Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs are DOPE! However, limited research examines our lived experience and voice at the intersection of race, gender, and organizational status. This qualitative research study uses Sista Circle Methodology to investigate the challenges of this population at Historically White Institutions. Additionally, I examine the concept of "voice" relative to how they navigate these challenges. Womanist theory situated my DOPE research perspective – Deliberative, Own It!, Powerful, and Ethic of Care.

This study addressed three goals: (a) to bring Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs together to explore the ways they used their voice in their roles; (b) to provide research from the perspectives and lived experiences of this group in higher education who face unique challenges due to their mid-level roles and responsibilities; and (c) to create dialogic space where Black womxn can learn from each other. Twenty-five Black womxn mid-level administrators across various student affairs functional areas participated in five sista circles (or DOPE dialogues). These dialogues included semi-structured interview questions and media elicitation activities. Participants' narratives were analyzed using a Listening Guide tool. The findings suggest that participants' experiences were hallmarked by non-physical violence, contradiction, and complex interpersonal relationships with supervisors and colleagues. The findings also highlight participants' multidimensional understanding of voice and how they applied various approaches to voice that I aligned with my DOPE research perspective. I conclude with implications for research and practice to amplify the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

Keywords: Black Womxn, Mid-level, Student Affairs, Voice, Sista Circles

DOPE VOICES: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMXN

MID-LEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS

NAVIGATING POWER

by

Carla Cadet Fullwood

A Dissertation
Submitted to
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Approved by

Dr. Silvia C. Bettez
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dope Black womxn administrators across the academy. I hope you see yourself in this study.

APPROVAL PAGE

This Dissertation written by Carla Cadet Fullwood has been approved by the following

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

> Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. (Lorde, 2007, p. 127)

My journey towards researching Black womxn's experiences and voice in mid-level administrative roles in higher education started in the summer of 2017. I had just completed a full year of my doctoral program. This was my sixth year working as a mid-level administrator in higher education in multicultural student services with intentions to pursue advancement toward a chief diversity officer role in higher education. My initial research interest was to either explore the effectiveness of multicultural student service centers on college and university campuses or study the experiences of chief diversity officers in higher education. However, I experienced a supervision performance review that summer that shifted my perspective toward a research topic I thought to be more significant – exploring the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education.

At the time, I was working in an environment where I experienced challenges prevalent in the literature associated with mid-level administrators, specifically: limited support and powerlessness that resulted in low morale (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Hernandez, 2010; Jo, 2008; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Thompson, 2016; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011). During the meeting with my supervisor, I sought clarification about comments regarding perceptions of my performance, specifically regarding a need to focus on *how* I expressed my beliefs. I perceived these comments to be a subjective evaluation about my communication style and outside the scope of evaluating how I conducted my job responsibilities. My supervisor's response seemed to reflect their opposition to my way of asking questions about initiatives and policies implemented at the

department level. After months of working within a chilly and toxic office climate, I felt angry, misunderstood, and targeted. I recall collecting my composure and finding my best diplomatic voice before vocally responding, "Is it *the questions* I ask? *How* I ask questions? Or the fact that *I* am asking questions?"

I recognized asking more questions was probably not the approach after receiving feedback about how I expressed myself in the workplace, but that was the best way I could respond in that moment. This written feedback — provided within an official performance evaluation and thus potentially impacting both my salary and advancement opportunities — caused a strong response in me. I felt like my voice, knowledge, and experiences were silenced. After the performance review meeting, I met with a faculty mentor who gave me some advice that helped me think about the value of my voice and how to channel my anger constructively. She advised, "Shift the paradigm." After further reflection of the situation and my experiences as a Black womxn mid-level administrator, I interpreted shifting the paradigm as changing my attention from the performance review, or other administrative tactics used to silence me, to focusing on the power of my voice and the voice of other Black womxn mid-level colleagues. While I was angry, I had to figure out how to channel that anger into something productive. Cooper (2018) described Black womxn embracing the process of working through their anger and expressing themselves with focused precision after feeling invisible, bullied, or misunderstood, as tapping into a superpower of "eloquent rage" (p. 6). Reflecting on the performance review led me to think more critically about my intersecting identities as Black, womxn, and a mid-level administrator in higher education and how my voice had been silenced or suppressed as a professional. This reflection process, Cooper's concept of eloquent rage, and Lorde's words used to open this chapter helped me focus my anger with precision to develop the

research idea about the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. Our voices can be a powerful source of energy supporting progress and change.

I have experienced a lack of support, recognition, and limited decision-making authority that defines the mid-level role as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. Conducting research was my way to use my voice to address power structures, organizational hierarchy, racism, and sexism in higher education. My professional identity is rooted in addressing diversity and equity issues as a higher education administrator. I want to advance in my higher education career from a mid-level to a senior-level leadership role. However, if my voice is not heard or valued at the mid-level rank, what will guarantee my voice being heard and valued at the senior-level rank? What would be the point of advancing to a senior-level role to address inequity at higher education institutions if I did not fully understand and seek to address oppressive hierarchical structures affecting my professional experiences, or the experiences of other Black womxn mid-level administrators? How can I affect transformative change and equity education if I have to conform my behavior and communication style to hegemonic structures set up to silence me? These experiences and reflections shifted my research trajectory to better understand my experience and that of other Black womxn in the academy who face ongoing climate issues and obstacles that "hinder their full participation in and contribution to higher education" (Johnson, 2019, p. 5,). Within higher education, Black womxn are expected to perform and communicate in ways that pander to the dominant white, patriarchal norm for our voices to be heard or regarded (Collins, 2001; Cooper, 2018). I am encouraged by the words of Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper (2018) and so, in response to my former supervisor's annual review recommendation that I "must focus on how to express those beliefs in ways which can support the staff, department, and programs," I say, "Fuck all that!" (p. 215). Shifting the paradigm

prompted me to investigate how Black womxn navigate within and against power dynamics and silencing tactics influencing our professional experiences at the mid-level rank. More specifically, I want to learn and understand how we use our voices to address and potentially transform higher education dynamics.

Problem Statement

Black womxn mid-level administrators have significant roles in higher education. However, the experiences and challenges of Black womxn in mid-level administrative roles are not thoroughly examined in existing research. Many existing studies about Black womxn on college or university campuses center on those who identify as undergraduate or graduate students, faculty, or those in senior-level leadership roles. There is a greater need for attention to the accounts of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. There is an opportunity to increase representation about the experiences of Black womxn, specifically at the mid-level administrative rank, in current research and how we are navigating within the professional border spaces shaped by systems of hierarchy, racism, and sexism.

The concept of "voice" as it relates to Black womxn in higher education, particularly those in mid-level administrative roles, remains unexamined in current research. Collins (2001) stated, "Even though Black women have made significant gains in education, they still struggle for their voice to be heard in the chilly environment of the academy" (p. 30). What is meant by "voice" in this context? Some literature alludes to raising awareness about the figurative and literal "voice" of Black womxn in the academy (Hope, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Miles, 2012, Wright & Salinas, 2016). I reflect on my experience with the performance appraisal and believe "voice" is a combination of several factors: what is expressed,

why it's expressed, in what context it's expressed, how it's expressed, and who (Black womxn) is expressing it.

The lack of literature about the experiences and narratives of Black womxn mid-level administrators is an example of silencing. There is an opportunity to understand how this group is navigating marginalizing and silencing work environments in higher education. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to explore what is meant by voice and the diverse ways in which Black womxn mid-level administrators embody this concept while navigating systems of hierarchy, racism, and sexism in higher education. The opportunities to further understand how Black womxn mid-level administrators are navigating their work environments and how we use voice in our roles informs the purpose of the study.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I investigated the experiences and challenges of Black womxn who were also mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWI). My intention was to understand how this population navigates the everyday realities of their role. Additionally, I examined the concept of "voice" relative to this population. The literature describes "voice" as a multidimensional phenomenon in which people can have agency and power depending on who uses their voices, how voices are used, and why voices are used (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1993; Hankerson, 2017; Henry, 1998; hooks, 2015; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Scott, 2013; Seale, 2010; Stanback, 1988; Templeton et al., 2019).

I had three goals in conducting this study: (a) bringing Black womxn mid-level administrators together to explore the ways they used voice in their roles; (b) providing research from the perspectives and lived experiences of a specific group of Black womxn in higher

education who face unique challenges due to their mid-level roles and responsibilities; and (c) creating dialogic space where Black womxn can learn from each other and then also share that learning with others, including leaders who help shape the climate that Black womxn mid-level administrators are navigating.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions face?

   a. What creates these challenges?

   b. How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy?

2. How do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

Delimitations of Study

The scope of this study was narrowed to focus on Black womxn who are mid-level administrators in student affairs units in higher education. This decision to narrow the scope followed Henry's (2010) "call to decouple, examine and honor the distinctive contributions [of] unique subgroups and subcultures within academia" (p. 2). Black womxn appeared to be overrepresented at the mid-level of the organizational hierarchy in student affairs, yet studies about their experiences are limited (West, 2020). This overrepresentation was also relevant to me as a researcher who worked in student affairs functional areas in higher education for about 18 years. According to Hope (2019), Black womxn faculty, administrators, and staff navigating oppressive campus cultures are more prevalent at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). This

study focused on Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs functional areas at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWI). PWI is a more commonly used institutional category, and PWI and HWI could be used interchangeably in many cases. However, I used HWI in this study because it more accurately reflected the structural elements of higher education institutions. These structural elements include "the historical and contemporary racialized infrastructure that is in place, the current racial campus culture and ecology, and how these modern-day institutions still benefit Whites at the expense of Blacks and other groups of color" (Smith et al., 2007, p. 574). I assert the infrastructure of HWIs also has historical roots in sexist, hierarchal, and other hegemonic practices.

Terminology

This study used the following definitions for terms:

- **Black**. The U.S. Census (2020) defines a Black person as "having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" (para. 3). For this study's purpose, the outreach for participants will include racial AND ethnic origins in the African diaspora (e.g., African American, Caribbean-American, and African immigrants living in the U.S.).

- **Womxn**. For this study and throughout this manuscript, womxn (2023) is spelled with an "x" instead of the traditional spelling woman/women. This action reflected my intention to be inclusive of representation across complex intersecting identities based on race, gender, and sexuality, including cisgender women, transgender women, gender non-conforming, and non-binary (Key, 2017). The traditional spelling of woman/women was used in direct quote citations of other scholars, research participants and other sources.

- **Student affairs**. Student affairs referred to student-facing units that provide out-of-classroom learning and development support. Appendix A lists 39 traditional student affairs functional areas in higher education (NASPA, 2023).

- **Mid-level administrators**. For this study, a mid-level administrator referred to a combination of factors: (a) a non-faculty staff person who directly reports to, or is one level removed from, a senior-level officer and oversees at least one student affairs function (Fey & Carpenter, 1996); (b) administrators who worked in the student affairs field for more than five years (ACPA, 2018; NASPA, 2020); and (c) staff with titles of assistant, associate, or director.

- **Historically White Institutions (HWI).** For this study, HWI is a description of colleges and universities where the current enrollment of white students is 50% or higher. This term also describes higher education institutions with the historical and contemporary racialized infrastructure (Smith et al., 2007).

Significance of the Study

Black womxn's lived experiences and existence at HWIs directly conflict with the dominant cultural norm of institutions originally built to educate and empower white, elite, [cisgender] men (Collins, 2001; Wallace et al., 2020). Despite the racist and sexist roots in greater society and U.S. higher education, Black womxn's access and contributions as administrators have increased over the past century. Black womxn mid-level administrators play a significant role in providing services and managing key initiatives, but our challenges and voice are not recognized, heard, or studied. In the first part of this section, I discussed the significance of understanding the specific experiences and challenges of Black womxn mid-level administrators while navigating within HWIs. It was also imperative to understand what was

meant by "voice" for the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education to be heard, centered, understood, and valued. In the second part of this section, I illustrated the use of voice by Black womxn in other sectors of society and how voice is framed in current literature. These examples were used to demonstrate how voice was conceptualized in relation to Black womxn mid-level administrators.

Overview of Challenges

Black womxn have long been present in higher education — as students, faculty, and administrators. The fact that we exist in the academy and advance academically and professionally contradicts the original purpose of higher education institutions (Collins, 2001; Henry 2010; Zamani, Wallace et al., 2020). Black womxn continue to experience a range of personal and professional challenges, even though they "have been participating in American higher education for more than a century and have certainly made great strides towards occupying their rightful place within academia" (Henry & Glenn, 2009, p. 2). Black womxn, specifically in administrative roles, face institutional barriers such as limited support, devaluation, isolation, powerlessness, and marginalization due to racism, sexism, and sometimes organizational status (Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Logan & Dudley, 2019). Although resilient and able to advance in their careers despite the obstacles, these challenges are often difficult to navigate, they impact salary and morale, and even dissuade some Black womxn administrators from continuing further in the field. Such obstacles have discouraged some Black womxn from being productive and invested in their institutions (Henry & Glenn, 2009; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Logan & Dudley, 2019). We constantly work within and against power structures such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and institutional hierarchy while attempting to achieve our full potential within our jobs. While current publications reveal these challenges about Black womxn in

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administration broadly, there is not adequate information about challenges faced by Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education.

Black womxn mid-level administrators have significant roles in higher education. Learning about their experiences and challenges can be beneficial to other Black womxn mid-level administrators and those with decision making powers within respective institutions. First, there is the value attributed to the mid-level administrator role. Mid-level administrators are described as being the largest administrative group in colleges and universities who have significant roles in executing essential functions, policies, and initiatives that uphold the institution's academic mission (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Hernandez, 2010; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2000, 2004; Young Jr., 2017). Mid-level administrators are also presented as having a positive influence on the experiences of faculty, staff, students, and other internal and external stakeholders on campuses (Rosser 2000; Young Jr., 2017). However, mid-level administrators often work in chilly environments where they experience a lack of support, lack of recognition, powerlessness, and limits on the opportunity for professional development or advancement, which contribute to low morale and job dissatisfaction. Secondly, there is value placed on being a Black womxn administrator. Black womxn in administrative roles are vital on university and college campuses, and institutions with goals of increasing the enrollment numbers of Black students benefit from their presence. The increase of recruitment, enrollment, retention, and completion rates of Black students are often linked to mentorship and role modeling by Black administrators and faculty working at PWIs (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). I recognize this perspective can be exploitative. This effect on enrollment demonstrates how colleges and universities with espoused commitments to diversity and equity commodify the "outsider-within" status Black womxn often experience. Collins (2009) defines the outsider-within location as the border space in which Black womxn are

situated when working in white-centric and male-dominated spaces, while still experiencing marginalization and not having their knowledge or experiences considered. The presence of Black womxn administrators positively affecting the experiences of Black students is reflected in some of the literature. Black womxn's presence and contributions are just as significant to other campus constituents when situated at the mid-level rank. Most of the current literature focuses on the struggles of Black womxn administrators in leadership roles, with no attention to organizational rank. The challenges encountered include isolation, marginalization, and tokenism Black womxn administrators experience in their work environment (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West 2015).

Black womxn face challenges no matter where we are situated within higher education. However, I focused specifically on Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs for this research. The student affairs field is a focal point because commitments to diversity, pluralism, equity, and inclusion are often emphasized in this functional area (Burke & Carter, 2015). However, the challenges of feeling powerless, isolated, tokenized and marginalized do not match these values. Black womxn staff and administrators in student affairs are essential to student recruitment, retention, and learning, and they provide collegial support (West, 2020). Although the contributions of Black womxn mid-level administrators are recognized, they may have experiences that contradict the values of equity and inclusion adopted by student affairs functional areas or universities as a whole. These experiences include inequitable pay, limited opportunities for career advancement, and racism in the workplace (West, 2020). These experiences are compounded when considering the organizational hierarchy's complex power dynamics for mid-level administrative roles in student affairs.

Mid-level student affairs administrators have some positional power by supervising entry-level staff and having earned graduate degrees. However, they are often invisible, or

devalued and disrespected, or have little to no decision-making power in their positions (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Belch & Strange, 1995; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Hernandez, 2010; Jo, 2008; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Thompson, 2016; Young, 2007). Exploring the complexities at the intersection of race, gender, and professional role was critical for this study. It was significant to examine how Black womxn mid-level administrators worked within professional spaces filled with these challenges. Senior-level administrators can learn more about the value and significance of Black womxn mid-level administrators to reduce or eliminate barriers that make them invisible, inhibit their ability to contribute knowledge and feedback, or prohibit them from making decisions in their roles. Black womxn in mid-level administrative roles can empower each other and share insight to actively address racist, sexist, and hierarchical power dynamics that reduce their full and authentic organizational structure participation. Learning about how Black womxn mid-level administrators use their voice can contribute to understanding their challenges, and how they can empower and learn from each other.

Overview of Voice

hooks (2015) highlights the powerful potential of voice when she writes, "When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone anywhere who lives in silence" (p. 18). According to hooks, voice is a liberatory tool that can allow us to connect with others and break free from our own silence. Such is the potential of voice concerning Black womxn as mid-level administrators in student affairs.

Around the same time as I was experiencing my performance evaluation in the summer of 2017, Congressional hearings with the Secretary of the Treasury on the International Financial System took place. About 30 minutes into the hearing, U.S. Representative Maxine Waters asked the U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin why he or his office had not responded to

correspondence sent from Waters' office in May about the 45th President's financial connections to Russia. Mnuchin, a white man, began his response by giving Waters, a Black womxn, platitudes and appreciation for her service in Congress. Mnuchin's actions were interpreted in the media as a tactic to run out the clock on her time for questioning. Waters proceeded to redirect Mnuchin to respond directly to her question by repeating the phrase "reclaiming my time," appealing to the U.S. House of Representatives floor procedures regarding questioning and debate (Emba, 2017). "Reclaiming my time" were three simple words that had a strong impact on Black America. In a *Washington Post* opinion piece, Emba (2017) wrote:

> For many women and people of color, the phrase "reclaiming my time" felt particularly poignant, with the idea of reclamation specifically speaking to both the present and the past. Society has been wasting not only their time but also their *voices* [emphasis added], agency and potential, for years. (para. 6)

This persistent act by Rep. Waters had a profound impact on me as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. Tactics — interrupting, patronizing statements, and avoiding the question — such as those enacted by Mnuchin were direct attempts at strategically silencing a Black womxn. Waters' act of speaking and the words she used exemplified how Black womxn can use their voice within their roles to resist these tactics used across different sociocultural contexts, including higher education.

Fast forward to the 2020 election season and the Vice-Presidential debate between former Vice President Michael Pence and current Vice President Kamala Harris. Former Senator Harris—a half-Black and half-South Asian womxn—stated assertively, "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking….I'm speaking. If you don't mind letting me finish, we can have a conversation," in response to Pence's attempts to interrupt her. This experience is all too familiar to most Black womxn. Memes of this moment exploded on social media. In another *Washington Post* opinion piece, Attiah (2020) wrote:

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Americans love to make empowering memes and sound bites showing powerful Black women fighting to reclaim their time, and yet time and space are sometimes the last thing America wants us to have, even when we play by the rules. (para. 8)

It was not only *how* Vice President Harris verbally and non-verbally expressed herself that caught my attention, but *who* she is as a Black-identified womxn asserting her knowledge and thoughts as a Vice-Presidential candidate. This debate interaction captured the essence and complexity of Black womxn's voices, which I wanted to unpack with this research. What does it mean to be a Black womxn at the mid-level administrative rank in higher education? How do Black womxn mid-level administrators use their voice when in situations with people who support or are supported by oppressive dominant power structures and are overtly or covertly attempting to silence them? What are the examples of these situations for Black womxn in mid-level administrative roles in student affairs functional areas?

Scholars across various academic disciplines have examined the complex phenomenon of voice (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1993; hooks, 2015; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Moore & Muller, 1999; Scott, 2013; Stanback, 1988). In Chapter II, I explored various understandings of voice in the literature review. There is a combination of four components that I connected specifically to Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs functional areas:

- Identity: whose voice, who has agency with voice, and how voice creates and is created by identity (such as Black womxnhood);

- Content: what thoughts, expressions, or experiences are communicated as subject matter;

- Context: why thoughts/experiences/subject matter are communicated, where thoughts are communicated - the physical and social conditions of the environment that supports or prevents the message from being shared; and

- Process: how content and context are communicated.

I selected these four components because I understood them as the four main themes of voice reflected in the literature. Figure 1 illustrates my interpretation of the relationship between these components of "voice" connected to the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Voice

CONTEXT
Where is voice used, Who is voice used with; The physical and social conditions of the environment that supports or prevents the message to be shared

IDENTITY:
Whose voice?
Voice creates or created by identity;
Black womxn as subject

PROCESS: Non-Verbal

PROCESS: Verbal

PROCESS: Silence

CONTENT:
What is [is not] communicated, Knowledge, thoughts, expressions, or experiences communicated as subject matter

CONTEXT:
Purpose of using voice; Why is voice is used? Why is subject matter communicated?

Women Silhouette Vector #1630240 [clipart image]. (n.d.).

Fullwood, 2023

By investigating the complexity of Black womxn's voices, I provided a deeper understanding of the unique ways they navigate power structures in the workplace. Examining this population's voice and experiences through my research lens highlighted these unheard narratives within higher education administration. Additionally, using Womanist theory as my framework for the study supported how I approached the research process to understand the lived experiences and challenges of Black womxn mid-level administrators through their own voice and lens.

Theoretical Framework

Womanism as a Black womxn's standpoint theory is the theoretical framework that guided this study on Black womxn mid-level administrators. Collins (2009) defines standpoint theory as:

> A social theory arguing that group location in hierarchical power relations produces common challenges for individuals in those groups. Moreover, shared experiences can foster a similar angle of vision leading to group knowledge or standpoint deemed essential for informed political action. (p. 321)

For centuries, Black womxn have experienced oppression in society through the interlocking power structures based on race, gender, and class (De Loach & Young, 2014). These experiences offer a unique perspective to understanding self, others, and society at large. Using a Womanist lens helped me recognize how Black womxn differed from each other, Black men, and white womxn when making meaning and responding to their experiences. Womanism as a framework supported my research goal to examine the lived experience and voice through the convergence of three identity categories — Black, womxn, and mid-level administrators in higher education. Through a Womanist lens, I acknowledged that Black womxn in mid-level administrators had unique singular experiences about their perceptions and use of voices in their role. Informed by this framework, I created space to acknowledge the value of this population's collective construction, understanding, and analysis of their self-defined standpoint.

Interpreting Womanist Perspectives

Novelist and social activist Alice Walker is recognized as coining the term "Womanist". The term first appears in her short story "Coming Apart," published in 1979. Womanism's specific characteristics are defined in her later book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (See Appendix B; 1983). I interpreted Walker's definition of Womanism as aligning with three central ideas significant to this study: (a) Black womxn's subjugated knowledge is a worthwhile form of meaning making in the academy; (b) Black womxn's unique

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use of voice to address power dynamics is legitimate; and (c) Black womxn's consciousness is often rooted in critical emancipation.

Subjugated Knowledge is Valid Knowledge

Black womxn's subjugated knowledge is an acceptable form of knowledge construction and production in research and academia. To say this plainly and informally: Black womxn be knowin'! Who we are and what we know is significant. However, practices and academic research paradigms in higher education institutions often privilege knowledge validation processes representing a white male standpoint (Collins, 2003). Black womxn's knowledge and standpoint are not traditionally regarded in the same way. I interpret Walker's (Appendix B; 1983) idea of acting Womanish as stating Black womxn always have the ability to contribute to and navigate within spaces that are not inclusive of our epistemological understanding. These spaces are often influenced by racism, sexism, and hierarchy. De Loach and Young (2014) explain that "Womanism seeks to celebrate the power inherent in Black women's ability to negotiate subjugated spatial locations including that within academe and ideological discourse in general" (p. 2083). Through my use of this framework, I centered Black womxn mid-level administrators' experiences in research and the significance of learning how they navigate systems and processes that suppress innate forms of knowing in higher education. Applying a Womanist lens in research helps me identify the lived experiences of Black womxn and the practical approaches to resistance and interruption of power dynamics they enact in their environment.

Black Womxn's Use of Voice Addresses Power Dynamics

Black womxn's unique use of voice to address power dynamics is legitimate. How we navigate and resist marginalizing structures is significant. Womanism situates the "everyday" in

Black womxn's resistance activities (Phillips, 2006). According to Phillips (2006), the concept of

the "everyday" is related to a feature of womanism they termed *vernacular*. Phillips explains:

> Vernacular identifies womanism with "the everyday" – everyday people and everyday
> life…Womanist views gross differentials in power and resources as highly problematic
> because they contribute to dehumanization and interfere with individual and collective
> wellbeing. (p. xxiv)

In other words, how Black womxn communicate or act, in their everyday home community lives,

may not always align with forms of communication and behaviors considered respectable on

college and university campuses. The social conditions within higher education settings are

created to reproduce, support, and reward docile bodies that do not challenge white supremacy,

elitism, and sexism (Wallace et al., 2020). Black womxn may be silenced by conscious and

unconscious practices embodied by others who are socially conditioned to perform as docile

bodies. As a result, some Black womxn may feel forced to perform or communicate in ways that

align with hegemonic norms (or may not do or say anything at all) as a way of self-preservation.

Some other Black womxn may resist this level of performativity by considering the idea of using

"everyday" vernacular to address or challenge power dynamics. I do not suggest that all Black

womxn are always looking to communicate or assert themselves in any which way. Rather, I

suggest that some Black womxn who operate under the concept of the "everyday" vernacular

may engage and address power structures differently when navigating within their higher

education roles — different from each other and different from the formal structures of higher

education. I think these unique differences utilized by Black womxn are legitimate approaches to

address power dynamics.

Critical Emancipation Often Grounds Black Womxn's Consciousness

Black womxn's consciousness is often rooted in critical emancipation. Kincheloe (2007)

stated, "Those who seek emancipation attempt to gain the power to control their own lives in

solidarity with a justice-oriented community" (p. 21). Why we navigate and resist marginalizing structures is significant. Walker (Appendix B; 1983) explains that Womanists have love for themselves and are also committed to the holistic survival of others in their community. Likely, Black womxn who use their voice or take action to resist power structures are doing so for themselves, while also understanding it will help support other marginalized or unheard communities. Black womxn mid-level administrators connected with various communities at their institutions — students, faculty, staff, alumni, senior and entry levels, community partners — have a unique vantage point. Learning about how this population navigates within and against power structures in the academy can benefit student affairs areas and universities that often promote commitments to equity and inclusion.

Situating my study within a Womanist framework allowed me to further understand the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. Walker (Appendix B; 1983) offers a definition of Womanism that I aligned with three central ideas significant to this study: (a) Black womxn's ways of knowing is a legitimate source of knowledge production and construction in a world that often subjugates their ideas; (b) Black womxn's use of voice grounded in the "everyday" can be a valid form of resistance against hegemonic norms in higher education; and (c) Black womxn's consciousness is often rooted in critical emancipation which informs the purpose for resisting power structures and addressing concerns that affect marginalized or silenced communities. Womanist theory grounded my research goals to center the perspectives of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education when investigating their experiences. Womanism as a research lens supported creating a space where Black womxn mid-level administrators shared ideas to empower each other and transform institutions to be more inclusive.

Womanism and Black Feminism

Walker's (Appendix B; 1983) definition of Womanism links it to the concept of Black Feminism. There are varying perspectives about the interchangeable use of Womanist and Black Feminist (Collins, 1996; DeLoach & Young, 2014; Phillips, 2006; Taliaferro Baszile et al., 2016). Womanism has similar features to Black Feminism in at least three ways: (a) emphasizing how Black womxn navigate multiple interlocking systems of oppression rooted in racism, sexism, and classism; (b) situating lived experiences as ways of knowing and meaning-making while navigating the world; and (c) staying grounded in a culture of resistance. While there are similarities, a distinguishing factor significant to me as a researcher is Womanism's emphasis on the "everyday" vernacular. I perceived Black Feminist theorizing to be often associated with formal academic studies or sociopolitical activism (Collins, 2009; Hull et al., 2016; Taliaferro Baszile et al., 2016). From my perspective, Womanism's "everyday" nature was inclusive of Black womxn's subjectivities across formal and informal settings. Womanism is a framework that allowed for practical, accessible analysis and applications along with scholarly, academic applications (Phillips, 2006). "By maintaining its autonomy outside established intellectual and political structures, Womanism has preserved its accessibility to a broad spectrum of people from diverse walks of life and retained its ability to flourish 'beneath the radar'" (p. xxi). The current literature describes how Black womxn in higher education are often silenced, isolated, and made invisible by their working environments' power dynamics. Although this study was conducted as part of academic research activity, I am a higher education practitioner who thinks there are opportunities to apply a practical lens when investigating the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. This study can contribute to developing practical

approaches to interrupting systems influenced by white supremacy, elitism, and patriarchy such that their authentic voices are amplified rather than silenced.

Positionality

It is essential to be self-reflexive about my researcher positionality because, as Bettez (2014) explained, "Our positionalities – how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, and our experiences – influence how we approach knowledge, what we know, and what we believe we know" (pp. 934-935). My positionality includes: I am a Black, Afro-Caribbean, cisgender womxn working in higher education for about 18 years, with over 12 years of experience as a mid-level administrator. My lived experiences varied, both positively and negatively, as a professional. Some positive experiences included opportunities for professional development, networking, and the satisfaction of producing successful initiatives and services that gained institutional or national recognition. My negative experiences included being administratively silenced, marginalized and tokenized in a system that promotes patriarchy and white supremacy despite having the best intentions of these systems to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. I have also observed contrary dynamics between other Black womxn mid-level administrators working in higher education. These experiences and observations drove my research interest in Black womxn mid-level administrators' experiences and the power structures they navigate.

I was also interested in learning how Black womxn mid-level administrators used their voice within their roles in college and university settings. This interest stemmed from my own attempts to make meaning of my voice. As a professional, I have always had to pay attention to how I sound. As a Haitian-American from New York currently living in the South, I experienced aspects of my voice being reveled or scrutinized. I have confidently facilitated presentations, and

knowledgably responded to questions in group settings only to be met with the infamous "Where are you from?" question; I have discovered that the listener was so caught up in my accent that they lost or ignored my content. Perhaps the New Yorker in me informs my direct, matter-of-fact approach to asking questions or stating observations that were met with resistance in my new Southern regional context. Early in my professional career, I developed and started providing a short disclaimer describing where I am from and acknowledging what people may hear. I did this after noticing how often individuals focused on my accent, candor, tone of voice, or speech colloquialisms. My disclaimer signals to listeners how my Haitian and New Yorker identities influence my speech and delivery. I hoped this disclaimer helped people stay focused on what I say rather than how I spoke.

I learned that no matter what disclaimer I created, my voice was perceived as how others thought I felt despite what I said. I had my job performance critiqued based on interpretations of emotion (perceived as angry, upset, frustrated, etc.) because of how I communicated instead of being evaluated for how I carried out my job responsibilities, which in turn did make me angry, upset, or frustrated. These misperceptions upset me because I would describe my communication style as direct, or matter-of-fact, yet on numerous occasions, this style of communicating is interpreted negatively, especially coming from a Black womxn. There is an [Instagram video](#) that reflects this type of experience where a Black womxn calmly states, "I'm not mad. I'm not sad. I'm not upset. I'm not tired. I'm not annoyed. I'm not ignoring you. When I have something to say, I talk. When I don't have anything to say, I don't talk. That's it"(@fearless_and_formidable, 2021). When considering my voice as content — my thoughts or perspective on a subject matter — I experienced my voice being both celebrated and challenged after speaking up about concerns, which is an interesting paradox. I experienced the frustration of delivering a message

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and navigating people who resist what I say, only to then have that frustration intensified when colleagues approached me after a meeting to show me "support" in agreement. I think, "Why didn't you speak up at the meeting, then?" I have silently engaged in internal dialogues about *how* to say something that will be received well by others to the extent that the moment has passed to deliver the message. I have verbally delivered my message and been ignored, then noticed colleagues of other genders, races, or higher organizational rank express the same thing and have their message accepted and valued. Like, really? I have experienced exhaustion based on these preceding examples, which has led to my silence and internally reciting the mantra, "Not today[1]," or biting my tongue when I really want to say, "I told you all this was going to happen a month ago!"

The hegemonic culture of colleges and universities do not always align with Black womxn's standpoints. As a Black woman and first-generation American, my cultural beliefs, behaviors, and communication practices often conflict with higher education's dominant cultural norms. However, we have to find ways to navigate within, and sometimes against, these structures while being our authentic selves. This work is personal for me. At the same time, as a researcher, I recognize this study is not just about me. It is essential to consider other narratives that were similar and different, especially if my interest was to center Black womxn's collective voices. My experiences informed why understanding the experiences and voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators matter to me, why our narratives matter in general within higher education settings and in research studies. My main purpose for conducting this study was to provide research from the perspectives and lived experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators. I intended to design, conduct, and share research that is practical and accessible

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[1]   I have this [sticker](#) on my laptop surface that I look at for comfort when engaging in this internal dialogue.

and present the intricate ways systems of power and everyday White supremacy operate in these womxn's lives.….while f**king some sh*t up.

Reflexivity

Pillow (2003) discussed the recognition of self as an effective reflexive strategy when engaging in qualitative research. Similarly, I found it essential to think about and question who I am and the assemblages of my identities, experiences, and related assumptions as I conducted this study. Assemblages are "a series of dispersed but mutually implicated messy networks [that] allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities" (Puar, as cited by Bettez, 2014). Engaging in self-reflexivity helped me realize my interactions have varied across institutional (i.e., public, private) and geographical settings (i.e., Northeast, Midwest, South). My identity as a Black, Afro-Caribbean person is just one narrative of many under the Black and African diaspora. My experiences as a cisgender woman may not be the same as others on the gender spectrum. While I identify as a mid-level administrator, the categorization and experiences of individuals at this level vary. Scholars have defined this role based on positionality within an organizational structure, job title, years of service within the profession, or job functions (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2000, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Reflecting on my assemblages forced me to critically consider the complexity of my reality based on race and gender and how my reality informs my lens when analyzing existing literature and understanding potential participants' lived experiences.

Subjectivity

My personal and professional experiences in higher education and unapologetic love of Black womxnhood informed my research subjectivity. I think we are Dope!! This word is an

urban expression I use when I recognize something to be unique, positive, or adds value of some kind. I do not name any and everything as "Dope." However, my perspective and assumptions made about Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education were based on my experiences and the observations made while interacting with other Black womxn in these roles in student affairs functional areas and across higher education. These observations and relationships helped me conceptualize DOPE as an acronym that describes us as:

1. **Deliberative:** Black womxn have a distinct consciousness and moral capacity to understand self and self in relation to others and their environment when taking action. This consciousness is often rooted in how Black womxn critically think about and contextualize their existence through the lens of race, class, and gender (Brock, 2005). This understanding was important to me because this process of knowing and being informs the unique ways Black womxn mid-level administrators pay attention to the world around us. We have vision, knowledge, and wisdom. "Knowledge allows Black women to understand the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression. Wisdom affords Black women the tools needed to survive in this system and is essential to the survival of those subordinated by hegemonic forces" (Brock, 2005, p. 23).

2. **Own It!:** I use this urban colloquialism to describe how Black womxn mid-level administrators have a sense of personal responsibility for our actions and communications. This perspective was important to me as it demonstrates that the Womanist perspective of being willful can coexist with being responsible and serious. I think Black womxn mid-level administrators' voices and contributions can be both personal and credible.

3. **Powerful:** Black womxn mid-level administrators can define our reality and reclaim power when working in spaces and environments not created for us. It can be difficult to navigate within hegemonic power structures in higher education. However, as Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us, "Your silence will not protect you" (p. 41). Through this study I acknowledged the courage and audacious spirit of Black womxn and recognized the authority we have when using our voice as a source of power.

4. **Ethic of Care:** For this research, this idea was important because it addressed some of the nuances of "voice" I explored concerning Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. Collins (2003) states, "the ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (p. 62). The emphasis on individual uniqueness and expressing empathy (Collins, 2003) is particularly significant to the multidimensional nature of Black womxn's "voice" and what sets us apart when navigating the academy in the mid-level administrative roles.

Although I think Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs functional areas are DOPE, I recognized that affirmation may not be a universal perspective. I give a nod to Zora Neale Hurston, who succinctly captured this recognition when she said, "All my skinfolk ain't kinfolk;" I understand there are individual Black womxn mid-level administrators who act in ways that promote oppressive power structures within and outside of the academy. However, as a collective, I think Black womxn have a lot to offer, especially while occupying mid-level administrative roles.

<h3 align="center">Research Paradigm</h3>

I situated this study in a postmodern paradigm. Bhattacharya (2017) described postmodern feminism as offering critiques of modernist discourses embedded in patriarchy that

affect how we understand and take up various subject positions in our everyday lives. This study centered Black womxn mid-level administrators as subjects and addressed the hegemonic and patriarchal norms that influence the oppressive, hierarchical environment navigated by Black womxn mid-level administrators. A postmodern paradigm allowed me to reveal the effect of power structures in higher education on Black womxn mid-level administrators from their perspectives and consider how these structures affected how this population performed or navigated within their roles. A postmodern paradigm was compatible with a womanist perspective. Both helped me problematize and deconstruct dominant grand narratives and focus on linguistics and speech, which is significant to a study focused on voice (Ford, 2005; Phillips, 2006). As a researcher, I connected with the idea that "Womanism is postmodernism at street level" (Phillips, 2006).

Conclusion

In this study, I explored how Black womxn mid-level administrators navigated power dynamics in higher education. Additionally, I learned how this population used their voice to address and potentially transform these dynamics in their roles. Mid-level administrators and Black womxn administrators are described as having essential roles on colleges and university campuses. However, the literature describes how these communities' experiences are riddled with challenges rooted in hierarchy, racism, and sexism.

In Chapter II, I presented a literature review expanding on factors that categorized experiences of mid-level administrators (across race and gender representation) and Black womxn administrators (across hierarchical levels) and revealed the scarcity of published works about the intersections of those identities. In the literature review, I also contextualized the concept of voice and expanded on the significance of this concept to Black womxn when

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navigating power dynamics in the academy. I designed this study to explore the connection

between voice and how Black womxn mid-level administrators navigated power structures in

their roles. The study was informed by a Womanist framework. This framework, coupled with a

postmodern paradigm, was important to this study because it helped me center Black womxn's

standpoint, recognizing this is everchanging. This research perspective also helped me

problematize how power and identity issues were often examined through a dominant research

perspective.

In Chapter III, I described my research methods and expanded on how Womanism

informed my research lens. I also made connections to popular culture references and "everyday"

colloquialism to keep this research accessible. Womanism helped give me direction to conduct

this study with my whole, authentic self. I also outlined the research plan and discussed how my

methods and analysis were grounded in the Womanist framework.

In Chapter IV, I presented the biographies of my participants. Guided by a Womanist

perspective, I decided to center the voices and experiences of my participants in a separate

chapter to amplify their narratives. I responded to Research Questions one and two in Chapters V

and VI, respectively. In Chapter V, I presented three themes reflecting challenges faced by

participants at both institutional and interpersonal levels: (a) Voicing Violence; (b) Voicing

Contradictions; and (c) Voicing Complex Communities. In Chapter VI, I presented five themes.

One theme was Multidimensional Voice, which described participants layered understanding of

voice as Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs. I presented four

additional themes about participants' use of voice to navigate challenging experiences informed

by dominant power structures in the workplace: (a) Deliberative Voice; (b) Owning Voice! (c)

Powerful Voice; and (d) Voicing an Ethic of Care. Lastly, in Chapter VII, I discussed my

findings, outlined implications for future research, and made recommendations for Black womxn

mid-level administrators and other higher education practitioners.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

"At this point, I thought of myself basically as trilingual. I knew the relaxed patois of the South Side and the high-minded diction of the Ivy League, and now on top of that I spoke Lawyer, too" (Michelle Obama, 2018, p. 94)

Like Michelle Obama early in her career, some Black womxn in administrative roles in higher education are often navigating chilly work environments (Collins, 2001). Navigating these spaces can inform how Black womxn mid-level administrators see themselves, how they interact with their environment, and their communication strategies and behaviors in the workplace. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs and understand how this population navigates the everyday realities, including challenges, informed by oppressive power structures rooted in racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy. In addition, this study aims to examine the concept of "voice" to explore the narratives of Black womxn who are mid-level administrators in student affairs.

The purpose of this literature review is to develop an understanding of the current research regarding the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in preparation for addressing the following research questions:

1. What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWIs) face?

   a. What creates these challenges?

   b. How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy?

2. How do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

This review is organized into three sections. The first section provides information about how mid-level administration is defined and the variations of how mid-level administrative roles and functions manifest across higher education institutions. Clarifying the definition of mid-level administration proved pertinent to frame the understanding of the experiences of womxn, Black and African American people, and collectively Black womxn at this level. The second section discusses factors that categorize the specific experiences of Black womxn administrators, with some comparisons to mid-level administrators in higher education broadly. The third section examines the multi-dimensional definitions of voice and how understanding the complexity of this concept can support how we understand the lived experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. Finally, I summarize my research goals to explore the connections between these topic areas and expand on research about Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education.

Mid-level Administrators in Higher Education: The Untold Story

Higher education administrators are the largest population employed on campuses, with over 600,000 non-teaching professional staff employed in over 4000 accredited institutions (Jo, 2008). Administrators at the mid-level rank are present and accounted for within these numbers, noted as the largest administrative group within colleges and university systems, and their representation continues to increase (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009). Mid-level administrators play an integral role in the operation of colleges and universities. They are presented as loyal and dedicated staff who interact with students, entry-level and senior-level professionals, faculty, and the public (Scott, as cited in Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2004). Rosser (2000) stated, "Midlevel administrators are the advisors, analysts, counselors, specialists, technicians, and officers on whom faculty and students have come to rely

and trust" (p. 7). Mid-level administrators are essential and dedicated staff who juggle multiple responsibilities outside their job description while working with students, entry-level and senior-level professionals, faculty, alums, and the community (Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2004). However, higher education scholars clarify a need for more literature about mid-level administrators (Hernandez, 2010; Rosser, 2000; Thompson, 2016). Scholars like Johnsrud and Rosser (2000) stated that this group is "virtually ignored in higher education literature" (p. 1). Belch and Strange (1995) also claim there seems to be more research on new professionals and senior-level administrators in student affairs than those at the mid-level.

There is evidence that mid-level administrators are essential in higher education and make up a significant portion of college and university campus personnel, particularly those who work in student affairs (Young Jr., 2007). Mid-level administrators play a growing role in student affairs yet are not often studied (Belch, Strange, 1995; James, 2019; Mather et al., 2009). James (2019) discusses a meta-analysis of 30 years of research on student affairs, showing that only 13% of the research focused on mid-level professionals. Literature about mid-level administrators in student affairs functional areas, and broadly in higher education, exist, yet they need to be more extensive and updated. Within the literature, scholars have defined the mid-level role as based on positionality within an organizational structure, job title, years of service within the profession, or job functions (Adams et al., 2019; James, 2019; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2000, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

Stuck in the Middle: Organizational Positionality

Robert A. Scott's 1980 publication, *Lords, squires, and yeomen: Collegiate middle-managers in the U.S.*, is noted as one of the first comprehensive texts focusing on mid-level administrators in higher education (Hernandez, 2010; Huelskamp, 2018; Rosser, 2000;

Thompson, 2016). Scott compared mid-level administrators to lords, squires, and yeomen who are bookended by peasants or nobles in the English middle-class hierarchy. Mid-level administrators are between entry-level and senior-level staff in current higher education systems (Hernandez, 2010; Johnsrud et al., 2000). Current literature discusses individuals who serve in a mid-level role as stuck in the middle (Adams, 2021; Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Belch & Strange, 1995; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Eddy and Ward (2017) also assert this idea of being "stuck in the middle" (pp. 22–23) when discussing womxn in faculty and administrators in higher education at mid-level ranks. They discussed that the mid-level rank for faculty are associate professors who have not yet been promoted to full professorship, and for administrators, the mid-level are those who report to upper-level leadership. Mid-level administrators report to senior-level officers with decision-making power within the institution (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2000). Fey and Carpenter (1996) defined *mid-level* as reporting directly to the senior student affairs officer, being one level removed from the senior officer, overseeing at least one student affairs function, or supervising at least one professional staff member. This mid-level rank can be distinguished by reporting structure, position on an organization chart, or job titles.

What's in a Name?: Job Titles

The mid-level administrator role can vary across institutions based on job titles (Hernandez, 2010; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009). "Kraus (1983) contended that mid-level administrators may hold the title of director, assistant director, assistant dean, associate dean, vice president, or 'assistant to' another person" (Hernandez, 2010, p. 21). Director, assistant, or associate titles surface several times when describing a mid-level administrator (Eddy & Ward, 2017; Huelskamp, 2018; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009).

Hernandez (2010) problematizes only defining mid-level administrators by title (i.e., assistant, associate, vice) or reporting structure. These elements do not account for job function and decision-making authority within the organization. For instance, an assistant director within a department has a different power or influence than the assistant vice president of a division. In higher education, everyone reports to someone. "With countless titles and positions occupying campus organizational charts, what is known is that mid-level managers are experienced professionals with significant responsibilities but often lack final authority on decisions" (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019, p. 29). Titles and organizational/reporting structures offer ways to define and understand the mid-level administrator role but should be one of many determinants because titles and their meanings vary. Job function and responsibilities offer additional insight into defining mid-level administrators in the academy.

Other Duties as Assigned: Function/Responsibilities

After Scott's *Lords, squires, and yeomen* publication, there are about 19 years of literature discussing higher education administration broadly, yet none specifically naming mid-level administration in higher education. Narrowing the search for to mid-level administrative roles uncovered the works of Johnsrud and Rosser (1999), who draw from other scholars and studies to offer the following explanation of the role and function of mid-level administration across the academy:

- Mid-level administrators may be academic or nonacademic support personnel. They are not faculty and are usually a nonexempt, noncontract group.
- Their positions may be differentiated by functional specialization, skill, training, and experience.
- Another means of identifying mid-level administrators is by the administrative units in which they work. Although these may vary by institution, typically, Student Services include admissions, registration, financial aid, counseling, advising, and other student affairs; Academic Support includes computer, media, library services, learning skills center, and cooperative education; Business/Administrative Services includes fiscal management, accounting, and human resources, operations and

maintenance, and bookstore; External affairs includes public relations, alumni affairs, communications, and fundraising (p. 122)

Johnsrud and Rosser (1999, 2000) discuss the mid-level role at various university units. Young's 1990 anthology, *The invisible leaders: Mid-level student affairs managers* (as cited in Fey & Carpenter, 1996), is referenced as the earliest work to address mid-level student affairs administrators extensively. Mid-level administrators in student affairs typically work in student-facing units in higher education, such as the student services and academic services areas described by Johnsrud and Rosser. "Mid-level student affairs leaders play an essential role in achieving [postsecondary education] goals by administering programs, services, and functions that are central to the institutional mission of colleges and universities throughout higher education" (Rosser & Javinar, 2003. p. 813). Young Jr. (2017) expanded on the functions and responsibilities of mid-level administrators in student affairs by describing a competency-based definition. According to Young Jr. (2017), student affairs mid-level administrators:

1. Are able to describe the issues, problems, and opportunities inherent in a given student affairs division so that they can properly re-allocate resources and staff toward enhancing student learning and development;
2. Are able to model communication and collaboration with all levels of internal and external stakeholders; and
3. Are able to demonstrate the academic mission of the institution, bringing it alive for student learning and development. (pp. 36-37)

Mid-level administrators in student affairs or student service units at four-year colleges and universities units are described as having responsibilities to supervise entry-level or first-line administrative staff (Hernandez, 2010; Mather et al., 2009) or executing policy, projects, and initiatives as communicated by upper administration (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Hernandez, 2010; Mather et al., 2009), or have the professional competency to enhance student learning and development by effectively communicating and collaborating across all levels and supporting the academic mission of the institution (Young Jr., 2017). Professionals at this level often have clear

job responsibilities related to these functions and responsibilities. However, they are often expected to perform additional duties and functions under the directives of those higher on the organizational chart with unclear or unspoken expectations. The number of years at the mid-level rank or in their respective roles can indicate the types of functions mid-level administrators are expected to perform.

Started from the Bottom, Now We're Here: Years in Profession

Some of the literature reviewed described the number of years one must be in the profession to identify as mid-level. A range of 5-15 years in the higher education profession is articulated more specifically by student affairs professional associations (ACPA, 2018; NASPA, 2019; Scott, as cited in Hernandez, 2010). The literature also suggests another determinant to consider when defining the mid-level administrator role is based on educational background. The readings discussed attaining an advanced graduate degree (i.e., master's), but not necessarily a terminal degree (i.e., doctoral), which contributes to the idea of a person's eligibility to function in the mid-level role or to be considered mid-level in the organizational structure (Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2000). Hernandez (2010) again problematizes these ideas by drawing attention to professional staff serving in entry-level roles for five or more years (potentially without advanced degrees) or individuals in mid-level roles within the organizational structure with less than five years of professional experience.

Mid-level Intersecting with Race and Gender

The literature review revealed other narratives about mid-level administrative roles in higher education since the early contributions of Scott's 1980 publication, Johnsrud and Rosser's (1999), or Young's (2007) initial contribution about student affairs mid-level administrators. When narrowing the lens to examine the narratives of mid-level administrators in student affairs

from historically marginalized identities based on gender and race, the literature is sparser. Rosser (2000) reported, "The data indicate that womxn hold 60 percent of administrative staff positions in public and private colleges and universities" (p. 6). The number of womxn holding mid- or senior-level administrative roles in higher education continues to increase (Eddy & Ward, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics-NCES, 2017; Rosser, 2000; Ryu, 2008; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011), along with an increase in the representation of racially minoritized groups, mainly Black and African American communities (NCES, 2017; Rosser, 2000; Ryu, 2008). The Fall 2016 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2017), females as a subgroup of administrators in student and academic affairs and other education services (n = 179,164) is the largest at 67.5% (n = 121,001) in comparison to males at 32.4% (n = 58,163). While I understand there is a difference between sex and gender, I presume these statistics frame gender identity markers. The NCES (2017) report shows 30% (n = 51,276) of minoritized racial groups work in student and academic affairs and other education services in comparison to individuals categorized as white at 66.7% (n = 119,678). Individuals categorized as Black are the highest minoritized subgroup at 45.3% (n = 23,238) of all minoritized groups who work in student and academic affairs. Womxn have the highest percentage of representation across gender groupings. Black people have the highest percentage of representation across minoritized racial groups in student affairs administrative levels at colleges and universities. However, the representation of these groups in the research literature needs to be proportionate.

According to the literature, many womxn and Black administrators are at the mid-level rank (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2004). In addition, the growing increase of these communities often aligns with universities' goals of

diversifying staff to reflect the growing racial and gender diversity in student demographics. For

example, Rosser (2000) stated:

> The ethnic and racial makeup of mid-level administrators at many colleges and
> universities tends to reflect student and local community populations more closely than
> do faculty or senior administrative groups. This is primarily due to the nature of the mid-
> level positions themselves as well as the institution's hiring practices. (pp. 6-7)

Higher education looks different from when it was first created in the United States. Universities

and colleges are becoming increasingly diverse, considering race and gender, and the

administrative staff are starting to reflect this along with students and faculty. However, while

there is statistical data found about the representation of womxn and Black administrators, the

research literature is limited about these specific groups at the mid-level rank in higher

education, particularly with the intersecting identities of Black womxn.

Why Black Womxn Specifically?

The statistical data found for this literature review suggest there is growth in the number

of womxn and Black administrators, respectively, in higher education. When describing the

landscape of Black womxn in higher education administration, Hayden Glover (2012) states:

> The number of Black women in full-time administrative positions in higher education is
> rising. In the Fall of 2009- there were 13,394 Black females in executive, administrative,
> and managerial positions within U.S. higher education institutions (NCES, 2010). They
> represented the highest percentage of minority women administrators, followed by
> Hispanic women (Cook & Córdova, 2006). (p. 12)

The representation of Black womxn administrators is increasing at higher education institutions,

especially in student affairs (West, 2020). However, their representation in the research literature

needs to be proportionate (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Johnson, 2019;

Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Johnson (2019) also indicates that studies about Black womxn staff and

administrators in higher education are highly underrepresented. However, Black womxn

administrators play an integral role in supporting students' recruitment and retention efforts

(Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Therefore, I think it is problematic that research about the experiences of Black womxn administrators is scarce, considering their representation in numbers and their significant role on college and university campuses.

Black womxn in the academy matter on campuses espousing commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The presence of Black womxn administrators is beneficial to the mission and operation of colleges and universities, yet the experiences of this population are primarily nonexistent in the literature. The presence and contributions of Black womxn in administrative roles matter to students who are the primary stakeholders on our campuses, as well as other campus constituents. More importantly, Black womxn just matter in the academy, whether at the mid-level or other institutional levels. Conducting more research to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black womxn in administrative roles in higher education through research is another step toward increasing their visibility.

Black Womxn [Mid-level] Administrators: Their Stories

Conducting a literature review search on administrators in higher education, mid-level administrators in higher education, and mid-level administrators in student affairs helped develop an understanding of these populations' experiences. In turn, these broader search results helped guide the search about the experiences of Black womxn in these roles. There is also a dearth in the literature about Black womxn in mid-level roles (Arjun, 2019; Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Stewart, 2016). Searching for research literature about Black womxn mid-level administrators in any facet of the academy yielded higher results about Black womxn students, faculty (e.g., provosts, deans), and senior-level administrators (e.g., university presidents). Initial searches on "Black Women mid-level administrators in student affairs (and various combinations of "midlevel," "mid-manager," or the

words "African American") resulted in very few results. Two studies surface as primary sources. Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) conducted a phenomenological study conceptualizing the leadership and professional experiences of African American women in midlevel[2] student affairs positions at 2- and 4-year predominately white institutions. Adams (2021) is a more recent phenomenological study exploring mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals' ability to thrive at southern Historically White Institutions (HWIs). This search process established a gap in the research, thus providing an opportunity to raise awareness of the accounts of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education through research. The literature search was narrowed to "Black women administrators in higher education" and "Black women administrators in student affairs." That search uncovered some studies with small sample sets, unpublished dissertation studies, published book chapters, and journal articles with narratives about or from Black womxn administrators in higher education. These texts provided direction for additional searches and valuable points on the significance of future studies about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs.

Experiences and Challenges

Black womxn administrators have to contend with several issues as a result of racism, and sexism in higher education, including but not limited to marginalization, isolation, and tokenism (Adams, 2021; Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West, 2015). For example, when discussing the professional experiences of African American student affairs professionals, West (2015) stated:

> As it relates to the experiences of African American women at work, there is limited research that conceptualizes the terms that ground this study, especially from the perspective of African American women themselves...The dearth of research related to the concepts as mentioned earlier (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization,

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[2]   This study uses "midlevel" without a hyphen. Adams (2021) states that labels change between midlevel, mid-level, mid-manager, or middle manager, making it challenging to find relevant literature.

personal well-being, and professional success) signals the need for multiple investigations regarding what it means to be an African American woman who is navigating the complex and often tumultuous terrain of professional life in the academy. (p. 110)

West (2015) conducted a study exploring African American womxn student affairs professionals' experiences and perceptions of several concepts, including marginalization and isolation. The definitions of these terms presented in the findings of West's study reflect similar narratives described in the literature reviewed for this paper:

> As expressed by the participants, isolation was described as the persistent sense of being physically present in a specific group but being forced to function in the group as an individual entity with little to no support or genuine camaraderie... According to the participants in this study, marginalization was defined as the experience of having your ideas, experiences, beliefs, and contributions devalued, dismissed, and regulated to the periphery of the group conversations, decisions, and actions. (pp. 115-116)

Becks-Moody (2004) conducted a study exploring African American womxn administrators' challenges and experiences in higher education. In their study, the "token" label was assigned to African American womxn who were often the only Black or woman in their areas (Becks-Moody, 2004, p. 23). Because Becks-Moody (2004) and West (2015) are two strong examples of research studies conducted about the experiences of Black womxn in higher education, I have mentioned them specifically. Becks-Moody (2004) conducted a doctoral qualitative research study exploring the challenges and coping strategies of ten senior-level African American womxn professionals (e.g., president/chancellor, vice president/vice-chancellor, or dean) at traditionally white and historically Black public institutions. West's (2015) study explored how ten African American womxn professionals in student affairs experienced and conceptualized underrepresentation, marginalization, and isolation in their careers at predominately white institutions.

Three themes emerged in the literature about Black womxn administrators in higher education. These are experiences of marginalization, isolation, and tokenism in higher education settings.

Marginalized

The literature on mid-level administrators in higher education revealed they needed more support; in particular, they needed to receive clear expectations regarding department/institutional goals from senior leadership regarding implementing programs or policies. Lack of support also resulted from a negative relationship with supervisors. Mid-level administrators also described feeling powerless due to not having decision-making authority or the inability to use the skills and expertise that got them hired. Some studies described mid-level administrators finding support through interdepartmental or external relationships or developing relationships with their supervisors (Hernandez, 2010; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Although these studies were not conducted with Black womxn; the narratives of Black womxn administrators in higher education have some parallels.

Patitu and Hinton's (2003) study exposed how Black womxn are placed "outside of the flow of power and influence within their institutions" (p. 82) in the form of budget constraints, denial of programming, or not being invited to pivotal meetings regarding their job responsibilities. Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) presented a similar scenario with one of their study participants, who "described the drawbacks to their continued leadership development when they are isolated from politics, policy-making, and contact with senior-level administrators" (p. 133).

In West's (2015) study, "participants also noted the subtle, yet intentional nuances of exclusive behavior exhibited by their colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates, which relegated

them to the figurative, and sometimes literally, periphery of their respective work settings" (p. 114). Acts of exclusion or avoidance were not the only behaviors that contributed to marginalization or being devalued. Black womxn administrators expressed experiencing microaggressions, which are "conscious, unconscious, verbal, non-verbal, and visual forms of insults [that] are directed toward people of color" (Howard-Hamilton as cited in Henry, 2010, p. 12). They also experienced verbal and sexual assault from colleagues and supervisors (Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

These experiences are degrading and contribute to low morale and lack of support defining mid-level administrators' experience in general and punctuated by racism and sexism. Researchers found that Black womxn administrators are often stereotyped as incompetent or relegated to roles that do not allow for their expertise to be recognized (Miles, 2012) or hired for specific units such as multicultural offices, equal opportunity offices, or other roles previously held by minoritized racial groups (Becks-Moody, 2004). Stereotyping Black womxn administrators in higher education contributes to limited opportunities for professional development and mobility.

Isolated

Isolation is another challenging experience faced by Black womxn administrators in higher education. Becks-Moody (2004) shared how Black womxn administrators in senior-leadership roles experience isolation because, more times than not, they are the only person of their gender and race at the senior level, particularly at predominately or historically white four-year institutions. In addition, numerical underrepresentation in departments contributed to the isolation experienced by Black womxn administrators across administrative ranking. The

opportunities for Black womxn administrators to build camaraderie in the workplace are very

slim when you factor in marginalizing behaviors.

West (2015) found that participants experienced isolation (a) by being separated from

other African Americans due to underrepresentation in departments, (b) by experiencing

marginalizing behaviors, and (c) actual physical isolation by their workspace situated in

locations far from other colleagues and students.

> This lack of collegial fellowship may be the result of simply not having a critical mass of
> culturally similar pairs with whom to connect, or it may be due to some African
> American women's struggle to force entry into already established, culturally
> homogeneous groups that do not embrace the perspectives, interests, and/or values of the
> outsider– an example of [Black feminist thought scholar Patricia Hill] Collins' (1986)
> 'outside within' phenomenon. (West, 2015, p.116)

Black womxn administrators may be physically present in these roles yet not adequately

represented or recognized as suggested in the definition of isolation.

Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) conducted a phenomenological study with six African

American womxn in mid-level student affairs roles exploring how they conceptualized their

professional leadership journey. Their study discussed how this population often navigates

university environments in silos due to a lack of representation and mentorship from other

African American womxn and a lack of guidance from other identity groups in their peer group

or higher leadership roles. This discussion aligned with the definition of isolation suggested by

West (2015). Isolation can lead to a lack of recognition and powerlessness, contributing to low

morale and job dissatisfaction.

Tokenized

Experiencing marginalization or isolation can create a challenging work environment for

Black womxn administrators. These challenging factors can leave administrators feeling

devalued and affect the overall trajectory of their professional roles. Becks-Moody (2004) found

Black womxn encountered a range of other challenging circumstances when being the only

Black person, the only womxn, or the only Black womxn in their work units. These situations

included being called to serve as experts on matters related to Black or womxn's experiences and

feeling the pressure to outperform others, which can feel overwhelming or lead to burnout. Some

may feel compelled to underperform and reduce their visibility, leading to more scrutiny or

professional limitations. For Black womxn, reduced visibility "means being relegated to narrow,

limiting, unimportant tasks that offer few opportunities for growth and advancement' in the

workplace" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 157).

Researchers Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2003) conducted a two-year study, *The*

African American Women's Voices Project. They surveyed 333 Black womxn, ages 18-80,

across 24 states, with differing marital status, sexual orientation, educational background, and

incomes, then conducted in-depth interviews with 71 of these womxn (pp. 5–6). Their study

aimed to learn about African American womxn's experiences with racial and gender stereotypes.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) state that irony accompanies being "the only" in a worksite.

They cite the term "salient object" (p. 155), coined by Dr. Bernardo Carducci, to describe this

contradiction. "Salient object" denotes the significance of feeling scrutinized or experiencing

negative attention for being the most noticeable person in the room (Jones & Shorter-Gooden,

2003). Being the only can lead to positive aspects of visibility for some Black womxn. However,

most literature outlines more negative consequences of tokenism in higher education when being

the "only" in the workplace.

Comparing Experiences with Mid-level Administrators

Most of the literature that describes mid-level administrators' experiences in higher

education is riddled with challenges and difficulties at both the interpersonal and institutional

levels. I did not expect the abundance of negative narratives about mid-level administrative roles and imagined some texts describing positive experiences. The issues addressed most frequently were low morale, job [dis]satisfaction, and intent to leave or turnover (Hernandez, 2010; Jo, 2008; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011). Some factors that contribute to these feelings include lack of recognition of competence and expertise; limited support and resources to perform optimally in their roles; feeling powerless or having little to no decision-making power in their role; and limited to no professional development or opportunity to advance past the mid-level range (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Becks-Moody, 2004; Belch & Strange, 1995; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Eddy & Ward, 2017; Hernandez, 2010; Jo, 2008; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Miles, 2012; Rosser, 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Thompson, 2016). In addition, mid-level administrators face discrimination due to hierarchy within the organizational structure, job title, job function or responsibilities, or years of experience.

The literature highlights that mid-level administrators experience a lack of support, lack of recognition, powerlessness, and limits on the opportunity for professional development or advancement. These experiences can contribute to low morale and job dissatisfaction. Black womxn administrators and professionals face similar challenges, yet the literature suggests their experiences are heightened by additional factors related to race and gender. Black womxn experience racism and sexism throughout their lives, and these forms of oppression extend into higher education (Becks-Moody, 2004; Henry, 2010; Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2011). Marginalization, isolation, and tokenism are some outcomes of how racism and sexism differentiate the experiences of Black womxn administrators in higher education. The complexities experienced by Black womxn mid-level administrators and how

these identities inform how they navigate their lives in the academy are not examined thoroughly in the research literature (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). The chance to expand on the existing literature content drives my desire to investigate the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators. I am also interested in studying the concept of "voice" in connection to Black womxn mid-level administrators. To raise awareness about the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs, it is also imperative to understand what " voice " means in general and in higher education to this group. This understanding includes how the concept of voice relates specifically to Black womxn in society and higher education (Collins, 2009; Johnson, 2019; Stanback, 1988).

Voices of Black Womxn [Mid-level] Administrators

Racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy create environments where some Black womxn administrators in higher education are rendered powerless and voiceless after being marginalized, isolated, or tokenized in the workplace. A consistent theme throughout the existing literature about Black womxn administrators in higher education is the significance of individuals having the agency to tell their own story about positive or challenging experiences in higher education without the [mis]interpretation by those who hold societal power (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Agency in this context "is defined as the expression of individualized power through thoughts, behavior and voice" (Davies, as cited in Orozco et al., 2019, p. 125). Exploring agency and power when navigating higher education further motivates my interest in research about Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. "[Black Womxn at universities] tell stories about their lives that are different from the stories that other people tell about us" (Bobo, as cited in Johnson, 2019, p. 1). Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs should have the

power and agency to share narratives of their success, challenges, lessons learned, and future insight in their own way and on their own terms for research or when navigating within their professional roles.

Some research about Black/African American administrators includes stories about marginalizing experiences and identity, increasing representation due to isolation, or "being heard" in their roles or professional settings were often connected to the idea or word "voice" (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Before conducting the literature review, similar anecdotal observations raised personal questions about what " voice " means in connection to Black womxn.

To better understand these observations, it became apparent that there was a need to investigate what voice means in higher education and to Black womxn (Collins, 2009; Scott, 2013; Stanback, 1988). Therefore, in this literature review section, I examine the multi-dimensional definition of voice and how understanding this concept can support understanding the unique lived experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

Defining Voice

Most current literature defining voice in K-12 and higher education centers on students (Hankerson, 2017; Henry, 1998; Seale, 2010; Templeton et al., 2019). Scholarship in sociology, psychology, feminist and Black feminist studies, and communication studies also examine the complex phenomenon of voice (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1993), with some literature addressing Black womxn's specific language and speech mannerism in society and educational systems (hooks, 2015; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Scott, 2013; Stanback, 1988). As a result of the multiple ways voice is examined in the

literature, I use a semiotics analysis approach to examine how voice is a signifier of

understanding experience, identity, expression, behavior, and communication. Silverman (1983)

described the study of semiotics as language, symbols, or signifiers used to communicate or

convey meaning and how different groups or human subjects perceive and interpret these

elements.

Arnot and Reay (2007) offer a theory on voice called "a sociology of pedagogic voice

which engages with the power relations which create voice" (p. 312). These scholars suggest

there are four aspects of voice to consider: (a) style of communication and language codes (e.g.,

verbal speech and written text); (b) communicating competently on a subject matter; (c) voice as

an expression influenced by social identity (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, ability); and (d)

expressions influenced by dominant social or cultural norms (Arnot & Reay, 2007). In this study,

I referenced how Arnot and Reay's framework served to explain how marginalized voices

exposed oppressive power relations. However, there are limitations to their framework. The

framework was conceptualized by studying students' voices in the classroom and what teachers

needed to consider for pedagogy. Arnot and Reay's framework does not offer a concrete

translation of how to understand the voices of Black womxn in higher education who are

navigating racism and sexism and other issues as mid-level administrators. Even with these

limitations, I reference Arnot and Reay's framework because its four components collectively

reflect aspects of voice discussed in other studies and frameworks.

Based on the research literature grounded in sociology, psychology, and womxn's studies,

I assert that voice can function as one or more of the following: (a) Identity, (b) Content, (c)

Context, or (d) Process. Findings from the literature also suggest that in order to understand

voice, one must understand who has agency to communicate content and context and whose

process of voice or communication is regarded and accepted, especially when factoring in racial and gender identity (Gilligan, 1993; Hankerson, 2017; Henry, 1998; hooks, 2015). Communication studies research grounded in Black Feminists frameworks (Scott, 2013; Stanback, 1988) points out the unique language and communication patterns of Black womxn, the specific population I want to study in administrative roles in higher education. Understanding these factors can support incorporating the voice of Black womxn in education and help understand how they make meaning and use their voice through research.

Voice as Identity

Some of the literature implies that the concept of voice relates to understanding identity – developing an awareness and consciousness of self as to what and why (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Hankerson, 2017; Henry, 1998). For example, in a study examining the meaning of voice concerning Black students and other students of color in classrooms, McElroy-Johnson explained:

> When I use the term *voice,* I am thinking of a strong sense of identity within an individual, an ability to express a personal point of view, and a sense of personal well-being that allows a student to respond to and become engaged with the material being studied by the other students in the classroom and the teacher. Voice is identity, a sense of self, a sense of relationship to others and a sense of purpose. Voice is power - power to express ideas and connections, power to direct and shape an individual life towards a productive and positive fulfillment for self, family, community, nation, and the world. (as cited in Henry, 1998, p. 236)

McElroy-Johnson's definition of voice illustrates how voice is connected to identity, a "sense of self", the agency associated with who uses voice, and how one uses voice. Hankerson's (2017) study examined systems of privilege that surrounded the idea of voice and suggested that understanding voice as a "subjective entity" (p. 35) opens access for marginalized communities to develop agency to use their voices to express ideas and feelings to disrupt normative practices in classrooms. Understanding voice as identity complicates the earlier definitions of student

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voice in higher education (Seale, 2010; Templeton et al., 2019) because understanding voice as both a form of identity and influenced by identity suggests there are power dynamics that hinder some from exercising voice as content and context.

Arnot and Reay (2007) developed an approach to understanding voice called "a sociology of pedagogic voice which engages with the power relations which create voice" (p. 312). They problematized early scholarship about the relationship between language and power in education, focusing on the *how* and *what* aspects of voice without centering the *who*. These scholars suggested centering voice discourse and analysis as identity work – centering the diversity within marginalized groups' experiences as the subject – not only their relationship with the power structure that silences them. Arnot and Reay (2007) articulated this perspective of voice as a form of standpoint theory "where members of marginalized groups can themselves become subjects–authors of knowledge [...] speaking from a particular standpoint, an experience, and a location" (p. 313). As a result, Arnot & Reay (2007) put forward four aspects of voice to consider in their studies about pedagogic voice in the classroom: (a) style of communication and language codes (e.g., verbal speech and written text); (b) communicating competently on a subject matter; (c) voice as an expression influenced by social identity (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, ability); and (d) expressions influenced by dominant social or cultural norms.

Black feminist scholar and sociologist Collins (2009) is one of many scholars recognized for writing about the complex, multifaceted ways voice is understood concerning Black womxn in society. Collins (2009) states, "An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice" (p. 130). In other words, there are many ways that womxn, particularly Black womxn, make meaning of their respective voices. Scholar bell hooks (2015) offers a perspective of voice that further signifies its complexity when

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discussing self-awareness and expression. "It seemed that many black students found our situations problematic precisely because our sense of self, and by definition our voice, was not unilateral, monologist, or static but rather multi-dimensional" (hooks, 2015, pp. 11-12). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) uses a Womanist perspective when connecting Black womxn's subjectivity to voice-centered research.

In this study, the combined social identity categories of Black, womxn, and mid-level administrators are foregrounded. I was interested in voice distinctly from the subjectivity of Black womxn mid-level administrators. "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (hook, 2005, p. 42). Rather than rely on the interpretations of others (e.g., other research, it was important to legitimize Black womxn mid-level administrators' ways of knowing and being through their standpoint.

Voice as Content and Context

I interpreted explanations of voice in the literature framed as content and context: the *what* and the *why*. Voice is defined as having the ability to share or express thoughts, stories, narratives, or subject matter (content or the what) to influence purpose or to be engaged in environmental factors that inform one's experience (context or the why) (Seale, 2010; Templeton et al., 2019). In a recent study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and University (AAC&U) about student voice in higher education, voice is defined as "students' agency to exercise, and institutional inclusion of, thoughts, ideas, and opinions in shared governance and related processes and environments that drive decision making" (Templeton et al., 2019, para. 7). Another study about students in higher education describes voice as a series of metacognitive skills which includes asking questions about and attempting to understand experiences that can relate to content; and further reflecting on the implications of practice,

which I relate to the purpose, or context, of voice (Seale, 2010). Based on these definitions, students' voices can be interpreted as a link to their experience and capacity. However, having agency to use voice to influence practice or purpose can be informed by the social and environmental conditions where voice is employed. Quite simply, the culture of the environment, including other people, are factors that affect whether or not one's voice will be heard and accepted. Templeton et al. (2019, para. 7) discussed the institution's role in making student governance leaders heard and influential. This study presents four core metrics to help operationalize students' voices:

1. "Access is the extent to which students have contact with or easy ability to interact with decision-making entities" (para. 9). Access links to the spaces where student leaders are included and with whom they get to interact.

2. "Roles refers to the responsibilities assumed by or granted to a student serving in a representative capacity with a decision-making entity" (para. 10). This metric addresses what rights or privileges student governance leaders have to engage or contribute formally.

3. "Empowerment is the extent to which institutions invest in student leaders' abilities" (para. 11). Empowerment connects to the environment, or institution, demonstrating value toward the contributions made by students.

4. "Influence is the power or effect students believe they have in the decision-making process or with decision-making entities" (para. 12). Influence addresses how the institution makes apparent that students have the capacity to effect change.

I interpret these metrics as placing some onus on the institutions to create conditions where voice can be used. When considering the voice of Black womxn mid-level administrators

in higher education, what they say/do and why will remain ineffectual if the conditions they are navigating do not allow space for their voice. Contextualizing voice as a process, in addition to content and context, expands its definition of voice. There is significance in understanding how one is heard and what is communicated or why voice is used. The context addressed in this study includes the physical and social conditions of the environment "where" Black womxn mid-level administrators are navigating when using their voice. What is happening in the professional and cultural communities at 4-year HWIs that may influence the voices of Black womxn working as mid-level administrators? What are the practices that suppress Black womxn mid-level administrators' voices? Who are the people in the environment that Black womxn mid-level administrators navigate? Context also addresses "why" Black womxn may communicate thoughts and knowledge or the purpose of their engagement in the environment. In this study, voice as content addressed the subject matter, knowledge, and skills communicated or demonstrated by Black womxn mid-level administrators in their work roles.

Voice as Process

There are some distinctions in the literature about how voice is used, or not used, that I associate with the process of voice – the vocal/verbal or written ways content and context are delivered or received. Most ideas about the content, context, and process of voice are rooted in systems of dominance based on race and gender. Gilligan's publication *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, initially published in 1982, is noted as one of the earliest feminists and psychology scholars to consider womxn's development and epistemology as another way of understanding thoughts and experiences (Gilligan, 1993). Gilligan (1993) states:

By voice, I mean voice. Listen, I will say thinking that in one sense the answer is simple. And then I will remember how it felt to speak when there was no resonance, how it was

when I began writing, how it still is for many people, how it still is for me sometimes. To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act. (p. xvi)

I acknowledge there may be some critique from other scholars about Gilligan's work. However, when searching for "voice" cross-referenced with "Black women," I found some studies that referred to Gilligan's notion of womxn's voice and moral reasoning. I interpreted Gilligan's ideas as an outlet that legitimized womxn's voice as a process, content, and context. Grounded in Gilligan's works, Belenky et al. (1986) developed five epistemological perspectives through which womxn view themselves, the world, and their relationship to knowledge. These five perspectives describe womxn's cognitive development as dependent on the evolution of identity (self); the interrelationship of the self with others (voice); and the understanding of truth and knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) references Gilligan when discussing the significance of voice-centered research to highlight the complexity of subjectivity and making space for voice as an absent subjugated point of knowledge.

Seale's (2010) study on doing voice work in higher education indicates another meta-cognitive skill that defined voice as "hearing or listening to previously inaudible or ignored voices" (p. 998). This study referenced other studies that frame audibility as a component of voice. Hankerson (2017) also describes students "negotiating oral and written identity" (p. 35) as being a significant factor in the interpretation of voice. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) connect elements of gender and race when discussing how the audible component of voice impacts the experience and perception of Black womxn in society:

For an African American woman, perhaps no act is as critical to successfully counteracting the myths and stereotypes that swirl around her as changing the way she speaks. The pitch of her voice (whether it is deemed too loud or just right), the rhythm of her speech (undulating like a blues or popping in a crisp staccato), and the vocabulary she uses (calling a coworker "triflin'" as opposed to "irresponsible") can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. A phrase ("You so crazy"), an "incorrect" verb ("He

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be trippin'") or a simple inflection ("Say what?") can shape the listener's impression of her, often in ways she may not have chosen. (p. 96)

Similar to the power structures that inform what content and context is deemed acceptable as voice, there are dominant norms that inform the appropriateness of how voice is delivered and heard.

While I interpreted the process of voice to address the oral or audible nature of how voice is heard, it would be negligent not to address the connection of silence to voice. Vaccaro (2017) described how voice and silence are juxtaposed literally and metaphorically in many academic disciplines. "Others view voice and silence as more than the act of speaking and inseparable from constructs of subordination, empowerment, and identity" (Vaccaro, 2017, p. 394). hooks (2015) asserts that the concept of silence is just as varied and multifaceted as the concept of voice. Across the literature, silence can be a barrier or subordination resulting from being marginalized or oppressed. "There is the silence of the oppressed who have never learned to speak and there is the voice of those who have been forcefully silenced because they have dared to speak and by doing so resist" (hooks, 2015, p. 13). At the same time, silence and voice are metaphorically associated with identity, empowerment, agency, and action. Houston and Kramarae (1991) critique the negative connotation of silence and describe how silence can be a form of power and resistance related to how womxn use their voices.

hooks (2015) asserts that, although Black womxn have always grappled with tensions of racism and patriarchy, it is not in our nature to be silent. Black womxn were never voiceless. "Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard" (hooks, 2015, p. 6). The idea of knowing our listeners and audience is another interpretation of voice. To understand Black womxn's voice and how to establish liberatory

voices as resistance, hooks states, "One must confront the issue of audience – we must know to whom we speak" (p. 15). Silence is complex in relation to speech, and knowing our listeners and audience is another interpretation of voice. Some strategies for navigating this complexity include actively deciding when not to speak or verbalize thoughts as strategic protest, being submissive, or pretending to be ignorant in ways that advance a marginalized person's agenda. In this study, voice as a process referred to how experiences, thoughts, and knowledge of Black womxn mid-level administrators are or are not communicated through various styles (e.g., verbal speech[3], non-verbal communication codes, and written expressions). Voice as a communication strategy and linguistic style is multifaceted and Black womxn have endless possibilities in how they express their viewpoints, knowledge, and lived realities.

For this study, I am interested in researching the content, context, and process distinctly from the subjectivity of Black womxn mid-level administrators. The literature reviewed about Black womxn administrators in higher education signaled the need to examine the verbal aspect of how Black womxn voice their thoughts and experiences as subject matter (Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). How Black womxn administrators communicate subject matter is relevant and connected to the reception and perception of their content and context. Johnson (2019) addresses how listening to the stories of Black womxn administrators and creating space for verbal exchange was valuable to the staff she engaged in discussions. The oral traditions and verbal elements (e.g., speech, style, tone) of Black womxn's voices led me to explore literature about Black womxn's language and speech through communication studies. Communication studies

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[3]   While I did not examine the connection to voice and ableism within the scope of this study, I recognized that critical disability scholars trouble this unquestioned connection. Reference to voice as verbal speech can be interpreted as ableist language stigmatizing persons with speech impairments. For the scope of this study, I used the term verbal speech as voice because this is used in the literature as a descriptor for verbal style of expression or communication.

research, grounded in Black Feminists and Womanist frameworks, points out the unique language, rhetoric, and communication patterns of Black womxn (Houston & Davis, 2002; Scott, 2013; Stanback, 1988). Houston and Davis (2002) and Scott (2013) described gaps in research across disciplines about the rhetorical and interpersonal communication styles of Black womxn and the lived communicative experiences. This gap can present limitations in understanding how Black womxn communicate and incorporate their voices in educational spaces with contradicting cultural borders. Black womxn administrators who may be experiencing marginalization, isolation, and tokenism at colleges and universities that often engage in hegemonic social practices cross cultural borders daily. Black womxn mid-level administrators' embodied practice of constantly engaging in this border-crossing process relates to the notion of "shifting."

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) defined shifting as "a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society" (p. 6). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) elaborate on the dynamics of shifting as including, but not limited to: accommodating and negotiating differences based on race, gender, and class; changing behaviors and attitude; adjusting language and tone. "Shifting one's style of expression and the content of one's message, emerged as the predominant way in which Black women accommodate to the social and behavioral codes of white middle-class" (p. 96). Code-switching is a form of shifting in connection to Black womxn's language and communicative practices. Jones and Shorter-Gooden explain:

> Given their desire to fit in both with Blacks and non-Blacks, many women often "code-switch" by shifting between dialects, languages and styles of communication. Code switching is a result of what we call the "yo-yo paradox," the pressure Black women feel to shift back and forth in order to meet the conflicting codes, demands, and expectations of different groups. (p. 108)

Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2009) voice-centered research explores the [mis]perceptions of the "strong Black woman" idea and connects Black womxn's subjectively to speech and behavior. Beauboeuf-Lafontant study discusses how some [Black] womxn "engage in surface conformity, consciously 'ventriloquating' (Brown, 1998) words and performing actions of acceptability" (p. 9). This concept aligns with the ideas of shifting and codeswitching presented by Jones and Shorter-Gooden. However, what is interesting about Beauboeuf-Lafontant's study is it challenges the idea of centering our attention on how Black communicate and perform and listen to Black womxn to understand what social order is informing why Black womxn need to appear strong by changing their words and behaviors in respectable ways that align with hegemonic structures.

Scott (2013) points out that studying Black womxn's language and communication strategies are the key to understanding how they navigate constant movement across cultural borders in higher education settings. Scott refers to Anzaldúa's theory of borderlands, defined as "present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory...it's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions" (Anzaldúa, as cited in Scott, 2013, p. 313). Black womxn's talk – the unique, authentic, everyday language and speech mannerisms of Black womxn – reflects that language and communication strategy (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Stanback, 1988). Black womxn's talk is an example of the unique combination of content (what thoughts, experiences, or identity factors are communicated), context (why thoughts/experiences/ subjective matters are communicated), and process (how content and context are communicated) concerning Black womxn.

Conclusion

Evidence highlights that mid-level administrators have it tough on college and university campuses. While they are highly represented at institutions, mid-level administrators are less visible in the research. This absence extends to other demographics within the mid-level administration roles, especially Black womxn who are virtually invisible in the literature.

Based on existing research, mid-level administrators contend with some uncertainties regarding their roles, low morale, job satisfaction, and deciding whether or not to stay. Actions that contribute to these experiences include lack of support or recognition, no decision-making authority, and limited professional development or opportunity to advance. Black womxn administrators have similar experiences in higher education while also dealing with racism and sexism. Interpersonal and institutional acts of oppression contributed to Black womxn administrators feeling marginalized, isolated, or tokenized in their roles and campuses. I wonder how these experiences are similar or different for Black womxn administrators at the mid-level rank. Unfortunately, their stories continue to be silent in the literature.

When I think about the root of what drives the purpose of my study, I cannot help but think about the popular social media GIF from the reality TV show, *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, in which one of the cast members passionately states, "I said what I said." I think this form of communication demonstrates the unique combination of Black womxn's language and speech mannerisms and the authenticity of combining the process (how voice is used), content (what is voiced), and context (why voice is used) of voice for this subgroup (whose voice). How Congresswoman Waters (i.e., reclaiming my time) and Senator Harris (i.e., "I'm speaking" and various non-verbal expressions) demonstrated their voice as a combination of their intersectional identities (i.e., Black, womxn, professionals), in connection to others and the environment

(context), while legitimizing content and subject matter also aligns with what this study seeks to investigate. There is something to be explored about the unique range of how Black womxn specifically connect the process, content, and context of their voice. Not all Black womxn are the same or experience life in the same way in society or higher education settings. Not all Black womxn focus on the oral tradition and verbal nature of voice in the same way. How are they grappling with experiences at the mid-level rank? What and why do they communicate, and how are they communicating?

I believe there is an unrecognized power about the voice of Black womxn and recognizing how their voice can be a benefit among Black Women and to higher education institutions. The literature review implies the need to conceptualize the diverse nature of how Black womxn use their voice to navigate between different cultural worlds in higher education while also amplifying their voice. I want to conduct research that connects these three ideas (multi-dimensional aspects of voice, Black womxn, mid-level administrative role) to contribute to the research literature about these ideas. Expanding on research studies about the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education is relevant as it addresses the power dynamics influencing the experience of a sub-group working in environments described as marginalizing, isolating, and tokenizing. This study's focus can offer possibilities to address challenging power structures affecting the mid-level administrative ranks' experiences while contributing to academic scholarship.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

"And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives." (Lorde, 2007, p. 43)

Lorde (2007) opens her essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," by reflecting on the significance of sharing personal narratives and about matters that are important to her, even if it is scary or at the expense of being misunderstood. Although the circumstances at the root of Lorde's reflection are different, her essay resonates when I think about the purpose and goals of my study. This quote reflects the significance of me conducting research using critical, strategic approaches to demonstrate the study's relevance to readers. In Chapter I, I described the purpose of this study as investigating the experiences and challenges of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWIs). The intention was to understand how this population navigates the everyday realities, including challenges, informed by oppressive power structures rooted in racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy. This study also aimed to examine the concept of "voice" to explore the narratives of these Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. I focused on Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs functional areas to narrow the scope of the study. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions face?
    a. What creates these challenges?
    b. How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy?
2. How do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs use

their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

This chapter outlines the nature of the research, theoretical framework, methodology, and data collection and analysis methods to effectively address the research questions.

Nature of Research

This is a qualitative research study using Sista Circle Methodology—to be explained later in this chapter. As a qualitative researcher, I am "... interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24.). Bhattacharya (2017) states:

> If a qualitative researcher is trying to understand someone's experiences, then s/he conducts a study where s/he collects all relevant information surrounding the experience and reports them. The goal is to simply understand and explore in an in-depth manner and not to generalize. (p. 19)

In the introduction chapter, I acknowledged that this study is personal. However, as the researcher, I recognized that this study is not about centering my narrative. I wanted to explore, understand and share the stories about the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs. Centering the voice and perspectives of these womxn through research created an opportunity to discover how they conceptualized their experiences in their own words. The literature review in Chapter II illustrated the scarcity of research about Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. Conducting a qualitative study to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black womxn in these roles at HWIs may increase their visibility in academic research and amplify their voices across the academy.

Womanist Theory

This study seeks to offer a platform for the stories of Black womxn in mid-level administrative roles to be told in their way without feeling the need to conform or perform to standards dictated by white supremacy, elitism, and patriarchy. I used Womanist Theory to

ground my study because it is a social change perspective rooted in Black womxn's standpoint, reflecting our experiences and problem-solving approaches when navigating their everyday realities (Phillips, 2006). Situating my study within a Womanist framework allowed me to center the narratives of this population in higher education as a legitimate source of knowledge production and construction. I believe a Womanist perspective also supports my focus on understanding how Black womxn mid-level administrators use voice as an everyday approach when navigating within or against racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchies in the academy. In the next section, I discuss characteristics of Womanism that informed my lens and approach as a researcher.

Womanist Perspectives as Researcher

Womanism is a relevant framework to use in addressing my qualitative research goals. My goals in conducting this study are to:

    (a) Bring Black womxn mid-level administrators together to explore the ways they have used voice in their roles;

    (b) provide research from the perspectives and lived experiences of a specific group of Black womxn in higher education who face unique challenges due to their mid-level roles and responsibilities; and

    (c) create dialogue space where Black womxn can learn from each other and then share that learning with other Black womxn and higher education leaders who help shape the climate that Black womxn mid-level administrators are navigating.

Phillips (2006) suggests there are five overarching characteristics to Womanism: (a) antioppressionist, (b) vernacular, (c) nonideological, (d) communitarian, and (e) spiritualized. In the following sections, I discuss how these characteristics are central to the Womanist

perspective and how they inform my lens as a qualitative researcher.

Antioppressionist

Phillips (2006) states, "The term 'antioppressionists conveys that Womanism is identified with liberationist projects of all sorts and that Womanism supports the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression" (p. xxiv). Antioppressionists seek to disrupt oppression across related socially constructed identities (i.e., antiracist, antisexist, antiheterosexist, etc.) or of identities not understood as members of dominant social groups. The antioppressionist characteristic of Womanism aligns with my goal to investigate and understand experiences at the convergence of three identity categories: Black, womxn, and mid-level administrators in student affairs. In the literature review of this proposal, mid-level administrators in higher education are discussed as experiencing several challenges and difficulties at both the interpersonal and institutional levels; those challenges are compounded when considering the layers of race and gender. Challenges and oppressive factors affect these identities individually and collectively at HWIs–based on race, gender, and organizational status. For this study, I operationalized the antioppressionist lens by broadening my definition of "Black" and "woman." While conducting the literature review for this study, I found the term "Black" was often used interchangeably with "African American." When I consider my positionality as a Black Haitian-American woman, I do not think everyone identifying as "Black" identifies as "African American," which is often synonymous with ancestral roots to enslaved peoples brought to the United States. As a result, recruitment language for this study defined "Black" as having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora (e.g., African American, Caribbean-American, and African immigrants living in the U.S.).

I recognize in society and the field of higher education that identifying as a "woman"

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may not always be synonymous with cisgender identity. As a result, I used the spelling of "womxn" in recruitment strategies for this study. Key (2017) writes, "The term 'womxn' was created to broaden the scope of womanhood by including 'womxn-of-color,' 'trans-womxn' and other 'womxn-identified' groups" (para. 9). This spelling also aligns with the use of this term by some affinity groups within student affairs associations, where I targeted my recruitment efforts. I understood that using these definitions was a liberationist project, as suggested by the antioppressionist characteristic. As a researcher, I intended to be critical and justice-oriented in my approach, including whom I aim to study.

Vernacular

According to Phillips (2006), vernacular is a characteristic that situates Womanism in "'the everyday' — everyday people and everyday life" (p. xxiv). Vernacular is defined in the dictionary as a nonstandard language or dialect native to a place or region. Phillips (2006) describes this characteristic as Black womxn's experiences and problem-solving methods includes more than language and communications practices. Vernacular represents Black womxn's cultural practices to harmonize and coordinate across differences (e.g., through food, relationship building strategies, consideration of different belief systems, etc.) (Phillips, 2006). Black womxn engage in these cultural practices to resist dominant power structures that overshadow or criticize these everyday life activities. In Chapter I, I discussed how vernacular and the "everyday" support my perception that Black womxn's unique use of voice, in whichever way it manifests in the workplace (i.e., verbal or non-verbal communication, behaviors, or actions), is legitimate when addressing power dynamics.

The characteristic of vernacular is the most interesting to me as a researcher. I think of using metaphors to illustrate a point when operating in my professional role as a mid-level

administrator, and even how I used quotes, music lyrics, or visual social media references in this manuscript reflect Black womxn's lived experiences. For this study, I invited my research participants to share different forms of media to illustrate their understanding and use of voice. The intention behind this approach was to amplify how Black womxn's use of contemporary and popular references found in everyday life are legitimate practices to describe how they see themselves in relation to the power dynamics they are navigating in the workplace.

Nonideological

Nonideological as a characteristic "refers to the fact that Womanist abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized manner" (Phillips, 2006, p. xxv). I interpreted this characteristic as addressing how Womanists have an aversion to performing or conforming to normative standards as they attempt to find inclusive ways to share power and responsibility. Collins (2003) asserts that most institutions and knowledge validation processes center a white male standpoint and suppresses Black womxn's standpoint. I am interested in understanding the challenges Black womxn mid-level administrators are navigating within work environments informed by rigid boundaries of white supremacy, patriarchy, and institutional hierarchies. The nonideological characteristic helped me consider alternate approaches to respond to research questions without reproducing dominant power dynamics as a researcher. I intentionally conducted this study using a nontraditional research methodology (Sista Circle Methodology) as an inclusive practice to affirm Black womxn mid-level administrators' voices and narratives. Other strategies I applied to reflect this characteristic included encouraging participants to select their pseudonyms and creating a structure for participants to develop verbiage for their biographies.

Communitarian

Phillips (2006) refers to communitarian as "the fact that womanism views commonweal as the goal of social change" (p. xxv). Commonweal is defined as having concerns for the collective well-being of all community members (Phillips, 2006). Since mid-level administrators are presented as having a positive influence on the experiences of faculty, staff, students, and other multiple stakeholders on campuses (Rosser, 2000; Young Jr., 2017), and Black womxn administrators are linked to increasing student success rates of some communities on predominantly white campuses (Patitu & Hinton, 2003), then how are HWIs demonstrating care and concern about the well-being of Black womxn in mid-level administrative roles who are perceived as contributing to social change on their campuses? As a researcher, I strongly believe learning about the experiences of Black womxn administrators at the mid-level administrative rank in student affairs — who they are, what they know, and how or why they share what they know — can contribute to transformational change in higher education. The purpose of my study – to learn about the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs and understand how they use voice when navigating the everyday realities of racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy – demonstrate concern for their common well-being. Very few studies are asking questions about this group. This study's findings can empower other Black womxn mid-level administrators and contribute to social change in higher education.

Spiritualized

The fifth characteristic of Womanism, according to Phillips (2006), is spiritualized, which "refers to the fact that womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined" (p. xxiv). Some scholars discuss interpretations of the spiritualized characteristic as supporting a religious or

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theological perspective of Womanism (Houston & Davis, 2002; Jackson & Hogg, 2010). However. that is not the only interpretation. Dillard (2006) defines spirituality as having consciousness of, and relationship with, a divine power; in academic research, this can be reflected as engaging in activities that reconcile the mind, body, and spirit. Dillard explains that a spiritual paradigm in research aims to serve humanity. "Such service begins with engaging oneself, as the researcher or teacher, in continuous reflection, examination, and exploration of one's heart and mind for the true purposes of one's work" (Dillard, 2006, p. 42). Engaging in reflexive practices such as journaling during data collection and taking reflection notes during the analysis process was a significant aspect of conducting this study. These practices demonstrated the spiritualized characteristic of Womanism … almost to a fault. There were times when I excessively questioned my approaches to interpreting participants' narratives and making decisions about applying a deductive coding analysis, reflecting my findings for research question two. I engaged in continuous reflection and exploration of my research motives as I did not want to compromise the trustworthiness of this study.

Elements of popular culture such as hip-hop and other genres of music, magazines, art, and other forms of media are described as influencing spiritual beliefs that contribute to Womanist ways of knowing and Black womxn's knowledge constructing (Jackson & Hogg, 2010; Phillips, 2006). The influence of music, media, and popular culture seemed to align with Walker's tenet of Womanism:

> Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. (*Regardless)*

I interpreted this tenet as showing that Black womxn's appreciation for creativity, culture, and other forms of expressiveness demonstrates the spiritualized characteristic. In this study, I incorporated this interpretation through the media elicitation activities. Participants were invited

to submit words, quotes, and contemporary social media images to help describe their experiences in higher education and perceptions of their voices. I discuss this method in-depth in my data collection section.

Dialogue as a Womanist Method

Brock (2005) and Collins (2009) speak about dialogue as a relational practice among Black womxn used to construct and share knowledge, promote empowerment, and enact change. While dialogue is not a characteristic of Womanism, it is described as a Womanist activity for social transformation (Phillips, 2006). Phillips writes:

> Dialogue is a means by which people express and establish both connection and individuality. Dialogue permits negotiation, reveals standpoint, realizes existential equality, and shapes social reality. (p. xxvii)

This description directly relates to my goals of creating a dialogic space where Black womxn mid-level administrators can learn from each other and share that learning. As a researcher, creating a space where participants can share their viewpoints while being authentic was essential to this study. This level of authenticity included some participants exhibiting the use of communication styles not often present in the workplace, particularly among white people or even some other Black womxn colleagues.

DOPE Perspective as a Researcher

In Chapter I, I introduced three ideas from Womanism that support my research goals:

1) Black womxn's subjugated knowledge is an acceptable form of knowledge construction and production.

2) Black womxn's unique use of voice to address power dynamics is legitimate.

3) Black womxn's consciousness is rooted in critical emancipation.

These ideas were influenced by Alice Walker's definition of Womanist (see Appendix B) and

informed my subjectivity that Black womxn mid-level administrators are DOPE. The word "Dope" is an urban term I use to acknowledge when something or someone is unique, positive, or adds a value of some kind. For this study, the acronym DOPE means:

1. We are *Deliberative* by knowing ourselves, others, and our environment when taking action to address concerns related to our experience;

2. We *Own It!* by having a sense of personal responsibility to be credible to take serious, nonfrivolous action to address inequities in our environment;

3. We are *Powerful*. We recognize there is risk in living in spaces and systems not set up for us to exist, let alone thrive. Yet, we embody a sense of agency, or power, informed by the culture of Black womxnhood when addressing challenging dynamics; and

4. We often engage an *Ethic of Care* by demonstrating our unique personal expressiveness to support individual well-being and express empathy as care for the well-being of others.

I believe that most Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs functional areas in higher education positively and significantly contribute to their work environment. This perspective is based on my interactions with and observations of other Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs and across higher education. Adding a Womanist perspective to personal observations helped me conceptualize. The DOPE perspective drives my curiosity as a researcher seeking to understand how other Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs see themselves and use their voice as they navigate within their roles.

Many of my participants perceived themselves as "dope," similar to the urban expression. However, I recognize that not all Black womxn, including those who are mid-level administrators in student affairs, ascribe to my DOPE perspective – Deliberative, Own It!, Powerful, Ethic of Care. I also do not intend to position my DOPE perspective as a controlling

image or new grand narrative about Black womxnhood. I applied a postmodernist paradigm for this study to deepen my understanding of the challenges experienced by Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs by drawing out multiple perspectives and voices from different members of this population. The postmodern paradigm is an interpretive research paradigm that asserts "knowledge claims must be set within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other groups affiliations" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326).

Positioning the knowledge claims of Black womxn mid-level administrators is relevant within the current conditions of higher education institutions with expressed commitments to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. A postmodern paradigm is particularly relevant in a society where the voices and knowledge of some Black womxn are increasingly regarded in mainstream media. I align my DOPE perspective and Womanist theory with a postmodern paradigm to conduct this study to establish there are possibilities in situating the narratives and knowledge of Black womxn mid-level administrators as a critique to the grand narrative of white supremacy, patriarchy, and hierarchy that influences the culture they are navigating within higher education. I do not propose that all Black womxn mid-level administrators think or act like me, like each other, or that they always think and act in ways that oppose hegemonic ideologies that influence higher education. As a result, I investigated the narratives of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs through a lens that prioritizes their standpoint to better understand their experiences and add to a scarce body of research.

In summary, Black womxn mid-level administrators' perspectives and narratives were examined by conducting this study through a Womanist perspective. Alice Walker's definition of Womanist (Appendix B, 1983) and developing the DOPE acronym helped me understand how I

think about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs. Womanism influenced my DOPE subjectivity of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. I think we are DOPE as a collective population even though some Black womxn mid-level administrators may have a different perception of self and others. Womanist theory aligned with a postmodern paradigm presented the opportunity to center a new narrative through research and within the higher education landscape that often prioritizes a standpoint rooted in racism, sexism, and hierarchy. My research approach is situated in several Womanist characteristics described by Phillips (2006) while using dialogue to address my research goals. Womanism as a Black womxn's standpoint theory supports my methodology, Sista Circle Methodology, which is also grounded in Black womxn sharing their perspectives through dialogue. I elaborate on this methodology in the next section.

Sista Circle Methodology

I used Sista Circle Methodology to address my research purpose for this study. Sista Circle Methodology moves beyond engaging in dialogue as a research technique and serves as a research theory that informs inquiry, data collection, and analysis.

Johnson (2015) describes Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) as simultaneously being a qualitative research methodology and serving as a support group for Black womxn to connect and share their lived experiences. SCM is derived from Sister Circles, often known as dialogic spaces that promoted a sense of connectedness, empowerment, and collective activism among Black womxn (Collins, 2009). Collins discusses how Black womxn intellectuals historically and contemporarily engaged in dialogical practices to construct and share knowledge and collectively move from thought to action when addressing societal challenges. Sister circles date back to the Black womxn's club movement established in the late 1800s in response to African American

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womxn's exclusion from White womxn's and Black men's social and political clubs (Cooper, 2017; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Cooper (2017) writes about one of the earliest Black womxn's clubs, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), led by activist Fannie Barrier Williams. "The club movement ... is nothing less than the organized anxiety of women who have become intelligent enough to recognize their own low social condition and strong enough to initiate the forces of reform" (Williams, as cited in Cooper, 2017, p. 33). Black womxn's clubs and sister circles serve as sites for critical community, empowerment, and resistance that uplift the ideas and actions of Black womxn. In higher education settings, Allen (2019) states sister circles "allow womyn to have a space to unpack their daily struggles and cope with difficult incidents that occur while being a black womyn at a PWI" (p. 69). Sister circles are important dialogic spaces for Black womxn students, faculty, and staff to discuss and improve their experiences on college and university campuses.

Johnson's (2015) dissertation research appears as the earliest study to use the nomenclature "Sista Circle Methodology." However, earlier studies have demonstrated the application of similar methodologies rooted in dialogue and research spaces centering Black womxn's subjectivities and lived experiences. For example, Brock's (2005) study published in *Sista Talk: The personal and the pedagogical* discussed the application of the "Methodology of Sista Dialogue" (pp. 121-128), a critical action research informed by an African American epistemological framework using sista dialogues as a research method. Dunmeyer's (2020) dissertation expanded on Johnson's nomenclature and discussed the emphasis on the term "sista" versus "sister" as a colloquial term used by and among Black womxn signifying solidarity and a sense of community based on racialized, gendered, or other lived experiences. Dunmeyer (2020) explains:

> Sista circles acknowledge the individuality and power in Black women's storytelling of their lived experiences, centering a structure that affords them opportunities to discuss their authentic selves — how they see themselves within society, how they understand their positioning within that society, and how they navigate the spaces in which they exist. (p. 50)

My use of Sista Circle Methodology was ideal for this study because it aligns with my research goals of centering the multidimensional, authentic voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators while engaging in dialogue where they can learn from and empower each other. Furthermore, as a researcher, this methodology allowed me to engage with other Black womxn mid-level administrators fully, continue to learn from them, and amplify their voices through this study.

For this study, I drew from both Johnson's and Brock's work to illustrate the features of SCM and its application for my research purpose and goals. SCM was an innovative way to investigate and validate the standpoint of Black womxn, which is often viewed as subjugated knowledge by dominant groups (Collins, 2003). SCM has three distinguishable features that align with the goals of this study:

1. Communication Dynamics;

2. Centrality of Empowerment; and

3. Researcher as participant (Johnson, 2015, p. 46).

The first feature of SCM focuses on the verbal and non-verbal communication dynamics that exist when Black womxn engage in dialogue with each other. Johnson (2015) discusses how Black womxn's speech style, content, and non-verbal communication cues contribute to how they understand themselves and each other. I interpret these verbal and non-verbal communication dynamics to relate to what the literature describes as "Black women talk" – the unique, authentic, everyday language and speech mannerisms often associated with Black

womxnhood (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Stanback, 1988). This feature of SCM is connected to the multidimensional concept of voice highlighted in this study. In my review of the literature about Black womxn's voice, scholars support the need to further investigate, understand, and analyze how Black womxn's specific communicative strategies are used in everyday lived experiences while navigating different environments (Houston & Davis, 2002; Scott, 2013). These communication dynamics warrant a unique inquiry perspective and separate analysis that can come from SCM (Johnson, 2015).

The second feature of SCM is the centrality of empowerment. Johnson (2015) describes empowerment as "the process of stimulating Black women to access their personal or collective power to strengthen one another" (p. 480). I believe dialogue is a legitimate methodological approach to research because it is not just about talking. It is an empowering strategy that allows for listening, mutual inquiry, and deeper analysis of self and others. Dialogue is essential to assess and validate knowledge among Black womxn (Brock, 2005; Collins, 2003).

The third feature of SCM is the researcher as a participant. This feature distinguishes SCM as different from traditional focus groups. Glesne (2016) describes the researcher as primarily a facilitator or moderator during a focus group. "With sista circles, the researcher's role extends beyond facilitating the discussion" (Johnson, 2015, p. 48). SCM values reciprocity and calls for the researcher to be just as engaged in knowing themselves and the participants engaged in the study. It is important not just to collect the narratives of other Black womxn but to be vulnerable by contributing personal knowledge and experiences. Brock (2005) explains how the researcher functioning as a participant is central to her methodology of sista dialogue, and she asserts the significance of exercising empathy, reflexivity, and balance. For this study, I participated as a researcher grounded in Womanist Theory while balancing paying appropriate

attention to eliminating power dynamics and not taking over the dialogue (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The three features of Sista Circle Methodology — (a) communication dynamics; (b) centrality of empowerment; and (c) researcher as participant — helped me apply a unique qualitative research approach to understand Black womxn's experiences and honor their process and ability to produce knowledge. In the next section, I describe the specific methods and analysis within SCM for this study.

Research Methods

In this section, I elaborate on implementing Sista Circle Methodology by describing my participant demographics, recruitment and selection process, and data collection methods.

Participant Demographics

The scope of this research called for a homogenous sampling – "select[ing] all similar cases in order to describe some subgroup in depth" (Clark, as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 51). The definitions of participant demographics for this study were outlined more specifically in the introduction chapter's Terminology section.

In Chapter I, the terms and definitions of participant demographics for this study was in the Terminology section: Black, womxn, Student Affairs, and Mid-level Administrators. These definitions helped me identify eligible research participants. Black was defined as having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora. Womxn included self-identifying as a woman across complex interconnecting identities based on race, gender, and sexuality, including cisgender women, transgender women, and those who may identify as gender nonconforming or non-binary. The term "womxn" was used during participant recruitment to signal the inclusion of these identities, and it is not uncommon to use this spelling in the field of student affairs in

higher education. Mid-level administrators were defined as a non-faculty, staff, or administrator who directly reports to, or is one level removed from, a senior-level officer. These roles may include titles of assistant, associate, or director. Lastly, a student affairs administrator referred to working in a student-facing unit that provides out-of-classroom learning and development support. Appendix A exhibits traditional student affairs functional areas in higher education. For this study, I recruited participants who self-identified as Black womxn mid-level student affairs administrators who had worked in the field for more than five years.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Participants for this study were recruited using two processes. First, I emailed colleagues I knew personally and professionally in student affairs. I am a researcher with similar identities as potential participants who engage in various networks with other Black womxn mid-level administrators working in student affairs functional areas at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWIs). I followed up with womxn in my network to ask about their interest in participating in the study. Second, I requested their assistance in forwarding any solicitation materials to recruit new participants meeting the demographic criteria. This process is called snowball or chain sampling, where researchers learn of potential participants from people who know others who meet the research interest or criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016).

Third, I used social media as a recruitment strategy. I used Canva, an online graphic design platform, to create a social media graphic with pertinent recruitment information (see Appendix C). I posted this graphic with some descriptive text on my Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn profile pages. I also posted the graphic on the following Facebook and LinkedIn pages:

- Facebook: Black Women in Higher Education; BLKSAP (Black Student Affairs Professionals); Student Affairs Mid-Level Professionals; American College Personnel

Association (ACPA) Coalition for Women's Identities;

- LinkedIn: Black women ROCK in Higher Education Student Affairs; BRIDGES Academic Leadership for Women Sisters; NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) I Womxn in Student Affairs (WISA).

I also included the Canva graphic in the email I sent to colleagues in my network, requesting that they post it on their respective social media pages. I was tagged in a few posts on Facebook and LinkedIn by friends and colleagues who shared my post.

Incentives were also used as a recruitment strategy. Four selected participants were eligible to win a prize of a free 60-minute holistic wellness coaching session with Dr. Kellie Dixon, the Owner & Principal Consultant of Clear Pathway Consulting Services LLC, who is also a Black womxn mid-level administrator well-known throughout the student affairs national associations, ACPA and NASPA. In addition, every selected participant in this study also received a free signed copy of a book co-authored by Dr. Dixon, *Reclaiming Our Affirmations: A 30-Day Renewal*. The books and coaching sessions were discounted for this incentive. I applied and received a small research grant to assist with purchasing the books and coaching sessions as an incentive for participating in my study.

My recruitment email and social media image directed interested participants to a screening questionnaire via Qualtrics, a password-protected online survey software (see Appendix D). All Qualtrics responses were downloaded and stored in my University's Box drive, a password-protected online file storage tool. Respondents who were eligible for the study were currently employed at a 4-Year Historically White Institution, identified as Black womxn mid-level administrators (as defined in Chapter I), and/or currently working in a student affairs function area with at least five years of experience. There were 48 eligible respondents for this

study after two rounds of recruitment. Twenty-five were selected to participate in the study based on availability in times set for the virtual sista circles (referred to as DOPE dialogues for this study). Centering the experiences and voices of the 25 participants and how they conceptualized their experiences in their own words was essential to advancing my research goals and aligned with a Womanist perspective. As a result, Chapter IV includes full biographies of participants.

Data Collection

The data collection techniques for this study include a demographic screening questionnaire (Appendix D), a virtual introduction meeting (Appendix E), and virtual sista circles (Appendix F) with media elicitation.

Demographic Screening Questionnaire

As described in the previous section, I created a participant screening questionnaire via Qualtrics. The link to the screening questionnaire was included in recruitment materials (i.e., emails, social media posts, and a Canva social media image). The first page of the questionnaire landed on an adult consent form to participate in the study. After giving consent by submitting an electronic signature and date, the questionnaire moved respondents to a set of eligibility screening questions. Respondents who were not eligible for the study were directed to an exit page. Eligible respondents were directed to demographic questions to provide additional information about their identities and work experiences. The responses provided were used to develop participant biographies. The questionnaire also solicited responses for a media elicitation activity which were used as prompts to facilitate sista circles. Media elicitation and sista circles are two data collection methods I discuss later in this chapter. This last section of the questionnaire included instructions for scheduling a virtual introduction meeting and a virtual sista circle time.

Virtual Introduction Meeting

Due to the national COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, many interactions and research activities transitioned to remote and virtual approaches. Despite the current societal context, virtual platforms are increasingly used for qualitative studies (Green, 2017; Sweet, 2001). As a result, the demographic questionnaire also prompted respondents to schedule a virtual introduction meeting through my Google Calendar appointment scheduling tool (which allows for anonymous scheduling) and indicate their time preferences for a virtual sista circle during the Fall 2021 semester. I facilitated 30-minute virtual introduction meetings with participants to begin building rapport, share more details about the purpose and goals of the study, clarify participants' questions about the sista circle method, and confirm virtual sista circle time availability. Appendix E displays the discussion guide for the introduction meeting. An initial form of member checking also occurred at these meetings, where I confirmed participants' self-selected pseudonyms or assigned a name. For those who did not choose their pseudonyms, I assigned names of notable Black womxn scholars and historical figures as pseudonyms (e.g., Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Ida B. Wells, June Jordan, Patricia Hill Collins, etc.) The virtual meetings helped narrow the number of selected participants due to scheduling conflicts. After the virtual introduction meeting, I grouped participants for virtual sista circles and sent confirmation emails with the date, time, and Zoom link information. As requested by several participants, I also included a list of the semi-structured interview questions for the circle with a note that other questions may surface based on the flow of conversation.

Virtual Sista Circles

Sista circles are traditionally conducted in person, but I conducted virtual circles due to the national COVID-19 pandemic. Before describing the sista circle process for this study, it is

important to discuss the similarities and differences between sista circles and focus groups and how the distinctions will be reflected in this study.

Sista Circles, Not Focus Groups. Sista circles have similar features to traditional focus groups, an interviewing process where a select group participates in a facilitated discussion about a particular topic (Glesne, 2016). Focus groups help researchers "better understand how a group would discuss some issue and elicit multiple perspectives in the process" (Glesne, 2016, p. 123). However, sista circles as a method within SCM includes features that make this experience slightly different from the traditional focus group. One example is facilitating the circles in the researcher-as-participant role, one of the features central to SCM. This feature extends the role beyond just moderating the discussion, keeping time, and posing or redirecting questions (Glesne, 2016). I engaged as a participant to help create a shared learning experience and establish a sense of balance Brock (2005) describes as integral for reciprocal dialogue. The circles were facilitated as an informal conversation, inviting participants' storytelling and encouraging them to guide the flow of conversation. Sista circles align with the Womanist characteristic, nonideological — to be less concerned with the questions raised and more concerned about the methods to pursue answers. This approach is also congruent with the "kitchen table" metaphor used to illustrate the Womanist perspective on dialogue. "The kitchen table is an informal woman-centered space where all are welcome and all can participate" (Phillips, 2006, p. xxvii). Facilitating sista circles virtually posed some challenges in creating this intimate environment, which is why it was important to facilitate them differently than traditional focus groups. The second feature of SCM is that sista circles are usually designed as spaces to foster empowerment where Black womxn can share perspectives and learn from each other. Additionally, the dialogues function as a relational site that promotes empowerment, healing, and

community-building (Johnson, 2015).

  DOPE Dialogues. For this study, the goal of the sista circle method was to gather several groups of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs to share their experiences and how they use voice in their roles. During the recruitment process, the circles were named "DOPE dialogues" as a strategy to attract participants to the study. The dialogue concept also connects to Womanist research methods and SCM. I hosted five virtual DOPE dialogues with 4 to 6 participants in each group. There were two rounds of recruitment for DOPE dialogues. Round 1 included dialogues 4, 5, and 6. Round two included dialogues 8 and 10. The number indicates the number of dialogue options offered to participants (i.e., 1 - 10). Each dialogue met two consecutive nights for over 90 minutes each night. I met with one participant, Lisa, for a one-hour one-on-one interview because she experienced a death in her family, preventing her from participating in her group's second night. I used the Zoom video conference platform for the dialogues because it has video and audio recording functions. Video recording is essential for Sista Circle Methodology to assist with capturing verbal and non-verbal dynamics of voice (i.e., facial expressions, hand gestures, response timing, communication patterns, etc.). and to observe if communication practices related to the Womanist characteristic of vernacular emerged in the study. Appendix F includes the facilitation guide and questions for the dialogues.

  At the beginning of each night, I played a Spotify playlist – The Black Feminist Mixtape – I cocurated with other sista scholars from another manuscript. Playing the music helped set a welcoming tone as participants entered the virtual room. I asked participants to introduce themselves by their real names, professional titles, institutions (if they preferred), and their respective functional areas to get acquainted before recording. Then, I asked them to rename their Zoom name display to their pseudonym before recording. I opened each dialogue with a

short icebreaker to allow participants to continue getting to know each other before asking the first formal prompt question. I had semi-structured prompt questions to address this study's research questions. The questions for the first night of the DOPE dialogues prompted stories about the experiences and challenges of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. The questions for the second night prompted stories about the use of voice in their professional roles on their campuses.

Media Elicitation Activity

I used media elicitation as another data collection technique during the DOPE dialogues. "Elicitation techniques are a category of research tasks that use visual, verbal, or written stimuli to encourage participants to talk about their ideas" (Barton, 2015, p. 179). I use the term "media" because participants were asked to include three words to describe what it meant to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs in higher education in the demographic questionnaire. I then used an online multimedia tool to create prompts used to facilitate dialogue. I used an online word cloud generator to visually represent their words for the first night of DOPE dialogues. The main purpose of this task was to generate discussion and the media was not analyzed.

For the second night, the demographic questionnaire asked participants to submit a type of visual media (e.g., social media image, GIFs, a screenshot of a quote/passage, etc.) representing what "voice" meant to them as Black womxn mid-level administrators. I created a photo compilation for each dialogue group with participants' images. The main purpose of this task was to generate discussion and the media was not analyzed.

Media elicitation was a relevant technique for this study because Womanist and postmodern research are described as applying creative, unconventional methods to present

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multiple perspectives (Brock, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Barton (2015) also asserts that elicitation techniques shift the power balance between researcher and participants, allowing participants to own part of the process and their voices, which aligns with several of the Womanist characteristics presented by Phillips (2006).

Journaling

Journaling aligns with taking fieldnotes or field journals during research observations (Glesne, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I kept electronic and written journals of my observations and reflections when facilitating the introduction meetings and the DOPE dialogues. Journaling during this study's data collection and analysis supported my reflexivity. Glesne (2016) stated, "Reflexivity entails reflecting upon and asking questions of research interactions all along the way, from embarking on an inquiry project to sharing the findings" (p. 145). Journaling as a reflexive practice helped capture my immediate researcher reactions and follow-up questions between the two nights of the dialogue, ideas, follow-up questions, or general observations of the sista circles. I noted when I found myself in agreement or in conflict with what a participant shared. I jotted thoughts like, "Why did that comment make you smile and snap in agreement?" and "What about that story is making me feel some type of way?" It was important for me to note my beliefs or certain judgements and reflect on how these thoughts and observations affected how I conducted the study or engaged with participants as a researcher-participant. Observations noted in my journals were not a formal method for this study, and journal notes were not shared with participants.

In summary, Sista Circes were the primary method of data collection used for this qualitative study. They were referred to as "DOPE dialogues" during recruitment and facilitating the circles to align with the study's title. Media elicitation was a technique used during dialogues

to prompt participants to share their unique perspectives. The demographic questionnaire, virtual introduction meetings, and journaling were methods used to gather logistical information to support dialogue facilitation and data analysis. In the next section, I will discuss the data analysis methods for this study.

Coding and Analysis

Data analysis involves organizing data, reviewing and reading through data, coding the data to search for emerging patterns and themes, then interpreting and summarizing findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016). I used a Listening Guide (LG) to analyze the collected data. The Listening Guide is a voice-centered analysis tool created by Gilligan et al. (2006) that was primarily used in psychology to examine the lived realities of white, middle-class womxn's experiences with gender subordination. However, it has become a tool with universal application to investigate the voices of other groups (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008, 2009). I used the guide to learn about the power structures rooted in racism, sexism, and hierarchy that may create challenging experiences for Black womxn mid-level administrators. I also used it to understand the multilayered, multidimensional aspects of voice. Woodstock (2016) states the LG is different from other qualitative analysis forms because it emphasizes the psychological complexities of individuals with particular attention to voice - the stories shared, how they are shared, and silence. "Given that the LG is feminist in nature, it [is] well-suited to many educational research questions because the LG provides spaces for the voices of those populations that have traditionally been silenced" (Woodstock, 2016, p. 3). This analysis is relevant to my study's examination of voice — defined as identity, process, content, and context — for Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. The listening guide involves a series of sequential "listenings" of recorded data, with a guide directing the researcher on how to read the transcripts

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(Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Gilligan et al., 2006; Woodcock, 2016). Gilligan et al. (2006) state:

> Each of these steps is called a "listening" rather than a "reading," because the process of listening requires the active participation on the part of both the teller and the listener. In addition, each listening is not a simple analysis of the text but rather is intended to guide the listener in tuning into the story being told on multiple levels and to experience, note, and draw from his or her resonances to the narrative. (p. 4)

I find this idea of actively listening particularly poignant for this study about a population — Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs and higher education — that scholars have identified as being unheard and silenced in both research and the academy.

There are usually four rounds of listening during the listening guide analysis process. However, Woodstock (2016) explains that there are opportunities for different, innovative cross-disciplinary approaches to using the guide. In the next section, I will describe the LG process and how I decided to implement this analytical tool for my study.

Listening Guide Process

After every circle, the video recordings and audio transcriptions from the Zoom platform were transferred and saved to my University Box drive, which has multi-factor authentication for increased security. I re-watched the video recordings and made corrections to audio transcriptions where needed. I did this manually for some recordings and used Rev Speech to Text transcription services for some recordings. The transcriptions were then compiled into an Excel document used as a codebook. Every listening was directed by the listening guide (Appendix G) adapted from another research study (Jones, 2016). The use of a listening guide is supported by Saldaña's (2021) explanation of coding as a cyclical act that links data to each other and affiliates ideas that emerge from the data. Woodcock (2016) suggests researchers use a color-coded system for each listening and use symbols across listenings to connect themes and patterns that may later support research claims. Since my codebook was an online Excel file, I

used different formatting functions for each listening (e.g., colored text, bold text, and highlighted text).

Listening 1: Listening for Experiences

The first round of listening entails two parts (Gilligan et al., 2006; Woodstock, 2016). First, it requires listening for the plot, which involves paying attention to "what is happening, when, where, with whom, and why" (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 5). Woodstock (2016) explains, "Some important elements to be aware of are the informant's stories or the "plot"; emotional resonance; repeated words, phrases, and images; information and comments that jump out at the researcher; contradictions; omissions; and revisions" (p. 3). The second part requires the listener to practice reflexivity and note their own questions, reflections, and responses to promote thinking analysis (Woodcock, 2016). For this study, I listened for participants' explicit examples of their lived experiences related to my first research question:

1. What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions face?

    a. What creates these challenges?

    b. How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy?

I listened for words and statements used to describe difficult moments and who participants named playing a role in these examples. I listened for connections made to their race, gender, and professional rank. I listened for similarities and differences between each participant's contributions, themes in the current literature, and my own experiences. My initial codes included In Vivo codes, or direct quotes from participants, that were repeated often and descriptive codes summarizing general patterns or topics describing participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Listening for the plot, reviewing my journal notes from facilitating the DOPE

dialogues, and summarizing my initial reactions and responses after the first listening round helped me develop some initial interpretations of the data. This form of inductive coding allowed me to put aside any preconceived ideas and truly "hear" my participants to learn about their experiences.

Listening 2: Listening to DOPE Voices

Centering the experiences and voice of Black womxn mid-level administrators and capturing how they made meaning of these experiences in their own words was key to this study. The procedure for the second listening of the LG closely aligned with my research goals. Woodcock (2016) and Gilligan et al. (2011) state that the second listening session serves two purposes. First, to listen to the first-person voice of the participant and pay attention to "how" they talk about themselves — listening for cadence, tone, rhythms, patterns, etc. Secondly, to attend to how participants talk about themselves — listening for content about self-perception and perception in relationship to others.

The suggested process for this listening is to create "I" poems and use a different coding process when participants use "I," "me," "you," "we," and "them" pronouns and their associated verbs. Woodcock (2016) states, "focusing on the 'I' pronoun, and at times, its relation to other pronouns, brings the informant's subjectivity to the foreground" (p. 4). For this study, I listened more intentionally for how participants talked about themselves, their relationship with others, their environment, and the challenges they experienced. I bolded this text in my electronic codebook in Excel. In Chapter IV, I include a version of the "I" poem by selecting 1-2 statements from each of the 25 participants to be cohesive. While I reference some of the "I" statements in my findings, it was important to include the poem with the biographies in Chapter IV to illustrate how participants spoke about themselves in their own voices. This approach also aligns with the

nonideological characteristic of my Womanist perspective as a researcher, where I aimed to create an avenue for my participants to hold power over their personal narratives.

Listening 3: Listening for Use of Voice

Gilligan et al. (2011) and Woodcock (2016) suggest that after the first two listening sessions, the listener/researcher should scan their transcriptions and notes for overlapping patterns and look for evidence corresponding to the research questions. Subsequent listenings are referred to as Contrapuntal Listenings. Gilligan et al. (2011) and Woodcock (2016) explain that listening for contrapuntal voices allows the researcher to look for connections and tension between codes from previous listenings and begin making meaning of participants' experiences. "When thoroughly examined, contrapuntal listenings can potentially unveil vital understandings, and illustrating how the themes interlace into an elaborate measure of insight" (Woodcock, 2016, p. 6).

For this study, the third listening allowed me to develop codes to address my second research question:

2. How do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

I reviewed where color-coded texts from the first listening overlapped with bolded "I" statement texts from the second listening, then noted some descriptive codes. Next, I listened for how participants defined voice and their examples of when or how they experienced having or using voice to address their challenging experiences. During this listening round, I coded in two ways. I used some descriptive codes and coded deductively (Saldaña, 2021), noting when participants spoke about voice in ways that aligned with my conceptual framework presented in the introduction chapter (Figure 1) – voice as identity, content, context, or process or when their

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examples aligned with my DOPE perspective – Deliberative, Own It!, Powerful, Ethic of Care.

Analysis Process

After conducting the three listening rounds, I took a break. The process was honestly overwhelming. I journaled about my feelings and questioned myself about what caused me to feel overwhelmed. I questioned myself about how my feelings could impact my study and the decisions I made to organize the data. It was important for me not to lose sight of one of the goals of my study – to provide research from the perspectives and lived experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

I proceeded to group my codes around ideas related to what informed or impacted my participants' lived experiences in the workplace, my participants' self-perception and perception from others, and how they understood and used voice. This process of synthesizing and ascribing meaning to codes is an example of categorizing (Glesne, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Categorizing codes and noting what patterns emerge helped me begin developing themes. Glesne (2016) states:

> The coding, categorizing, and theme-searching process is a time when you think with your data, reflecting upon what you have learned, making new connections, gaining new insights and imaging how the final write-up will appear. (p. 201)

After developing initial categories, I conducted a member check. Member checking is a process of sharing my interpretations of the data with participants and asking for their perspectives and feedback on my analysis to ensure the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016; Saldaña, 2021).

I set up two nights for member checking and invited my participants to attend and provide feedback on my process and initial categories. These member checks were structured similarly to DOPE dialogues. Twelve participants attended the member check meetings over

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Zoom, and two more responded with feedback via email. Receiving feedback, answering questions, and conversing about my initial categories were extremely helpful and affirming as a researcher. They helped me determine the best way to present "I" poems & clarified a few points made in respective dialogue groups to consider in my final themes. In addition, the member check created a space where participants met new people outside their initial DOPE dialogue group. As a result, they helped me thread ideas presented across groups in ways I did not think about initially. After the member check, I reorganized some codes and categories and developed themes. I present my findings in Chapters V and VI. I also sent participants a draft of their biographies, asking them to review and make edits. All participants reviewed and then edited or approved their biographies presented in Chapter IV.

The listening guide served as a voice-centered analysis tool for understanding the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs and the multilayered aspects of voice. The listening guide includes a multi-series process of active listening guided by prompts to pay attention to during each listening. I interpreted this series of active listening and tuning in to the participants' stories as a deeper level of engagement in the researcher-as-participant role, a feature in the Sista Circle Methodology. The use of the listening guide from a postmodern lens created an opportunity for "descriptive and individual interpreted mini-narratives which provide explanations for small-scale situations located within particular contexts with no pretensions of abstract theory, universality, or generalizability involved" (Grbich, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 11). Learning about the multiple truths among individual Black womxn mid-level administrators while attempting to examine their collective experience are factors that align with a Womanist framework. In the next section, I will discuss ethics and trustworthiness in relation to this study.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

It is imperative for qualitative research to include appropriate consideration for ethical practices and trustworthiness in the ways data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and presented. These considerations are important because they verify the credibility and integrity of the research process and results (Glesne, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethical considerations reflect strategies that promote respect, safety, privacy, justice, and honest representation in relation to research participants and the information they share (Glesne, 2016). "Trustworthiness is about alertness to the quality and rigor of a study, about what sorts of criteria can be used to assess how well the research is carried out" (Glesne, 2016, p. 53). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), ethical practices are important to establishing the trustworthiness of a study.

For this study, I applied several practices to address ethical considerations when working with Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs in higher education. One example included facilitating the virtual introduction meetings to build trust in me as a researcher and for the research process. This strategy is also related to the Womanist characteristic of communitarianism, which focuses on reconciling relationships between people and their environment.

Member checking was another strategy to address ethical concerns and trustworthiness. I reconvened 12 DOPE dialogue participants for their feedback and reflections on my preliminary categories. This process exemplified how participants played an essential role in trustworthiness techniques. Member checking was important to my research to represent how my participants conveyed their experiences and prevent my DOPE perspective from overshadowing the raw data. It was also a significant way to be inclusive and share power and responsibility with participants, which is congruent with my Womanist approach to research.

Another strategy used to enhance the credibility of this study is engaging in reflexivity. Journaling my reflections and observations as a reflexive activity during data collection and analysis enhanced the trustworthiness of this study. For example, journaling during the introduction meetings, DOPE dialogues, and listening sessions helped me capture and check my reactions and assumptions during the research process. Some of the questions in the listening guide about points of connections and confusion, or similarities and differences to my experiences, are examples of the types of questions I asked myself when journaling.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations must be maintained when conducting a qualitative study to deepen one's understanding of a research topic. Reflexive activities and attending to safety, privacy, and consent during the data collection and analysis process were some significant examples of addressing trustworthiness and ethics in this study.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a quote from Lorde's essay because it explains why this study is important to me and for higher education. In the essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Lorde (2007) talks about self-determination, speaking our personal truths, and modeling living by these truths even if we are fearful or experience resistance from others. I was initially fearful about conducting this research study. I wondered if anyone would care about the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs since there is currently a gap in the literature about this population. As a Black woman who has worked as a mid-level administrator in higher education for over 13 years, it was significant to me to seek out, examine, and share the narratives of a population often unheard and unrecognized.

My feelings of trepidation in conducting this research informed my approach to

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thoroughly collecting and analyzing the data. Conducting a qualitative research study grounded in Womanist theory deepened my understanding of the lived experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs while situating our standpoint. This study is necessary and relevant to the field of higher education. I used Sista Circle Methodology as a qualitative approach to learn about Black womxn mid-level administrators' experiences using voice while navigating their work environment. While I think Black womxn mid-level administrators are DOPE — Deliberate, Own It!, Powerful, and engage in an Ethic of Care — I also recognized the significance of researching about the lived experiences of this population to discover what narratives align or conflict with my thoughts. I approached this study with a postmodern paradigm. Whether or not all Black womxn mid-level administrators think they are DOPE like I think they are, I think positioning their subjectivities and realities as an authoritative form of knowledge within hegemonic structures is significant, particularly at Historically White Institutions. Twenty-five Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs participated in DOPE dialogues to share their knowledge and narratives. These womxn are introduced in Chapter IV. I used a listening guide to analyze their stories to answer the research questions. My findings are presented in Chapters V & VI. I engaged in reflexive activities and included ethical measures to secure and protect collected information to enhance the trustworthiness of my study. Conducting this study is important to me. Conducting my research well is just as important. Representing my participants accurately is important to me. I hope this chapter demonstrates my commitment and integrity to this study. PERIODT.

CHAPTER IV: DOPE BLACK WOMXN MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS

I'm a lovable person. I do everything with love.
I'm not someone they can talk down to.
We are typically the backbone of our departments or our areas.
We don't want to be too strong where people think we're immune to pain and trauma.

But I think for me, I've been able to ground myself in who I am as a Black woman for myself.
I am who I am, and I'm not intimidating.
I've had people tell me like ... you got to walk soft and carry a big stick.
I'm too big to walk soft. I walk heavy, but I'm learning when to use my voice.
I don't have that many times that I can speak, and it matters, so I got to choose the right moments.
I had to learn how to speak when I needed to speak and not just speak on everything because sometimes your voice is taken from you in ways that you can't get back.

I was thinking about the numbness of Black voice.
I don't have to be here, but I choose to be here, and I choose to do the work every day. I choose to show up every day, and I'm impacting the students that I work with, and I'm bringing something to the table.
If we do everything that we can and we are capable of, we would be powerful and dangerous beyond measure and could probably rule in and run any and every institution.
My dreams have changed. Even some of my aspirations have changed as I've navigated through different institutions.

There are times where I feel like some people don't hear me,
I want to speak my African American Vernacular English at the table, but don't get it twisted,
I can flip and show you what literature says.

It just feels like the system's not ready …
I'm ready.

As a group and as a culture, we are achievers.
We've been taught to know what we're talking about.
I'm now feeling more confident as a professional.
My relationships and other things that I'm interested in make up who I am.

I have no ownership.
It's okay that that isn't home for me, it's okay for me to see this as an opportunity that I am using for a purpose to further me and to further my people, but I don't have to make it my home.
I have an assignment and a purpose, and I'm going to utilize the space for that.
I recognize how impactful and how important my voice is.

We deserve the same grace.

Trust Black womxn.

<div align="right">- DOPE Voices Participants</div>

In September and October 2021, I met with 25 Dope Black womxn mid-level administrators who shared their experiences and voices for this study. They represented various functional areas in student affairs, including Academic Advising, Academic Support/Student Success Services, Career Services, Dean of Students, Graduate and Professional Student Services, Housing and Residence Life, Multicultural Services, Student Conduct, Student Affairs Professional Development, and Wellness Programs. Their voices represented over 160 years of knowledge and experience at the mid-level rank in Student Affairs. Their titles ranged from Assistant Director to Associate Director and Director. However, they were more than their titles and were not defined only by the scope of their work responsibilities.

During the DOPE dialogues, I learned about these womxn and the assemblages of other identities that inform how they navigate dominant racist, sexist, and organizational hierarchies within their respective historically white institutions. They have different family and relational statuses, like mothers, daughters, wives, fiancés, and significant others. They are first-generation students, doctoral students or doctorate recipients, research scholars, and mentors. They have different spiritual beliefs, from Christian to Agnostic, that inform their values and actions. Outside the academy, they are members of Black Greek-letter sororities, health and fitness enthusiasts, community activists, and entrepreneurs with "side hustles". For this study, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire which included questions about their identities and work experience to assist in developing the following biographies. Participants were also invited to select a preferred pseudonym for this study. For those who did

not choose their pseudonyms, I assigned names of notable Black womxn scholars and historical figures (e.g., Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Ida B. Wells, June Jordan, Nina Simone, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston). Table 1 provides a general overview of the participants. Full participants biographies are included after the table.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Overview

Pseudonym	Tenure as a Mid-level Professional	Current Student Affairs Functional Area	DOPE Dialogue (DD) Group
Toni	2 years	On-Campus Housing/Residence Life	DD4
Octavia	3 years	Graduate and Professional Student Services	DD4
Tabitha	7 years	Student Affairs Division - Staff Professional Development & Recognition	DD4
Dr. Lady	7 years	Graduate and Professional Student Services	DD4
Secretlion	11 years	On-Campus Housing/Residence Life	DD4
Marie Younger	6 years	On-Campus Housing/Residence Life	DD4
Ororo	2 years	Multicultural Services/ Social Justice Education/ Diversity, Equity, and	DD5

		Inclusion Initiatives	
Zora	9 years	Wellness Programs/Dean's Office-Student Services	DD5
Jules	14 year	Multicultural Services/Social Justice Education/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives	DD5
Roxanne	6.5 years	Student Conduct/Dean of Students	DD5
Nadine	2 years	Career Services	DD6
Natasha	8 years	Career Services	DD6
Ida	10 years	Multicultural Services/Social Justice Education/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives	DD6
Sandy	6 years	Academic Advising - First Year Experience	DD6
Alice	9 years	On-Campus Housing/Residence Life	DD6
Jordyn	2 months	Academic Support Services/Learning Assistance	DD8
Zoe	4 years	Multicultural Services/Social Justice Education/Diversity, Equity, and	DD8

		Inclusion Initiatives	
Lisa	4 years	Dean of Students	DD8 & 1:1[4]
Nina	12 years	Orientation	DD8
Arizona	9 years	Graduate and Professional Student Services	DD8
Bell	5 years	On-Campus Housing/ Residence Life	DD10
Shantel	1 year	On-Campus Housing/Residence Life	DD10
Patricia	6 years	Multicultural Services/Social Justice Education/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives	DD10
Audre	6 years	Student Conduct	DD10
June	5 years	Multicultural Services/Social Justice Education/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives	DD10

Note. There were two rounds of recruitment for DOPE dialogues (DD). Round 1 included dialogues 4, 5, and 6. Round two included dialogues 8 and 10. The number indicates the amount of dialogue options offered to participants (i.e., 1-10).

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[4]   I met with Lisa for a 1-hour one-on-one interview because she had to miss the second night of DD8 due to a family emergency.

Toni

Toni describes herself as a young, Black, married, Christian woman. She was raised in a two-parent household with a mother who instilled values of assimilating white culture into her as a teenager. Toni has been a mid-level administrator in student affairs for over five years and was recently promoted to a Director-level role in a housing/residence life functional area at a private 4-year institution at the time of our dialogue. Toni's professional experiences have only been at private or public HWIs.

Octavia

Octavia describes herself as a Black woman raised in the South. She has attended both a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) and an HWI as a student, and her academic discipline is in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Octavia identifies as a single mom who works as a mid-level administrator at the HWI she attended as an undergraduate student. She has served in her current mid-level role for less than five years in the graduate student success functional area focusing on recruitment, retention, and diversity initiatives.

Tabitha

Tabitha describes herself as a Black woman raised in the Midwest. She is a wife, mother, and a first-generation, nontraditional student finishing her doctoral degree. Tabitha has served at one institution for the last 13 years in two different mid-level roles. Her past professional experiences in student affairs/student services have centered on providing support to first-generation, low-income, and nontraditional students. Tabitha currently works as a mid-level administrator at an HWI; she is responsible for professional development for the Division of Student Affairs and infusing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) effort in her role.

Dr. Lady

Dr. Lady describes herself as a Black American from the Southeast who leads with her heart. She identifies as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and has a Ph.D., but is not a "superwoman". Dr. Lady works at a mid-sized, public 4-year research university. She has been in the same mid-level administrative role for over five years for the same HWI. In addition, Dr. Lady works in student services with professional-level doctoral students.

Secretlion

Secretlion describes herself as a Black-Asian woman of Caribbean descent raised by godparents. She is also the only college graduate in her immediate family working in higher education. Secretlion has worked in student affairs for about 15 years and in the housing/residence life functional area for over ten years as a Resident Director, Assistant Director, and is currently an Associate Director.

Marie Younger

Marie Younger describes herself as a cisgender woman raised in the South. She identifies as a first-generation college student with a Ph.D., a wife, and a mother. Marie has worked for about 15 years in higher education and six (of those 15) as a mid-level administrator at HWIs, primarily in the housing/residence life functional areas at large public and mid-sized private institutions.

Ororo

Ororo describes herself as a millennial Black cisgender woman born and raised in the South. She identifies as a girlfriend/partner, a Christian, and a first-generation student who recently completed her doctoral degree. Ororo has worked in student affairs/higher education for about nine years. In addition, she has served over two years in a mid-level role at a private

Christian liberal arts HWI. Her functional area has primarily been in Multicultural

Services/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives.

Zora

Zora describes herself as a Black cisgender woman raised in the Southwest by two

military parents in the South. She grew up COGIC (Church of God in Christ) but identifies more

as a radically liberal Christian. Zora is in a committed relationship with no children. Zora has

worked in Higher Education for about 14 years and served in a mid-level role – Director and

Assistant Dean – for about nine years at three different institutions: a 4-year, mid-sized Research

II HWI in the south-central US; a 2-year public technical HWI/community college in the

Northeast; and a 4-year, large, Research I HWI in the Midwest. In addition, Zora has worked in

several student affairs functional areas, including enrollment services, Dean of students/student

success, and student wellness.

Jules

Jules describes herself as a Black cisgender woman raised in the Midwest. She is a proud

third-generation student from a line of educators and is pursuing her doctoral degree. Jules is a

Christian, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a sister friend. She has worked for over 20

years in higher education in several functional areas – recruitment and retention, scholarships

and financial aid, new student orientation, student activities, and academic advising. In addition,

she has served at the mid-level rank as Director of Multicultural Affairs for about 14 years,

creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging.

Roxanne

Roxanne describes herself as a Black, cisgender woman born, raised, and currently living

in the Midwest. She is a first-generation college student, but her most favored identities include

fiancée, bonus mom, auntie, sister, and daughter. Roxanne also identifies as a card-carrying member of the Beehive (a fan of entertainer Beyonce). Roxanne has worked in higher education for about 12 years at various 4-year liberal arts HWIs. She has served at the mid-level rank for about 6.5 years in Residence Life and is currently in the Dean of Students office.

Nadine

Nadine describes herself as a Black, Christian, cisgender woman raised in the Northeast and currently living in the Midwest. She identifies as a mother, godmother, grandmother, entrepreneur, and first-generation college student. Nadine has worked in higher education for about 13 years. She worked at a large urban community college at the start of her career. After 11 years of service, Nadine transitioned to a new mid-level role at another HWI in the career services functional area.

Natasha

Natasha is a Black Afro-Caribbean and a first-generation student raised in the Northeast. She recently left the field of student affairs after about nine years and over eight years at the mid-level rank.

Ida

Ida describes herself as a Black, cisgender, Christian woman raised in the Northeast. She identifies as a wife, daughter, and mother. She is also a first-generation college graduate currently pursuing her doctoral degree. Ida has served as a mid-level administrator for the past ten years at two HWI institutions in Student Affairs, primarily in Residence Life and the Dean of Students Office. In addition, she has worked in higher education for the past 17 years.

Sandy

Sandy describes herself as a Black woman, mother, sister, daughter, partner, and friend,

born and raised in rural, western North Carolina. She also identifies as a first-generation undergraduate and a current graduate student pursuing her doctoral degree. Sandy is a mid-level administrator at a medium-sized, 4-year, private liberal arts, nationally competitive HWI, working in academic advising and first-year experiences programs. She has been in this role for about six years.

Alice

Alice is a Black American cisgender, spiritual woman raised in the South. She has been a mid-level administrator for about nine years at two universities: large, 4-yr public, land grant, Research I, and flagship institutions in the Midwest and South. Alice worked primarily in housing and residence life throughout her career.

Jordyn

Jordyn describes herself as a Black, cisgender, Christian woman and doctoral student. She is the youngest administrator in her office, who is also single/unmarried, whereas everyone else is partnered. Jordyn has worked in student affairs/higher education for about six years and as a mid-level administrator at an HWI, working in student success for about six months. She started her career in higher education at a mid-sized Historically Black Institution (HBCU), then moved to a public 4-year HWI working in assessment and supporting underrepresented minoritized students. Jordyn has also worked in several other student affairs functional areas, including diversity and inclusion services/initiatives, campus activities, Greek life, leadership development, undergraduate research, assessment, and academic advising.

Zoe

Zoe describes herself as a Black, cisgender, straight, Christian woman who recently completed her doctoral degree. She was also born and raised in the Southeast. Zoe has been a

higher education administrator for about eight years in student affairs and four years as a mid-level administrator at the same mid-sized private elite HWI in multicultural student affairs.

Lisa

Lisa is a Black/African-American cisgender woman raised in the Southeast. She identifies as a Christian, a wife, and a first-generation college student. Lisa worked in student affairs for about five years and four of those years in three different mid-level roles at one public, mid-sized HWI. These roles were in various student affairs/services functional areas, including Gender-based Violence Student Services, Access and Retention, and the Dean of Students Office.

Nina

Nina describes herself as a Black, Afro-Caribbean, cisgender woman raised in the Southeast. She is a first-generation college student, sister, and daughter raised by a single mother. Nina served as a mid-level administrator for about 12 years at a small 4-year, selective, private liberal arts HWI. Nina has worked in several Student Affairs functional areas throughout her career, including multicultural affairs, residence life, and orientation.

Arizona

Arizona describes herself as a Black cisgender woman raised in a rural, predominately white town in the Northeast. She is the youngest of her siblings raised in a household where both parents were present throughout her childhood. In addition, she identifies as a live-in girlfriend to a cisgender man. Arizona has worked in Student Affairs for about 13 years and served as a mid-level administrator since 2012 at five types of HWIs: one small public state institution, one large Division I, a public state institution, two private Ivy leagues, and one mid-sized private institution. Her experiences have ranged across several functional areas in student

affairs/services, including Academic Advising, Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, College/Student Union, Graduate and Professional Student Services, Multicultural Services/Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Initiatives, and Orientation.

Bell

Bell is a Black and Puerto Rican woman born and raised in the Northeast. She identifies as a Christian and a first-generation college student with a middle-class upbringing. Bell has about ten years of experience in higher education and served in two mid-level roles in residence life at two types of HWIs – a public land-grant research institution and a private liberal arts institution.

Shantel

Shantel describes herself as a Black, cisgender woman raised by her father and grandparents in the Northeast. She identifies as a doctoral student, an agnostic, and a plus-sized woman working on her mental health. Shantel has been in higher education for about seven years, with one year as a mid-level administrator at a 4-year, public, mid-sized comprehensive HWI public university. All of her professional experiences have been in Housing/Residential Life.

Patricia

Patricia describes herself as a proud Black woman raised in the Southern portion of the United States. She is the youngest child and her parents' only living daughter. Patricia identifies as a Christ follower, a first-generation college graduate, and a current doctoral student. Currently living in the middle class, she hopes that higher education will help catapult her family into generational wealth. Patricia's early career in higher education has been in Housing and Admissions at an urban, public liberal arts HWI. She has worked in Student Affairs for 11 years,

with six of those years at the mid-level rank. Patricia currently serves as a mid-level administrator in the Multicultural Programs and Services functional area at a Research II, regional, public HWI in the South.

Audre

Audre describes herself as a Black, cisgender woman raised in the Southeast. She identifies as a widow, a mom, and a Christian. She is also a first-generation college student and a current doctoral student. Audre has served as a mid-level administrator for the last six years at three different HWIs: a small public Research I, a mid-sized public Research I, and a large public Research I. In addition, she has worked in various student affairs functional areas, including Housing and Residence Life, Career Services, Orientation, and Student Conduct.

June

June describes herself as a Black woman born and raised in the Northeast and currently living in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. She completed her undergraduate and master's degree at an HBCU and is currently a doctoral student at an HWI. She also identifies as a single woman without children. June has worked as a higher education administrator for 13 years at an HWI, five of those years at the mid-level. She has also worked at a private HBCU and a private liberal arts school. June's primary experience has been in Multicultural Services/Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives.

My goals while conducting this study were to: (a) bring Black womxn mid-level administrators together to explore the ways they have used voice in their roles; (b) provide research from the perspectives and lived experiences of a specific group of Black womxn in higher education who face unique challenges due to their mid-level roles and responsibilities; and (c) create dialogue space where Black womxn can learn from each other so I can share that

knowledge with other Black womxn and perhaps with higher education institutional leaders who shape the climate that this community of administrators is navigating. I brought together 25 womxn for DOPE dialogues, where they shared their experiences, their understanding of voice, and learned from each other. This study's Listening Guide (LG) analysis process recommends listening to how participants talk about themselves and their perceived relationship with others.

Creating "I" poems, like the poem opening this chapter, helps bring my participants' subjectivity to the foreground (Woodcock, 2016). Centering the experiences and voices of these 25 Black womxn mid-level administrators and how they conceptualize their experiences in their own words is essential to advancing my research goals and aligns with a womanist perspective. Chapters V and VI present this study's findings and further highlight themes of challenges faced when navigating dominant power structures at HWIs and how these womxn used their voices as Black womxn mid-level administrators. These womxn are Deliberative. They Own It! They are Powerful. They engage in the Ethic of Care. They are DOPE.

CHAPTER V: VOICING CHALLENGES

Working at a Historically White Institution … It's not home for me. It doesn't feel like
home for me.
I have worked so hard to prove that I belong in these white spaces.
We don't want to be too strong where people think we're immune to pain and trauma.
Being a Black woman was not supported and celebrated and really acknowledged.
I've come to a place where I feel like the system is too big for me to try and make a
change because it's too exhausting.
I don't want to be seen as the person that's pulling another Black person down or not
helping them be successful.
I belong at this table, and I'm worthy of this respect.

- "I" poem about participants' experiences

The experiences of Black womxn, specifically at the mid-level administrative rank, and

how we are navigating within higher education spaces shaped by systems of hierarchy, racism,

and sexism are not heavily represented in current research. Aiming to contribute to the available

research, this study explores the experiences and challenges of Black womxn mid-level

administrators at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWIs). This study also examines the

concept of "voice" to understand how participants navigate oppressive power structures rooted in

racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy. I conducted five virtual sista circles for this study,

which I named DOPE dialogues. Each dialogue met for two consecutive nights. The first night

focused on learning about the experiences and challenges of participants in their mid-level roles.

The purpose of this chapter is to respond to research question (RQ) one, which was primarily

addressed during the first night of dialogues:

RQ1: What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-

year Historically White Institutions face?

    a.   What creates these challenges?

    b.   How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism,

        or institutional hierarchy?

I used a Listening Guide (LG) method as a coding and analysis tool to gather participants' explicit examples of lived experiences and "[unearth] trends that may go unnoticed" (Woodstock, 2016, p. 2). I identified three themes about the challenges faced by Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs: Voicing Violence; Voicing Contradictions; and Voicing Complex Communities. These themes reflect challenges faced by participants at both institutional and interpersonal levels. I opened this chapter with a short "I" poem, a suggested process when using an LG as an analysis tool (Woodcock, 2016; Gilligan et al., 2011). The poem centers on participants' perspectives and provides a snapshot of the themes presented in this chapter. I present these themes as knowledge produced by participants who identify as Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. At times, I use "we" and "us" when describing the themes to demonstrate my participation in the study in connection to the third feature of Sista Circle Methodology (SCM): the researcher as a participant. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the findings and transition to expectations for the next chapter responding to this study's second research question.

Voicing Violence

During the Spring of 2020, the killing of a Black womxn, Breonna Taylor, at the hands of police officers in Louisville, Kentucky, profoundly impacted me and several of my participants. Some participants invoked Breonna's death and the killings of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery as examples of incidents that made them think about the challenges they faced in their roles in higher education. Black womxn mid-level administrators may not experience death or physical violence in the academy in the same ways we witnessed in American society because of racism and sexism. However, my participants communicated facing non-physical violence that informed their experiences as mid-level student affairs professionals at Historically White

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Institutions (HWIs). I compared the idea of non-physical violence to spirit murder – the personal, psychological, and spiritual harm to people of color through racist structures, practices, and traditions rooted in privilege and power (Love, 2013). Personal and psychological harm was often demonstrated by university cultural practices or traditions that perpetuated race or gender bias. Non-physical violence is also manifested as words or actions from supervisors, colleagues, or students that cause fear or frustration and negatively impact participants' feelings or mindsets. Non-physical violence was also reflected by abusive language or aggressive actions aimed at harassing or intimidating participants. I also found that participants signified violence by using specific terms when communicating about their experiences. In the following section, I explain my interpretations of non-physical violence represented in participants' lived experiences at HWIs.

Spirit Murder: Non-Physical Forms of Violence

Several participants voiced explicit examples of personal and psychological harm rooted in racist, sexist, and hierarchical practices or traditions at their institutions that negatively affected their lived experiences. I compared this harm to spirit murder. Love (2019) describes spirit murder as "a death of the spirit, a death that is built on racism and intended to reduce, humiliate, and destroy people of color." Shantel shared about a practice of the residents in one of the university housing areas she supervised:

> They had a thing that they did called Hard R Fridays. And that's exactly what you think it is. It's saying the N-word with the hard R. And they did that. And a Black student came up and had a conversation, crying, "What can we do about this?" And my supervisor said, "It's not our problem. Don't do anything. If you do anything, then this will be another letter in your file."

Shantel perceived the students' use of the N-word as a weekly tradition as racist and expressed feeling harmed weekly by this practice. She felt powerless to address this behavior or support

Black students also negatively affected by this action. Shantel then explained about the letter in her file. She facilitated a program with this supervisor's approval. However, when there was resistance and objection by external community members, Shantel felt scapegoated by this supervisor, who wrote a disciplinary letter in her employment records. Shantel explained:

> And when it came to it being an issue, [they] told everybody that I acted on my own. And I got a letter in my file stating that I was not a good employee. Even though I was the person who was getting emails, as well as my Black grad, getting emails… being called porch monkeys and all this other stuff.

Shantel's examples illustrate the implicit and explicit forms of racial identity bias and hierarchical exploitation Black womxn mid-level administrators can experience from within and outside the university. Harm from racist or sexist practices and verbal and administrative abuse were some challenging experiences voiced by participants. While people in leadership roles and environmental practices contributed to Shantel's experience, other participants shared examples of verbal abuse from colleagues and supervisors.

Nadine, who self-described as soft-spoken, expressed her words methodically when sharing about an incident with a supervisee:

> Welcome to my world… I just had a young lady turn in her resignation. She took a job down at [another HWI]. She had been real unhappy in her job as it was already because, like I said, there's a lot of stuff going around, and we had a miscommunication. She felt that it was okay to send her supervisor – because I'm her supervisor – she felt that it was okay to send me an email where you could tell she really was raising her voice. And then, when I had a conversation with her in person, she was raising her voice.

Nadine explained how the younger professional she supervised, who identified as a white womxn, communicated in a raised, yelling tone during the exchange and interrupted Nadine whenever she tried to respond. Nadine described feeling as if she could not return the energy displayed by this supervisee or behave like other white colleagues, whom she had witnessed openly berating their supervisors, "because," as she said with an emotionless tone, "if I do it, I'm

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the angry Black woman." Nadine's articulation of the negative trope often attributed to Black womxn responding to challenging situations in the academy is real. It is just as harmful to be defined by negative perceptions as it is to experience a high level of aggression at the hands of supervisors, colleagues, and supervisors.

In the same dialogue, Sandy described experiencing interpersonal aggression similar to Nadine, yet she approached the targeted behavior differently. Sandy recalled an experience of verbal abuse expressed via email by a colleague who was upset that Sandy was upholding a policy mandated by the university and an accreditation board. Sandy described how the university culture seemed to condone the verbal abuse because the "[white male colleague] copied his supervisor on the email where he was talking reckless, which told [her] how more comfortable he was with what he was saying." Sandy advocated for herself and spoke with her supervisor about the inconsistent accountability based on race and gender. She told her supervisor, "As a Black woman, I would never be able to communicate in the email the way that he is communicating, and it needs to be addressed, and it needs to be addressed soon." Like Nadine, Sandy acknowledged different expectations for Black womxn experiencing aggression in the workplace. Black womxn are perceived as the aggressor rather than the affected person, or the professional consequences are not the same as that of their dominant identity counterparts based on race and gender.

This group discussed several other examples of explicit aggressive behaviors or workplace bullying — intimidating, offensive, or unfair workplace treatment — they either experienced or observed. Sandy and Ida, who worked together in the same department at one point, shared about a colleague throwing books, chairs, and other items across a room during a meeting. Natasha described observing a white womxn supervisor yelling at another colleague

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with a minoritized racial identity. When Natasha attempted to intervene calmly, the supervisor accused Natasha of yelling at her. I describe these experiences as cultural violence because the aggression and verbal abuse by individuals who identify as white and/or male or as having organizational seniority appear to be accepted practices of the environment these participants are navigating. The title for this subtheme referencing non-physical violence is from a quote made by Ida. She states "… people see how you're experiencing the violence, and it doesn't have to be physical." Ida's words are fitting as she described experiencing harm, but not physically like the physical violence against George Floyd or Breonna Taylor. My participants are experiencing non-physical harm because of racist practices and dominant ideologies by supervisors, colleagues, and students. That harm is perceived as violence that affected participants personally, psychologically, and spiritually as they navigated the workplace.

Signified Violence: Emotional and Psychological Violence

My participants' narratives revealed subtle expressions of violence and war-like wording used to describe how Black womxn administrators in student affairs navigate relationships within HWIs. The words "fight" or "fighting" are mentioned about 20 times. Participants use the word "battle(s)" 14 times. "Tired" or "tiredness" is also said about 14 times. During the second listening round, I journaled about feeling sad and disturbed by the reoccurrence of these types of words on the first night of several dialogues. This reflection prompted me to intentionally code for these subtle expressions of violence during the third listening round, then conduct a word count. I interpreted these words as signifiers of non-physical personal or psychological violence experienced by these Black womxn mid-level administrators.

Shantel references the word "battle" from the word cloud for DOPE dialogue 10 (Figure

2). Describing what it means to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs,

Shantel stated:

> I keep on going back to the word 'battle.'...I think it's just a really appropriate word...
> because I think battle is not only just like an external [concept], but an internal [concept]
> when I'm thinking about it. Like, how much do I keep on pushing myself to continue
> operating at this high level when I'm going to burn out soon, but I can't afford to burn
> out? … And it's like, I want to remind people that Black exhaustion and racial trauma is
> real, and we don't have the ability to always talk about it when you're ready.

Shantel used words like "battle" and "racial trauma" to describe the challenging nature of the

work environment. Shantel is not only dealing with stressful relationships with supervisors or

colleagues, but there is also an internal struggle to stay engaged and motivated, which can

contribute to exhaustion and trauma. Shantel and others in DOPE dialogue 10 referenced words

like "battle," "exhaustion," and "trauma" to describe the impact on their inner thoughts and

professional performance at the mid-level rank at HWIs

Figure 2. DOPE Dialogue 10 word cloud

Note. This image represents the words submitted by participants in DOPE dialogue 10. In the
demographic questionnaire for data collection, participants were asked to include three words to

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describe what it meant to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs in higher education. I used an online generator to create a word cloud, a visual representation of the words submitted by participants for each dialogue. Word clouds were used as dialogue prompts. Analysis of the word clouds were outside the scope of this study.

Participants also used metaphors to signify non-physical violence participants experienced at their respective institutions. For example, Natasha felt "beat down" by the institutional rigmarole when addressing DEI issues. Tabitha voiced similar feelings of subjugation and isolation when describing her feelings about working against systems rooted in racism. She stated:

> But I think what it does in a historically white system, I think it makes me feel unappreciated. It makes me feel isolated sometimes. And, if my circle of support is not in the room with me, then sometimes I'm alone trying to battle this system of whiteness and white supremacy. That, of course, like you just said, is not designed for me, but yet I've decided to continue trying to fight it.

Tabitha's example relates to emotional violence that can cause Black womxn mid-level administrators to feel defeated and unsupported at HWIs. Experiences dealing with institutional issues left some participants feeling mentally and emotionally harmed within their roles. Yet, some participants used words signifying violence to help describe demonstrating resistance. For example, Toni commented:

> Some of these problems are not our battles to fight. Some of them are at the institutional level, and [senior leaders] have to make decisions at an institutional level to change things before you can even make impact. Some problems, yes, you can solve them. You can have impact as a Black woman in this position, but some of them are just above you, and that's okay.

Although Toni used the term "battle" to describe the challenge faced at HWIs, she is signaling that Black womxn mid-level administrators don't have to internalize these challenges. Of course, not all expressions of these terms — battle, fight, trauma — or other related words signified direct harm experienced by my participants. However, I found it significant to reveal the use of these terms as signifiers of violence as a researcher conducting this study through a Womanist

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lens. This approach aligns with paying particular attention to vernacular – the everyday language used to communicate and address power structures that influence experiences.

My participants voicing violence exemplifies some structural and cultural challenges in student affairs at HWIs that informed the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators. In the next section, I discuss some of the institutional challenges these participants face as they navigate within their roles.

Voicing Contradictions

Grounding my study in a Womanist framework led to my interpretations of contradiction when analyzing the data about my participants' experiences. Smith et al. (2019) introduce the term "contradiction" as the Womanist idea of two types of responses after recognizing systems of white supremacy and patriarchy exploit, steal from, and silence Black womxn. One response is the audacious act of Black womxn who stay to speak up against these oppressive systems with some understanding there may be little to no change. The other response is Black womxn who feel forced to remain silent to preserve a sense of safety and security. My participants voiced some of these contradictions when describing their experiences working at HWIs. For example, they voiced recognizing the contradictions of working in roles, seeking to advance within systems not designed for them, and grappling with self-perceived misaligned values. Another contradiction named by participants was about the hypocrisy of HWIs communicating efforts to prioritize diversity and inclusion. Yet, at the same time, their systems and practices continue to exclude or exploit Black womxn and other racially minoritized communities. In this section, I explain my interpretations of contradictions experienced by participants at HWIs.

It's Not My House: Existing in Spaces Not Designed for Black Womxn

Black womxn existing, let alone working professionally, is in opposition with the origins of Historically White Institutions (HWIs) built to develop, educate and employ white, wealthy, cisgender men. In over three centuries, the presence of Black womxn has increased in these spaces, but we still experience challenges rooted in racism and sexism. My participants voiced how some of these dynamics continued to inform challenges in their roles. In DOPE dialogue 5, Zora addressed this challenge:

> It wasn't built for us. (*laughter*) We weren't there at the beginning, it wasn't built for us. We are in some ways … (*deep sigh*) allowed to be there, not necessarily always [wanted] there ... (*matter-of-factly*) It feels like in some ways, obviously we are interrupters because it wasn't built for us or by us, right? So, the way that they kind of built their system, … [the space] needs to change, but, of course, bureaucracy doesn't want to change, right? ... I feel like just who we are, our [skin], is revolutionary. It's a revolutionary act (*laughingly*), and the system is not built for revolution. It's really built for quiet changes, small changes that really don't matter much, right? [Therefore], it feels like we're intruders in some ways when you are wanting to change the system.

Zora continues to explain that although colleges and universities have evolved, the culture of maintaining the status quo remains prevalent. Her reflections about Black womxn being "interrupters" versus "intruders" is a contradiction because Black womxn being present in the space is not always a welcomed idea and doesn't equate to changing oppressive institutional systems. I think the powerful aspect of Zora's reflection is her delivery. She begins her response with laughter, then moves into a serious tone after taking a deep breath, signaling the irony of what it's like navigating within an HWI. The idea of being an interrupter or a revolutionary should feel empowering, yet it was communicated with a level of sarcasm.

Several participants described how being visible as a Black womxn mid-level administrator can come with a real or perceived influence to stop oppressive systems. The title for this subtheme, "It's Not My House. I'm an Invited Guest," is from my one-on-one with Lisa

when she compares working at an HWI to working as an enslaved person moving from the field to the master house. She explains:

> I think even with using the analogy and just talking about the master's house and all of that. It doesn't matter if you're invited into a space if you had to be invited into that space. You're still an invited guest, you know what I mean? It's not my house. I'm still an invited guest. And as an invited guest, I have rules as an invited guest. There are certain expectations of things that I do and that I don't do because I'm still invited. And at any moment, I could be back outside. So yes, I have the opportunity, but I still have to play certain things a certain way because I'm still invited. I don't have any ownership. There's nothing that is entitled to me. I have no ownership. I'm invited, and my invitation can also be rescinded.

Lisa's reflection illustrates the contradiction of upward professional movement as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. Advancement can be perceived as an opportunity, but Black womxn mid-level administrators must still exercise caution with a promotion. Lisa's metaphor was both powerful and painful in describing experiences working or advancing as a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs. I state painful because it hurts as a researcher to have a participant feel powerless or devalued like an enslaved person. Lisa's metaphor powerfully illustrates the contradiction of working and advancing in environments not designed for people like Black womxn mid-level administrators. There can be a perceived level of influence with advancement as a mid-level administrator, like the perception of moving from the fields of chattel slavery to work in the master's house was perceived by some as advancing. However, one must be conscious that even this level of advancement comes with a false sense of security. That is part of the contradictory experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators. We move up and are offered opportunities, but we are still "invited guests" who must be aware of explicit or hidden rules of performing in accordance with dominant norms to succeed. It can seem futile when these norms or rules are established to work against us. Participants also discussed the presence of rules rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and organizational

hierarchy. These rules influence how Black womxn mid-level administrators "play the game," a term introduced by Marie. Even though Black womxn mid-level administrators are invited into spaces and offered opportunities to advance, they must learn hidden rules regulated by dominant racial, gender, or hierarchal norms to succeed as best as possible before the rules change.

Zora and Lisa's experiences are a snapshot of conversations during the various dialogues about the contradiction of existing in spaces not designed for them. Another layer of contradiction is how some participants communicated a sense of complicity to the systemic challenges at an HWI. Natasha framed this contradictory relationship as having cognitive dissonance:

> For me, I think our role as Black women in a predominantly white institution, a lot of times you feel like that cognitive dissonance. Like, you love working with the kids, you love working on a college campus. It's great. It's fun. You get to be an advocate. You get to be engaging. You're doing purposeful, meaningful work, but the dissonance is you're ignored. You are basically a box check. You have a seat at the table, but no one's really listening to you. You're definitely overworked, fatigued, exhausted, unappreciated. This dichotomy of 'it's great and wonderful' and 'horrible' at the same time. I always said what would make my job in higher [education] more enjoyable is if there were no administrators.

Natasha's reflections capture the opposing tension of the good that comes with the bad of being a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs at an HWI. This is related to recognizing we have misaligned values with HWIs, yet we sometimes stay silent to preserve employment or financial security. Octavia also addressed this two-sided dynamic surfacing in her role. She recognized the positive impact of her work with students and colleagues, and these experiences can be positive aspects of her role. Yet she states, "It's the other end of the coin, where it's a lot more burden and responsibility on us as leaders to get that work done. It's almost like I wouldn't want to advertise somebody do this type of work, honestly." Natasha and Octavia are communicating there can be positive, rewarding experiences as a Black womxn mid-level

administrator in student affairs. So they stay in their roles despite knowing these challenges are rooted in oppressive systems. They recognize a conflict professionally aligning with an environment whose values and practices don't fully support their identities as Black womxn. They stay in their roles and at these universities but realize staying is problematic enough that they wouldn't recommend others to be in their shoes.

Shantel, who shared her experiences with the N-word and other cultural challenges (as described in the "voicing violence" section), also expressed the contradicting tensions of having a positive experience in an environment with oppressive institutional practices. She states:

> I'll be real honest and transparent. So really and truly, student affairs saved my life in the sense of was very much like I have a history of self-harm as well as attempts on ending my life. And through being able to find myself in student affairs is really the reason that I'm still here ... And so that is really hard to turn your back on something that really has made an impact on your life, in however you want to necessarily see it.

Shantel credits working in student affairs as contributing to her professional livelihood and explicitly saving her life, even though she has experienced harm at structural and institutional levels. The common thread between Zora, Lisa, Natasha, Octavia, and Shantel's experiences is the notion of opposing experiences that convey contradiction when working as a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs at HWIs. Yes, we have access to spaces that were not meant for us to exist and thrive, yet access comes with other challenges that remind us we are not entirely accepted. We sometimes stay for employment or financial security. As a result, we are also physically and mentally grappling with the contradiction of the rewards of being invited to the master's house, having a seat at the table, or literally having our lives saved at the expense of experiencing harm in other ways.

Participants voiced contradictions in spaces with cultural norms and practices not designed to support Black womxn mid-level administrators. These HWIs acknowledge change is

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needed to be more inclusive, yet continue to function in ways that perpetuate exclusion. In the next section, I discuss another form of contradiction participants revealed about student affairs functional areas at HWIs that communicate values of diversity, equity, and inclusion yet demonstrate inconsistent action to support these values.

Microwave Mess and Leftovers Every Day: The Hypocrisy of DEI Values

After the national events in the summer of 2020, where the nation witnessed the live-streamed murder of George Floyd at the hand of a police officer and other killings rooted in racial bias, American colleges and universities seemed to become more "woke" – or socially and politically aware – of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues and communicated increasing or concretizing their efforts. Or so they would have people believe, according to my participants. Many of my participants voiced experiencing HWI's hypocrisy of DEI values. DEI hypocrisy means HWIs may pose as actively supporting DEI efforts while their actions and processes do not match.

Several participants disclosed the challenges of working at universities articulating DEI commitments yet not allocating appropriate financial or human resources to act on these commitments. For example, Ororo is a professional in student affairs working in Multicultural Student Services but experienced challenges with the added responsibility of addressing DEI efforts outside her functional area:

> Currently, if anybody asks what I do, I'll say all things DEI because that's essentially what it comes down to. For a while, we didn't even have a chief diversity officer. So, between me and my director, we handled the faculty/staff DEI and student DEI. So, I mean, we were essentially running the show, but now we have a chief diversity officer. So, it's literally the three of us that do diversity [work] at our institution. And with that, I just acquired a secondary role as an NCAA diversity and inclusion liaison for my institution. So, I do DEI on the athletic side as well as student affairs. And because there's no one interested in helping get certain Greek life for underrepresented students, I'm now also doing some Greek life [DEI] work. So it's a very interesting time with that.

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Ororo's experience exemplifies how some mid-level professionals, especially Black womxn, are often tasked to address DEI efforts within their role in student affairs and other functional areas at the university. This responsibility can cause Black womxn mid-level administrators to feel overworked, undervalued, and exploited. Tabitha shared similar sentiments when reflecting on a prior professional experience where she was seeking to advance to a mid-level rank:

> But, in order for me to get the Associate Director title, they then added … 25% of my job to be diversity work. Mind you, I've been doing diversity work on this campus for 10 years already … and that's what I explained to them. I said, "Listen, y'all know I already do this work. There's nothing that needs to be added to my job. I should have been making more money, and I should have had a different title." [It] pisses me off, but that's what they do to us. That's what they do to Black women.

Tabitha worked as an entry-level coordinator for some time, yet her workload was like those with Director level titles. She was also involved in leadership meetings with these colleagues with more advanced titles and pay. Tabitha felt exploited and undervalued and advocated for herself to get a raise and title change. Her efforts were met with resistance, and the explanation there were no funds in the budget to increase her salary. After senior leaders learned Tabitha began a job search to leave her role, leaders miraculously found funds to increase her salary. However, they added more DEI responsibilities to her role, which was frustrating. The issue was not that Ororo opposed implementing DEI services or programming. Ororo's frustration was heightened due to being exploited to do the work of multiple people or whole departments. For Tabitha, her frustration heightened when she was not recognized or paid her worth on par with other colleagues with higher titles doing the same amount of work. Then, she had more responsibilities added to her portfolio after getting a promotion and pay raise. It was frustrating that she was still expected to do more.

Another cause of frustration experienced by participants was how their HWIs lacked sincerity in addressing equity and inclusion issues. The motivation to address DEI issues seemed

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to increase at many institutions after the summer of 2020. However, the institutional responses of some participants were perceived as rushed, disingenuous, or mishandled and sometimes fell on their shoulders as Black womxn mid-level administrators to support student leaders who recognized the university's contradicting actions. The title for this section, "Microwave Mess … and Leftovers Every Day", is from an exchange between Ororo and Zora during DD 5 about experiencing and observing HWIs' lack of sincerity when responding to issues of inequity on campus and in society:

> Zora: Do you all remember that there was this meme early in the pandemic? Right around George Floyd? Where it was a student talking about the university saying, "What they're about to do here? Here [are] the next five steps that all these universities are going to do when they talk about DEI work [or] that they care about DEI or inclusion. They're going to have a DEI committee. They're going to study it. They're going to have a survey out, right?"

> *(Jules nods and laughs in the background)*

> Zora: And literally, I was reading it, and I was like, "Oh God!" Literally, if you've ever been in higher [education], it was the five things that they do over and over again, right? It's like they just microwave it and try to change it around on the plate to make it look like it's different.

> *(Jules laughs heartily in the background, Ororo is nodding)*

> Zora: I was like, "Oh my God, yo, this student just pulled their tag. Just showed the receipts". They knew. And I was like, "Oh man, these universities, they got something coming for them because [of] these students. They know the playbook. They already read the plays. They know what's happening and what's going to happen. This next generation, they ain't going to just fall for it. They're not going for it. Don't come with them with no microwave mess no more."

> Ororo: Because that's what it is. It's leftovers every day. It's the same thing or whatnot. Because I mean, you wouldn't even have a chief diversity officer if our students hadn't pulled their receipts on them.

> Zora: That was one of the plays! That was one of the plays? (*laughs and points with emphasis*)

> Ororo: (*referencing students*) "You said this in your mission as far as diversity. How come we don't have somebody to handle it? You always call the folks in student affairs to

handle it. That's not their job." I mean, [students] literally ripped the president to shreds because they were like, "No, you need somebody else." And so then you bring in the chief diversity officer, and anytime there's something Black Lives Matter, (*gasp sound effect*), you call out the chief diversity officer and the two Black folks that were in student affairs, (*referencing senior leaders*) "Let's write a statement." I'm like (*glares at screen and pauses*). And it got to the point where the three of us – because I literally have a chat that says "the firefighters" because that's what I call us. It's literally the three of us putting out fires for everything. And the chief diversity officer was like, "I got to write another statement." We're like, "We know! (*with sarcasm*) We already drafted up a little piece. Here's our little piece so we can make sure you had your part, and you don't even have to spend that much time on it because that's all they want."

I felt it necessary to include this entire dialogue as I analyzed the data through a Womanist lens, focusing on participants' vernacular–everyday language. As discussed in Chapter III, Black womxn's voices can manifest as verbal or non-verbal communication, behaviors, or actions used to address power dynamics. Zora and Ororo's exchange, with laughter and head nods by all participants, demonstrates participants' perceptions and critiques of power dynamics at play at some HWIs when responding to DEI issues. Actions by senior leaders are perceived as predictable and insincere, especially when there is a lack of direct substantive institutional action. The examples Zora and Ororo discussed demonstrate how some staff and students at HWIs are beginning to notice the lack of congruence between words and actions, and this incongruent behavior is not new. Black womxn mid-level administrators and other administrators of color are often negatively affected by this hypocrisy. They can feel tokenized when forced to be the face to respond to students and colleagues who recognize and call out these contradictory actions when addressing DEI matters.

Marie shared a similar observation as Ororo about hiring a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) to be the face responding to DEI issues with limited to no support. She read an article about the high turnover rates of CDOs leaving roles within five years and wondered why this

was happening. Then Marie disclosed her own experience of feeling tokenized when selected as

a representative to assist her school with addressing DEI issues:

> It's not enough to have a seat at the table. A lot of tables I know I sit at because of how I look, but that doesn't mean I have decision-making power. When someone is mad at an institutional decision, and I'm part of said group, I don't take responsibility for that [decision] because I know [the institution is] not listening to me. I'm there, I give my voice, and sometimes they listen to me about DEI issues or issues impacting people who look like me, and sometimes they don't.

Marie was placed in a situation to help address DEI concerns because of her visible identity as a

Black womxn and her knowledge as a mid-level administrator. As a result, she is often expected

to rationalize institutional decisions for others even if she does not influence these decisions.

Tabitha agreed with Marie and discussed her initial interest in advancing to become a

CDO, but those intentions have changed. These plans changed because she has also observed and

experienced her school's actions not matching their rhetoric. Tabitha said:

> These institutions that only want to look like they're changing. They really don't want to change though, because if they did, we wouldn't still have some of these same policies that keep on just regurgitating and over and over holding back staff, faculty, and students.

Tabitha is pointing out the inconsistency of HWIs claiming to prioritize DEI efforts. Yet, there

are no changes in institutional policies and procedures that reify the exclusion of historically

marginalized groups. These inconsistencies cause participants like Zora, Jules, Ororo, Marie, and

Tabitha to feel frustrated and ineffective when performing their duties at the mid-level rank.

The contradiction of HWI's actions not matching their commitment to advancing DEI is

not new. Roxanne's observation captures this idea of DEI hypocrisy as a contradiction in student

affairs and higher education. She shared:

> Though people outside of higher [education] think that we are this (*with emphasis*) change force, and we are the (*laughingly*) future in a way. The people inside higher [education] are like, (*stoic tone*) "No, girl. This is not that. We are at the (*with emphasis*) back of the bus, (*with emphasis*) behind the civil rights movement."

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Roxanne points out there is an illusion of prioritizing DEI efforts often portrayed by student affairs divisions and HWIs. However, staff in these units, such as Black womxn mid-level administrators, are observing or personally experiencing the opposite. U.S. colleges and universities are often seen as sites to advance DEI efforts. Student affairs is often the administrative and co-curricular area that claims to advance these efforts at HWIs (Burke & Carter, 2015). However, participants express these claims are often at the expense of staff, like Black womxn mid-level administrators, to follow through on actionable items or that the claims are altogether fictitious as there is no substantive action or support to follow through on DEI efforts.

Participants of this study recognized the contradiction of existing and navigating within institutions that were not created with them in mind or exploited their contributions. They also experienced tensions with remaining and advancing to mid-level roles or higher, even if they spoke out against oppressive systems at their HWI or complied for a sense of security. What made participants' experiences challenging and more prevalent was recognizing the contradiction of some HWIs claiming to be progressive due to promoting and prioritizing DEI efforts, yet actions do not match these claims. Participants of this study expressed they are among those responsible for implementing these efforts with little to no institutional support, resources, or recognition while experiencing tokenism and exclusion themselves. When no substantive evidence of action matches these claims of prioritizing DEI, Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs are among the staff responsible for responding to this hypocrisy.

In the next section, I move from looking at the institutional challenges of my participants rooted in non-physical violence and contradiction and discuss some of the interpersonal challenges in their professional relationships and communities with similar social identities.

Voicing Complex Communities

Some of the challenges faced by my participants were connected to environmental practices that support different forms of non-physical violence or institutional contradictions that further exploited or devalued them. Participants also voiced challenges navigating interpersonal relationships with others they worked with, including supervisors and colleagues at the mid-level rank. Interactions within these communities varied for participants, and those different experiences often depended on whether supervisors and colleagues had similar racial and gender identities. As a researcher, I applied a Womanist perspective when analyzing this study. Womanist research seeks to highlight and validate the narratives of Black womxn while also being concerned about the relationships with and wholeness of other Black womxn. As a result, the narratives about the interactions and relationships with colleagues with similar identities based on race and gender stood out when analyzing the transcripts. However, participants demonstrated uneasiness in discussing situations involving other Black womxn. This dynamic contributes to my meaning of complex. In this section, I present my findings about participants' positive and negative experiences with their supervisors or colleagues, including other Black womxn, at the mid-level rank.

Complex Relationships with Supervisors

The role of supervisors had a significant influence on the experiences of the participants in this study. Positive and negative experiences with supervisors were discussed in all five DOPE dialogues. In DOPE dialogue 6, we discussed the significance of being a Black womxn at the mid-level rank and what informed our journey advancing to this level. Ida shared her interactions and observations with past supervisors:

> [For] me, I happen to stumble upon some really incompetent supervisors. I always said, "I don't want to be in charge, but I need to be supported by a supervisor who I have faith

and trust in." And in those instances where it didn't pan out that way, I found myself aspiring to have their roles. I think that motivated me in my professional career.

Ida's experiences with ineffectual supervisors prompted her to stay in student affairs to enact positive change for future mid-level professionals. Sandy followed up by echoing similar sentiments. She described her experiences with white supervisors who limited her decision-making scope and made her feel powerless in her roles. However, Sandy felt the only way to change these dynamics was to stay to get the experience and opportunity to advance and replace supervisors who were perceived as inept in their roles. In my one-on-one with Lisa, she addressed how her experiences with supervisors impacted her self-perception as a mid-level administrator:

> I have these little pockets [of experiences], which I think taints my relationships with my supervisors. [They] get an idea of me because I kind of show up in this way of, "Oh, I'm learning from you. What do you have to share?" and then I become what feels like to me, "oh, this is my little like Black girl doll, my little pet, and I'm going to take her with me, and she's likable." Then I'm like, "oh no, this ain't what this is!" and then I switch up.

Lisa is the same participant who compared her experience as a Black womxn mid-level administrator to chattel slavery and moving from the fields to the master's house. She questioned what prompted past white supervisors to select her to advance in the various mid-level roles she has worked. Lisa does not doubt her skills or abilities. However, she questions if she is perceived as a Black womxn who is colluding with oppressive dominant structures. She questioned whether demonstrating interest in learning more from experienced supervisors to enhance her skills as a practitioner is perceived as a desire to learn about operating within the status quo. Lisa struggled because developing a relationship with supervisors for mentoring and learning opportunities seemed to initiate a relationship where supervisors began treating her as a diminutive, inexperienced person. That behavior from supervisors affected how she perceived herself at the mid-level rank and as a Back womxn. When she reasserted her authentic self as a

competent professional, the supervisors' behaviors changed negatively. Lisa later revisits this thought by stating, "[I] have a lot of negotiation and struggles with supervision." She continues to grapple with her self-perception and how her interactions with past supervisors influence how she supervises others.

The experiences with supervisors and colleagues were not all negative. For example, Tabitha shared:

> My supervisor is a white woman, but she's amazing. I love her to death. She's hardcore. She's a little lost in some areas, but she listens when she realizes that she's wrong at something, and I appreciate that with her.

Tabitha discussed her reluctance to advance beyond the mid-level rank because of prior challenging interactions and observations with supervisors and senior leaders higher on the organizational chart. Tabitha shared her observation of these supervisors dealing with university bureaucracy, which affected how they exerted power over her as a mid-level employee. However, she did not have the same experiences with her current supervisor. Shantel, whose challenging experiences with a white woman supervisor were noted in the Voicing Violence section, described a shift with her current supervisor:

> And now I'm in my current position, which is very, very different, but there's still like a lot of [thinking], "when is the other shoe going to drop?" But this is the first time I've ever had a Black supervisor, even though I'm at a PWI, who has a lot of experience, who's also within like the [Divine Nine] culture. … But it's still kind of like when he comes outside of my office, [I'm thinking], "What did I do? How have I messed up the department now?" And he's like, "I wish just to come by and say 'hi' and tell you that your [sports] team's going to lose this weekend." Or things like that. And I'm not used to that camaraderie from a supervisor because I'm always feeling like the scapegoat or the Black person that you get to talk to however you want to.

Shantel's experience demonstrates she feels distrust and anxiety with a current supervisor who treats her kindly because of prior traumatizing supervision experiences. It seems to help that her current supervisor shares Shantel's same racial identity.

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There were other examples of positive experiences attributed to working with supervisors who either identified as Black womxn or Black men. Nina states, "In fact, I'm a dual report, so I have two supervisors, and they're both Black. One's a Black man, and one's a Black woman. Incredible!" Nina and Shantel's experiences with Black supervisors seem rewarding and alleviate interpersonal challenges faced in their roles. However, there were examples of alternate perspectives in the dialogues about working with Black womxn. In addition, participants approached the topic with hesitancy. I provide examples of these varying experiences in the following section.

Dangerous Waters: Complex Relationships with Other Black Womxn

The identities of supervisors and colleagues impacted how my participants navigated the workplace as student affairs professionals in higher education, especially if these colleagues were other Black womxn. It became apparent when conducting the listenings that participants displayed a level of caution when discussing relationships and interactions with other Black womxn in the workplace. Some participants expressed hesitation in discussing complex relationships with other Black womxn. One example was Toni, whose quote about the topic being "dangerous waters" was used as the title for this section. As a researcher seeking to uplift and center the perspectives of Black womxn, I grappled with reporting these findings because they illustrate a potentially harmful image of some Black womxn in higher education. This study demonstrated Black womxn face spirit-murder, institutional hypocrisy and other challenges rooted in racism, sexism and organizational hierarchy. Addressing the complex relationships with other Black womxn felt dangerous because my participants and I don't want to reinforce these challenges or contribute to devaluing Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. As a reader, I invite you to read these narratives with the understanding that they

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reflect the lived experiences of my participants and do not seek to portray a comprehensive

image of Black womxnhood at any level or position in higher education. We must recognize that

part of the challenges between Black womxn occur because we are aiming to find our place and

voice within oppressive spaces that sets us up to compete with each other. Those strategies may

be interpreted as behaviors that align with the dominant norm that is also working against Black

womxnhood.

Some participants shared that positive and negative supervision or interpersonal

interactions with Black womxn affected their self-perception or professional development. Bell

described her experiences:

> I have felt blessed in a lot of spaces because I've had some good supervisors, and I've had
> supervisors who have looked like me. But I've had some that look like me, and it went
> haywire.

Bell clarified that the supervisors who looked like her were other Black womxn. Bell continued

to tell a story about working with a Black womxn supervisor. This supervisor prided herself as a

mentor who supported the professional development of younger, less experienced Black womxn

professionals and graduate students. That relationship was a safe space for Bell as she navigated

higher education as a young professional. Bell experienced empathy and understanding that

seemed to be present because they shared the same identities as Black womxn. However, the safe

space experience was not universal for Bell when working with Black womxn supervisors. Bell

expanded on her experiences:

> But then I will also say on the flip side, the standard of excellence ... I've always felt like
> there was a different level [of expectation from Black womxn supervisors] than what my
> other colleagues would get … They're like, "I'm not going to have you out here looking
> crazy. And if nobody's going to tell you something, I'm telling you."

Bell proceeded to tell a story of a Black womxn supervisor giving her feedback on her

professional attire – her dress being too short. She questioned if this supervisor would have

provided similar feedback in the same way to a white colleague. The expectation from the Black

womxn supervisor of how to "be" a mid-level professional felt different for Bell. Bell thought the

outfit was work-appropriate because she had worn the same outfit to church. However, she

accepted the feedback as a form of professional development.

The heightened expectation from Black womxn supervisors to behave or dress a certain

way was a narrative that surfaced in other dialogues. Some participants compared these

expectations to policing each other. Other participants thought these expectations from Black

womxn supervisors or colleagues were a form of protection and guidance on how to successfully

navigate within institutional cultures with rules set by whiteness and patriarchal norms. Zoe

commented on this idea of policing:

> Racism is real. Sexism is real. But I also think it hurt even more because it's a Black
> person saying it to another Black person. Of telling them like how they should dress and
> that they should like literally dull it down just so that they can get heard. And that stayed
> with me. I'll be honest.

Zoe's reflection comes after telling a story about her observation of a Black womxn mentor

advising another Black womxn colleague in Zoe's presence. Zoe describes herself as short in

stature and enjoys wearing high-heeled pumps, sometimes four inches high. She is comfortable

wearing heels that height, and these shoes make her feel confident as a professional. The older

Black womxn mentor suggested to Zoe's colleague (in Zoe's presence) not to wear high heels

because wearing heels may cause other white colleagues to have unfavorable perceptions about

her. Zoe was unsure if the suggestion was subtly being offered to her as well and was uncertain

how to interpret the interaction in general. Zoe felt whether or not this Black womxn mentor was

directing the suggestion to her, the feedback was perceived as the use of respectability politics

placating to dominant standards of dress and behavior. Zoe thought her appearance and what she

wears should not be the primary indicator of the quality of her work as a professional mid-level administrator.

Participants' caution while discussing challenging experiences with Black womxn supervisors or colleagues in their student affairs units was particularly evident in an exchange in dialogue four. Tabitha shared experiencing a toxic work climate in a department with predominantly Black colleagues who sought to regulate her behavior and how Tabitha carried out her duties in her role. The title of this section is reflective of a comment made by Toni in response to Tabitha:

> I was just going to say this is very dangerous waters, what we're talking about. I think we got to be careful when it comes to policing each other. Marie said yesterday, "We have to stick together."

Tabitha didn't expect to experience interpersonal challenges in a community of colleagues with shared racial and gender identities. Toni's response to Tabitha demonstrated the sensitivity on the topic of interactions with Black colleagues, including Black womxn, in the workplace. Toni continued reflecting that while those critiques are perceived negatively, perhaps feedback from Black womxn supervisors is a form of protection or shared wisdom about navigating within institutional systems not designed for minoritized racial and gender identities. This level of protection can result from lessons learned from how these Black womxn supervisors navigated racist and sexist spaces they occupied in higher education. Dr. Lady enters the conversation by explaining she often tries to find the balance to mentor younger Black womxn colleagues as an older person at the mid-level. However, she may not always relate to the experience of her fellow Black womxn colleagues in the same way. As a result, her strategy of mentoring can be perceived as directions to perform inauthentically, but the message is not always received with the same intention it was given. This conversation engages all the participants in this dialogue.

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Toni proceeds to caution against revealing these complexities as such revelations may create circumstances to polarize Black womxn in the workplace further. Tabitha states:

> So, Toni, you were saying about how they'll use it against us to play us against each other. And I think that we're already used in that way. I think that they've already learned how to weaponize folks of color against each other.

Tabitha's statement demonstrates another perspective of how the culture of HWIs poses interpersonal challenges for some Black womxn at the mid-level rank. It also illustrates why participants were cautious about disclosing these experiences and my hesitation to write about them as findings. Toni and Tabitha highlight the possibility of other colleagues working in systems rooted in white supremacy using these narratives to create or widen chasms between Black womxn, causing more interpersonal challenges. Tabitha continues by stating:

> And I don't even know if I want to bring this up, but what I will say, the thing that we don't talk about because of that loyalty and because of us not wanting to, of course, I'll never have this conversation in a room full of white people but some of my main hurt, when my heart has been broken the most, has been at the hands of Black women within these institutions. And that's something my loyalty and my support, and my always wanting to uplift Black women, keeps me from talking about that. It keeps me from actually speaking about that. And so then these people get to keep on going on and hurting the next person. And so I think that that is another thing that we struggle with, is that loyalty and support that we have for folks, it's also the thing that's hurting us.

Tabitha's reference to loyalty connects to what makes critiquing the harm and hurt imposed by other Black womxn difficult and dangerous to discuss in public. However, Tabitha also alludes that staying silent about these matters can contribute to continuing a cycle of harm and negative interpersonal interactions.

Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs units at HWIs are in community with students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. Participants' interpersonal relationships with supervisors and other staff members significantly impacted how they navigated their workplace at HWIs. Some challenges participants faced included dealing with perceived incompetent

supervisors or demeaning supervisors who exercised administrative authority to limit participants' decision-making power. Supervisors also impacted participants' self-perception as Black womxn mid-level administrators. On the other hand, some supervisors demonstrated support for participants. The situational experiences with supervisors informed some of the complexity experienced by participants. The complexity of relationships was heightened when discussing the challenges faced when interacting with other Black womxn supervisors and colleagues. While participants expressed positive and challenging experiences with supervisors, the hurt and harm seemed more intense when challenges were at the hands of other Black womxn. Black womxn mid-level administrators experience challenges in student affairs and in higher education differently. At times there are Black womxn who have learned to navigate and succeed by behaving in ways they think are helping other Black womxn, but in reality they are contributing to the oppression. Navigating white supremacist spaces can cause conditions where Black womxn may attempt to mentor or protect other Black womxn by offering feedback on how to perform but have the feedback perceived as policing. Black womxn supervisors or colleagues may have different "standard of excellence," as stated by bell, for other Black womxn because they recognize we are navigating spaces where the rules are different for us. Those expectations may be perceived as being harsher or promoting conformity to oppressive norms. Ultimately, I claim it's important to recognize what makes the relationship between Black womxn complex are the white supremacist, patriarchal, and hierarchy structures that promote or reward conformity, competition, or divisiveness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have answered the first research question of my study:

What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year
Historically White Institutions face?

    c.   What creates these challenges?

    d.   How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism,
        or institutional hierarchy?

I found participants faced several different challenges as Black womxn in mid-level roles. First, they experienced various forms of non-physical violence in the form of racist or sexist traditions, verbal aggression, and emotional and psychological harm. These experiences seem to exceed what the current literature calls a chilly work environment (Collins, 2001). Non-physical violence negatively impacted participants' self-perception and ability to perform their roles effectively without fear or trauma. Second, although the demographics at HWIs have evolved over centuries to include more racial and gender diversity, these institutions still seek to reproduce, support, and reward docile bodies that do not challenge white supremacy, elitism, and sexism (Wallace et al., 2020). Third, Black womxn mid-level administrators faced the contradiction of existing and navigating interactions within institutions that were not created with them in mind. Participants expressed being exploited, tokenized, or having their work devalued as student affairs professionals in higher education. Experiencing marginalization and tokenism align with challenges in current literature about the general experiences of Black womxn in higher education settings, regardless of being at the mid-level rank (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West, 2015). There were additional tensions from feeling complicit in these oppressive systems that promote but don't consistently follow through on DEI commitments by remaining and advancing to mid-level roles. Lastly, participants faced complex relationships with supervisors and colleagues,

especially with other Black womxn. These experiences caused mistrust of supervisors and

colleagues and apprehension among participants when discussing interaction with other Black

womxn.

In Chapter VI, I present the findings in response to research question two about how

participants use their voices relative to their experiences navigating dominant power structures in

the workplace.

CHAPTER VI: USING VOICE

> For me, voice is everything.
> It's my belief system … it's my opinion. It's the sound … It's all of those things.
> Voice for me is more than just the spoken word. It's also some of the silent pieces,
> the influence, the perception, the whole packaging of self.
> We don't just come in there talking about what we know. We're able to show what we
> know.
> I needed to show up for myself authentically as a Black woman.
> Helping them to understand that "No, I belong at this table, and I'm worthy of this
> respect."
> I also need to represent the voice of others who aren't at the table,
> who don't have a voice because I am the only Black person in that room.
> I'm now feeling more confident as a professional.
> My voice is my passion and my power.
>
>   - "I" poem about participants' using Voice

The purpose of this chapter is to respond to research question (RQ) two, which was primarily discussed during the second night of dialogues:

RQ 2: How do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

I applied a deductive analysis approach (Saldaña, 2021) during the third listening session of the DOPE dialogues, noting when participants spoke about voice in ways that aligned with my conceptual framework presented in the introduction chapter and Figure 1 – voice as identity, content, context, or process. The first theme I identified is Multidimensional Voice, which reflects the layered understanding of voice as Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs. Four additional themes emerged by deductive analysis reflecting how participants behaved or communicated in ways congruent with my DOPE perspective of Black womxn introduced in Chapter 1: (a) Deliberative Voice; (b) Owning Voice!; (c) Powerful Voice; and (d) Voicing Ethic of Care. I opened this chapter with a short "I" poem of participants' quotes reflecting elements of these themes. In this chapter, I present a more in-depth overview of the findings on participants' use of voice to navigate challenging experiences informed by dominant

power structures in the workplace and challenges presented in Chapter V. These challenges included (1) spirit-murdering (Love, 2013) and other forms of emotional and psychological violence; (2) experiencing contradictions working in spaces not designed for Black womxn and other forms of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) hypocrisy; and (3) complex interpersonal interactions with supervisors and colleagues. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the findings and transition to expectations for the next chapter.

Multidimensional Voice

For this study, I referenced current literature to develop a framework for the multidimensional nature of Black womxn's voices. I claim Black womxn's voices function as a combination of the following elements:

- Identity: whose voice, who has agency with voice, how voice creates and is created by identity, such as Black womxnhood;

- Content: what thoughts, expressions, or experiences are communicated as subject matter;

- Context: why thoughts/experiences/subject matter are communicated; where thoughts are communicated - the physical and social conditions of the environment that supports or prevents the message from being shared; and

- Process: how content and context are communicated.

Across all the dialogues, it became apparent there were multiple ways participants defined and understood voice when navigating challenging experiences informed by the dominant power structure in the workplace. There were active connections between understanding one's identity as a Black womxn mid-level administrator, how voice is applied verbally and non-verbally, where and in what workplace situations one uses their voice, who participants voiced perspectives to, and what is being voiced (Figure 1).

Octavia reflected on what she learned about her voice over her tenure as a mid-level professional and how her understanding of voice evolved while navigating workplace interactions during a global pandemic. Octavia expressed her perceptions of voice:

> I think voice is also situational. It depends to me what person is involved as far as what voice is even needed. Some think that you have a scale voice. And sometimes, depending on what's the effort at hand or the colleague, you can decide how powerful your voice needs to be at that time to still get the goal accomplished. And also, for me, when I think of my voice, (*chuckle*) I'm working on it, but I think sometimes tone is also a big thing.

Octavia refers to the audible aspect of voice by mentioning "scale" and "tone." This auditory process of voice is influenced by who she was interacting with or what goal Octavia was addressing at the time. She was addressing aspects of process, content, and context of voice. In the same dialogue, Tabitha shared her perspective on various attributes of voice:

> I know it's that woman thing, but then when you throw in us being Black women. Well not only do you have to be Superwoman. You've got to have a Ph.D. You've got to be able to make people smile a little bit. You can't come in too direct and too stern. You can't disagree with anybody too quickly in order for them to feel like you will (*gestures air quotes with fingers*) "fit" within that cabinet or fit within that table.

In Chapter V, I presented Tabitha's reluctance to advance beyond the mid-level rank because of challenging interactions with supervisors and senior leaders at her institution. Tabitha was also a doctoral student and thought getting her terminal degree would allow her to be valued more and have more influence in her role as a mid-level administrator. Tabitha's quote highlights the idea that Black womxn are often expected to overperform in their roles, like "Superwoman", while also having to consider getting additional credentials and communicating or behaving in alignment with acceptable norms of higher education institutions that are not fully accepting of Black womxnhood. For Tabitha, voice is who she is and what she knows – reflected by her academic and professional qualifications, considering her colleagues' perceptions, where she was situated at her institution, and her communication style.

A conversation during this dialogue captures the different perspectives of the various layers of Black womxn mid-level administrators' voices. For this study, participants were asked to submit a form of media (e.g., images, graphics, memes, quotes, etc.) to help elicit responses about their understanding and application of voice in their roles. For example, Ida submitted an image (see Figure 3) that prompted a rich dialogue with others in this group.

Figure 3. Megaphone Image

Note. In the demographic questionnaire for data collection, participants were asked to include visual media representing what "voice" means to them as Black womxn mid-level administrators. This image, submitted by Ida, resonated with several participants in DOPE Dialogue 6. Visual media were used as dialogue prompts. Analysis of visual media were outside the scope of this study. Image citation: Arthimedes (n.d.) - Large group of people seen from above gathered together as a megaphone symbol.

I present an excerpt of a conversation between participants prompted by this image:

> Sandy: I mean, at first, I was like, "That's a megaphone!" And then, I was like, as Black women, we're working to be heard. But then for me, I was like, sometimes that puts us like we're in an echo chamber, right? Like we're saying all these things, and we're

thinking about how we're saying it, and although we're not yelling it, people still take it as if we're yelling. And, sometimes, we're just in this echo chamber, and nobody's really hearing what we're saying. And I think sometimes, a lot of times when I see people with megaphones, its people who are in protest, right? They have a megaphone. They're trying to be heard. They're trying to get their point across. And they have that megaphone because they feel like they're not heard. And they're using that megaphone as a tool to help them be heard. But then, I was also wondering, like, the people around it. There's people that are part of the megaphone. People make up the megaphone, but at the same time, [there's] a lot of people that are walking away that kind of have their backs turned. It was just interesting to see because I feel like as a Black woman, I think we all in some way, shape, or form have referred to this picture in a number of ways, right? Like the people being in the room, hearing us say things, but yet we're not there. I mean, like Natasha just told us [about] this whole situation, how she just gave all this information, and somehow it's been dismissed. As if she's not even there [and] what she said didn't even exist. And the people that are in the picture that have just turned their back and not even listening to the megaphone or what's coming out [of] the megaphone or the person that's talking through the megaphone. So yeah, it's just a lot. I was just curious what the interpretation was because that's what kind of came into my head.

Alice: I was thinking the same thing. I was looking at it as "that's a megaphone." Then I was more drawn to the shadows of the people that were around it and not included in it. And I'm like, *(long reflective pause)* people hear, but they don't care. Like you were saying, Sandy, it's an echo chamber. And only the people that make up the megaphone I can think of that as like other Black women that are in the same situation as we are in, or even other people of color that are other marginalized identities where they're using all the force they can, and people are still just walking around oblivious and just doing whatever they want. That's what I thought when I was looking at [it], and I wanted to be optimistic or positive and see that the [megaphone] is there and it's projecting everybody's thoughts, but then at the same time, I was just thinking like, "nah." It's just only certain people [who heard] it, and everyone else is just oblivious to it.

Ida: So, that was one of the images that I selected. And I intentionally looked for an image that didn't have words. I wanted to leave room for interpretation [because] that's what I feel like messages are oftentimes, right? You may say one thing, but someone else hears something else. And so I wanted to leave room for interpretation. But then also when I, when I saw the image of folks walking away, I sort of think about "what do I want people to take away from what I'm saying and what do I want them to do with it?" Right? So thinking about where are they going next after they've heard whatever my spiel is or my messages, where are they going next? And what actions and how may that impact [or] have like a ripple effect on something else? And then the absence of the middle part, the white part, the white space. I was like, "Well, it looks like a bell, right?" So are you using your voice to sound an alarm? Are you using your voice to bring attention to something, to amplify something? Or is it the emptiness that you feel when you're not heard? And so all that was in that one image. (*laughter*)

Natasha: So what I thought when I saw that picture … somebody sent this [quote] to me,

and I always keep this in my mind (*paused to look through phone*). It says, "Know this: Some people will not hear you regardless of how much, how loud, how truthful, how loving, or how profound you speak. Wish them well and let them go." And those are the people, they're never going to hear you, no matter what you say. So don't waste energy on that. Like, stay in the crowd, say what you got to say, but those people walking away, you're never going to get them. No need to bother yourself with that.

This conversation about Figure 3 between Sandy, Ida, Alice, and Natasha reflects the multidimensional perspective of Black womxn's voice. Ida stated her intentionality of selecting this image to leave room for multiple interpretations of voice. These participants discussed the interrelated aspects of identity, content, context, and process. For example, Sandy connects to the identity component of voice when commenting on how hard Black womxn, in particular, have to work to be heard. Similarly, Alice suggested it matters to consider whose thoughts are projected through the megaphone. Ida's consideration of the takeaways from her message relates to the component of voice as content and sharing ideas or knowledge. The interpretations about the figures that make up the megaphone conveyed how participants interpreted the audience as context – whether these figures are listening, oblivious to the messages, turned away dismissing the message communicated by Black womxn, or taking action based on what was said and heard. I interpreted statements made by Alice and Sandy about being in an echo chamber also related to context and considering one's environment when using voice. Sandy's comparison of using a megaphone as a tool in protest or Ida's perception of the white space as a bell amplifying a message exemplifies the process of voice. Our group conversation about the image was rich and demonstrated the complexity of Black womxn mid-level-administrator voices.

I connected the quote Natasha read aloud to how I approached analyzing the stories and narratives of my participants. I interpreted parts of Natasha's excerpt (i.e., "Wish them well and let them go," or "No need to bother yourself with that") as conveying that Black womxn mid-level administrators should not focus on the negative challenges presented in higher education. I

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also considered the Womanist framework that guided my research lens and recalled Wyche (2016) points out that Womanist research studies are often framed from a strength perspective. As a result, I approached coding during the third listening with a focus on the self-affirming accounts of how participants used voice and aligned those narratives with my DOPE perspective introduced in Chapter 1. These findings are presented in the following sections.

Deliberative Voice - Knowledge and Wisdom of Voice

The "D" in DOPE stands for deliberative. I explain Black womxn being deliberative by having a distinct consciousness and moral capacity to understand self and self in relation to others when taking action. I compare deliberative as a manifestation of First Lady Michelle Obama's quote from her speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, "When they go low, we go high." Knowing about ourselves and the people or situations we navigate is important to make principled decisions. For Black womxn, this level of awareness and action aligns with how I further describe deliberative as having both knowledge and wisdom. More specifically, knowledge is having information and understanding about the systems of oppression that inform our experiences, while wisdom is knowing how and when to apply that knowledge to survive these dominant norms and achieve desired outcomes (Banks-Wallace 2011, Brock 2005). Participants of this study provided examples of using deliberative voice by demonstrating an understanding of self and their environment and strategically taking action when navigating spiritually and psychologically violent and contradicting environments or complex relationships with supervisors or colleagues at HWIs.

As presented in Chapter V, some participants discussed this idea of "playing the game," which is about understanding the presence of hidden rules rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and organizational hierarchy that guide individual and culturally oppressive practices of HWIs.

Marie spoke about using voice in relation to "playing the game":

> I think about knowing the rules, knowing what your agenda is and what your desired outcomes are, and how you need to get there. What relationships you need to make? What are the cultural aspects of where you work? And what will work? In some institutions, certain levels have decision-making agency and authority [where] you might can get something done at your level. In another institution, that might not be the case. But, these cultural norms that exist at all these institutions, those are the things you need to know in order to play the game and get your agenda accomplished.

Marie acknowledges that we can already assume these hidden rules exist at HWIs that inform dominant cultural norms. With these considerations, she is suggesting the significance of also knowing what our goals are as Black womxn mid-level administrators, assessing what power or authority we have in our roles, and understanding what relationships and environmental elements exist. Knowing these factors can help determine what may support or hinder our desired outcomes as Black womxn mid-level administrators. Marie is talking about the combination of identity – recognizing the scope of power or agency and identifying personal goals, and context – identifying relationships and other environmental conditions that will influence her action steps. Octavia also offered a perspective about how she used her voice relative to this idea of playing the game:

> I think once you learn the rules, you learn how to outsmart [others and] strategize more to make sure that you're on the winning side of the game at the end. So, I would say it involves strategy, [and] working with others involved in playing the game. But also knowing who are the strongest players on that team to make sure you win.

Octavia asserted it is significant to understand the context, including the presence of oppressive rules and norms, and to figure out how to make the rules work for us as Black-womxn mid-level administrators, even if these rules were not designed to do so. Using voice is about having the knowledge that we are working in or seeking to advance within systems not designed for Black womxn mid-level administrators, but having the wisdom to strategize how to make the rules work for us.

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Several participants spoke about the roles mothers and mentors played in their lives to support how they understand themselves and their relationships with others and develop the wisdom to manage the challenges presented by HWIs effectively. For this manuscript, I focus on messages from mothers because, in Walker's definition of Womanist (Appendix B), she talks about Black mothers communicating with their female children. Sandy noted how messages from her mother informed her identity development and self-definition about navigating and surviving challenges at the mid-level rank. Sandy said:

> Anytime I think about voice, I think about my mom and seeing her as a Black woman and how she navigated spaces, especially with white people, and the things that she taught me. So, I lost my mom [some] years ago, but the things she told me: How to speak, how to carry myself, in particular in relation to white people, it rings in my head all the time. [I] remember she would always tell me, "You always speak up," "You always project your voice," "You never let anybody make you feel like you're less than," "You always speak your mind and share your thoughts." These are things that she would always tell me and my sister. So, I think for me, voice as a Black woman ... And she always said too, "You always look white people in the eye." She always said that "When you're having a conversation with them, you never look down. You don't ever look down when you're talking to a white person, [and] you look them in the eye so they show you respect." Just things like that.

The message from Sandy's mother about speaking up, projecting her voice, and looking white people in the eye are examples of the process of voice. How Sandy engaged the process of voice reinforced her understanding of self and fostered a sense of empowerment that supported how she interacted with white colleagues at HWIs. Alice reflected on the occasions she felt her voice – what she said and how she relayed a message – was heard the most when she practiced techniques learned from her mother about communicating with white colleagues or supervisors. Alice commented about her mother teaching her when to exude confidence effectively. Alice stated those lessons were "like she was saying, 'say it with your chest.'" Alice did not understand why her mother instilled these messages. However, after years of learning, growing, and sometimes even failing as a student affairs professional, Alice recognized the wisdom behind her

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mother's lessons and was strategic about when to apply that wisdom during her interactions with others.

Lisa also described how messages from her mother informed how she uses her voice as a Black womxn mid-level administrator:

> So I feel like I have voice, and I think that's been something that's just been a part of me as a person since I was young that I learned from my mother. And so I've always felt like I had voice. I've had experiences where my voice has gotten me in a lot of trouble in school because I'm always speaking up when I didn't agree with things. So I was always aware of my voice, and I learned pretty early on that my voice can cause a lot of damage and indirectly cause me damage because of the result of me speaking, even if it was true.

Lisa expressed always having confidence in using her voice. She elaborated about having the wisdom to exercise that confidence and not always speaking up as a form of personal damage control. She states, "just because it's true, it doesn't mean that you hold onto it and that you hold other people to that standard because true doesn't mean right." Although Lisa has the moral capacity to identify the problematic truths within the harmful systems and practices at an HWI, her consciousness helps her recognize she doesn't need to address these truths every time. Not because she is afraid of aligning herself with those practices but because people perpetuating these oppressive cultural norms are not always ready to hear these observed truths. As Black womxn in mid-level roles, we often already know what's up! I use this colloquialism meaning we are already aware that we are navigating in spaces in the academy not meant for us. We already know to be in the space doesn't mean we can always change it. Therefore we often develop strength in our identities and the wisdom to not further complicate complex relationships by pointing out the violent and contradictory nature of HWIs. When thinking about the quote by Michelle Obama, we know when to go high, but Black womxn in mid-level roles also know when not to go at all.

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Owning Voice- Credibility of Voice

The "O" in the DOPE acronym stands for Own It! This slang term is a declaration about how Black womxn operate with a sense of personal responsibility and seriousness when communicating and taking action. Banks-Wallace (2011) discusses the ethic of personal responsibility as a dimension of Womanist epistemology. This concept indicates perspectives and actions taken in research are often grounded in concrete realities and personal beliefs. This understanding can be applied to knowledge constructed and actions taken by Black womxn mid-level administrators as practitioners. Their views are based on lived experiences, formal education, and professional training, often informing their actions at the mid-level. To Own It! asserts that constructing and communicating this knowledge is how Black womxn mid-level administrators use their voice, and this knowledge should be considered credible by the dominant power structures at HWIs.

Participants of this study shared experiences of how the content and knowledge they presented in their roles was a form of using their voice. Secretlion remained quiet for a better part of DOPE dialogue 4 but engaged energetically when we began a conversation about how participants used their voice to navigate challenging interactions or spirit-murdering in the workplace. Secretlion is a Housing and Residence Life professional who described an exchange at a meeting with contractors building a new residence hall:

> I can remember a time when my voice was tested throughout this experience of building a residence hall and having constant meetings with the construction company, campus facilities and management, and [others]. And I had to be the voice for the students because, of course, facilities and construction, they're just focused on just building a building. And I'm like, if you're building a residence hall, we've got to think about lounge spaces for the students. We've got to think about studying spaces for the students. Bathrooms that are accessible for disabled students, and things of that nature. So I didn't realize how empowered my voice [was] or how strong my voice was going to be in all these different meetings that we've had and trying to build a residence hall. And that experience was great. And, of course, everyone in campus facilities and management, and

construction were all middle-aged or older white men. So for them to see me, who's a little petite, African American woman sitting there in a room giving them direction. That was a problem for them. And I felt very proud in those meetings.

Secretlion explained she and her supervisor are the only two Black women in the Division of Student Affairs at her HWI, which has over 200 professionals. They often experience frustrations navigating the predominantly white space. However, Secretlion is confident about her knowledge of student development needs and residential experiences after over ten years of working in the residence life functional area. She knows her stuff! Yet, she constantly faces doubt from others and microaggressions based on her gender, race, physical stature, and mid-level rank. She is confident about how and what knowledge she constructs based on her experience and schooling. Communicating that knowledge is how Secretlion uses her voice because "[she wants] to be unforgettable at the table in any space [she's] in with [her] colleagues, especially since [she's] technically the only person that knows [her] job and what that means for the students."

Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs often think about how their identities influence how others [mis]perceive their knowledge and ideas. As a result, Black womxn mid-level administrators often hold themselves to a higher level of accountability for how and where they gather knowledge to reduce questions about their credibility. Arizona commented on this idea:

> For my voice at work, I tend to not speak on something unless I know what I'm talking about. I'm not just going to talk to talk. So if I'm speaking in a meeting, it's because I rather have seen it live, I have the research, I've read the things, whatever it might be. So I'm not just speaking to give an opinion, or so my name is on the minutes. Like listen, that's why you should trust [my contributions] because we've been taught to know what we're talking about. And to be able to back it up just in case you question [us].

Arizona is highlighting the seriousness with which she approaches her work responsibilities. Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs are cognizant that we are operating in

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HWI spaces not meant for us. That often comes with colleagues having doubts about our knowledge and skills. As a result, we know we have to "come correct" – approach our work with a level of personal responsibility and accountability. In my DOPE perspective, I submit Own It! means having a sense of personal responsibility for our knowledge and how we use our voice. Owning voice is about being responsible, serious, and credible. Black womxn mid-level administrators are not being performative when contributing their knowledge and ideas. Using our voice means acting with integrity when constructing and communicating knowledge.

Understanding the value of Black womxn's identity and how that identity is shaped by the concrete realities of navigating violent, contradictory environments, and complex relationships at HWIs based on those identities is a component of owning voice. Being grounded in one's identity informs how one constructs and contributes content – knowledge and ideas – while performing their duties in their role. The credibility of their knowledge supports most Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs to advance to this rank. Jules noted the significance of knowing herself as she navigated the various jobs she's had in student affairs over 20 years. She admits that self-awareness and confidence were not always present, preventing her from asserting the knowledge she acquired through formal education and professional experiences. However, Jules's demeanor has changed over the years. She states, "This time, I'm walking in like, 'Hey, I've arrived. I'm a Black woman. You all are going to hear me.'" Jules reflected on how she navigates addressing DEI hypocrisy and complex relationships with supervisors and colleagues in her current role within multicultural student services. She is confident in what she knows through her years of experiences but also owns that her identity as a Black womxn is a significant part of her voice. She knows that her voice as identity should be respected just like her knowledge and ideas.

Owning voice is about the credibility of Black womxn's knowledge construction. The participants of this study revealed who they are informs what they know. Being aware and confident in both their identities as Black womxn mid-level administrators and their content knowledge based on lived experiences, formal education, and professional training is how they use their voice when navigating violence, contradiction, and complex community.

Powerful Voice - Courage to Speak Up or Leave

The "P" of my DOPE perspective stands for Power. I submit that Black womxn mid-level administrators can reclaim power by using their voice when working in spaces and environments not created for us. Powerful voice is demonstrated by engaging in the courageous spirit to speak up. Vocally speaking up is relative to the process dimension of my voice framework – the verbal and nonverbal actions of communicating. Powerful voice also recognizes our authority when we decide to leave the toxic environments of HWIs on our own terms.

Courageously Speaking Up

In Chapter V, I discussed one of the ways Black womxn navigate institutional contradictions and non-physical violence rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and organizational hierarchy is by speaking up against these oppressive systems. Speaking up comes with assessing professional risks and understanding there may be little to no change. Across all the dialogues, several participants addressed this idea of risk when speaking up as mid-level administrators. Tabitha points out:

> But it seems like when I think about my voice, Black women's voices in these historically white spaces, the word risk constantly comes to my mind. It's like in order for us to use our voices, it's as if we always have to be okay with taking a risk. And I think that is because of how powerful our voices are and how much truth-telling I think we do with them. Unfortunately, in those spaces, they don't want to hear that (*chuckle*) so it's almost like always consistently having to be okay with putting yourself at risk.

Tabitha's statement, I believe, relates to the idea of speaking truth to power. There is assumed

risk in speaking up and truth-telling to hold colleagues accountable in recognizing how they

perpetuate spirit-murdering or create challenging interpersonal relationships. These colleagues

may not want, or be ready, to hear about their harmful actions.

Nina shared an expression she uses to remind herself about the significance of speaking

up:

> Basically it says, "When life gives you lemons, make orange juice and leave the world wondering how you did it." And this is a quote that, for me, reminds me that sometimes you need to tell people what the sacrifice was required in that orange juice happening … And so that's how I think about utilizing my voice, whether it be for myself or for someone else to say, "I need you to understand what that required of that person. Or what that required of me, or what that required of this team" or whatever. So that quote, for me, just pushes me to not remain silent in the way that I move.

Having the courage to speak up is necessary for Nina when working with supervisors or

colleagues who ignore or devalue her presence or contributions. Sometimes Black womxn mid-

level administrators in student affairs have to outright tell supervisors or other senior leaders

about their accomplishments as a form of self-advocacy or vocally advocate for others. Ororo

spoke similarly about being vocal and using her voice to "[make] noise and cause some good

trouble" as a form of advocacy. The term "good trouble" was used by the late civil rights leader

and Senator John Lewis. His idea, popularized in contemporary social media before his passing,

suggests there is power in standing up for oneself and one's personal beliefs. In the same

dialogue, Zora indicates the significance behind verbally speaking up. She explains, "If I need to

say something, even [if] it's not going to be perfect, I'm still going to honor that piece of myself."

Having the courage to speak up can be a form of self-advocacy and empowerment needed when

navigating challenges experienced at HWIs, even if one uses tones or speech mannerisms

deemed inappropriate when measured by the dominant norms of the academy.

Similar to Nina explaining how speaking up was her way to advocate for others, other

participants also indicated having the courage to speak up was significant to model for other

Black womxn or colleagues. Audre offered another perspective on role modeling that I found to

be impactful:

> I've been more vocal in gathering people because of stuff that I would've normally let go of ... this is the first role that I've had where I'm more cognizant of the imprint that I have on my daughter. And so I'm a little bit more intentional in thinking about how do I teach her to be more vocal for herself as a mother. Even when it was just Audre and as a wife, I didn't care. I let stuff go. I would vent and then just let it go. But now I'm like, "No, I wouldn't want [my daughter] to stand for this. I wouldn't want her to do this." And so I say a little bit more.

Audre uses the urban expression of "gathering people," meaning she holds others accountable

when speaking up. For Audre, exercising courage to speak up is as much about role modeling for

her daughter as it is about advocating for herself. Black mothers modeling the use of voice is an

empowering factor. This influence is similar to how Sandy and Alice were impacted by their

mothers, as described in the Deliberative Voice section. Black womxn mid-level administrators

in student affairs having the courage to speak up can reduce the negative impacts of their

experience both in and outside HWI spaces.

Participants were clear about how they believed being vocal and speaking up was a

powerful act, even if there was a level of risk involved. Black womxn mid-level administrators

verbally using their voice for themselves and others takes courage and is an empowering factor

as they navigate challenging experiences with people and oppressive environments at HWIs.

Power in Leaving Roles

In Chapter V, I discussed how some Black womxn mid-level administrators experienced

a sense of complicity to the systemic challenges presented at HWIs. They grappled with the

contradiction of working in roles or seeking to advance within systems not designed for them or

that operated with misaligned DEI values. While some participants used their voices by staying

and speaking up against these contradicting systems and non-physical violence, others found power by leaving their roles. Leaving was how they used their voice.

June described working in a previous mid-level role at an HWI where student activism was prevalent in response to the killings of Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY, and Mike Brown in Ferguson, MO. Part of June's responsibility was to offer student support and develop diversity awareness programming in response to these national social issues. Due to her role and identity, June was often called into spaces to help develop institutional responses to DEI issues to the point that June indicated the university president knew her name and face well. However, June consistently experienced hostility and a lack of support from her supervisor, who was a white womxn. June said her supervisor would make statements like, "You're doing too much outside the office." June attempted to work with her supervisor to determine the best strategies to manage her involvement in university-wide DEI projects, especially when the invitations came from senior leaders like the university president. June stated she met her job expectations and continued supporting students effectively. However, her supervisor would continue to exhibit hostile behavior toward her. June felt like "[this supervisor] just hated that people liked me" and didn't recognize how June's knowledge of students and programming added value to these external committees and projects. June used her voice by job searching and resigning from that role. June stated:

> She was shocked that I left. (*emotionless tone*) I don't know why. But in my card when I left, she was like, "You're going to do great things. I'm just your biggest supporter." I'm like, (*elevated voice and widened eyes*) "What? Who are you?" The card was just so weird to read.

June was surprised at a card she received from that supervisor at her going away gathering. June continued to describe the supervisor's surprise at the demographic of guests who attended June's going away gathering. Guest ranged from students to senior-level administrators, not just

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departmental colleagues. That type of representation was uncommon at going away gatherings for staff who resigned. June interpreted the diverse guest representation as a testament to her contributions on campus and that others recognized her value, even if her supervisor did not. Using her voice by leaving was a message that the university was losing a valuable member.

Jules shared a similar story about using her voice by leaving a previous role and that her absence in the role caused others to recognize her value. Jules stated, "So it took me removing myself, it seems like, for people to actually hear my voice." Jules described working within a team in a student involvement area where several colleagues had responsibilities supporting student leaders. Jules felt an invisible pressure to prove herself by overworking. She also felt the office dynamic was one where the work would not get done if she were not performing her duties and that of others while supporting and advising students. At some point, Jules realized she could not continue working in that environment and resigned. Jules said, "So, for me, when was my voice actually heard? When I was on my way out the door, then people realized." Jules noted taking some risks to leave that role but felt empowered by not succumbing to the unhealthy pressures of that department's culture.

As described in Chapter V, Lisa was the participant who compared working in student affairs at an HWI to chattel slavery, and that advancement was like moving from the field to the master's house. Although she was offered advancement opportunities, promotion often felt like she was being tokenized. Advancement didn't feel like it resulted from her knowledge or positive performance. Her white womxn supervisors didn't seem to want to learn about her or how she could contribute knowledge from her academic experiences or professional training. When she got into these mid-level roles, white supervisors treated her differently if she didn't behave in ways that supported oppressive dominant structures. As a result, Lisa used her voice by leaving

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when realizing the true nature of relationships and expectations. Lisa specified:

> And so I feel like the crazy part is, in my experience, I feel like [past supervisors] don't want to learn from me, or they don't really know who I am until I leave. That's always my power move. And then it's like, (*with sarcastic tone*) now you want to do lunch, and now we're kind of eye-to-eye, and now I can be in this space and be this person. But I feel like so far, my power move has been to leave, to peace out, and then all of a sudden, it's like, "Okay, now y'all understand who I am." And I don't want that to be my goal. I want to learn how to be [seen while] in the role, but so far, my way of expressing that has been [that] I get to that extreme, and now I'm out.

Lisa transitioned into three different mid-level roles over four years. She found that leaving a role after recognizing complex supervisory relationships was a power move and a mental health move that gave her peace of mind. She found that when she left, these supervisors would seek to develop relationships with her and gain an understanding of her knowledge. To be clear, Lisa and study participants like Marie, Toni, Nina, and Bell would comment on recognizing professional boundaries are needed when developing relationships in the workplace. Participants were not seeking friendships if those relationships did not transpire organically, especially with supervisors. Participants sought to be supported, respected, and their knowledge and contributions recognized. If they did not receive these components, in addition to experiencing spirit murder and aspects of institutional contradiction, they left. They found power in leaving their role or institution, especially after experiencing the global pandemic when participants found time to refocus and reprioritize personal and professional values.

Patricia also indicated she expressed her voice by leaving mid-level roles after experiencing challenging supervisor relationships or non-physical violence. She offered some additional advice for Black womxn mid-level practitioners. Patricia advised:

> I would say to other Black women to know when it's time to shift or transition. Sometimes we overstay out of a sense of loyalty to students, to the university, to all of these things that aren't ourselves. And so choose us in that process. And if you choose to stay, document! Learn how to document things in the right way. And if you choose to leave and you have an [Equal Opportunity] case, let them know. Not just at an exit

interview, because we know universities don't do anything with that. But while HR is not our friend, [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] cases and complaints and reports and records go somewhere, and that could be helpful to you in your process.

Patricia is encouraging Black womxn mid-level administrators who leave their jobs due to the challenging experiences to also use their voice by vocally speaking up about those toxic workplace experiences. These experiences should be recorded to accurately reflect why these professionals are leaving. I have observed and experienced supervisors and colleagues providing a false or altered narrative about why a Black womxn colleague departed a role or institution. Recognizing external parties may never fully know the truth behind a person's personnel history, Black womxn mid-level administrators can also claim power by officially documenting and telling their truth to appropriate institutional offices, like Human Resources, before they officially depart.

It can be difficult to navigate within dominant power structures rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and organizational hierarchy at HWIs. Some of those difficulties can affect how Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs use their voice. Some find power to address challenges by speaking up, and others find power in leaving. Speaking up and leaving are associated with the process dimension of voice – the methods to relay or communicate the other dimensions of voice, like identity or content.

Voicing Ethic of Care - Expressing Authenticity and Empathy

The "E" in the DOPE acronym stands for Ethic of Care. This concept is comprised of three interrelated components:

- Personal expressiveness: unique personal expression, language, style of dress, forms of worship, or other factors of interacting with others;
- Emotion: one's personal belief in what content or knowledge is communicated when

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interacting, and the depth of feeling associated with that knowledge;

- Empathy: recognizing how one's well-being is connected to the well-being of others (Collins, 2003, Banks-Wallace, 2011).

When interpreting the data for this study, I found participants often addressed two components of this concept – personal expressiveness and empathy. They spoke about using voice by demonstrating authenticity and personal expressiveness through dress or other forms of non-verbal expressions. Banks-Wallace (2011) states, "The affirmation and expression of one's uniqueness are considered essential to the individual and collective well-being of African-Americans" (p. 321). Personal expressiveness is a form of self-care and personal recognition that supports their confidence and motivation to navigate psychologically violent workplace culture and challenging interpersonal relationships successfully. Black womxn mid-level administrators caring for themselves by expressing their uniqueness in appearance or communication style enabled them to role model or directly show care for others. Demonstrating this type of care was a way of using voice to resist the dominant structure in the workplace. Others demonstrated empathy by recognizing the connection between their identities and those of the undergraduate and graduate students they advocate for in their roles. Some participants also discussed role modeling empathy by extending support to other Black womxn who also perpetuated spirit-murder or contributed to complex, challenging relationships. Using voice was a combination of considering identity, process, content, and context.

Urban Nails and Other Authentic Expressions of Voices

For the study participants, one approach to engaging in the process of voice to navigate dominant power structures at HWIs was by expressing their authenticity through dress, personal style, or other non-verbal communication styles. Most of us have heard the saying, "How you

dress informs how you feel." This adage became apparent as participants discussed using their

voice and finding the motivation to address workplace challenges by how they style themselves.

One aspect of style that was discussed across several dialogues was participants getting their

fingernails done to express their unique identities. The title of the section was from a quote made

by Jordyn:

> I thought about how I even think I might have internalized this message of the way I present myself will impact how my voice is heard. Or how my voice is interpreted and received. And so, at work, I dress very professional. With (*with emphasis and laughter*) a hint of popping, but I dress very professional. I always wear heels, usually. And one is because I like to look nice, but two, I think I might have internalized when I present myself in a certain way, people will hear me when I speak because I look a certain way. Now my nails, I have absolutely committed to giving urban nails. I have committed to that because I was doing the professional nail thing. And I'm like, "Y'all, I want some designs. I feel like I'm a boring person." I'm like, "The one thing that's going to give me some pizzazz in my life is these nails." And for any Black girl [student] who I come across that want to wear long nails, and they think they can't have long nails as a professional. I'm going to be an example that you can have some long nails with some designs on them. Since it's like if they don't ever see nobody else at that campus working with long nails, y'all going to see me with them. But yeah. So I thought about how I present myself and how I think that might impact how my voice is heard, especially being young.

Jordyn describes "giving" urban nails, an urban slang term explaining how she displays

her authentic self. Jordyn asserts how she presents herself through dress and designing her nails

impacts how she feels heard or accepted. I believe Jordyn's reference to dressing professionally

is informed by acceptable standards often rooted in white supremacy and patriarchy. Jordyn

adhered to some of that standard and recognized that may have impacted being accepted and

heard. However, it's important for her to add her own "pizzazz" because that gives her the

confidence to assert herself. She also considered how she served as a role model for other Black

womxn students to encourage them to express their authenticity while navigating with HWIs. In

the same dialogue, Zoe also discussed wearing high-heeled pumps gave her the confidence to

assert herself when interacting with others. Even though, as described in Chapter V, she

perceived other colleagues questioning her professionalism, Zoe found she was most comfortable and confident in addressing workplace challenges when she wore heels and was pleased with her appearance.

Across most of the dialogues, several participants describe expressing their voice as stylish nails and other styling factors. Whether they wore special earrings, bold-colored lipstick, or unique hairstyles, these personal expressions were a form of resistance against some of the anti-Black culture of HWIs. Similar to Jordyn, Ororo expressed her personal style supported her ability to push back against the dominant narrative of professionalism while also connecting with students. She explains:

> I think my students really appreciate me coming in with my hair in its natural state. I'll wear a [head] scarf. I'm very much a person that I can turn it up and dress up, but then I'll literally come in with a sweatshirt and yellow sneakers on, and then the students [are] like, (*said in a swaggered tone*) "Oh, that's Dr. [Ororo] with a drip!" (*laughingly*) That's their thing. And that's important to me because that makes me relatable to my students. But then also I want the people that are at senior administration level [who] are usually white people, to know I'm not going in with my head bowed. I need you to know I'm here and I'm here for the students and I'm here for pushing the mission forward. So that's kind of how I use my identity for my work.

Ororo recognized working at an HWI may cause some Black womxn mid-level administrators to feel like they have to exercise caution and display professional standards rooted in dominant cultures. However, if she cannot express her authentic, unique personal style, she does not feel comfortable and confident to perform her job duties and withstand other challenging dynamics in the workplace. Personal expressiveness also supports how Ororo built trust and rapport with the students she served. They find her relatable, and having positive relationships with students allows Ororo to understand and advocate for their needs effectively. This idea of personal dress as a form of voice resonated with my experience. I noted my excitement when hearing participants sharing these examples of using voice. As a higher education professional, I often

get my nails done with unique designs or colors or wear graphic tees with social messages and cute sneakers to work or national conferences as a personal expressiveness voice. I felt encouraged to learn of other Black womxn mid-level administrators who used their voices similarly to resist power structures at respective HWIs.

Some participants also expressed using other forms of non-verbal expression of voice to withstand challenging workplace environments. Tabitha, Nina, and Jordyn explained communication style factors like speaking with international or regional accents and intentionally not code-switching to "sound" acceptable as examples of authentic personal expression of voice. Roxanne spoke about no longer monitoring her facial expressions during meetings:

> So I think of it in the sense of for me and my voice, sometimes it's not necessarily literally using my voice when I'm in a meeting or at a table or whatever. I am extremely animated in my face all the time, so I don't have to say a whole lot sometimes in a meeting. Everybody can know exactly how I feel, or what's going on, or the gears are turning, or I'm annoyed, or anything like that.

Roxanne further explained that she reached a point in her personal life and career where she did not have the capacity to monitor her nonverbal expressions to make others feel comfortable.

Sandy made a similar argument:

> At some point, early in my career, I made a decision that I was going to be unapologetic about who I was. And I was going to show up as me, and this is what you get because I got to do all the other stuff all day. So the last thing I need to add on to [workplace challenges] is not being myself. Like, we already got to have all these difficult conversations. We're already telling everybody how what y'all doing don't make sense and how it's racist. So the last thing I need to add to [my experience] is not to be able to be myself. I told myself I won't be code-switching. The words that come out is the word you're going to get. How I say it is how I say it. Whatever my face looks like when I say it is how it's going to look. Whatever my hand motions are is what you're going to get. I think for me, making that decision that I wasn't going to do those things helped me to be able to focus more on, "Okay, how am I going to make sure that what needs to be said, or what I want to be heard is being heard." Like that strategy and the intentionality behind it.

Sandy and Roxanne acknowledge they often experience challenges related to spirit murder and

DEI hypocrisy. They have to navigate these challenges while meeting general or imposed higher expectations of performing their roles. HWIs are not fostering environments to make them feel comfortable, so why should they be expected to make others feel comfortable or monitor their non-verbal expression? Using their voice was authentically expressing verbal and non-verbal communication to navigate power structures in the workplace. Not all Black womxn mid-level professionals expressed the ability to express their authentic selves. For example, Toni stated, "I do feel authentic in some spaces, but in some other spaces I don't feel safe to be myself." Personal and psychological safety are valid factors to consider, especially in spaces that may impose non-physical forms of violence. For some other participants in this study, expressing themselves authentically contributed to strengthening their self-efficacy to navigate oppressive structures at HWIs as Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

Expressing Empathy

Another way participants used their voice to address spirit murder, institutional contradiction, or challenging workplace relationships, especially with other Black womxn, was by practicing empathy. As a Womanist epistemological framework, Banks-Wallace (2011) states, "Empathy implies a level of concern grounded in the realization that one's own well-being is connected to the well-being of others" (p. 321). For this study, I associated how participants spoke about their advocacy for marginalized students as a way of using their voice because advocating for these groups of women enabled them to address the oppressive structures at work.

June spoke about demonstrating empathy by advocating for student needs when participating in meetings with university leaders who can make decisions about policies and programs:

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Specifically in this field, I try to add voice to student experiences because students don't necessarily have the power and agency to be at certain tables that I am to add their perspective. So I tell students, "Let me know what you need, what you want. Because if I'm at a certain meeting and I'm able to voice that for you, I will. Or I'm going to bring you to that meeting with me so that you can add voice to what you need." So voice is just making sure that things that need to be said are said and not speaking unnecessarily.

June explained that she is deliberate when speaking at meetings and recognized that her ideas and perspectives were best heard when representing students' needs, particularly racially minoritized students. Sometimes, the development needs of this student population mirrored her needs as a Black womxn working through some of the toxic challenges at her HWI. June recognized she was impactful when she was not only focused on her professional challenges. Advocating for racially minoritized students was June's way of expressing empathy. Advocating for students allowed her to use her voice to challenge the dominant norms at her HWI.

Zora reflected on her inability to separate her student experiences from her own as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. She said:

As a Black person in America, I don't want to be at a table and have a voice where I can't speak about my lived experience and the experience of others who look like me or I know are marginalized or underrepresented, right? It feels like it would be inauthentic to me, or at least it would feel like I am not ... It feels like there's a responsibility or duty, right? That my voice is more than just ... It feels like I can't just be me. I also need you to represent the voice of others who aren't at the table, [and] who don't have a voice because I am the only Black person in that room. So if I don't speak on it, who is? Who's going to?

Although she doesn't work in multicultural student services, Zora noted that she must speak on behalf of marginalized communities based on her racial identity and positionality at the mid-level. She explained it could feel exhausting to "represent a whole long laundry list of people" with visible or invisible marginalized identities. However, Zora thought it would be inauthentic if she didn't demonstrate empathy by shifting her mindset to think about the inclusion experiences of students based on race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and students from rural

areas. Zora indicated these social groups were her institution's primary marginalized identity groups.

As indicated in Chapter V, a topic that surfaced was complex relationships with other Black womxn supervisors or colleagues. Although this topic came up as a theme, there was minimal discussion about using voice to overcome this specific challenge. However, participants in DOPE dialogue 10 discussed the significance of expressing empathy and care for other Black womxn. In Chapter V, I highlighted how Bell articulated a positive experience with a Black womxn supervisor. June followed up with a story about working with another Black womxn colleague who does not always meet expectations in her role. While June finds this colleague's inaction frustrating, she recognizes a need to demonstrate empathy. She could only assume what form of interpersonal challenges this fellow Black womxn colleague is facing in her role and how those challenges affect this colleague's performance. June stated:

> And I'm just like, "I can't let us fail." So I'm going to do extra stuff. So I can't let it look like we're slipping as a collective because if there's one, it's 'y'all.' So that has been my experience.

June revealed taking on extra responsibility by assisting that colleague with their duties. She recognizes the general attitude and perception of Black womxn administrators is that they do not meet expectations, and that assumption is assigned to most Black womxn, collectively. Patricia echoed the sentiment of supporting other Black womxn even if they do not offer that support in return. She explained:

> I think for me, it's the notion that I've always been taught that we have to protect each other in the Black community regardless. And so if I have an issue with another Black person, I need to go talk to that person and kind of keep it in-house, or try to cover them, because one, like you said, if you look bad, we all look bad. Because most of the time they don't know us apart from each other … So I need to support you, even if you raggedy, because the next person may not get a chance or another person of color, a Black person, may not get a chance to do that … But ultimately, I don't want to be seen as the person that's pulling another Black person down or not helping them be successful.

Patricia also suggests there is a need to think collectively. The Black culture teaches us to care for and protect each other. I assert this attitude aligns with the Womanist perspective of demonstrating love for all Black womxn. Patricia commented that showing support and empathy is not only about the individuals involved in the situation but can significantly impact other Black colleagues (women or men) who seek to assume similar mid-level roles at HWIs. Even if Black womxn colleagues act "raggedy" – unfavorably – our fates are tied. Patricia indicated a desire to avoid contributing to the lack of success or misperception of another Black womxn showing her understanding that her welfare as a Black womxn mid-level administrator is inextricably tied to the success of other Black women mid-level professionals.

For the participants of this study, using their voice to express an ethic of care was demonstrated by behaving authentically. For some participants, that meant being comfortable expressing a unique style of dress and appearance as a form of resistance against the dominant narrative of professionalism. For others, personal expressiveness was a non-verbal communication style that can be perceived as unacceptable by the dominant norms of the academy. However, some Black womxn mid-level administrators persist by exercising their voice how they feel comfortable. They recognize the hypocritic culture of their HWIs is not shifting to accommodate them, so why change who they are and how they communicate to accommodate the institutional culture?

Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs using their identities and access to decision-makers supported their ability to express empathy for students. Advocating for students with marginalized identities was a way they used their voice. Empathy was also exhibited to Black womxn colleagues, even if these colleagues contributed to the challenges these participants experienced in their roles.

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have answered the second Research Question of my study:

RQ2: How do Black women mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs

use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

Using deductive analysis, I found participants understood voice as a multidimensional concept in alignment with the framework I introduced in Chapter I. This framework reflects the interrelated components of Black womxn's voice as (a) identity, (b) content, (c) context, and (d) process. My analysis revealed how participants' use of voice was congruent with how I conceptualize Black womxn's ways of being and communicating as DOPE: this means (a) acting with a Deliberative Voice, (b) Owning Voice!, (c) claiming a Powerful Voice, and (d) voicing an Ethic of Care. Acting with a deliberative voice is to know about yourself, others, and your environment, then apply wisdom when taking action. For several participants, their mothers and mentors taught them to understand themselves and develop the wisdom to act as a form of survival. Owning voice is taking personal responsibility to construct and communicate credible knowledge. Understanding how identity plays a role in how that knowledge is constructed is also significant.

Claiming a powerful voice was reclaiming power and agency as Black womxn mid-level administrators by vocally speaking up to address the issues they observed or experienced despite the potential for personal or professional risks. Participants also claimed power and communicated strong messages when they left their roles, choosing to escape oppressive spaces. Voicing an ethic of care included showing empathy for students from historically marginalized communities and colleagues. Participants also voiced an ethic of care by expressing their uniqueness through appearance and communication style. The personal expressiveness supported participants in feeling confident and motivated to actively resist and persist through the challenging culture of the workplace.

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In Chapter VII, I discuss my findings, present recommendations to further support and amplify the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators and outline implications for future research.

CHAPTER VII: LEARNING FROM DOPE VOICES

Black women are just DOPE!

--Toni

This study was initiated by my reaction to a performance review process I felt was an institutional tool used to silence my voice as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. I acted audaciously and questioned the performance review but was also mad and hurt. My anger was legitimate because I was navigating within a space not designed for me to exist, let alone succeed, and the review seemed to function as a challenge. One of my faculty mentors advised me to "shift the paradigm." These wise words helped me shift my focus from the dominant norms of the institution and look inward at the legitimacy of my voice, as well as those of other Black womxn mid-level administrators. This study centers and amplifies the voices of 25 Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my research study and present the strengths and limitations of the research. Then, I respond to the research questions and discuss the connection between findings to current literature and my theoretical framework. Following the discussion of findings, I share key takeaways of the study. Then, I present implications for research and practice to support positive experiences and amplify the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators. Finally, this chapter concludes with my reflection as a researcher and Black woman mid-level practitioner.

Overview of Study and Findings

Black womxn administrators in student affairs often play significant roles in recruiting, mentoring, and retaining students while managing key initiatives that support student development, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts and engage internal and external

stakeholders such as faculty, alums, parents, and the surrounding community members (West, 2020). Despite the significance of their contributions, Black womxn administrators experience challenges due to racism and sexism in higher education (Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West, 2015). Most of the current literature focuses on the struggles of Black womxn administrators in leadership roles, with no attention to organizational rank. There is a gap in the literature about their experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and organizational status in the student affairs functional area. This study contributes to scholarship about the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs (Adams, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Stewart, 2016)

Black womxn mid-level administrators' voices are often unheard or silenced while working in historically white spaces. Current literature about Black womxn administrators, regardless of organizational rank, are often described as silenced, unheard, or state a need to center and recognize their voices in higher education settings (Adams, 2021; Arjun, 2019; Becks-Moody, 2004; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2001; Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Stewart, 2016). Some scholars allude to raising awareness about the figurative and literal "voice" of Black womxn in the academy (Hope, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Miles, 2012; Wright & Salinas, 2016). I perceive the lack of literature about the experiences and voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators as an example of silencing. As a result of this perception, this study investigates the challenges faced by Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. Additionally, I examine the concept of "voice" relative to how they navigate these challenges.

Two research questions guide this study:

1. What challenges do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year Historically White Institutions face?

    a. What creates these challenges?

    b. How might these challenges be connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy?

2. How do Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at 4-year HWIs use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace?

I conducted five virtual sista circles, referred to as DOPE dialogues for this study, to assist with responding to the research questions. Each group met for two consecutive nights, consisting of a total of ten dialogues. On the first night, I focused on learning about the experiences and challenges of participants in their mid-level roles. On the second night, I focused on understanding how participants understood and used their voices to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace. The DOPE dialogues incorporated semi-structured interview questions and two media elicitation activities. Participants were asked to include three words to describe what it meant to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs in higher education. For the first night, I used an online word cloud generator to represent their words visually. For the second night, participants submitted a type of visual media (e.g., social media image, GIFs, a screenshot of a quote/passage, etc.) representing what "voice" meant to them as Black womxn mid-level administrators. In addition, I created a compilation of the visual media submitted by participants for each dialogue group.

Using a Listening Guide as an analysis tool (Appendix G), I identified eight themes in this study. There are three themes for research question one about the challenges participants

faced at both institutional and interpersonal levels: Voicing Violence, Voicing Contradictions, and Voicing Complex Communities. There are five themes for research question two about how participants used their voices to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace. These themes are Multidimensional Voice, Deliberative Voice, Owning Voice, Powerful Voice, and Voicing Ethic of Care. In the next section, I discuss some of the strengths and limitations of my study.

<div align="center">**Strengths and Limitations of Study**</div>

The Sista Circle Methodology (SCM) was a strength of this study. SCM informed my research approach when collecting, analyzing, and presenting findings. In addition, the features of SCM strongly align with Womanist theory.

Lacy (2018) indicated that the first feature of SCM - communication dynamic - is not only about verbal communication but that "Black women in spirit and community are continuously communicating with their whole being" (para. 6). This feature also aligns with the characteristic, spiritualized, that describes practices that reconcile mind, body, and spirit as discussed in Chapter III.

The second feature of SCM - centrality of empowerment - suggests that Black womxn's lived experience is a legitimate form of knowledge construction, and engaging in dialogue is a valid format to share and make meaning of those experiences in research (Johnson, 2015; Lacy, 2018). Conducting sista circles (or DOPE dialogues in this study) allowed me to achieve my research goal of bringing Black womxn mid-level administrators together and creating a dialogue space where they could learn from each other and share that learning with others.

The third feature of SCM - researcher as participant -, aligns with the Womanist characteristic of antioppressionist. This feature supports inclusive research design and values

reciprocity between researcher and participants to eliminate power dynamics in research (Johnson, 2015; Lacy, 2018). I demonstrated inclusivity throughout my recruitment and data collection process by intentionally using "womxn" as discussed in the terminology section of Chapter I. I also demonstrated reciprocity by participating in DOPE dialogues and facilitating the member check process in a similar dialogue structure to enable participants to provide feedback on my analysis process and initial findings.

As a researcher, I frequently engaged in reflexive practices such as journaling and taking voice memos during data collection and analysis to monitor my subjectivity while conducting this study. Glesne (2016) indicated reflexive practice, such as asking oneself, "What do you notice?" "Why do you notice what you notice?" and "How can you interpret what you notice?" (Jefferson, 2000, as cited in Glesne, p. 152) are trustworthiness strategies. I incorporated similar questions in my Listening Guide while analyzing participants' narratives.

Facilitating sista circles/DOPE dialogues as a method was a strength and limitation of this study. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to conduct dialogues virtually. Virtual dialogues allowed me to expand my recruitment outreach efforts and widen the net of eligible participants for this study. Participants were at HWIs in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and Midwest regions of the U.S. Only two participants were at the same university, and two others worked at the same institution at one point in their professional careers. There was a diverse representation of schools and student affairs functional areas. This range of representation allowed for diverse perspectives to be included in the study. A limitation of the virtual sista circles was the barrier to fully experiencing the "kitchen table" metaphor central to dialogue. The informal yet community-centered nature of dialogue around a kitchen table, or common space in person, is an essential part of SCM and Womanist research. Meeting virtually

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for the dialogues posed some challenges, as faulty internet connections sometimes made

participants inaudible, disrupting the flow of conversation. At times, participants would turn off

their videos which made capturing the fullness of their communication dynamics difficult. This

barrier made it difficult to fully capture the range of non-verbal communication dynamics with

multiple participants, which is a signature of SCM.

Overall, the alignment between Womanist theory and SCM enhanced the trustworthiness

of this study. Another trustworthiness strategy was engaging in reflexivity practices as a

researcher. While sista circles are a crucial feature of both SCM and Womanist research,

conducting them virtually posed some challenges in capturing the wholeness of participant

narratives.

In the next section, I respond to my research questions and discuss the connections

between my findings to current literature and my theoretical framework.

<div align="center">**Research Question Responses**</div>

The first research question for this study was developed to support Black womxn mid-

level administrators to tell about their experiences and challenges they faced at HWIs. The

second research question was framed to understand how Black womxn mid-level administrators

communicate about and address these challenges through the concept of voice. The findings

reflected in Chapters V and Chapter VI directly respond to these questions, respectively. I

provide an overview of the research question responses in this section.

Challenges Faced by Black Womxn Mid-level Administrators

My findings for the first research question indicate that participants faced forms of non-

physical violence, institutional and personal contradiction, and complex relationships with

supervisors and colleagues. I compared experiences of non-physical violence to spirit murder

because challenging interactions with students, supervisors, peers, and other campus stakeholders were described as psychological attacks that affected participants' lived experiences. In addition, the range of racial microaggressions to overt hostile, aggressive behaviors in the workplace left participants feeling psychologically or viscerally harmed.

Participants indicated experiencing exploitation or being devalued as Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs due to the contradictory nature of HWIs. Their presence disrupts the historical and contemporary narrative of HWIs as spaces initially built to educate white, Christian, elite, property-owning, [cisgender] men (Adams, 2023; Collins, 2001; Wallace et al., 2020). Black womxn mid-level administrators' personal perspectives and professional contributions support the functional operations at HWIs, especially those communicating values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, their talents and efforts often went unrecognized, and participants also received little to no human or financial support to effectively perform their duties. The lack of support or recognition resulted in some participants experiencing existential conflict. Some participants questioned themselves about staying in spaces that needed to be more fully inclusive. Some grappled with the tensions of recognizing the significance of their presence and labor or having some rewarding experiences within their institutions while recognizing they also had misaligned values with HWIs.

Participants also experienced complex relationships with supervisors. Sometimes harmful supervision prompted participants to stay and pursue advancement as mid-level professionals to counter these ineffective supervision styles for future professionals. The decision to stay required some participants to maintain or foster relationships with supervisors even after experiencing personal or professional conflicts. Some participants articulated unexpected positive experiences with supervisors with different racial or gender identities. However, participants also indicated

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tensions with experiencing and naming challenging experiences with Black womxn supervisors or other Black womxn colleagues. Participants recognizing and verbalizing these tensions were especially hard because they expected support and camaraderie based on having similar race and gender identities.

The challenges participants faced were created by negative attitudes that shape the perception of Black womxnhood and the mid-level role. Attitudes inform individual actions and behaviors that intentionally or unintentionally recreate or support harmful practices. Spirit murder or other forms of non-physical violence, contradictory institutional or DEI values, or complex interpersonal relationships seemed to be the result of one or more of the following factors: (a) explicit racial bias; (b) marginalization based on the intersection of race and gender identities; or (c) the devaluation of the mid-level role.

These challenges and harmful practices are connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy because these oppressive structures inform the foundational values of HWIs. Wilder (2003) discusses that the establishment of higher education institutions in the U.S. were rooted in white supremacy. HWIs were built by enslaved Black people on land stolen from Indigenous people (Adams, 2023; Wilder, 2003). Candia-Bailey (2019) addresses the historical ties to sexism, stating, "Higher education is deeply rooted in a dominant ideology and women are often left behind in the trenches" (p. 21). Candia-Bailey explains how this dominant ideology was what U.S. colleges and universities were built upon to prepare young white men to be religious and government leaders. Institutions' values and practices rooted in white supremacy, gender oppression, and elitism shape and produce individual attitudes, behaviors, and cultural norms that exclude, marginalize, or suppress people with intersecting identities based on race, gender, and organizational status.

I relate this idea to Bourdieu's cultural and social reproduction theory which explains how individuals interacting within dominant, oppressive systems and structures, like HWIs, can maintain or reproduce dominant, oppressive ideologies and actions (McDonough & Nuñez, 2007). Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs are experiencing racial and gender bias reflected in hostile and aggressive behaviors, exploitation, and devaluation. I assert that even the interpersonal challenges with other Black womxn are the result of cultural and social reproduction in the form of respectability politics. Black womxn who perceive other Black womxn as behaving differently than the socially acceptable norm dictated by white supremacy, gender oppression, and elitism can be considered engaging in respectability politics.

One purpose of this study was to learn about the challenges Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs face at 4-year HWIs, what creates those challenges, and how those challenges are connected to larger structures of racism, sexism, or institutional hierarchy. Participants' descriptions of their experiences at HWIs seemed more traumatic than how current literature describes the "chilly environment of the academy" (Collins, 2001, p. 30). Collins (2001) provides a historical overview of the participation of Black womxn in the academy and discusses how education was a tool to support socialization in the academy and society after the Civil War. I learned from my participants that their credentials to qualify for employment at HWIs did not absolve them from the challenges of being in a place not designed for Black womxn that is rooted in white supremacy, gender oppression, and elitism. Even if these institutions had commitments to DEI values, their challenges persisted. My participants' narratives expand on findings from similar studies, like West (2015), discussed in Chapter II. West's (2015) study explored how African American womxn professionals in student affairs experienced being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized at predominately white

institutions. However, West's (2015) study did not seem to focus explicitly on Black womxn mid-level administrators like my study. My interest in experiences at the mid-level was to understand what was similar and different between my experiences and that of other Black womxn mid-level administrators at HWIs. I learned from my participants that the non-physical and psychological harm is more profound than West (2015) discussed. With examples like Lisa comparing working as a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs to chattel slavery and other examples of spirit murder, I believe what my participants communicated as challenges profoundly impacted how they performed, communicated, and perceived themselves in their roles.

Another surprising factor I learned from my findings related to the complex and challenging relationships with other Black womxn. While there were studies describing Black womxn administrators experiencing complex, unsupportive relationships with supervisors (Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West, 2015), there were no explicit discussions of these supervisors identifying as Black womxn. Next, I discuss my findings in response to the second research question.

Black Womxn Mid-level Administrators Using Voice

Findings for the second research question indicate that participants understood voice as multidimensional. Voice was described, at times, as abstract forms like "energy" and was recognized as "situational" by participants. I learned that voice was just as much about what participants did as it was about what is said when addressing experiences of spirit-murder or other forms of non-physical violence, contradictory institutional or DEI values, or complex interpersonal relationships. Participants acting with a deliberate voice represent how the womxn thought about themselves and their knowledge about others and applied that wisdom when

taking action or communicating. Participants owned their voices by taking personal responsibility to construct and communicate credible knowledge as they navigated power structures at HWIs. Participants claimed a powerful voice by vocally speaking up, despite the potential for personal or professional risks, to confront the challenges they experienced or to advocate for others. Participants also reclaimed power when they left their roles. These actions often relayed a strong message about the significance of their voice at HWIs. Finally, participants voiced an ethic of care by demonstrating personal expressiveness and empathy. According to Womanist theory (Banks-Wallace, 2011) and Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2003), Black womxn expressing their uniqueness or authenticity through dress or other non-verbal expressions is a form of affirmation supporting individual well-being. This sense of individual well-being, which I interpreted as self-care, supported participants' ability to be more confident or sustain their internal motivation to address the challenges they faced when navigating or resisting power structures at HWIs. Expressing empathy as care for others' well-being can positively impact individual well-being (Banks-Wallace, 2011). Participants voiced an ethic of care by demonstrating support for and maintaining communication with other Black womxn supervisors or colleagues who contributed to forms of non-physical violence or complex interpersonal relationships. Participants also expressed empathy as caring for marginalized students and advocating for their experiences because they can relate to the challenges these students face at HWI. Advocating for students, as an expression of empathy, was an approach to address contradictory institutional or DEI values. Next, I discuss how my findings connect to current literature about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs, the literature on voice, and Womanist theory.

Connecting DOPE Voices to Literature and Theory

The nature of this study was to understand the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators and tell their stories to contribute to the literature about this population at HWIs. In addition, I wanted this study to serve as a platform for the stories of Black womxn in mid-level administrative roles to be told in their way without feeling the need to conform or perform to dominant standards dictated by white supremacy, elitism, and patriarchy in higher education. In the next section, I elaborate on how this study aligns with or expands upon the current literature.

Expanding the Stories of Black Womxn Mid-level Administrators in Student Affairs

For this study, I completed a literature review about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. I found literature about experiences at the mid-level rank in student affairs functional areas and broadly within higher education (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Belch & Strange, 1995; Hernandez, 2010; Huelskamp, 2018; James, 2019; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). In addition, there is literature about Black womxn in administrative roles across higher education and in student affairs with no specific attention to the mid-level rank (Becks-Moody, 2004; Burke & Carter, 2015; Hayden Glover, 2012; Henry, 2010; Miles, 2012; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wallace et al., 2020; West, 2015, 2020). There are also a few recent studies about Black womxn mid-level administrators across higher education with no specific attention to student affairs (Arjun, 2019; Stewart, 2016). This study expands on existing literature examining experiences at the intersections of all four areas: (a) Black; (b) womxn; (c) mid-level administrators; and (d) student affairs. (Adams, 2021; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

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Findings in current literature reveal how Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs experience challenges in their roles due to racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy that limit their leadership development (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007) or their ability to thrive in white spaces not designed for them (Adams, 2021). These experiences can cause Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs to feel isolated, marginalized, conflicted, and devalued while working at HWIs. This study offers additional perspectives on the extent to which Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs face challenges rooted in structures of white supremacy, gender oppression, and elitism.

Current studies reaffirm that Black womxn administrators at HWIs, across organizational ranks, feel their voices are silenced or unheard (Adams, 2021; Arjun, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Stewart, 2016). This study asks the question, "What is voice?" What are the literal and figurative ways Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs perceive and use voice to feel heard and navigate power structures at their institutions? The findings of this study suggest that Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs perceive and use voice in multiples ways as they navigate structures operating in dominant racist, sexist, and hierarchical norms. Participants' actions align with several aspects of how voice is discussed in current literature.

Connecting the DOPE Perspective to Voice Framework

In Chapter II, I discuss a sample of literature that describes how the concept of voice can function as one or more of the following: (a) identity, (b) content, (c) context, and (d) process. When speaking about Black womxn, the literature primarily addressed how their voice was reflected as language and other verbal communication elements (e.g., speech, style, tone, code-switching) (Houston & Davis, 2002; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Scott, 2013; Stanback,

1988). As a result, I developed an initial conceptualization of Black womxn's voice (Figure 1). However, my study reveals multiple ways in which some Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs understand and use their voice that are not strictly limited to the traditional communication structures we associate with voice.

I learned from participants that their voices are more than just verbal communication styles and speech patterns. There were various approaches to how Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs used their voice to navigate dominant power structures at 4-year HWIs. Participants articulated the interconnections between identity, content, context, and process. However, I recognized that identity was a consistent factor across all approaches. Their standpoint was rooted in Black womxnhood, and their sense of self seemed to situate their voices uniquely. Participants' sense of self – thinking, knowing, being, behaving, and communicating – often connected to my DOPE perspective of Black womxn. As a result, I aligned components of voice to my DOPE perspective of Black womxn to describe participants' use of their voice when navigating the challenges they experienced in the workplace.

I aligned participants' multidimensional understanding of voice to my DOPE perspective of Black womxn to reflect how participants used voice in their roles to address dominant power structures connected to racism, sexism, and institutional hierarchy at HWIs. Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs use a Deliberative voice by demonstrating knowledge of oneself, others, and their environment, followed by strategic action based on that understanding. Deliberative voice is knowledge and understanding of whether or not there is alignment between their identity and context – the environment's physical, social, or interpersonal conditions. These factors inform their voice process - how they relay information or behave. Deliberative voice is making a connection between identity, context, and having wisdom of how and when to apply

the process.

Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs Own voice when they demonstrate a sense of personal responsibility in how their identity and lived experiences inform content – their knowledge of the subject matter. This sense of personal responsibility reinforces the credibility of Black womxn's ideas and perspectives when operating within dominant structures that often dismiss them. Owning voice is making a connection between identity and content.

Claiming a Powerful voice is when Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs make a connection between their identity and their verbal communication process. Several participants discussed recognizing the literal use of their voice, or the process of vocally speaking up to address and resist oppressive power structures at their respective HWIs, which involves some risk when identifying as Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs. Participants can also reclaim the power of their voice by leaving their roles. They perceived the absence of their identity and vocal expression as impactful and empowering.

Participants also used their voices by engaging in an Ethic of Care. Participants demonstrated this by expressing themselves in unique ways that resisted dominant norms or demonstrating empathy to others, including those who enacted harm or hurt. Voicing an Ethic of Care is similar to claiming a Deliberative voice because there are connections between identity, context, and process. The difference is identity and context influence why one applies process. Participants center care on themselves and their identities. That care, expressed by empathy, informs their motivation to connect with others in their environment (context). Some Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs voice an ethic of care by demonstrating authenticity or personal expressiveness in their environment. These actions are motivated by

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self-affirmation and self-definition to sustain themselves while navigating often challenging, toxic environments. Next, I discuss how Womanist theory informed the development of my findings.

Connecting DOPE Voices to Womanist Theory

Where most other studies about Black womxn's experiences use Black Feminist Theory as a theoretical perspective, I used Womanist theory to support and amplify the experiences and multidimensional voice of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs who participated in this study. Clayborne and Hamrick's (2007) recommended applying different theoretical lenses to examine the complexities of leadership development of African American women in mid-level student affairs within higher education.

Brewer (2021) suggests that Black Feminism is a standpoint that examines and addresses systems that affect Black womxn's experiences at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other constructs of identity. I interpret Black Feminism as a standpoint that looks outward through an activist or intellectual lens to respond to social conditions that affect Black womxnhood influenced by oppressive structures based on race, gender, and class. Womanism is described as having similar motivations as Black Feminism but from the standpoint of relying on the everyday lived experiences of Black womxn, rooted in Black culture and spirituality (Brewer, 2021; Maparyan, 2011). As a result, a Womanist lens helped me see how Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs looked within themselves and the everyday cultural components of Black womxnhood to use their voice in their way when responding to and navigating power structures. In addition, this research lens allowed me to focus on the "everyday" problem-solving behaviors and communication approaches exhibited by participants as a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives that guide the operations of HWIs. Wyche

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(2016) asserts that Womanist research enables Black womxn to tell their story in their own words, which is critical. The Womanist lens, coupled with Sista Circle Methodology, allowed me to interpret the extent of their challenges at HWI differently from existing literature.

My study contributes to current literature about the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs in higher education. I used Womanist theory to expand on current narratives about this group at the intersections of race, gender, and organizational rank in a specific functional area. The current literature describes student affairs as a functional area that often emphasizes commitments to diversity, pluralism, equity, and inclusion (Burke & Carter, 2015). Unfortunately, existing literature claims that Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs feel that their voice is not heard in their roles. This study contributes to the scholarship about the unique perspective and functions of the voice of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs while navigating challenging power structures at HWIs. In the next section, I present research implications and recommendations for future practice.

<div align="center">

Implications for Research and Practice

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This study contributes to the literature about the experiences and voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs. After completing this study, I recognized the opportunity to extend future research and practice on several elements composed in this study. First, there is an opportunity to expand on the connections between the components of voice (i.e., identity, content, context, and process) and my DOPE perspective. This perspective uniquely understands Black womxn's voice beyond language and other verbal communication elements. Secondly, sista circles were a component of this study that gave the participants a unique opportunity to share their lived experiences and learn from each other in a dialogic space created specifically for them. There are opportunities to expand on future research about sista circles and

incorporate this method as a practice to support Black womxn mid-level administrators as they face challenges at HWIs. Third, I share participants' messages about how supervisors and colleagues can support the experiences and amplify the voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

Reconceptualizing DOPE Voices

The ways some participants in this study described their use of voice (e.g., being strategic, leaving roles, styling their hair and nails, etc.) surprised me. Based on the literature, I thought participants would have shared more about aspects of tone, speech mannerisms, code-switching, and other communication style elements regarding the use of voice. However, many participants characterized their understanding and use of voice as methods that seemed to align with my DOPE perspective introduced in Chapter I. I described my DOPE perspective that Black womxn are Deliberative, Own It!, Powerful, and engage an Ethic of Care. My DOPE perspective about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs, and broadly in higher education, were based on my experiences and observations as a fellow mid-level professional. My participants' narratives expanded my DOPE perspective; the way I think about Black womxnhood evolved to a way of understanding how Black womxn may think about themselves and how they communicate and behave to thrive in the academy. Adams (2021) offers the following definition of "thrive" in another study about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs:

> Thriving is the ability to bring one's unapologetically whole self into any space without constant fear of discrimination. An individual who is thriving is working within their purpose, achieving their self-definition of success, appropriately compensated for their labor, and is able to have a positive impact on others while also growing professionally and personally. To thrive is to have one's identities and experiences affirmed and valued. Individuals are mentally and physically well and have a strong community support on and off campus. To thrive also includes leaving the spaces one occupies better for those coming behind them. Finally, to thrive is the ability to work in spaces where White

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colleagues and HWIs take ownership of their past and present ties to systems of oppression while creating and implementing an actionable plan to address the ways that they perpetuate these systems. (p. 146)

Some participants were still discovering their voice as Black womxn mid-level administrators. There were narratives where participants used voice to navigate as a survival strategy and not to thrive as defined by Adams' definition above.

For this study, I chose to focus on the narratives where my participants use of voice seemed to be motivated by thriving in the academy and moving beyond surviving or enduring the challenges they faced. The scope of my study did not consider participants' perspective of thriving or their self-definition within my DOPE framework. There is an opportunity to expand my research agenda as a critical scholar by intentionally connecting these concepts – (a) my voice framework (Figure 1); (b) how other Black womxn (at the mid-level in other administrative units at HWIs, and in higher education in general) conceptualize what it means to be DOPE; and (c) thriving in, or resisting, oppressive power structures in higher education. I think understanding how other Black womxn administrators see themselves as DOPE and use their voices in alignment with that understanding to thrive in the academy can reveal additional strategies to support their ability to effectively navigate power structures.

Expanding Sista Circles in Research

As discussed in Chapter III, sista circles have a long history as dialogic spaces that promote a sense of connectedness, empowerment, and collective activism among Black women (Collins, 2009). What started as social clubs in the late 1800s have evolved into a research technique that legitimizes Black womxn's knowledge construction. A growing number of dissertations implement sista circles as a research method. However, few studies focusing on Black womxn administrators and practitioners in higher education, in general, incorporate Sista

Circle Methodology or sista circles as a data collection method. Sista circles as a research method can offer a unique opportunity for collective knowledge construction and meaning-making about the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs differently than individual interviews, the method most often used for data collection in current studies about Black womxn in administrative roles across higher education.

Expanding Sista Circles in Practice

This study reinforces recommendations from other studies about Black womxn administrators in higher education to create professional and personal networks (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007), Black caucus counterspaces (Adams, 2021) or affinity spaces (Arjun, 2019) where Black womxn can build relationships that support their retention and development at HWIs. Sista circles are examples of these types of spaces for Black womxn mid-level administrators, or Black womxn administrators within HWIs in general to foster positive experiences and community development. Several participants of this study expressed positive sentiments about participating in sista circles. For example:

> Secretlion: So I think this is really beneficial for me. I've been in higher [education] and student affairs for a long time now, and I can count how many conversations I've had in a sister circle. So this was great. I hope we can continue to keep this going.

> Dr. Lady: After yesterday, when I got off [the call] I walked out of the room, and my husband was like, "How did it go?" And I almost started crying. I was like, "It's not just me. It's other people. And it's not just in the South. There are people from New York. There are people from ..." So [the DOPE dialogue] was just so wonderful.

> Ida: Being able to leave this space and being able to talk about some things that I haven't talked about, that I haven't voiced, or that I haven't acknowledged, it's been beneficial as well. So thanks for creating this space for that.

> Bell: And this [dialogue] made me think about how these types of spaces can be comforting or healing or validating.

As Black womxn continue to navigate these spaces, I recommend supporting the creation of sista

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circles as dialogic spaces for Black womxn to find their voice, connect, empower each other, and problem-solve together. Sista circles can also be spaces for in-group community-building and practicing empathy to address complex in-group interactions and relationships as described in the findings outside of the white gaze of the academy. Sista circles can be supported by staff development programming in student affairs divisions or by Human Resources as an Employee Resource Group. Black womxn are also encouraged to explore developing these spaces for themselves, either in person at their respective institutions or virtually, to reconnect or establish new connections with other Black womxn. We do not need to rely on the academy to create, or gatekeep, community building and problem-solving spaces the spaces we need for support related to our ability to understand and use our voice.

As a researcher and higher education practitioner, I want to incorporate the DOPE perspective – Deliberative, Own It!, Powerful, and Ethic of Care – as a framework to create dialogues as professional development for Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education. As indicated in the section above, *Reconceptualizing DOPE Voices*, my understanding of DOPE is expanding beyond a way of thinking about Black womxnhood. I believe Black womxn mid-level administrators can use their voice in DOPE ways to navigate and resist dominant structures at HWIs. DOPE dialogues can be leadership development, professional development, or group career coaching opportunities for Black womxn mid-level administrators at HWIs using the DOPE perspective as a structure to support an affirming way of thinking and acting to address challenges.

Message to the Academy

Quite honestly, this study was conducted so Black womxn could learn from and empower each other. As a researcher, I was not interested in suggesting strategies for HWIs to be more

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inclusive of Black womxn mid-level administrators or other marginalized identities. That

information is already accessible. There are numerous research studies and publications about

best practices to acknowledge and address racist, sexist, and hierarchical structures within HWIs.

Nonetheless, there are messages I can relay, many of which relate to already existing narratives,

if people in power in these institutions are willing to listen.

I invite practitioners (i.e., Senior-level administrators, supervisors, colleagues, etc.) to

consider some of the messages from participants:

> Patricia: Know the value of Black women and recognize it, pay us, and realize when we
> leave, we're taking more than just ourselves with us.

> Audre: I would say to other Black women that we can both be great within the
> community, and my glow doesn't stop your shine. You do you, be you. It's not a
> competition. To the administration, I would let them know that my voice is a singular
> experience, and it's multifaceted what we experience as Black women … So make sure
> that you're being inclusive of the different women and different people of color who are
> at the table and their voice and use that information and make informed changes to the
> institution and the structure that you have at the institution.

> Nadine: I would say really just to be open to hearing our voice. I get that it might be
> uncomfortable. I get that it might not be your norm, but still be open to it. Be comfortable
> being uncomfortable.

> Sandy: I mean, listen to Black women. I mean, it's proven [when] you listen to Black
> women … we're not going to lead you astray. Listen to Black women like you listen to
> that white woman in the corner that's crying all the time. Like, give us that same energy
> … Give us the same in terms of listening to what is happening, wanting to know how we
> feel about things, wanting to make sure we're okay, wanting to make sure that we're taken
> care of, and that people are listening to how we feel and what happened. Give us that
> same energy.

The following are additional recommendations for members of the academy seeking to support

Black womxn mid-level administrators:

Recommendations for Senior-Leaders and Well-Intended Colleagues

I recommend senior-leaders and supervisors examine policies and practices that exist

within respective departments that may be silencing Black womxn mid-level administrators.

Examine university or departmental traditions or individual behaviors that contribute to the spirit murder of Black womxn mid-level administrators. Examine performance or promotion evaluation practices that uphold expectations for communication and behavior standards that align with oppressive dominant norms. Audre alludes to Black womxn mid-level administrators not being monolithic and wants leaders and colleagues to consider being inclusive of different women. My findings reveal how Black womxn use their voice does not always align with the traditional communication styles or behaviors deemed acceptable by dominant norms. Senior leaders, supervisors, and colleagues should expect and understand that Black womxn's voices manifest in a variety of ways. Examine what is informing perceptions and expectations regarding a Black womxn mid-level administrator's tone, speech, behavior, or appearance. Consider if those perceptions are in alignment with the DEI values of your institutions or if you are potentially operating in contradiction to these values.

Senior leaders and supervisors in the academy should look to retain and support the advancement of Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs and other functional areas across HWIs. Our presence and knowledge are a value add to HWIs. As Patricia indicated, our knowledge and other assets depart with us once we leave. Explore psychologically safe methods to gather information about what Black womxn mid-level administrators are experiencing on your campus or within your division. Seek to learn about resources Black womxn mid-level administrators need to effectively perform their responsibilities and address those needs. Sandy indicates that empathy is often actively demonstrated toward our white womxn counterparts but not toward Black womxn. Examine if salaries and compensation that Black womxn receive are equitable to white women and men counterparts. Examine supervision styles and approaches to support Black womxn mid-level administrators who are experiencing

non-physical violence from other colleagues, students, or even you as their supervisor. Examine department or division-wide dynamics that inform why a Black womxn mid-level administrator is speaking up and leaving their roles. Use your positionality as a supervisor or senior-leader to address and change those dynamics. I am not suggesting that Black womxn mid-level administrators are absolved from correction or guidance when expectation are not met. I am suggesting that supervisors or senior-leaders lead with an equitable lens when viewing Black womxn mid-level administrators. Leading through an equitable lens means recognizing and shifting when you are privileging the narratives or behaviors of other colleagues or students that are perpetuating harm and further silencing Black womxn mid-level administrators within HWI structures already set up to scrutinize their voices.

Consider Nadine's words, "be comfortable being uncomfortable." Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs, and potentially other areas in the academy, are most likely experiencing discomfort when navigating challenges like spirit murder, contradictory institutional and DEI values, and/or complex interpersonal relationships in white spaces not designed for us. Supervisors or senior-leaders, particularly those with dominant identities, often find comfort in using DEI rhetoric with the intention of promoting environments that support Black womxn mid-level administrators. However, my study shows DEI hypocrisy means leaders or supervisors are not behaving in ways that align with the rhetoric they are well-versed in using. Engage in DEI or supervision development opportunities or seek inclusive coaching that creates space to intrinsically examine perspectives or behaviors that support oppressive dominant norms that may be silencing Black womxn mid-level administrators.

Lastly and simply, LISTEN. Listen to the Black womxn mid-level administrators in your areas who are most like using their DOPE voices.

Recommendations for other Black Womxn

To my sistas who are Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs and across other areas at HWIs, consider Toni's quote used to open this chapter. "You are dope!" Like the urban expression, remember you are excellent and add value in your role. Your voice matters at the mid-level. Consider strategies to use deliberative voice, own your voice, claim a powerful voice, or voice an ethic of care. As Audre stated, Black womxn are multifaceted and there is no one way to use or express your voice.

Use a deliberative voice to identify a mentor, a leadership or career coach, or participate in a sista circle to support determining the best approaches to further understand yourself and your environment to take strategic action to address oppressive power structures. Similar to Sandy and Alice, reflect on the messages from trusted maternal figures who have provided you with tools to address life challenges and how those tools can be applied in the workplace.

Own your voice and demonstrate a sense of personal responsibility by further developing credible knowledge. Use your professional development funds to take that class, attend the webinars or learning & development workshop, read the book and articles, listen to the podcast, or interact with media content that will make you a subject matter expert. Remember your accomplishments, formal education, and informal lived experiences that inform your unique standpoint and that these components are credible forms of knowledge construction.

Claim a powerful voice and vocally speak truth to power like Tabitha suggested. While there are consequences to being vocal in spaces not designed for us, as Zora indicated, existing at HWIs is already a revolutionary act. Channel a message from Audre Lorde (2007), "Your silence will not protect you" (p. 41). Engage in sista circles to learn from other Black womxn how to step into that power and effectively navigate risks involved in being vocal. Recognize it is

appropriate to stay and speak up, but there is also power in leaving roles that are devaluing, exploitative, or perpetuating challenges like spirit murder, contradictory institutional and DEI values, and/or complex interpersonal relationships. Seek experiences and opportunities that will value and uplift your voice.

Voice an ethic of care by demonstrating your unique personal expressiveness to support individual well-being. Personal expressiveness can be dressing in the traditional standard of dress or communicating in ways acceptable to dominant norms to exhibiting unique personal expressiveness like wearing high heels like Zoe, wearing graphic sweatshirts or t-shirts and Air Jordans like Ororo, wearing urban nails like Jordyn and Tabitha, or deciding not to codeswitch language or tone like Sandy. Define and be confident in how you express Black womxnhood to be agentic as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. Also voice an ethic of care by expressing empathy as care for the well-being of others. Name and address the problematic aspects of HWIs on behalf of other marginalized students and staff if that helps you find and practice strategies to use your voice.

The challenges Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs face because of perceived or actual harm by other Black womxn was a difficult theme to include as much as it was difficult for my participants to discuss. As Black womxn, we often serve as role models and mentors for each other while figuring out how to navigate other challenging experiences. There are Black womxn who are dealing with internalized oppression and may target other Black womxn or engage in respectability politics. There are some Black womxn who authentically want to support others but do so through the lens of navigating their own challenges in the academy in ways that may feel repressive to those they aim to support. Extend empathy toward other Black womxn who are perceived as conforming to oppressive structures, or engaging in

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respectability politics, by recognizing how they are aiming to find their voice in the context of oppressive spaces that reward competing with or challenging other Black womxn.

Supporting or mentoring other Black womxn through the lens of experiencing harm may result in having (or being perceived as having) higher expectations of other Black womxn administrators than those of White administrators. When we learn to operate from fear, we may (sometimes inadvertently) impose the limits of that fear on others. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend that Black womxn across the academy seek to act in DOPE ways toward other Black Womxn and understand the different ways we use voice among ourselves when offering guidance and support. A few reflection questions to consider:

1. What is similar or different about our lived experiences?

2. What strategies or approaches does she believe best serve her needs or challenges?

3. What can I learn from her ideas and knowledge? What perspective is she contributing?

4. How can I help her understand the power dynamics involved and identify the risks? How can I help address those power dynamics?

5. How can I help amplify her voice and knowledge?

6. How can I demonstrate empathy?

7. How can I create space for her unique forms of expression?

8. What type of support or guidance is she seeking from me? Am I advocating with her the ways she needs me to?

There is space to support and amplify the diverse voices of other Black womxn. We should consider if and how we may communicate or behave in ways that uphold oppressive systems and strive to instead dismantle them. Like Audre said, "It's not a competition." We can all shine.

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Conclusion

The findings of this study uplift the significance of the presence, contributions, and voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators. Their knowledge based on lived experiences navigating challenges in racist, sexist, and hierarchal spaces not designed for them offers a unique standpoint that is beneficial to others in the academy. Their perspectives at the mid-level matter where they are situated on the organizational chart. Arjun (2019) states Black womxn mid-level administrators face unique challenges advancing beyond the mid-level rank. There are limited opportunities to advance because the number of leadership roles decrease at the top of organizational structures. Furthermore, the representation of Black womxn in leadership at HWIs often lags behind white women and men (West, 2020), which can be attributed to the oppressive structures of higher education rooted in white supremacy and gender oppression. Lastly, I often say some Black womxn mid-level administrators don't want those problems! Some do not want to advance to senior-level roles recognizing that the challenges at higher levels are often exacerbated when there is less representation of Black womxn. Also, they may want to remain in roles that work more directly with students. In the introduction chapter, I disclosed having a desire to advance professionally from a mid-level administrator to a senior-level leadership role. However, if my voice (expressed in ways that do not align with dominant oppressive structures set-up to silence me) is not heard or valued at the mid-level rank, what will guarantee my voice will be heard and valued at the senior-level rank? Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs want to be respected, valued, humanized, and heard right where they are positioned in the academy.

Final Thoughts

It took a while, now I understand just where I'm goin'
I know the world and I know who I am, it's 'bout time I show it. (Beyoncé, 2013)

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The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges faced by Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs at HWIs - I thought it was essential to understand and name these challenges to explore how Black womxn mid-level administrators used their voices to address the challenges they faced. I hope that the narratives of my participants not only contribute to literature about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs but reveal how our voices are significant at HWIs.

I experienced a range of positive outcomes and tensions while conducting this study. I met new colleagues and reconnected with a few familiar faces. I was encouraged when strangers greeted each other with the informal "Hey, girl, hey!" on the first night of DOPE dialogues. Relationships quickly developed to participants exchanging emails, telephone numbers, and resources by the end of the second night. I experienced vulnerability with my DOPE participants as we shared stories about life at our respective institutions. We laughed, sighed, shook our heads, gasped, snapped, pointed, sucked our teeth, and clapped through stories about aggressive behaviors and attitudes experienced in the workplace. I learned that while we had similar stories, there were colleagues who experienced far worse than a negative performance review, like my experience that led to the conception of this study. I did not experience overt racism, hostile colleagues yelling in my face, or others throwing items across the room. However, these were some of the intense characteristics of my participants' experiences. That realization humbled me.

The excerpt at the opening of this section about my final thoughts is from the lyrics of "Grown Woman" sung by Beyoncé. I think it conveys a message about self-awareness, growth, and action. This study led me to critically think about who I am and how I use my voice as a Black womxn mid-level administrator. Perhaps that is why it was difficult to write about the challenging dynamics between Black womxn. After listening to my participants' stories and

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writing up this work, I found myself reflecting more deeply on my own interactions with other Black womxn. I wondered how I may be inadvertently imposing my ideas of the best ways to use voice ideas onto other Black womxn who express their voice differently. I can grow as a practitioner who is more inclusive of the voices I seek to amplify and not act as an agent of oppressive structure that silences other Black womxn, especially at the mid-level. I can demonstrate growth by managing expectations of other Black womxn mid-level administrators who operate differently from my DOPE perspective, yet use tangible "everyday" problem-solving strategies to build community and redress challenges. After processing my findings, I recognize I can continue to grow by actively using my voice against systems of oppression at HWI and exemplify the DOPE characteristics with integrity.

There is so much that could be said about the challenges and voices of Black womxn mid-level administrators. This study helped me to reexamine and clarify my voice as a scholar and practitioner. As a scholar, I can use my voice to amplify the voices of other Black womxn mid-level administrators through scholarship and research. As a practitioner, I continue to grow and practice using a deliberative voice, owning my voice, using a powerful voice, and voicing an ethic of care. I hope this manuscript demonstrates I have the capacity to be a DOPE scholar-practitioner.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT AFFAIRS FUNCTIONAL AREA PROFILES

In the annual VPSA Census, NASPA identified 39 functional areas that are often housed within student affairs divisions and created profiles detailing the organizational structure of each functional area. These Functional Area Profiles include the location of the functional area within the institutions and job titles and reporting structures for the responsible student affairs staff member. Visit the methodology page for details on the individual data points found in the profiles (from http://census.naspa.org/functional-areas).

1. Academic Advising
2. Admissions
3. Alumni Programs
4. Campus Activities
5. Campus Safety
6. Career Services
7. Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement
8. Clinical Health Programs
9. College Union
10. Community Service / Service Learning
11. Commuter Student Services
12. Counseling Services
13. Disability Support Services
14. Enrollment Management

15. Financial Aid
16. GLBT Student Services
17. Graduate and Professional Student Services
18. Greek Affairs
19. Intercollegiate Athletics
20. International Student Services
21. Learning Assistance / Academic Support Services
22. Multicultural Services
23. Nontraditional-student Services
24. On-Campus Dining
25. On-Campus Housing
26. Orientation
27. Recreational Sports

28. Registrar
29. Spiritual Life / Campus Ministry
30. Student Affairs Assessment
31. Student Affairs Fundraising and Development
32. Student Affairs Research
33. Student Conduct (Academic Integrity)
34. Student Conduct (Behavioral Case Management)
35. Student Media
36. TRIO / Educational Opportunity
37. Veterans' Services
38. Wellness Programs
39. Women's Center

APPENDIX B: WALKER'S DEFINITION OF WOMANISM

Womanist (1983) - Alice Walker

1) From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2) Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3) Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4) Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1983, as cited by Philips, 2006, p. 19)

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT AND GRAPHIC

Greetings,

You are invited to participate or share with others who may be eligible to participate in a study about the experiences of Black women mid-level administrators in student affairs/student services and how they use their voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace.

Participants eligible for this study include those who:

(a) Identify as Black - having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora (e.g., African American, Caribbean-American, African immigrants living in the U.S)

(b) Identify as womxn within the gender spectrum - this includes identifying as a cisgender woman, transgender woman, gender non-conforming, or non-binary

(c) Currently employed at a 4-year HWI- defined as an institution whose historical and contemporary infrastructure and culture were created to promote and reproduce whiteness at the expense of Black people and other racially minoritized groups

(d) Currently working in a functional area typically categorized as Student Affairs/Student Services (examples can be found HERE- (Hyperlink to http://census.naspa.org/functional-areas)

(e) Function as a full-time, mid-level administrator in student affairs (i.e., at least 5 years of experience; have a title of Assistant, Associate, or Director in a non-faculty role; report to a senior-level officer)

Womxn interested in participating in this study should fill out a participant screening questionnaire at tinyurl.com/DOPEvoices. The participant screening questionnaire will allow respondents to give consent to participate in the study, schedule a 15-minute virtual introduction meeting to learn more about the study and clarify questions, and schedule to participate in a sista circle with 4-6 other participants. Sista circles are known as supportive, dialogic spaces that promote healing, connectedness, empowerment, and collective activism among Black womxn. For this study, sista circles will be referred to as "Dope dialogues." I use the word "Dope" to describe my perception of the significance of Black Women gathering for dialogue. Each dialogue will take place over two sessions for 90-minutes each.

Participants of this study will be eligible to win a prize of a FREE 60 min holistic wellness coaching session with Dr. Kellie Dixon (Dr. K), C.L.C., Owner/Principal Consultant of Clear Pathway Consulting Services LLC (up to 4 coaching sessions are available; valued at $75 each). Every participant in this study will also receive a free signed copy of the book Reclaiming Our Affirmations: A 30 Day Renewal by Jayde Ware and Dr. Kellie Dixon.

If you have any questions, please contact the principal investigator for this study, Carla Fullwood, at [EMAIL}. Thank you in advance for your time and assistance!

Are you interested in engaging in a Sista Circle with other Black Womxn Mid-level Administrators?

Are you a Black Womxn Mid-level Administrator in Student Affairs at a 4- Year HWI?

Share your VOICE!

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black *womxn mid-level administrators at 4-year Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and how they use their voice to navigate everyday realities, including challenges, in the workplace.

(*inclusive of women within the gender spectrum)

CONTACT INFORMATION
Carla Fullwood
Ph.D. Candidate; UNC Greensboro
ccfullwo@uncg.edu
IRB-FY21-216

VISIT
tinyurl.com/DOPEvoices
TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE STUDY CRITERIA AND COMPLETE A SCREENING/DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

CLEAR PATHWAY
Consulting Services, LLC
*Black womxn-owned

Participants will receive a signed copy of the book *Reclaiming Our Affirmations: A 30 Day Renewal*. Up to four participants will be eligible to win a FREE career coaching session with **Clear Pathway Consulting Services LLC** (valued at $75 each)

(Using Qualtrics online survey software)

FIRST PAGE:

DOPE voices: Understanding the experiences of Black women mid-level administrators in Student Affairs and their use of voice to navigate dominant power structures in the workplace

- The front landing page of the screening questionnaire included the adult informed consent form template found at https://integrity.uncg.edu/institutional-review-board/ with personalized text for this study

NEXT SECTION: PARTICIPATION CRITERIA SCREENING

Participants eligible for this study must identify as a Black womxn mid-level administrator working in a student affairs functional area at a 4-year Historically White Institution.

- Do you identify as Black- having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora (e.g., African American, Caribbean-American, African immigrants living in the U.S)? YES/NO
- Do you self-identify as a womxn- (note, this includes identifying as a cisgender woman, transgender woman, gender non-conforming, or non-binary)? YES/NO
- Do you work at a 4-year Historically White Institution? (defined as an institution whose historical and contemporary infrastructure and culture were created to promote and reproduce whiteness at the expense of Black people and other racially minoritized groups) YES/NO
- Do you currently work in a functional area typically categorized as Student Affairs/Student Services in higher education at your institution? Examples of these functional areas can be found at http://census.naspa.org/functional-areas YES/NO
- Do you function as a full-time, mid-level administrator in student affairs (i.e., at least 5 years of experience; have a title of Assistant, Associate, or Director in a non-faculty role; report to a senior-level officer)? YES/NO
- Are you willing to participate and share your experiences in a sista circle with 4-6 other participants who meet the criteria? Sista circles are known as supportive, dialogic spaces that promote healing, connectedness, empowerment, and collective activism among Black womxn. YES/NO
- Do you have access to Zoom video conferencing platform? YES/NO

<u>NEXT SECTION:</u> PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Based on your previous responses, you are eligible to participate in this study. Please respond to the following questions. All responses to this questionnaire will be transferred and saved to a password-protected Dropbox drive only accessible by me, the researcher. If you have any questions, please contact Carla Fullwood (ccfullwo@uncg.edu).

- Participant First and Last Name:

- Pronouns:

- Preferred Pseudonym for Study:
    - *Please indicate at least two options; if you don't care, type "N/A" and I can create one for you*
    - *This will be a fictitious name used when writing about the study to maintain participant privacy*

- Personal Email Address:
    - *Emails will be sent to share details about virtual introduction meetings and virtual Dope dialogue. Personal, non-institutional affiliated emails are encouraged to offer a level of privacy*

- Mobile number:
    - *Calls or texts will be made in the case of dropped services during virtual introduction meetings and virtual Dope dialogue*

- Briefly describe all your salient identities, in addition to identifying as a Black womxn, that inform how you navigate higher education.
    - *Example: I am a Black, Afro-Caribbean cisgender woman raised in the northeast. I am a first-generation college student and a current doctoral student. I am a wife and a Christian*
    - *1-5 sentences*

- Briefly describe how long you have served as a mid-level professional in student affairs, including years of service, institution types, and former departments if applicable.
    - *Example: I served in the mid-level role for about 10 years at three different universities: a mid-sized research II, Private, religiously affiliated 4-year HWI; a mid-sized, selective, private liberal arts 4-year HWI; and a large research II, public 4-year HWI. I worked primarily in multicultural student services centers and student success offices.)*
    - *1-5 sentences*

- Which Student Affairs functional area do you currently work in?

- Academic Advising
- Admissions
- Alumni Programs
- Campus Activities
- Campus Safety
- Career Services
- Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement
- Clinical Health Programs
- College Union
- Community Service / Service Learning
- Commuter Student Services
- Counseling Services
- Disability Support Services
- Enrollment Management

- Financial Aid
- GLBT Student Services
- Graduate and Professional Student Services
- Greek Affairs
- Intercollegiate Athletics
- International Student Services
- Learning Assistance / Academic Support Services
- Multicultural Services
- Nontraditional-
  - student Services
- On-Campus Dining
- On-Campus Housing
- Orientation
- Recreational Sports

- Registrar
- Spiritual Life / Campus Ministry
- Student Affairs Assessment
- Student Affairs Fundraising and Development
- Student Affairs Research
- Student Conduct (Academic Integrity)
- Student Conduct (Behavioral Case Management)
- Student Media
- TRIO / Educational Opportunity
- Veterans' Services
- Wellness Programs
- Women's Center
- Other _____

- Share three separate words to describe **what it means to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator in student affairs in higher education?**
  - *If you do not have words now, you can email them to Carla Fullwood (ccfullwo@uncg.edu)*

- Please upload an image or quote that illustrates **what "voice" means to you as a Black womxn mid-level administrator?**
  - *Example: image, meme, gif, a screenshot of a quote/passage, etc.*
  - *This will be used to prompt conversation during the sista circle/Dope dialogue*
  - *If you do not have an image now, you can email it to Carla Fullwood (EMAIL)*

- Please submit or upload an image or quote that illustrates what "voice" means to you as a Black women mid-level administrator. (Example: meme, gif, screenshot, link to short clip, or short quote). This will be used to prompt conversation during the sista circle/Dope dialogue

SCHEDULE VIRTUAL INTRODUCTION MEETING

You and I (PI Carla Fullwood) will meet for a brief introduction meeting for about 15 minutes to get to know each other and discuss the study before the Dope dialogue. We will discuss the research goals and your questions about participating in the Dope dialogue. Please go to this site to schedule a virtual introduction meeting during the week of [DATES]: [SCHEDULING LINK]

- ☐ I scheduled a virtual introduction meeting at [SCHEDULING LINK]
- ☐ A virtual introduction meeting is not needed. I understand the purpose of the study and am prepared to participate in the Dope dialogue.

SCHEDULE VIRTUAL DOPE DIALOGUE TIME

Participants selected in the study will be grouped in a Dope dialogue with 4-6 other participants meeting the criteria for the study. Sista circles are known as supportive, dialogic spaces that promote healing, connectedness, empowerment, and collective activism among Black womxn. For this study, sista circles will be referred to as "Dope dialogues." I use the word "Dope" to describe my perception of the significance of Black Women gathering for dialogue. Dialogues will be scheduled for two 90-minute meetings, over two days (total 3 hours total). Please indicate all your availability for the Dope dialogue below at the following doodle poll: [DATE and TIME OPTIONS]

- ☐ Select this option if you are not available for any of the Dope dialogue times above and would like to discuss scheduling during the virtual introduction meeting.

Sista circles/Dope dialogues work best when there are existing relationships with other participants. If you know of others who may be eligible for this study, please share the PI's contact information and screening questionnaire link:

Carla Fullwood
[EMAIL]
tinyurl.com/DOPEvoices

APPENDIX E: VIRTUAL INTRODUCTION MEETING GUIDE

● Name/Initials:_____	● Pseudonym:_____
● Words-Circle 1	● Image- Circle 2
Consent form: Yes No	Dialogue 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 days/time

- PI and participant introductions
- Discuss purpose of study, clarify consent form questions
- Clarify purpose of collecting specific details on survey:
    - Identity description, length of service, and university classification will help write participant bio
    - Descriptors about what it means to be a Black women mid-level administrator in student affairs will be in a word cloud to prompt dialogue in circle session 1
    - Media submitted describing voice will be used to prompt dialogue in circle session 2; Confirm permission to share it during circle
- Discuss purpose of sista circles/Dope dialogue; discuss kitchen-table dialogue concept, Elaborate on the use of word "Dope" for study
- Share format of study (video and audio recording, pseudonyms, media elicitation); confirm sista circles time
- Question(s) from participants
- Share researcher's contact information
- Discuss next steps

JOURNAL NOTES:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX F: SISTA CIRCLE/DOPE DIALOGUE FACILITATION GUIDE

First Night

- Play music from a Spotify playlist
- When all participants are on the call, facilitate introductions asking participants to share their real names, roles, and university
- Remind each participant to rename Zoom profile to their pseudonym
- Reiterate the nature of sista circle/Dope dialogue, and goals of study
  - Clarify my role as researcher and participant
  - Share goals of this study
  - Remind participants this is a space for them to share, ask questions, and support each other
- Group Agreements: To build community and systems of support, invite participants to share conversation considerations to engage in a dialogue, and share personal stories openly
  - Remind participants to take care of themselves. Acknowledge time constraints and virtual constraints. Encourage participants to be their authentic selves (i.e., conversational/speak freely, take breaks as needed, take care of family, eat, etc.)
- Invite participants to do a short breathing exercise

Begin Recording

QUESTIONS FOR NIGHT 1

***These are guiding questions for the circle. All questions may not be asked**.

1. Please share what appealed to you about participating in a DOPE dialogue about Black womxn mid-level administrators in student affairs.

2. Share about a time you became aware of how your identity as a Black womxn was shaping your experience as a mid-level administrator. *(Be prepared to share a personal story as a researcher)*

3. Let's review the words used to describe what it means to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator from the recruitment questionnaire (allot about 1-2 minutes to review, encourage participants to write down reflections).

   a. What resonates with you the most?
   b. What surprised you?
   c. How do these words connect to the stories you shared?
   d. What words may be missing after hearing each other's stories?
   e. What do these words suggest about what it means to be a Black womxn mid-level administrator?
   f. How is your experience different from the words in this image?
   g. What questions do you have for each other about these words?

4. How do your intersecting identities as a Black womxn affect how you navigate in your role as a mid-level administrator?

5. In what ways do you think racism, sexism, or organizational hierarchies impacted your experiences as a Black womxn mid-level administrator?

6. What do you think other Black womxn mid-level administrators or others in higher education should know about your experiences as a Black womxn mid-level administrator?

Second Night

- Play music from a Spotify playlist.
- Reshare group agreements and offer an opportunity to add additional agreements.
- Remind each participant to rename their Zoom profile to their pseudonym.

Begin Recording

QUESTIONS FOR NIGHT 2

These are guiding questions for the circle. All questions may not be asked.

1. Briefly recap the first circle and invite participants to share additional thoughts about their experiences as Black womxn mid-level administrators.

2. Introduce the concept of voice: What does voice mean to you as a Black womxn mid-level administrator?

3. I put together a compilation of your words and images submitted in the recruitment questionnaire. Let's take a look (allot about 1-2 minutes to review, encourage participants to write down reflections)

   a. What resonates with you the most?
   b. What surprised you?
   c. How do these words/images connect to the stories you shared?
   d. What does this compilation suggest about what voice is to Black womxn mid-level administrators?
   e. How is your experience different from the words/images in this compilation?
   f. What questions do you have for each other about this compilation?

4. Please share a time when you felt like you had a voice or that your voice mattered as a Black womxn mid-level administrator.

5. Share a time when you realized your intersecting identities as a Black womxn influenced your voice.

6. Share a time when your work environment or other colleagues affected how you used your voice.

7. Share time when your knowledge and experience as a mid-level administrator influenced your voice.

8. Describe a time when you were aware of your communication style (i.e., speech mannerisms, tone, colloquialisms, silence, etc.) when using your voice.

9. What impact do racism, sexism, or organizational hierarchies have on your use of voice?

10. What do you think other Black womxn mid-level administrators or others in higher education should know about your voice as a Black womxn mid-level administrator?

11. Given that I am interested in the experiences of Black womxn mid-level administrators in higher education and how they use their voice, is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask?

12. Is there anything you would like to share about this sista circle experience?

13. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX G: LISTENING GUIDE WORKSHEET

(Adapted from Jones, 2016)

I.   Listening 1: Listening for Experiences

Color Code:_____

    A. Stories about specific experiences:

        1. When? Where? Who are involved?.
        2. Connection to race, gender, mid-level role

    B. Words used to describe challenges

        1. Positive experiences?

    C. Researcher/Listener reactions (Journal notes)

        1. Feelings and thoughts
        2. questions; confusion
        3. where did I feel connected? Why?
        4. Where was I disengaged?
        5. Similarities and difference to my experiences

    D. Summarize Interpretation(s)

II.   Listening 2: Listening to DOPE Voices (listening for Self-Perceptions)

Color Code:_____

    A. Self- perception: Note the use of 1st person voice (I/me/we); How do they speak for and about themselves?

    B. Self in relationship to others – Note the use of 2nd person voice (you, them); How do they speak of the "other"?

    C. Words used to describe "self"

        1. Note verbal tone, communication style, non-verbal cues

    D. Researcher/Listener reactions (Journal notes)

        1. Feelings and thoughts
        2. questions; confusion
        3. where did I feel connected? Why?
        4. Where was I disengaged?
        5. Similarities and difference to myself perception

    E. Create "I" Poem(s)

III.   Listening 3: Listening for Use of Voice

Color Code:_____

    A. Where do the current color codes overlap?

    B. How is voice defined?

    C. How are voices used? What are they doing with voice? What are they not doing?

    D. How does voice connect to experiences?

    E. When do they have a voice? Why is voice used or not used or not used when navigating the everyday?

    F. What are verbal and nonverbal communication cues?

    G. Researcher/Listener reactions (Journal notes)

        1. Feelings and thoughts
        2. questions; confusion
        3. where did I feel connected? Why?
        4. Where was I disengaged?
        5. Similarities and difference to my experiences

    H. Summarize Interpretation(s)