served as a way for them to confront oppression. BFT centered around the participants' realities as they used education to resist their oppression and challenge the status quo. This question was relevant because it addressed the gap in literature for this study and significance of this study and, therefore, was the most appropriate with which to complete the interview process.

Following the initial interview and preliminary data analysis, I scheduled a follow-up interview using the transcriptions to verify the findings. This interview lasted approximately one hour. During this time, I asked more specific questions and verified accuracy of data from the first interview. This interview obtained more details of the participants' lived experiences and gathered a rich account of the participants' experiences. This interview also included any thoughts, impressions, or topics of discussion that may have emerged for me during the review of the initial interview transcripts. Through the sharing of my thoughts and impressions as I journaled, I was able to clarify my understanding and remain as close to participants' lived experiences as possible (van Manen, 1990).

Data Analysis

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study using the theoretical frameworks of Transformative/Race-centric Transformative Learning, Critical Race and Black Feminist Thought was to describe the lived experiences of impoverished African American single mothers who have completed a post-secondary education program. The ten African American single mothers were asked about their lived experiences prior to, during, and upon completion of their education program. The participants were asked to recount both educational and lived experiences and the meanings and feelings associated with these experiences in the context of welfare reform. The participants' narratives told the story of their lived experiences and how

these experiences related to their participation in and completion of an education program. A narrative is a distinctively human way of meaning-making in which individuals make sense of their experiences by “storying them, by constructing narratives that make things cohere. Coherence creates sense out of chaos by establishing connections between and among these experiences” (Clark & Rossiter, 2009, p. 459).

Phenomenology reduced the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon (life change/transformation in the context of welfare) to a description of its essence that I described. A qualitative researcher will identify this phenomenon as an object of human experience (Creswell, 2007) and give voice to it.

Following the transcribing of the taped interviews, I read all written transcripts several times so that I could attain an overall feeling for them (Creswell, 2007) and organize the data. I obtained a general sense of the entire picture prior to breaking the information into parts (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2008) maintains that “initial preparation of the data for analysis requires organizing the vast amount of information, transferring it from spoken or written word to a typed file and making decisions about whether to analyze the data by hand or by computer” (p. 245). After reading each participant’s transcribed interview, I organized data according to participants’ interviews (Creswell, 2008) by creating a table for data organization that included raw data or actual statements (Saldana, 2009) from each participant’s interview. Afterwards, I assigned codes based on notes from my preliminary jotting of the actual descriptions of the participants’ experiences and identified key phrases or statements (Creswell, 2007). A code is defined as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). I assigned

a code to key phrases or statements identified from each topic area. The following were key phrases or statements from each topic area that were common among the transcriptions: *Topic Area 1*: I got pregnant; I came back home; Extra help; It wasn't something that I wanted to do; Pre-judged; Stereotyped; Guilt; Shame; Steppingstone; I wasn't able to provide for my kids. The code that I assigned to the key phrases in Topic Area 1 was *dilemmas*.

The following were key phrases from *Topic Area 2*: I wanted better for my life; I knew that I had to go to school; Education was instilled in me; I saw education as a way to get off welfare; I wanted my kids to have what I didn't have growing up; Struggle; We helped each other; Prayer; Faith. The code that I assigned to Topic Area 2 was *education*. Key phrases or statements from *Topic Area 3* were Hard work pays off; I was able to get off public assistance; More confident; Sense of accomplishment. The code that I assigned to this topic area was *confidence*. Key phrases or statements from *Topic Area 4* were Education; Instill in children; Don't abuse public assistance; Want something better; Seek help; Follow up on requirements; Work hard; Determination; Go into the communities; Training; Support. The code that I assigned to the topic area was *hope for others*.

Next, I identified preliminary patterns and themes which surfaced from the combination of preliminary jotting, raw data, and codes (Creswell, 2007). Themes are determined as repeating ideas which the participants have in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). As common themes developed more fully, and similarities in descriptions emerged, I coded the subsets. I also used the constant comparison method of analysis (Silverman, 2000), analyzing and comparing data within each transcription prior to moving on to examine data between transcriptions. The theme that emerged from Topic Area 1 was *Disorienting Experiences* that I subdivided into the categories temporary help and social stigma. The theme that emerged from Topic Area 2 was

Learning Beyond the Curriculum. I subdivided this theme into the following categories: racial subordination, education, support systems, and changes. *Competent, Confident, and Independent* was the theme that emerged from Topic Area 3. I subdivided this theme into the categories, Beating the Odds and Open Doors. The final theme, emergent from Topic Area 4, was Becoming Advocate Educators that I subdivided into the categories role models, a change in perspective, and meet them where they are.

A second interview was scheduled to clarify and elaborate themes and to verify the findings from the initial interview (member checking). All participants verified the findings from the first interview as accurate. The findings of a phenomenological study are a collection of meanings for individuals of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). These descriptions were presented as written phrases or statements that depicted the meaning that an individual ascribed to an experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). All data were secured and locked a file cabinet in which I have sole access.

Validity and Trustworthiness

It is imperative that a researcher accurately presents the story of each participant's experiences. According to Creswell (2013), validation means making an effort to evaluate the "accuracy" of a study's findings. Qualitative researchers commonly use more than one strategy to check for validity and trustworthiness (credibility) (Creswell & Clark, 2011). For this phenomenological study, I established validity and trustworthiness by using the following strategies: I spent a minimum of two hours with each research participant in an effort to engender an authentic experience. Lester (1999) asserts that "the establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy is critical when interviewing in order to gain depth of information, particularly where the participant has a strong personal stake" (p. 2). Also, I used member checking,

reflexive journaling, and thick, rich descriptions of participant reports.

Member checking

I used three forms of member checking: The first check was conducted immediately, during the first interview process, as I asked the participant to provide clarification as needed. The second member check occurred during the second scheduled interview. First, each participant was asked to read the transcripts of dialogue to ensure that their words reflect what they intended to say. In addition, participants examined codes, themes, descriptions, and conclusions. This member check focused on confirmation, modification, and verification of the accuracy of codes, themes, descriptions, and conclusions based on the initial interview (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). I requested open and honest feedback from the participants concerning the findings from their initial interviews (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In addition, I highlighted the importance of the participants being able to respond truthfully concerning the accuracy of the themes and descriptions based on their initial and subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2008).

Additionally, I created an audit trail as I engaged in debriefing sessions with my committee chair. These sessions were useful as my chair and I examined my proposed courses of action to identify and address any limitations or flaws. The sessions also served as a space for me to share any developing ideas or interpretations related to my field notes, interview transcripts, and conclusions to identify any personal biases or preferences (Shenton, 2004).

Reflexive journaling

A reflexive strategy allows researchers to talk about themselves, “their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). I kept a self-reflective journal to provide a research trail of any changes in or information regarding my

methodologies and analysis. I also maintained entries of research activities, including conducting interviews, completing transcriptions, initializing coding, and analyzing data. I included any thoughts, impressions, or topics of discussion that may have emerged for me during the review of interview transcripts. Through the sharing of my thoughts and impressions, I was able to clarify my understanding and remain as close to participants' lived experiences as possible (van Manen, 1990).

My intent was to make “my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part” of my research (Ortlipp, 2008). Journaling allowed me to preserve information concerning my investigation, such as potential biases, any preconceived notions and assumptions that I identified, as well as information related to methodological discussions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Thick, Rich Descriptions

I used thick, rich descriptions to allow participants' stories or experiences to be heard (Gamson, 2000). Thick, rich descriptions will assist in revealing “the actual situations that have been investigated and, to an extent, the contexts that surround them” (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). Without this insight, it will be challenging for the reader to establish to what extent the overall findings are accurate (Shenton, 2004). My intent was to paint a picture with words to assist the reader in forming mental pictures of and getting a feel of what these impoverished African American single mothers had encountered.

Pilot Study

I have completed prior work on the topic of this study as a pilot study. The phenomenological narrative pilot study used the theoretical framework of transformative learning to explore, describe, and understand the lived experiences of impoverished African

American single mothers who had completed an adult education program. There were three low-income African American single mothers who participated in the research. Their ages ranged from 33-58. All participants had to meet the same criteria: adult low-income African-American single mothers residing in Tennessee who had assumed head of household and received some form of public assistance during the time they were participating in an adult education program.

The following research questions guided the pilot study:

Research Question 1: How do low-income African-American single mothers who are participating in an Adult Education program make meaning of learning beyond the curriculum?

Research Question 2: To what extent do low-income African-American single mothers participating in an Adult Education program view themselves differently than from their previous selves?

Research Question 3: To what extent do low-income African-American single mothers experience transformative learning as a result of participating in an Adult Education program?

Life change/transformation was the phenomenon of importance that I chose to study. Data was collected via semi-structured oral history interviews using an open-ended interview format. Participants were asked to recount both educational and life experiences and the meanings and feelings associated with these experiences. The participants' interviews told the story of their transformative experiences and how these experiences related to their participation in and completion of an adult education program. Again, to determine whether the single mothers' participation in an adult education program led to perspective transformation, Mezirow's (1991) ten phases of perspective transformation was used for the pilot.

After the data were analyzed, the following themes emerged: determination, empowerment, and personal growth. Determination was a recurring theme in all three participants' responses. It was important for each participant to do well and succeed in their educational endeavors. To do so, they were determined to endure rigorous schedules, rigorous coursework, and limited family time.

Completing their program seemed to trigger within two of the participants what they described as a sense of "boldness" that they could pursue anything they desired. All the participants also described attitude changes such as increased compassion for others, increased discipline, overall self-confidence, and self-esteem.

Participating in and completing their adult education program helped these African American single mothers examine their meaning perspectives. They were able to revise meaning perspectives and act on them. These mothers experienced emancipatory learning, liberating themselves from former unchallenged misconceptions and beliefs that limited their options.

Summary

Acknowledging the voice and interests of poor African American single mothers and describing their experiences could reveal to policymakers and leaders of the need for program and legislation to be inclusive of the knowledge and experiences of this marginalized population. Phenomenology was chosen as the theoretical perspective for this study since its approach has the potential to permeate deep into the human experience, perceive the essence of a phenomenon and describe the phenomenon in the form that was experienced by the individual (Kafle, 2011).

By expanding the understanding of low-income African American single mothers' experiences in and perceptions of post-secondary education in the context of welfare reform, this study can also provide information for educational professionals to ensure these women of color have the support they need to successfully complete educative programs. Moreover, acknowledging the voices and interest of poor African American single mothers and understanding the experiences of this oppressed group could reveal to leaders the need for continuous program improvements and the use of methodologies that start with the knowledge and experiences that adult learners bring with them into the classroom. Sheard (1999) declares that those who are involved in the educative process must recognize that "African Americans place value on education and knowledge and that it is important for them to believe that they matter" (p. 38).

Finally, this study can be an insightful source of information and encouragement for other low-income African American single mothers who are seeking to improve their standard of living, desiring a better life for themselves and their children. The intention of this qualitative study was to bring truths to the forefront so that others can relate, corroborate, or even question what they read. According to Crotty (1998), in qualitative research, "truth, or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world" (p. 8).

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The intent of this phenomenological narrative study was to 1) describe life experiences and events that contributed to low-income African American single mothers' need to participate in public assistance; 2) describe how low-income African American single mothers who had participated in a post-secondary education program made meaning of their learning beyond the curriculum; 3) describe how low-income African American single mothers participating in a post-secondary education program viewed themselves differently than prior to enrolling in the program; and 4) describe the participants' hope for the future.

All except two of the twelve single mothers who were contacted participated in the study. One declined to participate in the study because her rigorous work schedule would not permit her to do so. Consequently, she declined to participate. Another prospective participant did not meet the study's criteria because she had received public assistance for more than twenty years. I saw her story as one to be told in a different study related to long-term welfare use.

An interview guide was used to conduct face-to-face interviews with the study's participants: ten low-income African American single mothers. First, the participants were asked questions about their lives *prior to* receiving public assistance and enrolling in a post-secondary education program. Additionally, the participants were asked about their experiences *while* receiving public assistance and participating in their post-secondary education program. Questions pertaining to these topic areas were asked to determine the meaning perspectives the participants associated with public assistance, post-secondary education and beyond these entities.

The final questions pertained to the participants' experiences *after* completing their post-secondary education program. These questions were asked in order to provide a description of the impact that the participants' use of public assistance and completion of their post-secondary education program has had on their lives and may potentially have on the lives of others. Questions related to these topic areas were also asked in order to describe any meaning perspectives associated with these experiences.

In this chapter, the data analysis and interpretation of findings are presented as emergent themes and categories. Data obtained from the interviews are presented using Mezirow's (1991; 2000) ten stages of perspective transformation and are grouped under the most appropriate theme. The four themes are disorienting experiences; learning beyond the curriculum; confident, competent, and independent; and becoming advocate-educators. The information provided in this presentation builds the answer to the overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare?

Ten African American mothers were interviewed for this study. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' identity. All ten of the participants identified themselves as African American. Table 4 provides a profile of the study's participants. Their ages ranged from 32 to 59, with the average age being 40.3 years. The ages of the participants while receiving public assistance ranged from 18-31, with an average age of 21.9 years. All had been single mothers who had at least one child while receiving public assistance and enrolled in post-secondary education. On the average, the participants received welfare for 4.2 years. The table identifies the post-secondary education program that each participant completed as well as the type of public assistance received. Three participants earned their license in cosmetology,

education, or a medical-related field and one participant earned her degree in English. Seven of the participants received food stamps and lived in subsidized housing; four received TennCare insurance; three received Families First cash benefits; and two received WIC (Women, Infant, Children) food vouchers.

Table 4 Participants' Profile

| Participant Name | Age | Educational Program | Age on Public Assistance | Type of Public Assistance | Number of Years on Public Assistance | Number of Children while on Public Assistance |
|------------------|-----|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Nicole | 43 | Cosmetology | 19 | Food Stamps Housing | 7 | 2 |
| April | 32 | License Practical Nursing | 22 | Food Stamps Housing | 5 | 1 |
| Carla | 33 | Education | 20 | Families First TennCare Housing | 4 | 1 |
| Rita | 32 | Education | 18 | Food Stamps WIC | 5 | 1 |
| Tracy | 38 | Medical Assistant/ Phlebotomy | 21 | TennCare Housing | 4 | 2 |
| Lisa | 43 | English | 20 | Food Stamps TennCare WIC | 1 | 1 |
| Frances | 51 | Cosmetology | 31 | Food Stamps Housing | 4 | 2 |
| Earnestine | 59 | Registered Nursing | 29 | Food Stamps Housing | 6 mos | 1 |
| Teresa | 40 | Education | 21 | Families First TennCare Housing | 2 | 1 |
| Candice | 32 | Cosmetology | 18 | Families First Food Stamps | 5-Families First 10 - Food Stamps | 1 |

The study used Mezirow's (2000) ten stages of perspective transformation to determine the extent to which the study's participants experienced transformative learning. Mezirow's Transformational Learning Model consists of the following iterative and linear learning stages (p. 22):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of option for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Theme One: Disorienting Experiences

Theme One is "*Disorienting Experiences*." This theme is subdivided into two categories: temporary help and social stigma. In this first theme, the participants described life experiences and events that contributed to their need to apply for public assistance and their experiences when applying for and while receiving public assistance and education. Nicole, Tracy, Frances, Earnestine, and April responded that factors related to their immediate circumstances had led to their need to apply for public assistance. Conversely, Carla, Lisa, Teresa, Candice, and Rita asserted that a situational crisis, their unexpected pregnancy, led to their need for assistance. The participants saw public assistance as the only available resource to meet the needs of their disparaging situation. However, without exception, all the single mothers explicitly stated their reluctance or lack of desire to receive public assistance and expressed their ambition to leave public assistance as soon as possible.

Mezirow (1978; 1991; 2000) declared that for transformational learning to take place, it must be launched by a *disorienting dilemma*. This phenomenon emerges following a critical incident or a series of incremental events that act as a trigger or catalyst (Mezirow, 1990). Examples of a disorienting dilemma would be the loss of a loved one, the loss of employment, a marriage or divorce. Mezirow suggests that these events could inspire learners to “reassess taken-for granted assumptions, values, beliefs, and lifestyle habits and, in some instances, totally alter their lives: (Mezirow, 2000, p. 24).

All the participants identified their immediate circumstances, which included their inability to adequately provide for themselves and their children, as their disorienting dilemma. Based on their past experiences and meaning perspectives, the participants were unable to make meaning of their present experience (Mezirow, 1990). Nine of the ten participants also revealed the application process for receiving public assistance to be disorienting. However, as with most of the single mothers in Goodban’s (1985) study, these single mothers either implicitly stated or specifically labeled public assistance as being temporary. The ten participants’ responses resonated that their welfare use would only be until they could independently and adequately provide for themselves and their children.

Temporary Help

Although Nicole needed extra help to care for herself and her children, her account of having to apply for public assistance and the possibility that she and her children might receive assistance long-term was disorienting. She asserted that she would rather seek two sources of employment than receive long-term assistance.

Nicole: Well, I was a single mother, unemployed, and I just needed some help feeding my kids, feeding myself, housing my kids. I just didn’t have the means to do it all on my own...it was a struggle for me. This is not what I want, living on public assistance for the

rest of my life. It wasn't enough, and whether I had to work two jobs...I knew that's what I was going to do to get where I wanted to be... to get off public assistance.

Carla, Lisa, and Teresa were away in college when they discovered they were pregnant. This discovery was disorienting for the college students. They all moved back to or near their hometown and applied for public assistance. Carla, blaming herself for her predicament, felt embarrassed and regretful that she had disappointed others.

Carla: When I got pregnant with my daughter, it was an embarrassment. I felt like I had let people down. I was needing to get my own place and of course provide for me and my child while I was trying to continue my education. And pretty much needing the extra help to provide for me and my child was why I decided to apply for government assistance. I needed some place to stay. So I applied for government housing. Food stamps was one thing that I applied for...I needed to eat. You know, my idea was not to depend on other people, per se, versus, you know, using those resources that we have—that the community offers; so that's what I did...I knew that it was something that was only going to be temporary.

Lisa's situation of being an unwed mother was comparable to that of her mother's past. Consequently, Lisa's pregnancy created a rift between her and her mother, contributing to her disorienting dilemma. The lack of social support, especially parental support, can produce increased stress in single mothers more than married mothers (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Lisa moved back home, and because of the lack of support, she had to apply for assistance. However, Lisa was determined that her current circumstances would not deter her from achieving her goals.

Lisa: I was a student and I found myself with child, and I was not married. It was similar in many aspects to my mother's own life. My mother had me when she was very young—when she was 15. So there was always a disconnect...between me and my mother because she did not want me to do the things that she did. She did not want me to end up in the situation that she found herself in with children and no man to assist with them...My family was opposed to me having a baby, so I did not have the financial support that I would have needed to properly care for a child. I came back home, and I went to the local office...and I applied for assistance. It's help, and I need assistance right now...So I took it...It wasn't something that I looked for as a crutch because I knew where I was headed.

Although April was working, she stated she was not earning enough to adequately care for herself and child. Because of low wages, April qualified for the assistance that she needed. Like April, nearly 40% of low-income single mothers work part-time jobs with making low hourly wages and no benefits (Lee, 2004).

April: I was working but wasn't making a lot. I had one daughter; she was 5 years old at the time. I applied for food stamps and low-income housing which was based off your income...that's what public assistance did for me: food, clothing, housing, all of that. I didn't think... me personally...that I would ever do it. I was just using it as a bridge to get across.

Frances became single when she and her two children left her abusive husband. She applied for assistance because she needed a place to live and a way to take care of herself and her children. Frances needed to secure support with which she and her children might begin to rebuild their lives.

Frances: Approximately 20 years ago, I was in an abusive relationship and I left my husband and I moved in with my sister-in-law. I applied for Section 8 housing and welfare...I didn't want it...Public assistance was the thing that helped me out while I was getting ready to take my state boards and get into a hair salon. I had two boys—11 and 9.

Candice became pregnant and sought assistance because her mother was having difficulty taking care of the two of them. Subsequently, when Candice was pregnant, she applied for government assistance.

Candice: I applied for Families First and food stamps...I only used it as a steppingstone. It was nothing I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Earnestine's disorienting dilemma surfaced when she did not pass her nursing course and had to sit out for a year. When she went back to complete her degree, Earnestine made the sacrifice not to work while in school. Consequently, Earnestine had to apply for assistance to help with her needs.

Earnestine: When I went back to finish my degree, I decided that I would not work because I knew that my degree was my way to a better life for me and my child. So, I made that sacrifice not to work. And so in doing that I needed assistance. So, I applied for public assistance, got food stamps, I was in a home, so my house note decreased because it was based on my income. As far as my attitude towards it, it was something I needed at the time. It wasn't something I was going to live in.

Rita's disorienting dilemma resulted from her learning that she was pregnant as she went off to college coupled with her mother's death soon afterward. Consequently, Rita moved back home, and applied for assistance. After having faced this traumatic event, Rita immediately garnered the strength to begin making alternate plans to continue her education. She realized her focus needed to be on caring for her child.

Rita: Well, my mom took me to college. I was pregnant. After being at [university] a week, that's when there was a knock at the door, and they had said that my mom was pronounced dead...then I came home. I enrolled at [another university] and I applied for the assistance. And I enrolled in there because I just knew I had to support my child. I knew that the situation that I was in, I could've either bellowed in it or I could have burrowed through it. So, therefore, I decided, you know, to go on to school and finish.

Social Stigma

For most of the participants, receiving temporary help did not come without a price. The participants described experiencing a disorienting dilemma while applying for and receiving assistance. Eight of the ten participants endured being judged and stereotyped. They described stigmatized encounters with their caseworkers, whose primary responsibility was simply to help them receive public assistance (Haleman, 2004). In effect, the participants were not able to make meaning of their stigmatized experiences based on past experiences and the meaning perspectives gleaned from them; therefore, a disorienting dilemma occurred (Mezirow, 1991).

Parallel to Haleman's (2004) findings, the participants in this study were stereotyped because of their family structure, welfare use, and race. They endured having to answer invasive questions and experiencing feelings of degradation, judgment, and condemnation. The

caseworkers seemed to be reading the participants' bodies as if reading a book, interpreting the participants as "pathological and aberrant and in need not of support or assistance, but of control, regulation, punishment and discipline" (Adair, 2008, p. 2). However, while seeking validation of their experience, the participants questioned the authenticity of their encounter in order to act upon it (Mezirow, 1991).

The participants' similar responses to this experience demonstrate that the perspectives of these particular women— African American women—are specific to their unique positionality as low-income African American single mothers (Collins, 2000). Although members of marginalized populations such as these single mothers tend to internalize negative depictions that certain constituents of society have created to maintain their oppressive power (Bell, 2009; Taylor, 2009), this study's participants used this opportunity to tell their personal stories in an effort to cure the pain produced by racial oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Nicole recalled several occurrences when she felt scrutinized and degraded. She talked about the invasive home inspections that she had to endure when she and her children lived in public housing. Nicole maintained that the inspector's focus should have been on any structural building needs that she may have had rather than on the contents of her home and how she maintained her home. She also described incidences at the social services department and the grocery store.

Nicole: The questions that they asked...it was all too personal to me. I don't feel like you have to know every single thing that they wanted to know just to obtain help. For me, it was kind of degrading...like I felt less than...because I had to ask for assistance, and the fact that I was unmarried, and I had two kids. It was questions like, 'Where is the child's father?' To me just pointless questions. I was on Section 8. But the fact that somebody was coming in observing how I kept my house; the food that I had in the refrigerator or the pantry...it just felt like an invasion of privacy. Even with the inspections, they would come in and look in your bedrooms and look in your closets and, to me...all they should have been concerned about is that we had adequate housing. I don't feel like how clean I kept my house or what kind of clothes we had had anything to do with

me needing housing assistance. And to go down there, and then analyze every single penny: “What are you doing with your money.” But just to look at her behind the desk and judge me because that’s what I saw on her face. Oh, it’s very degrading.

Frances concurred that there was the loss of privacy connected to receiving assistance.

Frances: All the information that you had to give them [caseworkers]. It was like they were probing into your life. You had no privacy. [They asked] Who’s staying with you. Do you have a boyfriend that comes over? Does he stay? What are you spending your stamps on?

Carla and April were made to feel as if they were just some more of those poor African American single mothers trying to scam the government (Alfred, 2007; Cazenave & Neubeck, 2001; Easton, 2016; Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004). Carla’s caseworker also made her feel undeserving of public assistance, and that she had the ability to move beyond poverty on her own if she wanted (Easton, 2016).

Carla: She [caseworker] gave me a hard time. I would say that she was kind of negative. I took it as if she felt like I was trying to get over or something. I don’t know. She rubbed me the wrong way. I feel like a lot of them [caseworkers] do pre-judge. They pre-judge you. They don’t know your situation and they put you in that category, that group. They stereotype you before they even know your situation. It was like I was just another single parent, trying to get over on the system.

Lisa stated that her caseworker asked her personal questions that were non-scripted, which made Lisa feel guilty for even applying for assistance. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) presents the issue of poverty as caused by a person’s bad behavior. TANF declares that if that person would just marry or work, his poverty will go away (Bridges, 2017).

Although Lisa was in the advanced stage of her pregnancy, the guilt Lisa experienced brought on by the message that TANF and her caseworker resonated nearly caused her to consider other options.

Lisa: I felt...it wasn't a pleasant experience. It wasn't comfortable. Some of the questions that she asked me that wasn't on her script. Like some of the questions were, "So are you planning to work?" "Are you planning to go back to school?" "Are you going to finish school?" It was just some questions that made me feel like, "I shouldn't be in here asking for assistance," "I should maybe go and try to find"...I know I'm pregnant and I'm getting pretty big, maybe but I should just go and try to find another job since I've left school and now I'm back at home. It was not a pleasant experience. I felt very uncomfortable.

Tracy's experience left her feeling belittled. In fact, for decades, poor women have been "targets of suspicion and blame" (Krumer-Nevo, 2005, p. 87). Moreover, this outlook on poverty is prominent with the general population and is evident in how society acknowledges impoverished women (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012), particularly African American single mothers. Tracy's experienced stigma nearly resulted in her rejecting the use of public assistance. Experienced stigma, or the concern of being treated badly by others, tends to lead to low participation in public assistance programs by those who need the assistance the most (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006).

Tracy: They [caseworkers] got all in your business, wanted to know all your information like where you work, how much you make, why you're applying. Just different questions like that. They acted like it was their money and didn't want to help the ones who wanted to help themselves. They look at people who applied for assistance as if you would not be anything and was just using the system. It made me feel belittled. It made me strive to want to do better.

Earnestine was made to feel guilty and undeserving (Easton, 2016).

Earnestine: You know, when you go to apply, of course, sometimes not the same race than you who is asking the questions. They look upon you, or you feel like that you are doing something wrong because you are applying for assistance. And then, they on the other hand, feel like it's their money. They have a job. They are just there doing a job; they don't own the benefits. But it's as if their attitude is "You don't deserve this; I'm giving you this." You know, it's not, "You should be doing something else." It's like it was their money.

In Rita's effort to explain her situation to her caseworker, Rita felt pre-judged and stereotyped. Historically, African American women's experiences, such as those that Rita and

the other participants were describing to their caseworkers, have been considered meaningless (Collins, 1990).

Rita: [The questions were] An invasion. They were a little damning, and a little demeaning. For me, I felt deemed of my character or pulled or dragged down. She [the caseworker] was smiling; however, I didn't feel like it was. I really don't think that she really believed in me as I was getting the assistance. Prejudged. Because, you know, she would say, "So MANY of you." You know, using that type of terminology.

Mezirow (1978; 1991; 2000) maintains that a disorienting dilemma launches the process of transformative learning, compelling learners to begin self-examination to assess their set of assumptions or beliefs. In this introspective second phase, steps are taken to engage in self-examination of feelings of fear, anger, or other emotions elicited by the disorienting dilemma. Following their self-examination, the participants described how their experiences led to the discomforting feelings of guilt and shame.

Nicole was dissatisfied with her life of working in factories, working for someone else. She was frustrated with the commands. Concerned that even her children would judge her, Nicole seemed to have experienced a sense of shame when she thought that her children were not proud of her. She wanted to make her children proud; she yearned for the prestige of owning her own business.

Nicole: I knew it wasn't the life that I was going to live forever. Working different jobs. I had been in factory, after factory, after factory. And I never made it a year mark. I always felt like once I got close to that year, I was settling. And this ain't what I wanted. I didn't want to be in a factory. I didn't want to work for somebody else. I never felt like somebody else telling me when to clock in, when to go to lunch, when to go to the bathroom, when to get off work...that wasn't for me. I didn't want to have to go through this person: "Can I get this day off? Can I do that? I wanted my own. And I wanted to be somebody that my kids could be proud of one day. So I said, "I want to work for myself. I don't want to work for somebody else."

Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine (2003) reveal that the effect of life circumstances on depression is greater for single women than for married women. Carla described feelings of guilt,

shame and depression that she experienced when she discovered her pregnancy. Her feelings resulted from public perception of unwed motherhood and her belief that she had failed to meet certain expectations. A 2014 poll reveals that a majority of Americans believe that poor people are to blame for their poverty (Pew Research Center, 2014). Among those are political commentator, Bill O'Reilly, who argues that behavioral and ethical deficiencies, such as having children outside of marriage, cause poverty (Bridges, 2017).

Carla: I had my daughter my sophomore year in college. That was a struggle. I actually fell behind when I was pregnant with my child because when I got pregnant with my daughter, it was an embarrassment. You know...to me. I felt like I had let people down. That wasn't a part of my plan. I let myself down and I felt like I had let other people down as well. Because people do...they judge. I had people that...couldn't believe it. So I kind of went through a spell. I probably went through a little depression, a little bit and I kind of fell behind in school.

April's assertion suggested that she felt ashamed when she realized she had not made anything of her life. Although April's parents pushed her to simply find employment, April wanted more than just a job; April desired a career.

April: I decided, I was like, I wanted to go back to school; I wanted to make something of myself. I grew up in a two-parent household, but they weren't educated, so to speak. They didn't really push me. They were on a *working* standpoint. They were more on..."Just go to work. I don't care what you do; just get your own money." So I was like ...but still you need education.

When comparing herself to her sisters and considering what her children would think of her receiving public assistance, Frances felt ashamed for having to receive public assistance.

Frances: I didn't want it (public assistance). I was the only girl in my family that had to resort to it. All my other sisters, they worked. It was just something that I didn't want for myself because I didn't want my kids to depend on it like everybody else did. I wanted to show them that you can do it without any help.

Candice spoke of having misaligned priorities when she initially enrolled in beauty school at the age of 18. Her decisions caused her to get a late start on the road to independence. Candice experienced guilt for making unwise decisions that prolonged her welfare- dependency and inability to provide for her children that which they desired.

Candice: The first time I didn't take it [school], as seriously as I should have because I was young and just didn't have a sense of reality. I still had to depend on the State to help me feed my family. My kids wanted, and I wasn't able to provide. Both of my boys are active in sports, and that's like a bill within itself. And no worse feeling than telling your child that he can't play his favorite sport because you don't have the money.

Lisa shared the feelings she experienced when her unplanned pregnancy disrupted her mother's plan for Lisa's life. She felt guilty for not abiding by her mother's guidelines.

Lisa: It [public assistance] wasn't something that my mother wanted me to do. She was even against me even going to apply for it. She was like, "Well if you need something, you can ask us, which I didn't feel that I had a right to ask her for anything. Because I felt like I didn't follow her rules; I didn't follow her plan, the way she told me to do it, so I felt like I put myself in a box...to say I'm not going to ask her for anything because if I had done it her way, I wouldn't be in this position.

Tracy's guilt and shame for having to receive public assistance was based on the dominant ideology of welfare recipients as lazy and selfish "tax burdens" (Adair, 2008, p. 8). Tracy felt the sting of society's attitude toward poor people as moral outsiders and society's adversaries (Brodkin, 1993).

Tracy: I didn't want to receive government assistance at first because I thought it was for people who didn't want to make anything out of themselves. I based that on how people, like White people, just judge African Americans of not wanting to do anything or have anything.

Earnestine recalled examining her situation of becoming pregnant in high school. Upon examination, Earnestine felt that for her to succeed in life first as an African American and then as a single mother, she would need to earn a college education. Her conclusion mirrors that of

Johnson-Bailey (2006) who states that African American women in the United States experience the double jeopardy of racism and sexism. This reality becomes evident in the lives of this population in lower wages, lower-status jobs, and higher rates of poor health and mortality.

Earnestine: I had my first child when I was 18, my last year in school. I always knew that I needed to go beyond high school. For me as a Black woman...I had two strikes: being black and being a woman. So I knew that in order for me to have the amount of money I needed to take care of mine as a single mother, I needed that degree behind me, that education behind me to help me negotiate a better way of life, a better salary.

Teresa's responses suggested shame that her ideal plans of having the "perfect life" did not unfold accordingly. She admitted that her plans did not consist of ever having to need public assistance, but instead were ordered as earning a college degree, getting married, buying a house, and having children. Teresa struggled with deciding the best course for this new situation in which she found herself.

Teresa: You have this idea that it's just some stuff that you're just never going to need. Public assistance. You're just never going to need it because life for you is just going to be so...I'm not going to say *well*, but you're just going to do things. You're going to go get this degree. Then you're going to get married if that's what you want to do. You're going to go get a home. You're going to have children. But when life doesn't work out like that and you see the reality of, "Oh, I have some responsibilities."

Theme Two: Learning Beyond the Curriculum

Theme Two is "*Learning Beyond the Curriculum.*" This theme is subdivided into four categories: racial subordination, education, support systems, and changes. While exploring paths that could lead them to independence and economic mobility, the participants described discoveries they made and lessons they learned beyond the classroom. Eight of the ten participants described encounters that they had had with family members or friends that inspired them to make important decisions at a particular time in their lives. Prior to learning, Mezirow

(1978, 1991, 2000) contends that individuals should engage in a critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions, Stage Four of Mezirow's perspective transformation.

To make meaning, individuals make sense of, or interpret, an experience. Individuals then allow the interpretation to guide their decision-making and actions. It is at this point that meaning making turns into learning (Mezirow, 1990). Meaning perspectives are uncritically acquired through the process of socialization. The more meaning perspectives are strengthened, the more deeply ingrained and unchangeable they become. Three areas of common distortion in meaning perspectives, are epistemic, socio-cultural, and psychic. Epistemic distortions relate to the essence and use of knowledge; socio-cultural distortions concern taken-for-granted belief systems that involve power and social relationships, namely those that are widespread, permitted, and carried out by institutions; and psychic distortions concern assumptions creating undue anxiety that inhibits an individual from acting (Mezirow, 1990).

Individuals can overcome these distortions in their frames of reference through reflection aided by collaborative discourse, which then creates the possibility to think and act differently (Mezirow, 1991). According to Mezirow (1990), most meaning perspectives are assimilated through cultural assimilation, while some are stereotypes. For example, some individuals have inadvertently learned what it means to be an impoverished African American single mother.

Through the process of critical reflection, the participants were able to make meaning of their use of public assistance. Flawed meaning perspectives were transformed through the critically reflective examination of epistemic, socio-cultural, and psychic distortions established through the uncritical acceptance of another's values. By engaging in critical reflection of their disorienting dilemmas, the participants rejected the notion that African American single mothers are lazy, welfare-chiseling, welfare-queens (Adair, 2008; Cazenave & Neubeck, 2001; Easton,

2016; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013) to present counter-narratives that articulated “knowledge of their actual, felt circumstances, their limited opportunities, their struggles, and the nature of their difficulties” (Krumer-Nevo, 2005, p. 87).

Carla, Earnestine, Teresa and Nicole used their counter stories to confront the stigma and status quo associated with receiving public assistance. These participants confronted the claim that low-income African American single mothers would rather assimilate than challenge the status quo (Collins, 1989). Instead, they used their position in society as low-income African American single mothers to justify their own claims about their experiences (Collins, 1989; 2000). The experiences of impoverished single mothers address poverty-related stress that included concerns related to work, discrimination, and stigma. According to Critical Race theorists, the experiential knowledge from these women of color through their counter-stories is legitimate and critical when examining and assimilating aspects of racial subordination (Solozano, 1998).

Earnestine and Teresa denounced low wages which create economic barriers to upward economic mobility. Haleman (2004) informs Earnestine and Teresa’s critique of low wages, finding that economic barriers, such as low-wage employment magnified by low education attainment experienced by African American single mothers invariably ensure sustained poverty. Similarly, Alfred’s (2007) findings identified the job market situation of low-paying jobs as one of the barriers that hinder African American women from achieving self-sufficiency. Further, the race-centric perspective addresses the economic barrier of low-wages, contending that not only has this barrier historically affected African American single mothers but low-wages can also impact the life course of this population. The impact of low-wages has transcended generations to persist in oppressing and marginalizing African American single mothers.

In this study, the participants used their position along the margin of society as a foundation for their transformative learning (Johnson-Bailey, 2006). Transformation is incited by talking back and acting out (hooks, 1989; Freire, 1970). Critical Race scholarship regard these participants' voices as authentic representatives of their positionality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Further, giving voice to those who have been considerably and historically silenced is central to advancing race-centric transformative learning, which promotes empowerment and fosters the ability to negotiate between and across cultures (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Mezirow (1991) contends that individuals learning to thoroughly understand their historical and biographical position influence the development of autonomy and responsibility in identifying problems and plans of action.

Racial Subordination

In addition to poverty, these African American single mothers also had to manage the effects of racism (Everett, Hall, Hamilton-Mason, 2010). However, Carla renounced the common stereotype of African American single mothers as simply wanting to sit around and wait on the government to send a welfare check. The following assertion made by Former Speaker of the House, John Boehner in 2014, was similar to how many others viewed Carla and other African American single mothers: "Should those individuals eventually find themselves in poverty, it will be due to their 'sick' wish to avoid the paid labor force" (Bridges, 2017, p. 39).

Carla's intention, however, was to reject accusations like Boehner's (2014). For Carla desired to become a contributing member of society.

Carla: Don't view all people as lazy, not wanting to do...not trying. Because some of us are out there trying very, very hard. But these programs are put into play because of situations and because people needed that extra help. And so, there are a lot of us that are out there using that as extra help. That's not that we depend on. We only use it just to get to where we're trying to get...just to kind of help us, because you don't want to take care

of us forever. So let me use these resources while I can, to do what I need to do. I'll be off of it in, however amount of time, and then I'm going to be that person in society trying to give back and contribute. So don't take the positive aspect of it away from those who are trying to use it the right way because they need it.

While campaigning for the 2016 presidential election, Republican candidate Jeb Bush made the following statement, which is consistent with poverty being an individual issue rather than structural: "Americans must increase the number of hours they work so that they can earn more income for their families" (Bridges, 2017, p. 42). However, Earnestine critically assessed the assumption that the current minimum wage was a living wage, stating the impossibility that poor people could adequately meet their needs and lift themselves out of poverty while earning low wages.

Earnestine: I want others to realize that when we, as Black people receive public assistance, it is not because we don't want to work. It is not because we feel like it is something that we are entitled to. Even today when I look at the hourly wage. That's not a living wage. It is sad that we have people who go to work full-time and make an hourly wage, a little less than \$8.00. Nobody can live off of that. And so, receiving public assistance is just what is needed at the time, for most people. I mean people work and still need public assistance.

Teresa used her experiences as a social worker and an African American single mother to debunk the myths about all African American single mothers are government scammers.

Teresa: Well, you know, the whole concept of public assistance is to assist the individual who at a particular time can't do things that they need to do in entirety. Not that they can't do some things. But they can't do everything. And so, the whole idea of people getting something for free or people being lazy and not working, that's just the farthest thing from the truth. And so the whole idea that people just take and don't put anything in it, that's just not true at all. That's just not true. Just the thing that people are lazy, and people are going to stay on it forever. And you have to make people work or they're not going to work. Who wants \$147 a month? They know better than that. That's not what they do. I've worked in social services. You can give them that 147, but they have other things that supplement their income.

Rita recounted the racial bias and racial seclusion that she and her fellow Black

classmates experienced in high school during the time that scholarship and financial aid information was being disseminated by school officials. Rita remembered their feelings of aloneness and discrimination. However, Rita confronted this racial bias and seclusion by successfully completing her education in spite of discrimination. Critical Race scholarship asserts that racism such as that which Rita experienced, is pervasive and systemic due to structures focused on ideas of merit that perpetuates the authority of whites (Bergerson, 2003).

Critical Race desires to understand the relationship among race, power, privilege, and subordination to challenge and transform these connections (Bell, 1992).

Rita: I've always believed that only the rich or, you know, the ones that had resources were going to be able to finish [college]. When we were going through high school, nobody helped us at all when we were going through that high school to sign us up for anything. A lot of us, of my fellow classmates, we just felt... alone. That nobody was there to help us or to see us sign up for scholarships. They may push it to others. I still think it's some bias with it. It's not just given in the same manner to everyone. I've seen them give the information willingly to our White counterparts, but the Black students, I don't remember them giving me anything.

A critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural or psychic assumptions allowed April, Candice, Frances, Lisa, and Tracy to make meaning of and describe meanings associated with education. Similar to the findings in Haleman's (2004) and Jennings (2004) studies, the African American single mothers in this study actively challenged the dominant imagery and stories — stories that devalued and pathologized the African American single mothers (Adair, 2008).

Following their examination of flawed assumptions, these single mothers came to see education as the means for them to gain control and to rewrite their own stories in a way that would emphatically change their circumstances and conditions. They saw education as a motivator, a way to resist stereotyping, and a way to a better life. In other words, the participants perceived education to be both instrumental and transformative —as the opportunity for upward

economic mobility and personal growth (Haleman, 2004). As Black Feminist Thought proposes, these women sought to be active agents in the construction of their social world and personal lives (Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Education became the avenue for these participants to earn their way out of poverty and into a secure and fulfilling career.

Education

When April's dream of marrying a rich man was disrupted, reality set in for her, after which April perceived education as her portal to opportunity and distinction.

April: Before this [current program], I had went to the [university], knowing I could do it. But in my head, I was just going to marry a rich man and just go on with my life. I didn't want kids...none of that. That wasn't what I wanted to do but I'm glad I made that decision though. It [education] changed me. Education broadens your vocabulary. It opens up doors ...networking capabilities. And it motivates you. And it kind of separates you from everyone else...being educated.

Candice argued: Education first. She saw education as the door to eye-opening opportunities and experiences. She summed it up this way:

Candice: Become educated, first and foremost...because once you're educated, it opens your eyes to a whole other world. Because being under the poverty level, like there are people that don't realize that there's a world outside of their world. Because they're just stuck in their little town, with their local grocery store, their local Wal-Mart. But there's a whole other world around them, but they wouldn't know it because they've never been outside of that bubble.

Based on her upbringing, Lisa perceived education as the sole solution to self-sufficiency.

Lisa: Education was always driven into us. Even my grandmother who was receiving assistance in a number of forms for eight children. Education was always the most important thing. You did your homework. She made investments in things like encyclopedias, so there was always reference materials on a bookshelf somewhere. It was seen to be the only way out of poverty...to be out of the projects. If you want a better quality of life, then you study hard and it will pay off for you.

Seeing education as her path to freedom from government assistance, Tracy entered school as a single mother, welfare recipient, and fragile student. Conversely, Tracy states now she has a different life perspective compared to before she completed of her education, emerging more confident and self-assured.

Tracy: I saw education as a way to be able to get off of public assistance. To get my kids what I didn't have growing up and to better my life. And if I look back on it now, it's helping me a whole lot versus before. I doubted myself and then I figured out I could do it. And now that I did do it, it makes me have a different approach on life. It makes me want to strive even more. I am able now to give my kids the things that I didn't have growing up and able to encourage them to reach for the sky and to know that nothing is impossible.

Following a critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions, the participants recognized that their discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change, Mezirow's (1978; 1991; 2000) Stage Four. According to Mezirow (1991), meaning perspectives arise from the interaction, culture, and language of an individual's social context. Accordingly, meaning perspectives can be discerned as distinctive collections of shared social resources. In this vein, individuals and identities are basically relational and exist mutually with their social contexts. The shared essence of meaning perspectives engenders social bonds between individuals and by means of these bonds, individuals can experience feeling acknowledged by others. When individuals reflect on their personal meanings, they are simultaneously confronting the social bonds that connect them with those of similar minds (Malkki, 2012).

As individuals live and grow in society, they embrace an ideology. Individuals also assimilate the prevailing set of assumptions about reality, or the meaning perspective, of the particular social group that offers the immediate context for their socialization. Subsequently, each social group manifests the overall hegemonic ideology of the larger society. Through this

process of enculturation, individuals form a self-identity and a self-interest. The whole of all individual and group self-identities makes up the environment in which individuals are located and the ideology of this environment influences how individuals see the world and all social relationships. However, when an individual's characteristics do not fit neatly within the prevailing social perspectives, there is a "constant negotiating and conflicting process between individual and social group similar to the ideological negotiating and conflictual process under way among the social groups in the larger society" (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 100).

As the participants experienced other perspectives or sensed contradictions within the embraced framework (Mezirow & Associates, 1990), these single mothers found that the social context of the classroom created a safe place for them to critically question meaning perspectives, oppose the conditions that are assumed to be truth, and arrive at other interpretations (Mezirow, 1991). While facing structural barriers and personal challenges as learners, the participants were met with the realization that there were other learners who had faced or were facing similar struggles. This awareness of commonality created bonds and a support system that enforced the notion that the participants could negotiate a change in their circumstances. Interestingly, Malkki (2012) argues that in the accepting atmosphere of the classroom, the learners might be more capable of reflecting than they might on their own, given they would have to maintain the image of others accepting them, not positively knowing whether they, along with their new insights and questionings, were actually accepted. In effect, the classroom created the space for the participants to define their African American womanhood and their identities while changing their perspectives of themselves—a highlight of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000).

Support Systems

Not only was Nicole dissatisfied with factors in her personal life, but she also described being discontent with her spiritual life. She credited God for placing classmates in her life that were able to strengthen areas in both her spiritual and personal life. The participants in Banerjee and Pyles (2004) study found that in the era of welfare reform their spirituality to help comfort them during their challenging situations by reminding them that a higher power was caring for them and their children.

Nicole: I'm a firm believer that God places...the right people, around you at the right time. And I actually met a lady from Bolivar, and I met a lady from Jackson. And it was always the three of us. And the lady from Bolivar, she was deep in church, where I was kind of on the fence. But I feel like He placed her around me to open my eyes and see. And I actually got more out of school than I thought I would. But at the same time, I got more church and more Godliness to work hard and strive for what He had for me.

Carla had come to realize that she shared a significant experience with others before her: being an unwed mother. She further concluded that some of those individuals had gone on to achieve their goals. Because of this epiphany, Carla began to shift her focus to what really mattered: the welfare of her unborn daughter.

Carla: Life happened and that's when I ended up pregnant with my daughter. But that was a barrier, but I overcame that because of course I had someone coming into the world that going to depend on me and I knew that giving up wasn't an option. I was still going to show that I could do it. Like...you can have a baby; you can go to school; you can do all of those things. It was just another hiccup. You know, and we have those when we are trying to get to where it is that we are going. Cause I wasn't the first person that it had happened to; these things happen.

April and her classmates shared a faith in God and prayer to help them through their challenging coursework. April also stressed over, yet prayed, for provisional needs that she lacked in her personal life outside of school. For poor single mothers, poverty-related stress includes concerns related to work, housing, food, and family (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson,

2012).

Research (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004; Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010) has found that spirituality serves as a valued protective component for impoverished individuals and families. For example, Banerjee and Pyles assert that spirituality contributes to the ability to “cope, achieve inner peace, harbor self-esteem” (p. 62).

April: Praying. Not just for passing tests. I had life stuff going on. You know, everybody else, you know. ‘They’re praying, “Lord, let me make an ‘A’ on this test’. And I’m praying, “Lord, let me have some money to do this when I get home.” He (the Lord) taught me how to study. He taught me how to have common sense in school. If they (teachers) tell you to read this chapter, read this chapter because obviously it’s going to help you pass the test. So that’s when my common sense kicked in.

Frances noted that she and her classmates shared similar life challenges. In fact, most were also single mothers faced with economic burdens. This commonality created a long-lasting bond among the classmates.

Frances: Most of us who were in the same class had gone through the same things that I had been through, public assistance or either working part-time. I don’t think there were many of them that were married...were single mothers too. We all connected because we had similar experiences. Yes, and I’m still friends with all of them today.

Candice’s recalled how her instructor set the tone for camaraderie at the onset of her nursing program. The instructor created an accepting atmosphere where the learners, even with their imperfections, could become aware of their assumptions, reflect on meanings, and safely challenge those assumptions. Consequently, as with the students in Frances’s program, Candice and her classmates formed long-lasting friendships.

Candice: I had a very diverse classroom; people from all races, ethnic backgrounds, ages, and struggles of life...it taught me to be humble. Because I don’t know if you’ve heard the saying, ‘Just when you think you’re doing bad, it’s someone that’s like ten times worse than you.’ And I ran into a couple of those people and we were

like a unit. We just helped each other. Just about every other African American female was either in my position or in a worse position. We had an instructor that kind of opened the door for that on the first day. And she was White. But she opened the door and kind of let us know that we all struggle; we all go through and from that day forward, we were just like a family to this day. We still call and check on each other and ask about each other's kids and parents because we shared each other's life stories.

Tracy told of her struggles with an instructor showing partiality to the non-Black students in her classroom. Consequently, Tracy's responses indicated that the Black students, in a sense, formed a "community" and used "their place along the margins" (Johnson-Bailey, 2006, p.4) to resist this act of racism. The learners formed a bond, studied cooperatively, earned passing grades and negotiated successfully through the program.

Critical Race theory labels the instructor's conduct, or misconduct, as White privilege. White privilege is described as a structure of opportunities and advantages granted to individuals just because they are White (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). One of the motivations of Black Feminist Thought is to give a voice to African American women who have been informed that they do not matter by acts such as being excluded from equal educational opportunities, as were Tracy and her colleagues (Collins, 2000). Sheared (1999) declares that those who are involved in the educative process must recognize that "African Americans place value on education and knowledge and that it is important for them to believe that they matter" (p. 38).

Tracy: When I first started, I really doubted myself. I didn't think I could do it. And then I ended up meeting a couple of friends there and we kind of like studied and made it through the course. I had one teacher that was like real mean and made it hard. It seemed like she didn't want Black folks to succeed. If you asked her something that she taught, she wouldn't like tell you more about it. She would just tell you to read your book and figure it out. So basically, when I was in her course, we had to fend for ourselves. We only had two white people in our class, but she always helped them. It made us feel that we could prove her wrong and do it on our own. So it made us study extra hard.

Similarly, Earnestine described forming a bond with the few Black women that were

typically enrolled in nursing programs at that time. Equivalent to Tracy's experience, the African American students in Earnestine's program formed a bond and helped each other successfully negotiate through their nursing courses.

Earnestine: And as far as my classmates, when I went to nursing school, there was no more than three Blacks in that class. We would start out with about 50, and we'd lose people along the way. One of my best friends, I lost her along the way. And there was another lady, Black lady, that graduated with me. But like I said, there wasn't a lot of us, Black women or Blacks in a class. We supported each other. We encouraged each other. We studied together. In these programs, you just need somebody to study with.

Interestingly, Rita and Lisa were fortunate to have had professors who had experienced similar life stories as theirs. Consequently, their instructors served as people Rita and Lisa could not only identify with but also aspire to become. Rita described her desperation to have what her professor had attained.

Rita: I had...I guess this was my first Black teacher. Her husband and herself were professors and just the poise that she had just standing before the class and the articulation that she spoke. And just speaking life into all of us because looking around the room, it was only Black students in that room. And she was just pouring into us that you know that we were somebody. We could make it. And we could do this, and we could do that. That was a very meaningful experience for me. And then just knowing that, here you have this Black professor who she gave us her life story, where she had to start from government assistance on up into her role as being a professor. Her husband was also a professor, and I just wanted that. She had her doctorate degree, both her and her husband. I just wanted what she had.

Lisa's knowledge of her professor's challenges and subsequent successes served as an inspiration and validation to Lisa that her goals, in spite of her circumstances, were attainable.

Lisa: I remember the instructor. And she talked about some of her challenges. She dropped out of high school. She didn't finish. She got pregnant. She dropped out, and she didn't get her GED until after she dropped out. And when she went to get her GED, she said, "I don't know what happened. It just like I wanted to know everything." So she enrolled in college. Well she got her Associate's. Then she got her bachelor's degree; then went on and got her Master's. And then she went on and got her doctorate. And I'm like, "How inspiring is this?" She talked about how at one point she was on government

assistance. And she said, “I just knew, me and my kids...this is not how our story ends.” So it was inspiring to me to keep going, to keep pushing because she did it.

Teresa and her best friend faced similar challenges while going to school. They both were single mothers attending the same university with their children in tow. They were each other’s support system.

Teresa: My closest friend, when we left for college, her baby left with her. She lived in an apartment the minute we hit campus. We had looked into all of that. If there were times where she needed me to swing over to pick him up between classes, we just partnered up because we just understood that those children that we had, they were our responsibility. They were ours.

Mezirow’s (1978; 1991; 2000) Stage Five involves the participants investigating new options and exploring the relationships forged within their new life-world. For example, going to college was something that Carla’s parents instilled in her at a young age. As she got older, this vision never strayed from Carla’s mind. Therefore, in high school, Carla began to explore her options for post-secondary schools.

Carla: College is not anything that I thought about doing; it was not something that I wondered about. The way I grew up and the way my parents raised me was like that wasn’t an option. I was going to school, so it was something that I knew I was going to do after high school. When I was in high school, of course, I was applying to different schools and I was able to go to a school in Arkansas because I got an ROTC scholarship. So that’s what based my decision on what school I went to.

Candice and Tracy both loved taking care of loved ones. Their compassion led them to pursue a career in the medical field. Candice had initially received her license in cosmetology, but she found that she was not making enough to adequately take care of her and her children. She also had received training as a certified nursing assistant to help care for her sick dad, which inspired her to pursue nursing.

Candice: As a little girl, I always loved fixing hair and I’m a people’s person.

The small town that I'm from, there's a lot of cosmetologists, and I actually enjoy it. Now nursing...like I said, doing cosmetology, I wasn't doing well (financially), and my dad got sick. And I just knew he was going to be a case to work with. So I wanted to go get training as a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) just so I would be able to take care of him. And then it's like from CNA, I just fell in love with nursing.

Earnestine explored other programs before she went into the medical field as a certified nurse's assistant. It was then that Earnestine realized that she had the potential to become a nurse.

Earnestine: I graduated and stayed out for a year and went back to school. I started out in data processing at the local college, but I ended up, I took data processing, then I took business. I took several courses, but I didn't find my niche to what really was my calling until I became a nurse's aide and went into the hospital setting and realized that, I can be a nurse. I can be a nurse if that's what I wanted to do. Growing up, Rita's mother would speak into Rita's life that she would become a teacher.

Consequently, when Rita ventured off to college, she adopted her mother's idea as her own, explored this option and, later, the prophecy was fulfilled: Rita had become a teacher.

Rita: But she took me on to college. You know, as a child, my mom would tell us every day, "Rita, you're going to be a teacher. You're going to be a teacher. And I'm like, "I'm not going to be a teacher. I was the class clown in school." I had fun every single day. And I tell my students that too. I had fun every day. I wasn't going to be no teacher. (laughing) Well, my mom took me to college. I had the college experience.

Initially, Frances started searching for cosmetology programs with the support of a family member. However, when the family member withdrew from the program, Frances was left to support herself. Earlier in the interview, Frances spoke about a transportation barrier that caused her to finish her 9-month program in 18 months. She did not have the most reliable transportation. Nonetheless, Frances did persist to earn her licensure.

Frances: Well I looked at a couple of places, but I ended up with Pizazz in Jackson. Me and my cousin-in-law we started together. We started together but she figured out it wasn't for her, but I kept going. I found any way I could.

I got a little putt-putt and I drove it.

Mezirow (1991) contends that a person who comes to better understand his individual historical and biographical state supports the development of autonomy and responsibility in determining the best way to describe problems and the plan of action that is most suitable based on the situation. After their investigation of choices for new roles, relationships, and actions, the participants began planning their course of action, Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2000) Stage Six.

Changes

The participants were able to "to look beyond their current reality and expand their life-world to include post-secondary education" (Brown, Roberts, Whiddon, Goossen, & Kacal, 2005, p. 58). Seven of the participants, Nicole, Carla, Frances, Lisa, Earnestine, Rita, and Teresa described a change in their original course of action. This change actually led to the accomplishment of their career pursuits.

Nicole insisted that after working in various factories, she had had enough. She was not going to tolerate being in unsatisfying positions. Finally, when the opportunity presented itself, she quit her last factory job and began the process of pursuing a satisfying career.

Nicole: Working different jobs. I had been in factory, after factory, after factory. And I never made it a year mark. I always felt like once I got close to that year, I was settling. And this ain't what I wanted. I didn't want to be in a factory. I didn't want to work for somebody else. I wanted my own. So I said, "I want to work for myself. I don't want to work for somebody else." So that last day, I walked out. I never looked back. I started school the next week.

Carla described how she had dreamed of becoming many things when she was growing up. Her original plans seemed to have been well laid out but ended up not being what she had expected. Consequently, "life happened," and there was a change of plans. As Carla further described later in the interview, she pursued a career in education.

Carla: Well like most kids, you know you go to school and you do have big dreams and I wanted to do a lot of different things initially. I started out doing nursing and I got an ROTC scholarship where I went to Arkansas and I was going to go that route...do the military and come out as a nurse, but of course, when I got there I felt like it wasn't for me and I ended up transferring to the University of Memphis. And my idea was to do Physical Therapy. So that's what I was going to do. And going through that... "life happened" and that's when I ended up pregnant with my daughter.

Frances endured many life changes: she had been in the military, gotten married, worked in factories and waitressed. Finally, she decided she just wanted to be her own boss. Her desire to become self-employed pointed her to a final career in cosmetology.

Because of Lisa's unplanned pregnancy, her original plan of becoming a Chemical Engineer was thwarted. The program's requirements were too demanding. The path that Lisa took instead was more manageable for the soon-to-be single mother.

Lisa: I was in school and my major was Chemical Engineering. So, it was a rigorous schedule that required a lot of my time, demanded a lot of my energy. And after I found out I was pregnant, I couldn't keep up. So, I changed my major to English. And I did that because it was a subject that has always been easy for me. I felt like I had one challenge literally in my arms. So, I felt like if I could just do something that was second nature to me, I could proceed through school with the least amount of friction.

While working in a secretarial position in a hospital, Earnestine watched and even assisted other nurses in her work area. After reflection, Earnestine began to plan the process of becoming a nurse.

Earnestine: I loved that environment. I loved taking care of the patients. I was a ward clerk. I knew everything about those patients, what was going on with those patients. The only thing I didn't or couldn't do was give the medication.

Although Teresa applied to several colleges and universities, she cautiously weighed her options of schools. Coming from a close-knit family, Teresa had a change of mind about venturing off to a distant university, finally deciding to attend a community college closer to

home.

Teresa: I kind of always knew that I was going to do something. I baffled about where I was going to go get my education at. I had applied to several universities. I wanted to be an educator because at the time I was really big into teaching. And I thought that that was just going to be me. I got accepted into all of those colleges. But I thought about the different things... that when you've never really been away from your family...the things you experience. And I felt like for me, let me start somewhere local. Let me go to a junior college.

Individuals recognized the importance of acquiring new knowledge and developing better life-habits and skills before their plan to exit their current socio-cultural life-situation could be perceived. The perceived necessity for new habits, skills and knowledge is associated with the seventh stage of Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory. The participants described the experiences they encountered while participating in their prospective career choices.

Frances described her dissatisfaction with the theory part of cosmetology. However, she anticipated the hands-on component of her program.

Frances: It took me a lot longer cause at first...the teaching...the book learning... the theory... it was too slow for me. But once I got passed the first couple of months, it got easy. Getting through those first couple of months was hard. After then, it was alright. I was waiting to do the hands-on. The first day on the floor...getting a taste of what it was like. That was wonderful.

Carla seemed to be pleased that her career ended up being one that she loved despite initially having taken unexpected turns.

Carla: And I ended up changing my program. So my degree is in Health and Human Performance because I still had the idea that I was going to go back and do physical therapy. But as time went on, I ended up doing education. I ended up being a teacher. Though... it's kind of like...even though I didn't plan it, it seemed like it was my plan. I like it (chuckles)...it's like that's what I feel like I was meant to be.

April knew that the increase that she wanted began with her acceptance into a nursing program.

April: I went down to the technology center and applied. I just knew I wanted more... talked to the lady at the front desk. I told her what program I wanted to apply for. She told me what I needed to do. She gave me a schedule on when the testing was. So I went in, took the test, passed it...by the grace God. And then I applied for the program. I got a call from my instructor in November who told me I had got in. And that I started in January.

Working as a certified nurse's assistant, Candice got an idea of the work nurses do. Therefore, to make the best use of her skills, Candice decided to move forward in becoming a nurse and receiving greater benefits.

Candice: And as a CNA, I had several nurses that told me, "You should do nursing; you should do nursing; you should do nursing." And I worked one case where I was actually doing nurse's work and was getting CNA pay. And I was like, "Well...if I'm going to do the work, I may as well go to school and get the pay."

Tracy's self-proclaimed determination was evident in her study habits.

Tracy: I studied before school, on breaks, and at night when my kids slept. In class, I had started picking up lessons to where I was making good grades and passing the course. I had great determination and motivation.

Rita talked about her challenges and critics. However, she did not allow those negatives instances to discourage her. Instead, she allowed her challenges to inspire her to succeed.

Rita: The struggle can either make you or break you. The struggle for me lit a fire underneath me, and it just made me want it. Because I would hear the different ones say, "Well, she's not going to do anything." Whispering and stuff. But the struggle for me lit a fire underneath me; however, I see the struggle in some people does not light the fire underneath them. They just kind of get complacent.

After planning their course of action, participants tried on their new roles as learners, Mezirow's ((1978, 1991, 2000) Stage Eight. Several of the participants affirmed seeing things differently while they were enrolled in the post-secondary education program. Learning occurred for these participants as they made an association within a frame of reference, accepted an

interpretation as their own, called upon an earlier interpretation, and had a change of attitude toward or change of perspective regarding some aspect of their engagement with the environment, other persons, or ourselves (Mezirow, 1991).

Nicole went from quitting factory jobs nearly 20 years earlier to developing a strong work ethic and providing a valued service to her community. Prior to enrolling in her program, Nicole admitted to being dissatisfied with her former jobs, which resulted in her quitting job after job. However, now Nicole has learned the value of having a good work ethic.

Nicole: You have to show yourself. It's a choice if people choose you, and you have to present yourself in a manner where "I'm here for business." This is not a game; this is my livelihood. There is no Plan B. This is how I support my children. I talk to kids now. They graduate high school. They want to go into the beauty industry, and I tell them point blank, "You can't go to the mall every weekend. You can't hang out with your friends every weekend. You've got to be there and show yourself worthy of your clients.

Carla learned the importance of perseverance. She recalled a meaningful experience that she had as a new mother while enrolled in her program at the [university] after she had made the decision to continue with her educational plans. Carla had made prior arrangements with her professors, gave birth, came back to school, took her exams and passed all of her courses, all in the same semester. Carla could have easily given up or postponed her educational endeavors, but she chose to persevere.

Carla: My perception of college...it was positive. Something that I knew that I wanted to do; and something that I was going to do. People were supportive. I didn't feel singled out or anything like that. Professors were accommodating. I ended up having my daughter in the middle of the school year. I had her in April. As a matter of fact, I came back with her the end of April to take exams. My professors were playing with my baby while I'm finishing up a test. So that was a positive experience. And that was meaningful to me because they were so accommodating, you know. I could have flunked all of those classes. But they worked around it. And I made preparations in advance to say... This is what's about to happen. What are my options? And so, we made it happen.

Frances described the barriers that she faced and her responses to those barriers while

pursuing her education.

Frances: It took me 18 months. But it was supposed to take 9. I guess starting off and then finding a way to class. I had a transportation barrier. As far as childcare, well my oldest was already in school, but my baby boy...my nephew, my mama, my mama-in-law, whoever wasn't doing nothing that day...that's where he was until he started school.

Candice attested to learning several lessons: the value of an education, the value of a credit score, and the value of persistence. Although Candice was not successful at her first attempt at finishing her program, she never gave up her dream. Candice's persistence paid off because now she enjoys a rewarding career as a licensed nurse.

Candice: I'm grateful because I know now the value of an education. I know now the value of a credit score. And I believe you can do anything you put your mind to because I told you I had got put out the program two years previous to me graduating and that kind of did something to my ego for a minute but then you have to dust yourself off. Delayed doesn't mean denied. You just have to go back in and just give it my best shot.

Lisa realized, as she was participating in her program, the value of gaining knowledge. She also stated that she learned to respect people who were different from her and their cultures.

Lisa: I think with any change the driving factor is knowledge. The more you know about different people, different cultures. So I think that the knowledge, knowing more, makes all the difference. The more I knew, the more I learned. The more I was around people, and especially in my program, I started to see people as people and not just some kind of idea that I had in my head about what they were.

Tracy pondered on the time she decided to apply for public assistance and how this service had been a help to her and her children. Although she initially had a negative perception of public assistance, now she has had a change of heart. Because of this help, Tracy had accomplished a milestone in her life.

Tracy: I didn't want to receive government assistance at first because I thought it was for people who didn't want to make anything out of themselves. I used

public assistance to help me better my life as far as me and my kids, as far as the insurance, the housing...just until I could become the successful medical assistant and phlebotomist that I am now. I now see it wasn't so bad receiving public assistance because it helped me to go back to school and to better my life for me and my kids. It was assistance to help better my life. In a way public assistance is good if you want to use it wisely.

Earnestine had a change of heart about her perception of who can become a nurse. She remembered watching Black females on television playing in stereotypical roles but only one playing a nurse. Even in real-life when she worked in a hospital setting, Black nurses were rare. However, Earnestine did not let that illusion prevent her from pursuing her call to become a nurse.

Earnestine: Well, I guess, probably growing up in the late 50s early 60s, I didn't see many Black nurses on TV. I think Julia used to be a nurse. But we didn't see that many on TV shows as Black and having a career like that. Most of what we saw were people cleaning up, cooking or keeping somebody else's kids. They were White females, not Black. And even when I worked in the hospital setting, it was rare. There weren't hardly any Black RNs. So nursing was not really one of those. African American nurses "weren't in my village." You know they weren't in my village growing up. Now when I got older and moved to...still a small town, but bigger than where I grew up...then I saw a few more Black women nurses. So I thought, "Maybe this is possible." And it was. Like I said, I think it's always been my calling.

Rita compared her education to the game of chess and to one of Robert Frost's renowned poems. She saw her education as the key to open other doors that she may have more options. Each choice that she made, Rita considered a victory. Likewise, Teresa saw the completion of her education as an open door to other options for her to choose any direction she desired to pursue.

Rita: Education is the key factor of...it's like a chess game. It's a checkmate move to where I can be a gamechanger or I can just, you know, I don't have another move. Having an education is just having another move on hand. It's just being able to make a different move. It gives me more options. Kind of like the poem Robert Frost wrote, The Road Not Taken. That was another epiphany for me in my life to where I can say, "Man, I've got a choice."

Education is a choice, so if I have it, it can open up more doors to make other choices.

Teresa realized that although she had completed her education and became what she had set out to become, she was in a constant state of evolving, a constant state of learning, a constant state of becoming. Teresa also realized that knowledge empowers and that in the real material world she now possessed the skills and knowledge to analyze, critique, and speak out (Adair, 2008).

Teresa: It was good to have accomplished something on my own. I had to put in the work and the time and to get some things under my belt so that I could build a better foundation for my own children. It's opened up doors in me exploring even when you have a goal of just being an educator, how things will evolve for you. Things don't always stay the same. And you kind of have to be open for that. And just being in that environment of learning...of being like a lifelong learner; it helps you understand that, "You may start off here, but it may end up like this at the end of your journey." So I think that's what education has done for me.

Theme Three: Competent, Confident and Independent

The theme "*Competent, Confident, and Independent*" can be subdivided into two categories: Beating the Odds and Open Doors. In this third theme, the participants described how it felt to have persisted in achieving their educational goals and attaining economic self-sufficiency despite structural barriers, stereotyping, and personal deficits. Carla and Candice described confronting the dominant ideology associated with impoverished African American single mothers. Overall, these participants, as other African American women, were determined not to be oppressed; instead, they redefined their African American womanhood, their identities and perspective of themselves and challenged the status quo (Collins, 1989; 2000). Nicole and Lisa recalled the great effort they expended to reach their goals and to finally feel that their children are proud of them. April and Candice described heightened levels of confidence. Frances recalled overcoming the effects of abuse. Tracy, Earnestine, Rita, and Teresa described

how attaining their goals has created other opportunities for future endeavors.

As transformative learning highlights the process and self-reflection of experiences, it assisted participants in developing new roles and relationships, consequently provoking self-confidence and sufficiency, and consciously embracing new actions (Uyanik, 2016). These described Mezirow's (1978, 1991, 2000) Stage Nine. The African American single mothers acknowledged the confidence they had developed as a result of completing their post-secondary education program. They proclaimed how their accomplishment had lifted them out of poverty, engaged them in satisfying and secure employment, gave them a voice and helped them develop healthy, happy, and productive children (Adair, 2008).

Beating the Odds

Carla described completing her education as a great accomplishment in spite of an unplanned pregnancy. She compared herself to other African American single mothers who faced similar situations but did not persist. Haleman (2004) states that some low-income single mothers, such as Carla, hold on to their personal aspirations and educational experiences as a way to oppose the stigmatism they face.

Carla: I feel like... I wouldn't say that I did the impossible, but me completing my education program, it was a feat. You know, it was a great achievement. Because when you get young black females in my position, they usually give up. You know, they usually don't go on. They don't finish, and they do become how people sometimes view us and how society views us and me being able to go ahead and go through the program... get my degree and do that, I showed them that, "No, we're not all the same. Some of us are out here "making it happen." (chuckles)

Nicole reached her goal of becoming an entrepreneur. She described her achievement as emancipating. Now, she believed that her children were proud of her accomplishments.

Nicole: It's liberating. Because I know that my children are proud of me, as a mom. And just to see their friends come over and I see the look in their face where they're proud because now our home looks like their homes. And they don't have to be shamed anymore, not that they were. But just to see the look on their face. That I can say my children are proud of me. and I worked hard to get here.

In spite of her former circumstances, Lisa felt accomplished. Having her son acknowledge how proud he was of her contributed even more value to Lisa's achievements.

Lisa: It made me feel accomplished in reaching and maintaining the goals that I set for myself. Not only in the workplace, but in every area of my life. I recognize the value of what I have achieved in spite of my circumstances. So now, my son is a student at a [university]. And he tells me all the time, he says, "Mama, I'm so proud of you. And it makes me feel so good. (Laughing) And I know that I didn't do everything that was right, but I feel like this is one instance where the means really did justify the end result.

April's confidence exuded in her statements that she felt she could overcome any obstacle now that she was armed with the necessary knowledge and tools to move forward in her career.

April: Oh, I know that I'm able to overcome any obstacles, any boundaries...because I'm educated, and I know more than what I knew before. You say, "Okay, if I pass this program, I can go to the next level." It gave me enough ammunition to go to the next level. You know, there's no stopping me.

Candice admitted to having a lack of self-confidence before completing her education. She also described herself as having defied the odds. Candice confronted similar negative experiences of stereotyping as Carla. She described herself before completing her education as being at a low-point in her life. However, she perceived her post-secondary education as a way to exit poverty, as a route to upward mobility, and as a pathway to personal growth (Haleman,2004).

Candice: I've doubted myself for so long. I guess from being at the bottom. Seeing other people doing...like a lot of my classmates were already into their careers and here I was with a baby, single mom, with a GED. Not even a high

school diploma. And to just beat the odds, I guess you could say. I am more confident. I have work ethics. My professionalism went to another level. It humbles you a whole lot. Cause I went without for a whole year just to finish the program, and NOT need welfare again. Cause that was my goal—NOT to go back to welfare. I worked part-time, and it was not recommended. But you have to do what you have to do.

Frances recollected her journey of being a victim of domestic violence to where she is now since completing her education: a successful entrepreneur.

Frances: I'm a strong woman. I can say that. Coming from a single mother to an abusive marriage to being on your own, raising your kids, and now working in my family-owned salon. There's nothing more fulfilling!

Open Doors

Tracy expressed that she has more goals to reach. However, reaching this first milestone has opened the door for Tracy to aspire and work towards achieving her next goal: becoming a nurse practitioner.

Tracy: Assistance helped me to achieve what I was looking for and helped me better myself. My future is to not stop now... to keep on growing and going to school until I go to what I really want to be and that's a nurse practitioner.

Similar to Tracy, earning her nursing degree has allowed Earnestine to explore other career options. She expressed her gratefulness for receiving a competitive salary. According to Alfred (2006), "the purpose of education should be to situate the individual in a stronger position to compete for better employment opportunities while promoting equity and justice for a more tolerant society" (p. 114).

Earnestine: Being Black and a woman, me completing my program has allowed me to have options as far as careers or jobs. Because had I not had that nursing degree, I could probably be...I might be a secretary, or I might be cleaning houses or working in hotels cleaning or cooking. I'm not degrading or downplaying those roles or those jobs. But having that degree has allowed me to have a career. See those are jobs, but I have a career. And I'm a professional. I have a real competitive salary. I feel extremely blessed...proud because I'm a Black woman who did it...in my

community. Out of that little small community I came from. I'm one of those who made it.

Rita stated that completing her program had opened doors for her and her family to live the American Dream. The American Dream is the belief that despite the circumstances into which a person is born, that person, through hard work, can attain prosperity, success, and upward mobility (Bogle, Acs, Loprest, Mikelson, & Popkin, 2016).

Rita: Aw...education was always number one. You know, education has just always been a priority in our household. Oh, without the completion of the program, I wouldn't be living the dream. That's just point blank. The American Dream. I go where I want to go. I buy what I want to buy.

Teresa's newfound confidence and competence as a result of completing her program are evident by the versatile career opportunities in which she has engaged.

Teresa: And so, I have a degree in Health Education. After I got that degree, my first job, I didn't even apply for it! It was in Early Childhood Education. So I worked at Northwest Community Head Start here in Lauderdale. And then from there, I did adult education through the technology center. Then from there, I worked with the Department of Children Services for 12 years. And so, DCS... I was employed for them up until August of last year when I did a career change. Currently, I work with DIDD, which is Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. I'm an investigator there...one of the investigators in West TN.

The ten African American single mothers critically reflected on their experiences by examining the integrity of assumptions and beliefs, leading to a discovery of contradictions among thoughts, feelings, and actions. They realized inconsistencies in what had been held as true. The single mother proceeded to take part in dialogue to further examine new thoughts and ideas that had come out of the critical reflection and is the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed. Their dialogue consisted of gathering opinions of others to further question the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness and to question the credibility of the person(s) making the assertion. Finally, the African American single mothers

transitioned through Mezirow's (1978; 1991; 2000) Stage Ten, as they took action through an integration of their new meaning perspective into their life.

The participants recognized that earning their high school diploma or equivalency had not been enough to position them on the road out of poverty. They realized that in order to facilitate economic mobility, seeking and completing their education beyond the diploma was the critical step that was necessary (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). In spite of the economic and structural barriers and personal challenges faced by these participants, they were able to persist in their educational pursuits.

At the onset of their interview, Nicole, Lisa and April remembered being reluctant to apply for and receive government assistance. However, they later saw the value in having received the assistance as just what they needed to not only help meet their immediate needs then but also regarded the aid with helping them to reach their educational goals.

Looking back on her experiences with public assistance, Nicole credited government assistance as being the catalyst that propelled her to do what she needed to become self-sufficient. She also urged others who may need assistance to allow it to affect them in a similar way so that their welfare use will only be temporary.

Nicole: I feel like everybody has a past, and you don't know where life is going to take you, but you can make the decision whether to strive for better or sit and slumber. If it wasn't for government assistance, I don't that I would've even had the drive to do what I needed to do to get up on my feet. But I think that a lot of it is the way I felt applying for it. The way the people looked at me. And I just knew I didn't want to feel like that. I didn't want my kids to have to feel like that.

Lisa remembered the day that she left public assistance. Then she made a powerful appeal to caseworkers for a display of compassion for impoverished individuals who make the decision to go and ask for assistance. Lisa argued that everyone is worthy of compassion. The perception

of these individuals should reflect compassion as those who are affected by unequal larger systems that are beyond their control (Easton, 2016).

Lisa: So I had to go down to speak to my caseworker about the TennCare and let her know that, “Hey, I’ve got a job now, and I’m not going to need this anymore.” I think that people should understand... whatever feeling I’m feeling... happy, sad, depressed... we all experience those feelings at some point in our lives. And I think the most important of those is COMPASSION. And when you see somebody who needs help, and they decide that they want to go ask for help—that’s HUGE for most people... that they had to even ASK for HELP! So the fact that even if I know somebody that needs assistance, it is not for me to judge them. It is for me to pass on the same compassion that I needed, whether I got it or not. Everybody’s worthy of it.

Carla described what life is like for her now as an independent, African American single mother. She also contended that because of her past experiences, she is now able to make better life choices and model those choices for her children.

Carla: I’m in a position to where I didn’t have a bank account; now I have more than one bank account. I didn’t have a savings account growing up. I make sure my kids have those things growing up. I’m making wiser decisions. I’m not putting myself in that situation with that poverty line that I was used to growing up. I think about things before I do it, and I also pass those same things and those same values on to my kids. I lot of things that I experienced growing up, they have no idea what that is.

April credited public assistance as the extra measure of help that she needed to provide her basic needs. April urged those who may also need this measure of help to make it short-termed—to aspire to do better.

April: Everybody’s not blessed to have parents that are able to support you financially. You need that extra push [public assistance] to help. Life comes first. That’s what the Maslow’s hierarchy of needs says... you’ve got to supply your physiological needs first. Without that, you can do nothing. You can’t go to the next step. And that’s what public assistance did for me: food, clothing, housing, all of that. I’m out of public housing and no food stamps. That makes me feel good that I was able to do it.

Frances’s statements spoke to her newfound confidence for becoming independent.

Frances: After I graduated and started working in a salon, I felt better about myself. I was making my own money. I was depending on myself...even though it was hard...

Candice recognized that because of public assistance, her children would not have the opportunity to experience new things. She named traveling to another country, seeing the beach, and enjoying activities that they love new opportunities.

Candice: I only used it [public assistance] as a steppingstone. It was nothing I wanted to do for the rest of my life. If it wasn't for me being on assistance for a limited amount of time, I wouldn't be who I am now. My kids wouldn't experience the things they experience now, and I'm hoping to teach them. I started to save for their college, so they WON'T have to depend on public assistance. We were able to do a family vacation this year. We went to Mexico. And it felt good, being able to take my kids and to do things that I've never done growing up. And my baby boy said he wanted to go to the beach, and that's how it came about, us taking a cruise. And I was like, "You know what; that's not a bad idea. And not only are we going to go to a beach; we're going to go to a beach in another country." That's how it's changed our lives dramatically. My oldest son, I just sent him to a \$300 basketball camp where previously that would have been totally out of the question. That's the way it's changed our lives. We can now do the things we want to do, not just the things that needs to be done.

Tracy claimed that although she was met with skepticism from others who thought she could not, as an African American single mother, attain her education, she did it. This achievement gave Tracy increased self-confidence. Instead of creating a self-fulfilling prophesy, Tracy confronted the socio-cultural distortion that supported the dominant ideology of African American single mothers. Consequently, she has experienced a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1990).

Tracy: Completing my education made me feel good about myself and that I did it. I can move forward with the education behind me when others thought that I couldn't...as an African American single mother. My education has helped me so that I don't have to be back on government assistance. So that people can't say that's all Black people are good for.

Completing her education presented Teresa the opportunity to work in different areas

during her career. Now Teresa was fortunate to pursue other interests as well as work toward completing an advanced degree.

Teresa: I'm an investigator there...one of the investigators in West TN. But that's going to soon change. My last day there is going to be the 31st of the month. Now I just kind of want to work on some things that I've been desiring to do...finish up my Master's (degree) and spend more time with my children and different things like that... just because my work has been really excessive.

Theme Four: Becoming Advocate-Educators

The final theme facilitates inspiring the participants to become advocate-educators for their children, for other African American single mothers who are receiving public assistance, and for policy development. Poverty policies and practices of countries such as the United States control the lives of poor people and influence their loss of capacity over the economic, cultural and political aspects of their lives (Ceballos, 2006). However, the voices of the poor have been typically ignored in developing and implementing policy and intervention programs (Krumer-Nevo, 2008). Unfortunately, the African American voice has not been heard with much capacity although “education has always been of utmost importance to the Black community—from desegregating K-12 schools and colleges to establishing and managing historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), the African American community has always championed equality of opportunity and access for students because in this country, it has long been the key to social mobility and economic independence” (Anderson, 2016).

Conversely, if the voices and perspectives of marginalized populations continue to be excluded when developing these policies, the outcome is that there will continue to be insignificant differences in the level of knowledge (Guy, 1999) considered when developing poverty policies. It is the hope of this researcher that future poverty policy reform will be relevant to the lived experiences of those whom the policies impact the most. Theme Four can be subdivided into three

categories: Role Models, A Change in Perspective, and Meet Them Where They Are.

Role Models

While raising their children as single parents, the participants played the role of advocate-educator. In this final theme, the participants described their efforts of being role models for their children and what they hoped their children have learned from them. Their responses to the hope for their children resonated the realization that their capacity as single mothers consisted of more than just the need to fill their children's stomachs; they also recognized that their children's minds needed to be filled. April, Frances, Candice, Lisa, Rita and Tracy's responses suggested that their children viewed them as role models and wanted to emulate their mothers.

April's daughter wants to become a nurse like her mother.

April: They admire me because my daughter says she wants to be a nurse. To earn extra income, Frances's son styles hair like his mother.

Frances: My youngest one, he knows the things of ... a job and getting his own... And the only way you're going to get it these days, is to get it on your own. Cause he is doing the same thing I did... he's doing hair to back him up.

Candice painted this picture of being her children's role model:

Candice: My oldest son knows he wants to go to college. Just seeing me going to school and seeing me reap the benefits of going to school. My youngest son, he thinks cause I work, and he only sees me spend money, that if you work, you can have all the money in the world. (Laughing). That's what he thinks. Work ethics, that's what they're picking up. For the last past two years, they've just seen me work, work, work. Go to school, work. Go to school, work. Go to school, work. Then after school, it was just working. And now, it's just work and we play. We work, and we play. It was a process to play. And now they know to trust the process because they've seen it. If you work hard, you can play even harder.

Lisa described being the role model for her son this way:

Lisa: Well one of his goals, of course, is to complete college. He's working on

that one. His values are very much in line with mine. I think because he's watched me along the way, so whether I've said it to him or not, he still knows that it's important to me that he finishes. I always tell him, "No pressure from me." (laughs) No pressure.

Rita described how her compassion for teaching made such an irrevocable impression on the young minds of her children that their desire is to grow up and also become teachers.

Rita: They both say they want to be a teacher, which I keep instilling in them both. I tell [my son] like my mom told me, she said, "Rita, you're going to be a teacher." And I'm like, "You think I'm going to be a teacher. I'm not going to be a teacher. I'm not going to be a teacher." And I speak it into my son every day. "You're going to be an engineer. I speak it into my daughter, "You know, you're my little attorney." And they say, uh uh, mama, we see the way you teach. We want to be some school teachers." And I say, "No, you're going to be an attorney." And I'm just trying to see if that reverse psychology, you know, land on some fertile soil, some kind of way. (Laughs). But if they are teachers, I would be more than grateful of knowing that my two, star pupils have become teachers.

Tracy expressed that she has tried to instill in her children the importance of an education and working hard as they saw her do.

Tracy: If they work hard, get whatever they want. As far as trying to get an education because that right there will go far in their life. My baby girl wants to go to college. She just has great determination. So, whatever she sets her mind to, that's what she's going to do. I think she got that from me, as far as the working and wanting to do better for herself and to have whatever she wants.

The idea that education is the basic route to economic success and that educational ambitions can be influential inter-generationally are crucial components of the American Dream (Haleman, 2004). Earnestine made sure that her children and grandchildren knew the importance of an education as she literally modeled for them the outcome of earning an education.

Earnestine: And as far as education, I hope that they have learned through me that they need their education in order to advance. You know, I got my BSN in 2013, and I got it online, so I really was not even going to march. I really didn't even have to march, but I needed to march so that my grandkids would

see somebody graduating from college. That's the only reason why I marched. I needed them to see that somebody that they know and somebody that looked like them marched across the podium and received that degree in hand.

Teresa recognized the value of parents exposing their children to different things so that children know that there is more than one option available. Teresa modeled this for her children. Throughout her career, Teresa's children saw her enjoy various career opportunities. As a result, they are aware that their options of career choice are unlimited.

Teresa: My oldest is a senior, he wants to do something in the trade area, like the technology center or something like that, more hands-on. He's even spoke about the military. My middle, he hasn't really identified what he wants to do. He's a very strong student academically.

Carla has instilled in her children the importance of an education. Because she modeled going to college and the benefits thereof, Carla's children, too, desire to emulate their mother.

Carla: They talk about where they're going to go. They talk about how much money they're going to have. They talk about how big their houses are going to be. They talk about "Mom, I'm going to buy you a house." My 8-year-old already says, "I'm going to the University of Miami." I'm going to go to school. They know what a major is. All those kinds of things they know because they've been exposed to them.

Nicole believed that it was important for parents to be their child's first role model. She insisted that parents should model those values that they want their children to possess and as well as to model resilience.

Nicole: Being your kids' role model. I hate to get on Facebook or social media and see young kids call somebody else's parent their role model. Be your kids' best and first role model. I was a single mother. All of my friends...it was always six of us, except my one friend...were married, with kids. None of the kids went to college, got a degree, furthered their education, got a good job. But I was the single mother. And I pushed my kids. And I pushed myself. And I look at my kids...and I'm not speaking ill of the two-parent family, but I think with my struggle in being the single parent, I wanted my kids not to have to do what I did to be the best person they could be. So it made me work harder. It made me push them harder.

A Change in Perspective

All participants hoped that their will to persist in attaining their education and becoming empowered in spite of the structural and personal barriers they experienced would serve as an example and inspiration to other impoverished African American single mothers. The participants' engagement in their post-secondary education program provided potentiality for them to engage in critical self-reflection to confront presuppositions underlying explanations for their oppression. This critical self-reflection in the context of transformative action to change social order resulted in their liberation. Freire defines this process as conscientization (2001).

However, simply making other impoverished African American single mothers aware of the participants' experiences is a form of banking education with the participants acting as teachers. Conversely, others who are marginalized must engage in their own reflective undertaking of their reality in the context of transformative action to resist daily oppressions (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Through this research, the participants hoped to alert other African American single mothers of the historical oppression that have considered them to be inferior (Collins, 1990), a focus of Black Feminist Thought. The participants urged other single mothers to recognize that a better life begins with a change in perspective.

Nicole hoped that other African American single mothers would recognize that there is a way to independence, and that independence requires a desire for independence and hard work to attain it. She urged these single mothers to let go of those self-concepts and values gleaned from prescribed social norms, and instead, confront those assumptions to redefine their reality in their own terms (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Nicole: My hope is that they don't settle. Even though you've got the apartment, and your rent is free, and your light bill is free, nothing in life worth having and keeping is going to be free. You don't appreciate it as much if it's given to you. But if you go out and work for it and get it yourself, you'll appreciate it more. Independence. Not having to rely on the system for everything.

Carla released a call for unity among African American single mothers. She included herself in this call for unity to contest stereotypes, to encourage and support each other, and to strive to reach their full potential. Johnson-Bailey (2006) argues that African American women can be identified as a learning community, and as a community "bound by positional connectedness" (p. 307), this population can use their perspective toward their circumstances in society as the foundation for transformative learning.

Carla: My hope for other African American single mothers would be to be the strong, Black women that they are. Don't give up. Keep pushing towards the goal. Don't fall to the system, to the stereotypes. Know that you have a right to be there. Know that you have a right to keep striving. My hope is that we ALL get to wherever it is that we want to be. That we are ALL successful that we ALL build one another up; that we ALL try to be the example; that we ALL try to help one another and not always tear each other down. We are supposed to support one another. My success depends on your success. We are supposed to be able to rely on one another. If I fail, it's not just me failing. I feel like I've let us all down. We are supposed to be in this together. My hope is that we all strive to be the best that we can be.

April and Frances urged those who need assistance to use it, but make sure the aid is used only to assist them while they are in the process of engaging in opportunities to help them move beyond public assistance. These opportunities that April and Frances recommended to welfare recipients are those that aid this population in developing a critical consciousness that can direct them to new practices focused on transforming the conditions that reproduce oppression (Ceballos, 2006).

April admonished other single mothers to develop greater confidence in themselves and

their abilities. She exhorted these mothers not to allow their thinking and actions to be influenced by the dominant ideology of African American single mothers abusing welfare (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012).

April: To not be ashamed. If you need government assistance, go apply. Because, you know, some people are ashamed, and you shouldn't be. DO NOT think that you have to have it. You can pay for your own insurance. You can pay for your own food. You can pay your own daycare fees. So don't think that you have to have it for the rest of your life. Because a lot of Black women's mentality is that they have to have it to survive. Frances reminded single mothers that public assistance is not permanent assistance.

Frances: Use it [public assistance] as needed. But if you don't need it, get off of it. You need to get a stable life. You have to get a job. You have to...depend on yourself.

Lisa hoped that African American single mothers would look beyond their past and current circumstances, set goals, and use public assistance only to help them get to a better place in their lives as they reach their goals. Lisa wanted the single mothers to realize that what they think or perceive is powerfully influenced by habits of expectation that make up a set of assumptions that dictate the way they interpret their experiences. However, Lisa also hoped that they recognize that these flawed assumptions can be revised (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Lisa: I hope that they can see past the now, and eventually be able to change their perspective of their lives. And hopefully they don't see this as the end of their story because it's not. It can be a powerful steppingstone.

Tracy hoped that single mothers would be provided the opportunity to reject socio-cultural distortions associated with single motherhood—to challenge the validity of what has been communicated to them (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Instead, she hoped they would develop resilience as they worked to change these negative images.

Tracy: I hope that other African American single mothers would feel like I feel, to give their children a better life than what they had growing up. Not to just lean on public assistance a long time. To try to better themselves, and don't let people tell them that they can't do it or have that mindset that they can't because...they can.

Candice desired African American single mothers the opportunity to attend workshops that would teach them life skills and equip them with the necessary tools to succeed in the workplace. Reverting to her own experiences, Candice recognized that African American single mothers must acquire the knowledge and skills before implementing any plans (Mezirow, 1978; 2000).

Candice: And I think it should be mandatory that you have to attend workshops that teach you how to get a job because a lot of people probably apply for a job but you're not going to get it if you're not presentable. A lot of mothers don't have the presentable wear, so if they come in dirty and dingy because I'm a mother, and I'm going to take care of my kids before I take care of myself. So I might have some dingy, dirty clothes.

Earnestine's hope was that African American single mothers not only gain the willpower and desire to move beyond their present condition but also instill in their children that same desire for a better life. Freire (2000) affirms that the way to upward social and economic mobility is through risks. Without risk, African American single mothers will remain paralyzed, absent and invisible.

Earnestine: But hopefully that they, like me, see it as a temporary thing. That they can move beyond that and take those kids with them and mentor them into a better way of thinking, a better way of living. So I hope that that's their goal. It's not to make that a way of living but only living at that present moment and that they can move beyond that. They can do it. It takes willpower. It takes desire, and it takes effort. But if I did it, they can do.

Rita appealed to other African American single mothers to find a way out of their present situation and to set and achieve their goals. Ceballos (2006) identifies feelings of hopelessness as a common symptom experienced by impoverished individuals because of a loss of control over certain aspects of their lives as well as poverty engendered by poverty policies. Nevertheless, Rita assured the single mothers that there is hope and it begins with a critical

assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 2000).

Rita: I would tell them: Have a goal set in mind. Is this long-term for you? Do you see yourself on this in the next, I'm going to say two years because you can get an education in two years. I'll say between 2-5 years, you know. Seek some help through your case manager to see if they can align you with some type of adult program like school. Ask different ones what was their story? How did they make it out? What were some of the obstacles or some of the challenges? Or even what's some enlightenment that has helped them. Find a support system. They have to want something better for that child, or their children, or themselves. There is a way out. There is a way out.

Teresa beseeched African American single mothers to recognize nothing free always lasts forever. She hoped that with this knowledge, these mothers would be wise in setting goals and making to reach financial goals.

Teresa: It is my hope that, number one, that you do not believe that it will last always. And that you are preparing yourself for a transition before you are asked to get yourself off. That's my hope because the day always comes where there's an end to a thing.

Teresa also called for African American single mothers as well as all citizens living in impoverished neighborhoods to acquire greater control over their own situations. She admonished citizens to work to become individually empowered in order to help establish productive and empowered communities. Transformative learning can be instrumental for community empowerment. When individuals gain increased authority of their personal domain, they can affect change at the community level (Johnson-Bailey, 2006)

Teresa offered further insight to other single mothers, stating:

Also, you need career development because you need to be working towards something. You need to know what does it take to be a homeowner. How you can be productive in your own community. What are some various needs in your community? Do you understand the difference between what is plight and what is your normal condition? You need to know what a safe community looks like. What are your responsibilities as a citizen in your own community? If you want a solid community, and you want a community to grow and to nourish, it has to be some basic understanding of how things work. And then you can build. You can build; people will look out

for you. People will help you. It needs to be a bridge that everybody can walk across together instead of building all these other little bridges. And we have a lot of that going on.

Based on their observations and experiences, the participants recognized the need for welfare reform that would truly assist those receiving public assistance to permanently exit poverty and the system. After experiencing the impact of the current welfare reform, the participants observed that this current legislation had produced only temporary crests of progress, a claim supported by Critical Race theorists (Bell, 1992). They provided recommendations based on their authentic experiences as African American single mothers who had received public assistance. The participants contended that central to aiding recipients in exiting welfare is the need for research, dialogue and visibility in communities, the provision of life skills and tools and support programs, and an implemented graduated process of exiting the welfare system. Research indicate that any endeavor to promote economic mobility must make known the significant structural barriers that populations such as African American single mothers must overcome to exit poverty (Alfred, 2007; Bogle, Acs, Loprest, Mikelson & Popkin, 2016).

Meet Them Where They Are

Edmonds-Cady (2009) states that any work with low-income women should begin from these women's lives and to understand their viewpoint. When women's standpoints are examined, others are able "to see the ways in which hierarchical power relations work, rather than viewing these relations through the obscured and privileged lens of men, and those of power" (p. 15). Critical Race theorists concur that marginalization is best understood from the experiences of those who are marginalized (Leonardo, 2009).

These participants, equipped with new knowledge and skills, desired not only their

transformation but aspired to simultaneously be empowered to transform the world (Mezirow and Associates, 1990). Accordingly, their efforts began with making recommendations to policy makers and leaders to assist in equipping marginalized populations with the skills and knowledge to attain self-sufficiency. These recommendations were based on their experiences as impoverished African American single mothers. The participants recognized that discussions and decisions about African American single mothers are ongoing, and that policies are still being developed and implemented affecting the lives of this population without their input (Adair, 2008). In effect, a recommendation echoed by Tracy, Lisa, Earnestine, Rita, and Teresa is to go into the communities and listen to their unique experiences, which are foundational to understanding their needs, desires, and places in society (Collins, 2000).

Nicole stressed the importance for the facilitation of single mothers' moving beyond public assistance through implementing a step-down process rather than abruptly forcing them off assistance. This process, she believed, would have the potential to create long-lasting financial stability. She reminded policymakers that these are individuals who desire better for themselves and their children but may not have the knowledge to manage their money. Nicole recognized the necessity of providing programs for this population to assist them in exploring option for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; and attaining the knowledge and skills for implementing their plans (Mezirow, 1978; 2000).

Nicole: I know a lot of single mothers that want to come out of the system, but they've been in the system for so long they don't know how to come out. And the thing that government does is, "OK, we're going to give you free housing; we're going to give you free food; we're going to give you free insurance; we're going to give you money for your utilities. And we're going to give you childcare. But the minute you go get a job, we're going to cut all that off. And that's not helping them because they've grown dependent on not having to do nothing. And the minute I say, "Ok, it's not enough anymore; I'm going to go get a job," you cut me off of everything. And they haven't been taught to manage money, to pay bills because I've never paid any bills. But now that I want more, you crutch me. I feel like it should be a graduated process. [For

example,] within six months of being on your job, you're going to have to pay this amount of rent. Within a year of being on your job, ok, now you've got to pay this on your utilities. You can't just cut them off cold turkey because then they're going to revert back to, "Well, I don't want to work; I just want to live free. Everything's given to me over here." It's kind of like weaning a baby off a bottle. You can't just take it; it's graduated.

Carla, Teresa, April, and Tracy recommended making childcare provision more affordable. In 2001, 40 percent of impoverished single mothers spent almost half of their cash income on child care. Further, another 25 percent of single mothers paid 40-50 percent to child care providers (Matthews, 2006). Carla, speaking from her experience, stated it this way:

Carla: So probably offering more support programs. For example, with the childcare, I do need help with someone watching my child while I go to school. But I don't have an extra 7 or 800 dollars to pay a daycare, so if I had support in that area. Childcare was a big issue for me being able to work and drive back and forth (to school). I want to work; I want to take care of my child. But at the same time, I also cannot afford this. It was like I have to make a choice. Am I going to work full-time just to put her in childcare and not be able to go to school? Why can't I have both? So, making things a little more affordable—more support programs.

Candice initially experienced barriers to reaching her goals because of some of the requirements that welfare had in place. In an effort to meet those requirements, Candice had to postpone her educational plans. Therefore, she recommended that policies and social service providers be more of a support rather than a hindrance to those who truly want to exit welfare.

Candice: I would recommend that the requirements, as far as the work requirements to receive the benefits were more lenient. Not lenient to the point where a person can live off the government for the rest of their life...no. Just support. It is hard. It is very hard having to just be a mom. Period. So just imagine being a mom trying to further your education. If they can just be the shoulder. Like the shoulder the mom could lean on, it would be great instead of knocking them down. Cause just a lot of times, single moms get knocked for just being a single mom. Welfare did help me in some ways, which made me just get out there and get it. Welfare reform was like, "Well, we'll give you give you this little bit," but you've got to do so much on top of being a mom, going to school, trying to work. Then you gotta go do these hours. So when will you get the chance to be a mom? So a lot of times, people get discouraged and won't even try because it's so much...you've got to jump through so many hoops to get the assistance

that it's not even worth it... "I'll just sit back and have nothing". Because I know a lot of people like that personally. They would rather sit there and do nothing than jump through all the hoops.

Among Lisa's recommendations included the need for policymakers, leaders and social service providers to become more visible in communities. Lisa made a heartfelt plea for policymakers and social service providers to consider those who are illiterate or functionally literate. Lisa contended that for these individuals, it is the most difficult to go to someone to ask for assistance. If, on the other hand, those in the upper echelon would go visit communities and identify the needs of these people, greater results in addressing needs may become evident.

Lisa: I know that a lot of policymakers, a lot of agencies feel like, "Well, we put it out there. We put out commercials. We have flyers in the health departments and doctors' offices." But I think that if you met people where they were. If you went out and you actually talked face-to-face to people. Because me, sitting in this massive building behind all these doors with a piece of paper on my desk—an application. For me to get from where I am to you, I don't think people realize what that struggle is like for people. And especially if you are someone who has trouble reading, trouble writing, that's another thing that has to be dealt with. And people don't want to come in to a building. It's intimidating that the building is there. And if you can lessen that intimidation for people, I think it would go a long way. Because I think people get so wrapped up in their little world. They get so wrapped up in there that they can't see out of it. So if you go there, and you say, "Hey, this is what I'm going to do." I mean, you keep shoving forms at people; shoving forms at people. They don't even want to ask. I don't want to ask you for help if I don't even know how to write my name. So now I've got to ask you to help me write my name? So if you think it's intimidating to ask for assistance, think of what that feels like for a lot of people. So they would just rather just... "stay in my mess because I don't want to have to expose myself to anybody." So I just feel like if we meet people there. If somebody actually went to the projects and said, "What do you need?" "Tell me what do you

need? What do you need to get to the next step for your life? Tell me what you need, and let's figure out how we're going to get it." "What are the things that you need to work on, and let's get you where you need to be to get that. Earnestine saw the need to make recommendations for single mothers who may take the welfare-to-work approach to exiting welfare. Based on her experience, Earnestine recognized that economic self-sufficiency is impossible to attain by working a minimum-wage job, even full-time. Currently, Tennessee's minimum wage remains at \$7.25. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 117,000 Tennesseans earn at or below the federal minimum wage (Policy Brief, 2015). Earnestine argued the need for providing true living wages by increasing minimum wages so that those who do not seek education as a way to upward economic mobility can also have an opportunity to leave public assistance. This population can also have an opportunity to have a better quality of life for themselves and their children.

Earnestine: Low minimum wage would be my first thing. Minimum wage needs to reflect the change in times, and it needs to reflect that everything is going up, prices of everything. No matter what you need, the prices are going up, but wages are not and nobody can live effectively or abundantly or appropriately with a low wage. So that's the first step is to increase the wages so that it is a living wage.

Rita saw the need to address the generational cycles of poverty within some African American single mothers' families. Because most families only know their way of living, Rita suggested that leaders and providers go to these neighborhoods and work closely with these mothers and their children to help them broaden their knowledge-base of better ways of living and alternate opportunities available to assist them in permanently achieving a better quality of life and breaking the cycle of poverty. The race-centric perspective of transformative learning highlights the historical factors that have transcended generations in the marginalization of African American populations (Teasley & Ikard, 2010).

Rita: Some parenting classes...parenting classes. Make that a requirement. “Do you want this cycle to continue with your child?” When is enough, ENOUGH? As far as like, just say if they’ve been on assistance for years, and they’re still on assistance, even when their children get out of school. And then they trickle down and THEY begin the cycle again. And then THEIR children begin...when is enough to where you can say, “You know what, I understand you had to go this route, but here’s a different avenue. Going back to Robert Frost...here’s a different avenue. And asking the parents...making THEM verbally state something that could possibly help them better their situation. Giving the parents a voice and asking them what could lawmakers do? Because if they’re stuck in a generational spiral, they’re just going to continue to spiral out of control. So therefore, you know, the cycle will continue.

Adair’s (2008) assertion supports Teresa’s claim as Adair maintains that legislators are aware that higher education has the potential to lift impoverished single mothers out of poverty, position them in secure and satisfying employment, provide them a voice and authority, and help adequately care and provide for their children. Yet, she pondered why legislators, through policy, decide to punish and control this population, sentencing them to intergenerational poverty.

Give them what they need. Give them what they need versus throwing everything at them and then saying, “Ok, you have 72 months, and you’re cut off for a life-time.” Life don’t happen like that. You could be up today and down tomorrow. You could do good for 25, “So you mean when I need it at year 27, and I’ve been off of it for 25 years, I can’t get it because I drew it 5 years from way back then?” That’s not appropriate. Well, to know the need, I know the census and other things are used to accommodate funding in an area, in an African American community. We are underrepresented because of not enough information a lot of times. We don’t have enough information in our communities. And we’re just a phone call away, but there’s some things in basics we’re just not getting, and I think that’s one reason why we are being overlooked. Yes, welfare definitely needs some reforming. We have to get information in our communities, and it has to come somewhere other than the African American church. Everybody does not go to church! And that’s just one of these things that policies and different things have always been filtered through our churches to get to us. But that’s not the norm. We have to develop a new way. We have to meet them where they are.

Teresa then addressed bridging the communication gap between leaders and communities. go to the communities and identify individual and community needs. Be approachable. “Meet them where they are.” In addition, Teresa agreed with Rita that these

individuals are capable of voicing their personal needs; they know what their deficits are.

Finally, Teresa sent out an appeal to impoverished communities to stop electing invisible leaders. Instead, become knowledgeable of and identify public officials who have the best interest in and ability to improve community plights. Well the design is that people know to go to DHS and get assistance, but people have to feel like...that you count. I know your name when you come here in a small community. And it has to be personable enough that you can listen and hear information. And I'm going to be honest, we have people in professional positions that are not personable. They service people, and they are not PEOPLE people. But NO, who we elect into positions should be coming back to us disseminating information. That's what should happen. But that is NOT what is happening, and therefore if you are not one of those individuals, then the way that you remedy that is to not vote for them again. To get in people who represent your interest because that's the name of the game now. It's no more of that just because I know you, and just because I like you. "What can you do?" "Who are you willing to work with?" "What do you think you can make happen?" Not just a face. I think we've dealt with too many faces already in our communities. We need more than face.

Summary

This study sought to contribute to the awareness of African American women's collective shared realities and experiences by their true essence and experiences through their own distinctive perspectives (Collins, 1989). Four themes emerged from this research: a) *Disorienting Experiences*; b) *Learning Beyond the Curriculum*; c) *Competent, Confident, and Independent*; and d) *Becoming Advocate-Educators*. In response to their former oppressed state, the African American single mothers in this study did not perceive their social position as beyond their control (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). They used their learning, critical reflection and other rational processes to engage in meaning making of significant life events and changes (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Subsequently, through acts of resistance, the participants eventually developed a critical perspective of their oppression and sought to transform their reality (Freire, 2001). Despite the barriers created by welfare policy coupled with their own personal challenges, these African American single mothers fought against the oppressive welfare policy and other structural and personal barriers to attain their goals.

While education is vital to everyone, the participants' experiences convinced them that education is necessary for all who will confront perpetual barriers such as racism, classism, and sexism; to all who have been excluded from U. S. mainstream culture; and to all who have endured generations of oppression and marginalization (Adair, 2005). Further, the aim of emancipatory learning is not only individual empowerment but also social empowerment. Freire (2000) maintains that "even when you individually feel yourself most free, if this feeling is not a social feeling, if you are not able to use your recent freedom to help others to be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only an individualistic attitude toward empowerment or freedom" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 109). The African American single

mothers in this study remembered those who remain in the margins of society. Consequently, their hope aligned with the aim of Black Feminist Thought: to stimulate African American women's consciousness, that other African American single mothers might engage in self-reflection and self-actualization to gain individual freedom from structures that bind (Collins, 2000).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to describe how ten African American single mothers experienced transformative learning while participating in a post-secondary education program in the era of welfare. Life change/transformation in the context of welfare reform was the phenomenon of importance for this study. The phenomenological aspect of this study allowed me to gain a deeper and richer understanding of this phenomenon as I engaged in conversation with each participant concerning the meanings of their experiences (van Manen, 1990) revealing how these women became active agents in the construction of their social world and personal lives (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003).

The following overarching research question framed the study: *“What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in the context of welfare?”* Each participant engaged in two extended interview sessions in which they shared their lived experiences, providing insight about their lives prior to, while, and after receiving public assistance and completing a post-secondary education program. These questions were asked to determine the meaning perspective the participants associated with public assistance, post-secondary education and beyond these entities.

Transcribed interviews were analyzed in relation to Mezirow’s (1991) 10 stages of Transformative Learning in order to identify themes shared by the single mothers. While each participant’s narrative was unique, several collective circumstances, trials, and motivations seemed to influence their perceptions of their ability to overcome obstacles and barriers. As the single mothers told their stories about their process of change in the context of welfare, the

following four overarching themes developed: Disorienting Experiences; Learning Beyond the Curriculum; Competent, Confident and Independent; and Becoming Advocate-Educators.

The following findings resulted from this study: 1) Racism and sexism are still a part of society and impact the lives of African American single mothers; 2) The African American single mothers renounced the experiences of the dominant culture as standard, to expose, challenge, and deconstruct racial and social constructs (Bell, 2009; Taylor, 2009). The participants used their positionality as low-income African American single mothers to reject the notion that they were lazy, welfare-chiseling, welfare queens to tell a different story; 3) The low-income African American single mothers perceived education as a path of resistance to the structural forces and dominant imagery. They also saw education as a critical tool for gaining upward economic mobility; 4) As the single mothers progressed through Mezirow's (1991) ten stages of perspective transformation that began with their disorienting dilemma, they engaged in self-examination and the critical assessment of their beliefs and assumptions that resulted in changed frames of references from which the single mothers adopted new actions and reshaped how they viewed their lives.; 4) The participants regarded their use of public assistance as a steppingstone—a bridge to economic security; and, 5) The following three results related to perspective transformation emerged from the participants' experiences: an increase in self-confidence, a new sense of empowerment, and the desire to advocate for others who are marginalized.

This research presented the accounts of ten African American single mothers concerning what poverty and acts of resistance to dominant ideology through education resemble. The data revealed that racism has not been eliminated through legislation, which is an affirmation of Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992). The following chapter presents a discussion of these themes in accordance with the research question and existing literature. The discussion is followed by

the study's limitations, a presentation of implications, including implications for future research.

The African American single-mother participants looked backward and forward to describe past, present, and future experiences in connection to their educational participation and completion. Their stories were supported by similar emergent themes from their histories, current day realities, and future visions. The development of theme one referred to the participants' views of single motherhood, government assistance, and social stigma. The second theme was based on the participants' critical assessment of acts of racial subordination and education. The third emergent theme represented the participants' persistence and resilience in overcoming structural barriers and personal deficits. Finally, the development of theme four pertained to the participants' assuming the role of advocate-educators in an effort to impact the future of their children, other African American single mothers, and poverty policy decision-making. This chapter will present the findings of the study as they relate to each theme and participants' journey toward transformative learning.

Theme One: Disorienting Experiences

The findings from the interviews indicated that the participants' disorienting experience encompassed more than one factor. First, all ten also acknowledged that their inability to financially care for themselves and their children was disorienting. Five of the participants were soon-to-be mothers who admitted that their disorienting experience resulted from the discovery of their unplanned pregnancy as students. Carla, Lisa, Teresa, and Candice were enrolled in a post-secondary education program, and Rita was beginning her first semester of college. An additional disorienting experience for Rita was the unexpected death of her mother.

The news of Lisa's pregnancy and welfare use created tension between Lisa and her mother. The rift in their relationship caused her mother to refuse to support Lisa financially and personally. For example, when she needed someone to care for her child while she worked or attended school, Lisa remembered her mother telling her, "I didn't have a baby. You had all that fun." So, I'm not keeping your baby. You find a babysitter." Lisa's mother labeled those who had to resort to welfare as lazy. Lisa's mother had assimilated this meaning perspective of welfare recipients based on a set of cultural assumptions in which she had internalized (Mezirow, 1981).

Earnestine and Candice had to postpone their educational endeavors, which also proved to be disorienting. Because Earnestine did not meet certain nursing program requirements, she had to delay her program for a year. For Candice, meeting welfare requirements led to a delay in her educational plans. During the interview, Candice still felt the frustration as she recalled how her experience with public assistance caused her to have to postpone her plans of continuing her education.

Candice lamented, "They said I didn't qualify because I wasn't going to school enough, and that I had to do more hours. But I couldn't do more hours. It was just a big mess that I had to wait and go to school later."

Coming from low-income families, all of these African American women had to seek assistance to care for themselves and their families. Although none of the women saw themselves as ever having to apply for public assistance, they all expressed their gratefulness to access that resource as a steppingstone to a better life. However, applying for government assistance led to another disorienting experience for the women. Through the comments and actions of their social service providers, these women were subjected to the commonly held beliefs about poverty and welfare, being blamed for their conditions (Adair, 2008; Bridges, 2017). Eight of

the ten participants felt pre-judged and stigmatized. During her application process, Rita remembered her caseworker referring to her as, “So many of you.” Rita commented, “I felt deemed of my character...pulled or dragged down.”

Cultural consciousness and definitions of racial identity are rooted in the social realities of an individuals’ experience and in their “communities of origin” as asserted by critical race theory (Matsuda, 2001, as cited in Schneider, 2003, p. 88). Race and racism were revealed within the participants’ educational journeys, and in some cases, race factors became a part of their struggle in their pursuit of academic success and achievement. Rita negotiated her meaning perspective that only those who had financial and human resources would be able to earn a college education. She recalled observing racial bias in high school as White students were provided with information regarding scholarships and other resources. However, she and other African American students were not afforded the same opportunity.

Although the participants valued being able to use public assistance as a steppingstone as they pursued education as a way out of poverty, six of the participants spoke about the intrusive process of applying for assistance. For example, Lisa observed that the questions that she was asked were not the standard, scripted questions caseworkers were supposed to ask. Instead the questions very personal, creating an uncomfortable experience for Lisa. Not only did the participants find the interview questions disorienting but also the attitude of the caseworkers was disconcerting. Earnestine said that “It’s as if their attitude is ‘You don’t deserve this; I’m giving you this.’” Because of the stigma associated with African American single mothers’ welfare use, such as being interpreted as ignorant, foolish, unmotivated, and incapable of bettering themselves (McComb, 2009), Tracy stated that she had considered not applying for public assistance.

Unfortunately for Tracy, while participating in her education program, she also encountered discrimination from a teacher. Tracy remembered needing help with coursework but was told by her teacher to “read the book and figure it out.” She further stated that “we had only two White people in class, and she [the teacher] always helped them.” The teacher’s attitude led Tracy to believe that the African Americans students were not worthy of the teacher’s attention.

Tracy’s experiences caused her to develop low self-concept. Tracy admitted that she had doubted her ability to complete her program. However, Tracy maintained that after she had become acquainted and bonded with other African American students in her class, she had others to study with and negotiate through the program. With their formed bond, Tracy and her classmates learned to resist these acts of discrimination through their education. Tracy declared,

“It made us feel that we could prove her [the teacher] wrong and do it on our own. So, it made us study extra hard.”

According to Mezirow (1978; 1991), the disorienting experiences that these participants faced had the potential to trigger the process of perspective transformation. Indeed, the participants began the process of self-examination to question their beliefs, values, and assumptions. The participants were in the transitioning phase on the road to perspective transformation. However, before the possibility of perspective transformation, habits of perceptions, thoughts and action, along with cultural assumptions such as social precepts, expectations, and stereotypes that the participants internalized had to be brought into critical consciousness through the process of critical reflectivity (Mezirow, 1981). While they were participating in their education program, the participants described lessons they learned beyond the curriculum.

Theme Two: Learning Beyond the Curriculum

While enrolled in their education program, seven of the ten participants became aware of other students within their classroom who were experiencing similar hardships as they and had also sought education as a means of negotiating a better way of life. Equipped with this knowledge, the single mothers formed bonds with their counterparts and within the accepting atmosphere of the classroom, the single mothers/learners became more capable of critically reflecting on meaning perspectives or frames of references in which they had uncritically assimilated through the process of socialization (Mezirow, 1981).

For example, four of the participants engaged in a critical assessment associated with socio-cultural distortions of their uncritically acquired meaning perspective. As an example, Carla negotiated her meaning perspective on morality and unwed motherhood. Carla's parents, family members, and teachers had instilled in her the importance of earning a college degree. Everybody believed that Carla was going to do the right thing by remaining focused on her education and earn her college degree.

Everyone wanted Carla to learn from her mother's experience of being an unwed mother on welfare. For this reason, when she learned that she was pregnant, Carla felt that she had let herself down as well as all those who had encouraged her to earn her degree. Carla stated that she could almost hear people whispering about what Carla considered her fall from grace. This deeply affected Carla's emotional health. Carla's previous meaning perspective affected her self-image. She said, "People judge. I had people that couldn't believe it." Being negatively judged by others caused Carla to experience guilt, shame, and depression. Carla's idea of personal identity was initially based on how well she perceived herself fulfilling the cultural prescriptions of marriage and motherhood (Mezirow, 1981). However, while participating in her program,

Carla was able to negotiate her meaning perspective concerning unwed motherhood assimilated from dominant cultural ideology. She began moving in a direction that allowed her to revise the assumption that single mothers are lazy and lacking motivation to do better for themselves (Adair, 2008; Bridges, 2017). Carla maintained that she had no intention of being on public assistance indefinitely. She had personal goals to achieve. Carla responded to the dominant cultural ideology this way:

Don't view all people as lazy, not trying. Because some of us are out there trying very, very hard. Let me use these resources to do to what I need to do. I'll be off of it and then I'm going to be that person in society trying to give back and contribute.

Following a critical assessment of cultural assumptions on unwed motherhood, Carla realized that she had made a mistake and was able to forgive herself and move forward. She realized that although she was a single parent, she could still accomplish that that she had originally set out to do. Carla also made another discovery. She exclaims, "that inferior attitude is not there because I did belong. I felt inferior a little bit because sometimes you have other people around and everybody seems to have it going on." Carla learned that she was just as deserving as anyone else. Carla had confronted the conflict with her socio-cultural ascribed identity and categorized herself as original and separate, indicative of her unique identity as an African American woman, which is at the heart of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989; 2000).

Tracy negotiated her meaning perspective on the dominant cultural belief that those who received public assistance were undeserving, unmotivated, and immoral (Adair, 2008; Bridges, 2017; Easton, 2016). Tracy negotiated a meaning perspective on her self-image; that is, she negotiated a meaning perspective that was very significant to her sense of self. What was Tracy's meaning perspective on her self-image? She described her initial reluctance in applying for

public assistance, explaining

“I thought it [public assistance] was for people who didn’t want to make anything of themselves. I based that on how people, White people, judge African Americans of not wanting to do anything or have anything.”

Tracy had yet to become critically aware of the cultural and psychological beliefs and assumptions that had impacted the way she saw herself and her relationships and the way she patterned her life (Mezirow, 1978). However, after completing her education program, Tracy made the following assertion:

I thought that people thought that Black people couldn’t succeed in life, but when I finished I had a different approach on life. I knew I was a single parent trying to make it and provide a better lifestyle for my children. This belief made me challenge myself to become better and to prove to others that successful single Black women could better themselves with just a little assistance until they can get on their feet.

As a result of her educational journey, Tracy recognized the value in public assistance and attributed the successful completion of program in part to having received the assistance.

Theme Three: Competent, Confident and Independent

How have the participants in this study changed or transformed? Three central results that relate to transformative learning theory emerged from the participants’ experiences: an increase in self-confidence, a new sense of empowerment, and the need to advocate for others. This part of the transformation moved the African American single mothers from a place of fear, self-doubt, and uncertainty to a belief in their own abilities and strengths.

As an example, although Carla took a little longer to complete her education, she did accomplish her goal. Carla wanted her completion to be a message to those who view all African American single mothers as immoral, lazy, and undeserving (Adair, 2008; Easton, 2016). She confidently asserted,

“I showed them that. No, we’re not all the same. Some of us are out here making it happen.” Nicole described her transformation as “liberating.”

Lisa made the following exclamation about completing her program:

“It made me feel accomplished.” Lisa also affirmed that her accomplishment has positively impacted every area of her life.

Early in the interview, Tracy and Candice admitted that when they initially started their program, they doubted themselves. However, as they persisted in their studies, they met others who were experiencing similar trials, and they helped each other. After completing her program, Tracy’s level of confidence increased tremendously, and she has contended that she will continue “to keep growing and going to school” until she reaches her ultimate goal of becoming a nurse practitioner. Candice proclaimed herself to be at the bottom for so long that when she finally completed her program, she proclaimed both confidence and victory. During the interview, Frances became emotional when she realized how much strength she had developed since leaving her abusive husband. She declared herself to be “a strong woman” who journeyed from being a victim to becoming an entrepreneur. Upon completion of her program, Rita excitedly declared that she is “living the dream.” She described taking her children to the house where she grew up and remembered her children’s reaction of pity for their mother after seeing the house. However, Rita quickly told her children not to be sorry for her because she remembered the great times she had in that house. Rita’s point was to show her children that they could make it out of any situation.

Earnestine recalled the time when she had applied for public assistance and her caseworker looked at her as if labeling Earnestine as being responsible for her plight (Haleman, 2004). However, since completing her education, Earnestine has labeled herself as a “professional” with a “real competitive salary.” Teresa has demonstrated her confidence and

competence by engaging in a variety of career opportunities. Teresa stated in the interview that her work as an investigator for the state would soon end so that she could concentrate on earning an advanced degree.

There were significant transformative dimensions that some of the participants revealed that moved beyond Mezirow's (1978; 1991; 2000) theory—making connections to spiritual meaning making. For example, Nicole, Earnestine, Rita, April and Candice all acknowledged their faith in God and prayer and crediting God for giving them strength and provision to persist in their program. When asked about how she responded the challenges she faced while enrolled in her program, Candice reported, “I prayed about it, and just asked God to direct my steps and just went on in faith.”

While enrolled in their education program, the participants were able to move to a new perspective and sustain the actions in which their new perspective called for due to the connection with others in their classroom who shared, supported, and re-enforced the new perspective (Mezirow, 1978). All ten of the participants declared changes in their perspectives as they embraced autonomy and self-sufficiency. However, these ten selfless African American single mothers' desire was that others would experience the economic and social freedom that they were appreciating. Evidence of their concern for the well-being of others was reflected in their responses that led to the emerging of Theme Four.

Theme Four: Becoming Advocate-Educators

From self-reflection comes self-knowledge and self-knowledge leads to autonomous self-directed thinkers (Brown, 2004). Overall, the participants in this study were able to recognize their own personal, spiritual, and emotional change as it had taken place. The strongest feature of personal transformation was the participants' complete change of actions

and behavior. For example, all ten African American single mothers stated that they had completely and permanently left public assistance, having no intention of ever going back to it.

The single mothers, having transformed their value and life's meaning (Adair, 2001) desired to share their experiences and learning to help other African American single mothers achieve economic and social mobility. Oftentimes the voices and expertise of those along the margin of society are viewed by policymakers and leaders as anecdotal, to be used when prefacing an article or lecture, but not as a source to be used for designing policy or refining intervention processes (Krumer-Nevo, 2008).

In Theme Four, the participants offered recommendations based on their authentic lived experiences to other African American single mothers as well as those who make decisions pertaining to the welfare and opportunities of this population. This research created a space for the study's participants to use the political framework of consciousness-raising to inform economic and structural barriers that influence the lives of African Americans. This action is at the center of the race-centric perspective of transformative learning (Taylor, 2008). These single mothers, a community bound by common struggle, aspired to be agents of change grounded in their transformative experiences to advocate community empowerment (Johnson-Bailey, 2006).

All ten participants made a resounding plea to this population to develop a change in their perspective. The participants primarily recommended that single mothers use public assistance first, only if it is needed, and secondly, only as long as necessary to achieve the goals that they are working toward. Nicole urged the single mothers not to just settle for those monthly benefits but to desire better. Lisa, Teresa and Rita recommended goal setting. Tracy urged African American single mothers to reject the dominant imagery associated with African American single

motherhood (Easton, 2016). Candice's concern was for the single mothers to attend life skill and job skill training to become equipped for success. Finally, the participants offered recommendations to policy makers and leaders. Five of the participants recommended the need for policymakers and leaders to go into the impoverished communities and not only talk to constituents but also listen to the struggles and barriers encountered by these impoverished individuals. Listening to the impoverished would determine needs so that policies make sense as to the needs. Lisa argued that meeting those in need in their own neighborhoods can make the experience less intimidating for this population. Policymakers and leaders should meet this population where they are. Critical Race contends that if the authentic voices of African Americans are not heard, what is said or known by others may be of little use (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Three participants suggested the need for better childcare provisions. Tracy contended that the provisions in place are too stringent and single mothers cannot afford or meet the criteria for childcare. Earnestine spoke for those single mothers who cannot to go college for specific reasons such as learning disabilities or other barriers. Tracy and Earnestine's recommendations align with the race-centric perspective that speak to structural barriers affecting this population (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Earnestine addressed the needs of single mothers who take the welfare-to-work approach to leaving public assistance. She stated the need for legislature to provide true living wages for this population so that they, too, can have the opportunity to experience upward economic mobility. Earnestine's assertion is seen through the lens of race-centric transformative learning that economic barriers that oppress this population (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Three of the participants made an eye-opening assertion that policymakers and leaders may not have considered concerning those African American single mothers who have tried or are trying to

leave public assistance but continue to face barriers or meet the requirements. Candice asserted the following:

“A lot of times, people get discouraged and won’t even try because you’ve got to jump through so many hoops and say that’s not even worth it. So I’ll just sit back and have nothing. They would rather sit there and do nothing than jump through all the hoops.”

What did the narratives of the ten low-income African American single mothers teach us about their journey as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare? The narratives of the single mothers in this study brought the stories of this population to life and make their transformative experiences a reality. In addition, their narratives demonstrated how these individuals define the experiences and circumstances in their lives and how, through critical reflection, the single mothers/learners were able to see what they had learned to create a positive “life-world” (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), desiring the same for others.

Limitations

Specific drawbacks to this study concern the sample of this study, which was limited to African American female adult learners who met the following criteria while participating in an adult education program: a resident of Tennessee, a single mother, and receiving public assistance. It is recommended that this study be replicated using a larger sample and with participants from various geographical areas, with demographic data included.

In addition, this study focused on participants who experienced a perspective transformation while participation in and completing their education program in the context of welfare. Future research may also focus more specifically on what educational processes and experiences within a post-secondary education program can facilitate the process of perspective transformation.

Finally, for this study, the researcher maintained multiple roles as the sole researcher, interviewer, data analyzer, and transcriber for the interviews. Assuming these multiple roles example, all ten African American single mothers stated that they had completely and permanently left public assistance, having no intention of ever going back to it.

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In Theme Four, the participants offered recommendations based on their authentic lived experiences to other African American single mothers as well as those who make decisions pertaining to the welfare and opportunities of this population. This research created a space for the study's participants to use the political framework of consciousness-raising to inform economic and structural barriers that influence the lives of African Americans. This action is at the center of the race-centric perspective of transformative learning (Taylor, 2008). These single mothers, a community bound by common struggle, aspired to be agents of change grounded in their transformative experiences to advocate community empowerment (Johnson-Bailey, 2006).

All ten participants made a resounding plea to this population to develop a change in their perspective. The participants primarily recommended that single mothers use public assistance first, only if it is needed, and secondly, only as long as necessary to achieve the goals that they are working toward. Nicole urged the single mothers not to just settle for those monthly benefits

but to desire better. Lisa, Teresa and Rita recommended goal setting. Tracy urged African American single mothers to reject the dominant imagery associated with African American single motherhood (Easton, 2016). Candice's concern was for the single mothers to attend life skill and job skill training to become equipped for success. Finally, the participants offered recommendations to policy makers and leaders. Five of the participants recommended the need for policymakers and leaders to go into the impoverished communities and not only talk to constituents but also listen to the struggles and barriers encountered by these impoverished individuals. Listening to the impoverished would determine needs so that policies make sense as to the needs. Lisa argued that meeting those in need in their own neighborhoods can make the experience less intimidating for this population. Policymakers and leaders should meet this population where they are. Critical Race contends that if the authentic voices of African Americans are not heard, what is said or known by others may be of little use (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Three participants suggested the need for better childcare provisions. Tracy contended that the provisions in place are too stringent and single mothers cannot afford or meet the criteria for childcare. Earnestine spoke for those single mothers who cannot to go college for specific reasons such as learning disabilities or other barriers. Tracy and Earnestine's recommendations align with the race-centric perspective that speak to structural barriers affecting this population (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Earnestine addressed the needs of single mothers who take the welfare-to-work approach to leaving public assistance. She stated the need for legislature to provide true living wages for this population so that they, too, can have the opportunity to experience upward economic mobility. Earnestine's assertion is seen through the lens of race-centric transformative learning that economic barriers that oppress this population (Teasley & Ikard, 2010). Three of

the participants made an eye-opening assertion that policymakers and leaders may not have considered concerning those African American single mothers who have tried or are trying to could increase the potential for researcher bias influencing the findings. To address potential researcher bias, I spent a minimum of two to three hours with each research participant in an effort to engender an authentic experience and to attain thick, rich descriptions of participant narratives. Also, I used the following qualitative research techniques: member check, audit trail, and reflexive journaling, as outlined in the Methodology section of Chapter Three.

Practical Implications

What do the findings from this study suggest about education and transformative learning? The participants in the study assimilated meaning perspectives prescribed by dominant ideology, but while participating in their post-secondary education program, they became critically aware of distorted, taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions to change them. The women's perspective transformation was triggered by the dilemmas they spoke of in this study that could not be resolved by gaining additional information or honing their problem-solving skills. Instead, resolving their dilemmas and transforming their meaning perspectives resulted from their becoming critically aware that they were trapped in their own history and of the cultural assumptions which structured the way they saw themselves. As evident through the findings of this study, post-secondary education, then, can be used to facilitate and support perspective transformation of those who are marginalized. For this reason, a key priority of post-secondary education should be to develop its potentialities for perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978).

Implications for Policy

What do the findings from this study imply as it relates to policy? Although the participants in this study successfully achieved their educational goals, they were faced with many structural barriers. Therefore, collaborations between educational leaders and policymakers should be paramount in securing access to post-secondary education opportunities for poor single mothers. However, access to higher education, independent of support services, may not be enough to ensure these low-income single mothers persist in their educational endeavors (Adair, 2001). Individuals must be provided with realistic opportunities to earn a post-secondary education. As the participants shared in this study, there are many obstacles—financial, material, familial, cultural, and pedagogical—that can hinder otherwise capable low-income single mothers from succeeding in educative programs and force them to give up their educational goals in support of work that will not be substantial or sufficient (Adair, 2001).

By expanding the understanding of single poor African American mothers' experiences in and perceptions of post-secondary education in the context of welfare reform, this study can provide information for educational professionals and economic policy developers to ensure these women of color have the support they need to successfully complete educative programs. Further, curriculum and program developers and other higher education administrators can better design programs that promote safe learning communities in which students can participate in discourse and critical reflection that can promote transformative learning. Moreover, acknowledging the voices and interest of poor single mothers and understanding their experiences should reveal to leaders the need for continuous program improvements and policy development that start with the knowledge and experiences of marginalized populations.

Implications for Other African American Single Mothers

In spite of the economic and structural barriers and personal challenges encountered by this study's participants, they were able to persist in the educational endeavors. They declared that their use of public assistance would be temporary and solely used as a steppingstone to reach higher goals. The participants' experiences and narratives should suggest to other African American single mothers that receiving public assistance is not the end of their story. The participants' stories should be testimonial and encouraging for other low-income African American single mothers who are seeking to improve their standard of living, desiring a better life for themselves and their children. Finally, the experiences and narratives of this study's participants should invoke a desire in similar populations to use their positionality along the margins as low-income African American single mothers to recognize ideologies of the dominant culture and the relationship among race, power, privilege, and subordination to challenge and transform these connections (Bell, 1992).

The intention of this qualitative study was to bring truths to the forefront so that others can relate, corroborate, or even question what they read. According to Crotty (1998), in qualitative research, "truth, or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world" (p. 8). In other words, truth is based on how one sees his or her own experience.

Theoretical Implications

Transformative Learning Theory

What was the contribution to Transformative Learning Theory? Through the contributions of transformative learning theory, the following three results emerged from the participants' experiences: an increase in self-confidence, a new sense of empowerment, and the desire to advocate for others who are marginalized.

The three themes of transformative learning, individual experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse (Lange, 2004) were all common to the study's participants as they transitioned through Mezirow's (1991) ten stages of perspective transformation. As they examined flawed socio-cultural distortions while transitioning through the ten stages of perspective transformation, the single mothers came to see education as a way for them to gain control over their lives and rewrite their own stories rather than accept those of the dominant culture. Also, through the process of critical reflection, these women were able to make meaning of their use of public assistance, rejecting the notion that African American single mothers were lazy government scammers (Adair, 2008; Cazenave & Neubeck, 2001; Easton, 2016; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013).

Race-centric Transformative Learning

What was the contribution to Race-centric Transformative Learning? Race-centric transformative learning spoke to the lived experiences of the low-income African American single mothers within a socio-cultural, political, and historical background. This theory aligned with the economic and structural barriers that the single mothers attested to facing prior to and while enrolled in their post-secondary education program and even growing up at home with their parents, which aligned with the race-centric perspective that these barriers transcend generations. The participants' voice in this study also confirmed and expanded Race-centric transformative learning as their voices served as instruments for change, empowerment, and the capacity to negotiate between and across cultures. Finally, BFT aligned with the participants' realities as they used education to resist their oppression and challenge the status quo.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

What was the contribution to Critical Race Theory? These findings confirm the

philosophy of Critical Race Theory. The results from the study show that there is a need for poverty policymakers and program developers to engage in dialogue centered on race, as evident by the stories of racism told by this study's participants. Critical Race argues that any program or policy of emancipation should mainly center around an inquiry of race (Bell, 1992). The participants' accounts revealed that racism was not eliminated by welfare reform; instead, welfare reform created only brief peaks of progress for them. The African American single mothers in the study shared experiences of their being confronted with stereotyping, racial subordination, and discrimination resulting from their welfare use and race. However, the African American single mothers, through education, renounced the experiences of the dominant culture as standard, to expose, challenge, and deconstruct racial and social constructs that had influenced their perspectives (Bell, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

What was the contribution to Black Feminist Thought? The underpinnings of BFT were confirmed in the study. For example, the participants' similar responses to experiences of discrimination and stereotyping align with that of Black Feminist Thought, contending that the perspectives of African American women are specific to their unique positionalities (Collins, 2000). Also, the single mothers renounced the claim of the dominant culture that African American women would rather assimilate than confront the status quo (1989). Conversely, the single mothers in the study used their position in society to uphold their personal claims concerning their experiences (Collins, 1989; 2000). In other words, BFT informed the participants' realities as they used education to resist their oppression and challenge the status quo. Another position of Black Feminist Thought is that race, gender, and class are systems of oppression mutually integrated and work together to create inequality. This stance aligns with the study's findings that racism and sexism are still a part of society and impact the lives of African

American single mothers.

Implications for Future Research

As outlined in the problem statement and literature review, much of the data and information surrounding low-income African American single mothers are either quantitative or based on public and political discourse from a dominant cultural perspective (Easton, 2016). Unfortunately, poverty policies have relied on this type of data to assist in designing poverty policy (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013) that have been said to punish this population for immoral behavior rather than assist them in moving out of poverty (Adair, 2008; Bridges, 2017). For this reason, further research is needed in investigating African American single mothers' economic, educational and social needs with a qualitative lens which could create the opportunity for policymakers and leaders to understand this population on a different level. A practical implication of this research would be to encourage policymakers and educational leaders to engage qualitative research teams within their entities to allow for new questions to be asked to understand this marginalized populations at a different level, and directly hear their voices to truly understand their needs.

Conclusion

The collection of participants' stories demonstrated an authentic change in who these individuals are as people and as learners. This study aligns with the aim of Black Feminist Thought, which is to promote scholarly awareness of African American women's collective experiences (Collins, 1989). In my perspective, the main focus of transformative learning is that marginalized populations develop into academically, socially, and emotionally-prepared individuals equipped to face an unjust society.

The participants in this study, prior to their educational endeavors, had been written off

by some because of their position in society as low-income African American single mothers. However, these participants struggled for the opportunity to learn, grow, and change—despite their challenging circumstances and the mistakes that they may have made in the past. And because of this, there is no telling the impact that can manifest or has already manifested from their transformation.

Emancipatory education as both Freire (2000) and Mezirow (1997) characterize it, is education for liberation and transformation. The participants in this study recognized their empowerment through their educational experiences, and most of them insist that this is just the beginning. The participants experienced increased cultural consciousness and spirituality identity which were both consequences of personal transformation and their post-secondary education experience. In essence, the participants' learning transformation helped to not only raise their cultural consciousness, but also helped them to share their counter stories, which Critical Race theorists deem to be very important (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008).

Finally, as the participants gained more knowledge, their perspective of the world and their understanding of their role in society began to change. These African American single mothers were able to recognize social stigma and injustice at a heightened level rather than accepting it. Consequently, their transformation has become a tool for them to become advocate-educators to help to change the lives of others.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Solicitation Script

Hi, my name is Heather Bonds and I am a doctoral student at the University of Memphis where I am currently conducting a research study titled *The Voices of African American Single Mothers as Potential Agents for Change: Education for Transformative Learning*. The purpose of my study is to answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare?

This study will describe how ten low-income African American single mothers experienced transformative learning while participating in a post-secondary education program in the era of welfare. I am the principal investigator of the research under the direction of Assistant Professor, Dr. Wendy Griswold in the Leadership Department at the University of Memphis.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study. However, there are expected benefits associated with the research. This study will create a space where the voices and perspectives of African American single mothers can be heard without being criticized, stigmatized, or discriminated against. Acknowledging the voice and interests of African American single mothers and understanding their experiences could reveal to Tennessee policymakers, leaders, and adult educators the need for poverty legislation and programs to be inclusive of the knowledge and experiences of African American single mothers. Legislation that is developed to encourage economic mobility must acknowledge and address the significant structural barriers that this population must conquer to move out of poverty. Findings from this study could also be an insightful source of information and encouragement for other African American single mothers who are seeking to improve their quality of life by moving beyond

poverty and becoming economically self-sufficient.

To participate in this study, participants will have to be an African American single mother who had resided in Tennessee and received some type of public assistance (TANF benefits, government housing, SNAP benefits, WIC food vouchers), while enrolled in a post-secondary education program. Also, they must have completed their program and be a willing participant in this study. Do you meet all the criteria for this study? Are you interested in participating in the study? You will receive a stipend (two \$25 Wal-mart gift cards) for being a willing participant in this study. Feel free to ask questions about the study either prior to participating or during the time you are participating.

As the researcher, I will keep your identity completely private and only use the information I gather for this specific research. Your name will not be associated with the research findings and only the researcher will know your identity. I will assign you a pseudonym to protect your identity, and I will keep all information I gather locked in a file cabinet. Do you have any questions or concerns?

Please read, sign, and date both copies of the consent form that I will have available during the initial interview session. You will keep one copy, and I will keep one for my files. You will be interviewed twice for approximately one hour for each session. Only you and I will be involved in the interview process. Each interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. During the second interview, you will receive the transcription of the initial interview to ensure the words transcribed are those that you meant to share. This interview session will also be used to confirm and clarify information obtained during the initial interview.

Please provide me with a date, time and location most convenient for you and me to meet for the first interview. Here is my telephone number so that you may contact me if you need: 731-612-4460. Thank you, and I look forward to the potential benefits and transformations inspired by your story.

Appendix B - Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The Voices of African American Single Mothers as Potential Agents

for Change: Education for Transformative Learning

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the lived experiences of African American single mothers as learners in a post-secondary education program in the context of welfare. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are an African American single mother who resided in Tennessee while you were completing a post-secondary education program and receiving public assistance. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about ten people to do so.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is doctoral candidate, Heather Bonds, of University of Memphis Department of Leadership. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Griswold, Assistant Professor in the Department of Leadership. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to document the lived experiences of ten African American single mothers in Tennessee who have participated in a post-secondary education program while receiving public assistance.

By doing this study, we hope to learn the extent to which African American single mothers experience transformative learning while participating in a post-secondary education program.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You should not participate in this study if you are not an African American mother who was single, living in Tennessee and receiving public assistance while enrolled in a post-secondary education program.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The research procedures will be conducted at a location of your choice that will be most convenient for you and is conducive for conducting interviews. Each of the interview sessions will take about one hour thirty minutes. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is **two hours** over the next two weeks.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

I will begin collecting data by interviewing you. There will be two scheduled audio-taped interviews. During each interview, I may periodically ask you to provide clarification, if any is needed. We will engage in a conversation-like interview while you provide rich details of your experiences before you enrolled in your post-secondary education program, while you were enrolled in your program and after you completed the program. After this interview, I will transcribe the recording and complete a preliminary analysis of the data. A follow-up interview will be scheduled for the following week so that you can examine, clarify and verify accuracy of the data. You will read the transcripts to ensure that your words reflect what you intended to say. Also, you will examine the codes, themes, and descriptions from the analysis for clarification, modification, and verification.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

You may find some questions we ask you (*or some procedures we ask you to do*) to be upsetting or stressful. If so, we can tell you about some people who may be able to help you with these feelings.

In addition to the risks listed above, you may experience a previously unknown risk or side effect.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. However, some people have experienced a sense of meaning and self-worth when a space has been created so that their voices and perspectives can be heard without them being criticized, stigmatized, or discriminated against. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole better understand this research topic.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will receive a \$50.00 Wal-mart gift card for taking part in this study. This compensation will be pro-rated should you choose to withdraw early.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. Your name will not be associated with any research findings. You will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity and to be used in the research findings. All identifiable information along with the audio-recorded interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet in which I will have sole access.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Memphis.

CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons. You may take

part in this study if you are currently involved in another research study. It is important to let the investigator know if you are in another research study. You should also discuss with the investigator before you agree to participate in another research study while you are enrolled in this study.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Heather Bonds at 731-612-4460 or her advisor, Dr. Wendy Griswold at 901-678-5439. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

WHAT IF NEW INFORMATION IS LEARNED DURING THE STUDY THAT MIGHT AFFECT YOUR DECISION TO PARTICIPATE?

If the researcher learns of new information in regards to this study, and it might change your willingness to stay in this study, the information will be provided to you. You may be asked to sign a new informed consent form if the information is provided to you after you have joined the study.

What happens to my privacy if I am interviewed?

Your name will not be associated with any of your responses. You will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity and to be associated with your responses.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

Date

Appendix C- Interview Questions

- **Topic Area 1**

How have various life experiences and events contributed to the low-income African American single mothers' need to participate in a public assistance program?

1. Tell me about the time when you made the decision to apply for government assistance. **Follow-up prompt:** Describe specifically what was going on in your life. (i.e., family structure, housing, financial, education and employment experiences)
Follow-up prompt: Describe how your experiences were similar or different than those you experienced growing up at home with your parents. (i.e., family structure, housing, financial, parents' education and employment experiences)
Follow-up prompt: What were your perceptions and attitude about receiving public assistance? What seemed to be the attitude or response of your family and friends who were aware of your receiving public assistance?
2. Describe significant experiences you encountered when you applied for public assistance (i.e., social service visits, grocery store, other public places or institutions) and while you were receiving public assistance (i.e., social service visits, school/classroom, grocery stores, other public places or institutions).
Follow-up prompt: How did you respond?

- **Topic Area 2**

How do low-income African American single mothers who are participating in an adult education program while receiving public assistance make meaning of learning beyond the adult education program's curriculum?

1. Tell me about the time when you made the decision to enroll in an adult education program.
Follow-up prompt: Describe specifically what was going on in your life.
Follow-up prompt: What were your perceptions, assumptions, attitude about enrolling in an adult education program?
Follow-up prompt: Why did you choose your particular program?
Follow-up prompt: Describe the steps you took to enroll in your program.
Follow-up prompt: What barriers or challenges did you encounter? (i.e., welfare requirements, childcare, financial, personal) How did you respond to those barriers?
Follow-up prompt: Tell me about some of your experiences in the classroom that were meaningful to you. Describe your experiences outside the

classroom that were meaningful to you. What made these experiences so meaningful to you?

- **Topic Area 3**

How do low-income African American single mothers participating in an adult education program view themselves differently than prior to enrolling in the program?

1. Tell me in what ways you feel the completion of your education program has impacted your life.
Follow-up Question: Tell me what you have learned about yourself as a result of completing your program.
Follow-up Question: Describe any changes in your perspectives/beliefs and values as a result of participating in and completing your education program.
Follow-up Question: Tell me about some life changes you and your children have experienced as a result of the completion of your adult education program. How do those changes make you feel?

- **Topic Area 4**

What is the participants' hope for the future?

1. Tell me how you feel others should understand your decisions to receive public assistance and pursue and complete your education.
Follow-up Question: Tell me what you hoped your children would learn from your decisions.
Follow-up Question: Tell me how your decisions have impacted your children's perceptions, beliefs and values. (i.e., future goals)
Follow-up Question: What is your hope for other low-income African American single mothers.
Follow-up Question: Based on your experiences, if you were given the opportunity to advise policymakers and leaders on developing effective initiatives that would support low-income African American single mothers in their efforts to attain a better quality of life for themselves and their children, what would you recommend?

From: irb@memphis.edu [mailto:irb@memphis.edu]
Sent: Friday, June 22, 2018 2:17 PM
To: Heather Bonds (hsbonds) <hsbonds@memphis.edu>; Wendy Griswold (wgrswold) <wgrswold@memphis.edu>
Subject: PRO-FY2018-656 - Initial: Approval - Expedited

[REDACTED]

Institutional Review Board
Office of Sponsored Programs
University of Memphis
315 Admin Bldg
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

June 22, 2018

PI Name: Heather Bonds
Co-Investigators:
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Wendy Griswold
Submission Type: Initial
Title: The Voices of Low-income African American Single Mothers as Potential Agents for Change: Education for Transformative Learning

FW: PRO-FY2018-656 - Initial: Approval - Expedited

Page 2 of 2

IRB ID : #PRO-FY2018-656

Expedited Approval: June 22, 2018
Expiration: June 22, 2019

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. This IRB approval has an expiration date, an approved renewal must be in effect to continue the project prior to that date. If approval is not obtained, the human consent form(s) and recruiting material(s) are no longer valid and any research activities involving human subjects must stop.
2. When the project is finished or terminated, a completion form must be submitted.
3. No change may be made in the approved protocol without prior board approval.

Thank you,
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
The University of Memphis.