

MAURO, ALTA THORNTON, Ph.D, Identity (re)Determination Among Upwardly-Mobile Black Women. (2017).

Directed by Dr. Silvia C. Bettez. 212pp.

Thousands of Black women in America are experiencing upward mobility, defined for the purpose of this study as moving into a higher socioeconomic status than one's parents, guardians, or whoever raised them. As research indicates, these women may experience the strain of upward mobility more acutely than men or those of other races, given their identities as both women and racial minorities. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore Black women's journeys of upward mobility, and to contribute to what we know about their experiences, specifically, any shifts in their perceptions of self, resulting from upward mobility. I explored the ways that Black women conceptualize changes in their socioeconomic status alongside potential changes in their identity *following* a change in socioeconomic status. The sample included ten self-identified African-American women who self-identify as upwardly-mobile. The primary methods of data collection were in-depth interviews, focus groups, limited email exchanges during member-checks, and field notes. Evidence from this study suggests that a part of upwardly-mobile Black women's socialization in Black families and communities was recognizing that their identities had been *overdetermined*, or determined for them, by others in those communities. The women were expected to be hyper-performers, meeting and exceeding high expectations. Being a hyper-performer would position them for success in new spaces where a different value system prevailed. A critical part of maintaining their sense of self as they pivoted between these differing value systems was, in fact, recognizing that their identity had been *overdetermined* again,

this time by people who did not share the communal, Black values under which they had been socialized. *Redetermining* their identity for themselves would mean reframing their expectations of themselves and others, and finding ways to attend to their mental, spiritual, and emotional needs in lieu of having ample culturally-sensitive models from which to draw inspiration.

IDENTITY (RE)DETERMINATION AMONG
UPWARDLY-MOBILE
BLACK WOMEN

by

Alta Thornton Mauro

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2017

Approved by

Committee Chair

©2017 Alta Thornton Mauro

DEDICATION

Brandon, you've always believed in me and cheered me on. I would not have had the mental space, time, or energy to attempt *and* finish my doctorate if it weren't for the way you love me and our children. I see all that you've done along our journey; I'm grateful. Guy & Naomi: How can I impact the world so that your load is lighter than mine? I pray that this effort does that, at least, in part. Finally, to God: I'm not sure what to call you these days, but I know you're here with me. I know you love me. I love you, too.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Alta Thornton Mauro, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Silvia C. Bettez

Committee Members _____
Shelly Brown-Jeffy

Lori Patton-Davis

Leila Villaverde

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began this work many years before matriculating into a doctoral program. Balancing the need to be flexible with the desire to be authentic; carrying centuries-old archetypes and ever-shifting expectations; acknowledging the legacies I have inherited and the debts I would be expected to settle... Performing the emotional labor required to both understand who I was in my own mind and heart *and* in the various contexts in which I would find myself. Maintaining enough humility to honor my ancestors, and channeling their power as fuel to press forward, with the audacity to be resilient in the face of ever-present oppression... And still, mine has been a relatively easy road to traverse. I am humbled by the tenacity of other Black women who have borne heavier burdens and prevailed.

I cannot begin this work without acknowledging a group of influential people without whom my contribution to this field of knowledge could not have emerged. To “snowflake #1” and “snowflake #2,” who helped me to identify willing and energetic participants: thank you for hearing me, believing that I had something worth hearing/ exploring, and granting me access to your neighbors, colleagues, and sistafriends. I hope that what you read rings familiar and true.

To Dr. Barbee Oakes: thank you for supporting my PhD dream! Darlene Starnes, Jonathan Cox, Wesley Harris, and Celina Alexander: thank you for being so supportive and patient during my coursework. I could not have gotten out of the gate so strongly without you. I owe you all for the reciprocal mentorship, teamwork, and prayers.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the incomparable Dr. Maya Angelou, who modeled such incredible humility. I will never forget her inviting me into her home and sowing seeds of wisdom into my life. In response to the question, “Should I be brutally honest?” she replied, “Well, dear, there’s never a reason to be a brutal anything.” That was a word meant just for me. I pray to live that lesson more completely one day.

Other educators who opened my mind, heart, eyes, and ears to new worlds: Blair Watts, Nina Bishop, Olivia McGee-Lockhart, Pat Boone, Elisha Madden, Brad Braxton, Norma Dillon, Doris Young, Nancy Klein, Christine Bennett, Shaun Harper, Dick McKaig, Mary Howard-Hamilton, Afeni Cobham... I am grateful, and I hope you know that. Thank you for the roads you paved.

Daddy: I hope I make you proud.

Joe: Thank you for loving and taking care of me in your own way.

Dana, Monica, and Rhonda: Thank you for being who you are; for cheering for me all these years, coming to see me all over the world, and for not making me feel even more guilty about not keeping in touch well. Thank you for sharing your children and loving mine, too. Thank you for everything.

Mommy: Thank you for working so hard so that I could sit at any of the tables I’ve ever been blessed to sit at. I see, understand, and affirm you more with each passing day. Thanks for letting me make my own mistakes (although, just in case you are reincarnated and come back as someone else’s mama, maybe don’t allow *so* many mistakes!) I love you much and I respect you more.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| LIST OF TABLES | ix |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Strategic Essentialism | 6 |
| Introduction to the Theoretical Framework | 7 |
| Rationale for Study | 9 |
| Research Questions | 10 |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW | 12 |
| Racial Identity Development among African-Americans..... | 13 |
| Racial Socialization in African-American Families | 15 |
| Gender Socialization by Race | 16 |
| Black Women at the Intersection of Race and Gender | 19 |
| Upward Mobility among African-Americans | 22 |
| Detriments of Upward Mobility..... | 25 |
| Conclusion | 28 |
| III. METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND METHODS..... | 30 |
| Theoretical Framework..... | 30 |
| Methods and Design | 34 |
| Positionality Statement | 39 |
| Participants..... | 43 |
| Data Collection | 46 |
| Analysis..... | 51 |
| Establishing and Ensuring Trustworthiness..... | 52 |
| IV. LEARNED BLACK BEHAVIORS: “THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS BLACK PEOPLE JUST DON’T DO!” | 56 |
| Introduction..... | 56 |
| Exposure to a Narrow Range of “Black” Behaviors..... | 58 |
| Influence of Class on Understanding of Blackness | 63 |
| One is Always Representing All Black People..... | 70 |
| Conclusion | 72 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| V. “WE 3D, BABY!” FLUIDITY AND COMPLEXITY OF BLACK WOMANHOOD ALONG THE JOURNEY TOWARD UPWARD MOBILITY | 76 |
| “Not Black Enough for Some; Not White Enough for Any” | 76 |
| The Perpetual Pivot of Code Switching | 87 |
| I’m Doing It ... but It’s Dizzying | 93 |
| Storm Closets | 98 |
| The Importance of Character: Spirituality and Integrity | 101 |
| Conclusion | 106 |
| VI. COMMUNITY: THICK LOVE AND THE LACK THEREOF | 108 |
| Community: The Critical Role of Support Systems | 108 |
| One is Silver and the Other Gold: The Value of Enduring Friendship | 109 |
| Challenges to Community | 111 |
| We Took Different Directions | 112 |
| “No Smudges:” Perfectionist Roots Turned Competition among Upwardly-Mobile Black Women | 117 |
| Colorism and Competition | 121 |
| Thick Love: Participants’ Experiences Cultivating “Framily” | 123 |
| Secrets that Can’t be Shared | 126 |
| Iron Sharpens Iron | 129 |
| ... and the Lack Thereof: Upwardly-Mobile Black Women’s Experiences of Loneliness | 132 |
| A Word on Upwardly-Mobile Black Women Compared to— and in Relationship with- Black Men | 136 |
| Conclusion | 139 |
| VII. SUMMARY | 141 |
| Summary of Key Findings | 141 |
| There are Certain Things Black People Just Don’t Do! | 142 |
| We 3D, Baby! | 145 |
| Thick Love and the Lack Thereof | 147 |
| Conclusion of Key Findings | 151 |
| Discussion | 152 |
| The New Normal: Reframing Expectations of Themselves | 153 |
| Mental Health in the New Normal | 160 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Limitations of the Study..... | 163 |
| Conclusion | 165 |
| VIII. ANALYSIS..... | 167 |
| Introduction..... | 167 |
| Key Findings..... | 167 |
| Learned Black Behaviors and an Exposure to a Narrow Range of “Black” Behaviors | 168 |
| Influence of Class on Understanding of Blackness | 169 |
| One is Always Representing All Black People..... | 172 |
| The Complex, 3D Nature of Black Womanhood Along the Journey Toward Upward Mobility..... | 173 |
| I’m Doing It . . . but It’s Dizzying | 177 |
| Seeking Refuge from Stress: Storm Closets | 179 |
| Community: The Critical Role of Support Systems | 181 |
| Thick Love: Participants’ Experiences Cultivating Family | 185 |
| Anticipated Findings | 188 |
| Socialization Under Non-Traditional Gender Norms | 191 |
| Critical Analysis of Learnings | 193 |
| Implications for Future Research..... | 195 |
| Conclusion | 198 |
| REFERENCES | 201 |
| APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW ONE PROTOCOL | 206 |
| APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL | 208 |
| APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW TWO PROTOCOL..... | 210 |
| APPENDIX D. RECRUITMENT MESSAGE..... | 211 |
| APPENDIX E. FACEBOOK RECRUITMENT MESSAGE..... | 212 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | Page |
|---|------|
| Table 1. Respondent Date Gathered. | 45 |

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

I hadn't meant to make her cry. I hadn't meant to cry myself, but my tears are never buried too deep. Between working full time, being a full-time doctoral student, and raising two toddlers with a husband who is supportive but equally exhausted by our life, I am overwhelmed and emotionally fragile. I assumed she was balancing a good amount of stress herself, working full-time, raising a pre-teen, planning her wedding, and maintaining other responsibilities. The only way that talking about our experiences of upward mobility *wouldn't* bring us to tears is if we did so on a more mental level, recounting events of our lives while intentionally avoiding the associated feelings. And like good, Black women, we fought back the tears with herculean effort, dropping eye contact, checking the time, checking to see that the recorder was still active - anything not to cry ourselves, and to give the other woman time and space to compose herself, lest we display any feminine emotion.

And so "Erica" and I sat down as two, upwardly-mobile Black women. I set out to learn about her life - what she had been taught about being Black, being a girl, being a Black girl (and later, a Black woman), and what impact her family's socioeconomic status had on how she learned to integrate all of this knowledge. I was interested in Erica's story, for sure, but was not surprised by anything in particular. Until she invoked a popular metaphor; she described herself as a *brick house*-- but not in the 1977

Commodore's way. She looked out the window of her tastefully-decorated home office, to the lot across the street where an extraordinary house-- similar to hers-- was being completed. She was remembering her mother and one of her mother's sisters, the women who were most directly responsible for teaching her what it meant to be a Black woman, saying, "But my other auntie and my mom, they always were the powerhouses and that's what [my cousins and I] saw... Me and my other cousins, our mothers have it, and we kind of like, we're going to get it. And with us, it almost seems effortless. And with [my other aunt] it almost seems like it's always a struggle."

I asked her to describe *powerhouse*, wishing I had been keeping tally, as she had used the term five times in the previous few minutes, and although I was certain of what she meant, I wanted to give her the opportunity to define the term for herself. She replied,

Erica: If I look across this street and I see this house and it's well put together. It's brick, it's a literal *brick house*. I mean, short of a tornado coming through and knocking it down or some God-forbidden catastrophe of that nature, it's going to be there standing through hailstones, rain, snow whatever. [These women are] the same way. They are resilient, very motivated, and sometimes it may be to a fault because they are so driven. It's hard when you are on such a driven track, you can veer a little but you can't lose sight of what's in front of you and sometimes it's family and sometimes it's even your kids because I love them to death but like I tell my mother a lot of times, to be a great businesswoman, a great mother, handle your business- just be an all-around good person...? You taught me that. So when I say powerhouse, definitely not a perfect house. We got some cracks in the drywall but when you look at it, it looks well put together and overall it's a well-built machine. But there are some flaws.

Alta: When I asked you to define what a powerhouse is, it never occurred to me that you would talk about [an actual] house... [W]hen you think about houses, more than likely all the houses in this subdivision were built by the same builder so you might expect the same -or at least similar- [issues] from house to house... And like you said things that [women] are being shown to emulate and what women are *not* being shown to emulate...

Erica: Because if you drive into – I'll just use [this housing] subdivision – you drive into the subdivision, these are some nice brick houses! You look at these powerhouse women

these are some powerful, well-put together *brick house* women, flawed nonetheless and facing challenges... For the most part I'm smiles, giggles and jokes all day long you know what I'm saying? But it's this part of me and it's like I keep it subdued because it doesn't have to come out a lot but when it comes and it's so nasty and it's like okay quit subduing it and deal with it.

But I actually have come to terms with, actually just recently, there's some stuff that needs to be dealt with you need to allow yourself to figure out where all this comes from and deal with it because it's unhealthy. But we are so good as *powerhouses*... Showing no vulnerabilities - until a tornado comes, then you realize you aren't as solid as you thought you were.

Alta: The architect's *plans* may have been alright but the foundation was a little lopsided.

Erica: Honey! Like you wouldn't believe, hear me?!

Alta: And I did. I heard her loud and clear.

Thousands of Black women are experiencing upward mobility and achieving many markers of the proverbial American Dream. Existing research has established the oft-experienced strain of upward mobility, conceptualized here as moving up into a higher socioeconomic status than one in which one was socialized (Simmons, 2009, p. 22). Upwardly mobile Black people report experiencing this strain more acutely than those of other races, citing the need to develop a bicultural identity in order to thrive in both their cultures of origin and the dominant culture where they work, attend school, and/or live (p. 21). As a result of social, economic, and political realities, there is an intense pressure for women of color to find acceptance in their work, school, and neighborhood contexts. It is likely that the pressure to develop a bicultural identity is intensified for women, as they do not take the benefit of male privilege with them into new spaces where institutional sexism still impacts women adversely (Doyle & Paludi, 1997).

Beal's (1970) concept of "double jeopardy" captures this intensified pressure, purporting that Black women, in particular, are penalized by both racial and gender inequalities (Beal, 1970, p. 90). In 2006, Berdahl and Moore's (2006) findings suggest that, despite gains in both racial and gender equality since Beal's claim in 1970, "[w]omen [still] experienced more sexual harassment than men, minorities experienced more ethnic harassment than Whites, and minority women experienced more harassment overall than majority men, minority men, and majority women" in the workplace (Berdhal & Moore, 2006, p. 426). Rosette and Livingston (2012) confirm that "[Black women] experience more negative leader perceptions than do leaders with single-subordinate identities (i.e., Black men and White women)" (Rosette & Livingston, 2012, p. 1). Black women understand the need to negotiate spaces using new skills, attitudes, and behaviors in order to assimilate into predominantly White middle- and upper-class spaces governed by White values (Simmons, 2009). In this study, I aim to understand how Black women conceptualize their own identity as they experience upward mobility. What is the impact of upward mobility on the ways that Black women understand themselves as individuals? As individuals in the context of their families? In their communities of origin? Situated in new neighborhoods, work environments, and social spaces?

According to Jones (2003), "...the potential for upward mobility contributes to a belief that the U.S. class structure is relatively permeable" (p. 804). African-American women have a storied and complex history of testing this permeability. Prospects of greater financial stability and social status have been effective motivating factors

prompting Black women to pursue professional careers, marriage or partnership with a financially stable mate, and other modes and markers of upward mobility (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). While research has established that social class alone is a significant determinant in one's life, a review of relevant literature reveals that the intersections of race and gender have a compounded impact on the way that one experiences life in a particular social class or across multiple social classes (Jones, 2003, p. 804).

Hill (2012) suggests that the values espoused in middle- and upper-class spaces may be in conflict with those demonstrated in the working-class communities where many Black women were socialized (Hill, 2012, xviii). Collectivist cultural values are theorized as foundational to Black identity (Carson, 2008). It stands to reason, then, that upwardly mobile Black women may struggle to reconcile their identity as they develop individualist, dominant culture behaviors which are valued in these new spaces, resulting –for many –in the development of new, bicultural ways of being that are indicative of middle- and upper-class contexts (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 433).

Identity is a fluid concept shaped by different contexts and, as some suggest, identity is performed and communicated differently in these different contexts (Sellers, 1998). Feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990), in asserting that *male is as male does*, suggests that identity is simply the summation of one's performance of that identity (Butler, 1990). Butler contends that “gendered behavior is not the innate expression of a gendered subject, but the result of the performative reiteration of social norms that sediment into the appearance of gendered being... of actions that enact gendered being rather than describe it” (Elliott, 2014, p. 379). Similarly, I suggest that being Black

cannot be reduced to the simple acting out of a role; however, communicating a Black identity does imply elements of performativity in that it involves both embodying Black cultural values and exhibiting behaviors that communicate those values to others.

Strategic Essentialism

I do not intend to suggest that Black identity is a wholly describable concept; such racial reductionism fails to acknowledge the differences that exist among Black people and their differing conceptualizations of race and their racial identity. On the contrary, the lived experience of Blackness is subjective, and phenomenologically unique in much the same way that members of other cultural groups often have shared experiences that set them apart from non-members. Because I believe that Black identity is subjective and experienced in a range of ways by those who claim it, I do not suggest that there is a singular or quintessential Black identity to which one should ascribe. I reject the essentialist notion that there are certain characteristics that can be attributed to or used to define every Black person, or that Black women, specifically, are a homogenous, unified group whose claims of blackness can be policed according to certain characteristics (Phillips, 2010). However, for the purposes of this research study, I attempt what Phillips (2010) identified as “a politically necessary shorthand” which recognizes the otherwise artificially simplified category of “Black women” (Phillips, 2010, p. 2). I employ Spivak’s (1988) sense of *strategic essentialism*, that “invoke[s] a collective category... while simultaneously criticizing the category as theoretically unviable” (Spivak, as quoted in Phillips, 2010). I suggest that there is a collective understanding held by many African-Americans of what it means to be African-American, although this

understanding is difficult to articulate to those outside the experience of being Black in America.

As a woman who identifies as Black, I am an in-group member of the population that I intend to study. I believe that my understanding of what it means to be a Black woman in America is a trustworthy description, but not an exhaustive definition, and I invite participants to outline the parameters of Black identity as they exist in their lived experience, knowing that they may differ from my own. I am assuming that participant experiences are influenced –quite significantly –by the ways that Blackness is envisioned in the American social imagination. Despite this allowance for participants’ unique experiences, I acknowledge that the *shorthand* that I employ in engaging them about their understanding of Black identity is still not without issue. I am at risk of perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black people in general and Black women in particular, should participants’ experiences mirror harmful archetypes. Similarly, I am wary of what Glesne (2011) calls “dangerous knowledge, or information that is politically risky to hold, particularly for an insider” (Glesne, 2011, p. 42). Although I may not incur real danger, it is possible that, in sharing views on race, class, gender, and the intersections of such in America, respondents may share views that I do not want to incorporate into my research findings. However, I am committed to reflecting participants’ responses truthfully, and in ways that honor their lived experience.

Introduction to the Theoretical Framework

I approach this study from an interpretive paradigm, as I seek to understand how Black women conceptualize their particular experiences with upward mobility and the

effects this mobility may have on their identities. As Bettie (2002) reminds, class and race/ethnicity are often situated as *categorical* variables “essentially *there* rather than *created*” (emphasis in original, Bettie, 2002, p. 35). Thus, it is essential that qualitative research leave room for a range of voices to emerge and, in the case of this study, acknowledge the ways that “race and class are politically, historically, and situationally constructed (and performed) in relationship to gender” (Bettie, 2002, p. 35).

A motivating factor for engaging in this research study was my query regarding the conflation of race and class in regard to Black women in particular; are race and class so enmeshed that the two are no longer discernable? Are the class influences across racial cultures so profound that the vestiges of one’s socializing class become definitive in the formation of a racial culture? How then do upwardly mobile Black women maintain their identity despite no longer needing to adhere to the class-influenced racial identity developed in their class of origin? To what degree are elements of their performances of race considered *passing*, and what are the implications for an upwardly mobile Black women’s sense of her racial identity?

In describing class subjectivity, Bettie (2002) distinguishes between *performance* and *performativity*, noting that “the former refers to agency and a conscious attempt at passing... [while] performativity, on the other hand, refers to the fact that [class] subjects are the effects of the social structure of [class] inequality” (Bettie, 2002, p. 52). The concepts of performance and performativity provide a theoretical frame through which I will analyze racial identity as simultaneously fluid and fixed. Bettie (2002) suggests that “we are all always performing our cultural identities, and the performance *is* the self...

But on the other hand, those constructed subjectivities are institutionalized, made into structures that have an autonomy apart from interactional performances” (p. 52). One’s performance may not align completely with one’s notion of an *authentic* self and can feel incongruent with who one thinks one is (p. 52). These feelings of incongruence can cause considerable anxiety and stress.

Bettie (2002) employs a poststructuralist framework and suggests that actors are not “agents who are free to choose identity performances” (p. 53). In her work on complex identity performance among working-class White and Mexican-American women, Bettie asserts that “the subject is constructed by the performance.” Given how this subject construction happens, it is imperative to explore how the identities of upwardly mobile Black women may have been *constructed* as a result of their performances in the spaces where they were socialized, and *reconstructed* by their performances in the new spaces they inhabit as a result of upward mobility. According to Bettie (2002), “[w]e employ discourses to construct our identities... from a limited range of options” leaving some of us “over-determined by the meaning systems that preexist us as individuals” (p. 54). To what degree are upwardly mobile Black women’s identities over-determined in ways similar to how Bettie found her respondents to be? How can more differentiated discourses reflect the great diversity of their identities and experiences?

Rationale for Study

In preparation for this research project, I reviewed literature that reflects Black women’s racial and gendered identities and how both intersect to impact their

experiences of upward mobility. For decades, there has been significant research on notions of race and people's racialized experiences. There is a growing body of research on Black women and their unique experiences. Likewise, there is significant research on upward mobility, and increasingly, there is information on the detriments of upward mobility which certain groups experience. There is still a scarcity of literature related to the specific experiences that Black women have as they become more upwardly mobile. I intend for this study to bridge this gap and contribute to what we know about the experiences of upwardly mobile Black women, specifically any shifts in their perceptions of self-resulting from upward mobility. I intended to explore the ways that Black women conceptualize changes in their social status alongside potential changes in their identity following a change in social status.

Research Questions

In this study, I aim to understand how Black women conceptualize their own identity as they experience upward mobility. I ask, does a Black woman's sense of herself shift as she takes on those values and behaviors required to achieve upward mobility, and if so, how? Of those Black women who have developed what Simmons (2009) defines as a "bicultural identity," to what degree are they conscious of this shift in the values they have come to espouse and/or perform (Simmons, 2009, p. 22)? Is there a degree of balance which they feel is ideal? What is the impact of their ability to perform this bicultural identity, on them? Their perception of self? Their relationship with family, friends, or acquaintances in their community of origin? For those who are less willing and/or able to perform a bicultural identity in order to advance, what has been the

impact of their inability to perform certain aspects of their new bicultural identity? Is this impact felt more significantly in certain spaces, or in the company of certain others?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review summarizes literature relevant to the lived experiences of upwardly mobile Black women and the impact of their experiences on their racial identity. Research findings on Black racial identity development are outlined first, followed by a summary of literature on racial socialization. In summarizing these two bodies of literature, I endeavor to situate the process of enculturation (socialization in the primary unit) as girls in either poor or working class Black families of origin in contrast to the process of acculturation (exposure to new values and learning new behaviors) as women in either middle- or upper-middle class White spaces (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, as quoted in Berry, 2003, p. 18). Differentiating between the enculturating contexts of home, family, and other familiar institutions and the acculturating context of new, dominant spaces will prove fundamental to this study, as these locations are the sites where racial identity is shaped and/or reshaped, and where it intersects with other identities in critical ways (Sellers, 1998). Next, I explore research that differentiates between the gendered socialization of girls by race, followed by a review of select literature regarding experiences at the intersections of race and gender. I then summarize literature on class and upward mobility among African-Americans, including a discussion of the detriments. Finally, I offer implications for further research.

Racial Identity Development among African-Americans

Constantine, et al. (1998) offers a comprehensive review of Black identity development theories, beginning with those that emerged in the psychological literature of the 1970's (Constantine, et al., 1998, p. 95). Original theories sought to define Black identity and to establish that an over identification with Whiteness and White culture is detrimental to a Black person's health (Helms, as quoted in Constantine, et al., 1998, p. 95). These theories assert that Black people achieve a healthy racial identity by progressing from degrading thoughts about themselves, other Black people, and Black culture (coupled with idealized regard for White people) to internalized positive sentiment about themselves and other Black people (and other racial minorities) (p. 95). Constantine et al. (1998) group these early theories into two categories: "mainstream approaches," commonly referred to as Nigrescence models, and "underground approaches," which have garnered less attention than mainstream models (p. 96). The former models are marked by a focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes by which Blacks develop a positive racial identity; the latter rest on the notion that positive Black influences may support Blacks in developing a healthy self-concept without having internalized a negative view of one's racial self (p. 96).

Cross' (1971, 1991) models are among the most popular Black identity models (p. 96). The psychologists' original Model of Nigrescence outlines the stages through which Black people progress as they develop a Black identity (p. 96). Cross' 1991 model reflects the influence of the literature on Black racial identity published after his original (1971) model, most notably regarding the concept of race salience in Black identity

(Vandiver, et al., 2001, p. 167). The first stage, *Pre-Encounter*, is marked by the beliefs that Whites are superior to Blacks and an internalization of Eurocentric values. During the *Encounter* stage, Black people have an awakening to the existence of race and the quickening of a racial consciousness, which prompts the shift from anti-Black to pro-Black sentiments. The third stage, *Immersion-Emersion*, brings an immersion in Black culture coupled with a distancing from Whiteness and the penchant for Eurocentricity. *Internalization* is marked by a positive and relevant Black identity and a reconciliation of ideological conflicts in the Pre-Encounter and Encounter stages. *Internalization-Commitment* (1971) reflects the goal of identifying and disrupting systems of oppression, primarily for Black people, but also for other people of color (p. 96). Helms (1984, 1986, 1990) updated Cross' original model, proposing that the stages be considered "ego-statuses" as to reflect a more fluid identity development process (p. 97).

Vandiver et al. (2001) update of Cross' 1991 model is the most critical of these updates (Vandiver, et al., 2001). The authors introduced the concept of *miseducation*, by which one could hold negative stereotypes about Blacks but not hate oneself (p. 197). More importantly, they introduced three independent ideologies: Black Nationalist, Biculturalist, and Multiculturalist (Vandiver, et al., 2001, p. 180). Critical to this proposed study is the internalized bicultural identity, which is marked by an acceptance of being both Black and American (p. 182); acceptance of one's Black and American identities is a criterion for this study. After a comprehensive research study, Phinney et al. (2001) concluded that developing a bicultural identity helped to facilitate minority student success in school settings (Phalet, Andriessen, and Lens, 2004, p. 67). These

authors do not extrapolate this finding beyond academic settings but existing research has cited the development of a bicultural identity as a coping strategy employed by upwardly mobile people of color across various settings (Simmons, 2009).

Racial Socialization in African-American Families

Sociologists describe socialization as the process of acquiring the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors deemed appropriate in a particular cultural group (Thomas & Speight, 1999). Racial socialization, then, is defined as the process of transmitting values, perspectives, or other information about one's racial group to children (Hughes, et al., 2006, p. 748). Further, racial socialization supports children's development of a positive racial identity which will aid them to cope with racism and to be both physically and emotionally healthy despite living in an oppressive environment (Thomas & Speight, 1999). Family units are considered "primary institutions" because they are the first and most pivotal influencers on a child's identity (Hill, 2012, p. xix). The influence of family in determining one's racial identity is particularly high and has been the focus of considerable research in the social sciences.

Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, and Lewis (1990) found that parents of color prepare their children for the realities of living in the United States as a racial/ethnic minority (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, and Lewis, 1990, as quoted in Hill, 2012, p. 87). Additional studies have shown that the majority of African-American parents actively engage their children in conversation or activity related to their Black identity, as opposed to avoiding Black identity in conversation with their children (Burton, as cited in Hill, 2012). Of primary concern for African American parents who racially socialize their children is

striking a balance between preparing children who can accept the realities of racial discrimination but still strive to achieve, without using race or racism as an excuse for failure.

Hill asserts that social class is essential in the shaping of family life (Hill, 2012, p. xiii) by asserting that “[s]ocial class is arguably the most powerful predictor of many aspects of social life, including the structure and viability of families” (p. xiii). The author posits that, although social inequalities based on gender, race, and ethnicity continue to exist and, obviously, affect families, social class position cuts across these dimensions of inequality in its ability to explain family life” (p. xviii). Hill incorporates Collins (1990) and Zinn & Dill (1996), acknowledging the impact of race and gender in intersecting with class to influence both the socialization of children and life throughout adulthood (p. 43). Hill’s (2012) findings related to the socializing power of families and the effects of family social class establishes a foundation for the exploration of the racial socialization of children by gender.

Gender Socialization by Race

The past three decades have seen an increase in the research on the racial socialization of African-Americans and other racial/ethnic minority groups (Burton, as cited in Hill, 2012). Whereas early research on Black families claimed that gender alone was not a significant factor in the socialization of children, more recent studies of Black families have found that when the impact of social class is considered, gender has a considerable impact on the ways that Black children are socialized (Hill, 1999, as quoted in Hill, 2012, p. 86). Hill (2012) found that low-income Black parents were more likely

than middle-class Whites ones to tailor their parenting based on their child's gender; most often, middle class White parents' intention was not to teach their children explicitly gendered behaviors. (p. 86).

Thomas and Speight's (1999) study aimed to fill the subsequent gaps in what is known about the process of racial socialization among Blacks. The authors cite the importance of a positive racial identity, evidenced by psychological adaptation and increased self-esteem, among other characteristics (Thomas & Speight, 1999, p. 153). They incorporate Boykin and Toms' (1985) categorization of Black families according to the type of racial socializing messages they transmitted to children: *mainstream*, indicating families who socialize children in accordance with Eurocentric values and beliefs, despite exhibiting Afrocentric values; *minority socializing*, representing a degree of passivity in accepting oppressive and racist beliefs; and *Black cultural*, indicating families where Afrocentric values (i.e. communalism, spirituality, harmony, et cetera) are transmitted (Boykin & Toms, as quoted in Thomas & Speight, 1999, p. 154).

The authors cite existing research which suggests that parents with more formal education and higher social class may be more inclined to engage in the racial socialization of their children (Barnes, as quoted in Thomas & Speight, p. 155). They note, however, that socialization occurs in both implicit (e.g. attending and/or participating in race-related civic engagements) and explicit (e.g. discussions on the importance of racial pride) ways. In contrast to Hill's (1999) suggestion, the authors confirm that the racial socialization messages used by Black parents do actually differ according to gender (Thomas & Speight, 1999, p. 152). For example, in a cited study,

“teenage boys reported receiving messages on racial barriers and egalitarianism, whereas girls reported receiving messages on racial pride” (Bowman & Howard, as quoted in Thomas & Speight, 1999, p. 155).

Thomas & Speight (1999) explored racial identity and attitudes about socialization among African American parents (Thomas & Speight, 1999). Ninety-six percent of participants in their study reported that teaching their children about racial issues was important, citing “the reality and presence of racism, the importance of being prepared to cope with racism, and the need to function appropriately in a racist society” (p. 160). An analysis of respondent data gleaned from the 104 participants revealed that girls received more messages stressing the importance of achievement and racial pride than boys did; girls were also given messages warning against premarital sex, while boys were not (p. 162). Finally, many participants highlighted the importance of instilling their daughters with a sense of acceptance of their own physical beauty, to combat their consumption of mainstream beauty standards (p. 165).

Hill (1999) opens a review of gender socialization in Black families with a quote taken from Collins’ (1987) study exploring the conceptualization of motherhood in Black culture:

Black daughters are raised to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because their skills are essential for their own survival as well as for the survival of those whom they will eventually be responsible (Collins, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 122).

Hill considers this possibility that Black girls are expected to “do it all” while Black boys are held to lesser expectations (p. 122). The author clarifies that very few studies have been dedicated to the ways that Black boys are socialized but that some have suggested that daughters are expected to be more competent and self-reliant than are sons (McAdoo, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 122).

Socialization under non-traditional gender norms are considered by some to benefit Black women in the long run, as it encourages the development of traditionally male characteristics (such as independence, competitiveness, and self-confidence), (Hill, 1999, p. 123). Hill cites Carr and Mednick (1988) who found that girls who were socialized in more “male” ways were more motivated toward achievement than girls who were not (Carr & Mednick, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 123). It may be that being socialized under such divergent expectations leads to the pronounced differences in lived experience which Black men and women often report. These differences in expectations and subsequent lived experiences may also contribute to strained relations between Black men and women, and eventually, the distance which upwardly mobile Black women feel exists between them and Black men, of whom less is [culturally] expected (Ucko, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 124).

Black Women at the Intersection of Race and Gender

Higginbotham (1993) calls special attention to the plight of Black women in America and the nearly impossible burden of having to choose *either* race or gender as their primary identity (Higginbotham, 1993). In describing the women’s movement in the twentieth century Black Baptist church, the author praises Black women for carving

out “...what Patricia Hill Collins calls ‘a safe space’ for self-determination [in the church] ... [where Black women] expressed themselves openly and without fear of reprisal” (p. 186). One might imagine that this creation of safe space was quite difficult to do, given the nature of the rhetoric around race which demonized Black people, in general, as subhuman, and Black women, in particular, as over-sexual, immoral objects. This “rhetoric of violence” and other attempts to over-determine Black identity meant that Black women had to overcome great obstacles in establishing their social worth (de Lauretis, as quoted in Higginbotham, 1993, p. 189). Higginbotham notes that “[t]he discursive effort of self-representation, of re-figuring themselves individually and collectively, was an immense one—stretching well beyond the limited context of their relationship [with others]” (p. 186).

More than just establishing themselves as worthy of respect, Higginbotham suggests that Black women had to “[assert] agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities—as Americans as well as blacks and women” (p. 186). This implies that they were not widely recognized as being all three simultaneously, or that Black women had to choose a sole identity marker, as opposed to embodying the intersections of their many identities. The author notes the urgency of positioning both race *and* gender themes within the context of their American identity (p. 186).

This urgency to oppose structural and symbolic representations of the all-encompassing white supremacy that denied them their full existence propelled Black women to adopt goals and strategies to reform the system of race relations in America (p.

186). The resulting goals and strategies privileged respectability, compelling Black people to protect their self-esteem and self-determination, despite their income or social status (p. 191). Although well-intentioned, this “politics of respectability” did as much to reify hegemonic White American values as it did to disrupt the subordination of Black women based on race and gender (p. 187). Its deliberate deference to hegemonic values as “proper” can be said to have been problematic, in that it reinforced highly negative stereotypes and cast those Black Americans who resisted such a way of being as unworthy (p. 194). It can be argued that these damaging stereotypes still exist today and impact the way that Black women are viewed in America.

Although the plight of Black Americans is markedly different now than one hundred years ago when the Black women’s movement in the Black Baptist church was at its zenith, the struggle to establish a positive self-concept despite racism and gender oppression persists. Crenshaw (1989) notes “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). The author goes on to suggest that “[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Because this tendency prevails, so does the need for critical research that considers the intersectionality of one’s various social identities.

Narayan (1988) supports the notion that those living under oppression may achieve a more critical perspective on their situation than do others but cautions against

the romanticizing of this “epistemic privilege,” as oppression does not necessitate this enlightened position (Narayan, 1988, p. 312). This is especially critical in the consideration of upwardly-mobile Black women, who inhabit oppressed positions in multiple contexts and may experience the complexity of intersecting identities in everyday life. As Narayan suggests, “the relationship between the [multiple] contexts the individual inhabits may not be simple or straightforward” (p. 316). They may find themselves attempting to dichotomize their racial, gendered, and class-based identities, and employing different frameworks to make sense of seemingly-different lived experiences.

Upward Mobility among African-Americans

In 1978, sociologist William Julius Wilson warned that Black America was becoming polarized into two extremes: an economically depressed lower class and an affluent, formally-educated middle class (Cole & Omari, 2003, p. 785). Wilson’s suggestion that class had replaced race as the primary predictor of African-Americans’ life chances has been both challenged and corroborated (Niemonen, 2002). As what Robinson (2011) calls “the splintering of Black America” into four distinct Black Americas continues, significant differences between Black subgroups and the ways that they experience life have become more apparent (Robinson, 2011, p. 5). What was once considered a monolithic group composed of members who experienced life in America in similarly predictable ways, Black America is now understood as a richly diverse community of communities. As such, there is increasing room for a “multidimensional

conceptualization of [B]lack identity,” marked by differentiation in identity and behavior (among other factors) (Demo & Hughes, 1990, p. 364).

Bettie (2002) suggests that race/ethnicity and class are often conflated or reduced to each other (Bettie, 2002). It is especially critical for the purposes of this study to acknowledge “how both social forces operate independently yet intersect” (Bettie, 2002, p. 38). Jones (2003) suggests that the “two ways of conceptualizing the relationship between class and ethnicity [are] class as a dimension of ethnicity and class as distinct from ethnicity” (Jones, 2003, p. 808). The author goes on to demonstrate a race-based alignment with these conceptualizations; while the experiences of poor and working-class Whites reveal that whiteness does not guarantee class-based privilege, members of historically marginalized racial groups who are disproportionately represented in lower social classes may develop their class and race identities in tandem (p. 811). This finding underscores other research on the intersections of race and class and affirms the notion that upwardly mobile Black women, having conceptualized their notions of a racialized self during their socialization in working- or middle-class locations, experience those identities as inextricably linked, more so than a White woman from a similar background and newly situated in a higher social class. This raises questions about how upwardly mobile Black women reconceptualize their racial identities as they shift into new class identities and take on new, adaptive behaviors in these new social class locations.

I intend for this study to add to knowledge about the interplay of these conceptualizations and racial identity among upwardly mobile Black women. If race is as influenced by class as Bettie (2002) suggests, what then remains of the upwardly

mobile Black woman's sense of Blackness when her attitudes, behaviors, and/or ways of being shift, in accordance with her new social class standing? Is a new, collective identity emerging among this upwardly mobile group? If so, does the influence of one's upward mobility serve to differentiate this new identity from versions of Black cultural identity influenced by poor, working- or middle—class status?

Noting that the scholarship on upward mobility focused narrowly on White men, Higginbotham and Weber (1992) embarked upon research comparing Black and White women's experiences with upward mobility (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992, p. 416). The authors identified three themes: *relationships with family*; *sense of obligation*; and *relations to the community* (p. 423). Many of the findings related to the latter two themes serve to inform an understanding of upwardly mobile Black women. For example, they explain that one method upwardly mobile Blacks employ to remain linked to their communities of origin is community engagement (p. 433). It is likely that this desire to be of service to Black communities is both evidence and a demonstration of an upwardly mobile Black woman's racial identity. Of Higginbotham and Weber's (1992) findings, those associated with the theme *relationships with family* are particularly informative.

The data suggest that Black women received more encouragement and support for educational and career attainment than did their White female peers (p. 423). This finding reifies the previously mentioned notion that Black girls are socialized to value education more than many of their peers, thus it should be considered when conceptualizing peer relationships that upwardly mobile Black women may seek to establish in school or work environments. Despite being encouraged to pursue an

education, both Black and White women found their parents to be ambivalent regarding their ambition to establish careers (p. 427). Specifically, both Black and White parents encouraged daughters to seek traditionally female occupations, as working in such a field was believed to make it possible for the women to balance their for-profit work with expectations of family and child rearing.

Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of Black respondents in Higginbotham and Weber's (1992) study reported having no recollection of parental messages situating marriage as a goal to be attained; only six percent of working class Black parents and four percent of middle class Black parents stressed marriage as a primary life goal (p. 428). Considering the importance of relationships in the formation of both Black and female identities, it is striking that such a critical relationship is largely unaddressed as parents socialize Black girls. The messages these Black parents *did* impart to their daughters regarding marriage - both explicit and implicit - were that marriage and economic security were separate concepts, as marriage was not expected to relieve their financial burdens or to be a sole source of financial support (p. 429). As such, Black women in the study recalled understanding the importance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and of pursuing avenues toward independence.

Detriments of Upward Mobility

Multiple researchers have established the benefits of upward mobility (Simmons, 2009; Jones, 2003). Despite these benefits, many social scientists contend that there are considerable detriments to such movement, citing acute and chronic stress and stress-related illness as a primary physical detriment (Hudson, Neighbors, Geronimus &

Jackson, 2015) and social isolation among peers in new communities (Jones, 2003). Further, upward mobility has not delivered Blacks from marginalization, discrimination, and racism (Marsh, et al., 2007, p. 7).

In particular, Black women have reported feelings of “conflicting class loyalties and a sense of being ‘nowhere at home’” as a result of upward mobility (Overall, as quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 804). They may find it difficult to maintain strong ties to their families and communities of origin while developing new ties in higher social classes. Even previously supportive family members may appear disinterested in their experiences or dismissive of their struggles with new issues (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 416). Deterioration in family and friend relationships is likely to cause internal conflict for the upwardly mobile Black woman, as much of her identity may rest on her sense of self in relation to others (Miller, as quoted in Higginbotham, 1992, p. 418). A woman socialized in a collectivist Black community may find herself feeling alone in more individualist, White spaces where independence and detached attitudes prevail.

Bettie (2002) suggests that class is a characteristic most often ascribed to men (Bettie, 2002). The author notes that “[w]omen make the stage as class subjects... when they represent consumption and leisure, not work” (Bettie, 2002, p. 34). This notion may help to explain the isolation from family that many upwardly mobile Black women experience; given the importance Black families place on socializing girls toward hard work and performance, it may be possible that, as these women come to represent consumption and leisure instead of work, they appear less familiar to members of their

families who are not upwardly mobile. What are the potential implications for a Black woman's identity in the context of her family unit as such a shift takes place?

Jones (2003) expounds on the notion of social isolation that upwardly mobile Black women may experience, stating that “marginalization happens within, not only between, racial groups” (Jones, 2003, p. 814). Upwardly mobile Black women are likely to internalize this marginalization from other Blacks in lower class status groups as a punishment for distancing themselves from Black communities or spaces in exchange for acceptance in the academy, their workplace, and/or their upperclass residential community. These feelings of detachment from home communities is often compounded by those of isolation from colleagues, neighbors, or other peers in new social circles, as people generally associate with others of the same class and race (Gilbert & Kahl, as quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 813).

This connects to James' *John Henryism Hypothesis* (1994); James (1994) purports that the effects of *prolonged high-effort coping*, or the “determined, hopeful manner” with which many low-income Blacks deal with stress had negative physical health effects (p. 160, emphasis in original). Low-income Blacks whose coping measures proved successful were more likely to persist; as a result of their persistence, they were more likely to develop adverse health conditions, including exhaustion, hypertension, and elevated heart rate (James, 1994). Although the research sample in the original 1983 study was completely male, James (1994) holds that the implications of *John Henryism* hold for Black women (James, 1994). James' research has been foundational in the research weighing the health cost associated with upward mobility against economic and

social returns. In short, while there are definitely stressors related to living in poverty or among the working class that many would hope to escape, research has established that managing the high levels of stress associated with achieving upward mobility is also detrimental to physical health (Miller, Yu, Chen & Brody, 2015).

Conclusion

Despite the existence of research on African-Americans, women's experiences, and upwardly mobility as independent categories, there remains a gap in literature on the experiences of upwardly mobile Black women. Cross' (1971, 1991) seminal research on Black racial identity development has served as a foundation for the exploration of Black identity (Cross, 1971; Cross 1991). Vandiver et al's (2001) updated Cross' (1991) model, acknowledging a bicultural identity indicative of comfort with both being Black and American (Vandiver et al, 2001). This bicultural identity may help to facilitate a Black person's success in predominantly White spaces (Phinney, 2001). The majority of Black parents will work intentionally to prepare their children to experience racial discrimination in such spaces, in the hopes that such racism will not derail their success (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, and Lewis, 1990, as quoted in Hill, 2012).

Hill (2012) found that Black girls received more messages about the importance of their ability to achieve than did Black boys (Hill, 2012). Such gendered messages are transmitted to Black girls in anticipation for the significant family responsibilities they will be expected to assume in adulthood (Collins, 1997). Intersecting with their gender identity, racial identity and class identity is theorized to be so closely linked that many Black women are not able to recall the formation of one in isolation from the other

(Jones, 2003). Although a component of their racial, gendered, and class identity formation has been the preparation for upward mobility, many upwardly mobile Black women report that the detriments associated with such movement are significant (Jones, 2003). I have examined literature that shows how Black women's racial and gendered identities may position them to experience upward mobility in unique ways that are not currently the focus of ample research. I intend for this study to bridge this gap and contribute to what we know about the phenomenological experiences of upwardly mobile Black women.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of upwardly mobile Black women, specifically any shifts in their perceptions of self-resulting from upward mobility. I intended to explore the ways that Black women conceptualize changes in their social status alongside potential changes in their identity following a change in social status. In this section, I outline the theoretical framework, methodology, and methods of data collection to be implemented in order to meet the goals of this study.

Theoretical Framework

I approach this study from an interpretive paradigm, as I seek to understand how Black women conceptualize their particular experiences with upward mobility and the effects this mobility may have on their identities. As Bettie (2002) reminds, class and race/ethnicity are often situated as *categorical* variables “essentially *there* rather than *created*” (emphasis in original, Bettie, 2002, p. 35). Thus, it is essential that qualitative research leave room for a range of voices to emerge and, in the case of this study, acknowledge the ways that “race and class are politically, historically, and situationally constructed (and performed) in relationship to gender” (Bettie, 2002, p. 35).

A motivating factor for engaging in this research study was my query regarding the conflation of race and class in regard to Black women in particular; are race and class so enmeshed that the two are no longer fully discernable? Are the class influences across

racial cultures so profound that the vestiges of one's socializing class become definitive in the formation of a racial culture? How then do upwardly mobile Black women maintain their identity despite no longer needing to adhere to the class-influenced racial identity developed in their class of origin? To what degree are elements of their performances of race considered *passing*, and what are the implications for an upwardly mobile Black women's sense of her racial identity?

In describing class subjectivity, Bettie (2002) distinguishes between *performance* and *performativity*, noting that "the former refers to agency and a conscious attempt at passing... [while] performativity, on the other hand, refers to the fact that [class] subjects are the effects of the social structure of [class] inequality" (Bettie, 2002, p. 52). The concepts of performance and performativity provide a theoretical frame through which I will analyze racial identity as simultaneously fluid and fixed. Bettie (2002) suggests that "we are all always performing our cultural identities, and the performance *is* the self... But on the other hand, those constructed subjectivities are institutionalized, made into structures that have an autonomy apart from interactional performances" (p. 52). One's performance may not align completely with one's notion of an *authentic* self and can feel incongruent with who one thinks one is (p. 52). These feelings of incongruence can cause considerable anxiety and stress.

Bettie (2002) employs a poststructuralist framework and suggests that actors are not "agents who are free to choose identity performances... rather, the subject is constructed by the performance" (p. 53). This suggests that upwardly mobile Black women have been constructed as a result of their performances in the spaces where they

were socialized, and *reconstructed* by their performances in the new spaces they inhabit as a result of upward mobility. According to Bettie (2002), “[w]e employ discourses to construct our identities... from a limited range of options” leaving some of us “over-determined by the meaning systems that preexist us as individuals” (p. 54). To what degree are upwardly mobile Black women’s identities over-determined in this way? How can more differentiated discourses reflect the great diversity of their identities and experiences?

I enter this study inviting upwardly mobile Black women to share reflections on their performance of race and the construction of their identities, the reconstruction of their identities in new spaces, and the impact that discursive over-determination may have on their identity. I intend to pose the following questions during the interviews:

Interview One

1. Talk to me about your childhood. I am especially interested in anything you remember related to your race, class, and gender.
2. Follow up questions about social class if not mentioned:
 - a. What would you say your social class status was growing up? (ie. working class, middle class, etc.)
 - b. Tell me why you would describe it as such?
 - c. What did your parents do?
 - d. What kind of home did you have?
 - e. What kind of neighborhood did you live in?
3. Follow up questions about race if not mentioned:

- a. Do you remember when you became aware of your race? If so, can you share how that happened?
- b. What can you tell me about the experience(s) that led you to know your race?
- c. Suppose you and I were to go back in time and visit your childhood home together. What would I see happening or hear being said related to race? What implicit messages about race might I miss?

Focus Group

1. What comes to mind when you think of upward mobility?
2. What have been *your* experiences with upward mobility?
3. In your experience, what have been some of the most significant benefits of upward mobility?
 - a. Have you experienced challenges as you have become upwardly mobile?
 - b. What has been the most significant challenge?
 - c. What causes these challenges?
 - d. How do you cope with these challenges?
 - e. Do you feel alone in coping with these challenges?
 - f. How do you imagine others responding to these challenges?

Interview Two

1. During the first interview, I asked you to reflect on your experiences growing up and becoming aware of your race. Then, during the focus group, we discussed some of the benefits and challenges related to upward mobility. I'd like to hear

more about your experience with upward mobility and the impact it has had on you.

- a. What effect, if any, has your mobility had an effect on any of your relationships?
 - b. Has your mobility affected your relationship with your family? How do you feel about this?
2. Has your sense of self shifted as you have become upwardly mobile? How?
 - a. (If applicable) How do you make sense of these shifts?
 3. How do you think being Black has influenced your experience with upward mobility?
 4. Has upward mobility impacted you the way you see yourself as a Black woman, in particular?

Methods and Design

This study explored the meaning that participants make of their unique experiences with upward mobility, focusing on the relevance of shifts in class to their identity. Women who participated in this study self-identified as African-American (although one also referred to herself as “mixed” or “biracial” at several points during individual interviews and a focus group). They must also have experienced—or be experiencing—upward mobility, defined—for the purpose of this study—as moving from one social class to a higher one. Eligible participants were self-identified African-American women who reported being socialized in poor or working-class families and being—at the time of the study—middle- or upper-middle class, and self-identified

African-American women who report being socialized in middle-class families and being—at the time of the study—upper-middle class. An additional criteria for participation was living in the large, Southwestern, metropolitan city where I would be conducting interviews and focus groups. I chose this geographic location because I was able to spend ample time there, reconnecting with participants in person as may be necessary. Further, two of the initial women invited to participate indicated a willingness to connect me to additional respondents in the same metropolitan area.

I employed snowball sampling, sharing a lay summary with initial participants via email and Facebook Messenger, describing the study and my research goals. I chose initial participants because they are either personal friends, or close friends of my friends and I have had the opportunity to hear them speak casually about the stresses of upward mobility. More specifically, I have heard each of them link their racial identity with class identity, and signal these linkages to other Black people with great intentionality. Specifically, I have heard each of them invoke class identity when responding to queries about their racial identity. For example, one woman, responding to a Black nail technician who questioned whether she was “fully Black” replied, “Trust me, honey, I’m from the ‘hood just like you. Ain’t nobody grown up with all of this that we have now!” This woman was not able to recognize the conflation of race and class in her statement. Later, when I inquired as to why she met a question about race with a response about class, she rolled her eyes and replied, “Ugh. You of all people knew exactly what I meant. Why are you being difficult?!” I believe that signals such as these are meant to prove to other Black people that one has been enculturated in poor or working—class

families despite being middle— or upper—middle—class adults. They are meant as a way of validating an upwardly mobile Black woman's sense of belonging *in* Black spaces and *to* Black communities.

Each of the three initial participants were already aware that I am a doctoral student interested in race, class, and gender; further, each knew of my studying upwardly mobility and Black women, but neither knew the nature of my proposed study. I asked that these women refer other participants in their social circle, hoping that their vouch for my trustworthiness would encourage others to participate in the study. I equipped each woman with an information sheet that she could share with women whom she thought may be willing and eligible for participation. In the end, this one participant referred six other participants.

I met another participant at a beauty salon. I booked an appointment with a stylist in the same Southwestern metropolitan area, whom I had never met. She asked what I did for a living and I began describing both my profession and the nature of my doctoral work. She turned to another client whom I had also never met and said “[Did] you hear her? You need to let her interview you so you can tell her about your life. You would be perfect for her study!” I shared the premise of my study with the other client and she agreed to be interviewed. Before our initial interview a few days later, she informed me that she had described our first conversation to a friend, and the friend also wanted to be interviewed. That evening, I interviewed both of them, and both have remained active participants. In the end, I did not need to attract additional participants using social media as first anticipated.

Glesne's (2011) warning that "[p]revious experiences with settings or peoples can set up expectations for certain types of interactions that will constrain effective data collection" proved true (Glesne, 2011, p. 41). Two participants told me that they were nervous because, essentially, they understood how important the study was in relation to my doctoral work and that they wanted to "do a good job for [me]" or "interview well." Once I assured them that there were no right or wrong answers and that my goal was to create the conditions for them to tell their stories, and then to represent what they shared with integrity, they reported feeling more at ease and able to participate fully. To date, I have received only positive feedback on the interview process and the nature of my work. One effort to avoid this confusion related to the role I played as both a researcher and participant was to invite participants to give me feedback on the lay summary before the study began. I also invited participants to ask questions about the study, my motivation in designing the study, and how I intend to use the findings (Glesne, 2011, p. 53).

I believe that engaging ten participants positioned me to gather adequate data on the phenomenon of upward mobility and its effects on respondents' racial identity. I used in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, which allowed me to encourage respondents to speak in their own words and afforded me the flexibility to respond to what they offered. I first engaged each of the ten participants in an individual 60 to 90-minute interview and then engaged them in 60- to 90-minute focus groups (two in-person focus groups with three participants each, and one in-person focus group with two participants each. I attempted to host a virtual focus group with the

remaining two participants but was not able to schedule it, as their schedules would not allow it). I followed up with each participant either via email, Skype, or phone interviews.

I audio recorded the conversations during both initial interviews and focus groups, and transcribed each recording to ensure accuracy in the data captured. Additionally, I observed respondent tone, word choice, and non-verbal communication (including body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, shifts in posture and positioning, contact between respondents, etc) in both the interviews and focus groups. This allowed me to contextualize and make sense of participant responses. I sought clarification regarding what respondent non-verbal communication represented, as not to take for granted that I understood their many ways of communicating simply because I am also an upwardly mobile Black woman, and am considered a part of the in-group.

During and immediately following each interaction with participants, I spent time writing field notes, noting my observations of each participant and nuances of the interaction which would not have been captured by the audio recording. I tried to capture nonverbal behavior, overlaps in conversation, and shifts in the emotional atmosphere, and to note my initial explanations of these phenomena. I also attempted to park lingering questions which I hoped to pose to participants during follow up interviews, or issues broached which would require further study. Most importantly, being able to revisit my field notes allowed me to identify emergent themes more effectively than had they been overly-influenced by my unchecked assumptions.

Positionality Statement

In order to execute this research project ethically, I had to acknowledge my positionality and the perspectives that I bring to this research topic in particular. It was critical that I interrogate what beliefs influence my sense of self as I determined the parameters of the study, selected and engaged with participants, analyzed, interpreted, and reported research findings. Among these influences were my understanding of and relationship to the notions of race, class, and gender. The following statement of positionality is my attempt to frame my social identities and the intersections of those identities that inevitably shape my perceptions of self and have shaped my understanding of myself in relation to the other women in the study.

My understanding of race and race performativity is shaped by my life experiences as a Black person in America. My understanding of class is informed by my socialization into a working-class family and the subsequent realization that, although we were “well off” in relation to my extended family, my immediate family was not financially secure, and we lacked the cultural capital of the middle-class friends I made in high school. My personal understanding of gender is certainly shaped by my experience of being socialized as a girl, but I cannot divorce my unique understanding from what I was taught about being a *Black* girl. I think back to my childhood and I do, of course, remember women admonishing me with half-smiles, finger-wags, and reminders that “Little girls don’t do that” or to “Act like a little lady” in relation to anything improper I may have done. But more vivid are those memories of women in my life making direct eye contact with me and saying, usually in hushed, serious tones, “*We* don’t do that.” I

cannot recall if anyone ever said, explicitly, “*Black girls* don’t do that” but I did not need them to. I wish I could list the many ways that I came to know what Black girls did and, more importantly, what they did not do, and how I needed to govern myself in order to maintain my membership in the group. What informs my perspective on gender in the most intimate sense is my coming of age as both Black and cisgender.

One critical criterion of Blackness that I was taught was collectivism. Collectivist cultures are those in which members view themselves primarily as belonging to a whole, and are motivated and governed by group norms (Triandis, 1995). Growing up, I was taught to maintain allegiance to my immediate and extended families, and my closest friends. Closeness with loved ones was considered to be of the utmost importance; spending time together was paramount.

Taken together, these notions of race, class, gender, and collectivism inform who I am becoming as an upwardly mobile Black woman; my socialization as a girl in a working-class, collectivist racial culture is foundational in how I see myself and how I view myself in relation to others. Further, these notions influence the ways that I embody my role as mother, especially as mother to a daughter. As I work to raise a daughter who is self-aware, and aware of the roles she may play in various contexts, I remember those messages – both explicit and implicit – that I received about what it meant to be a Black girl in a Black community. I wonder how valuable messages of this kind will be for my daughter. I imagine stark differences between my lived experiences at the intersections of race, class, and gender in a collectivist community and her future, growing up as a middle-class, biracial daughter of married, college-educated parents, living in middle-

class spaces where individualism is celebrated. I consider my daughter developing her racial identity, and I worry what effects my current racial (re)construction will have on her experience. In fact, I worry that my identity and ways of being will have no effect on her at all, or that she may seek to establish an identity for herself that is entirely different than mine. Just as the threat of growing apart from my birth family makes the benefits of upward mobility less attractive, the fear that the upper-middle-class life that I am working to establish for my children may mean that they grow up to be diametrically different than I am weighs heavily on my mind and heart.

My status as an insider among the population I have chosen to study informs my conceptualization of other upwardly mobile Black women's experiences. It is likely that my understanding of these notions coupled with my own phenomenological experience leads me to believe that I know more about other women's experiences than I possibly can. I have admitted this possibility from the onset. In considering the women who I invited to participate initially, I revisited the linkages I have heard them make between racial identity and class identity and their tendency to signal these links to other Black people intentionally. At times, these signals have seemed to me to be indirect – chiming in on an inside joke or claiming familiarity with a food or product associated with working— or middle—class life. At other times, I have heard women speak explicitly about having maintained the sense of self they developed in poor or working—class families. Each time, I can recall wondering if these signals had been more effective in establishing credibility with others or in reaffirming the woman's sense *of herself to herself*.

One instance I recall vividly took place when I helped to plan a friends' baby shower. We were a group of Black women, all in our late twenties or early thirties, all of us college-educated (most of us had advanced degrees), all of us employed in professional work, and each of us living in clean and safe neighborhoods in our respective cities, whether with a partner or alone. We were all laughing and telling jokes for the hour or so allotted for setup when one woman asked another for a recommendation on a brunch location, as she was visiting from out of town and was unfamiliar with the area. A line of jokes ensued regarding the local woman's extravagant taste, with a few others invoking fake British accents to mock her and her "highfalutin" ways of being. The woman stopped the music playing from her laptop, turned to face the group, took a deep breath, and said, with flat affect, "Not that I should have to say this but I assure you, I know what it means to have and what it means to have not. I prefer having, as I know all of us do."

I thought we had all been having fun but her response brought a peculiar shame over me. I regretted the way we had chided her. We had tried, collectively, to suggest that her upper-middle class tastes and ways of being separated her from Blackness, and further, we had made a joke out of the suggestion. I agreed with her in that all of us preferred *having* over *not having*. But why must upwardly mobile Black women have to prove to other Black people that we have been poor or working-class in order for our identities as Black women to be affirmed? Why does having had access to less serve as a prerequisite of a Black woman's identity in some circles?

Remembering the importance of collectivism in Black families, I knew how serious our accusations of her inauthenticity had been. Suggesting that a Black person who identifies as Black and who wants to be in relationship with the community is somehow *not Black enough* is a severe indictment. I imagine many, if not all, of us in the room had been subject to such accusations to some degree, at some point along our journey toward upward mobility. At times when my social class has made others challenge the authenticity of my (Black) identity, my emotions have ranged from anger, to fear, to shame, and back to anger. In those moments, I feel angry that I am being judged at all, afraid that others may hold the same view of me, ashamed that I may have done something wrong or not done a particular thing right, according to proverbial *Black codes*, and angry that I am not free to just *be* without feeling the need to perform a somewhat prescribed set of behaviors in order to convince others that I am who I claim to be. I engaged in this study influenced by my memories of this and other experiences, and my desire to know how relatable my own experiences are among other upwardly mobile Black women.

Participants

Each of the ten respondents self-identified as African-American (and were identified as Black or African-American by the women who referred them, when applicable) before participating in initial interviews. One participant, “Aundrea,” referred to herself as “Black,” “African-American,” and “biracial” interchangeably during both the individual interview and the focus group in which she participated. On occasion, Aundrea framed personal challenges associated with upward mobility as

especially pernicious because of her blackness; at others, she noted taking advantage of her racial ambiguity, particularly as it allowed her to enter into advantageous relationships with White people. At another point, she expressed the limits of this access, stating that certain spaces were still too White, and thus off limits to her.

Although Aundrea reported understanding that an eligible participant was one who had experienced or was experiencing upward mobility, she indicated mid-study that she may not, in fact, fit such a qualification. She stated that her parents were both college-educated, and that she grew up middle-class. Later, during a focus group, she described her mother, in particular, as a high wage earner, recalling that her mother had shown her a pay stub as evidence that she earned over six figures. Additionally, Aundrea shared that her friends all “spent time at each other’s’ mansions in [a particularly wealthy area]” even though she “didn’t live in one, but [she] lived close enough.” These offering prompted a fellow participant to ask, “So are you still upwardly mobile, then, if your mother was making six figures in the- what- 80’s? 90’s? And people had mansions...?!?” I attempted to clarify this point with her later, to which she replied “Yeah, I’m upwardly mobile! We were comfortable but we weren’t filthy rich.” I captured my own thoughts and feelings about this exchange, noting that Aundrea’s response was reminiscent of my upwardly-mobile friend in the nail salon, seemingly denying some aspect of her identity and/or experiences in order to solidify that she does, in fact, belong *in* Black spaces and *to* Black communities. While most participants felt compelled to reiterate that their blackness had not diminished as a result of their success -

that upwardly mobility had not lessened the degree to which they identified as Black - Aundrea's answers indicated more urgency in establishing her *both-and* status.

Another participant, Erica, indicated meeting the criteria for eligibility before we met for the initial interview. However, during this conversation, she indicated that she “did not grow up broke- at least to [her] knowledge. We were comfortable.” Erica later indicated that she self-identified as “maybe upper-middle--class, but definitely better off than [her] mom had been, although she was alright, too.” Similarly, Courtney indicated that while she would consider herself upwardly-mobile, her parents were middle-class.

Table 1. Respondent Data Gathered

| Assigned Pseudonym | Age | Self-Assessed Socioeconomic Status of Origin | Self-Assessed Socioeconomic Status at Time of Study | Data Gathered |
|---------------------------|------------|---|--|--|
| 1. Erica | 40 | middle-class | upper-middle class | Initial interview; member checks of main themes and data chapters |
| 2. Crystal | | poor | upper-middle class | Initial interview; focus group; member checks of main themes and data chapters |
| 3. Da'Shelle | | poor | middle-class | Initial interview; member checks of main themes |
| 4. Tiffany | 39 | poor | upper-middle class | Initial interview; focus group; member checks of main themes |

| Assigned Pseudonym | Age | Self-Assessed Socioeconomic Status of Origin | Self-Assessed Socioeconomic Status at Time of Study | Data Gathered |
|---------------------------|------------|---|--|--|
| 5. Felicia | | working-class | middle-class | Initial interview; focus group; member checks of main themes |
| 6. Camille | | working-class | middle-class | Initial interview; focus group; member checks of main themes |
| 7. Daria | | working-class | middle-class | Initial interview; focus group |
| 8. Marian | | working-class | upper-middle class | Initial interview; focus group; member checks of main themes |
| 9. Aundrea | 41 | middle-class | upper-middle class | Initial interview; focus group; member checks of main themes |
| 10. Courtney | | middle-class | upper-middle class | Initial interview; focus group |

Data Collection

In March of 2016, I asked a friend and sorority sister asking if she would be willing to be a participant in a qualitative research study which I was conducting as a part of my doctoral work. I informed her that I would have more information once the study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and that it would be helpful if she could refer friends and colleagues of hers who would also meet the study's

eligibility requirements. She and another friend indicated that they would help to recruit participants once I was able to share more about the scope of the study. Upon receiving IRB approval (Appendix G), I traveled to the large, Southwestern city where she lived to begin interviews. One friend participated but did not refer others. Another woman speculated that she could recruit all nine other respondents, and began reaching out to friends and colleagues immediately. In the end, she referred six participants. I recruited another participant at a beauty salon, and she referred one additional participant. I stopped recruiting new participants after meeting each of these ten women and being assured that they would continue on as participants. As the data gathered from first-round interviews had become sufficiently saturated (with no new themes emerging), there was no need to recruit additional participants.

For this study, I conducted at least two interviews with eight participants, and one interview with the remaining two participants. Additionally, all participants had the option to participate in member checks. During the first interview, I sought to understand the woman's memories of race, class, gender, and any intersections among the three. My goal for the focus groups was to hear women describe their experiences with- and what they felt to be the benefits and challenges associated with upward mobility.

I began each initial interview by introducing myself and thanking the participant for their time and attention. I shared my full name, how long I had known the mutual friend who connected us, and whether or not I had met them before. I described my doctoral research in layman's terms, and then shared the informed consent form for them to sign. Each participant was given the opportunity to question my motives or reason for

approaching this research topic, or to otherwise ask clarifying questions about the study before giving verbal consent for me to audio record. While I did not answer each of the interview questions myself, I did share personal anecdotes and relevant information on my background with participants as we talked. This supported my attempt to establish rapport, and helped to ensure participants that I was both listening actively and affirming their experiences.

Using a semi-structured interview protocol provided me the foundation to use the questions I created beforehand as well as flexibility to explore concepts of concern to participants as they emerged. This was especially important during my first meeting with participants, as I did not know most of them and could not anticipate which prompts would elicit the most response. I found that being equipped with core questions helped me to feel prepared and secure, and simultaneously allowed me to focus the conversation, and thus be present in the room with each participant. (See Appendix A for Interview One Protocol).

Interviews took place in four different locations. The first was conducted in a participant's home at the end of what she called a "long, slow workday." She and I chatted in her kitchen before moving to her home office, with her behind a gorgeous custom desk and me in a beautifully upholstered wingback chair. For the second interview, I sat on a sofa in my friend's bedroom while she moved around sorting laundry, choosing an outfit for the next workday, and wrapping her hair in a scarf for the night. Interview number three was with Crystal. She and I sat at a table outside her living room, moving around the kitchen at one point when she wanted a snack. I

interviewed Da'Shelle, a close friend of hers, at the same table after Crystal and I concluded. (Crystal would later open her home to me and host the first of the three live focus groups). Interviews five, six, seven, and eight (with Daria, Felicia, Camille, and Marian) were conducted in Tiffany's chambers, while she worked in a different space so that myself and other participants could have privacy. Interviews nine and ten were conducted in Aundrea and Courtney's chambers, respectively.

I opened each focus group thanking participants for their time and energy, and covering a few *housekeeping* points before beginning. For example, I ensured that each participant was able to participate for the full time allotted; gave directions to the closest restroom; and asked that cell phones be silenced. Additionally, I reminded participants that I would be using pseudonyms for them in the study, and sought their approval on the names I had chosen. (One participant opted for a different pseudonym, all others approved the name I had chosen for them). Finally, I informed participants that while I thought it permissible for them to ask questions of each other when relevant, I would not be asking any of them to revisit specific details from their individual interviews, in an effort to maintain confidentiality and protect their anonymity as much as possible.

I thought it best to ask whether participants had any lingering questions or thoughts from their initial interviews which they thought were relevant to the focus group. In each group, at least one woman reported considering the topic and the questions asked long after the interview concluded. Most agreed that the process of upward mobility had been bittersweet; the memories jogged by their participation in the study were complex, inviting both pride in their accomplishments and awe at their current

social status, but also isolation in some cases, and considerable stress in all cases. These reflections allowed me to segue into the interview protocol seamlessly, inviting women to reflect on their experiences of upward mobility, and to discuss these experiences together.

As mentioned previously, the first focus group was conducted in a participant's home. Three participants and myself gathered in the media room and got comfortable on a few leather sofas with an NBA game on mute projected on a far wall. I knew one of the women from college, and she knew one of the other participants through a mutual friend. The hostess only knew me, and solely through the research study. Our conversation hinged on issues of race and class, and our comparative experiences as Black women in working-class spaces versus middle- or upper--middle class spaces. Again, the protocol I created gave necessary direction for the conversation but allowed me to pursue critical themes as they emerged, and to explore shared reactions and what appeared then to be shared understanding among participants. (See Appendix C for Focus Group Protocol).

Focus groups two and three were conducted in a small conference room in the office building where seven of the ten participants work. I used the same interview protocol for all three focus groups, and allowed women to guide the conversation as necessary, with me returning to predetermined questions when themes overlapped. I attempted to host the final focus group via Google Hangout. One of the remaining two participants was able to participate in the call but the other was not able to connect. In all, I conducted just under twenty-one hours of interviews, and spent considerable time facilitating member-checks during the coding, analysis, and writing processes.

Analysis

Analyzing interview data includes a process of decontextualizing and recontextualizing data (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). In order to decontextualize individual data points, I assigned codes to particular quotes. I then analyzed the assigned codes for patterns, organizing them by theme, and distilled the core themes and linkages between all ten participant narratives. Creswell (1997) describes a formula for coding data in which individual statements are analyzed and organized into clusters of meaning that best represent the studied phenomenon (Creswell, as quoted by Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). I used this method to isolate particular data points, being careful to mark those assumptions that I bring to the study, both about the experiences of upwardly mobile Black women and the ways that they report (or infer) those experiences. A thorough exploration of my assumptions was necessary, as I found myself bracketing the expectations I had about their experiences before analyzing their offerings.

I attempted to write continually, distilling the most pertinent elements of upwardly mobile Black women's experiences as they shared them. Remaining open to participant offerings was difficult at points, primarily because I could not assume that the knowledge that I bring to the study by virtue of my personal experience as an upwardly mobile Black woman was aligned with other participants. I intended to acknowledge the role that I played as both a researcher and a participant. In keeping with the theoretical framework through which I approach this work, I resist essentialist notions of Black womanhood as a single, knowable and quantifiable identity that I must already be able to

explain because I am a Black woman myself. Despite this understanding, remaining skeptical of my own assumptions and suspending narrow judgement still required great intentionality.

Establishing and Ensuring Trustworthiness

Given my in-group membership as an upwardly-mobile Black woman, I had to undertake several processes to ensure that my own preconceived notions were both acknowledged and challenged, and that the resulting research findings were credible. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a qualitative research study's worth is determined, in part, by its trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, as quoted in Shenton, 2004, p. 64). Trustworthiness is achieved by establishing credibility, or internal validity; transferability, or external generalizability; dependability, or reliability; and confirmability, or objectivity (p. 64). I paid particular attention to each of these categories and sought to ensure that the study was trustworthy and reflective of what participants shared and implied about their experiences.

To establish credibility, I employed the strategy of peer debriefing which provided an opportunity for me to both test and defend the conclusions I was drawing from the initial codes and categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). I asked a friend who completed a mixed-methods dissertation a number of years ago to review non-identifiable information, ask me a line of questions she thought relevant to what she read, and indicate if she thought the findings were plausible. The fact that her doctoral research had not been qualitative suggested that she may not be familiar with the process I had undertaken and may challenge me further than a fellow qualitative researcher

might. Additionally, she is interested in my research topic but does not consider herself a member of the in-group, so I did not worry that she would be especially passionate about my findings. Discussing findings at this stage helped me to process my own thinking further in that I had to answer questions regarding aspects that I may have taken for granted.

I also employed a member-checking strategy to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Glesne, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested member-checking to be the most crucial technique researchers can employ to establish credibility as it allows participants the opportunity to confirm or dispute data. At the conclusion of focus groups, I shared initial codes and categories with each of the participants via email. I asked that they review the information and provide any feedback- positive, negative, or neutral. I also asked that they share any conversation that they had amongst themselves about the nature of the study or their experiences as participants, as many of them know each other personally and spend considerable time together. Several participants responded to these emails indicating that they liked or agreed with the themes, and asked that I continue to share research findings as they study evolved. No participant rejected or disagreed with any of the codes or categories that I shared. To this end, I shared potential chapter titles and indicated which of the original categories would become sections of other, more comprehensive chapters. I also asked participants to share their feedback on the order of the chapters; three did.

In working to ensure that findings of this research study were trustworthy, I concerned myself with the task of achieving a *thick description*- or robust explanation- of

the phenomena that participants described (Shenton, 2004, p. 70). It was important that the literature review which I conducted prior to embarking upon the active research be thorough and provide extensive information on Black people living and experiencing both race and class in America, Black girls being socialized in America, Black women experiencing upward mobility, and the often-disregarded detriments of upward mobility. My goal in providing extensive background information in this way was to provide a context in which participant stories could be situated, affirmed by those whose lived experiences have been similar to some degree, and understood by outsiders. While transferability is often suggested as a critical characteristic of qualitative research, I resisted the temptation to become preoccupied with it, as the stories women shared with me must be considered within the context where they first unfolded. Suggesting that their stories - and thus, their lived experiences- are trustworthy only to the degree that they can be used to also explain distant others is to suggest that they are less valid standing alone. A similar research study designed to understand the impact that upward mobility may have on a different demographic group may unveil to what degree aspects of my research findings are transferrable to other groups. However, I resist the temptation to insist that participants' experiences must be relevant for or applicable to others.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that attempts to ensure credibility support the establishment of the third pillar of trustworthiness, dependability (p. 310). In order to ensure that the research findings were dependable, I overlapped the methods of individual interview and focus group. A subsequent research project engaging upwardly-mobile

Black women may not yield the same exact results because the participants will likely be different but the research design itself could be used as a “prototype model” in that it can be replicated (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). The research design and methods of collecting and analyzing data provide ample information to researchers interested in replicating this study.

The fourth pillar of trustworthiness is establishing confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity, or the researcher’s intentional attending to their own construction of knowledge, is critical in ensuring that research findings are not *objective* but that they represent participant experiences and not researcher preferences (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). One method of fostering reflexivity is to curate a robust positionality statement, whereby the researcher can acknowledge their own preconceived notions, values, guiding principles, and relationship to both the participant group and phenomenon at the center of the study. I have included such a statement as a part of this study and shared how my personal identities, history, and experiences with upward mobility drive my interest in this phenomenon and impact the way that I undertake the study.

CHAPTER IV

LEARNED BLACK BEHAVIORS: “THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS BLACK PEOPLE JUST DON’T DO!”

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of upwardly mobile Black women. As the researcher, I was specifically interested in any shifts in participants’ perceptions of self which they would suggest resulted from their experiences with upward mobility. I set out to explore the ways that Black women conceptualize these shifts in their identity alongside changes in their social status. In this and the following three chapters, I outline the four emergent themes of my research findings: (1) the notion that, because they are Black, what is appropriate for upwardly-mobile Black women to do is predetermined by others and policed by mostly implicit--yet strict-cultural rules; (2) their already fluid identities have become increasingly complex as they have experienced upward mobility; (3) their relationships to and with others have been strained as they have experienced upward mobility; and (4) they consider the tremendous pressure under which they live as upwardly-mobile Black women to be part of a “new normal.” Despite each theme having distinct meaning, there is considerable overlap and implication across the four of them, and among the subthemes associated with each.

These four themes reflect participants’ own experiences, their reflections on the experiences of other upwardly-mobile Black women with whom they are in relationship, and the impact of these experiences on their sense of self. This is not to say that each of

the ten participants' experiences have been the same, only that these themes resonated with each participant. During interviews and focus groups, participants detailed those experiences growing up which most readily influenced their understanding of race, class, gender, and the intersections of the three. Further, participant stories illustrate how their understanding of these concepts impacted the ways that they have come to understand themselves.

In almost every case, the women contextualized who they were in relation to the various cultural contexts in which they found themselves, noting both the degree to which they were comfortable and the degree to which they were perceived to belong in each space. Women spoke passionately about lessons learned from childhood and early adolescence, their journey toward upward mobility and any shifts in sense of self. Participants were also eager to discuss their need to cope with the negative pressures of upward mobility and, unfortunately, in most cases, the inadequacy of their coping mechanisms. While there was overlap across their stories, participants were, in fact, a fairly diverse group, growing up in various parts of the United States and abroad, and being socialized through various family structures. Where and how participants grew up are critical considerations in that these factors have been found to impact childrearing and socialization (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Similarly, the range of attitudes regarding what behaviors were appropriate for Black girls and Black women, and what it meant to represent other Black people existed on a continuum based, in part, on where and with whom participants lived.

Other critical differences existed between participants at the time of study. They reported different relationship and socioeconomic statuses and they differed in physical appearance. Participants also subscribed to different notions of faith and spirituality, a factor which would prove important in the way that they accepted or rejected the pressures of their lives. The impact of the group's diversity is that while participants are characteristically different from one another, their stories intersect and overlap considerably, making it more plausible that themes in their experiences may also be relatable to other upwardly-mobile Black women.

In this chapter, I speak through participant stories to describe how participants learned *Black behaviors*, the narrow range of behaviors deemed appropriate for Black people, which they reported coming to understand during childhood and adolescence. All 10 participants communicated a firm understanding that there were certain things that Black people did, and certain things that they did *not* do. For the remainder of this chapter, I focus on how participants came to understand what behaviors were appropriate for them based not only on the behaviors of those around them but also on the messages they received from family members and other trusted influencers. Knowing what behaviors were expected of Black people was critical, as participants understood from an early age that they were not only representing themselves, but their individual families, and Black people on the whole.

Exposure to a Narrow Range of “Black” Behaviors

Participants reported feeling pressure to behave in particular ways in order to ensure that one was identified and accepted as Black by others. Behavior outside of these

prescribed ways was reason for one to be identified as White--or at least, according to one participant, "less Black" than others. Determining the parameters of Black identity was an unconscious process which participants could not describe explicitly but which each indicated was critical for their identity development. The primary explanation for why this range of behaviors was understood to be so narrow is that most participants had little exposure to non-Black people during childhood, when messages regarding appropriate behavior are strongly influencing how one learns to act. In other words, participants' understanding of what was appropriate versus inappropriate was influenced most directly by the Black people around them who, by Da'Shelle's definition, "acted Black, and showed [children] how to act Black." Those participants who did recall frequent or significant contact with non-Black people also stipulated that the people in their lives who were most influential, and who had the greatest impact on the formation of their own values, were Black.

With little exception, participants referenced a deeply-understood distinction between what Black and White people could do. Those raised in the most homogenous areas recounted specific instances where they received explicit messages about what was allowed, appropriate, or expected of Black people. For example, Da'Shelle shared that "[t]here were certain things that White people did, certain things that Black people did. There was a real dividing line, very, very much so." In remembering the social isolation of growing up in a rural community in Mississippi, she noted that her grandmother forbade her from "going into town" where White teenagers attended parties on the grounds that "*we* don't do that." I asked to whom her grandmother was referring by

“we,” and she clarified, amid laughter: “Black people, of course! Black kids didn’t hang out all hours of the night at parties acting like grown folks.”

Da'Shelle went on to recount other conversations with her grandmother: “[t]here were these times my grandmother would say “little Black children this, and little Black children that.” When I asked why she thought her grandmother commonly told her where she thought “little Black children” did and did not belong, she replied “I don’t even know- because of course, by the time I was seven or eight or so – young, *really* young – I already knew those things. I just – I just knew the deal.” DaShelle could not even articulate how she came to understand these specific expectations but she was sure of them at the tender age of seven.

The notion that acting outside of Black behavioral parameters might result in one being labeled as White resonated just as strongly with participants who grew up in relatively diverse neighborhoods. These women understood that there were strict rules (or at least commonly held expectations) for how Black people lived, and that these were considerably different than the ways that White people lived. Daria provided specific examples of things Black girls were not allowed to do, saying:

there is a great distinction between what the White people do and what the Black people do. I got that from my parents. For example, [White girls] were able to dress in a certain way. [Black girls] were not allowed to wear short shorts or other provocative clothes. Your mama or your sister or somebody would pull you aside and tell you “this is not how we dress” or something like that.

Daria talked at length about what Black girls were taught not to do as to preserve their chastity and reputation. This was because, even if they were active sexually, it was

imperative to maintain one's reputation as "clean, upstanding, or just... decent." On the contrary, Daria understood that White girls could not only have sex but that they could engage in illicit sexual behavior without the risk of being judged, whereas Black girls didn't do things like "have oral sex... [G]uys are liking girls because they are doing all these things that Black girls don't do, namely that Black girls don't have oral sex and they are not as freaky, so that is why guys [weren't] looking at [us] to date."

Daria was almost confused by my asking her how she came to accept such strict rules related to both trivial and more consequential behaviors.

Accept them? As in...? [Laughter] In Black homes you don't ask questions. Like, there is no 'why.' You do [what you are told]. It's a command. You do it "because I said so" so, whereas White kids could be questioning their parents... No! I remember my mother saying, "I am not your White friends' Mama. You don't ask me 'why?' You do it because I said so. Period."

Like Daria, Courtney also learned that she should not question the strict rules related to appropriate behaviors. She suggested that Black people come to know these behavioral "codes" as part of their enculturation processes. These codes were meant to encourage the women to behave in ways that would suggest to others, namely White people, that they were respectable (Higginbotham, 1993).

In short, most participants reported having limited exposure to non-Black people, thus they deduced that the behaviors which were appropriate for them to replicate were those exhibited by the Black people in their lives. The two exceptions were Courtney and Aundrea. Courtney grew up in what she would describe as a middle-class home in a neighborhood with only one other Black family who, ironically, shared the same last

name as hers. She smiled as she described her parents' efforts to "make sure [she] was Black," stating "I always had Black people around me that made sure I had Black values but my parents especially taught me very early on – you gotta know what to do [and] how to act or you will certainly be put back in your place." Courtney's parents were intentional about exposing her and her siblings to great diversity but were insistent that they learn values from other Black people.

Aundrea's late mother was White. She shared that her mother had the most significant influence on how she thought of herself as an individual and in relation to others. Interestingly, she commented repeatedly on the notion that her mother was "not your average, *weak* White woman. She was strong, and didn't take no shit, just like a Black woman [would not]" What seems to have resonated with Aundrea most is that her White mother acted more like Black women are stereotyped to be and behave. Further, her mother's implicit messages regarding how Aundrea should behave align with the implicit and explicit messages that other participants reported learning from their mothers, grandmothers, and other-mothers, all of whom are/were Black. Having a White mother meant that Aundrea had more access to non-Black influencers than did other participants but it did not result in her having access to a wider range of behaviors attributed to Black people. In her words, she was exposed to what she called "a *different* breed of Black folks [on the West coast]," who behaved differently than Black people on the East coast, where she attended college, and in the South, where she has made her home as an adult. Aundrea grew up around Black people whom she characterizes as markedly "different" than those she has come to know as an adult. Like other

participants, she was exposed to a “certain kind of Black person” and not a more diverse representation of Black people in general.

Influence of Class on Understanding of Blackness

Participants’ family’s proximity to wealth during childhood and adolescence influenced what they thought Black people could have, to what social classes they belonged, and, by proxy, *how* they were allowed behave. Having middle-class extended family members or Black family friends meant that some participants understood that being Black and being financially-secure or even wealthy were not mutually exclusive. Conversely, it was more difficult (in one case, impossible) for the women who grew up seeing a sharp dichotomy between poor or working-class Black people and middle- to upper-middle class White people to imagine themselves as one day experiencing upward mobility.

Courtney’s parents were intentional in exposing her to a variety of Black people, some solidly middle-class, some working class, and others working poor. Thus, as an adolescent, she could understand that Black people were a diverse group, with many being financially secure or even wealthy, despite a majority being working-class or poor. This understanding allowed her to envision herself becoming an upper-middle-class or even wealthy Black adult. Equally as important as Courtney’s understanding that Black people existed along a wealth continuum was her witnessing this diversity of people exhibiting a range of behaviors to demonstrate Black values.

Through Courtney’s exposure to a variety of Black people, she could understand and adopt “Black values.” Initially, Courtney and I shared an assumed understanding of

these “Black values.” As a fellow upwardly-mobile Black woman of similar age, I assumed there would be congruence in the ways that she and I would define the term. As a researcher, though, I nearly missed a critical opportunity to gain insight beyond my assumption. It was not until I heard her say “...you know what I mean...?” which was likely both a filler phrase *and* a suggestion that I did, in fact, understand what she had inferred, that I asked her to be explicit and to unpack the term:

Well, you know what I mean! What you know you stand for, what you are all about: hard work and perseverance, handling your business and getting shit done... taking care of your family, being respectful of elders, having faith... that’s what’s at [the] core. That’s what I mean by “Black values.” That’s what I learned all while growing up.

These values did, in fact, resonate with me, suggesting that our assumption was correct; despite us having grown up in different social classes, our understanding of communal Black values was aligned. When I acknowledged this, she responded by noting that “[Black values] are pretty much the same at the root but maybe a little different by class, or at least the way people *acted* was a little different by class.” In other words, Courtney was able to differentiate nuance among the ways that Black people demonstrated communal values across classes. Her understanding was that these communal values were critical to the establishment of a Black identity, even if, for example, working-class Black people and middle-class Black people expressed them differently.

Unlike Courtney, whose parents exposed her to racial and economic diversity with great intention, Crystal lacked both during the formative years. She grew up poor, moving around poor, predominately Black neighborhoods across several states in the

Midwest. Sometimes her mother's job would fall through, or she would otherwise experience financial strain causing the family to relocate. When asked how early on she realized that her family was poor, Crystal shared that she knew as a very young child in elementary school, understanding what it meant for her family to use food stamps at the grocery store.

In prompting Crystal to recall how she had understood the relationship between race and class as an adolescent, she told the story of her mother having a close girlfriend who was White:

My mom had a friend - gosh, if I think about her now - she *was* White! Oh my goodness, she was a White girl! But I just thought, this White lady is one of Mama's friends but she is not *White* - not like *that*. She was poor. It was like, okay, it's cool, she's White but she's poor, too. She's *poor* White, not *White*.

Crystal's emphasis on the woman's class as being more salient to her identity demonstrates her attempt to reconcile a poor person's Whiteness. Aside from her mother's one friend, Crystal was not exposed to much racial diversity. She shared that, growing up, '[she] didn't see White people much at all but never any that were poor. It was just Black people [who] were poor.' This friend served as an anomaly, being both White *and* poor.

Tiffany recounted a similar anomaly growing up. Her grandfather's near obsession with a local lawyer was her primary motivation to become a lawyer herself. She smiled wide as she remembered him:

Tiffany: He would always be there reading about "Martha Fish" who still practices law today in [my home state], I think. He would say 'Ooh wee, that

Martha Fish, she is so smart! Them lawyers- I tell you they go through a lot of rigorous work to get their degrees and then they get them. Martha and the other one, “Dr. Flatts-” them some smart people, them lawyers and doctors!’ And I would sit with my grandfather- he would just brag on these people. I didn’t even know that Martha was Black until years later when I saw her picture. I still just assume that Dr. Flatts is White.

Alta: Even though you’re a lawyer and a judge yourself, and you’re not White? You still assume that the doctor is White?

Tiffany: But I mean... because back then I thought they were White so I think it just planted in my head that they were White and they could possible be any other race... I have no idea. I just still assume, I guess...

Alta: What does it mean to you to have finished law school, practiced, and now [to be] a judge, and to not have reframed who could be lawyers and doctors? To still make these assumptions?

Tiffany: ...In our minds, we haven’t placed ourselves there and even myself, before I ran for judge I didn’t place myself as a judge. I was just happy to be a lawyer. Back then I didn’t know any successful Black people.

Tiffany had assumed that Martha Fish was White for years, solely because she had heard her described as smart, hard-working, and otherwise successful. It did not occur to her for many years that someone could be both Black *and* be a successful lawyer. She believed that not knowing any “successful” people who were also Black was the primary reason that she could not envision successful Black people.

Similar to Tiffany, Crystal could not recall her family having substantive relationships with Black people who were not also poor, except her uncle, who had achieved middle-class status through military service followed by a long tenure with a shipping company. She remembered that he and his wife had a nice house in a nice neighborhood. “Seeing them, I didn’t have to see a White person to see [wealth], it was just that... when I got into high school with the White girls, it was like even bigger

houses than my uncle's." Crystal went on to describe how her uncle had nice things and lived comfortably. She was influenced and energized by his success but turned off by what other members of her family considered his braggadocious nature:

I remember sitting and hearing them having those conversations about my uncle, him being successful and so on, and so I think that kind of played into it as I started progressing in school and doing better. It's like, I will achieve and have things but I don't need to tell the family that I did this or I got that, just remembering their gossip and the way they talked about him back then.

In short, exposure to just one middle-class Black person empowered Crystal to believe she, too, could achieve financial success. Yet, this was also fraught with seeing how he was looked upon negatively by her family.

Despite growing up in racially-diverse environments, Daria was not exposed to a great deal of socioeconomic diversity during the formative years of adolescence. Most Black people around here were members of military families, as was hers, and would have been classified as working-class. According to Daria, not only did Black children learn what they *could not do*, in terms of behaviors, they also learned what they *could not have*, in terms of wealth, and what they *could not be*, in terms of achievement, by observing who played certain roles around them.

Daria described how she began to expect that being Black meant that she would not be successful:

A lot of the messages [you receive] come from wherever you are educated and what surrounds you. My parents did a good job of... exposing us to God and Jesus but they didn't do a good job of exposing us to successful Black people.... I saw them as like the janitors, or on the bottom. So when you have the notion that... people who look like you are at the bottom... Then you see the successful

people as your doctors, your teachers, principals – they are all White. You start to think that is what success looks like - White.

With this, Daria further explained the impact of being exposed to a limited range of Black people during her childhood and adolescence. The Black people she was exposed to were mostly poor or working class, thus the lesson that she internalized about herself as a Black person was that she would also be “unsuccessful” (by her definition) and relegated to a life of poverty or near-poverty. As a result, Daria spent her adolescence believing that upward-mobility was impossible for her because she was Black. In turn, she actively rejected Blackness for many years of her adolescent and young adult life. She talked about being quiet in the classroom so that others would not notice “the only Black kid in the room.” Daria felt negatively about her Black identity and did not want others to notice it, or her.

Eventually, Daria came to find comfort - and ultimately, pride- in being Black. But she believes that exposure to more successful Black people in general -and women in particular- would have disrupted her understanding that Blackness was linked to poverty, and supported a healthier Black identity development. When asked how she might summarize her memories on the links between race, class, and who she grew up imagining that she could be, Daria offered, “I think if someone would have talked to me at a younger age about being okay with who I am and about being Black... and there [not being] one definition of being Black, I think it would have saved me a lot of heartache.”

Felicia told the story of when she realized that *she* had become someone else’s role model for upward mobility, the likes of which Daria had longed for growing up.

I think about this one time when I graduated college and started working in Bank of America. This guy that happen to work on my parents' house... he walked in the bank and he saw me there. Do you know he told my dad?! He was like "I saw [Felicia] at the bank. She's really doing good! Black folks on the rise!" It meant something to him and I am like, I'm barely making money. I am working for \$9 an hour, you know what I'm saying? But you see people in a button-up shirt and some slacks and then you believe they are doing alright... And so it's just funny that people perceive what you do as so successful. It gives them hope too, I guess.

While Felicia obviously did not set out to be a role model for this man, he took pride in perceiving her as a successful professional. Specifically, his suggestion that her individual success was a symbol of "Black folks on the rise," suggests a link between Felicia's individual success and the plight of other Black people. She was both a representation of herself and other Black people, and, unbeknownst to her, a factor in another Black person's ability to envision upwardly-mobile Black people.

In closing, their family's proximity and relationship to wealth during their formative years influenced what social classes participants thought Black people could belong to. Several participants shared how they had once believed that being Black was synonymous with being poor or working-class because they grew up only knowing poor Black people. Having upwardly-mobile extended family members or family friends allowed some participants to see that being Black and being financially-secure (or even wealthy) were not mutually exclusive. Several participants shared poignant stories of realizing that they had become someone else's role model in this way, embodying the only example of Black upward-mobility that some people in their neighborhoods had. Participants who did not have this exposure were less aware of these nuances and,

importantly, less likely to believe that they could one day become upwardly-mobile themselves.

Knowing Black people who were upwardly-mobile showed participants how Black people should behave in order to continue demonstrating the communal Black values they had learned before experiencing upward mobility. These participants were able to differentiate the nuances among class-based ways that Black people *acted* in order to communicate communal Black values. When they began to experience upward mobility themselves, these participants had models to emulate and adapt for themselves. They had seen how other Black people code-switch, continuing to “act Black” and demonstrate communal Black values despite their need to “act White” in professional and other, non-Black spaces.

Beyond the correlations which they made between Black identity and class, several of the women believed that being White was synonymous with being middle-class or wealthy because the overwhelming majority of White people they knew fit this description. Crystal’s family’s friend was an anomaly, being both White *and* poor. Her story of “not noticing” that this poor woman could be White is but one illustration of how Crystal and other participants repeatedly conflated race and class throughout the course of the study.

One is Always Representing All Black People

Most of the women in my study could remember being told explicitly that they were a representation of their families, their communities, and/or Black people in general. Da'Shelle laughed as she shared, “[l]et me tell you, even as a child, I was very often told

that I was always representing not only myself and my own family, which would make sense, but *all* Black people, [in her community, and] might as well go on and say *everywhere!* Like, how? Better yet, why?!? But... I knew the deal.” Here she accepts that it made sense for her behavior to be monitored by her family, but the suggestion that she represent all Black people was, to some degree, unreasonable. Despite her belief that the expectation was unreasonable, she “knew the deal,” which she clarified to mean “[T]hat’s just the way it was. No, *is!*”

While a few women could not recall being told explicitly that they were always representing Black people, each reported understanding this community expectation. The need to represent other Black people -and to represent them well- meant that participants were subject to a high level of ubiquitous monitoring and scrutiny. As stated previously, the women reported feeling that the parameters of their Black identity were both determined by- and monitored in Black communities. In other words, they were reminded of what others expected them to do, according to the lessons they learned regarding acceptable Black behaviors. This understanding resonated across participants. Even Aundrea understood that Black people and their behaviors were consistently policed, despite her experience of being encouraged to reject the notion that she had to “fit into narrow boxes that society placed on Black people, or in [her] case, mixed people.”

In keeping with research related to the policing of Black people and their behaviors participants reported being monitored by both Black and non-Black people (Harris-Perry, 2011). Felicia summarized this by stating that “[t]he eyes are upon you

and you will be struck down [for ill behavior]!” Similarly, Marian, in reflecting on her childhood, stated that this meant having her behaviors “corrected by almost whoever was around at the time.” This is especially telling as Marian grew up in what she described as a relatively mixed community. Her understanding that the White people in her community were equally at liberty to correct her behavior underscores the notion that Black behaviors are subject to ubiquitous scrutiny.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used participant stories to illustrate how they learned *Black behaviors*- the narrow range of behaviors deemed appropriate for Black people- which they reported coming to understand during childhood and adolescence. The women in this study learned what behaviors were appropriate for them by observing the behaviors of those around them. Additionally, having their behavior called out and corrected by family members and other, trusted influencers (the overwhelming majority of whom were Black) served to reinforce what participants understood as acceptable and expected. It was critical that participants understood and could perform these behaviors from an early age, as they were not only representing themselves, but their individual families, communities, and Black people on the whole.

Beyond the understanding that they were representing other Black people, women in the study remembered feeling pressure to behave in particular ways in order to ensure that they themselves were identified as Black by others. While most participants reported that their processes for determining the parameters of Black identity were largely unconscious, their understanding of behaviors indicative of a Black identity were more

explicit. They knew that they might be labeled as White--or at least, according to one participant, "less Black" than others, should they act differently than the other Black people around them, from whom they learned what behavior was acceptable. Because Black communities are so thought to be collectivist in nature, the less one appears to be aligned with the values of the group, the less a part of the group one can be. Being relegated to the margins of the Black community for not observing the parameters would be both punishment from the group and a source of shame for the individual, who likely longs to remain a part of the group.

Participants described their level of exposure to non-Black people during childhood and adolescence. Those who grew up in racially homogenous communities and therefore had little exposure to non-Black people during the formative years of childhood reported the narrowest range of acceptable behaviors. However, despite greater exposure to non-Black people, those who grew up in more diverse communities (or whose families exposed them to diversity intentionally) were also expected to exhibit a narrow range of acceptable behaviors. One explanation is that, despite the frequency of *exposure*, participants were *influenced* most directly by the Black people around them who, by Da'Shelle's definition, "acted Black, and showed [children] how to act Black." Courtney suggested that these influencers served to demonstrate *communal Black values*—namely hard work and perseverance, commitment to family, respect for elders, and faith—which should guide Black behavior. She went on to suggest that Black children learn these mostly implicit *behavioral codes* as part of their enculturation process in Black families and communities.

Participants reported that their family's proximity to wealth during childhood and adolescence influenced what they thought Black people could have and to what social classes they belonged, and, by proxy, *how* they were allowed behave. Those with middle-class extended family members could recall coming to the realization that they could be both Black and financially-secure or even wealthy. For example, Crystal indicated that exposure to a lone middle-class family member empowered her to believe that she, too, could achieve upward mobility. Conversely, it was more difficult (in one case, impossible) for participants who grew up seeing a sharp dichotomy between poor or working-class Black people and middle- to upper-middle class White people to imagine themselves as one day experiencing upward mobility.

All participants reiterated that they had learned these lessons regarding appropriate behaviors during childhood. Daria lamented that, not only was childhood a time when Black children learned what they *could not do*, in terms of restrictive behaviors, and what they *could not have*, in terms of material wealth, they also learned what they *could not be*, in terms of achievement, by observing who played certain roles around them. In keeping with other participants' offerings, Daria's suggestion underscores the notion that children learn what is expected of them from trusted influencers with whom they are in frequent and/or significant contact. When those influencers are Black, and act according to what are largely considered to be communal Black values, their behaviors tend to fall along a strict, narrow continuum, and be policed by both other Black people and non-Black people alike. Children come to integrate these

values, and to self-govern their own behaviors in accordance with those which have been modeled for them by adults, with the understanding that their ability to perform these behaviors reflects not only on themselves but on their families and wider communities.

CHAPTER V

“WE 3D, BABY!” FLUIDITY AND COMPLEXITY OF BLACK WOMANHOOD ALONG THE JOURNEY TOWARD UPWARD MOBILITY

In this chapter I focus on the two-ness which participants described as indicative of being a Black woman operating in both predominantly Black, working- or middle-class spaces *and* predominantly White, middle- or upper-middle-class spaces. I emphasize how participants feel simultaneously compelled to code-switch in order to achieve success, and subsequently stressed and isolated from their home communities as a result. I organize participant stories across five recurrent themes: participants feeling out of place in the company of both Black and White people; the need to code-switch in order to gain or maintain rapport in both Black and White spaces; the dizzying nature of shifting between different versions of self with such frequency (and participant expectation that they would no longer need to pivot once they achieved a certain level of professional success); seeking mental and emotional refuge from the resulting tumult; and the importance of character as an identity stabilizer.

“Not Black Enough for Some; Not White Enough for Any”

One theme which resonated across most participants was the notion that, growing up, they were often made to feel that they were either “too Black” or “not Black enough.” Each participant could relate to feeling “too Black” when encountering White people. Of the ten participants, Felicia, Courtney, and Tiffany were the only three who did not report feeling that they were “not Black enough” among their Black peers. The other seven

women had vivid memories of being made to feel this way when engaging with other Black people. Da'Shelle's experience is a great example. While she was "very aware that [she] was a little Black kid in a White town," she was also aware that she did not fit in fully with Whites or other Black people. When I asked her to choose where she remembered experiencing the most comfort, she replied "I wasn't Black enough to be with the Black people. On the other hand, of course, I didn't fit in with the White people, so... neither." When asked at what age she realized that she did not fully fit in either space, she replied "In my teens, you know, pre-teens."

Da'Shelle used the term "oddball" to describe the nature of her relationship to both her Black and White peers growing up. She considered herself simultaneously similar to and different from her Black peers. She acknowledged an appreciation for the sense of community which existed among the Black people in the small, Southern town where she grew up, and how that had served to bind to the other Black people there. Still, Da'Shelle felt characteristically different from her Black peers. "...[M]ost of the Black [students] were afraid of me excelling academically. Yeah, I was an oddball... I was very conscious of class work, conscious of my grades..." she stated matter-of-factly.

I remember wincing and tilting my head slightly mid-sentence. As a fellow upwardly-mobile Black woman, the suggestion that excelling academically set me apart from my Black peers felt defeating yet familiar; as a researcher, it felt dangerous if taken out of context. My body language may have implied either an appreciation of her experience, discomfort, or both. This woman who was otherwise so focused on our conversation shifted in *her* chair as well and began clarifying: "I focused on going to

college. That was my big thing...” Da'Shelle did not withdraw her original statement but her willingness to specify what about her academic pursuit she felt set her apart from her peers was a slight departure from the blanket assertion that Black people were not interested in education. While still a reductionist statement, the clarification that Da'Shelle's intent to attend college was what separated her from her her peers was more palatable to me as a researcher, understanding that collegiate aspiration is not the only indicator that a student desires a formal education. Given the socioeconomic status of most people Black in her hometown, it is possible that Da'Shelle's peers perceived attending college as outside their realm of possibility.

Similar to other participants who were made to feel “not Black enough” by their Black peers, Da'Shelle remembered being ridiculed for “talking White” and using formal English.

Well, ‘You sound White. You talk White. You think you're White.’ I’ve heard that a lot from Black people. But it didn't bother me because... my grandmother got in my ear really early to be this college student. And all I knew is that college students spoke well because if I said something that didn't sound right my grandma [would respond] ‘well that doesn’t sound like a college student’.

Her grandmother encouraged her to focus more on her goal of graduating college than on her classmates’ constant critique. This motivation was effective for Da'Shelle but it did not lessen the degree to which she felt distanced from her Black peers.

Beyond already feeling distant from other Black students, Da'Shelle shared that her White peers also homed in on to her dedication to academics. They taunted her, saying that this made Da'Shelle “less Black than the other [Black] kids.” Despite their

suggestion that she was not Black enough, Da'Shelle remembered students and teachers alike finding ways to remind her that "[she] was still not White - of course." She recalled her first-grade teacher making fun of her "ethnic name," and insisting that she change it:

Da'Shelle: You know my name is ethnic, and it was so ethnic that the teacher didn't want to pronounce my name. It's very simple to say my name but she wanted to give me another name- that type of thing. [She] wouldn't call me by my given name! She [would only] call me the name that she gave me.

Alta: Do remember the name?

Da'Shelle: Yeah it was Michelle, a very White name right? But my name is actually very easy to pronounce.

With this, Da'Shelle demonstrated how she grew up being told that she was simultaneously not Black enough for some and too Black for others. She did not act Black enough to gain her Black peers' approval; nor did she act Black enough to convince her White peers of her Black authenticity; still, even her "ethnic name" was determined to be too Black for her first-grade teacher. While this is not indicative of the overdetermination which Bettie (2002) describes in her work, it is an even more direct form of one person invoking their privilege and prescribing who and how someone else is allowed to be.

Da'Shelle shared another example of the tense relationship between her and her White classmates and teachers:

I found that a lot of the white kids would challenge me like I wasn't supposed to know about certain things - Beethoven and Mozart- I wasn't supposed to know those things because I'm black. Even the teachers, [they were] like how do you know about that? But I had P.B.S. at home!

Da'Shelle felt a constant pressure to prove to her White peers that she was their intellectual match. Meeting- and in many cases, surpassing- their academic achievements was the closest she came to garnering their respect, and experiencing pseudo-community with them.

While her academic achievement and extracurricular interests served to bridge Da'Shelle into White communities, they were met with scrutiny from other Black people. She referred to herself as an “oddball” again, primarily because she was not “hoodish:”

Remember, there weren't that many [Black people in town] but I was an oddball to them too because most of them were, for lack of better word, very hoodish. I didn't even know how to curse, you know, as a teenager. I just didn't. I lived in the country, I went to school inside the city limits and I went home to the country in the evening. So I wasn't socialized around a lot of things that a lot of my peers, my African-American peers were socialized around.

By this explanation, Da'Shelle suggested, in addition to her interest in poetry and other subjects which she described as “not necessarily Black enough,” her rural upbringing further solidified her status as an outlier among her Black peers from urban areas.

Similar to Da'Shelle, Erica remembered knowing that she fit with neither her Black peers nor her White ones even earlier, noting this sentiment by around age ten. “I want to say [it was in] fifth grade where there were maybe ten Black people in the entire elementary school.” Growing up, she attributed certain behaviors and ways of being to Black people, and other behaviors and ways of being to White people. Erica discussed coming to understand the way that Black people shifted their patterns of communication in order to assert their intelligence and negate stereotypes, and how she learned to do the same. She

told the story of a particular Advanced Placement English teacher who chided her about speaking Ebonics, saying,

I speak well when I need to speak well but [he wanted] me to be so articulate—that's just not going to happen. I can turn it on when I need to turn it on and act White, and turn it off when I don't need it and just be Black again, and I've always been like that.

She recalled making these shifts “effortlessly,” not realizing the extent to which she adjusted her behavior in order to appear “book smart” to those who might believe she was “too authentically Black” to be smart, and again to appear “street smart” to those who might believe she was “not Black enough.”

Daria also recalled needing to “turn off” certain behaviors depending on the context in which she found herself. She remembered experiencing significant anxiety as a result of her attempts to balance who she was and how she behaved at home with who she was and how she behaved in public. I asked if she remembered any particular cues that suggested to her that her authentic self did not belong in certain spaces, to which she replied,

I just knew that who I was at home - a *for real* Black person - wasn't who I [was] going to be in public - a kinda White version of my Black self - and I don't know how I knew it. I just knew it. It was second nature.

This shifting of behaviors and mannerisms as Erica and Daria described is a way of compensating for being labeled “too Black” in some spaces and “not Black enough” in others.

Crystal recalled first learning to behave differently in order to be perceived as “Black enough” by her peers, saying, “[a]ll of a sudden I’m kind of in the in-crowd but the conversation and things that went on [there] was like, I had to learn rap songs and stuff like that in middle school because it was like, hey, they’re talking about this and that, they’re talking about a song and I’m like, I’m clueless.” She went on to describe the lengths she went to disprove other Black people’s notions that she was “too White”, understanding “on a gut level” that neither side of the proverbial fence would be home completely. In the end, she believed that it was more difficult to find acceptance among her Black peers, and that her attempts to “learn slang so [she] would feel like [she] was part of the crowd with neighborhood kids and [peers at] school [had also connected her to her] family in important ways.” Listening to rap and using slang were strategies meant to prevent her from appearing (and feeling) foreign to the family who already thought of her as different from them, primarily because she was “the book smart girl who talked White.” Later in life, she would be chided by her family for other “White” behaviors: namely working out (specifically running), and eating “all that bourgeoisie food” which they attributed to White, upper-middle class culture.

Despite wanting others to affirm her place in both Black and White spaces, Crystal said that, “in [her] mind, [she] could relate more to Caucasian people because of them knowing that they [were] going to college and all that stuff.” She knew as a pre-teen that members of her family were simultaneously happy for, intrigued by, and envious of not only her intelligence but the opportunities that were expected to emerge for her as a result of her “White girl habits.” Her dedication to academic achievement

was the most contentious of these habits. While she was encouraged to do well in school, her achievements were often met with lukewarm responses, drawing “more eye rolls and shoulder shrugs than celebrations,” a phenomenon that she admits she could not understand as a child and has learned to expect as an adult. In this way, Crystal’s experience is indicative of Higginbotham and Weber’s (1992) research which found that, despite expecting them to achieve, the upwardly-mobile Black woman’s parents and family members were often ambivalent regarding her academic and professional aspirations (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992, p. 416).

Aundrea spoke directly to the ways that she compensated for being thought to be not Black enough throughout her life. She noted that she often needed the vouch of a readily-identifiable Black person to serve as a bridge between her and other Black people. She recalled “[earning] credibility from Black women even though they might look at [her] as an outsider – [being] some light-skinned girl from another state.” While she did not believe other Black people could alleviate the pressure she felt as a biracial woman, she was confident that their vouching for her character was critical in her ability to establish relationships with other Black people who she believes would have dismissed her as “too White” to belong in their social circles.

Camille remembered having amiable relationships with her Black peers growing up but “not being cool enough” to be a part of the all-Black in-crowd. It was in sixth grade when she transitioned from private schools to public school and was finally able to spend considerable time with the other Black kids who lived in the same housing project as her family. Before then, Camille had been restricted from doing so by her mother and

grandmother, who warned that she should not affiliate with kids whose “family really wasn’t doing much [productive]... or whose family name is known for some trouble.” This contributed to her being chastised as a “goody two-shoes” who did not quite fit in with her peers whose families she remembered being “closer, more connected to each other” than her family was to them.

Camille suggested that she may not have been cool enough to socialize with other Black kids in her neighborhood even if she had been allowed to do so earlier in life. Her mother and grandmother were adamant that members of their family speak formal English and refrain from using slang. She called her adolescent self a nerd, and remembered being embarrassed that, not only was she not allowed, she did not feel fully comfortable in these “cooler” social circles, primarily because she “was considered so prim and proper” by her peers. Similar to other participants, Camille’s speech patterns served as an ample signal to her peers that she was different enough to be virtually locked out of their social world. While there were other factors impacting her sense of separation from her Black peers (e.g. not always understanding their humor or inside jokes, or not being familiar with some of the music they enjoyed, etc), Camille’s use of language seemed to have the most impact.

Interestingly, Camille suggested that her not fitting in among her Black peers was not because she was *not Black enough*. Instead, she insisted that major differences between her and her peers and the subsequent distance between their worlds were class-based. She turned back to the topic of speaking formal English in order to explain her rationale:

I'm very adamant about that. I don't think [this] is a race thing. I think it is a class thing as far as like... For example, how you were able to talk around your family or at home [and the use] of broken English. I wasn't able to speak that way.

According to Camille, she did not fit in with her peers because of their class differences. This was difficult to reconcile because Camille shared that she grew up, primarily, in low-income housing projects; she was certainly living in housing projects during her sixth-grade year, when she first went to public school and was immersed in Black culture as her peers had shaped it.

Despite her mother having a desirable job with the local police department, Camille's family was still of the same class as those immediately around them when she learned that her Black peers considered her "a White girl." In short, one result of what she considered to be her family's class-based decisions (speaking formal English and not using slang) was her peers' (re)assessment of her racial identity. While Camille may hold that her peers' judgement of her is *based* on class distinctions and their assessment that she behaved like someone of a higher socioeconomic status, this assessment led them to reconsider her status as a racial insider, or one who was "Black enough." This suggests a relationship between race and class, and demonstrates how quickly they are conflated or otherwise entangled.

In summary, all the women in the study had experienced feeling "too Black" in White spaces or while encountering White people. Several participants spoke to the strategies they employed to bridge into White communities, including speaking formal English and showing an interest in music and popular culture which their White peers

consumed. Some of these behaviors were the same ones which brought scrutiny from their Black peers. Three participants did not but the other seven also remembered feeling “not Black enough” among other Black people. These seven women had the shared experience of being chastised by their Black peers for being “book smart,” “talking White,” or “acting like White girl[s].” One participant suggested that these criticisms were levied because she was a serious student with intentions to attend college. It is false to hypothesize that Black people are generally disinterested in education (or are otherwise critical of Black scholars). It is understandable, though, that those poor or working-class peers who could not imagine affording higher education may not have had (or may not have shared that they had) college aspirations.

The women in the study acknowledged that being considered “not Black enough” impacted their sense of self, and, in at least one case, their comfort with being Black at all. Beyond influencing the way that they understood themselves, being told that they were “not Black enough” impacted how participants saw themselves in relation to other Black people and to Black communities. The women responded to these accusations by devising strategies for demonstrating their membership in the traditionally collectivist, communal Black communities which were their cultural home. Among these strategies, trying to learn to rap and memorizing rap lyrics, using slang, and otherwise demonstrating familiarity with Black popular culture were the most popular.

Participants spoke to the ways that they carried the need to prove their Blackness and membership in Black communities well beyond their childhood and adolescence. They shared that while the aforementioned methods were effective to a degree, they

needed to engage more sophisticated tactics as they got older. Later in life, participants' strategies would evolve to include engaging other Black people to vouch for their identity and character directly, or aligning with reputable Black communal and fraternal organizations like National Pan-Hellenic Council sororities, NAACP, or Jack & Jill Club. While most participants suggested that their need to prove that they were, in fact, *Black enough*, waned as they got older, the intuition to gauge another's perception of them remained essential to their success.

The Perpetual Pivot of Code Switching

The women in the study talked at length about the code-switching that they had come to master in order to be successful across the various contexts in which they found themselves. Be it as a graduate student, member of senior management, or philanthropist, most could describe a practice of surveying the environment and those around them in order to decide what was appropriate or inappropriate to do. Beyond this behavioral code-switching, the majority of participants also indicated that they regularly embodied different personas, or sides of themselves, in order to meet the needs around them.

In the focus group with Felicia and Camille, Crystal attempted to explain how this shifting was “more than just not doing certain things around White people... it [was] a real... shift, I don't know how else to describe it.” While the two other women participating in the focus group could not describe the difference any further, they agreed that Crystal's description had resonated with them. She went on to describe the need to shift:

In the position that [upwardly-mobile Black women] are in the issue is... we have to wear a lot of different hats but in wearing those hats you have to change up for different people in different groups... I mean, you don't want to say it but- I mean, it's there. I'm not a white woman, I can't just be me wherever I go. I have to adjust to these people over here, then I have to come over here and adjust, these people over here. Then [at] family functions I adjust to [the] people over there... It's challenging but that's our life every day.

Neither Crystal nor Felicia nor Camille suggested that this need to pivot was unique to them solely because they are upwardly-mobile. They did, however, suggest that the perpetual nature of the need was indicative of their experience as Black women operating between classes. This makes sense, as upward-mobility has required that they move back and forth between predominantly poor- and working-class spaces where many of their families still live and middle- to upper-middle class spaces where they often work. According to participants, they likely move between these spaces and engage across these cultural lines more often than those who are not upwardly mobile and therefore less likely to engage with people outside of their communities.

Felicia noted that one difficult factor of the adjustments which Crystal suggested is that they often need to happen abruptly; one may not always be able to shift smoothly or at a comfortable pace. "Sometimes you gotta change quick - no choice" she noted. "Like a pivot?" I suggested. "*Just* like a pivot!" she exclaimed. This sentiment resonated with other members of the focus group. Crystal began mimicking the physical pivot many would recognize from basketball to illustrate the point, her body coming to an abrupt stop as she switched directions. "See, we be out here looking like-" as she demonstrated the jerky movements back and forth. "With the pivot. But not just the

pivot- the *perpetual* pivot” as she continued to shake her imaginary opponent. While we all laughed immensely at Crystal’s imitation of a basketball player, I remember thinking how aptly the notion of a *perpetual pivot* was in illustrating the constant challenge of code-switching which participants had described.

Erica’s experience with pivoting underscores Crystal’s suggestion that it is both challenging *and* a part of an upwardly-mobile Black woman’s daily life. She described her practice of engaging different personas based on the given context, saying that such role-playing has become second-nature to her:

[My identities] are not completely distinct from one another, they are one and the same, in a way that I almost cannot describe to you but that I know - well, I assume - you understand. Slipping into one is almost natural now, you know? I’m so good at it it’s funny. I’m playing *all* the roles. *All* the time.

Erica’s suggestion that she is almost always pivoting is in line with other participants’ understanding that this code-switching is expected of them. Her assertion that her identities “are not completely distinct from one another” reflects Crystal’s assertion that upwardly-mobile Black women must be able to tap into more complex sides of themselves than do their peers. In explaining this, Crystal suggests that accessing multiple, connected sides of herself is both a method and a requirement.

Marian described her process of determining which dimension of herself to present in a given situation. She shared that she was always cognizant of the way others perceived her as an individual, and how they viewed her in relation to themselves. This analysis informed the version of herself she chose to employ in a given setting. She said:

Marian: I am very cognizant, not as much now but I was early on... I mean this may sound callous but [I think] which part of me- who am I going to be in this room? What is my value in this room? Alright? So if I am in a room full of white people, would I [acknowledge] my value, my resume, my credentials... right? What I do for a living... I think if I walk into a room full of black people, I may be still thinking the same thing but what they would value of me if different. So, if I'm in a room... Let's say I'm speaking or I'm going to be interacting with people. If I'm in a room full of black people I'm going to bring up where I go to church, who my pastor is, why I [choose to] live in the city. I may not. I interact, you know? A lot of people don't know what I do. I am very quick not to bring up this job in a room full of black people. *'Oh I'm such a lawyer!'* but I mean, versus, on the other end like if I'm in a room full of white people, what I'm talking about is where I went to college, that I [went] to law school, what I do for a living, how long I've been there for a living you know. So, the characteristics of what I highlight may be a little different. My niece and nephew go to [a private high school] in town. [It is] the most prestigious private school in [the city]... And they have fantastic opportunities. If I'm in a group full of white people, I'll talk about that. If I'm in a room full of black people, rarely, because I don't know that they... Either we won't... I am not saying we don't understand or value it but it would sound like [I'm] bragging. I feel like I would sound like I'm bragging on this end. Over here, I am just making you understand that I am as equal as you are. Even though I really feel like I have to say it but I do recognize. I think it always had to be a selling point right. So I grew up and felt like [White people] treated me equally because of my achievements. I felt like that's why. I don't know if that's true because I felt that way. I've always felt like in that room I need to express my achievements versus the other room I can express my experiences not necessarily my achievements.

Alta: The question of 'what currency do I have to spend in what context?'

Marian: Yes... That's it exactly.

Marian's suggestion that the version of herself that she presents to others is determined, in part, by her understanding of her audience resonated with other participants. While their processes varied, each participant reported experiencing similar pressure to code-switch in order to maneuver their personal and professional lives successfully. Most participants ultimately described this pressure as primarily a source of frustration. At the

same time, they also acknowledged that the ability to respond to this pressure was a necessary skill for maintaining membership and rapport across various contexts.

Crystal spoke extensively about “the gift... of being able to respond to any amount of [shit] thrown at [her] just like you know Black people have always had to do... that is something to be proud of.” According to her, this flexibility and adaptability- while stressful and draining- is a source of access-granting power that Black people developed out of necessity, and which others, specifically White people, presumably lack. She told the story of driving to work one day, ruminating on the stresses of Black parenting and finding her White colleagues in the break room discussing their current parenting stresses: preparing their children for prom season:

[T]he conversations they talk about at work- it’s like, so far from what matters to me but I have to sit there and [feign interest] in that conversation like it matters. “Susie is going to two proms so [I will] take her to get dresses because she has to go to her boyfriend’s prom and [she] has to go to her own prom...” [T]heir concerns are so not my concerns... It’s like, my child is at school. Just because she is Black she may have missed questions, they made my baby [use an] IEP (Individual Education Plan). [If a White woman] had a little issue with that, they go talk to the teacher [and as a result] they are going to get a little extra instruction. No they try to put [an] IEP on [Black children].

Felicia interrupted: “They go talk to the teacher and get what [their] kid needs, or else they have a nervous breakdown” to which Crystal replied:

Right?!? Complete breakdown! They can’t handle what we handle - what we **have** to handle. We are so much more complex. We 3D baby! (making reference to a story she had told earlier). But for real, [White people’s] everyday life is different from our everyday life. We have a lot more that we have to worry about. There are so many things that we are juggling and its... I am so many people in one person... Look at the successes that we have had with the obstacles that

White women [do] not have but we still doing it! I mean, like man... excelling after excelling, being successful... We are amazing.

Participant reaction to Crystal's proclamation that upwardly-mobile Black women are amazing was mixed. Our smiling and head-nodding indicated that I and the other participants appreciated the compliment. I asked participants to explain the deep sighs and eye rolling which followed our smiles. Felicia replied that, while it felt good to hear another woman in a similar situation acknowledge her, "we all already know that we are amazing. What we need someone to recognize is how taxing it is to be all things to all people" with which other participants agreed.

In closing, the women in the study became masterful code-switchers, adjusting their speech, language choice, and other behaviors in order to fit in to a reasonable degree and be successful across the various contexts in which they found themselves. Beyond just adjusting their behavior, though, the majority of participants indicated that they regularly embodied different personas, engaging various sides of themselves, in an attempt to meet the expectations of those around them. Many Black women must pivot in this way but participants suggested that the perpetual nature of the pivoting which upwardly-mobile Black women are required to do as they move back and forth between cultures is what makes their situation so egregious. Further, this pivoting positioned participants to respond to everyday pressures of life which they believe frustrates and even cripples others (White women in particular), and is a hallmark of their complexity, which one participant described as "three dimensional."

I'm Doing It... but It's Dizzying

The women in the study described feeling out of place among both Black and White people to varying degrees. They described their efforts to code-switch in an attempt to gain greater acceptance in such spaces. Several participants acknowledged that this *pivoting* was not synonymous with coping in these stressful situations. On the contrary, this code-switching was, in itself, taxing. Two elements made it taxing: the sheer frequency with which they had to switch into new roles, and the potential threat to their authenticity.

Erica described this threat during our first interview. When I asked her what it was like to balance her need to embody so many sides of herself, she indicated complex feelings, saying “[o]n the one hand, I’m glad I can switch. On the other, it makes me worry that I’m not real in either situation, and not being real is **not** an option.” I interjected, asking ‘You’re not being a real *what* in either situation?’ to which she replied, ‘I’m being real but I guess - I’m being less authentically Black.’

At several other points during our first interview, Erica went on to speak of the fear that fluidity threatened to compromise her authenticity as a Black woman. Other participants did so as well, expressing varying degrees of concern regarding the shifts they have experienced in their identities. Many described how being flexible in their behavior had been critical to their success, and led to the complexity of their identity. For several participants, though, along with the many positives of a fluid identity came the fear that they must also be becoming “less authentically Black,” as Erica quantified it.

While she did not present it as a strategy to ensure she maintained her authenticity as a Black woman, Marian made blanket references to herself and other Black people being working-class on more than one occasion, despite her present reality of being upper-middle class. She seemed to make consistent correlations between *Black* and *poor* or *working-class*, and between *White* and *middle-class* or *wealthy*. I realized that she was usually referring to someone's race when she mentioned their class standing. She used these terms interchangeably throughout our one-on-one interview, as did several other women. Further, these connotations were not challenged during focus groups, where the women could have heard fellow participants assert these false parallels. In cases where I was not worried that interjecting would disrupt the interview, I attempted to clarify whether participants believed these correlations were legitimate.

Of the instances where I probed, participants were adamant that they had not intended to suggest that White people were always wealthy or that Black people were always poor.

When I challenged Marian on this, she attempted to contextualize her conflation of the terms:

There was a time period probably in my life where if I walk into a room and a hundred people were White and three were Black, even now I don't rarely even think of the difference in the race in the room... I don't see that because I grew up that way.

While this explanation of her experience growing up helped me to understand how Marian thought of (or didn't recognize that she thought of) race, I was not convinced that

she considered this anything more than an issue of semantics. Moments later she would make the same conflation, prompting me to ask:

Alta: Wait, are you suggesting that you automatically read a room full of White people as interested in your high-paying job, or other upper-middle class markers, and a room full of Black people as disinterested in that, or...? Are you linking Whiteness with wealth and Black identity with poverty? Or with the working class?

Marian (seeming surprised at the question): Wait, no! No. Like, am I saying that Black people are never middle-class, and White people are never poor? No I'm not saying that. I know better than that. But! You know what I meant when I said it, right?

Indeed, my assumption had been that Marian understood a significant difference between racial identity and socioeconomic status. Further, while her conflation of terms was an implicit suggestion that Black people were not (or could not be) wealthy, I knew that both of our personal experiences of upward-mobility and subsequent upper-middle class social status served as indisputable evidence to the contrary. It was myself as the researcher who interjected for clarity; my *personal* self-assumed a shared understanding of- and forgiveness for- her conflation.

In trying to understand why this conflation of race and class was so prevalent among participants, I turned to the ways that Marian, Tiffany, Crystal, Felicia and Daria's stories unfolded. All of them grew up poor or working-class, and each spoke about having close friends and family members who are still poor or working-class. This aligns with research on upward mobility which asserts that upwardly-mobile Black people are more likely to remain tethered to poor communities via and because of these

relationships. It may be possible that both poor or working-class Black people *and* Black people who grew up poor or working class and have transitioned to higher class statuses conflate Blackness with poverty as an unconscious strategy to demonstrate their commitment to maintaining these relationships. In other words, upwardly-mobile Black people have a proverbial foot in both worlds. They likely understand that transitioning out of poverty or the working-class is still relatively rare for Black people (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). While suggesting that "Black people are poor and poor people are Black" may be indicative of poor Black people's perspective or personal lived experience, the same statement may be an upwardly mobile Black person's attempt to signal a lasting cultural tie with other Black people who remain poor. To suggest that Black people are (able to be) upper-middle class, when, for example, only the participant is, and her extended family is not, is - according to participant stories - a sure way to create distance between oneself and family and friends who cannot identify.

While fluidity in moving between class and cultural groups may be necessary for professional success early in one's career, most participants believed that once upwardly-mobile Black women reached a particular threshold of success, they would no longer have to code-switch or pivot to the same degree. Along with a track record of performance came job security and the subsequent authority to be more authentic despite the circumstance. Erica described how this "permission to be for real" accompanies professional success:

Everyone isn't allowed to be like that. You're under the code but you realize once people get in certain positions of power, they're way above the code, now they're

rewriting the code because they're in that position. And [they] will definitely try to show you that!

Erica seemed hopeful that there would be a time when she could disengage from this pivoting and code-switching, and rest in the fact that her performance would suffice. I shared her hope; personally, I look forward to a time when I can focus my energy on the content and caliber of my work, and not fitting into the culture of my workplace. But I speculate that upwardly-mobile Black women in positions of leadership are not able to abandon their pivoting as quickly as Erica hopes. It may actually be possible that the more they engage with senior leaders who are more likely to be White and male, the more upwardly-mobile Black women may need to continue code-switching or pivot in order to demonstrate dominant cultural values and behaviors.

While they likely define what it means to be Black slightly differently, each woman in the study articulated that maintaining a Black identity was critical to them. In response to feeling somewhat out of place among both Black and White people, participants learned to code-switch. Code-switching served as a way for them to speak and act in ways that were familiar to White people in White spaces, which many of them conflated as middle- or upper-middle class spaces, and therefore gain rapport among White people. Their ability to pivot and switch back into a register familiar to their families, friends, and other Black people in their lives was critical in order for them to maintain their sense of credibility- and therefore belonging- among Black people. Participants described this *perpetual pivoting* as physically and emotionally taxing because it required them to gauge every audience's potential perception of them and

engage different sides of themselves accordingly. In short, the women felt that they had to maintain this pivoting but acknowledged that it was a source of significant stress. With each pivot, they risked their ability to be (and appear) authentic in either space.

Storm Closets

The women in this study spoke to the importance of relief from the stresses of upward mobility. They described seeking refuge from both psychological and emotional “storms” associated with perpetual pivoting and engaging multiple versions of themselves from setting to setting. Each of them recognized the need to disengage from school, work, family, and, in some instances, active social lives, in order to rest and recharge. Erica alluded to the need to take a break from even herself, having grown exhausted in her attempt to make balancing the many sides of herself look easy:

Erica: I am an angry woman. I am an *angry woman* and I don't know why because for the most part, I'm smiles, giggles, and jokes all day long, you know what I'm saying? But [there is] this part of me and it's like, I keep it subdued because it doesn't have to come out a lot but when it comes out, it's so nasty! And it's like, okay, quit subduing it and deal with it, [Erica]. But I actually have come to terms with it, actually just recently, there's some stuff that needs to be dealt with. [I] need to figure out where all this comes from and deal with it because it's unhealthy. But we are so good! We are powerhouses! Just being that- showing no vulnerabilities, until a tornado comes [and] then you realize you aren't as solid as you thought you were.

Alta: And then, if your home has a storm closet, and you close the shutters, you can walk away [from a storm] with minimal damage. But having minimal damage just reinforces the powerhouse mentality.

Erica: If a tornado [would] blow the whole thing down then you'd be forced to look at the other house and be like, 'that tornado blew the whole house down. Alright I need to reevaluate my strategy.' But then, what happens? Like, the little sapling in the front yard gets blown down, [or] maybe one of the shutters that was really just for decoration anyway, those blow off. That's external. I don't need

all that stuff, so then it's just like, well if that house can stand then I'll have to be able to withstand too. So these are seemingly like, it's reinforcing the expectation of you being able to withstand whatever- anything.

According to Erica, the storm closet is not a physical location; it is a metaphor for a place of refuge from outside pressures- those associated with being a Black woman, being upwardly mobile, and the intersection of the two. In her experience, the purpose of the storm closet is a place of respite from the mental and emotional toil of her life. Like the physical “powerhouse” that she described, Erica believed that, as a Black woman, she is expected to weather considerable storms without showing signs of damage.

I asked if the beautiful home she shared with her fiance and son had an actual storm closet. Ironically, it did not. “My house doesn’t have a storm closet. My *powerhouse* does, though! I just [haven’t] been in it in a minute... Even though I should’ve.” Erica went on to say that she did not have solid coping strategies in place. She offered that she could “cope, if it can even be called that” for a short amount of time but that she was better at adapting to situations and internalizing the stress than she was actually coping. In a word, she had incorporated the *perpetual pivot* into her way of being, and felt more confident that she could shift her persona and/or behavior than apply effective coping strategies in the midst of challenges related to upward-mobility.

Erica noted that this was especially true of her work persona, as, according to her, “when it comes to work, you’re not there to make friends.” I tried to clarify, saying, “Let me make sure I understand. So there’s a stressful situation or a scenario, whatever... So you’re frontin’, you’re not really developing a way of being or coping strategy?” She

replied, “[y]ou’re there to make money - not friends. Bottom line, so you keep it professional, you keep it respectful.” In Erica’s opinion, buffering herself was the most effective coping strategy to employ at work, as it did not make sense to be emotionally available among colleagues.

Other participants described their efforts to cope with and seek refuge from the stresses of upward-mobility. Crystal shared how physical exercise provided an opportunity for her to blow off steam, maintain her physical health, and center herself emotionally. She stressed the importance of being an active agent in one’s physiological health, especially since many people may not be aware of the impact that high stress has on the body. Tiffany described her commitment to yoga and healthy eating as critical in ensuring that her physical body could withstand the physiological pressures she experienced as a result of her high-stress job. While these two spoke about exercise as a specific coping strategy, the balance of participants referenced more intrinsic methods of maintaining sanity, peace, and/or balance.

The women in this study understood the importance of experiencing relief from the myriad stresses of upward mobility. They attempted to escape both psychological and emotional “storms” associated with the perpetual pivoting which they felt pressured to maintain. All of them recognized the need to disengage from the sources of pressure, namely work and family who did not understand their experiences, in order to rest and recalibrate. One participant suggested that the pressure of pivoting so often was further impacted by her need to make it look easy. This stress weighs so heavily on her that she often needs a break from herself. Most participants suggested that this type of periodic

disconnection was important but that they were not always able to achieve it. They were adamant that some form of coping with the stress of upward-mobility was essential to their sense of well-being, and many of them had cultivated specific practices or strategies.

The Importance of Character: Spirituality and Integrity

I asked the women in the study how they coped with the stresses of being an upwardly-mobile Black woman, given the perpetual need to pivot from one cultural setting to the next, and the threat to authenticity which some participants feared was their subsequent fate. In one way or another, the women shared the importance of maintaining a strong sense of character, despite the challenges they have faced along their journeys toward upward-mobility. When asked to define character, participants indicated a range of elements they considered critical, with spirituality and integrity resonating as central tenets. Whether recounting their dedication to academics throughout high school, college, or graduate school, or their perseverance in climbing professional ranks, the women in the study agreed that an evolving spirituality and a commitment to living with integrity kept them personally grounded. While not all participants indicated that they were religious, each one spoke to a sense of spirituality in some way. It should be noted that participants were not asked to indicate a religious affiliation. Many offered that they were Christian, with others referencing Christian and/or Biblical teachings in describing their own sense of spirituality.

Tiffany described her own spiritual relationship and how it served as the foundation of her character. She suggested that she was likely the most religious of all

participants, having lived with her grandfather, who was a minister, and her grandmother, who many believed had the gift of prophecy. Their influence on her was significant, and she carried much of their religious teaching forward into her adult life. For Tiffany, having such a strong religious teaching as a child meant that she had “an endless supply of encouragement and joy” to draw on during life’s difficult moments. She described how her belief that God intended for her to be blessed *and* to be a blessing both comforted her and challenged her to be the best version of herself that she could be. She went on to explain how this notion that “God was on [her] side” empowered her to be and do *her* best, and not to covet what others had growing up, a virtue that she still clings to as an adult.

Beyond being a source of inspiration and consolation, lessons from Tiffany’s religious upbringing served as a moral compass, guiding her behavior and ensuring that she “didn’t veer too far from the cross!” or otherwise stray from the conservative teachings her family held up as behavioral standards. She drew a distinction between religiosity and spirituality, noting that her relationship with God had evolved over time, and that it was a major factor in her ability to cope with the pressures she has experienced as an upwardly-mobile Black woman. She said, “It sounds so cliché but, just like the song says, ‘If it had not been for the Lord on my side, where would I be?’” Tiffany recalled how her faith in a loving, benevolent, God “carried [her]” along the difficult journey of teenage pregnancy, single-parenthood, the stresses of college and law school, and continued to be a calming force in her life.

Similarly, Da'Shelle spoke at length about the role religion had played in her upbringing and the on-going influence of spirituality in her current life. She was raised by a very religious grandmother who instilled a deep respect for God. One way that manifested itself in their home was humility and reverence to a God who protected them. Humility became a cornerstone of Da'Shelle's spiritual identity, and served to center her when she experienced pressures at work. In her opinion, a Black woman cannot afford not to operate with humility at work, as they are often judged more harshly than their peers. The notion that God was protecting her provided comfort when she experienced racism in predominantly White spaces or dismissal as a woman in a male-dominated profession.

Like Tiffany and Da'Shelle, Marian acknowledged the role that a spiritual relationship played in her ability to thrive. She described being "anchored," and how her spiritual relationship with God compelled her to operate with integrity. "I believe we have something to prove but to God and not to man." She went on to explain that her connection to "a higher source" gave her both a sense of purpose and validation that her efforts were worthwhile. Marian was one of several participants to note that, even when others do not appreciate the extent to which she had to struggle, "God knows" and approves of her. This suggestion that God's approval was more important than that of peers or even family members resonated among several other participants as well. As Tiffany said, "You just can't count on people being there for you, being in your corner, cheering you on, you know? But you can always count on God- no matter what."

As important as having God's constant support and unconditional approval, participants noted that operating with integrity also served to cement their character. While their definitions of integrity differed, they hinged on the notion of "keeping it real" and "being true to oneself." The general sentiment was that "keeping it real" was a way to maintain one's identity. Erica described what it meant for her to maintain this sense of self:

Keeping it real is about being consistent. I may have to put on a front at work but I know who I am and I can get back to that - to my core self. I am consistent. I keep it real with myself, first and foremost. Once I keep it real with me, I couldn't care less what others think, say, or do!

Erica's indication that "keeping it real" was first a commitment to herself resonated with other women in the study. Similarly, to the notion that having God's approval meant that participants were less concerned with being judged by others, being able to be true to themselves relieved them of excessive worry about others' perceptions of them.

Beyond authenticity to the self, participants suggested that "keeping it real" also served to keep them anchored to the communities that they cared about. When asked if "keeping it real" was a way for her to stay connected to her family or childhood friends, Crystal replied:

No. It isn't *a* way, it is *the* way. There are many ways to keep in touch with people, sure- but keeping it real, and showing up the way you always were is *the* most important [way]. I may be different than I used to be in some ways but deep down, I am still the same me. Your family and [others] want to be with who they remember, not some 'updated' you.

In other words, “keeping it real” is the way for Crystal to demonstrate integrity. It makes it evident that who she is “deep down” is still recognizable and, presumably, acceptable to her family and others with whom she has long-term relationships.

Courtney offered another explanation for why “keeping it real” was so important to one’s character. “You have to keep it real. That’s word one in Black communities! It’s cool that you have to front at work, or whatever- everyone understands that. We get it. But once that’s over... Keep it real.” By her definition, keeping it real is essentially a demonstration of a core Black communal value. Being able to reflect what is “word one,” or a community’s top priority, is key to proving one’s relationship to that community. Many described it as a difficult task but most participants agreed that maintaining integrity was essential, and that maintaining a relationship with their home community was also of some importance.

Finally, the women in the study offered that humility was a critical element of maintaining strong character. Humility was a significant factor in participants’ ability to maintain the integrity which so many of them indicated as being important. As Crystal said:

God keeps me grounded so I don’t get a big head. If it wasn’t for him I’d be conceited. I’m kind of a big deal <laughter>. No really, I am proud of what I’ve overcome - what I’ve become but I try to stay humble because I consider that a part of being a Proverbs-style ‘virtuous woman’.

For Crystal, as with most other participants, remaining humble despite her many achievements was only possible through their spiritual relationship with God.

In closing, the women in the study were adamant that maintaining a strong sense of character was critical in both achieving upward mobility and withstanding related pressures. Cultivating solid spiritual (and sometimes religious) relationships provided essential validation and affirmation which reduced their need to disconnect from their core values in seeking others' approval. Operating with integrity was both a way for participants to maintain a sense of identity despite needing to code-switch on such a regular basis, and a way to demonstrate a commitment to the communal values held in Black communities. As one participant stated, "I would not be afraid to be judged on the content of my character" in reference to the famous *I Have a Dream* speech in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for a time when people were judged as such, as opposed to being judged by the color of their skin.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the complexity of participants' experiences of being upwardly- mobile Black women. Participants remembered being made to feel "not Black enough" by other Black people in their families and/or communities, in most cases because their ways of speaking or other behaviors were believed to be more indicative of White culture than Black culture. Some women remember having developed rapport with White peers based on their use of correct English, shared academic goals, or their demonstrated dedication to academic excellence. Despite this camaraderie, participants knew that they were "not White enough" to fully belong in White spaces, which they largely understood to be middle- and upper-middle class spaces. Their experience of not fitting in fully in either space left the women feeling "nowhere at home," as Overall

explained of upwardly-mobile women at the intersections of race, class, and ethnicity (Overall, as quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 804). Despite their ability to understand both Black and White values and performed behaviors, which demonstrate those values to others, participants grew up feeling othered among both groups to some degree.

This *othering* would continue to be participants' reality into adulthood. In response, they felt compelled to *pivot*, or code-switch, in order to achieve success, sometimes engaging different personas in different contexts. While this has resulted in their professional success, the frequency with which they have had to pivot has brought great stress, and varying degrees of isolation from their families and communities. Understandably, the women reported seeking refuge from the exhaustion of such frequent code-switching. Many suggested that, while they were able to do it, they believed that such perpetual pivoting posed a threat to their sense of self; they worried that, the more they pivoted between Black and White cultural spaces, in particular, the less they were able to be authentic in either. When asked to describe how they preserve a stable sense of self, given the pressures they feel to embody such different sides of themselves, participants spoke to the importance of maintaining their character, namely through an evolving spirituality and a commitment to living with integrity.

CHAPTER VI

COMMUNITY: THICK LOVE AND THE LACK THEREOF

In this chapter I turn to the role of community in the life of the upwardly-mobile Black women who are the focal point of this study. I focus on how membership in various groups meets the women's need for community, and the challenges they face in those spaces. I organize participant stories across four recurrent themes which, together, serve to explain participants' experiences of community: the critical role of support systems; challenges of maintaining supportive relationships; isolation and loneliness; and competition among upwardly-mobile Black women. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the cumulative impact of these sub-themes on upwardly-mobile Black women's sense of community.

Community: The Critical Role of Support Systems

According to women in the study, belonging to tight communities was critical for their personal well-being. Most had developed strong support systems ranging from childhood friendships, to networks of friends from college or graduate school, to lifelong membership in one of the four historically-Black sororities where several of the women drew significant support. Several participants suggested that tending to friendships, staying connected to family, and otherwise maintaining these support systems had grown increasingly difficult over the years. Many felt that their best efforts simply fell

short, leaving once fulfilling relationships to fade or dissolve. In this section, I frame how participants valued lasting friendships, and their attempts to maintain them.

One is Silver and the Other Gold: The Value of Enduring Friendship

The women in the study placed a high value on the relationships where they received the most emotional support. They cherished those childhood friendships which had withstood the tests of time and, in most participant's cases, distance. Crystal talked about the lasting relationship she enjoyed with "Kevin," whom she met and befriended during middle school:

When I got to middle school is when I started, I guess, realizing that, I kind of started getting a little separated from my Black friends because my Honors classes were with just the White kids. So it [was] me or one other person whose name was "Kevin," and it's funny because to this day we are friends.... Middle school, high school- he went to Rutgers to get his law degree but it would always be like him and [me] or me by myself or him by himself [in the Honors classes].

While the two were friends beforehand, it was their shared experience of being the only two Black students in their high school Honors classes which bound Crystal and Kevin together most significantly. Beyond ensuring that the other was prepared for assignments and exams, they were intentional in supporting each other's ability to respond to implicit racism espoused from both teachers and fellow students. Crystal mentioned how just knowing that Kevin was there, and that she was not alone made her feel strong enough to deal with their flippant classmates. Dealing with this stress and the subsequent trauma was only bearable because it was done with the support of a trusted friend.

Crystal went on to share how she and Kevin have been purposeful in keeping in touch with one another over the years. They work to keep each other abreast of major

milestones and are always there to congratulate one another. Their friendship reminded me of a song I had learned in elementary school. I sang a part of the chorus without realizing it: ‘Make new friends but keep the old...’ Crystal nodded and finished the stanza: “One is silver and the other gold! Kevin is gold,” she said, smiling. Having an old friend of the same cultural and socioeconomic background who is also experiencing upward-mobility has meant that Crystal can feel understood as she reflects on her past and thinks through her present life “with someone who gets it” to some degree.

Tiffany described the unique relationship she and her uncle “Lamont” share. He has always been attentive to and protective of Tiffany, and she has always looked up to him. She understood from a young age that both her immediate and extended families were poor, including Lamont. “Money was a big issue in our family... [we were] robbing Peter to pay Paul.” The fact that he has done well for himself now sets him apart from many of her other relatives. Beyond being financially well-off, Tiffany credits Lamont’s “open-mindedness, interest in really living life, and just... willingness to look at things differently than most people in [their] family” as meeting her definition of upwardly-mobile.

Tiffany expressed sincere gratitude that she had Lamont in her life. She said, “he knows where I’ve been and where I want to go, so he can always support where I am at the moment.” Their shared history serves as a foundation for mutual understanding, which is of the utmost importance to her. She acknowledged the many bonds she has developed as an adult but noted that her friendship with Lamont was “treasured.” This prompted me to share how Crystal had called her relationship with her old friend, Kevin,

gold. Both of us smiled and laughed at the similarity among these descriptions, with Tiffany clutching her hand to her chest. “[Lamont], boah... There is no replacing him.” Building new, quality friendships was important to Tiffany but few were cherished as the one she shared with Lamont.

Crystal and Tiffany’s stories illustrate the importance the women in the study placed on old friendships and supportive relationships. While only Crystal and I invoked the popular children’s song to describe old friendships, most participants referenced how invaluable those old friends with whom they had been able to maintain relationship actually were. More specifically, relationships with the few old friends who have also experienced some degree of upward mobility were critical, as those friends were able to understand participants’ experience of upward-mobility. This shared understanding positioned friends to affirm the women’s sense of self in the midst of the perpetual code-shifting which many participants have suggested threatens their authenticity. No participant suggested that they were disinterested in establishing new supportive relationships. However, those who spoke of old friends did so nostalgically, acknowledging that these loving relationships, in particular, had withstood what they considered to be considerable tests. Participants who could claim close ties to old friends seemed proud to have overcome that which challenges modern-day friendship for women in their position.

Challenges to Community

The women in the study reported various challenges to their ability to maintain close relationships. In this section, I present the three themes which resonated across

participant stories of these challenges: having taken different life paths than some of their closest friends; perfectionist tendencies which bred competition with their peers, especially other Black women; and competition perceived to be spurred by colorism. Of these three, participants described the first two as directly related to their experiences of upward mobility. Those participants who shared stories of colorism and subsequent competition based on skin color discussed the impact this form of discrimination had on them but did not suggest a relationship between colorism and upward mobility. In all, participant stories describe the value they placed on friendship and other close relationships, and their efforts to overcome these challenges.

We Took Different Directions

Participants reported that becoming upwardly-mobile posed challenges to their ability to maintain meaningful connections to old friends who were not upwardly-mobile. Several of the women were still in touch with old friends loosely but lamented that many of the richest, most loving relationships they had enjoyed prior to becoming upwardly-mobile had faded. Daria said that most of her present-day friendships began in high school but her description of these friendships suggested that they were not especially strong. She was the only one of their group to attend college, a factor which she suggested created “a great distance between [herself and] them.” Daria has tried to bridge this gap by staying in touch with each of these friends but believes that her upward mobility has strained these relationships. In some cases, the relationships have not fully rebounded from this strain. She described her relationship with “Angie,” one of these friends with whom she reconnected after graduating from college:

[Our relationship] is kind of awkward... You kind of find yourself downplaying your success but downplaying like- because I don't think more of myself than I am but what I *am*, they think is really high. So downplaying that just so that we can be on equal [footing] because immediately when they see me: 'Oh you think you are better now that you [have this job].' She calls me 'Oh, so now that you're Olivia Pope....' She's the only one that I have been able to still stay connected to from that group. The other ones were kind of still... Yeah, just finding their way and... They don't... It's an uncomfortable conversation.

Daria went on to suggest that while Angie sometimes makes reference to her degree and prestigious job, Angie is also "doing good for herself" which makes it possible for them to believe that they still have something meaningful in common. The two of them meet up for lunch a few times per year and try to catch up on each other's lives:

[Angie is] the only one that I've been able to [stay connected to] but... I think that is kind of because [even though] she didn't go to college, she does taxes. She has a business. She's doing good for herself. I think that's why. I don't think she feels intimidated by [my] degree.

Daria wishes that she could maintain this type of closeness with her other friends but concedes that their belief that her socioeconomic status makes her different is a barrier to them having a more solid relationship. Having so few childhood friends with whom they could experience and reflect upon upward mobility was a source of frustration and sadness for Daria and other participants.

Courtney was especially vocal in mourning faded relationships. Thinking of her former best friend, whom she believes felt intimidated by her success, brought her great sadness. She apologized for the incredible show of emotion as she described failed attempts to stay connected to the woman who had been her best friend since elementary school:

I did have one friend that was my friend from grade school, middle school, *and* high school. We just kind of fell out. Not fell out but just kinda went different ways when we got into undergrad- once I transferred to [a different university]-you know. <Courtney's eyes well up with tears but she does not stop telling the story>. We were roommates at [the first university] and I got transferred to [a higher-ranked university]. We still stayed in touch but by the time I came back to [my hometown] for law school, you know, she was pregnant and was trying to do nursing school. Besides, she dropped out, you know? It just kinda... <Tears spill onto her cheeks and she wipes them away>. We took different directions 'cause I'm like, 'Look! Focus on what you said you wanted to do!' First she wanted to be a doctor, that was too hard. Then you said you want to be a pharmacist, and that was too hard. Now you are in nursing school [and] you want to call it quits on that too?! That's what we talk about. That's somebody [whose] parents are just like, happy you went to college so we don't care what you do with your life. And I felt like I was pushing her to want more, and she felt like I was being too "mama bear," you know? <Courtney tries to control her sobbing but is overcome with emotion>. But I was like, 'Come on girl! You know we got to want more, and you know... Then one day [of not speaking] would turn into two... one day she kinda has her feelings about things, and I kinda have my feelings about things... I wouldn't say I felt like, 'You're not good enough to be my friend.' I just felt like, I'm pushing you to want more for yourself, you know? And nobody wants to be that person. <Courtney is trying to control her breathing and wiping away tears continually>. [My relationships with] everybody else are still intact.

Courtney rejected the notion that she had "outgrown" this relationship, as she missed her friend, and had wanted very much to maintain the closeness they once enjoyed. She also rejected the notion that the relationship had ended solely because she was upwardly-mobile. She reiterated that "a lot of [her other] friends are great in their own way and [in their own] lives, they just have different paths. They are doing big things in their lane and I'm doing big things in mine." It was abundantly clear that she was incredibly hurt because of the loss of such a long and once-fulfilling friendship. Having achieved the success she worked for made her want to see her best friend work toward her goals as well. Courtney was confused by her best friend rejecting these sincere efforts.

Eventually, even her efforts to overcome the physical distance and lifestyle differences between the two of them would also be rejected.

The hurt that Courtney felt was similar to that which other participants felt when relationships they held so dear fizzled out. Losing her friend hurt, of course. What was especially devastating for Courtney, though, was that she had tried so earnestly to save the friendship. She believed that she had given her most sincere effort to show her best friend that the physical distance between them, different socioeconomic statuses, or divergent life paths did not have to mean the end of their relationship, and she had failed.

Courtney's tears suggested that although the loss was not recent, the pain was still somewhat fresh. I wondered if the *failure* which she mentioned hurt as much as the actual loss of friendship. The way she described her academic successes, the intensity of her professional ascent, and the way she was so highly regarded by members of her community suggested that she may not have experienced much failure in her lifetime. As a woman who could empathize, I wanted to signal to Courtney that I understood both her situation and the bitter irony of experiencing such loss as an indirect result of her success. Was it possible that this was one of the few times in her life that she had failed at something that meant so much to her? As a researcher, I regret the decision not to probe further.

Courtney talked about "pushing" her best friend toward her goals. She used the words "push" or "pushing" a total of eight times during our first interview to describe how her parents and other family members had encouraged her to achieve. Perhaps pushing became the way that she learned to encourage others. As Courtney mentioned,

her friend “felt like she was being too mama bear;” it makes sense that Courtney’s friend stopped returning her calls or responding to her efforts to remain close if she felt like a project to be completed.

Overall, Courtney and other women in the study had different hypotheses about how and why upward mobility had challenged some of their most meaningful relationships. They understood that they were (or were perceived to be) living different lives than many of their old friends as a result of experiencing upward mobility. As the old adage goes, “perception is reality,” and the perception was that more had changed about them than just their socioeconomic status, zip code, or other class marker.

In participants’ minds and hearts, though, they were still the same people who those friends had known in the most intimate of ways for so many years. The women claimed to still subscribe to the commonly-held Black values of communalism, spirituality, and harmony. They recognized that their lives were - and were perceived to be - different than they had been before they experienced upward mobility. Despite the differences in wealth and, in some cases, social status, they contested that their hearts were the same, and still tethered to the families, friends, and communities where they had been socialized. Feeling that their loved ones did not recognize or acknowledge their desire to remain connected hurt. Several participants maintained loose connections to some of their old friends, but they were clear that the losses - and the lack of closure to the relationships- were confusing, frustrating, and painful.

“No Smudges:” Perfectionist Roots Turned Competition among Upwardly-Mobile Black Women

Participants suggested that one potential barrier to developing and maintaining community among upwardly-mobile Black women is the competitive nature which many developed as a byproduct of working to meet others’ high expectations during childhood and adolescence. Research has established that Black girls are often socialized under especially high expectations (Collins, 1987). As Felicia stated, what many of her peers considered high expectations, she understood as “a baseline” which she intended to surpass. Camille described how she came to understand just how high her mother’s expectations of her were:

Maybe she demanded excellence, or I just didn’t want to let her down or let her think I couldn’t do it... Some things were expected to be on the level of perfection because I remember like, not being able to even- If I had to erase three times on an assignment, I had to start over. I was not allowed to have like, smudges. No smudges. [T]here was no erasing.

With this, Camille acknowledged the perfectionist foundations upon which she established a part of her identity as a hyper-achiever. At such a young age, Camille could not have known how the perfectionist tendencies she was developing would impact her ability to establish and maintain deep friendship. As she matured, she found that she had less patience for even close friends who she perceived as not striving for perfection. The perfectionist sensibility that she developed as a young girl was often experienced by others as judgement, which threatened her friendships.

Other women in the study confirmed that they had also internalized high expectations as young girls. While several attributed their personal and professional

successes, in part, to having done so, many participants also acknowledged that operating with such a heightened sense of focus and diligence at all times made it difficult to shift out of hyper-performance mode. This was true even among participants' close friends. Operating in this mode meant that participants found themselves in competition with others. Throughout high school, college, and on into adulthood, this would mean that participants were often in competition with other upwardly-mobile Black women.

Erica held that “healthy competition” encouraged her to be her best self.

Unfortunately, her experiences competing with other upwardly-mobile Black women in the workplace had been rife with tension. She summed up the times when she had hoped to cultivate community among other Black women at work, only to find that they saw her as a threat, saying:

[Y]ou run into those [who] are drunk with power, particularly a Black woman who seems to be intimidated by any other smart Black woman that comes into the agency. Because there can only be one. There can only be one.

Erica went on to share that she'd been surprised to find that other Black women considered her to be their competition. Having benefitted from healthy competition between her peers, she reported that she was not quite prepared to deal with other upwardly-mobile Black women “who were not out to see other women who look like [us] win.” More than being surprised, she admitted that, initially, she had been hurt to realize the hostility which other upwardly-mobile Black women projected on her. It was unclear whether or not Erica understood that an institutionalized system of oppression was likely perpetuating the competition which had plagued her relationships with certain women

(Fellows & Razack, 1997). These systems serve to intensify the oppression that people of color and other marginalized people experience, namely by encouraging competition over coalition-building, and positioning some marginalized people to subordinate others, often indirectly. The upwardly-mobile Black women who were hostile toward Erica may have been complicitous in perpetuating her oppression without even being aware of their role in said oppression.

Erica learned that the friendly competition she was accustomed to was interpreted as threatening to some other women. In her opinion, being seen as a threat left her ~~her~~ emotionally exposed to retaliation more so than it did to motivate her or the other Black women she thought she was encouraging. As a result of her failed attempts at “iron sharpening iron”, she decided it best to “close [her] heart” at work. She seemed resolute as she offered, “[w]hen it comes to work, you’re not there to make friends. You’re there to make money-bottom line. So you keep it professional. You keep it respectful. That’s it.” Instead of motivating others or looking to them for motivation, Erica decided to focus her energies inward, and to her immediate family, where she believed she would be protected and nurtured.

In conclusion, participants suggested that the perfectionist tendencies they developed as young girls were a triple-edged sword. On one hand, their drive and determination propelled them forward toward success; on another hand, it made it difficult for them to switch out of hyper-performance mode. Third, it is also possible that internalizing and then meeting or exceeding these high expectations regularly made the women less understanding of others who they believed to be equally competent but

underachieving. Several participants seemed to have little patience for those friends who had not achieved their own goals, despite being as smart or as capable as they were themselves.

Beyond it being rather cliché, it would be an overreach to suggest that the nature of their profession positioned the judges and lawyers to be more judgmental of their friends than other participants were. However, several of them were quite explicit in describing their impatience with friends who they viewed as underachievers. This sense of judgement was not thematic across all six judges and lawyers, and could not be extrapolated to other participants. I am left wondering how much the women's profession impacted the ways that they understood, empathized or engaged with others even outside of their work. This impatience and /or heightened sense of judgement may help to explain Courtney's disappointment with her best friend, who she described as "giving up on herself." It is not that Courtney was sad to see her friend not *also* become a judge, but that she was disappointed to see her not achieve the worthy goals her friend had set for herself.

Participants actively sought out the company of other Black women who had also delivered on the high expectations they had internalized as young girls. Many acknowledged that one unintended consequence was that they would likely be in competition with these women. The chances of these women finding themselves in competition with one another is high, given the ways that misogyny and White supremacy position already-marginalized people in conflict and competition with one another (Fellows & Zarack, 1997). While a certain level of competition may have been

healthy, when taken too far, it would threaten their ability to maintain community among them. In extreme cases, it would prove a barrier to some of their most treasured relationships.

Colorism and Competition

Aundrea also remembered competition among Black girls and women being a hallmark of her adolescent and undergraduate experience. Unlike Camille and Erica, though, Aundrea attributed other Black girl's desire to compete with her to their own jealousy, "because [she] was light-skinned and they were jealous,-for whatever reason." My assumption was that Aundrea believed other girls had been jealous of her *because* she was light-skinned. I asked if it were possible that girls (and later, women) were not jealous at all, or if they were, that they were jealous of her but for reasons *other than* her skin color. She agreed that they may have been jealous "because [she] was smart, or because [her] Dad was still around, or because [their family] had a nice house" but added, amid laughter, that "it also could have just been because [she] was light-skinned." While Aundrea's assumption that other Black girls were jealous of her solely because she was light-skinned may have been incorrect, considerable research on skin-color stratification among people of color supports the notion that they may have understood that she would likely be awarded social privileges based on her complexion (Hunter, 2005). Colorism has been shown to result in light-skinned people earning more money, living in more desirable neighborhoods, and having more marriage prospects to people with higher social status than darker-skinned people of the same racial or ethnic group, among other socially desirable factors (Hunter, 2007).

Crystal was the only other participant to suggest that other Black girls or women may have been envious of her because she was light-skinned. As a child and adolescent, she had not been fully aware that her light skin and green eyes were even sources of interest, let alone envy. That some other Black girls were jealous of her because of her looks did not even occur to her until high school when she and her peers began dating:

The whole green eyes thing and my color didn't hit me 'til when I started realizing guys [were] liking me and they would say something about my eyes. I'm like, dude I got more than my eyes! But it's always, I don't know, not necessarily [focusing on] 'this light [skinned] girl' but the other things that I had like oh, I'm on the cheering squad... I'm the only Black girl and the guys liked it, and then I was into track and running. So I thought it was the things that I was doing, not necessarily anything with my skin [that attracted boy's attention].

Originally, Crystal thought "the other things that [she] was doing" were what attracted boys to her. Similarly, she assumed that there were "other things" (e.g. like making straight As and maintaining a place on the high honor roll) that compelled other Black girls to compete with her, not her exoticized looks. Having other Black girls tell her that they were competing for boys' attention, and, further, that her skin color was a factor in their perceived inability to compete, was confusing and painful. In the end, the impact of colorism and the subsequent competition which it fueled would mean the end of several friendships which Crystal had treasured throughout her childhood and adolescence.

In all, the women lamented the loss of relationship they experienced as a result of becoming upwardly mobile. Some of these losses could be attributed to the impact of systemic and institutionalized racism on relationships between marginalized people. Other losses were impacted by the participants' fear that they had to be near perfect in

order to offset the impact of structural racism. Competition driven by colorism also posed considerable challenge to several friendships. Participants worked to offset these losses by developing wider support networks.

Thick Love: Participants' Experiences Cultivating "Framily"

In addition to feeling that their efforts to stay connected to once-beloved friends had failed, several of the women in the study felt that their efforts to maintain mutually-fulfilling relationships with some family members were also rejected. Participants described all that they had done to ensure members of their families that, while their financial circumstances had changed significantly, they had not. Tiffany shared that it was important for her to ensure "that [her] people know that [she is] still the same person they raised." Many women offered some version of this statement during our individual interviews, often acknowledging that they had changed but that their principles, values, or moral compasses remained intact and closely aligned with what they had learned from their families. It is possible that, despite their insistence that they were the same as they had always been, the women had, in fact, changed in significant ways. Perhaps these shifts were not as apparent to the women themselves as they were to those close to them. This would explain, in part, how they could be so adamant that they were "the same at heart," despite the implicit (and occasionally explicit) feedback that they had changed since becoming upwardly mobile.

Even if the women had not adopted wholly new values, the process of learning and demonstrating the dominant-culture values which they were compelled to adapt and pivot into likely made them *appear* different to old friends and family members. Several

participants suggested that even appearing different in superficial ways proved to be somewhat problematic to their family members. Crystal remembered being ridiculed for eating a lot of “bougie [healthy] food” once she learned more about the health implications of junk food. As a result, she had refused to eat what had always been served at her family’s gatherings. While she was somewhat flippant as she relayed how ridiculous her family’s response had been, it is possible that members of her family wondered what else, besides the food that they had always shared together, would she now reject. While refusing a dish your aunt is famous for making is not a full rejection of your family, choosing not to accept what has been created for you in love, or to otherwise participate in family traditions because of new understandings or beliefs could very likely threaten the communal relationship, which is a hallmark of Black families.

Beyond taking on new, seemingly inconsequential lifestyle habits, the pivots that participants grew accustomed to making may have signaled to family and friends that they were no longer governed by the same values which knit them together. If they were assumed to subscribe to something other than the traditional Black values, morals and customs which they claim remain their base, they may also have been assumed to have different priorities from those around them.

It may seem intuitive that participants would need to work to negate these assumptions and demonstrate that their socializing values remained intact. However, as a researcher, I am curious as to whether trying to negate these assumptions may have backfired unintentionally. For example, while suggesting that they were the same as they had always been may have served to signal that they *wanted* to be the same, doing so

would only be an effective strategy if their family and friends confirmed their sameness. If their family or friends already rejected the notion that they were still the same, then their insistence may have fallen flat. Further, insisting that they were still the same, when others' perception is that they were, in fact, different in consequential ways, likely added to the friction participants felt among them and members of their family.

Participants' assertion that they were still aligned with communal Black values was critical because of how important familial bonds were to them. In instances where they either had, or appeared to have changed, these bonds were strained. In lieu of having their original family ties providing webs of support, many of the women established "family," the popular nickname given to networks of close friends who are as close as (or, in some cases, closer than) family. They hoped that these "families" would compensate for the family they had lost. The role of the family was to provide the thick love that many of the women needed, characterised by affirmation, support, and encouragement, often towards goals that members of their family could not understand or envision, to console, counsel, and to love without judgement. In some cases, family members accepted the women in ways that their family could or would not.

Many participants believed that members of their family were envious of their upward mobility, and that this envy was a major factor in the dissolution of relationships with relatives with whom they had once been close. It is possible that participants' family members were less envious but more expectant. Hill (1999) found that Black girls were expected to achieve academically so that they could eventually support themselves *and* contribute to immediate and extended families. Perhaps participants' families

expected them to demonstrate the communal Black values which they claimed to still subscribe to by sharing more of their wealth. Being unwilling or unable to do so may have intensified any existing or brewing friction between them.

Daria suggested that it was important that members of an upwardly-mobile Black woman's family "have their own" means. A solid family member was someone whom participants did not suspect to be envious of them, their wealth (or perceived wealth), or other social status. By and large, the extra-familial relationships the women cultivated were with other upwardly-mobile people. In their experience, other upwardly-mobile people were more likely to have had experiences similar to theirs which positioned them to understand participants' current experiences, particularly their financial situations.

Secrets that Can't be Shared

Participants shared that there were certain stories or situations that they could not share with their family or old friends who were not also upwardly-mobile. Among them, two categories emerged: stories they believed would be misunderstood or hard for people who were not upwardly-mobile to accept, and those professional situations which were confidential. Regardless of the category, these experiences demonstrate how factors other than envy threatened participants' standing in their families and their relationships with once-cherished friends.

Camille filed for bankruptcy soon after relocating from her home state. Her decision to share her bankruptcy news with family but not her family demonstrates the predicament that many participants found themselves in: unable to admit that they sometimes need help because their families are so wedded to the idea that they are rich.

Her family members would not replace their image of her as wealthy with a more accurate understanding of her true financial situation, regardless of her prompting them to do so. This meant, in part, that they would likely be unable to comprehend her filing for bankruptcy. She cracked a half-smile and rolled her eyes as she expressed her frustration:

More money, more problems. More responsibility, more problems. The spotlight is on you... they just want you to be this miracle worker. Absolutely not. They think like 'must be nice,' like they know [your financial situation]. Sure would be nice to have some help sometimes. And they don't know what type of situation you have gotten yourself into! Even when I [moved to a new state]- I was [struggling] but my family in [my home state] was so busy bragging "Oh [Camille] is in [a new state!]" "Oh she's doing big." I could be living in a box, you know?! A cardboard box, or on a corner but it's like this belief in this small town that "Oh she made it big time." No, I'm struggling out here. I'm persevering but now even my dad, you know, he has other kids and they have had a lot more obstacles where they can't get themselves out of it, you know? I just always... I don't know... I didn't have anyone [to support me]. I sent money home during college you know? I put myself through college... [My father's] thing has always been "You are making good money out there. You got everything under control. You don't need me." I'm thinking, no one ever asked! You never asked me if I needed help. So it's what they believe, what they think. I'm like, you don't know my issue every day.

Camille wanted her family to understand that their perception of her as wealthy was inaccurate but she did not believe they could accept her reality.

Equally as important, Camille could not bring herself to tell her family because she was afraid that they would be disappointed in her. She knew that they expected her to not only be rich - which she was not - but responsible - which she feared they would second-guess if she shared that she had filed bankrupt. She did not want to bear the shame of letting them down. While Camille has maintained relationships with members

of her family, she learned that, because she could not share such critical truths openly, relationships with them alone may not satisfy her most significant needs for thick love and community. This also meant that certain members of her family could not be a part of her current lived experience, as it did not match the “baller lifestyle” they seemed committed to believing that she lived.

Not feeling able to share their successes- and not wanting family members to be disappointed in their failures - left several participants feeling distanced from family and friends. Aundrea shared how lonely she had felt going through a classified incident involving her bench. Even if her old friends could have understood her situation, it was illegal for her to share any information with them. She was completely prohibited from discussing what she called “one of the scariest times of [her] life” with anyone other than her own lawyers.

Aundrea’s story about being shamed publicly shed light on another important phenomenon: nine of the ten participants were largely restricted from sharing information on their professional lives with friends or family. Aundrea, Courtney, Daria, Felicia, Marian, and Tiffany are all unable to come home and talk about a tough day at the office because it would be highly illegal for them to discuss court proceedings or client matters. Similarly, Crystal’s work as an anesthesiologist is likely too technical for the majority of her friends and family members to understand but even if they could, it would be a violation of privacy and accountability laws requiring her to maintain patient confidentiality. Erica’s role with FEMA is certainly confidential and cannot be discussed with others outside of the Federal government. Da’Shelle’s role protecting client data is

as technical as it is confidential; she would likely not be able to share her work with family or friends, whether they were interested or not. Camille is the only participant who would be able to discuss intricate details of her work as a fashion buyer with people outside of the office without consequence.

Not being able to share about their work in meaningful ways left participants feeling isolated further from family and friends. This disconnection could be especially hurtful for them as sharing details of one's life is such a critical component of life in communal Black communities. Further, speculating that participants were being guarded by choice likely confused their friends and family members, who may have felt unable to demonstrate their values by supporting the women, also in accordance with communal Black values. In short, having such significant secrets among them meant that neither the women nor their family or old friends could fulfill their communal obligations to one another and remain in close community.

Iron Sharpens Iron

Among family members, sorority sisters played a particularly significant role in many participants' lives. Camille was one of the participants who discussed the role that their sorority sisters had played in meeting their needs for thick love and an expansive support system. While the women noted that their sorority sisters were diverse groups, they believed that their shared experiences of being raised as high-achieving Black girls meant that they had much in common. Attending college and pursuing membership together added another layer to their shared foundation. Further, they faced similar challenges engaging the world around them as Black women. Those who were

upwardly-mobile had additional circumstances in common. Participants' sorority sisters were uniquely positioned to meet their needs for support and community.

Those who were affiliated with sororities were forthright in crediting their pledge sisters and other Sorors with providing thick love and empathy, sometimes moving into roles that family members had previously played in their lives. During a focus group with Tiffany and Aundrea, Marian shared that out of her large extended family, friends from college and graduate school, and her sorority sisters, she spends the most time with the latter. “[My sorority sisters and I all hang out and then we can go the whole year until next summer when we hang out and see each other again. [My cousins and other old friends], we share on Facebook but we are not in each other’s lives.” She went on to describe how hard she has to work to maintain relationships with people but that the relationship with the sorority sisters in her family comes more easily.

Aundrea also spoke of the role her sorority sisters and other family members played in filling her life with love:

When I get home, I get over [immense stress]. I am showered with so much, you know, genuine, warm, loving women here in [this city] who have helped me, and have become my friends... who are in a similar situation with me who are upwardly-mobile women and so it’s like, we just got over it.

Not only did the support of her family help her to deal with the pressures she experienced as an upwardly-mobile Black woman, she believes that their relationships served to help *them* “get over” similar stress.

Beyond the love and care that they received, participants also noted that the encouragement they received from family was essential. Erica believed that “iron

sharpens iron” and that it was critical to keep people around her who could both “push [her] forward *and* keep [her] grounded.” While she was not a member of a sorority, members of Erica’s family network pushed her “in all the *right* ways.” She clarified that “the right way” to push her was to offer specific and timely motivation, as opposed to the nondescript ways that others who could not understand her life tried to encourage her toward vague goals.

Finally, participants were clear that there was no room for members of their family to be envious of them. Tiffany reiterated this point during a focus group with Aundrea and Marian. She was emphatic in describing what she considered critical characteristics of those who would be in her inner circle: “They simply cannot operate with a jealous spirit. It just won’t work.” Nodding heads and snapping fingers suggested that the other women concurred. This was understandable, given the way that participants understood jealousy to threaten close friendship. As Aundrea suggested, “most of my people are doing big things. They got their own big offices, their own projects and shit. and don’t have a need to be jealous of *or* compete with me. They just love to win and to see me win.” With this, Aundrea acknowledged that beyond money, participants’ status as college-educated, the prestige of their profession or their specific job, even the fact that they had an office could all be reasons for them to be held in high esteem. At an extreme, this esteem could very well be perceived as jealousy, which participants lamented so often.

In conclusion, many women in the study believed that their upward mobility had brought significant strain to some of their family relationships. Family members who had

not experienced upward mobility were often unable to understand participants' experiences. It is possible that the women's upward mobility represented a departure from their family's values. Many participants thought family members were jealous of their academic, professional, or financial successes. To compensate for these crucial losses, participants developed families, or networks of friends who they considered to be as close as family. They described the networks which they had cultivated as providing the support and thick love they had lost when family relationships had dissolved. Sorority membership was the most specific family which participants credited as meeting these needs. Others who did not belong to sororities described the depth and intensity of their friendship groups, and the consistency with which they found solace there. These groups were considered critical in participants' web of support.

... and the Lack Thereof: Upwardly-Mobile Black Women's Experiences of Loneliness

The women in the study spoke at length about the impact of having internalized others' high expectations of them at an early age. Beyond meeting and exceeding these expectations, succeeding academically and professionally and subsequently experiencing upward mobility, many participants reported another byproduct of their hyper-performance: isolation and loneliness. From responding to pressures to work well beyond standard work hours and simply not being available to socialize with others, to feeling alienated from family members with whom they felt they could not share their successes or challenges, to being unable to maintain romantic relationships, most women in the study had experienced some degree of loneliness, either in their present lives or at some point since becoming upwardly-mobile.

In addition to her feeling that upward mobility had introduced distance between her and her relatives, Camille remembered being isolated from her friends during the first few years after college. As a young professional, she found herself on the receiving end of passive-aggressive messaging from her manager and other colleagues. Camille believed that the warnings her mother and grandmother had issued throughout her childhood and adolescence were especially pertinent once again:

Career-wise, I start to deal in Corporate America... I needed to prove myself. Not only do I have to prove myself because I'm the young Black girl that they just hired to balance the diversity or whatever, you know; I'm the single mom that they hired so I got to let them know that [I am] not a handicap. That I'm here to be just as competitive and just as hard a worker as [the] other twenty assistant buyers that they brought in this group because it's very competitive... I'm trying to make sure that they don't regret, like, giving me the job, so I'm also making sure that, if we were supposed to stay until six o'clock, I am staying until 6:30. We were supposed to be there at 8:30, I am there 8:00 which equals "Camille misses [her daughter's] field trips. Camille can't pick her daughter up or Camille can't drop her daughter off - early on [in my career]... And I am a social person but if you don't naturally click with people then... Like, okay, I have to eat lunch with them every day but I have to schedule and make sure that I am doing enough "team play" so they don't say that I'm anti-social... or I'm not on the same page. So that it doesn't come up 'Oh, you're doing great but you know, people just don't know you enough.' And I'm thinking, the people who don't know me anymore are the ones I can't see because I'm always working or with y'all!

Camille understood that she needed to meet others' indirect expectations at work in order to ensure job security critical for a single parent. Not only did she work beyond typical hours to do so, missing social time with friends, she also sacrificed quality time with her young daughter. She felt incredibly lonely, longing to be with her child. Camille said, "I made the difficult choice to prioritize work over my daughter in the short term so that I

could provide for her in the long term.” Beyond the loneliness, she felt immense guilt because she was often at work instead of with her daughter.

Crystal’s experience of isolation and loneliness is less acute than Camille’s. Rather than experiencing isolation for a certain period of time, Crystal described the loneliness she felt upon realizing that she might be perpetually distant from her family. She explained how she came to understand that, while her family was supportive of her, in theory, they would not celebrate her accomplishments, no matter how worthy the goal or how hard she had worked toward it. She had a middle-class uncle who would often tell her mother and their other siblings of his professional successes, improvements he had made to his home, or big-ticket items he had purchased at bonus time. According to Crystal, her family members feigned attentiveness while he gave these updates in person but then spoke about him disparagingly behind his back. “I don’t remember a time when they didn’t mock the way he always bragged, or them calling him uppity.” Crystal knew at a young age that it was not acceptable to share her personal successes with members of her family. She decided not let her loved ones know if or when she had achieved her goals because she did not want to be ostracized, or isolated from her family the way her uncle was.

The tremendous hurt of not being able to share their accomplishments with the family members who originally encouraged them toward such success weighed heavily on some women in the study. Their upward mobility seemed to threaten familial relationships, despite early encouragement to pursue higher education, high-paying professional careers, and so forth. Crystal remembered being especially disillusioned

with early messages regarding how tight families were *supposed* to be, having witnessed how poorly her family treated her uncle behind his back. She decided for herself that, while she did not *want* to be shunned by her family, her success may mean that it was inevitable.

Erica remembered learning the hard lesson that upward mobility may also come with loneliness. One of her aunts struggled professionally and financially. In comparison to her mother and other aunts, this one aunt in particular was considered unstable, even experiencing problems with drugs at one point during Erica's high school years. In comparison to Erica and her other cousins, this aunt's daughters also struggled. She described her relationship with these cousins as "cordial but not close." She cited that their feeling "left behind," and subsequent disinterest in acknowledging her successes as the primary reasons. She smirked as she suggested that "the supposed 'everlasting bonds' of family obviously cannot withstand deep jealousy." Erica is at peace with the fact that much of her validation will come from family instead of these relatives. Luckily, she considers herself intrinsically motivated, and has identified ways to acknowledge her accomplishments which do not require engaging these family members.

Unfortunately, in striving to meet others' high expectations of them, the women in the study had developed hyper-performance tendencies which they found difficult to turn off. Many were disappointed and hurt to find that, in applying these tendencies diligently and achieving success and upward mobility, they may have traded success for community. In some cases, the very friends and family who had encouraged the women

toward such success were absent or silent when the participants achieved their goals. Some family members felt distant from the women's achievements and were therefore unwilling to acknowledge their milestones. The women spoke of pining for community, well-wishers, and authentic connection, and not trusting that they still had it with the people they had once valued most. They had aimed for goals that their family inspired but felt that they could not share the extent to which they had achieved them.

A Word on Upwardly-Mobile Black Women Compared to- and in Relationship with- Black Men

There was not much conversation about men at all. Several participants referenced challenges associated with managing working- or otherwise platonic relationships with men in general, given the lingering impact of sexism. Of the ten participants, only Aundrea and Courtney mentioned challenges managing these types of relationships with Black men in particular. Aundrea shared how Black men had been the source of considerable workplace conflict in her current role. According to her, the competition they initiated was not friendly but destructive. She said,

[i]t is worth looking at the history because black women and black men- it's always a competition. We are not going to be able to pull resources and come together on anything as long as Black men are so threatened by Black women and feel like they are in competition with us.

In Aundrea's opinion, there is a historical context in which Black men believe they are in competition with women.

Aundrea suggested that this may be because "everyone always expected so much more from [Black] girls and we always delivered." In her experience, the resulting sense

of competition continues to impact relationships between Black men and Black women. This perspective is in line with Hill's (1999) assertion that Black Black boys are often held to lesser expectations than Black girls. Hill cites studies dedicated to the ways that Black daughters are expected to be more competent and self-reliant than are Black boys (McAdoo, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 122). Being socialized under such different expectations may contribute to the strained relations between Black men and women which Aundrea described.

Beyond Aundrea's brief discussion of strained platonic relationships, she also spoke of romantic relationships with Black men. In all, only Aundrea, Crystal, and Erica did so, mostly noting the challenges they had faced trying to maintain these relationships. Their stories reflect Hill's finding that, as Black women, they were socialized to be more self-competent than Black men, the lasting impact of which they believed to be barriers to romantic relationships between Black men and Black women.

As the researcher, I was conflicted about whether the perspectives of such few participants were essential to the overall narrative which was unfolding. Because so few participants mentioned romantic relationships with Black men, the topic did not emerge as a category of its own during coding. Rather, it was a subtheme nested under "comparisons between men and women." The three women's stories were rich but not thematic across the remainder of participants.

I was somewhat surprised that participants did not say more about this topic, given the growing body of literature on Black experiences of upward mobility which sheds light on relationships between Black men and Black women (Landry & Marsh,

2011). More specifically, Marsh et al's (2007) important study describes SALAs, the upwardly mobile *single-and-living-alone* Black people making up America's new Black middle-class. This study identifies how upward mobility impacts the ways that Black people envision and respond to traditional notions of the desirability of marriage and partnership, suggesting that marriage and partnership are conceptualized in new ways among this demographic. In keeping with the themes in the literature, the women in the study did not appear consumed with thoughts of romantic relationships, marriageability, or the impact that upward mobility may have on their relationship prospects.

Nonetheless, women in the study did share that they placed a high value on relationships, both platonic and romantic. Further, I speculate that relationships between Black men and Black women may be of great interest to those who may read this study. Still, as a critical researcher who has grown exhausted consuming literature which so often situates Black womanhood in relation to Black manhood, I am honored to put forth this study about the experiences of Black women which does not -intentionally or by happenstance- center Black men. I respect that conversations about Black communities must include all Black people. At the same time, I am skeptical of the suggestion that conversations about Black women are somehow incomplete without considerable attention given to Black men, or Black women's relationships with them.

As an in-group member, I was grateful for the space to hear other upwardly-mobile Black women frame their own experiences with Black men and control the narrative in a way that made sense to them. I felt an obligation to represent the essence of what the few women shared with me and with one another without extrapolating it to

other participants. While these three women's stories were interesting, it was important to note that the other seven participants had opportunities to discuss a range of relationships, and they focused on relationships with family and friends, and not romantic relationships, with Black men or otherwise.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the role that community played in participants' lives, and the challenges they faced in maintaining loving, mutually-beneficial relationships. Belonging to supportive communities was critical for participants' personal well-being, and most of them had worked to develop support systems for themselves. While they valued enduring friendships, several participants admitted that maintaining them grew increasingly difficult over the years, and once-meaningful relationships faded or ended altogether. Several participants felt that their friends and family simply could not understand their lives post upward-mobility. Others reflected on how the perfectionist roots they had developed during childhood and adolescence both positioned them to be successful and situated them in constant competition with their peers, namely other Black girls and women. Still others noted that a byproduct of upward mobility had been that friends and family felt distant from them, their accomplishments, and perceived wealth, and that a spirit of envy may have played a role in the demise of close relationships.

When they realized that many of their age-old friendships and supportive relationships with some family members had dissolved, most participants developed "family," or close networks of friends who felt as close as (or closer than) blood relatives. These networks served to compensate for the thick love which participants had

hoped to get from family members or lifelong friends. Family bonds could also fulfill participants' needs for family connection when they were at risk of becoming isolated from family members who either did not understand their experience, could not or would not celebrate their successes, or were otherwise absent from their lives.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY

In this qualitative study, I explored the experiences and perspectives of ten self-identified upwardly-mobile African-American women through interviews and focus groups. The women told powerful stories about their lives, recalling how they learned what it meant to be Black; to be a Black girl, and ultimately, a Black woman; what it meant to be poor, working-class, or middle-class; and what impact upward mobility has had on them and their relationships with others. Themes which emerged across these rich stories have been organized here to offer insight into participant perspectives, and to deepen what we know about the unique experiences of upwardly-mobile Black women. In this chapter, I summarize key findings, indicate how the study contributes to the literature on both Black women and upward mobility, and frame limitations of the study.

Summary of Key Findings

The women who participated in this study described the ways that they came to understand what it meant to be Black; how they should behave as Black girls and later, women; what it meant to be Black members of particular social classes; and, ultimately, what it would mean to be an upwardly-mobile Black woman. In this section, I present key research findings across themes: learned *Black behaviors* as a specific way to communicate an understanding of what it meant to be Black; being made to feel “too Black” or “not Black enough” depending on their behaviors; the complex, “3D” nature of

Black womanhood, especially as impacted by socioeconomic status and upward mobility; and the role of family, friends, and family in providing the type of thick love participants shared was essential in their ability to maintain a strong sense of self.

There are Certain Things Black People Just Don't Do!

The women who participated in this study described the ways that they came to understand themselves as Black; as Black girls and later, women; as Black members of particular social classes; and, ultimately, as upwardly-mobile Black women. Most participants framed their sense of identity, their experiences, and their perspectives through the lens of Black womanhood, seldom isolating their racial, gender, or class identity over others. As a fellow upwardly-mobile Black woman, I understand that this is, indeed, how they experience the world. As the researcher, it was critical for me to explore with participants how their identities as Black people, as female and identifying as women, and having grown up as either poor or working-class people impacted their experience of upward mobility. This was imperative to avoid essentializing, or extrapolating one participant's perspective onto another's. Because each of their unique identities intersect to inform their values, behaviors, and perspectives in different ways, I was able to distinguish between that which was thematic across the data versus points of significant divergence among participants.

Participants could recall learning *Black behaviors*- the narrow range of behaviors deemed appropriate for Black people- during childhood and adolescence, primarily by observing the behaviors of other Black people around them. Having their behavior called out and corrected by family members and other, trusted influencers (most of whom were

also Black) served to reinforce what participants understood as acceptable and expected. Beyond understanding that they were representing other Black people, the women in the study remembered feeling pressure to exhibit these *Black behaviors* in order to ensure that they themselves were identified as Black by others. They knew that there were consequences to being labeled as White--or at least, "less Black" than others, should they act differently than the other Black people around them.

The understanding that there were parameters to Blackness, or that there were certain *Black behaviors* which participants were expected to exhibit is demonstrative of Bettie's *overdetermination* (Bettie, 2002, p. 54). In her work on complex identity performance among working-class young, White and Mexican-American women, Bettie (2002) suggested that some people's identities were "overdetermined by the meaning systems that preexist [them] as individuals," as the women in this study felt that they had been. Bettie's (2002) work lends a frame for exploring the ways that Black women's identity is structured by their performances; their identities were determined by the behaviors that they used to demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of Black values (p. 53). Use of language and speech patterns, dressing and acting modestly, obeying parents and other elders, and other behaviors were then policed by others, to ensure that participants were acting within the parameters of Blackness. As upwardly-mobile women, participants would have their identities restructured again, by their new performances in mostly White spaces, where Black values were not dominant.

Those participants who grew up in racially homogenous communities with little exposure to non-Black people during the formative years of childhood reported the most

narrow range of acceptable behaviors. However, those who grew up in more diverse communities (or were otherwise exposed to diversity intentionally) also understood the range of acceptable Black behaviors to be narrow. One explanation is that, despite the frequency of *exposure* to racial diversity, participants were *influenced* most directly by the Black people around them who exhibited these narrow *Black behaviors*. These behaviors demonstrated *communal Black values*, namely hard work and perseverance, commitment to family, respect for elders, and faith. Participants understood that their ability to exhibit these *Black behaviors* would be policed by both other Black people and non-Black people alike. Ultimately, they came to self-police, understanding that, in addition to being scrutinized themselves, their families and the wider Black community were also judged based on the ways that they behaved.

Their family's proximity to wealth during childhood and adolescence also influenced how participants thought Black people were allowed or expected to behave. Those with middle-class extended family members could recall coming to the realization that they could be both Black and financially-secure or even wealthy. Conversely, it was more difficult (in one case, impossible) for participants who grew up seeing a sharp dichotomy between poor or working-class Black people and middle- to upper-middle class White people to imagine themselves as one day moving beyond the social class into which they were born and socialized. All in all, participants reported receiving explicit and implicit cues or messages which informed what they thought they could do, and what and how they were allowed to be.

We 3D, Baby!

Behaving in accordance with the prescribed rules of *Black behaviors* was a concrete way for women in the study to communicate to others that they understood what it meant to be Black. They remembered being made to feel “not Black enough” by other Black people in their families and/or communities. In most cases, this was because their ways of speaking or other behaviors that were scrutinized as being more reflective of White culture than Black culture. Some women remembered developing a level of camaraderie with White peers, in part because some of their behaviors were similar but also because they were alienated from their Black peers. They knew that these surface relationships with White people served to make them more “White” according to many of their Black peers; nevertheless, they were still “not White enough” to fully belong in White spaces, which they largely understood to be middle- and upper-middle class spaces. These experiences of not fitting in fully in Black or White spaces left the women feeling “nowhere at home,” which Overall described as being the plight of upwardly-mobile women at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and class (Overall, as quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 804).

This sense of being *othered* would prevail well into participants’ adult lives. They learned to *pivot*, or code-switch, in order to achieve success and maintain status in communities outside their own. This often required that they engage different personas in different contexts. The women expressed a deep gratitude that they learned to pivot, as doing so has resulted in their professional success. Most acknowledged that the frequency with which they are compelled to pivot, though, brought about great stress. In

addition to this stress, participants reported varying degrees of isolation from the families and communities to which they still longed to belong. While they were, of course, able to code-switch as needed, many participants feared that this *perpetual pivoting* between cultures posed a threat to their authenticity in either space.

This threat to their authenticity was especially problematic, given participants' understanding that Blackness and Black behaviors are communal, narrowly-defined, and continually policed by both Black *and* non-Black people alike. Pivoting was described as simultaneously a poor or working-class Black woman's vehicle toward upward-mobility and an indicator that she was not authentically Black. These pressures to pivot, or to embody these different personas across different contexts, weighed heavily on participants. This pressure even weighed on those who reported resisting. As Ricks (2011) suggests, marginalized women are governed by the "roles that are required and expected" (Ricks, 2011, p. x). These expectations alone induced resentment and thus, stress. Participants described the combination of actually code-switching and knowing that they were expected to do so as "dizzying."

Women in the study were somewhat aware that their identities were complex. They acknowledged the relative fluidity of Black womanhood alone, as well as the additional layer of complexity required of upwardly-mobile Black women, citing the aforementioned need to code-switch perpetually. When asked how they manage to preserve a healthy sense of self despite such dizzying amounts of pressure, the women spoke to the importance of character in achieving balance. Although participants were not asked to provide explicit definitions of character, living with integrity, or remaining

consistent with one's values, emerged as a common theme across the way they intended to maintain their character. Additionally, while not all of the women were religious, they all indicated that some form of spirituality - whether canonized, or otherwise dogmatic, or not- played a role in their ability to maintain their character.

Thick Love and the Lack Thereof

Beyond spirituality and living with integrity, participants also indicated that maintaining close ties to supportive communities was critical in their ability to maintain their sense of self. Friendships which had endured the tests of time and distance were cherished and celebrated for having weathered considerable challenges. The women noted considerable challenges to keeping these relationships intact. A common challenge to some participants' friendships and relationships with family members with whom they had been close was others' belief that they were leading "new lives" since experiencing upward mobility. Other women believed that some friends and family members had grown jealous of them, their success, and wealth (both real and perceived), and that that subsequent covetousness had contributed to the end of once-cherished relationships. Finally, several participants reflected on how the perfectionist nature they developed during childhood and adolescence posed additional threats to their relationships in that it situated them in constant competition with their peers. Consistent competition with other Black girls (and later, women) would further limit participants' ability to maintain relationships and supportive communities.

In instances where these connections to family or friends had failed, participants were overcome with feelings of tremendous loss and loneliness. They developed

“family,” or networks of close friends who could provide support and thick love, and therefore compensate for what they did not get from family or former friends. Family members could be counted on to be present in participants’ lives - physically and/or metaphorically- to both celebrate their successes and console them in times of failure or loss. Most of these supporters were also upwardly-mobile, having experienced a level of academic and then professional success which positioned them to not to be envious of participants’ accomplishments, wealth, or social status.

In conclusion, evidence from this study documents how upwardly-mobile Black women become enculturated in their families and home communities. A critical part of their enculturation was coming to understand *Black behaviors*, that narrow range of behaviors deemed appropriate for Black people, to which they were exposed. It was essential that participants were able to exhibit these behaviors, as they understood that they were representing not only themselves and their families, indeed, they were representing *all* Black people. Their family’s proximity to wealth during childhood and adolescence also influenced what participants thought Black people could have, to what social classes they belonged, and, by proxy, *how* they were allowed behave. Those with middle-class extended family members believed that they could be both Black *and* financially-secure or even wealthy. It was more difficult for participants who were not exposed to wealth to imagine themselves as becoming upwardly-mobile.

As they became acculturated in middle- or upper-middle class spaces where Black values were not dominant, they learned new values and which behaviors would signal that they understood these new values. Doing so meant exhibiting great fluidity and

complexity, which resulted in them being told, or otherwise made to feel, that they were not Black enough. Despite their ability to behave in accordance with middle- or upper-middle class values largely associated with White people and White culture, they were still deemed not White enough for others. The women described the perpetual nature of pivoting, or code-switching, in order to move between these disparate communities, noting that it was anxiety-inducing. They sought refuge from this anxiety, and endeavored to maintain a strong sense of character, marked by operating with integrity and maintaining a spiritual identity.

Participants noted that strong support systems were critical for them. Old friendships which had endured the tests of time, distance, and upward mobility were cherished because they were rare. They described a variety of challenges to maintaining close relationships, including the perfectionist roots they developed during childhood which often resulted in their being in competition with other Black women, among other peers. In some cases, colorism, or stratification based on skin color, exacerbated the sense of competition between them and other Black women.

One detriment of upward-mobility which the women experienced was loneliness resulting from a loss of critical loving relationships. They spoke about cultivating family, or chosen family, who supported them and provided additional thick love that many felt was missing from their lives. They spoke at length about the enormous amount stress they carried but insisted that it was not more intense than other Black women bore. In the end, the women suggested that living with these stressors was their new normal. Despite the myriad challenges associated with upward-mobility, participants considered

themselves fortunate to be in positions of influence, having the opportunity - not the obligation - to impact the lives of the families and communities they cared about so deeply.

Beyond loneliness, the nature of the women's professions also impacted the distance they felt from family and old friends. Not being able to share details of their daily lives because it would be a violation of legal or ethical codes proved to be a barrier to the types of open, sharing relationships which participants valued and longed for. Their need to keep certain professional secrets also prevented their family members and old friends from guiding and supporting them in ways that they likely would have, in accordance with Black communal values. This isolation weighed heavily on participants and was yet another source of frustration.

The women in the study did not speak about it, but I reflect on the notion of secrets among families and am immediately reminded of the generational gaps between myself and my parents. The age gap between myself and my father is quite pronounced. I was born in Indianapolis in 1979; he was born in Southern Indiana in 1930. I remember experiencing what I felt were considerable microaggressions during college and always wanting to solicit my father's advice. I once told my sister about banana peels being thrown into the tree in front of a predominantly African-American residence hall. She scolded me for being thin-skinned and told me not to tell my father. We both agreed that he would have wanted to be supportive but she insisted that I not worry him over something so inconsequential. "When he grew up, it would have been his friends hanging from that tree." And she was right.

I wanted to share my full experience with my family, and I knew that they wanted me to share, *almost* freely. But the notion that I would dare suggest that my experience with microaggressions somehow mirrored my father's life during Segregation and Jim Crow absurd and self-absorbed, and therefore, disrespectful of the communal values which governed our family. That conversation with my sister marked the beginning of my closing off a part of my life from my family. I was the youngest of fourteen children and the only one who was going to graduate from college. People had worked tirelessly so that I could take advantage of the opportunity, and they were depending on me to succeed. I dare not worry them with petty problems that paled in comparison to theirs, no matter how significant those problems were to me. That's what my new, "college friends" were for.

Conclusion of Key Findings

A part of the participants' socialization in Black families and communities was recognizing that their identities had been *overdetermined*, or determined for them, by others in that community. They were expected to be hyper-performers, meeting and exceeding high expectations. Being a hyper-performer would position them for success in new spaces where a different value system prevailed. A critical part of maintaining their sense of self as they pivoted between these differing value systems was, in fact, recognizing that their identity had been *overdetermined* again, this time by people who did not share the communal, Black values under which they were socialized.

Redetermining their identity for themselves would mean reframing their expectations of

themselves and others, and finding ways to attend to their mental, spiritual, and emotional needs in lieu of having a plethora of culturally-sensitive models from which to draw inspiration.

Discussion

The data from this study suggests that the upwardly mobile Black women who participated had or were in the process of redetermining their identities for themselves, taking cues from both their enculturation in predominantly Black spaces and their acculturation in dominant cultural spaces. Their goal in doing so was to establish a version of themselves which would be recognizable to those in both their communities of origin *and* the professional/ academic settings they lived in or accessed on their journeys toward upward mobility. Reframing their identities contextually allowed the women to maintain a base of communal Black values at their core, while demonstrating a wide range of behaviors that could position them for success outside of Black families and communities that they longed to still call “home.” As a result, participants were able to maintain a tie, albeit strained, to both Black communities and the non-Black professional/academic spaces which they often accessed along their upward mobility journeys.

Having been enculturated in communal, Black communities and identified as high-achievers, participants were expected to perform better than their peers academically, to govern themselves according to a stricter standard of behavior than their peers had to, and ultimately, to be able to provide for themselves and their families independently. The women understood that they were expected to deliver on these

expectations more so than their peers were. They internalized incredibly high expectations of themselves and committed to meeting and exceeding them. The impact of being socialized in this way led to a high sense of competition- sometimes with themselves, their friends, or other peers - in efforts to deliver upon the expectations which others set for them, and which they came to hold as standards for themselves. This habit of hyper-performance likely propelled them toward upward mobility, but it may also be a factor in the sense of isolation that several participants felt.

The New Normal: Reframing Expectations of Themselves

Data from this study indicate that upwardly-mobile Black women believe that the “ungodly amount of stress and pressure [that they are] so used to living with” is their “new normal.” Aundrea first used the term during the second focus group, in response to my query about how they understand and then manage the stress that upwardly-mobile Black women feel as a result of racism, sexism, classism, clashes in values, isolation from some friends, and disconnection from meaningful friends, among other factors. I was curious how women in the focus group would respond to another participant’s suggestion that that they “don’t even call it stress anymore,” as dealing with these pressures is such a routine part of their lives.

Aundrea respond, “I think I have moved on.” The conversation began to overlap significantly, as both Tiffany and Marian chimed in with agreement repeatedly. Aundrea went on to say, “I think, at some point, you just get over it. I have gotten over it. I am over-”

Marian: So I am like Aundrea, I think. I just moved on and like, whatever.

Aundrea: 'Cause if we harp on it, we won't get past it.

Tiffany: You will be stuck in it. You get accustomed to it, and you become numb to it.

Marian: You're desensitized to [it]. Yeah, its nothing. It's not a factor.

Aundrea: And if it is, you just nip it in the bud that moment and on that day, and just keep moving.

This rapid fire of their responses left me feeling defeated. I had suggested that the stress that these women dealt with on a regular basis was abnormal. They responded by agreeing but only somewhat. More importantly, they seemed to suggest that, as both a fellow upwardly-mobile Black woman and a researcher, I simply move on. According to this group, there was more risk involved with confronting the stress and potentially getting stuck there than there was in ignoring it.

In each focus group, I explained how one participant had introduced the “new normal” concept. I asked if this notion resonated with others. It did, and the topic elicited a significant amount of discussion each time. Additionally, of those participants who responded to my attempts at member-checks or offered other feedback, this theme was most often commented and agreed upon.

Camille, a participant in the second focus group challenged me directly on the notion that these levels of hyper-stress were new to Black women at all. She commented that Black women are used like mules. This reminded me of the oft quoted line from Nanny, a character in Zora Neale Hurston's (1937) *Their Eyes were Watching God*: “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.” Camille's suggestion that

upwardly-mobile Black women were not unique in dealing with stress, and that doing so was “just a part of the Black woman’s experience” resonated with Crystal and Felicia, who were also participating in the focus group. When I asked if it were possible that upward mobility impacted the amount of stress that they experienced as Black women, though, all three women conceded, although Camille was slow to do so initially.

Similarly, participants in the third focus group affirmed my speculation that upward mobility served to impact their experiences as Black women. Daria attempted to explain her and other participants’ hesitation at being singled out from other Black women for the amount of pressure they are under. I understood this to be a recognition that their mothers, sisters, cousins, friends, sorority sisters, and other female peers who were also Black, also experienced a tremendous amount of stress by virtue of living in a patriarchal society where people are often segregated or discriminated against on the basis of race, skin color, or lack of wealth.

There may be other reasons why the women initially insisted that their stresses were not different from other Black women’s. I speculate that suggesting that their stress was still less daunting than other Black women’s stress may have been a strategy to signal a continued sense of belonging among Black women in general. As established in previous chapters, many participants found it difficult to maintain connections to the communities of Black people where they had once belonged. These attempts to not appear different from other Black women made sense, given participants’ claims that they still subscribed to communal Black values, desired to belong to Black communities, and desired relationships with other Black women.

I could not help but remark about the matter-of-fact way in which the women described the tremendous amounts of stress in their lives. Marian suggested that while the stresses she and other participants were describing were not new, what *was* new was the role each of them were being allowed to play *because* they are upwardly-mobile. During a focus group, she said that those participants who are mothers:

are probably carrying their husbands and children. Others are carrying themselves and, sometimes, their extended families, whole community uplift efforts. Not new. What *is* new, though, is that many of us are also leading companies, corporations, you know? As Black women have *not* always done- have not always been *able* to do, or allowed to do, we could certainly always do it! And now, we have access to the best education, wealth, creature comforts... a higher quality of life.

I understood from her suggestion and the way that Aundrea and Tiffany nodded her along that stress related to “carrying” families and community efforts felt similar to the burdens that other Black women had long bore. Again, participants’ attempts to highlight how they were no different than other Black women were evident.

As established previously, some women in the study remembered being called “White,” or otherwise scrutinized for *White behaviors*, during childhood or adolescence. Many spoke in detail about the strategies they used to overcompensate for others’ perceptions that they were “less Black” than others. It follows, then, that they may continue to employ strategies which make them identifiable as “more Black” well into adulthood. Again, insisting that certain differences between them and other Black women (who are likely *not* criticized for acting White) are insignificant was but one strategy for invoking feelings of sameness and belonging among- themselves and other

Black people. This also makes sense, given how some participants suggested that the perpetual pivoting they are compelled to do may lead others to believe that they are not authentic in either space. They must be *authentically Black* if they were experiencing what other Black women felt.

Marian recognized that Black women's roles leading companies, corporations, and other efforts beyond their families and immediate communities was relatively new. What struck me was the way that Marian framed these stressors as burdens that she was *allowed* to carry. She went on to note that her ability to be an influential "decision-maker where it counts [was] a big deal." Being *able* to take on these burdens in the service of others was considered a privilege. Tiffany interjected how actively quantifying the impact she has had in her community helps her to frame her stress differently. She said, "When I look at what I've been able to do, I see it as a blessing – despite the unbelievable stress." It was a privilege to bear these burdens, because they were understood to push their communities forward. Accepting their stressors, and recognizing the privilege that came with the increased wealth and status that added to those stressors, served to make the stressors more acceptable.

I understand how serving others can deliver a return on one's sense of satisfaction with themselves. However, I remained skeptical of the simplistic way that participants seemed to frame their responses to stress in this way. Marian interrupted me as I attempted to problematize this notion. She said, rather bluntly, "Opportunity, not obligation. It is an opportunity." I remember sinking into my chair a bit, unable to hide that I took issue with her suggestion. My assumption was that Marian was trying to

acknowledge that it was a privilege to be in a position to serve members of her community, as opposed to being on the receiving end. However, I also speculated that this was an attempt at reframing the same stress which relegated *the strong Black woman* back to her historical role of serving others and bearing others' burdens alone- and liking it. What is the impact of such high expectations being considered both their duty *and* their reward? What is the impact of gathering all of these stressors and sources of pain, professional frustration, and personal disappointment and insisting that they fit together under the banner of "opportunity?"

Tiffany then chimed in to say, "What else am I gonna say?! Right? How else am I gonna think about it? It *is* an opportunity-" at which point I asked, "So you're just fooling yourself by calling it an opportunity [instead of an obligation]?" She, Aundrea, and Marian all laughed as she replied, "No, no one is fooled! No one. What good would it do me to call it an obligation though, or to be mad about it?!? I have to do these things. I have to." I left it at that, recognizing that my probing was beginning to feel corrective.

As a fellow Black woman who also claims to subscribe to Black values much in the same ways that the three of them did, I knew not to cross the line that I was approaching: that I somehow knew how they should feel about this sense of obligation better than they did, and that I had a right to tell them that they way they approached their lives or, as importantly, reflected on their lives, somehow fell short. I maintained eye contact with Marian for a few seconds and then turned to Tiffany, who just smiled. And then Aundrea said, "Alright, next." and I knew that that meant that I should let their words stand as they had shared and defended them.

The following six seconds were among the only silent seconds during any interview or focus group. I made a note to revisit what I was feeling and wondering later. Upon reflection, many of these questions continue to linger: Is it possible that participants have internalized societal demands on them so much that they are convinced that they represent their life's mission? How might this impact the ways that upwardly-mobile Black women raise Black daughters, or otherwise influence young Black girls? How might this impact the ways that they set out to raise Black sons? What might they socialize Black boys to expect of Black women, either as siblings, family members, peers, friends, or romantic partners? How might their relationships with biracial children unfold, given the differences in how they might experience the intersections of race, class (and perhaps ethnicity), and gender?

I have spent considerable time asking myself what it is that challenges me so much about participants' suggestion that bearing such stress is an opportunity. How has it happened that I have agreed with and affirmed their stories so consistently, yet resist their conclusions on what these stories impart? I heard my own story when they answered the "what" questions. I felt similar pains, frustrations, despair at all the same points that they did in answering the "so what?" questions. What leads me to resist the conclusions that they offer when I ask "now what?"

I do not believe that the women have been dishonest or incomplete in exposing themselves; it is, more likely, that I do not want to accept what they seem to understand as "the new normal." I cannot fully reject participant's acceptance because I know that I have conceded to take on considerable stress myself, because I do so in the service of my

community. However, I seem to *wish* that I could escape the pressure more than the women in the study indicated. They seemed to have settled into their overdetermined identities more so than I am willing to do on my own volition. I am reminded of yet another Zora Neale Hurston quote: “If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it.” I felt great sadness thinking that the women were being silent about their pain, even though we were together in a place where it would have been safe to vocalize it.

Mental Health in the New Normal

I pressed participants in each focus group on the “new normal” concept, suggesting that, while the amount of stress they felt seemed familiar to other Black women, I had a hard time accepting that what they were describing was “normal.” I restated many of the points participants had shared and summarized a few vignettes to challenge participants to consider whether the amount of stress they describe themselves as living under on a regular basis was not normal at all- for anyone, not specifically upwardly-mobile Black women. I asked participants if it were possible that accepting this way of being was unhealthy; that they were compartmentalizing or otherwise blocking out significant aspects of their life so that they could persist/survive, etc. Each of the ten participants agreed that that is a possibility, but not one mentioned having considered it before I suggested it.

I remember thinking that these conversations felt like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I was reflecting back to these women what they have shared with me, and suggesting that the stress they described is abnormal. The nonchalant way that they

describe these stressors left me confused. In my notes, I wrote that the experience was “unreal.” I used that term because I didn’t know how else to describe what I thought were participants’ attempts to disown the stress without disconnecting from the stressors. It seemed to me that they believed that the magnitude of their stressors could be lessened if they simply reframed them as opportunities.

Participants suggested that accepting their *new normal* was the result of bearing so much stress. However, as a researcher, I am left to wonder if accepting that they should experience so much stress also contributes to their stress. As an upwardly-mobile Black woman myself, I empathize with the essence of what participants suggested: accepting that the intersection of my identities means that I will likely experience both race- and school and/or job-related pressures, is a way to cope with those pressures. However, I cannot help but believe that, were I to push back on this claim to some degree, I would be pushing back on the notion that the stressors are normal, and therefore *belong* in my life to the extent that they exist.

I asked participants if it were possible that their self-prescribed ability to deal with the “ungodly amount of stress” that they anticipated may preclude them from getting the professional, emotional support that they need. Many agreed that this was a possibility. Not only might accepting that being an upwardly-mobile Black woman automatically means that one will have to endure more stress than is manageable for the average person, it may also suggest that one cannot resist these stressors. It strikes me that this may not be a healthy response to stress. How much can a lifetime of hyper-performance and self-sufficiency render one unable to seek or receive support from others?

In addition to feeling that they are not allowed to resist stress, accepting that so much stress is normal may preclude upwardly-mobile Black women from seeking professional support to identify appropriate coping strategies or to otherwise attend to their mental and emotional health. Throughout the data-gathering and writing process, I could not help but to think of the trope of the *strong Black woman*, and how it serves to limit who and how Black women can be in our social imagination (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Research has already established Black women understand that they are expected to be hyper-performing and strong. Participants' stories support this.

Beyond affirming research on the trope of the strong Black woman, participants' stories suggest that they may be unable to resist this trope for reasons which may be unique to them. It is possible that upwardly-mobile Black women are not able to resist these harmful tropes because they must demonstrate the same herculean strength that other Black women do, lest they be ridiculed as "less Black." Being Black women, their identity has been *overdetermined* for them. If a Black woman's overdetermined identity includes stress at the intersections of race and gender, who are these women to escape said stress? If a Black woman's overdetermined identity is demonstrated by exhibiting certain collectivist values, which do not include drawing attention to the individual, how are these women to focus inward, even if in attempts to identify coping and healing strategies for themselves?

I did not ask about participants' experiences with therapy, as this study did not focus on mental health. Of the ten participants, two mentioned having sought counseling. Both of these women shared that they did so after feeling overwhelmed but did not

disclose further. Further research on compartmentalization may reveal the impact of upwardly-mobile Black women disassociating from this stress, and offer implications for how they can acknowledge and face their stress, and identify strategies to cope with them.

Limitations of the Study

As an upwardly-mobile Black woman, I am an in-group member and share considerable perspective in common with the women in this study. In addition to the unconscious biases which influence every individual's thoughts, responses, and behaviors, my membership in the group has undoubtedly impacted my experience of choosing everything from the research questions, participants, atmosphere of focus groups, and my interpretation of participant experiences, which result in the data presented here. I have worked to reflect deeply and thoughtfully on my own life, and the circumstances that have shaped my filters and lenses. I have revisited those moments when I initially questioned participants stories and asked myself, what am I resisting here and why? What leads me to believe that they are sharing their genuine experience but to wish that their interpretation of it were different? To this end, another researcher (even one with similar identities to my own) may have interpreted the same data through different lenses, and therefore reached different conclusions.

A second limitation was the limited time that I spent with participants. I interviewed each participant once, eight of the ten were able to participate in a focus group. I have spent considerable time in social settings with four of the ten, but I speculate that more time contextualizing their stories more deeply would have added

greater richness to the data. While I remain confident that I have represented them with transparency here, I believe that their willingness to share even more personally, and even to share stories and sentiments which they may feel paint them in a negative light, would have deepened. In cases where I believe that there has been more to a story that participants were hesitant to share, I have offered my own careful analysis.

A third limitation of this study is the relationship that some women had with one another before the study. One result of using snowball sampling, is that participants often know one another. Six of the ten participants in this study have careers in the legal field and work in the same building. They do not work in the same courtrooms but I happen to know that they interact often, professionally and socially. When I explained how I would approach data-gathering, one participant warned that two others had a tumultuous relationship and while they would be cordial, it would be best if they were invited to separate focus groups. It is possible that participants may have shared other stories; that they may have disagreed with certain points had others not been in the room; or that having some level of a relationship to one another may have otherwise impacted the study. It is possible that familiarity among participants allowed them to open up more than they would have done in the presence of complete strangers. It must be acknowledged, though, that anonymity may have allowed some participants to share more openly.

Finally, conducting focus groups with women who have achieved varying levels of upward mobility may have impacted what they offered. For example, Crystal hosted me, Camille, and Felicia in her spectacular home for the first focus group. Camille

shared more about her current financial and social status than did Felicia, and noted that she is “still not where she wants to be financially or career-wise.” As we packed up to leave, Camille commented on how beautiful Crystal’s home was, adding “One day!” as she looked around. Although I do not mean to suggest that Camille was envious of Crystal’s home, she did remark how she still lives in an apartment, and given the degree to which participants discussed competition among Black women and the role that envy played in threatening their relationships with other Black women, I wonder if Camille (or any other participant) felt censored in what she shared because she believes that she is not as upwardly-mobile as other participants or she was concerned about being perceived as jealous.

Conclusion

In closing, the ten upwardly mobile Black women who participated in this study shared their experiences of coming to understand what it meant to be Black; how they were expected to behave in order to demonstrate a commitment to Black values; how their family’s social class would impact their lives; and what shifts they would experience as a result of upward mobility.

Key themes from the research include: *Black behaviors* which participants learned in order to communicate that they understood what it meant to be Black; being told or otherwise made to feel that they were either “too Black” or “not Black enough,” depending on the behaviors they used in certain contexts; the fluid, complex, “3D” nature of Black womanhood, and the intersections of Black womanhood and social class and upward mobility; and the role that family, friends, and *family* played in providing thick

love, which the women identified as essential in enabling them to maintain a strong sense of self. In the next and final chapter, I summarize key findings; describe the findings I anticipated, given the literature reviewed prior to the study; undertake a critical analysis of key learnings, and suggest implications for further research.

CHAPTER VIII

ANALYSIS

Introduction

Before engaging upwardly mobile Black women to participate in this study, I reviewed literature on the intersections of race, class, gender, and class mobility. In this final chapter, I revisit the themes which emerged from participant stories in relation to this body of literature. I begin by restating key findings and offering a critical analysis of those themes which confirmed the literature. I also offer a critical analysis of those themes which emerged from participant stories but were not suggested in the literature, including implications for these ten women themselves and other upwardly mobile Black women. Next, I revisit anticipated research findings, identifying which of these anticipated themes were confirmed by participant data and which were not. I then suggest implications for further research. I conclude this chapter with a critical analysis of standout learnings from the study.

Key Findings

The experiences of the upwardly mobile Black women who participated in this study are rich and complex. Key research findings represent the themes across their experiences including: using learned *Black behaviors* (as a specific way to communicate an understanding of what it meant to be Black) and exposure to a narrow range of Black behaviors; the complex, “3D” nature of Black womanhood, especially as impacted by

socioeconomic status and upward mobility; the critical role of support systems; and the role of family, friends, and *family*, or chosen family, in providing the type of thick love which participants indicated was essential in their ability to maintain a strong sense of self. In this section, I will further analyze each of these findings through the lens of literature on race, gender, class, and class mobility which I reviewed prior to embarking upon this study.

Learned Black Behaviors and an Exposure to a Narrow Range of “Black” Behaviors

The women in the study remembered feeling pressure to behave in specific ways in order to prove their Blackness to others. According to them, the Black people around them demonstrated how Black people should behave, and both Black and non-Black people in their families and communities corrected them when they acted outside of this narrow range of acceptable behavior. In sharing these sentiments, participants have described the process of socialization, which sociologists describe as learning what knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors are acceptable in a cultural group (Thomas & Speight, 1999).

Participants observed members of their family and other influencers strike this balance of implicit modeling and explicit correction for misbehaving. This is racial socialization: the process of transmitting values, perspectives, or other information about one’s racial group to children (Hughes, et al., 2006, p. 748). Typically, parents socialize their children in ways deemed appropriate for their cultural group. Among others, Courtney’s experience of learning the values upheld by Black communities exemplifies this intentionality well. She described her parents’ efforts to “make sure [she] was

Black,” stating “I always had Black people around me that made sure I had Black values.”

Influence of Class on Understanding of Blackness

Participants in the study indicated that their family’s proximity to wealth during their formative years impacted their understandings of race. Specifically, their access to Black people who were not poor or working-class impacted whether they imagined that Black people experience upward mobility. Those participants who had family members or family friends who had experienced class mobility were able to imagine doing so themselves, while those who did not have this access found it harder to believe that they could do so. Hill (2012) provides one explanation for participants’ inability to imagine life outside of their own class without the model of other Black influencers who were also upwardly mobile: “[s]ocial class is arguably the most powerful predictor of many aspects of social life” (p. xiii). The author suggests that, while race and gender intersect to impact one’s life, “social class position cuts across other dimensions of inequality in its ability to explain [family] life” (p. xviii).

I do not wholly disagree with this author’s claim; I believe that research on the impact of social class is trustworthy. I am also invested in the concept of intersectionality, which holds that social identities intersect, resulting in a whole which is impacted by but distinct from the individual parts (Crenshaw, 1991). I can attest to my personal experiences growing up in a working class family adjacent to poor families; while my identity as a girl, or as a Black person, or as a Black girl was most salient, my experience as a Black girl from a working class family was distinct in a myriad of ways

from wealthy Black girls. Further, the similarities between my experience and those of poor White girls in the same neighborhood were not identical by any means, but they were observable. Our raced experiences were distinct, of course, but the impact of class positioned us in close physical and phenomenological proximity.

Upon reflection, inviting the women in the study into conversation about this claim may have revealed critical insight on their thoughts about the role of social class in predicting or determining one's life outcomes. Future research might engage upwardly mobile Black women in dialogue about the impact that their social class of origin had on both their family life and their ability to imagine their family life (or their lives as adults) in a higher social class. Future research might also encourage upwardly mobile Black women to reflect on the intersections of their racial, gendered, and class identities, and tease out their thoughts on the impact of each one has on their lived experience.

Beyond it being nearly impossible for Daria to imagine herself as upwardly mobile because she did not know or engage with other upwardly mobile Black people, other participants even found it difficult not to equate Blackness with poverty and Whiteness with wealth. Several participants conflated the terms *Black* and *poor*, or *White* and *wealthy*; Tiffany and Marian both did so repeatedly, despite me drawing attention to the phenomenon. Jones (2003) suggests that this conflation of terms reflects one way of conceptualizing the relationship between class and ethnicity, where class is a perceived dimension of ethnicity (Jones, 2003, p. 808). Participant stories indicate that, to varying degrees, their class and racial identities have been developed in tandem, and are somewhat indiscernible (p. 811).

In addition to Jones' (2003) explanation of this conflation, it is possible that women in the study have been socially conditioned to believe that Black people are poor and cannot be upwardly mobile, despite their own lived experiences of upward mobility. The intersectionality of race and class is so pervasive that even Black women who have achieved upward mobility themselves may still face challenges fully embracing or articulating distinctions between race and class. While the social configuration of race and class still result in people of color experiencing upward mobility less often than White people, these women are living indicators that the two are not completely interdependent (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992).

I speculate that these women's repeated conflations of race and class is not only indicative of the social configuration of the two concepts, but that it may also be a way for them to signal a continued commitment to maintaining relationships with their families and friends who are not upwardly mobile. Because upwardly mobile Black women are likely to remain connected to poor and working-class communities via relationships with close friends and family, they may believe that referring to Black people as poor and poor people as Black masks the fact that *they* are Black but *not* poor. The implication that they are somehow an anomaly means that upwardly mobile Black women may, in fact, perpetuate stereotypes of other Black women in particular, or Black people in general, believing somewhat unconsciously that because they are Black, they are also poor, or incapable of upward mobility. Future research might explore the possibility that upwardly mobile Black women are invested in the social stigmatization

which suggests that Black people are always poor, their motivations for maintaining this investment, and the degree to which they believe themselves to be an anomaly.

One is Always Representing All Black People

The literature which I reviewed originally did not speak directly to the notion that a Black person is always representing all other Black people. Steele and Aronson (1995) named the phenomenon *stereotype threat*, defined as the expectation that one person of color can, will, or should represent their entire culture (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Stereotype threat aptly describes participant experiences learning that their behavior would be policed. Of the Black people who were watching, many were likely trying to determine if participants' behaviors were adequate in demonstrating a commitment to Black values, and in accordance with the narrow range of ways that Black people acted. Other Black people may have felt motivated to police participants' behaviors as a result about one's own racial group which are perpetuated by White people and White culture (Molina and James, 2016).

The women in the study indicated that non-Black others would also police their behaviors. These people were likely gauging whether or not participants' behaviors were worthy of respect. This type of policing is indicative of Higginbotham's (1993) "politics of of their own *internalized racism*, or the acceptance of negative ideologies and stereotypes respectability," and is rooted in the same hegemonic Whiteness which some Black people perpetuated by policing participant behavior (Higginbotham, 1993). This strategy was meant to position Black women as worthy of dignity and respect, but which eventually served to punish Black people who resisted the notion that dominant White

values and ways of being were superior (Higginbotham, 1993). The hyper-respectable, conservative ways that participants were expected to behave mirror White-approved behaviors in ways that draw attention to and reify negative stereotypes of Black people.

The women in the study described the explicit expectation that they were always representing both their immediate and extended families, and their communities. For example, Da'Shelle shared that she understood and accepted the notion that she was always representing her family. However, it was somewhat difficult for her to make sense of the expectation that she represents Black people on the whole. While she did not *understand* it, Da'Shelle *accepted* that this was, in fact, her grandmother's expectation. Because her grandmother was the most influential individual norm-setter in her life, Da'Shelle did not believe that this expectation was negotiable. It is important to note that hegemonic White culture, and the pervasive preference that Black people behave in ways deemed respectable according to White values are the source of this expectation. Da'Shelle's grandmother was but one person who internalized this ubiquitous expectation, and perpetuated it through the ways that she socialized her granddaughter to deliver on this expectation. Feeling unable to resist this expectation that they were representing all Black people was thematic across participants.

The Complex, 3D Nature of Black Womanhood Along the Journey Toward Upward Mobility

The women in the study shared their experiences of pivoting between the predominantly working class, Black spaces where they grew up and the predominantly middle/upper-middle class White spaces which they studied, worked, or otherwise accessed as a result of upward mobility. Their experiences of not only code-switching, or

adjusting their behavior according to the context, but attempting to understand and respond to the value systems at play in different contexts demonstrated a certain fluidity of their identity. The women spoke of the demands placed on them across these various contexts and the subsequent stress they bore with near ambivalence. When I probed and questioned whether the level of stress they dealt with was a result of- or had been impacted by- upward mobility, participants responded that they were accustomed to others' high expectations of them and, subsequently, bearing heavy burdens of stress. This confirms the literature on the socialization of Black girls, namely Hill's (1999) finding that Black girls are expected to assume significant family and community responsibilities (Hill, 1999). They learned others' expectations at home and in their home communities. It is important to remember that people living in racist societies all internalize some level of racism (Molina, K. M., & James, D. (2016). Therefore, the messages participants heard about the expectations others had of them were inherently influenced by racism and the pervasive penchant to comply with hegemonic White expectations. The women carried both the expectations and the stress into their academic and professional lives in new, upwardly mobile spaces.

Hill (1999) suggests that Black girls are likely socialized to "do it all," and that they often mature into women who attempt to do the same (Hill, 1999, p. 122). Interestingly, Hill does not address whether these high expectations hold constant across class standings. The author goes on to acknowledge that girls who bear such stress and develop traditionally male traits of competence and self-reliance in response, are often propelled toward greater success than Black girls who were not socialized under such

high expectations. While I can speculate that upward mobility may be qualify as a form of “greater success” to which Hill referred, the author does not purport that the subsequent stress that upwardly mobile Black women bear as a result of upward mobility is more significant than those borne by other Black women.

That Hill (1999) did not differentiate between Black women who are not upwardly mobile and upwardly mobile Black women underscores participant feedback that they did not believe that they were more stressed than than other Black women who had not experienced upward mobility. The women pushed back when I suggested that the stress they carry may be compounded by their need to pivot back and forth between their communities of origin and other spaces. I believe they heard my suggestion but responded that, while the pressures of their lives were, “ungodly,” the *magnitude* of these stresses could not be said to be more intense.

I therefore acknowledge that, while the stressors which upwardly mobile Black women experience at the intersections of race, gender, class, and class mobility may be unique, the notion that they are more intense than those experienced by other Black women was not supported by participant stories. The upwardly mobile Black women in the study were adamant that both the types of stress which they experienced *and* that which is characteristic of other Black women’s experiences were intense.

Notwithstanding the intensity, the notion that upward mobility may make some Black women more *susceptible* to stress-related health risks was substantiated by the literature. James (1994) found significant health costs associated with upward mobility despite desired social and economic returns. A 2015 update to James’ (1994) study confirmed

the stressors of living in or close to poverty, while also establishing that managing the stressors associated with experiencing upward mobility were also considerably damaging to one's physical health (Miller, Yu, Chen & Brody, 2015). In short, while I empathize with participants' hesitation to indicate that the stressors which they experience as a result of upward mobility are not more significant than Black women who have not experienced upward mobility, it is possible that, as James (1994) established, "the *prolonged, high-effort coping* with which many Black people (particularly those from low-income families and communities) deal with stress" has been shown to contribute to negative health outcomes (p. 160, emphasis in original).

It may be that the women in the study are unaware of the health risks associated with upward mobility, namely acute and chronic illness, hypertension, depression, and other life-threatening medical conditions (Hudson, Neighbors, Geronimus & Jackson, 2015). Perhaps they do not consider physical or mental health in their assessment of stress. It is possible that being financially secure as opposed to being poor is a higher or more acute priority than physical or mental health. This may be especially true if none of the women were experiencing or had experienced significant physical or mental health issues which might influence the way that they assessed their own health. Either of these factors would further explain why upwardly mobile Black women insisted that, while their challenges were unique, they were no more intense than Black women who have not experienced upward mobility.

I was personally surprised to learn how adversely upward mobility impacts Black people, having assumed that certain chronic diseases were much more prevalent among

poor and working-class women who did not have access to healthy foods, quality health care, or prescription drugs, among other indicators of care. None of the women in the study mentioned any personal physical or mental health problems. However, when I reflect on my own experience and that of the other upwardly mobile Black women around me, I notice several of these strategies which help them to cope with psychosocial environmental stressors but which induce negative physical and/or mental health outcomes. Considering these coping strategies (increased time spent at- or engaged in-work in order to meet professional goals, and subsequently, decreased time spent with friends, family, or community; increased frequency and amount of alcohol consumption; increased intake of rich foods linked to hypertension, gout, and weight gain; even residing in expensive neighborhoods where they may be isolated from family or community members, etc), I can imagine how responding to the stresses of upward mobility by engaging any of these strategies could pose threats to one's health.

I'm Doing It... but It's Dizzying

During all three focus groups with eight of the ten participants, the women in the study actively rejected the notion that the stress they were facing as a result of upward mobility was more intense than that of other Black women who had not experienced upward mobility. What many women *did* confirm, though, is that the frequency with which they had to pivot back and forth between various contexts where differing value systems were at play was “dizzying.” (I did not ask Erica to define this term when she first introduced it, nor did I ask participants to clarify what they meant when they cosigned on the use of the term. Because we were discussing their perpetual need to

pivot back and forth between their families and old friends and other, predominantly White spaces, I feel confident that they intended to signal that the frequency with which they were required to do so was exhausting and overwhelming. Admittedly, the notion of the *perpetual pivot* which participants described resonated with me quite strongly. Given my own positionality and relationship to the need to pivot, often quite deeply and often without much notice, I recognize that I may have taken our shared meaning for granted.

Berdhal and Moore's (2006) work may provide additional context for why participants experience this pivoting as particularly harrowing (Berdhal & Moore, 2006). These authors suggest that, despite progress in both gender and racial equality, women can still expect to experience higher rates of gender-based harassment and discrimination than men; racial and ethnic minorities can still expect to face higher rates of discrimination than White people; and women of color can expect to experience greater discrimination than White men, White women, and men of color (Berdhal & Moore, 2006, p. 426). My expectation was that the added layer of class mobility, and the need to pivot back and forth so frequently between classed spaces (and thus, subsequently raced spaces) might lead participants to consider that the dizzying nature of their stressors are somewhat unique to them. In the end, the women did confirm this expectation, but not without asserting, again, that unique or "dizzying" did not equal more intense than the stresses which other Black women faced.

Because their stressors are somewhat unique to them, upwardly mobile Black women may find it difficult to identify opportunities to reflect on their experiences in the company of others who could relate and support their efforts to contextualize and

understand their lived experiences fully. Further, they may find it difficult to carve out space to identify strategies to maintain ties to the communities they care so deeply about. As they long to maintain closeness to other Black women (and Black communities in general), the uniqueness of their experiences of upward mobility may therefore contribute to the sense of isolation that they feel in coping with related stressors.

Seeking Refuge from Stress: Storm Closets

The women in the study shared the limited ways that they achieved reprieve from the stressors of life at the intersections of race, class, gender, and upward mobility. Tiffany described the release she experiences through the practice of yoga. Crystal talked briefly about her dedication to healthy eating and exercise. Marian and Da'Shelle both shared the impact that religion and spirituality had on their abilities to cope with stress. Despite these four women sharing their personal coping strategies, the subject of coping with stress was still addressed by less than half of the participants. What *was* thematic, though, was the concept of *retreat*, or temporary disengagement from stressors.

Erica's analogy of herself as a brick house, expected to withstand the gusty winds and heavy rains of life remains in the forefront of my mind, almost two years since she first told it. She described how she has to maintain the facade of being unaffected by the tumult around her, and how seeing other brick houses in the neighborhood escape storms unscathed, she further internalizes the incredibly high expectations which others have of her. If one of them were to show actual signs of damage after a storm, she would find it possible to reveal that she, too, was suffering silently. But if another house only has a shutter knocked out of place, or a sapling bent over, she, too, must stand strong. She

went on to say that what she needs is a retreat into the home's storm closet, where she could rest, take refuge, reassess, and tend to her mental and emotional needs. When I asked how long it had been since she ventured into this proverbial storm closet, she replied "... a minute!" meaning quite a long time.

Erica drew the distinction between this temporary time-out and coping. According to her, retreating from stressors is not the same process as understanding and coping with stress. It would be beneficial for her to retreat into her storm closet more often, yet she does not make the time to do so. Most participants identified those stressors from which they needed a temporary time-out, but only Erica, Aundrea, and Crystal mentioned specific examples of actually disconnecting.

Developing mechanisms to cope with psychosocial environmental pressures has been shown to position Black people to achieve desired upward mobility while simultaneously having detrimental effects on their health (James, 1994). James' study is now dated, and I had hoped that new studies would upend the findings. On the contrary, an updated study by Miller, Yu, Chen, and Brody (2015) confirms James' (1994) findings: dealing actively with the daily pressures of environmental stressors indicative of poor and working-class life, and developing coping mechanisms to respond to these stressors often positions Black people to achieve the goal of upward mobility; developing these coping mechanisms also often leads to both acute and chronic illness (Miller, Yu, Chen, and Brody, 2015). Developing ways to cope with the symptoms of stress is not equal to dealing with the fundamental inequity which perpetuates the stress. The implication here is that, the more effective Black women become in developing strategies

to cope with psychosocial pressures along their journeys toward upward mobility, the more stress they will bear, leading to increased physical health risks. I found the paradox to be rather disheartening. An implication for further research may be to explore the impact that developing coping strategies has on mental effects versus the impact it has on physical health.

Community: The Critical Role of Support Systems

The women in the study spoke about the importance of community. Each of the ten participants described the value they placed on relationships with family and friends. They shared how having support systems was critical to their personal well-being. According to the literature on socialization among Black families and the traditional Black values of communalism and family togetherness, I could expect participants to describe their relationships with family members as foundational in providing the emotional support (Hill, 2012). This was confirmed by participant data in that participants acknowledged the role of family in socializing them, and laying a foundation of the values which should guide their behavior. They told stories of their parents, grandparents, siblings, and other members of their extended families, and recalled these relationships fondly.

It is understandable that the women in the study identify the power of friendship in fulfilling some of their emotional needs. Specifically, participants shared that those friendships which had withstood the tests of time and distance were invaluable. Among the challenges of maintaining a sense of community, several of the women noted that they had simply taken different directions than many of the friends they had come to

know and love before experiencing upward mobility. In cases where this happened, participants described a distance between themselves and the friends who had not experienced upward mobility.

Daria's relationship with her circle of high school friends is a fitting example of participants' beliefs that their friendships had been impacted by their upward mobility. She felt that many of her friends who remained in working class communities like the ones where they were raised either did not understand her experiences of upward mobility, or were envious of her wealth and/or the prestige of her career. It may be that her old friends are, indeed, jealous of her or her life. It may also be that, in achieving upward mobility, Daria's values or ways of being have shifted, and she is unaware of the distance such a shift has created between her and others with whom she was once so close.

According to Simmons (2009), upwardly mobile people of color sometimes develop a bicultural identity in order to cope with the stress of needing to move between multiple cultural contexts. If developing this bicultural identity caused the women to either be or appear different to their family and friends, then this may help to explain how Daria came to grow apart from the friends whom she cared for so deeply. This could also be extrapolated out to other participants who attributed the distance between themselves and former close friends to their upward mobility and their friends' perception that they were somehow different. Participants may have responded to the need to move between multiple raced and classed contexts by developing a bicultural identity, which is not recognizable to former friends.

The notion that one of their coping strategies may simultaneously create distance between upwardly mobile Black women and the family and friends who they love is concerning. This is a particularly damning cause and effect relationship; the implication being upward mobility may risk important relationships for Black women. Beyond impacting the ten women in this study, this is an important implication for women in this demographic group in general. To say that they appeared to friends and family to be different as a result of experiencing upward mobility does not fully explain which differences most directly triggered the deterioration of the relationship. Future research might seek to identify greater specificity in terms of what about being upwardly mobile impacts these relationships so negatively. Further, future research might explore how upwardly mobile Black women might develop a wider range of code switching practices (or other coping strategies) without jeopardizing the relationships which serve to provide necessary emotional support, and position them to keep loving communities intact.

Beyond the phenomenon of taking different paths in life and growing apart from former friends, several of the women in the study suggested that competition among themselves and other upwardly mobile Black women also challenged their ability to maintain community in meaningful ways. One explanation participants gave for this competition was that they found it difficult to disengage the hyper-performance habits that had become their default. As they were so often striving to meet and exceed others' high expectations of them, they were sometimes in competition with their peers. This competition served to isolate them from other Black girls, and later, women.

The literature which I reviewed did not speak to competition among Black girls or women directly. It did, however, suggest that strained relationships among Black women and Black men are often an outgrowth of Black girls being socialized toward higher expectations than Black boys, and the subsequent divergence of their lived experiences (Ucko, as quoted in Hill, 1999). There may be similarities between the relationships Hill (1999) focuses on here and those between Black women who are- and who are not-upwardly mobile, as their divergent life experiences may induce the type of strain to which the author alludes (Hill, 1999). However, this framing falls short of fully theorizing competition among Black girls (and later, Black women), specifically. Future research might tease out similarities among -or differences between - the competition which Ucko and Hill (1999) describe and the phenomenon of competition among upwardly mobile Black women to which the women in this study alluded.

Beyond the either academic or professional competition which several participants referenced, Aundrea and Crystal recalled feeling the effects of unwarranted competition with other Black girls (and later women, in Aundrea's case) on the basis of skin color. Both of these women perceived that other Black girls were envious of them because they were light-skinned. Crystal could even recall being told directly that several of her middle-school peers (who were dark-skinned) were jealous of her because she was light-skinned. According to research on colorism, it is likely that these girls were already aware that discrimination on the basis of skin color was a real issue within Black communities, with lighter-skinned Black people being afforded social privileges denied to darker-skinned Black people (Hunter, 2005). These girls may not have been able to

articulate the potential impact that colorism could have on their lives, but they may have had an intuitive understanding that light-skinned Black people are regarded more favorably than are dark-skinned Black people.

Aundrea and Crystal's perception that these dark-skinned girls were jealous of them may have been somewhat accurate, but lacking in critical reflection on the power of race and racism. Future research might explore the ways that race and racism continue to perpetuate colorism in Black communities, conjuring feelings of envy and competition among peers. Further, future research may seek to identify the similarities among- and differences between the ways that Black people and other people of color experience and make sense of colorism, and whether strategies developed in one community could be engaged in other spaces.

Thick Love: Participants' Experiences Cultivating Framily

Participants in this study reflected on their experiences of upward mobility and the impact it had on their relationships with family and close friends. Several of the women lamented strained relationships with family members, assuming that many of the relatives perceived them to be somehow different since they had experienced upward mobility. To compensate for the waning of such critical relationships, many participants developed *framily*, or chosen family, in order to ensure that they had a robust system of people to support them. The women shared how important it was that they be able to share personally with members of their framily, even sharing openly that which they could not reveal to members of their families.

In Camille's case, being unable to admit that she was experiencing financial hardship with her family was an indicator that they did not fully understand her experience of upward mobility. More importantly, though, her family seemed committed to maintaining a single, inaccurate version of her as wealthy, and therefore incapable of experiencing financial hardship. The thought that they were unable to embrace the complexity of her life made Camille feel that she could not share her full self with members of her family. She sought the support of close friends and family to bridge this gap in her support system.

The literature on the socialization of girls in Black families suggests that Camille's family may have found it difficult to reconcile her financial troubles with their expectations of her as a high-achieving woman who not only supported herself independently, but who should also be in a position to contribute financially to both her immediate and extended family (Hill, 1999). The implication of Camille not being able to meet this expectation is that she did not fulfill an anticipated role in her family's life. Camille talked specifically about her grandfather, in whom she attempted to confide about her emerging financial stress, until he refused to even hear her story. His refusal indicated to Camille that she should keep information about her personal, financial business to herself. The reality of her financial situation would become a secret that she felt she could not share with members of her family.

Because they were unaware of her financial situation, it is possible, that Camille's *inability* to support her family financially was misinterpreted as an *unwillingness* to do so. While being unable may be pitied or otherwise thought to be unfortunate, being

unwilling would likely be judged much more harshly, given her family's close-knit, communal nature. According to the literature, adhering to Black family values and honoring a commitment to family is critical to maintaining cultural ties in Black communities. It may be that Camille was considered unwilling to demonstrate the level of commitment to her family which was necessary to maintain the close relationship they once enjoyed (Hill, 2012). One of the responses to this feeling of isolation from her family which she discussed was to seek out friends in whom she could confide, and from whom she could expect validation.

In addition to being able to share openly with their chosen family, participants shared that having family who were also upwardly mobile was important, as these friends were likely to understand their experiences and provide affirmation. The women described the benefit of having family who were upwardly mobile, noting that these friends were likely to be financially secure, and unlikely to depend on them for financial support. Further, upwardly mobile family members were unlikely to covet participants' wealth or the prestige of their career. This was important because, as several participants noted, a friend's jealousy over their accomplishments or subsequent wealth served to deteriorate friendship.

People are more likely to associate with others in their same social class, so the women in this study are not anomalies in choosing or intending to spend time in the company of other upwardly mobile people (Gilbert & Kahl, as quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 813). Choosing to spend time and build relationships with people who can make sense of one's daily lived experience is understandable. This certainly feels familiar from my own

experience. The implication for participants, though, and other upwardly mobile Black people, is that doing so may mean choosing to spend less time with the family and friends who could understand one's origins, family histories, and the values under which one was socialized. It stands to reason that, in communal Black families and communities, a shared understanding of one's origins and upbringing is a form of cultural tie. Given the premium placed on respect for elders in Black communities, it is possible that a respect for the past, in general, and a *shared* past, in particular, is also critical. The women's attempts to cultivate family who are not able to identify with this shared past that is so revered in Black communities may signal to their families that they place a higher premium on their future than on their past.

Anticipated Findings

In preparation for undertaking this research study, I reviewed literature on racial identity development among African-Americans; racial socialization in Black American families; the socialization of girls in Black American families; Black women at the intersections of race and gender; and both the advantages and detriments of upward mobility. Taken together, literature across these areas suggests the following themes relevant to the experiences of upwardly-mobile Black women: Black parents with formal education and higher socioeconomic status are more likely to discuss issues of race and racism directly with their children than are White parents of the same social class or Black parents of lower social classes (Barnes, as quoted in Thomas & Speight, p. 155); these parents are likely to socialize their daughters in accordance with traditional, communal Black values (Thomas & Speight, 1999); and they tend to expect their

daughters to be more competent, self-reliant, and high-achieving than their sons (Hill, 1999, p. 123). These girls are then expected to mature into independent women who can take care of themselves with or without the support of a partner (Weber, 1992). Further, they are expected to support their immediate and extended families, and the communities where they were raised (Hill, 1999).

Being socialized under what would be considered in as non-traditional gender norms (according to dominant cultural norms) often means that these girls often develop stereotypically male characteristics (i.e. independence, competitiveness and self-confidence), which motivate them toward greater personal achievement than girls who are not (Hill, 1999, p. 123). It follows, then, that some Black women may benefit from being socialized in this way, as these qualities likely aid them in achieving upward mobility (Carr & Mednick, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 123). These same qualities are thought to threaten both platonic and romantic relationships, particularly with Black men, who may often feel in competition with these hyper-performing women (Ucko, as quoted in Hill, 1999, p. 124). At the same time, some Black women report feelings of isolation as a result of upward mobility, as their new class status often creates distance (or perceived distance) between them and the family and friends who encouraged this hyperperformance. The phrase “being nowhere at home” has been used to connote the experience some people of color have living in these liminal spaces between home or community of origin and the predominantly White spaces they inhabit as a result of upward mobility (Overall, as quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 804).

Based on these themes in the literature, I anticipated the women in this study to recall specific messaging they received regarding race and the racial identity they were developing as children or adolescents. I expected them to describe the ways that other Black people taught them both *what* a Black identity entailed, and *how* to perform one. These expectations were realized, as nine of the ten participants described both the implicit and explicit messages they received regarding what it meant to be Black, and the correction they received from Black family and community members when they behaved in ways outside the narrow range of behaviors deemed acceptable for Black people.

Aundrea is somewhat of a stand-out here. Aundrea stated, on more than one occasion, that her White mother's influence on her- who she was, how she carried herself, and how she thought of herself – was stronger than her Black father's. She drew several parallels between her White mother and “other strong, Black women” who are role models for Black girls, modeling what it means to be “capable, competent Black women.” According to Aundrea, her mother's high expectations, her father's dotting love, and her own academic prowess were most important in setting her on a path for success. This does not run counter to the literature on families having high expectations of Black girls, per se. Further, Aundrea's experience is in line with other participants who internalized such high expectations from members of their families.

What is unique about Aundrea's story is that, according to her, her White mother's modeling and teaching “are, ironically, the reasons that she is the strong Black woman that [she is] today.” Her experience of being raised by a White mother is compelling, as it positions Aundrea as an outlier among the ten participants. Aundrea's

story offers a counter-narrative to the other women's stories of socialization and the development of their identities. I am left wanting to know more about how Aundrea's identity as a Black woman has taken shape, and how she conceptualizes this development.

Socialization Under Non-Traditional Gender Norms

According to the literature, I could expect the women in the study to discuss issues of tension between themselves as children and the boys in their families or communities fueled by the spirit of competition. Hill (1999) suggests that Black girls are socialized to be more competent and self-reliant than are boys. The author goes on to suggest that this differences in expectations promotes tension between Black boys and girls, and lingers into adulthood (Hill, p. 1999, p. 124). Participant data regarding competition was especially intriguing.

Courtney and Aundrea discussed the sense of competition between themselves and their brothers. Courtney described her father's confidence that she would succeed academically (and later, professionally), and his efforts to motivate her two brothers, whom her parents recognized were not as motivated to achieve academically or to plan for their futures. Aundrea remembered a friendly competition between her and her brother, who she described as equally as smart and driven as herself. The stories they told about the ways they engaged with their brothers did not reflect the tension which the literature suggested might be central to relationships between Black siblings, having been socialized under distinct expectations (Hill, 2012).

Given the prevalence of literature on the tensions between Black men and women, I expected the women in the study to have a plethora of stories demonstrating these struggles (Hill, 1999). Interestingly, Aundrea was the only participant to speak about intense competition with men in a professional setting. She suggested that the source of this competition was their jealousy at how quickly she has achieved professional success in the metropolitan area where they lived, and to which she was a relative stranger in comparison to these men who had called the area home for decades. She was not at liberty to share further details of the incidences, as the competition had gotten so severe that there had been court proceedings and a legal investigation. She said, “Whether or not I could talk about them or the case is not the point. The point is that some amazing women here in [this city] rallied around me and took care of me. That’s the point.” With this, Aundrea was suggesting that the conversation focus on “the women who held [her] up instead of the men who attempted to destroy [her].”

In analyzing participant data, it occurred to me that, despite having essential relationships with their fathers, brothers, partners, sons, friends, business partners who are men, the women in the study often focused on the relationships they had with other women. Aundrea’s decision to focus on the women who supported her instead of the men who did not is but one example. Even early conversations with Aundrea during which she focused on the significance of her White mother’s role in preparing her to be a Black woman instead of her Black fathers’ impact demonstrate this phenomenon. Similarly, Daria focused on the role her mother played in raising her, even though she also had a close relationship with her father.

This stuck me as interesting because much of the literature on Black women references or even centers Black men. I was honored to hold a space for Black women to describe a range of their experiences without requiring that conversations include, reference, or prioritize Black men, although I remained open to participants including men as it pertained to the rich stories they told. The implication here is that as researchers, we can and should work more intentionally to amplify the voices of upwardly mobile Black women and other women of color, without avoiding the voices of men, but without requiring that women's experiences be framed by men's experiences.

Critical Analysis of Learnings

I asked two colleagues to read and provide feedback on my dissertation as I prepared to submit it. One of them offered the critical feedback that she was "turned off" by women in the study, as they seemed to be seeking "praise" from their families and friends. She commented that the women should stop complaining that they were not routinely "pat on the back for the money they had." I took this critique quite personally, as I have come to know and respect these women in the near two years we have spent learning more about one another. Further, I felt personally affronted, being an upwardly mobile Black woman myself.

My personal experience of working to meet and exceed my family's expectations and struggling to maintain closeness with them mirrors participant experiences in significant ways. I take pride in honoring the communal Black values that are the hallmark of my upbringing. I have tried to deliver on expectations that I would support my family and community. My *own* expectation of the family and community which I

love dearly and continue to long for, is that I would experience this same commitment, and be embraced in the same way that I was before experiencing the upward mobility which creates distance (or the perception of distance) between us. Participant stories demonstrate that what they long for is this familiarity and closeness with the families and friends who they love, not a celebration of their wealth or prestige. As Crystal said, the suggestion that these women expect (or even want) their families or friends to praise them because they are upwardly mobile “adds insult to injury.” While the desire to be recognized and appreciated for the many obstacles they have overcome (with the support of their family and friends) may be real for upwardly mobile Black women, the desire to be singled out and praised would run counter to the communal Black values which participants indicate are still primary influences in their lives.

Thus, although my colleague gleaned that these participants seemed to be asking for praise for all the money they have earned, I interpret their stories quite differently. I see them as being grateful to the family and community members who have supported them; proud that they have been able to achieve or exceed their family’s expectations, and especially proud that they have maintained the fundamental values which were passed on to them by members of their family and close, trusted others; excited about the benefit they can be to their families; empowered by the opportunities they have to impact their communities in positive ways; and, unfortunately, surprised and saddened to find themselves somewhat isolated from the people and spaces they used to call “home.” I revisit my own bittersweet experiences of upward mobility as I reread their stories, feeling in good company. I recognize myself in their experiences, and I pray that they

recognize themselves in this work which I have curated on their behalf and with their support.

Implications for Future Research

The women in the study suggested that the tremendous amount of stress they were under is a *new normal* for upwardly-mobile Black women. As a researcher, I am left wondering if it is possible that accepting their fate in this way simultaneously supported participants' ability to cope *and* decreased their ability to envision and/or create coping strategies? In other words, is it possible that accepting identity-based stress prepares one to deal with said stress while simultaneously making it harder for them to refuse stressors? Further research might explore how one's attitude about the level of stress they will likely endure impacts their willingness to take on more stress, or to remain engaged with the source of their stress. Additionally, further research may also explore how this impacts one's ability to cope with stress.

In addition to feeling somewhat alone in coping with stress, the women in the study felt isolated because they believed they could not tell their family and friends about all of their successes. Fear of being ridiculed, or being called out as prideful or boastful kept participants from sharing what were often major announcements with people who had once been so close to them. What is the impact of believing that one's loved ones will not celebrate one's greatest accomplishments, or that even lesser achievements must be downplayed in order to maintain in-group membership? Further research should seek to understand the impact of internalizing these messages, which are often implicit.

The women in the study described the need to code-switch back and forth between contexts in order to demonstrate behaviors which are recognizable by members of the various groups. This ability to shift from one cultural context to another is a fundamental definition of cultural and intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004). Is it possible that the perpetual nature of pivoting across contexts that they must do in order to be successful requires that upwardly-mobile Black women be more culturally-competent than members of other demographic groups? As a long-time cultural competence coach and trainer, I would be curious to know if there is a correlation between the level of pivoting they perform and their cultural competence. Critical research in this area could indicate how crossing from the proverbial margins of dominant culture into the center and back so frequently impacts upwardly-mobile Black women's level of cultural competence, as measured on a number of scales and inventories.

Further research may also explore what impact upwardly-mobile Black women's acceptance of their *new normal* specifically in their professional lives. As more upwardly-mobile Black women move into upper-management and professional and corporate leadership, they are positioned to set tone and expectations in the workplace. Does the prospect of being a tone-setter bring greater stress? Could this prospect relieve stress in some way, since upwardly-mobile Black women may believe that they have "made it" and already proven themselves along their journey?

Beyond the implications for upwardly-mobile Black women themselves, what is the impact of their willingness to accept greater levels of stress on the employees with whom they may work? Are there different implications for those they may supervise or

manage? Might their expectations of other Black women in the workplace be higher than those they have of others? Further study may reveal implications for upwardly-mobile Black women's professional relationships.

Finally, further research is needed to determine the applicability of findings to women situated in other demographic groups. One premise of this study's rationale is that race and class are linked so closely in America, that it may be possible that some of the experiences we describe as particularly *raced*, are in fact, *classed*. As all participants self-identified as Black women, this notion did not surface during the course of the study. It was, however introduced by a close friend who I asked to read my dissertation as I prepared to submit it. This woman self-identifies as an upwardly mobile Latina. I talked to her extensively after she gave considerable feedback on the dissertation. She told me that she had been hesitant to say that she identified with some of the race-related themes since she is not Black. She had felt her own experience as a woman of color reflected, in part, at several points in participant stories. I responded that, as a person who experiences oppression at the intersections of race, class, and gender, and has learned to flex between the communities where she was socialized and those she accesses as a result of upward mobility, it is understandable that she would identify, in part, with the experiences of women in this study. Future studies could further explore the degree to which the themes which emerged in this study on upwardly mobile Black women are relatable or relevant to upwardly-mobile Indigenous and First Nations women, Latinas, and Asian-American women? Even if the culturally-influenced responses to stress are

different, there is much to learn if the nature or source of the stress is rooted in racism, sexism, classism, and respectability, as this study's participants' stressors are.

Conclusion

Author James Baldwin (1985) raised a timeless question about the outcomes of social mobility for Blacks. He pondered whether the psychological and cultural (and I would add, relational) costs were worth the trade-offs to being upwardly mobile. These trade-offs include fatigue, stress, and isolation from loved ones and colleagues (Jones, 2003). Cole and Omari (2003) try to answer this question by calling attention to the threats to psychological well-being that many Black people report as they “scale [the] steep structural [and] psychological barriers” that are indicative of upward mobility (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992, p. 416). Although not focused specifically on physical or psychological well-being, this study was concerned with the experiences that Black women have in scaling barriers to achieving upward mobility. As such, co-opting Baldwin's query was invaluable as a philosophical guide. As the researcher, I aimed to understand how an upwardly mobile Black woman's conceptualization of herself might shift, take new shape, or otherwise deepen in complexity as she transcends her poor, working- or middle-class roots. I was curious about how a Black woman might respond to threats to her psychological well-being, which research suggests is typical of the experiences of upwardly-mobile Black people (Cole & Omari, 2003). I wanted to know if these women's experiences of upward mobility had been challenging, surprising, or fulfilling. Trusting the literature which frames upward mobility as both desirable *and* potentially stress-inducing, I was interested in hearing Black women share their stories of

balancing the benefits and detriments. In instances where their experiences had been stressful, I hoped to understand to what degree have the benefits merited the stress. To what degree are the benefits of upward mobility worth the price of the proverbial ticket?

This study contributes to what we know about the ways Black women experience upward mobility and navigate the associated challenges. Through their stories, we gain insight into how they conceptualize the benefits in light of the detriments. We learn how they attempt to balance the celebration of personal victories with the losses of intimate relationships. This study sheds light on the implications of Black women's efforts to cope with stress related to upward mobility. It confronts the complexity and fluidity of Black women's identities and tensions between the archetypal roles that they are expected to play in their families and communities, and frames the degree to which their internalization of these expectations both propels them forward *and* induces stress which they then bear alone, or in the company of other upwardly-mobile Black people who can understand their experiences and affirm their need for thick love. This study shines a light on the isolation that many upwardly mobile Black women bear, feeling "nowhere at home" in the liminal spaces between Black families and communities of origin and predominantly White spaces which they access as a result of upward mobility.

At this conclusion of nearly two years of meeting and engaging with the women in this study, ruminating over their stories, and connecting themes in their experiences, I find that many of my initial questions have been answered. At the same time, several of the more sophisticated, nuanced -or even tangential- questions which emerged during the process linger in my mind and in my spirit. The sheer complexity of issues of identity,

belonging, community, fulfillment, and validation suggests that while my research questions may have been answered, my inquiry and wonder persists.

In describing the journey toward self-awareness to the college-aged students with whom I work, I often warn them of the danger of being certain, as certainty stunts curiosity. And so, while it is affirming to have participants take pride in my work, and acknowledge that I have captured the essence of their rich experiences, I acknowledge that further interrogation of what it means to be an upwardly mobile Black woman in America is warranted, and worthy of the attention of researchers across a myriad of disciplines. More importantly (at least, to those people in my own family, family, and communities in whose service I embarked upon this doctoral journey), additional careful and critical study of upwardly mobile Black women's experiences, challenges, and conceptualizations of self are necessary.

REFERENCES

- Baldwin, J. (1985). *The Price of the Ticket: Collected nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2009). *Behind the mask of the strong Black woman: Voice and the embodiment of a costly performance*. Temple University Press.
- Beale, F. (1970). Double jeopardy: To be Black and female. In Cade, T. (Ed.), *The Black woman: An anthology*. New York, NY: Signet, 90-100.
- Bennett, M. J. (2004). Becoming interculturally competent. *Toward multiculturalism: A reader In multicultural education*, 2, 62-77.
- Berdahl, J. L. and Moore, C. (2006). Workplace harassment: Double jeopardy for minority women. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(2), 426-436.
- Berry, J. W. (2003). Conceptual approaches to acculturation. In Chun, K.M., Balls, P. & Marin, O. G. (Eds.), *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research* (pp. 17-37). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bettie, J. (2002). *Women Without Class: Girls, race, and identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cole, E. R., & Omari, S. R. (2003). Race, class and the dilemmas of upward mobility for African Americans. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(4), 785-802.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Defining Black feminist thought*. (2nd ed). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Constantine, M. G., Richardson, T. Q., Benjamin, E. M., & Wilson, J. W. (1998). An overview of Black racial identity theories: Limitations and considerations for future theoretical conceptualizations. *Applied and Preventative Psychology*, Volume 7(2), 95 - 99.

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139-167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford law review*, 1241-1299.
- Cresswell, J. W. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cross, W. E. (1971). The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience. *Black World* 20(9), 13-27.
- Cross, W. E. (1991). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American identity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Demo, D. H. & Hughes, M. (1990). Socialization and racial identity among Black Americans. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Volume(53)4, 364-374.
- Doyle, J. A. and Paludi, M. A. (1997). *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience* (4th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Elliott, A. (2014). *Routledge Handbook of Social and Cultural Theory*. New York NY: Routledge.
- Francis, D. (2012, September 13). Where do you fall in the American Economic Class System? *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved from <http://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/articles/2012/09/13/where-do-you-fall-in-the-american-economic-class-system>.
- Fellows, M. L., & Razack, S. (1997). The race to innocence: Confronting hierarchical relations among women. *J. Gender Race Just.*, 1, 335.
- Gelman, S. A. (2004). Psychological Essentialism in Children. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Volume 8(9), 404 - 409.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers*, third edition. London: Pearson.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, Volume 14(3), 575 - 599.

- Harris, C. A. & Khanna, N. (2010). Black is, Black ain't: Biracials, middle-class blacks, and the social construction of blackness. *Sociological Spectrum, Volume 30*(6), 639–670.
- Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. Yale University Press.
- Higginbotham, E.B., & Weber, L. (1992). Moving up with kin and community: Upward social mobility for Black and White women. *Gender & Society, Volume 6*(3), 416-440.
- Higginbotham, E. B. (1993). *Righteous discontent: the Womens' movement in the Black Baptist church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hill, S. A. (1999). *African American children: Socialization and development in families*. Sage Publications.
- Hill, S. A. (2012). *Families: a Social class perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Hine, D. C. & McLeod, J. (Eds). (2001). *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative history of Black people in diaspora*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hudson, D. L., Neighbors, H. W., Geronimus, A. T. & Jackson, J. S. (2015). Racial discrimination, John Henryism, and depression among African Americans. *Journal of Black Psychology, Volume 41*, doi: 10.1177/0095798414567757
- Hunt, M. & Ray, R. (2012). Black Americans social class identifications: Trends and determinants, 1974-2008. *American Behavioral Scientist, Volume 56*(11), 1462-1480.
- Hunter, Margaret 2005. *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*. New York: Routledge.
- James, S. (1994). John Henryism and the health of African-Americans. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry 18*(2), 163-182.
- Jones, S. J. (2003). Complex subjectivities: Class, ethnicity, and race in women's narratives of upward mobility. *Journal of Social Issues, Volume 59*(4), 803-820.
- Kunjufu, J. (2004). *Countering the conspiracy to destroy Black boys #1-4*. Sauk Village, IL: African American Images.

- Landry, B., & Marsh, K. (2011). The evolution of the new black middle class. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37, 373-394.
- Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(2), 309-337.
- Lincoln, YS. & Guba, EG. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Marsh, K., et al. (2007). *The Emerging Black middle—class: Single and living alone*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Miller, G. E., Yu, T., Chen, E., Brody, G. H. (2015). Self-control forecasts better psychosocial outcomes but faster epigenetic aging in low-SES youth. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. Volume 112(33), 10325-10330
- Molina, K. M., & James, D. (2016). Discrimination, internalized racism, and depression: A comparative study of African American and Afro-Caribbean adults in the US. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations : GPIR*, 19(4), 439–461.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/1368430216641304>
- Narayan, U. (1988). Working together across difference: Some considerations on emotions and political practice. *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Volume 3(2).
- Niemonen, J. (2002). Race, class, and the state in contemporary sociology: The William Julius Wilson debates. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Parham & Helms (1981). The influence of Black students' racial identity attitudes on preferences for counselor's race. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 28(3), 250-257.
- Peterson-Lewis, S. and Bratton, L. M. (2004). Perceptions of “Acting Black” among African American teens: Implications of racial dramaturgy for academic and social achievement. *The Urban Review*, Volume 36(2), 81-100.
- Phalet, K., Andriessen, I., & Lens, W. (2004). How future goals enhance motivation and learning in multicultural classrooms. *Educational Psychology Review*, Volume 16(1), 59-89.
- Phillips, A. (2010). What’s wrong with essentialism? *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* (11)1, 47-60

- Ricks, S. A. (2011). *Tight spaces, contextualizing the journey of my experiences: Black feminist scholars negotiating power, navigating oppression, and resisting domination while dismantling this old house*. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
- Robinson, E. (2011). *Disintegration: the Splintering of Black America*. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Rosette, A. S. & Livingston, R. W. (2012). Failure is not an option for Black women: Effects of organizational performance on leaders with single versus dual-subordinate identities. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Volume 48(5)*, 1162-1167.
- Sellers, R. M., Smith, M. A., Shelton, J. N., Rowley, S. A. J. & Chavous, T. M. (1998). Multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African American racial identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, Volume 2(1)*, 18-39.
- Sellers, S. L. (2001). Social mobility and psychological distress: Differences among Black American men and women. *African American Research Perspectives, Volume 7(1)*, 117-147.
- Shenton, A.K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information (22)*, pp. 63–75
- Simmons, D. J. (2009). *Upward mobility: Experiences with families of origin among college-educated African American women* (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from Iowa State University Digital Depository. (10653).
- Thomas, A. J. & Speight, S. L. (1999). Racial identity and racial socialization attitudes of African-American parents. *Journal of Black psychology, Volume 25(2)*, 152-170.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Vandiver, B., Fhagen-Smith, P. E., Cokley, K. O., Cross, W. E., Worrell, F. C. (2001). Cross's nigrescence model: From theory to scale to theory. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*; Jul 2001; 29, 3; ProQuest Psychology Journals
- Yip, T., Seaton, E. K., & Sellers, R. M. (2006). African American racial identity across the lifespan: Identity status, identity content, and depressive symptoms. *Child Development, Volume 77(5)*, 1504 - 1517.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW ONE PROTOCOL

Study: *Racial (re)Construction among Upwardly Mobile Black Women*

Interview Guide One

PI: Alta Mauro altamauro@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Silvia C. Bettez scbettez@uncg.edu

Interview One

1. Talk to me about your childhood. I am especially interested in anything you remember related to your race, class, and gender.
2. Follow up questions about social class if not mentioned:
 - a. What would you say your social class status was growing up? (ie. working class, middle class, etc.)
 - b. Tell me why you would describe it as such?
 - c. What did your parents do?
 - d. What kind of home did you have?
 - e. What kind of neighborhood did you live in?
3. Follow up questions about race if not mentioned:
 - a. Do you remember when you became aware of your race? If so, can you share how that happened?
 - b. What can you tell me about the experience(s) that led you to know your race?

- c. Suppose you and I were to go back in time and visit your childhood home together. What would I see happening or hear being said related to race? What implicit messages about race might I miss?

APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Study: *Racial (re)Construction among Upwardly Mobile Black Women*

Focus Group Guide

PI: Alta Mauro altamauro@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Silvia C. Bettez scbettez@uncg.edu

- I. Opening
 - a. Welcome and thank participants for participating.
 - b. Introduce myself, my research, and why I am studying upwardly mobile Black women
 - c. Facilitate participant introductions
 - d. Provide overview for session
 - e. Ground Rules
 - i. I am here to listen; I hope you came to talk/share! (I will also be audio recording in order to transcribe later);
 - ii. There are no right or wrong answers related to this complex subject. Every experience is valid; and
 - iii. Please maintain confidentiality and do not share others' personal stories afterwards.
- II. Focus Group Interview
 1. What comes to mind when you think of upward mobility?
 - a. What have been *your* experiences with upward mobility?

2. In your experience, what have been some of the most significant benefits of upward mobility?
 - a. Have you experienced challenges as you have become upwardly mobile?
 - b. What has been the most significant challenge?
 - c. What causes these challenges?
 - d. How do you cope with these challenges?
 - e. Do you feel alone in coping with these challenges?
 - f. How do you imagine others responding to these challenges?

III. Closing

- a. Thank you
- b. Reminder about life cycle of the data and what will happen next.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW TWO PROTOCOL

Study: *Racial (re)Construction among Upwardly Mobile Black Women*

Interview Guide Two

PI: Alta Mauro altamauro@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Silvia C. Bettez scbettez@uncg.edu

Interview Two

1. During the first interview, I asked you to reflect on your experiences growing up and becoming aware of your race. Then, during the focus group, we discussed some of the benefits and challenges related to upward mobility. I'd like to hear more about your experience with upward mobility and the impact it has had on you.
 - a. What effect, if any, has your mobility had an effect on any of your relationships?
 - b. Has your mobility affected your relationship with your family? How do you feel about this?
2. Has your sense of self shifted as you have become upwardly mobile? How?
 - a. (If applicable) How do you make sense of these shifts?
3. How do you think being Black has influenced your experience with upward mobility?
4. Has upward mobility impacted you the way you see yourself as a Black woman, in particular?

APPENDIX D
RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Dear [],

Thank you for your interest in Racial (re)Construction among Upwardly Mobile Black Women. I am writing to ask whether you would be willing to share information with friends and/or members of your family who may also be interested in learning about and participating in this research study. You are under no obligation to share this information; your decision to share or not share will not affect our relationship. Thank you for considering,

Regards,

Alta Mauro, Principal Investigator
altamauro@gmail.com

APPENDIX E

FACEBOOK RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Study: *Racial (re)Construction among Upwardly Mobile Black Women*

Facebook Recruitment Message

PI: Alta Mauro altamauro@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Silvia C. Bettez scbettez@uncg.edu

I am currently conducting research on identity among upwardly mobile Black women through interviews. In this study, I aim to understand how Black women conceptualize their own identity as they experience upward mobility. I ask, does a Black woman's sense of herself shift as she takes on those values and behaviors required to achieve upward mobility, and if so, how? I presume that, because collectivist cultural values are thought to be foundational to Black identity, upwardly mobile Black women may struggle to find acceptance and meaning in spaces governed by individualist middle- and upper—middle class values.

I will spend around 60 minutes interviewing participants regarding their experiences as Black women who were socialized in a lower socio-economic status than the one in which they are currently. In addition, participants will take part in a focus group with up to four other participants, which will last around two hours. Lastly, I will conduct a second interview with each participant, which I anticipate will last around 60 minutes. These interactions will take place between February and June, 2016.

If you have questions, want more information, have suggestions, or would like to participate, please contact me at altamauro@gmail.com.

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.