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Women of color often experience the pressures of navigating multiple intersecting roles and multiple intersecting identities within various contexts. Within the hegemonic environment of higher education, particularly at historically or predominantly white institutions (HWIs or PWIs), as prior research demonstrates, women of color frequently enact the superwoman role to reconcile the tensions and pressures of multiple marginalization and multiple role conflict. This research sought to understand how graduate women of color negotiate their “multiverse” (the multiple identities and roles they experience) within their graduate student experience and if these experiences vary by race/ethnicity. Using Critical Geography, Figured Worlds, Critical Race Feminism, and the Superwoman Schema as a theoretical framework, this study explored the following research questions: 1a) Do graduate women of color at one PWI identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé’s (2010) Superwoman Schema (SWS) Conceptual Framework? 1b) Are there statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity? 2a) What are the various identities and roles that women of color graduate students negotiate within the context of their experiences as students? 2b) How do these negotiations impact their experiences as students? This research uniquely implements a mixed methods approach, intentional inclusion of non-Black women of color, focus on graduate students, and incorporation of institutional factors instead of a hyper-focus on individual experiences. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design enabled the researcher to use the Giscombé Superwoman Schema Questionnaire (G-SWS-Q) to survey 44 self-identified graduate women of color on their adherence to the superwoman role. Twelve participants from that survey

group, representing a diverse group of identities and experiences, completed individual in-depth interviews to provide more insight into their survey responses and their experiences as graduate students. The descriptive statistics and frequencies from the quantitative phase showed that the women in this study had moderate-to-high endorsement of SWS (mean = 76.57). Intense motivation to succeed was the most highly endorsed dimension, and obligation to help others was the least endorsed dimension. Within the qualitative phase, participants illuminated how the superwoman role showed up for them as it related to their student experience and various institutional factors that influenced their enactment of the role. Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative participants shared how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their student experience which was an important factor in the context of this study. While this study had some limitations, it also has significant implications for future practice and research, including the potential relevance of SWS for non-Black women of color. Adding to the growing body of literature on the experiences of women of color in higher education, this research highlights the necessity of recognizing the commonalities and differences within their experiences and the impact that multiple role conflict and the institutional environment play on the success and well-being of graduate women of color.

SUPERWOMEN OF COLOR AND THE MULTIVERSE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL:
AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF GRADUATE WOMEN OF COLOR
NEGOTIATING THEIR MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AND ROLES

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Anyone who knows me knows that I am a self-proclaimed “Blerd” (Black nerd) and that loving superhero stories, especially from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), is a part of my particular brand of nerd. Growing up, I remember that my dad had a large collection of Marvel Comics, and I wondered if they would be mine one day. I remember being in college and watching *Iron Man* (2008), the launch of the MCU, with my friends and being in awe of the storytelling. To date, I have seen every MCU movie and TV show at least once—some more than once. Although the majority of the superheroes shown on both the big and small screens are white men, the move toward intentional race and gender inclusion and representation is one of the aspects I love about the MCU. Their movies and TV shows have introduced me to many women of color superheroes, including Ororo Munroe, aka Storm; Monica Rambeau, aka Photon; Kamala Khan, aka Ms. Marvel; Shuri, aka Black Panther; Riri Williams, aka Iron Heart; Maya Lopez, aka Echo; and America Chavez, aka Ms. America.

America Chavez, the MCU's first Latina LGBTQ character, made her debut in the movie *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). In the MCU, the multiverse is an infinite collection of dimensions and realities with similar characteristics (i.e., multiple versions of the same character exist in different universes). America is an inter-dimensional being with the ability to travel through the multiverse. At the beginning of the movie, we learn that she cannot control her powers and has spent years traveling through the multiverse by accidentally opening portals from one dimension to another. Her story resonated with me. I related to the idea of being connected to multiple worlds and feeling constantly pulled from one world to the next. Women of color—and Black women in particular—have long been depicted as superhuman: strong,

independent, invulnerable, resistant to pain, resilient. But how do women of color superheroes navigate their lives constantly being pulled to and from the multiple worlds they exist in?

Background

The female archetype of the “superwoman” developed within the last fifty years and gained attention in the media, pop culture, and academic research. A “superwoman” engages in “multiple concurrent [and often conflicting] full-time roles” (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015, p. 4) such as wife, mother, student, employee, homemaker, etc., and she is expected to do it all “glamorously, effortlessly, happily, and perfectly” (Shaevitz & Shaevitz, 1984, p. 2). Subsequently, many studies have shown the negative consequences of the “superwoman” ideal and the experience of psychological, physiological, and interpersonal stress (Abrams et al., 2019; Hart & Kenny, 1997; Ledesema-Reese, 1999; Watson-Singleton, 2017; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Researchers often refer to this problem as the “Superwoman Syndrome,” and much of the existing research has focused on career women and the dichotomy between home and work (Bacchus, 2008; Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Herrera & DelCampo, 1995). However, the pressure of having to do it all may be formed before a woman sets foot in the workplace. In fact, this pressure to fulfill and excel in multiple roles may be formed as early as middle school (Callahan et al., 1994).

Women of all backgrounds within all contexts may experience stress and role conflict when negotiating multiple roles. However, the intersections of race and gender and the hegemonic nature of higher education—particularly at historically or predominantly white institutions (HWIs or PWIs)—have a significant impact on how women of color in these spaces experience these conflicts and pressures. Women of color not only experience the pressure of negotiating multiple roles but also multiple marginalized identities. For the purpose of this

research, I define women of color as any woman who identifies as non-white, including but not limited to Black/African American, American Indian/Native American, Latinx, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Multiracial.

The term “superwoman” is one way to describe these experiences, but how would women of color in the higher education context, specifically graduate students, characterize their experiences with negotiating multiple identities, multiple roles, and the multiple pressures and conflicts resulting from those identities and roles? Throughout this study, I will use the terms negotiating/negotiations to refer to “a process in which one considers the gain, loss or exchange of his or her ability to interpret their own reality or worldview” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 10, as cited in Jackson, 2002, p. 361). Individuals engage in identity and role negotiations as a result of conflict causing them to enact a “conscious and mindful process of shifting one’s worldview and/or cultural behaviors” (Jackson, 2002, p. 363). To this end, I explore how graduate women of color negotiate their “multiverse”—the multiple identities and multiple roles they experience—within PWIs and how these experiences vary by race/ethnicity.

The multiple marginalized identities of graduate women of color can create pressures such as being “an exotic token, an institutional symbol, a mentor and confidant, and a natural expert of all things to do with race” (Mirza, 2009, p. 235), which can also include individual pressures to succeed and to overcome racialized and gendered stereotypes. The majority of policies and practices in PWIs have language about commitments to diversity through embracing the dominant ideologies of colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. Often, those in positions of power at these institutions create these policies and practices without realizing (or perhaps without caring) how these ideologies “silence or distort people’s lived realities” (Vaccaro, 2017, p. 262). As such, institutional actors often place the burden on marginalized

people to acculturate to the university environment, and there is no responsibility for the institution to change to fit the needs of its constituents (Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Women of color in these environments are seen as “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004). Since higher education privileges those with a white male identity as the default and as “rightfully belonging in spaces of power and authority” (Alexander-Floyd, 2015, p. 465), women of color who enter these spaces are not the “somatic norm” (Puwar, 2004, p. 58), and those from the dominant group see them as disrupting the space; they are “bodies out of place” (Puwar, 2004, p. 58).

Women of color at these institutions often experience hostile campus climates, isolation, and lower levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Krusemark, 2012; Vaccaro, 2017). Though all people of color may experience these phenomena, the intersections of power and privilege and of multiple marginalized identities lead to experiencing these phenomena in very particular ways. Women of color are often stereotyped as angry, exotic, or sexually promiscuous; they are silenced and dismissed; and their bodies are judged against the normative gender standards of white women (Vaccaro, 2017). These experiences create “the paradox of in/visibility” (Puwar, 2004, p. 58)—a complex hybrid of invisibility and hypervisibility—for women of color in higher education that is a result of hegemonic structures at the intersections of race, gender, and class. They are sought after, displayed as representatives of diversity (hypervisibility), silenced (invisibility) and surveilled (hypervisibility) because of that diversity, and often passed over for opportunities for growth and advancement (invisibility) (Alexander-Floyd, 2015). Various studies have noted the experience of women of color faculty and administrators being underemployed and underrepresented and simultaneously being overused by their departments in comparison to their white counterparts through committee work, diversity efforts, and advising and mentorship, in addition to their actual job commitments

(Turner, 2002; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Gregory, 2001; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Additionally, women of color faculty often experience being psychologically divided between family, community, and career (Turner, 2002). As many graduate women of color have goals of becoming faculty or university administrators, these experiences may also be relevant to their present experiences in addition to future experiences. Women of color may take on multiple roles and “overfunction” (Rockquemore & Lazloffy, 2009) or embody the superwoman role as a measure to counteract those experiences of being a “space invader” due to racialized and gendered oppression, marginalization, and tokenization.

Statement of the Problem

Women of color make significant contributions to and are also significantly impacted by institutions of higher education as students, faculty and staff. However, their unique experiences often get lost in the larger bodies of literature about the experiences of women in higher education and the experiences of people of color in higher education. There is a growing body of research regarding how women of color in the higher education setting negotiate their various identities, roles, and responsibilities, but the majority of this research is from a micro perspective that is hyper-focused on individual experiences and outcomes and ignores the role of the institution and/or larger cultural context in producing those experiences and outcomes. In her review of 119 studies about Black undergraduate women, Winkle-Wagner (2015) discussed how the majority of the studies focused on “individual factors in college success instead of institutional (within college campuses) or larger sociostructural issues (race, class, or gender inequalities in the larger society) that serve as either barriers or catalysts to success” (p. 2). Additionally, many of these studies focus on the experiences of Black women and, to a lesser degree, Latinas. Researchers often leave the experiences of Native American and Asian women

out of the larger narrative of women of color in higher education. Graduate women of color are also marginalized within this research as the majority of studies focus primarily on the experiences of undergraduates or faculty. This group of women represents a unique intersection as they carry with them the experiences of being undergraduates and many of them may have faculty aspirations. Lastly, studies on the experiences of women of color in higher education have typically used qualitative methodology. Including qualitative and quantitative data and incorporating a mixed methods approach can facilitate a more holistic understanding of the experiences of women of color within an institutional setting and offer new insights that go beyond using a single approach. To my knowledge, however, there are minimal (if any) studies that have implemented a mixed methods approach to investigate the differences and commonalities in the experiences of women of color based on race/ethnicity in the “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998) of the PWI.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

As Hurtado (2003) noted in her commentary on the work of Cynthia Dillard (2000), theory should come out of “what we live, breathe, and experience in our everyday lives” (p. 216) so that social science can lead to social justice. In order to do so, researchers must bring attention to those whose needs and experiences they often make invisible, such as women of color. In this study, I bring attention to the complex experiences of graduate women of color and how their multiple roles and identities and the institutional environment influence those experiences. As there is also a need for more research about this topic from an anti-deficit perspective, I intentionally endeavor to address the productive potential of navigating multiple marginality and multiple pressures and the emancipatory possibilities of knowledge from the margins.

The purpose of this study is to understand the individual and collective experiences of graduate women of color at one PWI as they negotiate their multiple identities, roles, and responsibilities and the pressures and conflicts associated with them. In doing so, central to this study is the inclusion of non-Black racial/ethnic minority women, in addition to Black women, into the understanding of the experiences of women of color in PWIs. Building upon this inclusion, I explore the commonalities and differences of the experiences across race/ethnicity and to question if serving all women of color equally is. I hope to contribute to filling the current gaps of research in this area through mixed methods exploration that amplifies the voices of women of color in the academy, emphasizing agency and not simply marginalization. As previously mentioned, researchers have conducted a number of studies that focused on individual experiences of women of color and individual factors that contribute to or are barriers to success in higher education environments, most of which are focused on the experiences of Black women. However, few have explored these experiences by including the institutional and structural influences or by being intentional in including non-Black women of color.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, I developed the following research questions:

Q1a: Do graduate women of color at one PWI identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé's (2010) Superwoman Schema (SWS) Conceptual Framework? [QUANTITATIVE/QUALITATIVE]

Q1b: Are there statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity?
[QUANTITATIVE]

Q2a: What are the various identities and roles that women of color graduate students negotiate within the context of their experiences as students? [QUALITATIVE]

Q2b: How do these negotiations impact their experiences as students?
[QUALITATIVE]

Theoretical Framework

I choose to include four theories in my framework because of the incompleteness of each in addressing the area of study. To achieve the purpose of this study, I investigated the intersections of the individual experiences of women of color with the institutional and socio-cultural/socio-structural conditions in which they occur. Through combining the theories and concepts of Critical Geography (Helfenbein, 2010; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989), Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 1998; Chang et al., 2017; Urrietta, 2007), Critical Race Feminism (CRF) (Wing, 1997; May, 2015; Pratt-Clarke, 2010; Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015) and Superwoman Schema (SWS) (Woods- Giscombé, 2010), I am able to explore the individual and collective experiences of women of color within the institutional and socio-cultural/socio-structural contexts of one PWI in a way that highlights both marginality and possibility. I discuss these theories in detail in Chapter 2.

Type of Research

I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (quan → QUAL = explain quantitative results) that involved collecting quantitative data first and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In the first, quantitative phase of the study, I collected demographic information and data on adherence to the superwoman role using the Giscombé Superwoman Schema Questionnaire (G-SWS-Q) (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé et al., 2019) from 44 graduate students at State

University (a large, public university in the South) who identify as women of color. I conducted a second, qualitative phase consisting of semi-structured interviews with 12 of the survey participants as a follow-up to the quantitative results to help explain how graduate women of color navigate the experience of their multiple identities and multiple roles in the context of the institution and how those experiences vary by race/ethnicity.

Organization of the Dissertation

There are nine chapters in this dissertation. The first chapter introduces the focus of the intended research. I also include the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, overview of theoretical framework, and overview of research questions and methodology in Chapter one. Chapter two provides a review of literature focused on the hegemonic environment of higher education and the experiences of women of color in higher education with a focus on graduate students. I also provide further detail into the theories concepts that comprise the theoretical framework of this study: Critical Geography, Figured Worlds, Critical Race Feminism, and Superwoman Schema. Chapter three discusses the methodology used in the study with details about the research paradigm/epistemology, researcher positionality, research design, participant and site selection, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness and rigor. Chapters four through eight detail the findings of the study with Chapter four focusing on the quantitative findings and five through eight addressing the qualitative findings. Finally, I present my conclusion and overall reflections in Chapter nine.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

I reviewed relevant literature in this chapter to gain an understanding of the experiences of graduate women of color negotiating their multiple identities and multiple roles within the context of a PWI. This chapter demonstrates that a gap exists in the research related to the experiences of graduate women of color, particularly regarding the inclusion of non-Black women of color, the intersections of gender and race with other social identities and roles, and the emancipatory possibility of marginality. I also present the theories and constructs that frame my research approach in order to explore how space/place influences how graduate women of color navigate their multiple identities and roles. I present this chapter in the following sections: 1) the search for relevant literature; 2) the hegemonic space of higher education; 3) the experiences of graduate women of color in PWIs; 4) graduate women of color negotiating multiple roles and multiple identities; 5) theoretical framework with selected theoretical and conceptual models (Critical Geography, Figured Worlds, Critical Race Feminism, and Superwoman Schema); and 6) chapter summary.

Search for Relevant Literature

There is limited research on graduate women of color and their experiences negotiating multiple identities and roles. I conducted a comprehensive search of online databases to locate relevant literature published in the last two decades (2000-2020) on “negotiating,” “multiple identities,” and “multiple roles,” among graduate women of color. Searches also included the keywords “minority women graduate students” and keywords for the various racial/ethnic groups. The primary searches in the Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Education Source, Gender Studies Database, APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, SocIndex databases returned 36 results. I manually screened the articles for duplication and language and excluded the articles if

they were (a) outside of the 20-year range, (b) were not written in English, (c) were not about experiences at PWIs in the United States, (d) included participants that were not women of color graduate students, and/or (e) did not center on experiences of negotiating multiple identities and/or roles. I provide further information on the literature selection and screening in Appendix A. Notably, over half of the articles were published within the last five years, and all but one of the articles focused on qualitative research methods, with the majority being personal narrative or autoethnography. I identified other relevant studies by conducting backwards searches on the initial articles found.

Much of the research focuses exclusively on the intersections of the gendered/racialized experiences of graduate women of color at PWIs, primarily focusing on the experiences of Black women and Latinas. Black women and Latinas were participants in 64% and 36% of the articles, respectively, while Asian and Native American women were participants in 14% and 11% of the articles, respectively. A few studies discuss the intersections of gender and race with other social identities such as class, sexuality, and first-generation college student status. The role of motherhood also showed up in 14% of the literature. Studies of graduate women of color negotiating multiple roles and identities emphasize that “[e]xperiences of racism, sexism, isolation, and marginalization coupled with the ‘balance’ and negotiation of various roles complicate the academic trajectories for graduate women of color” (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007, p. 282) and impact their overall well-being. These studies also discuss various resistance and coping mechanisms that women of color enact as a response to these stressors; many of these responses are closely related to the characteristics of the Superwoman Schema. However, the majority of the research that addresses identity negotiation and role negotiation for graduate women of color focuses on the experiences of Black women and Latinas. Overall, there are no

recent empirically-based studies that explore the identity and role negotiation experiences of graduate women of color from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds; therefore, more research in this area is needed. The following sections discuss relevant research about the hegemonic space of higher education (particularly PWIs), the environmental microaggressions that women of color often experience due to their race and gender, identity and role negotiation, resistance and coping strategies, and the potential for institutional transformation.

The Hegemonic Space of Higher Education

Higher education, and formal schooling in general, has historically been a site of hegemony in the United States. From the early development of public schools during the colonial period, schools have functioned as agents of socialization to form and pass down “common sense.” “Common sense” is a term described by Antonio Gramsci as an “incoherent set of generally held beliefs common to any society” (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971, p. 322). One of the goals of the beliefs, ideas, and worldviews communicated through schooling was to establish a national character that would “establish social control from above” (Vallance, 1973/4, p. 13). As cultural diversity increased due to immigration, the creation of schools for Black and Native students, and the eventual desegregation of “mainstream” schools, schools functioned to assimilate students of color to “American” norms (Spring, 2018; Vallance, 1973/4). The practices of assimilation are still in effect in present day. The values of this “national character” often contradict with the lived experience and “good sense” of non-dominant groups from various social identities. “Good sense” is a Gramscian term which refers to the “practical empirical common sense in the English sense of the term” (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971, p. 322). Dominant groups exert influence to shape “common sense,” which in turn contributes to contradictory consciousness (Levinson et al., 2015). Contradictory consciousness occurs

when an individual holds one consciousness based on lived experience and another based on societal norms (Levinson et al., 2015). This concept is very similar to DuBois's (1961) "double consciousness," which he spoke of as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one black body" (p. 17). Through contradictory consciousness, we are able to understand hegemony, "an active process whereby legitimacy is sought and maintained by the dominant group through the balance of consent (that is, tacit support for the dominant group) and coercion (that is, the threat or use of forms of force)" (Levinson et al., 2015, p. 53). The dominant groups shape the "common sense" of higher education, creating a contradictory consciousness that impacts how students from non-dominant groups navigate higher education (Levinson et al., 2015).

Higher education and the formation of the dominant American national culture are inextricably linked due to the past and present role of the university as "producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture" (Readings, 1996, as cited in Palmadessa, 2017, p. 1). As such, institutions of higher education generally reflect white hegemonic values and norms (Hughes, 2013; Caldwell & Stewart, 2001; Shotton et al., 2013). The role of higher education was to prepare white men for roles of leadership in society (Museus et al., 2015). However, for those not in the dominant group (white, male, upper class), the dominant national cultural identity often conflicts with individual identities, which parallels the tension between Gramsci's common sense and good sense (Palmadessa, 2017; Levinson et al., 2015). Palmadessa (2017) introduces Gee's (2000, as cited in Palmadessa, 2017) framework for understanding identity to explore the relationship and tension between the individual and the individual's place within higher education. This framework provides

a lens to interpret how individual identities and an individual's "performance in society" are important to the understanding of "the workings of historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces ... in the formation and workings of 'modern societies' ..." and the implications of neoliberalism "for identity and changes in identity." (p. 11, original ellipses)

Through the concepts of institution identity, discourse identity, and affinity identity, Gee (2000, as cited in Palmadessa, 2017) points out the ways that higher education imposes situations in which individuals must consent and or face coercion. Institution identity is "an identity not sought by the individual, rather it is imposed upon the individual by the authority of an institution reinforced by laws, rules, regulations, and traditions of the institution... [and] influences how individuals make meaning of their role or position in society" (Palmadessa, 2017, p. 11). This identity aligns with the coercive form of hegemony. Discourse identity "perpetuates the accepted identity through individuals' interactions that are acceptable within the confines of the imposed identity in their given society and historical moment, and recreates a narrative through which the individuals can reciprocate a set of traits and normative values that are privileged in the national identity" (Palmadessa, 2017, p. 11). This identity aligns with the ways consent functions to support hegemony. The last identity, affinity identity, combines elements of coercion and consent. It refers to "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" (Gee, 2000, as cited in Palmadessa, 2017, p. 12) which create experiences that shape identity. "Businesses and other entities modeled in corporate structures socially engineer affinity groups to [e]nsure that people 'gain certain experiences, that they experience themselves and other[s] in certain ways, and that they behave and value in certain ways.' These experiences build allegiance through bonding and commonality in experiences and practices" (Palmadessa, 2017, p. 12).

Marco-Bujosa, Levy, and McNeill (2018) provide education-specific examples of each of these types of identities in their research exploring the identity of an in-service elementary science teacher. Teachers discussing the “roles conferred by the institution or context that shape their teaching/learning” was an example of institution identity (p. 84). “How teachers discuss and enact their science teaching/learning to teach science” was a representation of discourse identity (p. 84). Lastly, teachers describing “relationships or interactions with others shaping their teaching/learning” was an example of affinity identity (p. 84). Gee’s framework displays the relationship between institutional culture and individual identity and how this relationship shapes the experiences of all those who occupy the institutional space.

Since schooling is a function of hegemony, in which “consensus is maintained and the knowledge of the ruling bloc is legitimated” (Levinson et al., 2015, p. 60), participation by women of color in higher education is, at the very least, partially consensual. The multiple marginality of women of color creates “good sense,” born of lived experience, that is in opposition to the “common sense” of the dominant group, transmitted through schooling; the collision of good sense and common sense produces a contradictory consciousness. Thus, “if the very nature of hegemony is educative – that is, if the ideas upon which rule is based are taught daily through cultural apparatuses and structures of civil society – then a counterhegemonic education is needed to illuminate the cultural elements and undermine the structures” (Levinson et al., 2015, p. 76). This process of illumination creates a war of position which “occurs within the realm of ideas and culture and challenges dominant discourses that shape common sense” (Levinson et al. 2015, p. 63). For women of color in higher education, this war of position can create a tug-of-war between their various intersecting identities and roles and the dominant culture of higher education. This relationship between women of color, as the multiplicity of

their identities, and the space/place of higher education can create contradictory consciousness due to their position as “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004) because of the perceived incompatibility of cultural values.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that individuals in power created the space of higher education for elite, white males as a means to prepare them for positions of power and authority (Museus et al., 2015). Therefore, those who occupy positions of power and authority can see individuals who do not identify with their group as outsiders. Collins (1990/2000) used the term “outsider-within” to describe the existence of Black women within dominant U.S. culture: “Outsiders-within are able to gain access to the knowledge of the group [in this case, white academia] in which they are allowed access (within), but the power structure within the group remains unequal (outsider)” (Baxley, 2012, p. 48). Puwar (2004) builds on this foundation:

Formally, today, women and racialised minorities can enter positions that they were previously excluded from. And the fact that they do is evidence of this. However, social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy. There is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time. While all can, in theory, enter, it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the “natural” occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being “out of place.” Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders. (p. 8)

Simply put, women of color existing in PWIs “are seen as disrupting those contexts, presenting ontological uncertainty for white males whose identities are seen as defining the environments” (Alexander-Floyd, 2015, p. 465).

Graduate Women of Color in Predominantly White Institutions

Despite their status as “space invaders” and “outsiders within,” participation by women of color in graduate programs is increasing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2020, women of color made up 22.4% of the total graduate degree enrollment (includes master’s and doctoral programs as well as professional doctoral programs) and 36.7% of the total graduate female enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, Nov 2021). This is a slight increase from just two years prior when women of color made up 20.76% of the total graduate degree enrollment and a slight decrease from the 38.6% of the total graduate female enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, Sep 2019). In terms of degree completion, women of color received 19.7% of all conferred master’s degrees (31.9% of all female master’s degrees) and 18.5% of all conferred doctoral degrees (33.1% of all female doctoral degrees) in the 2020-2021 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, Sep 2022). These numbers increased from 18.8% of all conferred master’s degrees (36% of all female master’s degrees) and 17.1% of all conferred doctoral degrees (35.3% of all female doctoral degrees) in 2017-2018 (U.S. Department of Education, Oct 2019). Within these statistics, it is important to note that Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander women followed by American Indian/Native American women have the lowest representation within graduate enrollment and degree completion among the racial/ethnic groups. Another interesting finding is that although they have lower enrollment than Black women (14.1% of total female enrollment) and Latinas (11.55% of total female enrollment), Asian women (7.2% of total female enrollment) have the highest percentage of doctoral degree completion among women of color (11.2% of all female doctoral degrees). These enrollment and degree completion statistics show that there are disparities in educational

outcomes for women of color in comparison to the white majority and among the various racial/ethnic groups that make up graduate women of color.

Although the numbers of women of color entering into and persisting through graduate education are increasing, the institutions that graduate women of color occupy, particularly PWIs, rarely adjust their infrastructures and norms to create more inclusive and equitable spaces for these populations of women (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Moua, 2018) which results in marginalization. Young (2000, as cited in Baxley, 2012) defines marginalization as “the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions” (p. 47). In a study of faculty women of color, Turner (2002) discusses the concept of “multiple marginality” and how the more an individual’s identities differ from the norm of a space the more they affect social interactions. She refers to the idea that “[s]ituations in which a woman of color might experience marginality are multiplied depending on her marginal status within various contexts” (Turner, 2002, p. 77). Depending on the context, women of color can experience marginality based on race, gender, sexuality, first-generation college student status, or an intersection of these identities and more. The conditions of an institutional space—“the culture, habits, decisions, practices and policies that make up campus life” (Harvey, 1991, p, 128), also known as campus climate – determine the degree of marginalization.

Campus Climate

Campbell-Whatley et al. (2015) define campus climate as “the interplay among people, processes, institutional culture, and represent[ing] important aspects of an organization including perceptions and expectations in the academic community” (p. 40). Campus climate at PWIs has to be understood within the larger societal and historical contexts and systems of power and oppression. PWIs have a legacy of denying and limiting access and opportunity to students of

color. This history of racial segregation in schools directly influences the experiences of current students of color (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1998). However, many of these experiences have not changed: students of color often still characterize racial climates of higher education institutions as hostile and unfriendly (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Ancis et al., 2000; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Goward et al., 2021).

Students of color at PWIs have reported experiencing both overt and covert racism, including racial microaggressions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). They further define environmental racial microaggressions as “macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 277). These systemic and environmental factors can include community and cultural influences, policies, or laws (Sue et al., 2007). Examples of environmental microaggressions that people of color experience in the higher education space are assumptions of criminality based on race, social isolation, cultural bias in the curriculum, lack of representation, tokenism, and pressure to conform (Solórzano et al., 2000; McCabe, 2009; Mills, 2020; Douglas, 1998). These experiences of micro- and macro- level aggressions can have a negative impact on physical and emotional well-being and on academic, social, and psychological development (Nadal et al., 2017; Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015; Solórzano et al., 2000; Reynolds et al., 2010).

Environmental microaggressions affect all those within a social space but in different ways, as various studies exposing the different perspectives and experiences among distinct racial/ethnic minority groups illuminate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Torres-Harding, & Turner,

2015; Nadal et al. 2012). For example, in Harper and Hurtado's (2007) qualitative study of campus racial climates at five large PWIs, white and Asian American student participants expressed social satisfaction at their institutions; Latino and Native American students were less satisfied but mostly expressed being grateful to be at their institution; and Black students expressed the most social dissatisfaction at their institutions. Other studies highlight intersectionality and discuss experiences of environmental microaggressions at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017; Vaccaro, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2010; Weber et al., 2018). These studies reveal how institutional power exerts itself on groups differently and the necessity to speak to the specific experiences of the different intersections of race with other social identities.

Environmental Microaggressions Experienced by Graduate Women of Color

Despite the opportunities for personal and community advancement that women of color experience in the higher education environment, research shows they also experience hostile campus climates resulting in experiences of marginalization, silencing, isolation and exclusion, and tokenization (Esposito, 2011; Turner, 2002; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Ellis, 2001; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019). Various studies illuminate the impact that campus climate has on the experiences of graduate women of color. These experiences include having their worth and the value of their scholarship questioned by peers and faculty as a result of their minoritized social identities (Baxley, 2012; Alexander & Hermann, 2016; González, 2007; Trucks-Bordeaux, 2003); microaggressions resulting from invisibility, such as underrepresentation, isolation, and exclusion (Shotton, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019; Dortch, 2016); and microaggressions resulting from hypervisibility, such as controlling images/stereotypes and tokenism (Moua, 2018; Shavers & Moore, 2014a; Shavers & Moore, 2019; Ramos & Yi, 2020).

In a study comparing the overall experiences of Black and white male and female doctoral students, Ellis (2001) found that Black women doctoral students reported lower levels of satisfaction with and commitment to their degree programs. Studies about Native American doctoral students found that their overall experiences were characterized by being “othered” by individuals within the institution because of their cultures and by internal struggles to reconcile their cultures with the institutional culture of the PWI they attended (Fox, 2009; Trucks-Bordeaux, 2003; Ballew, 1996, as cited in Shotton, 2018). It is important to note that it is not the identities of graduate women of color that create barriers to academic success and degree completion but the interaction between these identities and the hegemonic institutional space.

Presumed Incompetent

Women of color experience various cultural expectations, assumptions, stereotypes, and obstacles that can cause conflict as they persist through their programs. These conflicts can be gendered, racialized, class-based, or an intersectional combination of these identities and others. One of the most common identity-based microaggression that graduate women of color experience is being “presumed incompetent” (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012) by having their intelligence and scholarship questioned. In her autoethnography about her experiences as a doctoral student at a PWI, Baxley (2012) recalled an incident when a white colleague questioned her opportunity to participate in a faculty pipeline program because the colleague thought she had the opportunity because of her race and not because of her intelligence. She noted, “This environment creates additional stress and resentment, placing women of color in a scenario where we constantly feel the need to prove ourselves more than our peers, even when we know our expertise is beyond reproach” (Baxley, 2012, p. 58).

Sometimes the questions of intelligence intersect with the particular academic discipline, particularly STEM disciplines (Alexander & Hermann, 2016; Ong et al., 2018; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019). Participants in Wilkins-Yel et al.'s (2019) study of 176 graduate women of color enrolled in STEM doctorate programs recalled instances when male colleagues and faculty questioned their competence because of their identities as women, women of color, and mothers. In addition to having their intelligence and place in academia questioned, women of color who choose to incorporate non-Western, non-dominant epistemologies often have the value and rigor of their scholarship questioned (Trucks-Bordeaux, 2003; Minnett et al., 2019; Patterson-Stephens & Hernández, 2018). In their narrative of sisterhood pedagogy, Patterson-Stephens and Hernández (2018) connect the notion of individual intelligence and scholarly credibility within PWIs by saying, "If a scholar's knowledge creation lacks uniformity with white cultural normativity, her intelligence and existence is questioned" (p. 401). Trucks- Bordeaux (2003) attributed the resistance of PWIs to scholarship that centers on non-white epistemologies to "a lack of understanding and more specifically an unwillingness to understand Indigenous peoples at all" (p. 417). The resistance and rejection that graduate women of color often experience within PWIs as it relates to their intersectional identities and scholarship can result in additional environmental microaggressions that stem from invisibility or hypervisibility.

Esposito (2011) explains how these experiences are rooted in the dual concepts of invisibility and hypervisibility and are embodied experiences in response to the gaze of power on their raced, gendered, and classed bodies. Esposito (2011) refers to the body as "a central text on which struggles over dominant meanings about race, class, and gender are lived out" (p. 145). Additionally, Esposito (2011) names the power that racism and sexism have to influence how women define and interpret their bodies as objects of "the gaze." An important addition to this

notion is that the bodies of women of color are both products of and producers of race, gender, and class (Esposito, 2011). The bodies of women of color are “as much sites for the inscription of hegemonic values as they are sites of critical agency, power, and pleasure” (Esposito, 2011, p. 144). They are not passive recipients but active producers and should be recognized as such in order to avoid deficit narratives. Here we see contradictory consciousness—the tension between “good sense” and “common sense”—manifesting and, through a Foucauldian lens, how bodies are sites of struggle and power (Levinson et al. 2015; Esposito, 2011). We are also reminded that women of color are “bodies out of place” (Puar, 2004) within the space of higher education that are either dismissed (invisibility) or put under surveillance (hypervisibility).

Invisibility

Invisibility is the result of microaggressions when members of a community overlook, dismiss, devalue, ignore, and delegitimize individuals because of their identity or identities (Franklin, 1999; Mena & Vaccaro, 2017; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019; Truitt, 2010). Franklin (1999) proposed an invisibility paradigm that emerged from research on Black graduate students’ identity struggles after negative racial incidents. He defines invisibility as “a psychological experience in which an individual may feel his or her personal identity and ability are undermined by prejudice and racism ... causing individuals to question whether their talents, abilities, personalities, or worth are undervalued or unrecognized” (Truitt, 2010, p. 247). Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) developed the term “intersectional invisibility” to explain the experiences of people with multiple subordinate-group identities as it relates to how androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism positions them in society. Concisely, “[b]ecause people with multiple subordinate identities do not usually fit the prototypes of their respective subordinate groups,” they will experience intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns

and Eibach, 2008, p. 378). Historical narratives and cultural understandings of women of color impact how society perceives and receives them as socially invisible. The intersectional experiences of women of color often get lost in historical narratives about race or historical narratives about gender. To emphasize this point, bell hooks (1989, as cited in Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) says,

No other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or a present part of the larger group of “women” in this culture... (p. 384)

I would argue that this statement is also true for other groups of non-white women. This cultural invisibility “refers to the failure of cultural representation to capture the distinctive experiences of intersectionally subordinate groups” (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 384). Hurtado (2003) says that this “fragmentation and the struggle to make oneself whole happens primarily when social identities are devalued” (p. 221). Dominant, “common sense” notions of culture conceal and silence the real-life experiences of women of color.

Various studies reference women of color experiencing invisibility through being absent from the curriculum (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007; Shotton, 2018); underrepresentation (Shotton, 2018; Dortch, 2016); isolation and exclusion (González, 2007; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019); and having their racialized experiences as women silenced, ignored or minimized (Alexander & Hermann, 2016; Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). Shotton (2018) speaks to the experience of the underrepresentation of Native people in general and Native women specifically, both as participants within the academy and as subjects within research. This underrepresentation served as motivation for the participants to pursue graduate degrees (Shotton, 2018). In contrast, Dortch (2016) discussed the burden of underrepresentation for

Black women who are “tired of being the only Black woman inside and outside classroom spaces” (p. 356). In a study of Latina doctoral student experiences framed through a resiliency lens, the participants discussed the isolation and segregation they felt as the only Latina or only woman of color in their department (González, 2007). Studies conducted by Alexander and Hermann (2016) and Souto-Manning and Ray (2007) both reference encounters that Black women had with white male peers and faculty in which they felt ignored, silenced, and dismissed. In a STEM class dominated by white males, one Black woman noted that the class “only listened when they [white males] had something to say” (Alexander & Hermann, 2016, p. 312). One of the authors of Souto-Manning and Ray’s (2007) personal narrative recalls “being ‘invisibilized’ in class as in, ‘When I speak, the eyes roll.’ The institutional discourse is such that ‘no one cares what the black woman has to say’” (p. 285). These examples highlight the various ways that graduate women of color can face challenges associated with marginalization, misrepresentation, and disempowerment due to invisibility (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019).

Hypervisibility

In addition to often being rendered invisible within spaces of higher education, women of color are also often simultaneously subjected to heightened visibility or hypervisibility (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019). Settles et al. (2019) define hypervisibility as “heightened scrutiny and surveillance where failures are magnified and individuals lack control over how they are perceived by others” (p. 63). Studies about the experiences of women of color with hypervisibility reference combatting controlling images and deficit-based stereotypes (Moua, 2018; Horsford et al., 2018; Shavers & Moore, 2014a); objectification of their bodies (i.e., clothing, hair, physical body) (Krusemark, 2012); being seen as the voice for their racial/ethnic community or people of color in general (Baxley, 2012; Ramos & Yi, 2020; Trucks-

Bordeaux, 2003); and having their bodies used to instruct their White counterparts about difference (Esposito, 2011).

Moua (2018) discussed controlling images related to her identity as an Asian American woman, including the model minority myth and stereotypes of Asian women being “submissive, obedient, easily manipulated, and always conforming” (p. 13). Horsford et al. (2018) and Shavers and Moore (2014a) spoke of controlling images related to Black students that could be internalized or projected on them from others that positioned them as “problems” within the institution. Graduate women of color also experienced tokenism at the intersections of gender and race. Participants in a study conducted by Ramos & Yi (2020) shared that they were “tokenized as the only person of color and exoticized as a woman of color” (p. 146). Through these experiences of combating controlling images and resisting tokenism, graduate women of color often felt pressure to perform in various ways: either to perform as “the token of [their] esteemed race” (Trucks-Bordeaux, 2003, p. 417) or to perform as the exception to the rule to negate deficit-based stereotypes.

Overall, the literature regarding the experiences of graduate women of color within PWIs shows that they experience various degrees of marginality due to their status as “outsiders within.” These experiences are influenced by the historical and cultural contexts of academia as well as interactions between people within these contexts. The combination of macro and micro interactions and processes create environments that are often hostile and unwelcoming for women of color as they navigate microaggressions that exist at the intersections of race and gender.

Graduate Women of Color Negotiating Multiple Roles and Multiple Identities

In addition to negotiating their racial and gendered identities, other social identities—such as sexuality (Glover, 2017), class (Crumb et al., 2019), and first-generation college student status (Leyva, 2011)—also intersect with and influence how graduate women of color experience their academic environment. Graduate women of color are also often in the position of negotiating various roles that impact their academic pursuits, including spouse (Leyva, 2011; Rogers et al., 2019), mother (Ramos & Yi, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019; Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007), employee (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017) and responsibilities to family and community (Leyva, 2011; Espinoza, 2010; Shotton, 2018). To address these multiple, often conflicting identities and roles, women of color, Grace and Gouthro (2000) write,

are left to work within a narrowly constructed institutional definition of commitment to graduate education that frequently ignores ... their right to balance commitments in terms of their responsibility in the homeplace and the university. (p. 10)

Experiences of marginalization due to race, gender, and other marginalized identities combined with attempts to “balance” multiple roles often create tensions and complications as graduate women of color navigate the culture of academia.

Communities of color often emphasize the importance of family, community, interdependence, and cooperation over the independence, autonomy, competition, and personal achievement reflected in the dominant American cultural values and thus in the values of higher education (Espinoza, 2010). Additionally, within communities of color, gender role expectations can cause conflict between traditional cultural values and academic and career pursuits. These role conflicts can create a double-bind for women of color, where they negotiate perceived

conflicts in roles or identities which can impact their academics, their relationships, and their self-concept (Rogers et al., 2019; Shavers & Moore, 2014b; Leyva, 2011; Espinoza, 2010).

For example, many Latina graduate students may experience the double bind of the internal and familial pressures to be academically successful and the gender role expectations and the traditional cultural expectations of familismo (Espinoza, 2010) and marianismo (Leyva, 2011). Familismo emphasizes strong attachment to nuclear and extended family and places the needs of the family over the needs of the individual (Espinoza, 2010). This value includes expectations such as caring for siblings, contributing financially, spending time with family, and staying close to home (Espinoza, 2010; Patterson-Stephens & Hernández, 2018). Similarly, marianismo refers to gendered expectations for women, prescribing selflessness, subservience and subordination to men and self-sacrifice for the family (Leyva, 2011). In her research on first-generation Latina graduate students, Leyva (2011) found that all the participants in the study “articulated the difficulties of living between two worlds: Mexican and American, family support for education and ambivalence [towards their educational pursuits]” (p. 29), and cultural gendered expectations and professional/academic expectations. In order to negotiate the boundaries between two worlds, Latina graduate students employ multiple strategies, including integrating their family and academic expectations and obligations and keeping the two worlds separate by shifting between them (Leyva, 2011; Espinoza, 2010).

Women of color also often negotiate their academic pursuits with the role of motherhood (Patterson-Stephens & Hernández, 2018; Rogers et al., 2019). Mothering while in graduate school can create strains on finances, time, and relationships with those who do not have parental responsibilities. In a study of Black mothers in doctoral programs, “[a]ll the women stated that while pursuing their doctorate they had two committees. The first determined the quality of their

academic work, but the second, a family committee, evaluated and critiqued their mothering” (Rogers et al., 2019, p. 97). The graduate school environment is often in conflict with the responsibilities of motherhood and can create pressure for graduate mothers to choose between academics and their children. These conflicts and pressure can delay or prevent graduate mothers from completing their degree (Rogers et al., 2019; Maher et al., 2004). Rogers et al. (2019) highlighted that “feelings of self-doubt and insecurity also manifest during conferences because they are spaces focused on academics (i.e., research and publication) and leave little or no opportunity for those who balance the roles of both mother and academic to discuss or process their experiences” (p. 98).

Graduate women of color also negotiate their racial, gendered, and academic/professional identities as they persist through their graduate programs (Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Harris, 2007). Despite the hostile campus climates that women of color often experience at PWIs, they persist to graduation and, in the case of Black women, often at a quicker pace than their peers (Ellis, 2001). Values and behaviors related to the strong Black woman ideal may contribute to this persistence as they encourage resilience, motivation, and managing multiple roles, but that success often comes at a cost. The strong Black woman ideal can cause Black women to damage their mental and emotional health, hinder them from creating or maintaining close relationships, ignore their needs, minimize their feelings, and prevent them from asking for help in order to present a façade of strength (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Romero, 2000). Research has also shown that graduate women of color from other racial/ethnic groups also internalize similar values and behaviors, including self-sacrifice and prioritizing the needs of family and community over their own needs (Leyva, 2011; Espinoza, 2010).

These dualities/double binds/“double-edge swords” (Shavers & Moore, 2014b) present graduate women of color with both means of support and motivation to persist through graduate school (Shotton, 2018; Vakalahi et al., 2014) as well as pressures and conflicts that can impact academic success and overall well-being (Glover, 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014b; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019). These pressures are in addition to the pressures to “prove them wrong” by resisting gendered racism in order to overcome the adversity that many graduate women of color experience as “space invaders” within PWIs (Shavers & Moore, 2014b). Both types of conflicts or negotiations exist due to the incompatibility of the cultural values of graduate women of color with the cultural values of the institution and academic as a whole (Espinoza, 2010; Leyva, 2011; Rogers et al., 2019).

Impact on Well-being

Experiencing environmental microaggressions and negotiating multiple conflicting roles can impact the overall well-being of graduate women of color, including physical health, mental and emotional health, and academic productivity (Glover, 2017; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2017; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Nadal et al. (2017) found that experiencing high incidences of racial microaggressions predicted mental health, with significant correlation to depressive symptoms. Chronic stress from microaggressions can also have a negative physical impact, including higher levels of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and coronary heart disease (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Baxley (2012) discussed how the environment of PWIs “created additional stress and resentment, placing women of color in a scenario where we constantly feel the need to prove ourselves more than our peers...” (p. 58). These experiences can wreak havoc on the spirit and psyche of women of color (Williams, 1987; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) refer to this effect as “shifting”: “Shifting is

often, internal, invisible. It's the chipping away at her sense of self, and her feeling of wholeness and centeredness" (p. 7). Psychological issues, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and self-hatred, can manifest as a result of shifting (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Resistance and Coping Strategies

Graduate women of color in various studies have likened the experience of shifting to wearing a mask (Shavers & Moore, 2014a; Rogers et al., 2019; Leyva, 2011). As a protective strategy, Black students and other students of color may "stifle their own voice and take on another—typically a Eurocentric one. Ironically, this results in the continued suppression of their identity" (Rogers et al., 2019, p. 95). Shavers and Moore (2014a) discussed how the participants in their study policed their language, appearance, and interactions in order to always appear "professional"; participants felt the need to "control how members in their departments perceived them" (p. 398). The Black women in this study felt that wearing the "academic mask" was necessary for them to be successful in their doctoral pursuits while simultaneously recognizing that it was damaging to their well-being; for them, "overall well-being and academic persistence and success [were] opposing aspects that [could not] be enjoyed simultaneously" (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, p. 404).

Graduate women of color also implement other navigational strategies to negotiate their identities and persist through and survive the often-hostile environments of PWIs. These strategies including resisting expectations based on controlling images (González, 2006, 2007), internalizing controlling images and questioning their abilities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011), creating spaces of support and resistance against marginalization (Squire & McCann, 2018; Gildersleeve et al., 2011), proving "them" wrong (Ramos & Yi, 2020), disengaging from academics and isolating themselves from faculty or peers (González, 2006, 2007), and educating

others about oppressive systems (Ramos & Yi, 2020). It is important to note that all of the resistance and coping strategies mentioned had to do with the individual self-presentation of women of color and not with institutional change. However, Souto-Manning and Ray (2007) made an important connection between individual agency, collective agency, and institutional change in saying, “We’re defining what it means to be a scholar” (p. 286). They go on to say:

By positioning ourselves as agents in “we’re redefining,” we see ourselves as capable of change, of affecting not only our positions but the positions occupied by women of color in the academy. We position ourselves as women with collective agency, who together can chart and carry out a course of action. (p. 286)

Building on this connection, I believe that women of color recognizing their individual and collective agency within higher education spaces will lead to institutional transformation.

Women of color often negotiate multiple roles in addition to negotiating multiple identities. Overall, the literature has shown that often these negotiations create stress and strain and impact the holistic well-being of women of color. These negotiations often serve as a survival mechanism and motivating factor that encourages graduate women of color to persist through their degree programs. The perceived benefits and challenges that result from these experiences show the complexity of how graduate women of color negotiate their identities and roles within PWIs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study incorporates four theories due to the incompleteness of using a single theory or concept. As Abes (2009) puts forth, “all theoretical perspectives that guide research are incomplete” (p. 141). Lather (2006) complements this notion

by arguing that the multiplicity of realities and lived experiences necessitates the use of multiple paradigms. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) named this approach *bricolage*. They explained:

The bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power. The task of the bricoleur is to attack this complexity, uncovering the invisible artifacts of power and culture, and documenting the nature of their influence on not only their own works but on scholarship in general. (p. 317)

Abes (2009) incorporates Kincheloe and McLaren's (2005) bricolage with Anzaldúa's (1999) borderlands in her discussion of "theoretical borderlands." Anzaldúa describes the borderland as a "both/and" location where "individuals fluctuate between two discrete worlds, participating in both and wholly belonging to neither" (Abes, 2009, p. 143). For this study, I will utilize "theoretical borderlands" to bring multiple theoretical perspectives, such as critical theory and constructivism, together in order to describe the complex experiences and understandings of identity among graduate women of color. For this study, Figured Worlds and Superwoman Schema are the constructivist theories that focus on individual and collective constructions of reality for graduate women of color, and Critical Geography and Critical Race Feminism are the critical theories that bring attention to the power relations that exist due to social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values in the spaces that graduate women of color navigate (Lincoln et al., 2011). Positioning myself in a "both/and" location between constructivism and critical theory allows me to be both a "passionate participant," as a facilitator of the reconstruction of multiple voices, and a "transformative intellectual," as an advocate for change (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 101).

First, I will discuss Critical Geography and Figured Worlds in order to position "the dynamic and continuous process of social-psychological exchanges between individuals and

their environments” (Chang et al., 2017, p. 195) within the larger context of the power structures that shape those environments. The qualitative phase explores Figured Worlds in an attempt to define the multiple “historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed worlds” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 7) within which graduate women of color negotiate their multiple identities and roles. I will then bring attention to Critical Race Feminism as a means to frame the unique experiences of women of color and to discuss possibility and transformation within higher education spaces. Finally, I discuss Superwoman Schema as a possible outcome of coping response that graduate women of color engage in as a result of gendered racial pressures and expectations. The quantitative phase operationalizes the Superwoman Schema to determine to what degree graduate women of color enact the superwoman role in response to negotiating their multiple identities and roles.

Critical Geography

The interaction between individuals and their environment are central to this study. According to Helfenbein (2006), “Identity forms emerge in the interaction between space and place” (p. 112). Said another way, “Some might suggest that the question of ‘Who am I?’ needs to begin with, or at least be considered alongside, the spatial consideration of ‘Where am I?’” (Helfenbein, 2019, p. 7). These interrelationships are central to a critical geography frame (Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989). Critical geography focuses on “people and their relationships to one another, the ways in which they create spaces and places both physical and imagined, and the intersections between people and the ecological” (Gershon, 2017, p. 126). Helfenbein and Buendía define space as “the physical, material attributes of the greater world that surrounds human experience” or “the conjuncture of the spatial forces at work on people at any given time” (p. 27). These spatial forces include socially constructed forces such as culture, politics, and

economics and social relations such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Bondi, 2005; Helfenbein & Buendía, 2017). Place refers to a “particular form of – and interaction with – space” and “the ways in which people engage in meaning-making as a relation to particular material locations or spatial relationships and characteristics” (Helfenbein, 2019, p. 5). Space and place create identity through “defining the limits within which people move, navigating and mapping as they go” and by “increasing individuation in relation to others” (Helfenbein, 2006, p. 112). Space and place contain power relations that shape who we are as people. Critical geography “expose[s] the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places” (Hubbard et al., 2002, p. 62). In this context, identity is “a negotiation constantly waged against the structural formations that set limits upon bodies” (Helfenbein, 2019, p. 8). Furthermore, spatial analyses emphasize the everyday, dynamic, lived, and embodied experiences of social life (Soja, 1989; Massey, 1994).

Application to School Contexts

Traditional education research perspectives can present schools as bounded systems, but, on the contrary, schools are complex social systems that are created and shaped by communities, history, politics, economics, and culture. In order to understand the functioning of schools and the interactions that take place in them, a critical geography framework in education stresses “the simultaneous attention to space, place, power, and identity” (Helfenbein, 2011, p. 319), encouraging researchers to see “space” as an essential element in the study of the lived experiences within schools. This framework is relevant for this study due to its purpose of exploring “how education systems and the educators within them can either perpetuate or work against inequality based on race, gender, or other difference” (Helfenbein & Buendía, 2017, p.

31). Various studies have explored students' and educators' perceptions of space, place, and identity as a critical approach to understanding schools and education environments, giving particular attention to lived experiences related to race, gender, and sexual orientation (Wozolek, 2015, 2018; Gershon, 2013).

Usefulness of Theory

As it relates to the intersections of race, gender, and other social identities, scholars use critical geography to explore how environments produce and reproduce social identities through normative understandings of people and places and also produce and reproduce difference through issues related to patriarchy, colonialism, and other oppressive social forces (Helfenbein & Buendía, 2017; Rose, 1993; Massey, 1994; Cope, 1997; Anzaldúa, 1999; Roberts, 1994). For example, Roberts (1994) explored the ways in which colonization involved the construction of racial identities and a racial hierarchy in her book, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*. This construction resulted in the space of whiteness in juxtaposition to the space of Blackness, and those in power constantly reinvented and redefined the racial boundaries of these spaces in order to marginalize and otherize Blackness (Roberts, 1994). This marginalization extends to the intersection of race and gender: "... the very images of what a woman is in our culture have depended upon how we think about race and what representations govern our assumptions" (Roberts, 1994, p. 9). The identities that women of color construct within their graduate school pursuits are both racialized and gendered and are shaped by the social context of the space of higher education and the place of graduate school. Women of color are constantly in the process of negotiating the identities and roles that they bring to the higher education space and the identities and roles that the higher education space imposes upon them.

Figured Worlds

Figured worlds is a concept within the Social Practice Theory of Self and Identity (Holland et al., 1998). Central to this theory is the idea that identity is situated within socially and culturally constructed worlds—figured worlds—and form in process or activity (Holland et al., 1998). Gee (2014) builds on the initial conception of the figured world and defines it as “a picture of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal” (p. 89). As such, “[p]eople ‘figure’ who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationship with the people who perform these worlds. People develop new identities in figured worlds” (Urrieta, 2007, p. 108). These identities are also influenced by larger institutional structures of power (Urrieta et al., 2011). Figured worlds are “continuously imagined, enacted and evolved” (Chang et al., 2017, p. 197), which provides space for agency despite and within the confines of the existing power structures.

Key Constructs and Assumptions

Activity and interaction are central to figured worlds as individuals “respond to what they encounter in their environment in the context of a historical, socially and culturally constructed form of social (inter)action” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 39). Holland et al. (1998) present several characteristics of figured worlds related to this concept. First, figured worlds are “historical phenomena, to which we are recruited or into which we enter, which themselves develop through the work of their participants” (p. 41). Second, figured worlds are “social encounters in which participants’ positions matter” (p. 41). Third, figured worlds are “socially organized and reproduced” and as such they “divide and relate participants (almost as roles), and they depend upon the interaction and the intersubjectivity for perpetuation” (p. 3). The second and third

characteristics emphasize the importance of relationships in the creation and maintenance of figured worlds.

Figured worlds are the foundation for the other concepts within Holland et al.'s (1998) theory: positionality, space of authoring, and world making. "Positionality refers to the positions being offered to (often imposed upon) individuals in different figured worlds" (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017, p. 14). These positions are based on positional identities which "have to do with the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance—within the social-interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127). As it relates to graduate women of color, these identities include but are not limited to gender, race, class, sexuality, and position within the university. Relational identities are also important in the ways that individuals come to understand themselves as actors in the social world because they "have to do with how one identifies one's position relative to others, mediated through the ways one feels comfortable or constrained" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127). Through the combination of positional and relational identities, "[p]eople tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3).

According to Holland et al. (1998), individuals within figured worlds are limited to varying degrees of accepting, rejecting or negotiating the identities offered to or imposed on them. Wagner (2009) echoes this idea in her theoretical concept of "unchosen me" by arguing that Black female college students do not get to choose their identities but are limited to choosing components of self that fit within the figured world of a PWI and are subjected to cultural and institutional norms. Participants in the study reported that the context influenced their presentation of self. Therefore, Black women and other women of color "may accept identities

that they may not have otherwise chosen as a strategy for success” (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, p. 397). These choices are made within a space of authoring, a product of multiple internal dialogues where individuals constantly form identities (Holland et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007). Space of authoring is “a space where, in any precise moment, an identity is asserted— partially self-orchestrated, but also bound by social parameters and sites that simultaneously constrain language and expression ...” (Chang et al., 2017, p. 196). This space of authoring involves both internal dialogue and external action. According to Holland et al. (1998), through engaging in play (internal dialogue and meaning making) and improvisational activity (active participation), we create new figured worlds. This continuous process of figuring worlds “serves as the primary mechanism of agency in and liberation from reproduced and imposed social landscapes,” as there is always space for agency within the various contexts and positions in which an individual finds themselves.

Usefulness of Theory

Figured worlds is a useful framework to explore identity, agency, and contexts in education. Chang et al. (2017) used figured worlds ~~as a framework~~ to understand the experiences of Latinx undocumented students navigating educational spaces. The participants in the study enacted agency in various ways— “[a]t times ... immobilized by fear, risk, challenge, silence, and defeat ... and at other times ... propelled by courage, responsibility, community, choice, and hope” (Chang et al., 2017, p. 198)— in shaping their identities and navigating their educational experience. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2017) presented an argument for using figured worlds and Critical Race Feminism to examine the effects of zero tolerance policies on Black girls and the impact the policies have on the girls’ racial and gender identity development and on how schools perpetuate normative narratives around discipline and behavior. According to the

authors, understanding how Black girls' experiences and identities are shaped or figured through racialized, gendered, and classed lenses is extremely important to creating better discipline policies that will lead to better outcomes for Black girls in schools (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017). Similar to these studies, figured worlds is a useful concept for the current study in order to see higher education spaces as "simultaneously confined by hidden power structures and malleable" through the agency that graduate women of color have to "confront, construct, and ultimately refigure" (Chang et al., 2017, p. 197) their experiences within higher education. Additionally, because individuals often participate in multiple figured worlds, it is important to address the interactions within and between worlds that often cause intersecting identity-based tensions.

Critical Race Feminism

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) emerged as a framework that combines Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2013) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Although it began in legal studies, scholars have used CRT as a framework to address various educational issues (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998) in order to "theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on school structures, practices and discourse" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). CRF shares the tenets of CRT, which include the permanence and normalcy of racism in the United States; the importance of voice through storytelling or counterstorytelling; race as a social construction; interest convergence, meaning that racial progress only happens when it aligns with the interests of the dominant group; and praxis, the process of moving from theory to action to facilitate positive change (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2013).

In addition to the principles of CRT, exploring the experiences of women of color in higher education requires the use of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Incorporating intersectionality into a CRT approach centers the voices and experiences of women of color and highlights the importance of anti-essentialism and the “multiplicative identities” (Wing, 1997) of women of color. According to May (2015), “[i]ntersectionality highlights how lived identities, structural systems, sites of marginalization, forms of power, and modes of resistance ‘intersect’ in dynamic, shifting ways” (p. 21). CRF adds a more intersectional and gendered approach to CRT by centering “the role, experiences, and narratives of women of color” (Pratt-Clarke, 2010, p. 24) and addressing “the intersections of race and gender while acknowledging the multiplicative and multi-dimensionality of being and praxis for women of color” (Berry, 2010, p. 25). This approach allows for and even requires the inclusion of the multiple identities (i.e., Black, woman, etc.) and multiple roles (i.e., scholar, daughter, employee, student leader, etc.) of women of color.

Key Constructs and Assumptions

The following are key constructs and assumptions of CRF as articulated by Pratt-Clarke (2010): 1) a focus on the multiple identities of women and how those identities influence their experiences; 2) narrative/storytelling; 3) a focus on praxis—“being involved in the solutions to problems that affect women of color through creating ‘comprehensive and practical strategies’” (p. 24); 4) a “multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach with a critical historical methodology” (p. 25); and 5) Black feminism as a foundation. Berry (2010) also emphasized how CRF highlights the importance of multiplicity and the intersections of identities. She writes:

CRF suits my sensibilities as it addresses all of my intersecting beings: African American, woman, teacher-educator, researcher, scholar, sister, friend and more. By

permitting myself to engage in the ideology of critical race feminism, I can be more free to bring all of who I am into the classroom. By doing so, I can disregard the monolithic discourse of the universal Black woman and acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of my personhood. (p. 24)

CRF acknowledges and necessitates the multiple aspects of one's being and resists fragmentation and essentialism, which can further exacerbate the ways that women of color experience harm from oppression with multiplicative effects.

Spirit Injury/Spirit-Murder

Many CRF scholars discuss the damaging mental, emotional, spiritual and cultural effects of racism and sexism (Williams, 1987; Wing & Merchán, 1993; Wing, 1990; Onwuachi-Willig, 2006). Williams (1987) terms this experience “spirit-murder” and says that the intersectional and cumulative damage of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression “is as devastating, as costly, and as physically obliterating as robbery and assault; indeed they are often the same” (p. 129). Spirit-murder, according to Wing (1990), “consists of hundreds if not thousands of spirit injuries and assaults—some major, some minor—the cumulative effect of which is the slow death of the psyche, the soul, and the persona” (p. 186). Glover (2017) describes her experience of spirit injury as a graduate student:

Essentially, this world and this environment was killing me slowly—constantly experiencing racialized and homophobic familial crises, financial crises, microaggressions and lack of safety, being tense and criminalized all of the time in the white and respectable environments, being disconnected from cultural expression central to my life force and catharsis, having no time to maintain wellness rituals, relationships, or get enough rest due to the large workload and its demands. (p. 170)

This example and others highlight “the need for individual women of color to recognize and honor the connections among body, mind, culture, and spirit ... to survive and thrive in a hostile academic environment” (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012, p. 7). Therefore, it is necessary to address the various spirit injuries at the individual and community level.

Usefulness of Theory

Childers-McKee and Hytten (2015) highlight how CRF also goes beyond theory to focus on practice and how it can help think about the possibilities for reform through 1) its systemic and structural focus, 2) the necessity of dialogue, community, and coalition for change to occur, and 3) drawing on cultural wealth and assets as tools for transformation. CRF foregrounds the roles that systems and structures play in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of women of color and other marginalized populations. It requires researchers to shift the burden of educational change and transformation from the students back to the institutions. In the efforts to reframe educational reform to turn attention to structural forces, CRF advocates for listening to and building coalitions with students and others affected in order to create change that is “specific and contextual” (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015, p. 406). These opportunities for dialogue should also aid in challenging the deficit narratives that exist about communities of color and identifying various forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) within communities of color that can be utilized to create culturally responsive educational practices. The inclusion of CRF in the theoretical framework for the present study has significant potential for providing a lens for understanding the lived experiences of women of color that is inclusive of current and historical contexts and institutional and systemic forces and works toward positive educational change. Central to creating this type of change is understanding the ways that

institutions influence individuals to reproduce gendered/racial controlling images such as the Superwoman Schema.

Superwoman Schema

The Super Woman Construct (SWC) was originally developed by Catherine Steiner-Adair (1986) in her work with adolescent females and eating disorders. The participants in her study were “32 girls, ages 14-18, attending a private girls’ school in upstate New York” (Steiner-Adair, 1986, p. 102). The racial/ethnic demographics of the participants were not included. Forty percent of the participants frequently used the term “superwoman” in their responses. Steiner-Adair’s (1986) characteristics of the Super Woman Construct includes: (1) valuing autonomy and independence in the pursuit of success, (2) subscribing to societal beauty standards, (3) valuing involvement and success in multiple roles, and (4) lacking a reflective relationship with oneself and connection to others. Hart and Kenny (1997) conducted research using Steiner-Adair’s (1986) model on the experiences of college women with eating disorders. In this study, only sixteen percent of the participants were women of color. Because of the colorblind approach to the original research and subsequent research based primarily on the experiences of White women, the findings may not be fully applicable to the experiences of women of color.

Although it was not considered research, Black feminist author and professor Michele Wallace (1979) referenced the “superwoman” role seven years earlier in her book, *Black macho and the myth of the Superwoman*. She asserted that the myth of the “superwoman” for Black women and the myth of the “macho” for Black men was “really an extension and reversal of the white stereotypes about black inferiority” (Wallace, 1979, p. xix). According to Wallace (1979), the Black female stereotype, “The Superwoman,” was “oversexed, physically strong, and warlike” (p. xx). For Black women, role conflict and role stress are a direct result of the history

of enslavement, the continued condition of racial oppression in the United States, and the unrealistic and stereotypical expectations placed upon them by society.

Wyatt's (2008) examination of Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics* (2004) and the works of other Black feminist writers explored the emergence and maintenance of the Strong Black Woman role (i.e., Superwoman role) in historical and contemporary times. She positions the Strong Black Woman role as "a necessary response to living conditions within a racist economy" (Wyatt, 2008, p. 56). Through the works of these various writers, Wyatt (2008) acknowledges the duality of recognizing the Strong Black Woman role with admiration as every "black woman's spiritual legacy" and with resentment as "an identity that requires the denial of their spontaneous feelings and needs" (p. 57). These writings also emphasize the Strong Black Woman role as a "myth created by whites to justify their brutality" (Wyatt, 2008, p. 61), which continues to live on as "our [Black people's] internalization of this mythology" (Wyatt, 2008, p. 61) as an attempt to "salvage some dignity from the esteem- ravaging forces of sexism and racism" (Wyatt, 2008, p. 61). Wyatt then calls for "resistance [to] and repair [from]" (p. 62) this damaging stereotype by quoting Morgan (1999, as cited in Wyatt, 2008):

Perhaps one of the most loving things sistas can do for themselves is to erase this tired obligation of super-strength. Instead let's claim our God/dess-given right to imperfections and vulnerability. As black women it's time to grant ourselves humanity. (p. 63)

For Black women, the Superwoman role is often referred to as the Strong Black Woman role, and there have been a number of studies around its characteristics and its impact (Abrams et al., 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Black & Peacock, 2011; Nelson et al., 2016; Watson- Singleton, 2017; West et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Participants in these studies identify embodying multiple forms of strength, having self and ethnic pride in spite of

oppression, embracing being every woman, and centering religion and spirituality as characteristics of the Strong Black Woman role and self-sacrifice, emotional suppression, postponement of self-care as behaviors associated with the Strong Black Woman role (Abrams et al, 2019; Black & Peacock, 2011; Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Participants of the studies demonstrated varying levels of accepting or rejecting the role in addition to seeing both benefits and limitations to the role (Nelson et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Key Constructs and Assumptions

Building on the foundation of the Superwoman Construct and the Strong Black Woman Schema, Woods-Giscombé (2010) developed a conceptual framework for Superwoman Schema (SWS) through exploring the experiences of Black women and their definitions of the “superwoman” role. The study revealed a more complex characterization than what Steiner-Adair (1986) developed years prior. This new framework includes defining characteristics, contributing contextual factors, and perceived benefits and perceived liabilities (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The five characteristics include: (1) obligation to manifest strength, (2) obligation to suppress emotions, (3) resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, (4) determination to succeed despite limited resources, and (5) obligation to help others (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Ancestral, familial, and personal history and spiritual values were contributing contextual factors to the “superwoman” role (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Participants saw the “superwoman” role as beneficial regarding the preservation of self, their family, and their community but detrimental regarding interpersonal relationships, stress, and stress-related health behaviors (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Strength, specifically the obligation to manifest strength, is the central theme of the Superwoman Schema. Participants in Woods-Giscombé’s (2010) study felt the expectation to

display strength for their children, parents, other family members and friends. They felt this pressure because of the other Black women who had gone before them, including their mothers, grandmothers, and important Black women in the media; and these displays of strength frequently came at the expense of their own health and well-being. These Black women spoke of hiding their feelings from others, of not knowing how to ask for help, and of protecting themselves from being seen as weak or being hurt by others (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). In order to counteract these feelings of vulnerability, the participants often felt the need to take the lead, be in control of situations, or take care of things on their own (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). For many of the participants, this necessity to lead and take control was connected to intense internal and external pressures to succeed, to be the best, and to have it all despite limited resources and support (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Feelings of obligation to help others also accompanied the pressures of their own success (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Various contextual factors contributed to the Superwoman role. Most relevant to the current study is the historical legacy of racial and gender stereotyping and oppression (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Participants recognized the historical burden placed on Black women that still exists today and acknowledged stereotypes of Black women as motivators to “not become what everybody thought [they] were going to be” (Woods-Giscombé, 2010, p. 675). They also acknowledged how this motivation to resist stereotypes often resulted in not asking for help or feeling the pressure to do more because of the scarcity of Black women in the “higher up” spaces they occupied. While the superwoman was beneficial in aiding in their survival and advancing their families and the Black community, Black women in Woods-Giscombé’s (2010) study also experienced strain in interpersonal relationships due to resistance to vulnerability; stress-related health behaviors, such as emotional eating and dysfunctional sleep patterns; and various health

issues, such as migraines, hair loss, panic attacks, and depression that resulted from stress (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Superwoman Schema illustrates the “double bind” that exists for Black women and women of color as a result of historical oppression based on gender and race; efforts to resist experiences of gendered racism often come at a cost of their overall health and well-being.

Usefulness of Theory

Overall, the literature about the Superwoman Syndrome reveals the duality and tensions that exist in this experience and its historical roots in intersectional oppression based on race, gender, and class. In its origins, Black women used the “superwoman” role as a response to oppression and by White slaveowners to justify that same oppression. In present day, the role can come with great benefit and great cost personally, professionally, and relationally. In the context of higher education, I put forth that these tensions are to be expected as Black women and other women of color attempt to reconcile their multiple marginalized identities with their role in the higher education context that has an expectation of success in an environment that often impedes it. The superwoman ideal has emerged in various studies about the experiences of women of color in higher education (Lewis et al., 2013; Younes & Asay, 1998; Shavers & Moore, 2014a; Robinson, et al. 2013; Overstreet, 2019; Huddleston-Mattai, 1995; West et al., 2016), but none reviewed for this study have used Woods-Giscombé’s (2010) model as an interpretive framework to contextualize experiences of negotiating multiple identities and roles. Many of the perceived benefits—including surviving the many challenges of graduate school and supporting their families and communities—and perceived liabilities—including chronic stress, spirit-murder, and psychological issues—of SWS emerged in the literature on graduate women of color reviewed earlier in this chapter. Woods-Giscombé (2010) also presents the potential to apply

SWS to other ethnic populations as an area for future research to explore the connection between ethnicity and culture and the superwoman role.

Chapter Summary

In summary, the literature regarding graduate women of color negotiating multiple identities and roles shows the relationship between institutional environment and outcomes related to academic success and overall well-being. Due to the university community positioning them as “space invaders” based on their racial and gendered identities, graduate women of color have experiences within higher education that can create barriers to degree completion, strain on other roles and responsibilities, and harm to their spirit. As a response to these challenges, graduate women of color respond with a variety of resistance and coping strategies; the Superwoman Schema encompasses many of these strategies.

The combination of the four theoretical approaches addresses key elements of this study. Critical Geography emphasizes the relationship between space/place, power, and identity and explores the lived experiences within educational contexts. Figured Worlds brings attention to the importance of relationships and interactions that occur within space/place and the ways that individual agency continuously creates social worlds. CRF highlights the experience of multiple marginality and the multiple dimensions of personhood for women of color, while the Superwoman Schema provides a framework for a possibility of how those experiences of multiplicity can intersect. The outlined theoretical framework centralizes the experiences and voices of women of color and brings the institutional and larger sociostructural issues surrounding the experiences of women of color and the contexts where these experiences occur to the forefront instead of simply focusing on individual factors. Additionally, this framework brings the tensions between self-defined positionalities and the positionalities created within

figured worlds into conversation. Finally, the integration of these theories illuminates the emancipatory possibilities of marginality and the potential for educational transformation.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of women of color at one PWI as they negotiate their multiple identities, multiple roles, and multiple pressures resulting from those identities and roles. My primary goal is to understand how women of color make meaning of their multiple identities and role negotiations within the context of their institution. The quantitative phase of the study sought to determine if the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé (2010), are an accurate model for these multiple identity and multiple role negotiation experiences and to identify any differences or commonalities across race/ethnicity. The goal of the qualitative phase of the study is to explore how women of color articulate and negotiate their multiple roles and identities in the context of their institution and how the institutional context influences these perceptions. To achieve this purpose, my research questions were as follows:

- Q1a: Do graduate women of color at one PWI identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé's (2010) Superwoman Schema (SWS) Conceptual Framework? [QUANTITATIVE/QUALITATIVE]
 - Q1b: Are there statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity? [QUANTITATIVE]
- Q2a: What are the various identities and roles that women of color negotiate within the context of their experiences as students? [QUALITATIVE]
 - Q2b: How do these negotiations influence their experiences as students? [QUALITATIVE]

Paradigmatic/Epistemological Framework

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), “all research is interpretive: guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (p. 13). By naming the paradigms I used in this study, I am providing an understanding of how I see the nature of reality, the relationship between the knower and the known, and how they guide my approach to the research. As a mixed methods design, this study is situated in the transformative paradigm – which incorporates both constructivist and critical paradigms – as the goal is both to understand and interpret and to critique and transform (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2011; Mertens, 2007).

The transformative paradigm addresses the exclusion of the needs marginalized populations from research and focuses on social justice and the pursuit of human rights (Mertens, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Marginalized communities – such as women, minoritized racial/ethnic groups, and people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds – are centered in this research approach, and researchers make the identities and values that shape their socially constructed realities explicit and bring them to the forefront (Mertens, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Addressing the issues of power that impact marginalized communities at each stage in the research process is a central tenet of the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2007). The end goal of transformative research is to pursue change in the social world that will lessen the effects of marginalization for the participants and their communities (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

In addressing issues of power, the transformative paradigm has certain ontological and epistemological assumptions. The ontological assumption suggests that reality is socially constructed and that these constructions are subject to power differentials based on individual

identities and the intersections of those identities (Mertens, 2007). As such, multiple realities are a result of socially constructed systems of power, privilege, and oppression such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other values. The epistemological assumption emphasizes the relationship between the researcher and the participants, where addressing issues of power and privilege, using culturally responsive practices, and building trust are important (Mertens, 2007). In order for the researcher to contribute to sustainable change in a community, she needs participant contribution at the beginning, throughout, and at the end of the research process (Mertens, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The transformative paradigm combines and enhances constructivist and critical approaches. Constructivism focuses on lived experiences and acknowledges that what we know cannot be separated from who we are or what we experience (Lincoln et al., 2011; Lowenthal & Muth, 2009). Flax (1990, as cited in Lincoln et al., 2011) says that “we cannot know the real without recognizing our own role as knowers” (p. 104). Thus, as a research paradigm, constructivism places as much (or even more) emphasis on who or where the knowledge is coming from as it does on the knowledge itself. This emphasis goes beyond the participants to also include the researcher. According to Preissle (2006), “we are studying ourselves studying ourselves and others” (p. 691).

A constructivist approach includes both the individual and the collective (Lincoln et al., 2011). I argue that all learners construct meaning both individually and socially (Lowenthal & Muth, 2009). As it relates to this study, it is important for me to include and explore the individual experiences of women of color as it related to their multiple identity and multiple role negotiations but to also situate these experiences within the larger collective experiences of women of color at PWIs. Since I also very much identify with these experiences, I view this

work as an opportunity to be a “passionate participant” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 101) and facilitate the reconstruction of these various perspectives.

Subsequently, critical paradigms bring attention to the fact that our socially constructed world functions through the use of power and social control, which creates interactions of privilege and oppression that operate based on social identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Lincoln et al., 2011; Porfilio, 2009). As such, there is a structural and historical emphasis that grounds the nature of knowledge within critical frameworks (Lincoln et al., 2011). While the suffering and oppression of marginalized people is a central focus of a critical approach, it does not stop there; these frameworks also promote “visions of social and economic emancipation” that are “predicated on improving the human condition and on embracing the values of democracy, equality, and justice” (Porfilio, 2009, p. 201). Within the context of education broadly, scholars, teachers, and activists have conducted research and designed pedagogies “aimed to guide students to reflect upon the totality of social reality, to struggle actively against oppression, and to dream collectively about a world without a hierarchy based on the social markers of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Porfilio, 2009, p. 202). As such, I also view this work as an opportunity to be a “transformative intellectual” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 101) to use my research to advocate for positive change within PWIs.

Scholars often situate race-conscious and feminist approaches within critical theory. These approaches incorporate standpoint epistemologies, which “are positioned in the experiences, values, and interests of a group that has traditionally been oppressed or excluded (women, gays, lesbians, people of color, the colonized, etc.)” (Glesne, 2015, p. 11). Since the focus of this research is the experiences of women of color, utilizing an approach or approaches that center race and gender can bring to the forefront the intersectional nature of their lived

experiences, “making it imperative that consideration and analysis of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other identities play a primary role” (Glesne, 2015, p. 12).

Critical paradigms also advocate for critical self-reflection for me in my role as a researcher and on my own lived experiences including histories, values, and assumptions (Glesne, 2015).

Centering both race and gender, I have chosen to incorporate endarkened feminist epistemology to frame my research methodology. Developed by Cynthia Dillard (2000), an endarkened feminist epistemology

articulate[s] how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppression and resistance for African-American women. (p. 662).

In contrast to many mainstream approaches to identity research, an endarkened feminist epistemology does not present identities such as race/ethnicity and gender as essentialist.

According to Dillard (2000),

Instead these positionalities must be seen as shifting and dynamic sets of social relationships which embody a particular endarkened feminist epistemological basis. Through utilizing multiple and complex representations, our ability to understand, construct and negotiate between and among these multiple relations and realities can continue to unfold. (p. 670)

She identifies the knowledge production of Black and other marginalized female scholars as “historical, political and cultural constructions, under constant and vigilant negotiation” (Dillard, 2000, p. 670).

In articulating this difference in knowledge production, Dillard proposes “liberating the notion of what constitutes ‘data’” in order to “capture the multiple realities of people who have not been studied systematically” within traditional methods (Hurtado, 2003, p. 216). This proposition is further reason to utilize a mixed methods approach. She also positions spirituality as important to knowledge production, which brings attention to purpose, emotion, and empathy in an approach to research (Dillard, 2000). In discussing Dillard’s (2000) incorporation of spirituality, Hurtado (2003) highlights that feminist frameworks claim that “ignoring the spirit leads to illness – both physical and psychological” (p. 217), which are issues at the heart of SWS. Endarkened feminist epistemology also acknowledges the duality of the fragmentation of how others see us as women of color due to stigmatized social identities and the necessity to develop coherent personal identity as a source of agency to deconstruct existing power relations, as fragmentation is a result of existing hierarchies in society (Dillard, 2000; Hurtado, 2003). As such, a goal of endarkened feminist epistemology is to explore ways to restructure institutions of higher education to be responsive to the spiritual needs of our students (Dillard, 2000; Hurtado, 2003); not doing so may result in spiritual death resulting from “spirit injuries” (Wing, 1990; Williams, 1987), “the cumulative effect of which is the slow death of the psyche, the soul, and the persona” (Wing, 1990, p. 186).

By placing the knowledge that comes out of the lived experiences of Black women at the center, Dillard (2000) intends to “disrupt and unsettle the taken-for-granted notions surrounding the very goals and purposes of educational research” (p. 665). She speaks to the utility of this framework for me as a researcher in exploring the lived experiences of women of color in institutions of higher education:

... [A]n inclusive and transformative possibility of any/all feminist thought must fundamentally take into account the special and particular ways of seeing that Black and other marginalized female scholars bring to the knowledge production process, not as biological constructions but as historical, political, and cultural constructions, under constant and vigilant negotiation, and conceptualized to disrupt at least, and possibly ‘to dismantle the master’s house.’” (Dillard, 2000, p. 670)

Incorporating endarkened feminist epistemology into the transformative paradigm highlights my identity as a Black woman researcher, my participants’ identities as women of color, and our relationships to institutions of higher education as “outsiders-within” (Collins, 1990/2000). It also pushes towards the goal of institutional transformation within higher education for both the experience of marginalized students and the legitimization of scholarship and new knowledge that is birthed from the lived realities of those marginalized students.

Woman of Color Scholar on Women of Color Scholars: My Researcher Positionality

My work is situated in constructivist, racialized, and feminist paradigms as the goal is both to understand and to emancipate (Glesne, 2015; Lincoln et al., 2011). Based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought and the experiences of Black women, this approach brings an awareness of multiple ways of knowing and doing research and holds as a central assumption the metaphor of “research as a responsibility” (Dillard, 2000, p. 662) to further social justice by using the lived experiences of the marginalized to inform our theories, methods, and policies. This metaphor speaks to reflexivity through exposing the sources and practices of power, questioning the authority of knowledge, and holding the researcher accountable (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014). “Reflexivity ... is a self-critical action whereby the researcher finds that the world is mediated by the self—what can be known can only be known through oneself, one’s

lived experiences, and one's biography" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014, p. 496). Therefore, I endeavor to name who I am, what I know, and how I know it in relation to the research throughout the research process.

In this effort to understand the experiences of women of color at PWIs, it is important to highlight my positionality in approaching this work. Bettez (2015) defines positionality as involving the combination of social status groups to which one belongs (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) and one's personal experience (understanding that experience is always individually interpreted, and it is the interpretation that gives an experience meaning). Our positionalities—how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, and our experiences—influence how we approach knowledge, what we know, and what we believe we know. Thus, positionality is paramount to the production and understanding of knowledge. (p. 934)

I identify as both a Black woman and a woman of color. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000, 2004) was instrumental for me in understanding that oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. are intersecting, mutually constructed systems of power. For me, being a woman of color goes beyond just existing as a non-white woman but choosing to stand in solidarity with other non-white women in pursuit of liberation from racialized and gendered oppression. In a world where the issues of women center white women and the issues of people of color center men, many of us at the intersections and on the margins ask, "What about us?" It is my goal that this work responds to this question and centers the experiences of women of color.

I am a current doctoral student at a large, public, historically-white but minority-serving institution located in the southeast region of the United States, engaging in learning and research

about power, equity, access and privilege in education. For many years, I was also a full-time campus administrator at large, predominantly white, Research 1 universities, where my daily work involved supporting students from marginalized identities. I recently left working in higher education full-time and am now in a university-adjacent role in the private sector. In these varied pursuits, I very often navigate the complexities of having multiple roles and multiple identities and the conflicts between traditional cultural values and academic and career pursuits, often resulting in a perceived incompatibility between being marginalized and being one of the “elite.”

As a student and a former administrator of color, I have always existed in predominantly and/or historically white post-secondary institutions. Therefore, I have always existed in these spaces as an “outsider within” (Collins, 1990/2000). I earned my undergraduate degree in Sociology from a small, private, predominantly white, liberal arts institution. It was my first experience being “othered” as I was surrounded by Black students and teachers for my primary and secondary schooling experiences. It was my first experience of fragmentation, of double consciousness. DuBois (1961) spoke of this experience as “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one black body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 17). Hurtado (2003) says that this “[f]ragmentation is the nature of women of Color’s existence since childhood” (p. 220), but I was fortunate (or perhaps ill-prepared) not to have this experience until I went off to college.

These experiences followed me into my Counselor Education master’s program at a large, public, PWI. During this time, my experience of fragmentation was amplified as I navigated my own invisibility and hypervisibility as a woman of color as a student in my program while simultaneously taking on additional emotional labor in my role as a graduate assistant supporting students from racially minoritized backgrounds. These are only a few of the

multiple pressures that I had to negotiate that required a level of “superhuman” ability. I was frequently met with comments such as, “I don’t know how you manage it all.” Often, I wasn’t sure how I did either, but I recognized that the work I was doing came with both great benefits and great costs. In the environment of higher education, these tensions are to be expected as Black women and other women of color attempt to reconcile their multiple marginalized identities with their role in the institutional context that expects success in an environment that often impedes it.

As an administrator, I watched the university leadership give speeches and release marketing about their commitment to diversity and inclusion while creating policies that undermined this commitment and suppressing student activists who speak out against these policies. I have watched faculty and staff of color leave en masse due to the campus climate. I frequently found tensions with my commitment as an employee and my commitment to supporting my community and advancing social justice. Additionally, as much as I found purpose in my job and joy in my students, I often felt burdened with the responsibility and obligation to do more because I was one of the only. My own self-imposed pressures and being assigned additional diversity-related responsibilities outside of my job description caused these feelings. Being one of the few administrators of color and dealing with frequent racial and gender battle fatigue was exhausting and was a large contributor to why I eventually decided to leave.

My experiences as a doctoral student countered those as an administrator. The majority of my classes have been taught by faculty of color, and my classmates frequently participate in conversations and community and academic engagements that demonstrate our commitment to critical pedagogy, equity, and social justice. I am able to study topics that center the experiences

of marginalized populations, and my class readings are frequently written by scholars of color. Although stressful, my doctoral journey has felt exciting, intellectually stimulating, and supportive. My mind is stretched and challenged, but my spirit is not broken. These experiences made me feel hopeful about my role in transforming educational institutions.

Experiencing these two environments simultaneously peaked my interest in the influence of environment on the experience of marginality and how one experiences various roles and identities. Throughout my various experiences with different positions in different types of educational environments, I have seen how identities have been externally defined, shaped, negotiated, rejected, accepted, and self-defined both within myself and within those around me. The complex relationships between identity development and institutional contexts are an area of educational research that has been fascinating for me to explore.

Reading through the survey results and having conversations with the interview participants was validating, saddening, frustrating, and motivating. The participants shared powerful stories of resistance and resilience that offer a glimpse into the experiences of many graduate women of color at PWIs. I found myself saying “me too” – to myself and sometimes out loud – to parts of each participant’s story, no matter their racial/ethnic background. Engaging in this research has solidified my belief that the G-SWS-Q can be both a tool of reflection for graduate women of color and a peek behind the mask for the faculty, researchers, and administrators dedicated to supporting them in achieving their academic goals. Additionally, the combination of Critical Geography, Figured Worlds, and CRF offer an important framework to assist in analyzing the experiences of graduate women of color situated in the environment of a PWI. This research process made me more insistent on the importance of mixed methods research. Having the numbers without the stories behind them leaves an incomplete view of the

research phenomena. We need both the head (quantitative) and the heart (qualitative). The next three chapters share those quantitative and qualitative findings – the numbers and stories – from my research with the goal of amplifying the voices of graduate women of color and shedding light on how they experience the multiverse of their educational environment.

Research Design

This study implemented a mixed methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) design, which “combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches ... for the purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al., 2007). Researchers use mixed methods approaches when qualitative or quantitative methods are insufficient by themselves to understand a phenomenon, such as the complex issue of how graduate women of color negotiate their multiple identities and roles in the context of a PWI. Utilizing both methods provided a more complete understanding of an issue than either approach on its own. Qualitative methods enabled me to explore individual perspectives in depth, and quantitative methods allowed me to examine many individuals’ responses to a few variables (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) outline in their guide to conducting mixed methods research, designing a mixed methods study requires the researcher to address three different types of decisions and features: timing, priority, and level of interaction. Timing (or sequencing) refers to the order of the methods or if the qualitative and quantitative strands are implemented concurrently or sequentially. Priority (or weighting) refers to which strand has more importance or if they have equal importance and uses all capital letters in the visual representation of the research design. Level of interaction (or independence or dependence) refers to the stage(s) where the mixing of the data occurs. Additionally, creating a visual representation helps

researchers map the sequence of the data collection, priority, and mixing and is standard in mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

This study implemented one of the most common designs used in educational research: explanatory sequential design (Creswell et al., 2003; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This design uses a qualitative strand to explain initial quantitative results. In the first phase, I collected quantitative data first to address RQ1 by distributing an Internet-based version of the G-SWS-Q that assesses the level of participants' adherence to the superwoman role, a potential outcome of negotiating multiple identities and roles (Puwar, 2004; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2009). I ran confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses on the data to determine if the Superwoman Schema Framework developed by Woods-Giscombé (2010) fit the data. Additionally, I conducted a chi square analysis to find any potential significant differences by race/ethnicity, addressing RQ1a. The participant background questions that accompanied the G-SWS-Q also partially addressed RQ2 by gathering information about various social identities (i.e., race/ethnicity) and by asking the participants to list the various roles that they occupy in addition to their student role. The overall goal of the quantitative phase was to see to what degree graduate women of color adhere to the constructs of SWS, to identify if there are statistically significant differences among the responses from different racial/ethnic groups, to allow for purposeful sampling of participants for the second phase, and to inform the interview protocol for the second phase.

The second, qualitative phase partially addressed RQ1 in addition to RQ2. In the second phase, I collected both text and sound data through individual semi-structured interviews to help explain if or how the characteristics of SWS, as tested in the first phase, show up in the experiences of graduate women of color, addressing RQ1. The individual interviews addressed RQ2 through an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences negotiating their multiple

identities and roles and the influence of the institutional context on those experiences. The qualitative phase also explored the commonalities in the experiences of graduate women of color in order to build solidarity among the participants and to highlight the differences in their experiences. The rationale for this approach to mixed methods research was that the quantitative phase provides a general picture of if or to what degree the superwoman role represents the experiences of graduate women of color negotiating their multiple identities and roles, while the qualitative phase explains those statistical findings by exploring those experiences more in depth.

The visual representation of the procedures for the explanatory sequential mixed methods design of this study is included in Appendix B. Although many researchers give priority to the first strand in the sequence (quan), the I prioritized qualitative phase (QUAL) in this study. I made this decision because the purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of graduate women of color negotiating their multiple roles and identities in the context of a PWI. Integration of the quantitative and qualitative methods first occurred at the beginning of the qualitative phase. In this study, I used the case-selection variant (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) of the explanatory sequential design where I collected and analyzed the quantitative data prior to the collection and analysis of the qualitative data. In following this process, the “quantitative results about participant characteristics [were] used to guide purposeful sampling for a qualitative phase” (p. 77). The quantitative findings regarding race/ethnicity, high or low adherence to SWS, and the number of roles occupied informed participant selection in the qualitative phase. I selected the participants based on (in order of importance) inclusion of the non-white racial/ethnic categories used by State University (Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic/Latina, Asian, and Two or More Races); an equal distribution of high, moderate, and low SWS scores; and variation in the number and type of roles occupied by the

participants. The results of the quantitative data also informed the qualitative protocol development. The interview protocol incorporated questions specific to the roles and identities that participants indicated in the participant background questionnaire and to the SWS constructs where the participants scored high or low. I also integrated the results of the two phases in the concluding chapter that discussed of the outcomes of the entire study.

Context of the Study

The site of this study was State University, a large public university in the South. Under the Carnegie Classification system, State University is a doctoral university with very high research activity. In fall semester 2019, State University had an enrollment of approximately 30,000 students, with approximately 64% undergraduate students, 28% graduate students, and 8% professional students (State University Office of Institutional Research, 2019). Of the total student population, the breakdown according to federal categories of race/ethnicity is as follows: approximately 6% non-resident alien, less than 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 10% Asian, 8% Black or African American, 8% Hispanic, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 4% race or ethnicity unknown, 5% two or more races, and 60% white (State University Office of Institutional Research, 2019). Additionally, the gender breakdown of the total student population is as follows: 59% female and 41% male. Unfortunately, State University's Office of Institutional Research website does not have a demographic breakdown of the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. Female-identified graduate and professional students make up approximately 20% of the total student population and approximately 57% of the total graduate student population. Graduate and professional students from minoritized racial/ethnic backgrounds (excluding non-resident aliens and those whose race/ethnicity is unknown) make up approximately 9% of the total student population and approximately 26% of

the total graduate student population. Therefore, while the exact number remains unknown, students who identify as graduate women of color likely make up less than 10% of the total student population and less than 25% of the total graduate student population.

Target Population and Sample

The target population of the study were currently enrolled students in graduate or professional programs at State University during spring semester 2021 who had completed at least one semester of coursework who identify as women of color and occupy one or more roles that conflict or require negotiation with their role as a student (including but not limited to graduate/teaching assistant, other full- or part- time employee, parent/guardian, spouse, etc.). Due to the nature of the explanatory sequential design, the selection of the participants for the second, qualitative phase depended on the results of the first, quantitative phase. Based on these results, I implemented maximal variation sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018), a type of purposeful sampling, in order to select individuals who I expected to have different perspectives and whose experiences would provide a complex view of the issue.

Methods

Phase 1: Quantitative

The first, quantitative phase of the study focused on whether or not the participants identify with the five characteristics of the SWS Conceptual Framework (Woods-Giscombé, 2010): 1) obligation to present an image of strength, 2) obligation to suppress emotions, 3) resistance to being vulnerable, 4) intense motivation to succeed, and 5) obligation to help others. I used the cross-sectional survey design (Lavrakas, 2008), which involves collecting data from participants at a single period in time, to collect the quantitative data through the use of the

Giscombé Superwoman Schema Questionnaire (G-SWS-Q) and a set of self- developed demographics questions.

I based participant selection on the following inclusion criteria: 1) currently enrolled as a graduate or professional student at State University; 2) self-identified as a Woman of Color; and 3) born in the U.S. or moved to the U.S. as a child. I used convenience and snowball sampling methods and received 77 responses to the survey. I screened out 33 responses because of inclusion/exclusion criteria, duplicate responses, incomplete responses, or category sample size, leaving 44 responses.

Recruitment

Convenience sampling involves individuals who agree to participate in a study who are easily accessible to the researcher, and snowball sampling involves current participants inviting others they know who are eligible to participate (Lavrakas, 2008; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Participants were recruited through emails sent to student listservs in State University's graduate and professional schools, student organizations that support graduate students of color, and personal networks connected to State University. Additionally, there was a question at the end of the survey to provide names and email addresses of other individuals who fit the criteria for the study.

Instrumentation

The Giscombé Superwoman Schema Questionnaire (G-SWS-Q), the first instrument developed to operationalize all five characteristics of the SWS Conceptual Framework, is a 35-item inventory consisting of statements organized into five subscales that correspond to the five characteristics (included in Appendix C). The participants rated the statements according to the following response scale: 0 = this is not true for me, 1 = this is true for me rarely, 2 = this is true

for me sometimes, 3 = this is true for me all the time. I added the participant background questions (included in Appendix D) to the end of the survey to request information regarding participants' age, race/ethnicity, employment, first-generation college student status (undergraduate and graduate), graduate student status (i.e., type of degree, type of program, year in program, etc.), the various roles the participants occupy in addition to being a student (i.e., spouse, parent, leader in organizations, etc.), and other factors or variables that would reflect the higher education context.

Cheryl Woods-Giscombé developed the G-SWS-Q to assess the relationship between the “superwoman” construct and physical and emotional health in Black women and to differentiate it from other scales designed to measure the same phenomenon. Woods-Giscombé et al. (2019) examined the psychometric properties of the G-SWS-Q by conducting three separate studies: 1) a qualitative study to generate the items for the questionnaire, 2) a psychometric evaluation of the factors and internal structure of the questionnaire, and 3) a psychometric evaluation of the reliability and validity of the questionnaire (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2019). The results of these studies provided preliminary evidence that the G-SWS-Q is psychometrically sound and supported the 5-factor structure, internal consistency, scale stability, and construct validity (Woods-Giscombé et al., 2019). This current research study (at the time of writing) is one of the first to implement the G-SWS-Q to address an area of future research suggested in the original development of the SWS Conceptual Framework: examining SWS in other ethnic groups (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Data Collection and Procedures

Graduate and professional school staff emailed the IRB-approved recruitment email, which included the survey link, out to listservs (some specific to students of color) for their

respective departments. I identified student organizations online through the institution's database; the database includes categories for cultural organizations and graduate student organizations, which made it easy to identify relevant groups. I reached out to the contact email provided on the organization's page asking the receiver to forward the recruitment email along to their members. I contacted potential participants referred through snowball sampling within three days of the referral.

I administered the survey through Qualtrics, a web-based survey software program. A screening section appeared as the opening page of the survey to determine the participants' eligibility to participate in the study. This involved three questions that represented the inclusion/exclusion criteria for the study: 1) Are you a current graduate or professional student at State University? 2) Do you identify as a Woman of Color (defined as any woman who identifies as non-white, including but not limited to Black/African American, American Indian/Native American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Multiracial)? 3) Were you born in the U.S. OR did you move to the U.S. as a child? The third screening question ensured participants would have U.S.-specific experiences navigating the intersections of race and gender specific to the U.S. context. If a respondent answered "no" to any of the screening questions, the survey did not allow them to complete it and skipped to the end. For respondents who passed the initial screening, an informed consent form preceded the survey questions. Participants were able to click on a checkbox below the consent form which said, "I agree to participate in this study," expressing their understanding of the consent form and intention to complete the survey. Participants had the ability to stop taking the survey at any time. In order to increase response rate of the final survey, participants had the option to enter a

drawing to receive one of ten \$25 Visa gift cards. Participants in the drawing included their email addresses.

Data Analysis

I downloaded the survey data from Qualtrics into a Microsoft Excel CSV file. From the initial survey responses ($n = 77$), in Excel, I first deleted cases that did not meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria ($n = 5$), who did not answer all questions in the survey ($n = 23$), or had duplicate submissions ($n = 1$). Additionally, I excluded respondents who identified their race as either American Indian/Alaska Native ($n = 2$) or White (self-identified as Middle Eastern; $n = 2$) due to small sample size within the racial/ethnic category. In total, I deleted 33 cases prior to examining the data, leaving a sample size of 44.

In terms of race/ethnicity, 20.5% of participants identified as Asian ($n = 9$), 31.8% of participants identified as Black/African American ($n = 14$), 31.8% of the participants identified as Hispanic/Latina, and 15.9% of participants identified as Multiracial ($n = 7$). They ranged in age from 22 to 49 years old, with a mean age of 28.9 ($SD = 5.7$). In terms of the type of degrees the participants were pursuing, 70.5% ($n = 31$) were enrolled in doctoral programs. The participants were studying a variety of disciplines, with 34.1% ($n = 15$) in health and medicine programs and 20.5% ($n = 9$) in social science programs; the other participants were enrolled in STEM, public and social services, arts and humanities, law and government, and multidisciplinary programs. Length of enrollment in the graduate programs ranged from 0.5 years (1 semester) to 6.5 years, with an average length of 2.8 years ($SD = 1.8$). Almost half of participants identified as first-generation undergraduate students ($n = 20$, 45.5%), and a majority of participants also identified as first-generation graduate students ($n = 28$, 63.6%). There was variety in relationship statuses of the participants, with 31.8% of participants ($n = 14$) who were

not married but living with a romantic partner and 27.3% of participants (n = 12) who were single/never married. The participants had between 0 and 2 children with a mean of 0.3 (SD = 0.6). The majority of participants (n = 31, 70.5%) were employed as teaching assistants, graduate assistants or research assistants at State University. I included a full summary of the demographics of the participants in the study in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables

Variable	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age	28.9	28.5	24.0	5.7	22	49
Race	2.6	2	2.0 ^a	1.3	1	5
Graduate degree	0.8	1	1.0	0.5	0	2
Academic discipline	4.7	5	3.0	2.1	0	8
Years in program	2.8	2	1.0	1.8	0.5	6.5
First-gen undergrad.	0.45	0	0	0.5	0	1
First-gen graduate	0.6	1	1.0	0.5	0	1
Relationship status	2.5	1	1.0	2.4	0	7
Children	0.3	0	0	0.6	0	2
Employment status	0.6	0	0	1.1	0	4

^aMultiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentages of Demographic Variables

	Frequency	Percent
Age		
22-28	22	49.9%
29-35	18	40.8%
36-42	2	4.6%
43-49	2	4.6%
Race		
Asian	9	20.5%
Black/African American	14	31.8%
Hispanic/Latina	14	31.8%
Two or more races	7	15.9%
Graduate degree		
Masters	11	25.0%
Doctoral	31	70.5%
Other Professional Degree	2	4.5%
Academic discipline		
Arts & Humanities	3	6.8%
Heath & Medicine	15	34.1%
Multi/Interdisciplinary	2	4.5%
Public & Social Services	5	11.4%
Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM)	8	18.2%
Social Sciences	9	20.5%

	Law & Government	2	4.5%
Years in program			
	0-2	25	56.8%
	3-5	15	34.1%
	6-7	4	9.1%
First-gen undergraduate			
	No	24	54.5%
	Yes	20	45.5%
First-gen graduate			
	No	16	36.4%
	Yes	28	63.6%
Relationship status			
	Married	9	20.5%
	Not married but living with a romantic partner	14	31.8%
	In a romantic relationship but not living together	7	15.9%
	Divorced	1	2.3%
	Single/never married	12	27.3%
	Engaged	1	2.3%
Children			
	0	35	79.5%
	1	6	13.6%
	2	3	6.8%
Employment status			

Teaching/Research/Graduate Assistant	31	70.5%
Working full-time for wages	5	11.4%
Working part-time for wages (non-TA/RA/GA)	4	9.1%
Not working	2	4.5%
Other	2	4.5%

The independent variable of this study is race/ethnicity. I collected data for this variable in the demographics section at the end of the survey. The dependent variables are the opinions participants have regarding their adherence to SWS in the dimensions of 1) obligation to present an image of strength, 2) obligation to suppress emotions, 3) resistance to being vulnerable, 4) intense motivation to succeed, and 5) obligation to help others, which cumulates in an overall SWS score.

Analysis consisted of descriptive statistics, correlations, confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses, and chi-square tests using International Business Machines (IBM) Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28. I used the demographic data and descriptive statistics to select the participants eligible for the second, qualitative phase and to summarize the characteristics of the data set. Correlations and chi-square tests showed the relationships between variables and among the five subscales. Confirmatory factor analysis verified the factor structure of the observed variables and to test how well the variables represent the constructs (Brown, 2015). Exploratory factor analysis uncovered the underlying theoretical structure of a group of observed and latent variables (Brown, 2015).

Reliability and Validity

In quantitative research, the researcher must consider the reliability and validity of the instrument in order to assess the quality of the research. Reliability refers to the consistency of a

measure and asks if the results can be repeated under similar conditions (Salkind, 2010). The internal consistency reliability of the G-SWS-Q helps assess how well the various items in the instrument measure each dimension of SWS using the Nunnally's (1978) recommendation for Cronbach's alpha range of acceptability ($\alpha \geq 0.7$) (Cronbach, 1951). I included the internal consistency reliability analysis of the G-SWS-Q items for the original study and the current study in Table 3. The G-SWS-Q for the current study provided good internal consistency. Internal consistency ranged from 0.54 to 0.82 for the five subscales within the current study; the overall internal consistency of the G-SWS-Q was 0.9. The Cronbach's alpha results from the current study help assess how well each item in a measure appears to reflect each dimension of SWS in the sample population of graduate women of color attending a PWI.

Table 3. Internal Consistency/Reliability

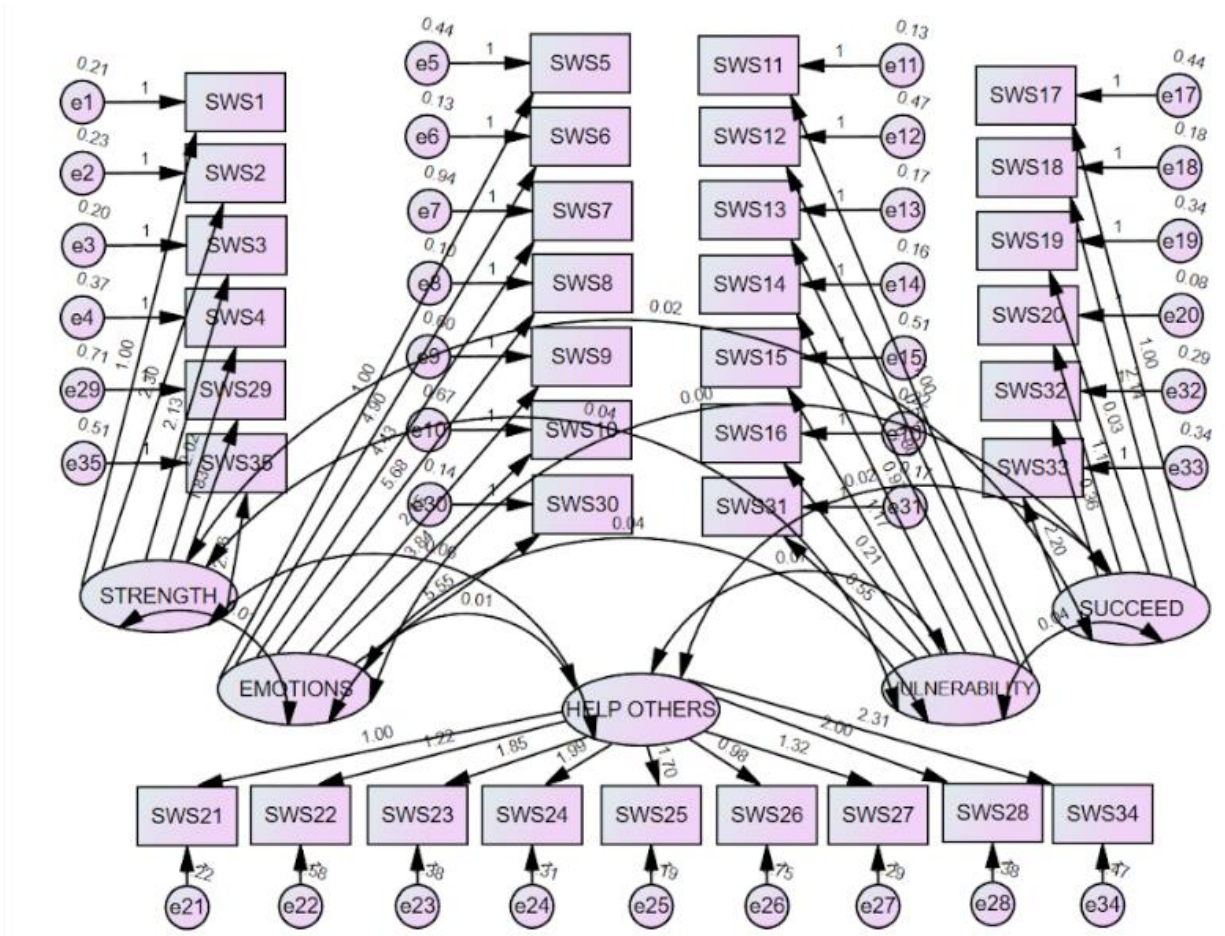
	Cronbach's Alpha (n = 44)	Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items (n = 44)	Giscombé RWJF Project internal consistency results (n = 130)
Overall G-SWS-Q	0.90	0.90	0.95
Obligation to present an image of strength	0.81	0.81	0.81
Obligation to suppress emotions	0.73	0.76	0.85
Resistance to being vulnerable	0.82	0.82	0.82

Intense motivation to succeed	0.54	0.55	0.72
Obligation to help others (over self-care)	0.81	0.82	0.89

Validity refers to the accuracy of a measure and determines if the results actually measure what they are supposed to measure (Carmines & Zeller, 1979; Litwin, 1995). For this study, I established construct, content, and criterion validity. Construct validity refers to “the extent to which a particular measure relates to other measures consistent with theoretically derived hypothesis concerning the concepts (or constructs) that are being measured” (Carmines & Zeller, 1979, p. 23). It asks the question, “Do you have a good operationalization of the construct, or the thing you are trying to measure?” Construct validity is “not a new ‘type’ of validity ... but a conceptual umbrella that cover[s] all thinking about validity” (Colliver et al., 2012, p. 367). Thus, this “type” of validity is the unifying concept of validity and includes both content and criterion validity (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Messick, 1989). I assessed construct validity for this study through conducting confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses.

Prior to performing any in-depth analyses, I conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the structure of the G-SWS-Q results from this study in accordance with the SWS Conceptual Framework. I created a path diagram for the G-SWS-Q in IBM SPSS AMOS (included in Figure 1). The goodness of fit statistics, displayed in Table 4, do not indicate a good model fit ($\chi^2(550) = 946.553$, $p = 0.000$; RMSEA = 0.129; CFI = 0.525). The standardized factor loadings ranged between 0.025 and 5.675. Overall, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis show that the five subscales of the G-SWS-Q are not in alignment with the SWS Conceptual Framework for this sample.

Figure 1. Path Diagram for G-SWS-Q



Minimum was achieved

Chi-square = 946.553

Degrees of freedom = 550

Probability level = 0.000

Table 4. Goodness of Fit Statistics

Baseline

Comparisons

Model	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
-------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

	Delta 1	Rho1	Delta2	Rho2	
Default model	0.34	0.28	0.55	0.47	0.52
Saturated model	1.00	-	1.000	-	1.00
Independence model	0.00	0.00	0.000	0.000	0.00

RMSEA

Model	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90	PCLOSE
Default model	0.13	0.11	0.14	0.00
Independence model	0.18	0.17	0.19	0.00

I then conducted an exploratory factor analysis to attempt to determine the relationships between the observed and latent variables in the sample. First, I ran the correlations for all the survey items; many were moderate to strong ($p > 0.3$), but there were also many that were less. After running the factor analysis, all the items had high communalities ($p > 0.4$). Ten components in the principal component analysis had eigenvalues > 1 . There were multiple items that loaded to multiple components, and even after running the varimax analysis and getting the results for the rotated component matrix, there were still items that loaded to two or three factors. The results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed that, based on the responses to the items on the G-SWS-Q, the items did not match up with a just one variable. This means that for this group of participants there was not clear separation among the characteristics of SWS.

Content validity is related to “the extent to which the content of the test is relevant to and representative of the construct definition” (Salkind, 2010, p. 1590). In order to establish content

validity, I began with a thorough exploration of the available literature on women of color negotiating their multiple identities and roles in the context of a PWI in order to understand the many facets of the phenomenon (see Chapter 2). Based on the literature review, the following domains of content frame the research questions: the hegemonic space of higher education, environmental microaggressions, multiple role conflict, and coping and resistance strategies. Overall, the literature shows that women of color at PWIs experience a paradox of invisibility and hypervisibility because they are “bodies out of place” that do not conform to the norms of the space of higher education (Puwar, 2004; Alexander- Floyd, 2015). As a result, women of color face many challenges including gendered racism, surveillance, isolation and alienation, underemployment and overuse by institutions, and conflicts between family, community and career (Turner, 2002). Often, women of color enact the various characteristics of the superwoman role in order to negotiate their identities and roles within the space of a PWI (i.e., feeling an obligation to help others due to being underrepresented by race and/or gender, which leads to being overused by the institution) and in larger society, which makes the G-SWS-Q a valid instrument to use to measure adherence to those characteristics.

Additionally, in the original study of the development of the Superwoman Schema Conceptual Framework (Woods-Giscombé, 2010), 40% of the participants were current students, which lends to the applicability of the G-SWS-Q in higher education. Although Woods-Giscombé (2010) developed the SWS framework from the experiences of Black women, she also acknowledged the existing literature that showed that the characteristics of the superwoman role were also relevant to other non-Black women of color (Hayes, 1986; Herrera & DelCampo, 1995; Lim, 1997; Mensinger et al., 2007; Whitty, 2001) and recommended that future research examine SWS in other racial/ethnic groups to explore the connection between race/ethnicity,

culture, and SWS, which is a goal of this study. I also previously conducted a pilot study that explored how nine undergraduate women of color – three Black, two Latina, two Multiracial, one Asian, and one Native American – at a PWI experience the Superwoman Syndrome. A major finding of this study was that all of the participants in the study identified with characteristics of SWS, although all but one had never heard of the term “Superwoman Syndrome.” These findings give additional validity for the use of the G-SWS-Q to understand the experiences of students who are women of color.

Criterion validity measures “how well one instrument stacks up against another instrument or predictor” (Litwin, 1995, p. 37). I made efforts to identify if one or more instruments are available that measures how graduate women of color negotiate their multiple identities and roles in the context of a PWI. To date, I have located no such instruments.

Phase 2: Qualitative

The second, qualitative phase of the study focused on explaining the results of the statistical tests obtained in the quantitative phase. The goal of the qualitative phase was to understand how graduate women of color negotiate their multiple roles and multiple identities within the context of their institution through exploring their lived experiences. Selection criteria for the qualitative phase required maximal variation sampling. For this study, I selected participants based on (in order of importance) 1) race/ethnicity; 2) high, moderate or low SWS scores; and 3) variation in types of roles occupied. With these guidelines, I selected 12 participants for one in-depth interview. The interviews occurred about a year after I collected the surveys. Each interview lasted between 28 minutes and an hour and 19 minutes. Table 5 includes background information on the interview participants.

Recruitment

At the end of the surveys, participants indicated if they were willing to participate in the QUAL phase. I cross-referenced survey responses so that only participants who had indicated that they were willing and those eligible based on the previously mentioned selection criteria were eligible for recruitment. In order to identify participants who would fulfill the maximal variation of the selection criteria, I created a 4 x 3 matrix (4 race/ethnicity categories, 3 SWS categories). I emailed a recruitment script describing the study to 15 eligible participants. The recruitment script included a reminder of their participation in the previous survey, thanks for that participation and interest in the second phase of the study, and a query if they were still interested in participating. The script went on to request a Zoom interview lasting 45 minutes to an hour, during which I would ask follow-up questions to their responses from the surveys and their experiences as graduate women of color. For those that were interested, I included a Doodle poll through which participants could sign up for available time slots. Twelve participants responded with their consent to participate in the interview via Zoom as well as a convenient date and time for the interview. Interview participants received a monetary incentive of a \$25 Visa e-giftcard.

Table 5. Interview Participant Demographics

Name ^a	Race/ Ethnicity	Grad. Degree	Acad. Disc.	Yrs. Enr'd (Spr. '21)	Age	Relationship Status ^b	Children	Employ Status	Interview Length
Dalia	Hispanic/ Latina	Doctoral	Arts & Hum.	2	31	RR/NL	0	TA/GA/ RA	47:44
Eva	Asian	Other	Law & Gov.	2	24	S	0	TA/GA/ RA	43:05
82 Hazel	Multi racial	Masters	Health & Med	1	24	NM/LW	0	TA/GA/ RA	47:04
Isabelle	Multi racial	Doctoral	Health & Med	1	24	NM/LW	0	TA/GA/ RA	54:29
Josefina de Luna	Hispanic/ Latina	Doctoral	STEM	2	25	NM/LW	0	TA/GA/ RA	38:26
Kat	Black/ African American	Masters	Social Sciences	1	27	S	0	FT work	1:07:51

Talia	Multi racial	Doctoral	STEM	1	23	NM/LW	0	TA/GA/ RA	41:09
Melissa	Black/ African American	Doctoral	Health & Med	2	24	NM/LW	0	PT work	42:41
Rochelle	Black/ African American	Doctoral	Multi/ interdisc.	6	42	D	2	TA/GA/ RA	1:19:08
Serena	Asian	Masters	Social Sciences	2	28	NM/LW	1	PT work	28:16
Noor	Asian	Doctoral	Arts & Hum.	2	32	M	1	TA/GA/ RA	51:04
Sydney	Hispanic/ Latina	Doctoral	Social Sciences	6.5	29	S	0	TA/GA/ RA	51:39

^a Pseudonyms are used in place of participant names to protect confidentiality.

^b Relationship status: Single = S; Married = M; Divorced = D; in a romantic relationship, not living together = RR/NL; not married, living with a romantic partner = NM/LW

Data Collection and Analysis

In the qualitative phase of the study, I coded and analyzed the sound and text gathered through interviews for themes. According to Saldaña (2011), “Qualitative data analysis is concurrent with data collection and management” (p. 95). I transcribed the audio from the interviews verbatim using an online transcription software called Temi followed by manual checking to ensure accuracy. I labeled the audio files and transcriptions with each participant’s pseudonym and saved in Box@UNCG to ensure data security. I listened to audio recordings and read transcriptions several times in order to gain a holistic understanding of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2011). During this process of data exploration, I also engaged in pre-coding by making notations of salient parts of the data and identifying any preliminary words or phrases for codes (Saldaña, 2009, 2011). Additionally, I also composed analytic memos through text and audio recording in order to reflect on and write about first impressions and preliminary connections, how I related to the participants and phenomena, my study’s research questions, and any challenges with the study (Saldaña, 2009, 2011). After several readings of the transcripts and memos, I began to identify key concepts and themes, using the research questions as lenses.

I implemented both deductive and inductive approaches to analyze the data in a sequential manner, following the overall research design (Azungah, 2018). Starting with a deductive approach, I used the SWS conceptual framework characteristics, contributing contextual factors, and perceived benefits and liabilities (outlined in Chapter 2) as *a priori* codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to begin classifying participant responses. The deductive approach “assumes that certain core concepts are in the data based on knowledge of the extant literature of the topic” (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). As such, the results of the quantitative phase informed the analysis of the qualitative phase through showing which characteristics of SWS should be found

in the qualitative data and comparing the saliency of the characteristics in the quantitative data (i.e., scores of subscale items on G-SWS-Q) with the saliency of characteristics in the qualitative data (i.e., number of frequency of codes related to each characteristic).

The inductive approach followed to explore and infer the themes that exist in the data (Saldaña, 2011). “Inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation” (Hatch, 2002, p. 161). To engage in this process, I read the transcripts line by line and assigned codes to parts of the text relevant to the research questions, theoretical framework and overall goals of the study (Saldaña, 2009). The coding process included descriptive coding, values coding, dramaturgical coding, and in vivo coding in order to 1) accommodate the different types of data being gathered; 2) explore intrapersonal, interpersonal and cultural constructs; 3) identify actions, reactions, and interaction, and 4) include the voices of the participants through using their actual language (Saldaña, 2011). I engaged in the process of coding and writing analytic memos through the computer-assisted analysis software MAXQDA.

I brought codes from the interviews together to identify emergent categories and themes (Saldaña, 2009). The themes help make sense of the participants’ lived experiences negotiating their multiple identities and roles within the context of their institution. I identified and clustered segments of participants’ statements related to each theme in order to amplify the voices of the participants in reporting of the data. Finally, the themes led to the development of key assertions based on the context of the study (Saldaña, 2009, 2011). These assertions addressed and summarized both “what is happening” in the particulars of the data and “what it means” in the larger context of the study (Saldaña, 2011).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), establishing trustworthiness is essential to qualitative research. To foster reflexivity, I engaged in reflective journaling and analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2009) throughout the data collection and analysis as a method of reflecting on my personal values, biases, choices, and experiences throughout the research process. Additionally, a positionality statement that addresses my experiences and values as an individual and as a researcher is included earlier in this chapter and a description of researcher subjectivity is included later in this chapter. During the interviews with the participants of the qualitative phase, I also shared my background and how I came to this research. The use of multiple sources of data provides a broad spectrum of evidence and perspectives which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the study through triangulation (Saldaña, 2011). I established credibility through member checking, where I presented to the participants the interpretations I have made of their individual and collective stories and requested their feedback after the analysis of the qualitative data and again after the integration of the quantitative and qualitative data. I made edits based on this feedback to ensure accurate interpretations of participant responses. When describing themes, I used verbatim quotes from participants as often as possible to enhance authenticity. Although generalizability is not the goal of this research, I use “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1994) of the participants’ responses for readers to make their own determination of the applicability of findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Mixed Methods Analysis

The intent of mixed methods integration in an explanatory sequential design is to connect the qualitative data and results in order to explain the initial quantitative results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This integration occurs at more than one point in the study. For this study, the

results of the quantitative phase informed the purposeful selection of the participants in the qualitative phase and the interview protocol as outlined earlier in this chapter. Additionally, I used predetermined codes for the qualitative data analysis based on the results from the quantitative phase. I include the various points of integration in the diagram in Appendix B. The mixed methods data analysis involved data reduction (statistical analysis of quantitative data and summaries of qualitative data), data display (tables and charts), and data integration (data was integrated into a coherent whole through the final audio documentary/podcast that shows how the qualitative data explains the quantitative results) (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003).

Validity in mixed methods research is referred to as legitimation. Legitimation refers to “the difficulty in obtaining findings and/or making inferences that are credible, trustworthy, dependable, transferrable and/or confirmable” (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006, p. 52). In addition to the steps taken to increase validity discussed earlier in the quantitative and qualitative phases, I made efforts to address issues of legitimation. Weakness minimization is the process of “consciously and carefully assess[ing] the extent to which the weakness from one approach [quantitative/qualitative] can be compensated by the strengths from the other approach” (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006, p. 58). To address this type of legitimation, I made assessments when weighting, combining and interpreting the results (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Insider-outsider legitimation refers to “the degree to which the researcher accurately presents and utilizes the insider’s view *and* the observer’s view” (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006, p. 58, italics in original). Incorporating verbatim quotes of participants alongside my own interpretations and including the actual voices of participants along with my voice addresses the distinction between the insider’s view and observer’s view.

Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) outline potential validity threats specific to an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, including 1) not identifying important quantitative results to explain, 2) not addressing surprising or contradictory quantitative results in the qualitative phase, and 3) not connecting the initial quantitative results to the qualitative data collection and analysis. To minimize these threats, I endeavored to consider all possibilities for explanation of results, kept any contradictory quantitative results in mind while designing the qualitative data collection, and purposefully selected participants for the qualitative phase using the quantitative results in order to provide the best explanations of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

In this study, I endeavored to center ethical considerations in each aspect of the research. In interrogating the purpose of this research, I recognize that the researcher is usually the primary beneficiary of the research. I reflected on my own desire to embark on this journey, beyond my own self-interest, and how it could also be beneficial to my participants and to the larger population of women of color. I believe that this experience also provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on and voice experiences that they may not often have opportunities to discuss. I endeavored to select participants from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, recognizing that the research on women of color is marginal but the research on non-Black women of color is even more scant. Due to the politics of representation, I recognize the blessing and the burden of being a woman of color in academia. Like Price (2004), “[c]onscious or unconscious, self-imposed or externally prescribed, issues of representation are a part of my reality” (p. 185). These struggles of representation require me as a researcher to engage in reflexivity as “a communal process that requires attentiveness to how the structural, political, and cultural

environments of the researcher, the participants and the nature of the study affects the research process and product” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014, p. 496). This process includes challenging the norms of academia through engaging participants in the research process instead of simply positioning them as the objects of the research. To echo Strega and Brown (2005), “nothing about us without us” (p. 3).

In addition to attending to reflexivity, I addressed various other ethical considerations before and throughout the research process. I submitted the study for approval to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UNCG, and, as required by IRB, obtained site approval prior to IRB submission. Each participant’s participation was voluntary and involved informed consent. I made sure to ask for permission to record their stories. I used pseudonyms chosen by the participants to identify them and omitted identifiable characteristics in writing the results. In my analysis, I made sure to distinguish between their words (used in the context of their narrative) and my interpretation based on the research paradigms, my own lived experiences, and the related literature.

Endeavoring to create a multisensory research experience that literally amplifies the voices of graduate women of color. I included compilations of snippets from my interviews with the participants in the qualitative phase linked at the beginning of Chapters five to seven and in the implications for practice and final thoughts sections of Chapter nine within the text of the qualitative chapters. All audio files can be found linked at the following website: <https://sites.google.com/view/scmgs2023/home?authuser=1>. Engaging in sound-based research necessitates other ethical considerations that can also bring clarity between the participants’ words and my interpretations. Since “sound is readily manipulated and always already misheard” (Gershon, 2020, p. 54), it was necessary for me to be transparent about my choices in the

soundwork process. Gershon (2020) notes, “Where sounds can literally be cut, altered, and phased regardless of whether they were recorded, particular ideas and ideals are similarly constrained and enabled ...” (p. 54). I endeavored to make sound choices so that “what is presented is identifiable by participants as what they intended to say, is typical of the kinds of information shared over the course of the study, and is audibly consistent between the original recording and its movement into a particular narrative” (Gershon, 2020, p. 58). I made these choices in consultation with the participants and documented them to increase reflexivity. During the data analysis phase, I shared my analysis (text and sound) with each of the participants in order to ask if they feel as if I represented their story correctly and to get their thoughts as I proceed in completing my dissertation. Their stories are the foundation of what I hope will be a work that will be able to contribute to graduate women of color feeling heard, seen, and valued, and it is important to me to acknowledge their contribution to this larger goal.

Role of the Researcher

Researcher subjectivity has the ability to “filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe or misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Therefore, my identities and experiences as a researcher influenced the assumptions that led the research process, analysis and interpretation, and presentation of results. At the time of writing the results of this study, I am a doctoral student at a minority-serving Historically White Institution (HWI), and I was also an administrator at a PWI. These experiences, along with my previous experiences as a student and administrator in PWI contexts, influenced my decision to pursue this research. As such, my experiences provided valuable information about the experiences of graduate women of color at PWIs. The salience of my social identity as a Black woman and my political identity as a woman of color had the

potential to influence participants' willingness to share their experiences. Although white people and men, can engage in research about women of color, identifying as a woman of color was beneficial because "there are fewer margins to mitigate, which can help the [research process] to be more intimate" (Shavers & Moore, 2014a, p. 396). Because of my experiences and knowledge of the research topic, it was important to minimize and acknowledge bias that emerge from researcher subjectivity. I used the methods outlined in the earlier section on "Trustworthiness and Rigor" to address biases that emerged.

CHAPTER IV: QUANTIFYING THE SUPERWOMAN ROLE

This chapter presents the quantitative results based on the Giscombé Superwoman Schema Questionnaire (G-SWS-Q). Using SPSS, I conducted a descriptive statistical analysis (including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percent) and chi-square tests. This chapter includes the results of these analyses using tables and figures. The quantitative research questions and hypotheses are included below:

- Q1a: Do graduate women of color at one PWI identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé's (2010) Superwoman Schema (SWS) Conceptual Framework?
 - Null hypothesis 1a: Graduate women of color at one PWI do not identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé's (2010) SWS Conceptual Framework.
 - Alternative hypothesis 1a: Graduate women of color at one PWI do identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé's (2010) SWS Conceptual Framework.
- Q1b: Are there statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity?
 - Null hypothesis 1b: There are not statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity.
 - Alternative hypothesis 1b: There are statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity.

Due to the results of the confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses as described in Chapter 3, the participants may not have interpreted the items of the G-SWS-Q as being defined within the distinct subscales as theorized in Woods-Giscombé's (2010) Superwoman Schema

Conceptual Framework. The confirmatory factor analysis did not show a good model fit between the data from this sample and the structure of the SWS. The exploratory factor analysis showed that the data was made up of 10 distinct factors or components, and only 13 of the 35 items in the inventory of the G-SWS-Q matched with one component. All of the items for obligation to present an image of strength loaded to at least two components, and there was significant covariance with the items for obligation to present an image of strength and obligation to help others. As such, I limited interpretations of the data to the overall SWS scores only and did not do further analyses at the subscale level.

Do Graduate Women of Color Identify with SWS?

The first quantitative research question aimed to explore if the responses from the participants showed an endorsement of the characteristics of Giscombé's Superwoman Schema. The independent variable for RQ1a is the race/ethnicity and the dependent variables are the opinions participants have regarding their adherence to SWS in the dimensions of 1) obligation to present an image of strength, 2) obligation to suppress emotions, 3) resistance to being vulnerable, 4) intense motivation to succeed, and 5) obligation to help others. I summed data gathered from the statements measuring these dimensions by each dimension to create subscale scores and by all the dimensions to create an overall endorsement score for each participant. Higher scores indicate a greater endorsement of the selected subscale or overall scale. These statements included "I try to present an image of strength," "I keep my feelings to myself," and "Asking for help is difficult for me." Participants could respond to these statements with "This is NOT TRUE for me," "This is TRUE for me rarely," "This is TRUE for me sometimes," or "This is TRUE for me all the time." The following appraisal statement came after each endorsement statement: "If you checked a TRUE statement, please indicate how undesirable or disturbing this

statement is by selecting one of the options below. This bothers me: not at all, somewhat, or very much.”

As the sample of participants came from diverse backgrounds and experiences, I expected that there would be a diverse set of responses to the survey questions. However, there were some overall commonalities and questions where the results stood out to me. The statement “I put pressure on myself to achieve a certain level of accomplishment” was the only survey item to which all of the participants responded that this was true for them sometimes (20.5%) or all the time (79.5%), making it the most highly endorsed statement on the survey. This statement falls within the intense motivation to succeed subscale. Other statements that all participants felt were true for them to some degree were as follows: “I try to present an image of strength”; “I wait until I am overwhelmed to ask for help”; “If I want things done right, I do them myself”; “No matter how hard I work, I feel like I should do more”; “I take on roles and responsibilities when I am already overwhelmed”; “I do things by myself without asking for help”; and “The only way for me to be successful is to work hard.” These statements fall within three of the five subscales: obligation to present an image of strength (1), resistance to being vulnerable (4), and intense motivation to succeed (2). Conversely, the statement “My tears are a sign of weakness” had the highest lack of endorsement among participants with 31.8% responding “This is NOT TRUE for me.”

The responses to the appraisal statement also provided interesting findings. Almost 70% of participants (68.2%) responded “This bothers me very much” to the endorsement statement “No matter how hard I work, I feel like I should do more,” which corresponds to the subscale intense motivation to succeed. Additionally, the responses to the following statements bothered 90% or more of the participants somewhat or very much: “I take on roles and responsibilities

when I am already overwhelmed,” “I wait until I am overwhelmed to ask for help,” “I keep my problems bottled up inside,” “It’s hard for me to accept help from others,” and “Asking for help is difficult for me.” These statements fall within the subscales resistance to being vulnerable (3), obligation to suppress emotions (1), and obligation to help others (1). On the opposite end of the spectrum, participants rated the statement “The struggles of my ancestors require me to be strong” the highest in not bothering them at all (40.9%).

Tables 6 and 7 show the descriptive statistics and frequencies and percentages for each subscale and overall endorsement, respectively. I followed the scoring instructions for the G-SWS-Q, which recommended that if the SWS subscale items are summed to create one SWS total to use the scoring ranges indicated in the first column of Table 8. The original scoring ranged from 0 to 101, and Woods-Giscombé then divided the scoring range evenly to create the three categories of low, moderate, and high. The SWS endorsement sums for this study ranged from 50 to 101, and I redefined the categories for the current analyses by dividing the scoring range of the study evenly between the three categories, as shown in the second column of Table 8. The mean score of 76.57 ($SD = 12.663$) fell into the established range of moderate SWS for this sample but into the high range of the originally defined categories. On average, intense motivation to succeed was the highest-endorsed dimension with a mean score of 15.25 out of a possible 18 ($SD = 2.081$), and obligation to suppress emotions was the least-endorsed dimension with a mean score of 13.34 out of a possible 21 ($SD = 3.583$). The finding that 75% of participants’ responses to the questions for obligation to present an image of strength were in the high range also stood out to me. This subscale had the most skewed distribution between low, moderate, and high of all five subscales. Based on these results, the graduate women of color in

this study do identify with the characteristics of SWS, particularly intense motivation to succeed and obligation to present an image of strength.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of SWS Subscales and Overall Endorsement

	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Subscale 1:						
Obligation to present an image of strength	13.70	15.00	16	3.515	2	18
Subscale 2:						
Obligation to suppress emotions	13.34	13.00	14	3.583	6	21
Subscale 3:						
Resistance to being vulnerable	15.61	16.00	16	3.532	7	21
Subscale 4:						
Intense motivation to succeed	15.25	15.00	15	2.081	9	18

Subscale 5:						
Obligation to help others	18.66	18.50	21	4.493	5	27
Overall SWS endorsement	76.57	78.50	80*	12.663	50	101

* Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.

Table 7. Frequency and Percentages of SWS Subscales and Overall Endorsement

	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Subscale 1:	2-7	4	9.1%
Obligation to present an image of strength	8-12	7	15.9%
	13-18	33	75.0%
SWS Subscale 2:	6-10	10	22.7%
Obligation to suppress emotions	11-16	26	59.2%
	17-21	8	18.1%
SWS Subscale 3:	7-11	6	13.6%
Resistance to being vulnerable	12-16	21	47.6%
	17-21	17	38.6%
SWS Subscale 4:	9-11	3	6.9%
Intense motivation to succeed	12-15	21	47.7%
	16-18	20	45.4%

SWS Subscale 5:	5-11	2	4.6%
Obligation to help	12-18	20	45.5%
others	19-27	22	49.9%
Overall SWS	50-66	10	22.7%
Endorsement	67-84	24	54.5%
amended	85-101	10	22.7%

Table 8. Original and Amended SWS Endorsement Categories

	Original	Amended
Low	0-35	50-66
Moderate	36-70	67-84
High	71-105	85-101

Are There Statistical Differences in SWS by Race/Ethnicity?

To address RQ1b, I conducted a chi-square analysis to determine if statistical differences existed in endorsement of SWS by race/ethnicity. As a reminder, a breakdown of the number of respondents from each racial/ethnic group can be found in Table 2 within Chapter 3. I represented the data from the crosstabulation in Table 9 and Figure 2. I included the output of the chi-square independence test of race/ethnicity and SWS in Table 10. The results show that the association between SWS endorsement and race/ethnicity is not statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 7.362, p = 0.289$.

Table 9. Crosstabulation

		Low SWS	Moderate SWS	High SWS	Total
Asian	Count	3	5	1	9

	% within				
	race/ ethnicity	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%	100.0%
	% within				
	SWS	30.0%	19.2%	12.5%	20.5%
	category				
Black/African American	Count	5	7	2	14
	% within				
	race/ ethnicity	35.7%	50.0%	14.3%	100.0%
	% within				
	SWS	50%	29.2%	20.0%	31.8%
	category				
Hispanic/Latina	Count	1	7	6	14
	% within				
	race/ ethnicity	7.1%	50.0%	42.9%	100.0%
	% within				
	SWS	10.0%	26.9%	75.0%	31.8%
	category				
Two or more races	Count	1	5	1	7
	% within				
	race/ ethnicity	14.3%	71.4%	14.3%	100.0%

	% within				
	SWS	10.0%	20.8%	10.0%	15.9%
	category				
Total	Count	10	24	10	44
	% within				
	race/ ethnicity	22.7%	54.5%	22.7%	100.0%
	% within				
	SWS	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	category				

Figure 2. Race/Ethnicity x SWS Bar Chart

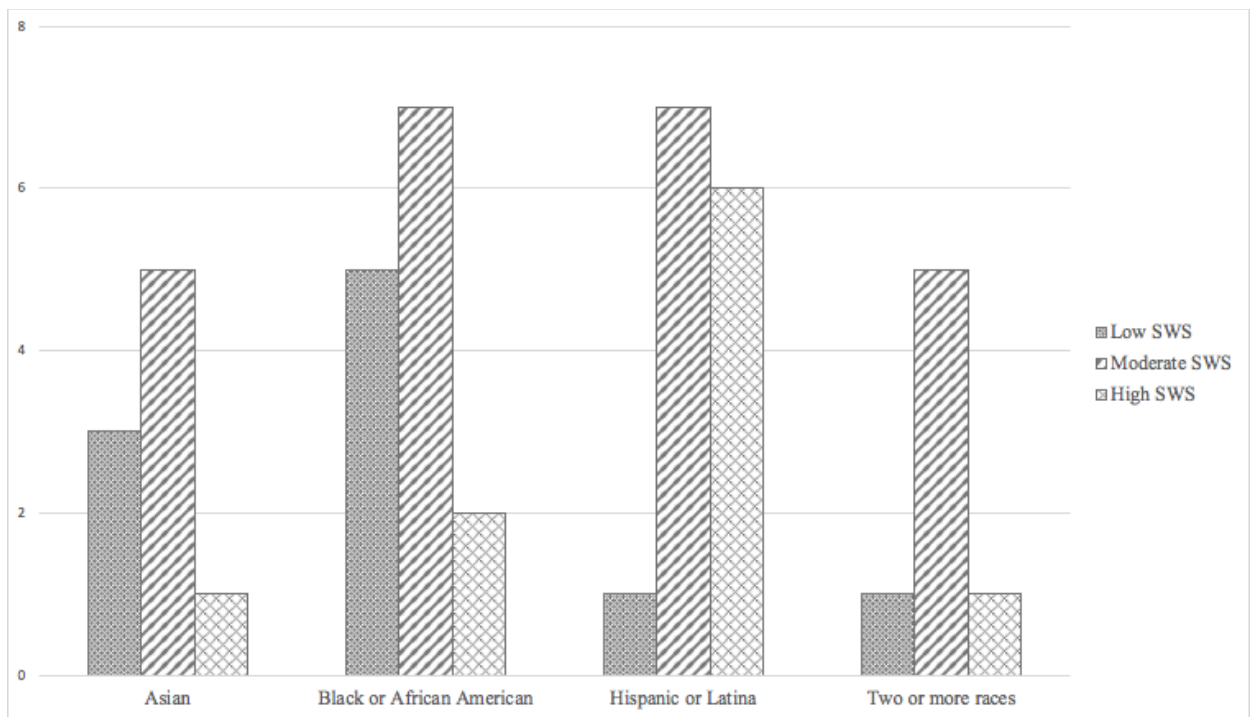


Table 10. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.362	6	0.289
Likelihood ratio	7.413	6	0.284
Linear-by-linear association	1.491	1	0.222
N of valid cases	44		

Chapter Summary

In addressing RQ1a, the data shows that on average participants moderately endorsed the characteristics of the superwoman role with a mean score of 76.57 and with all scores falling in the moderate to high range as defined by the original low-moderate-high category divisions. This data supports the alternative hypothesis for RQ1a Analysis of responses to individual statements uncovered some interesting findings. The statements that the participants most highly endorsed and indicated bothered them the most were within the intense motivation to succeed subscale. Since all of the respondents to this survey were women of color working on completing a masters, doctorate, or other terminal degree, this finding made complete sense to me. As a graduate woman of color myself, I believe that a certain level of internal pressure is necessary to endure the challenge of achieving a postsecondary degree, especially at PWIs. Participants also both highly endorsed and identified as bothersome multiple statements within the resistance to being vulnerable subscale. I found it interesting that the subscale with the statements that had the highest percentage of agreement from participants was also the subscale with the statements that

they felt were most bothersome, and I wondered about how the participants reconciled those tensions.

I used crosstabulation and chi-square analysis to answer RQ1b. Because of the literature on the Strong Black Woman role and the Superwoman Schema, I assumed that Black women in this study would have the highest endorsement of SWS. However, Hispanic/Latina women had the largest percentage of participants who had high endorsement of SWS (75%), and Black/African American women had the largest percentage of participants who had both low and moderate endorsement of SWS (50% and 30.8% respectively). Additionally, the highest scores (101) were from participants who identified as Asian and Hispanic/Latina. Chi-square test results showed that there were not statistical differences in endorsement of SWS by race/ethnicity for this sample, supporting the null hypothesis for RQ1b. Although there was no statistical significance in SWS endorsement among racial/ethnic groups, these quantitative results speak to the applicability of the G-SWS-Q to other populations of women of color in addition to Black women and are further strengthened by the qualitative results that follow.

CHAPTER V: [REFLECTING ON SUPERWOMAN](#)

As a reminder, the purpose of mixed methods research is to gain a broader and deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to gain an in-depth exploration of individual perceptions and experiences. In this chapter, I share qualitative findings regarding the 12 participants' adherence to and identification with the Superwoman Schema, addressing the qualitative component of RQ1a. I categorized these findings within the following themes: overall resonance, external motivations to succeed, managing our/their emotions and resisting weakness, wearing the mask of strength, helping others over caring for self, and accepting or rejecting the title "superwoman." The theme of overall resonance discusses the initial reactions to the Superwoman Schema once I revealed the purpose of the instrument and their scores. As a reminder, I did not disclose the name of the scale or its purpose to the participants prior to them taking it; I only revealed the overall purpose of the study. The next five themes discuss the findings related to each of the five subscales, and the final theme shares to what degree the participants accepted or rejected the title of "superwoman."

Overall Resonance

After opening each interview asking the participant to introduce themselves, their background, and why they chose to pursue their degree program and attend State University, I shared the context of my study and the survey that they completed a year prior. I explained that the survey was named the Giscombé Superwoman Schema Questionnaire, and I defined the "superwoman syndrome" for the participants. I then shared how they scored in each subscale and overall (Table 11) and whether the scores fell into the low, moderate or high range based on the overall survey sample (Table 12).

Table 11. G-SWS-Q Raw Scores for Interview Participants

Participant (Race/ Ethnicity)	Obligation to Present an Image of Strength (0–18)	Obligation to Suppress Emotions (0–21)	Resistance to Being Vulnerable (0–21)	Intense Motivation to Succeed (0–18)	Obligation to Help Others (0–27)	Overall SWS (0–101)
Dalia (HSPLA)	17	9	16	18	16	76
Eva (ASIAN)	12	21	20	15	14	82
Hazel (MULTI)	7	10	12	13	15	57
Isabelle (MULTI)	16	13	16	17	22	84
Josefina de Luna (HSPLA)	17	21	21	18	24	101
Kat (AFRAM)	16	17	17	14	21	85
Talia (MULTI)	15	9	16	16	17	73
Melissa (AFRAM)	2	10	14	15	9	50

Rochelle (AFRAM)	16	18	20	13	21	88
Serena (ASIAN)	18	18	20	18	27	101
Noor (ASIAN)	4	13	20	14	5	56
Sydney (HSPLA)	14	6	7	17	14	58

Table 12. G-SWS-Q Score Ranges for Interview Participants

Participant (Race/ Ethnicity)	Obligation to Present an Image of Strength	Obligation to Suppress Emotions	Resistance to Being Vulnerable	Intense Motivation to Succeed	Obligation to Help Others	Overall SWS
Dalia (HSPLA)	High	Moderate	High	High	Moderate	High
Eva (ASIAN)	Moderate	High	High	High	Moderate	High
Hazel (MULTI)	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
Isabelle (MULTI)	High	Moderate	High	High	High	High

Josefina de Luna (HSPLA)	High	High	High	High	High	High
Kat (AFRAM)	High	High	High	High	High	High
Talia (MULTI)	High	Moderate	High	High	Moderate	High
Melissa (AFRAM)	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Rochelle (AFRAM)	High	High	High	High	High	High
Serena (ASIAN)	High	High	High	High	High	High
Noor (ASIAN)	Low	Moderate	High	High	Low	Moderate
Sydney (HSPLA)	High	Low	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate

I asked the participants to take a few moments to look over the scores and ranges and to give their initial reactions. All of the participants resonated with the results. Melissa, a 24-year-old Black graduate student in health and medicine, did not recall taking the survey but was unsurprised by the outcome. When I asked for her initial reactions, she responded:

Um, I think, okay. So I don't remember taking this survey, but, um, I, I mean, initially I'm not surprised.

Dalia, a 31-year-old Latina graduate student in arts and humanities, was both surprised and affirmed the results as true. She said:

Yeah. I think I sort of chuckled <laugh> out of, I dunno. Um, not in the sense that I, I guess I'm more surprised of anything. Um, yeah, I especially, I, I just finished my comprehensive exam. Well, my qualifying written exams last week, and so I've been doing a lot of reflection about, um, my PhD program. Um, so I think that's why it's just seeing the scores. It's like, these are still very true. <laugh>

Both Rochelle and Josefina de Luna expounded on their initial reaction and revealed that these characteristics were necessary for them to survive and succeed in their academic program and in their lives overall. Rochelle, a 42-year-old Black graduate student in multidisciplinary studies and mother of two, specifically spoke to the characteristics of the superwoman role as a way of being for Black women that has been taught through generations. She said:

All of these are, all of them are things I was very aware of having to do to remain in and succeed in my program, but also just in my life. And, and also they are all areas in which the women who raised me, like, this is what they taught me. This is what I saw. This is how, how to be.

Here we see how in addition to Rochelle agreeing it resonated for her, she also reflected on how that is what she was both taught and saw in the women who raised her.

Josefina de Luna, a 25-year-old Latina graduate student in the STEM field, referenced the characteristics of the internal drive it takes for a person, particularly from “the community [she] grew up in,” to get to the level of pursuing a PhD and the sadness she feels about having to be so hard on herself. During our conversation, we had this exchange:

Josefina de Luna: I'm, like, surprised, but also not surprised. Um, like, I didn't think I would max out some of these, but I guess it makes sense.

Erica: Mm-hmm <affirmative> Can you talk a little bit more about that? The surprise, but not surprised.

J: Yeah. Like, um, like, I am very hard on myself and uh, like, I feel like you kind of have to be to get this far, um, especially, like, the community I grew up in. Um, so there has to be like some sort of drive to get here, but also, like, it almost makes me sad that I have to push my, like, I feel like I have to push myself this hard.

E: Yeah. Yeah. Do you think that kind of those feelings are specific to being a grad student and pursuing your PhD? Or do you feel like you've kind of always kind of felt this way to a certain degree?

J: I think I've always felt like this to a certain degree, like, at every stage of my education journey. Yeah.

Josefina de Luna's comments highlight how these superwoman feelings and behaviors develop at an early age and the tension that she feels about having to "push [herself] this hard."

The data in the tables above and the quotes from various participants show that both quantitative and qualitative resonance with the SWS exists for this group. All of the scores except one fell within the top half of the range of scores for the survey, and Melissa's score—the lowest of the group—only missed the top half of the range by 0.5. Eight of the twelve participants (almost 67%) scored within the high range of the survey. Additionally, all the participants that I spoke to affirmed that they saw at least some truth in the results that were shared with them.

After discussing initial reactions to the results of the survey, I asked the participants to reflect on the subscales that they scored high in and how those characteristics showed up for them as a graduate woman of color. As a group, the participants scored the highest in intense motivation to succeed, with all 12 participants having scores in the high range for the subscale. Resistance to being vulnerable was the second highest subscale followed by obligation to present an image of strength with nine and eight participants, respectively, having scores in the high range for each subscale. Obligation to suppress emotions and obligation to help others both had five participants with scores in the high range for each subscale. It is important to note that although the G-SWS-Q designed the subscales as distinct characteristics, the participants often did not discuss them in a separate and distinct way. They most often discussed resistance to being vulnerable and obligation to suppress emotions together during my conversations with them, and I combine these two subscales in my analysis in the sections to follow.

External Motivations to Succeed

Intense motivation to succeed was the highest endorsed subscale across all interview participants; all 12 participants scored in the high range for this subscale. For a group of women of color pursuing graduate education, this result was unsurprising to me. This finding also aligns with Woods-Giscombé's (2010) original study, in which she found that this theme was particularly salient for participants who were 18 to 24 years old in college and college-educated women aged 25 to 45. For this study, the majority of the interview participants were also first-generation undergraduate and/or graduate students with seven of the 12 being first-generation undergraduate students and nine of the 12 being first-generation graduate students.

Participants expressed being hard on themselves and feeling pressure not only to excel but to go above and beyond. In my conversation with Sydney, a 29-year-old Latina graduate

student in social sciences, she said, “I have to do things really, really well. Not just like subpar, like basic, but I have to like kind of, um, excel.” Melissa echoes this sentiment and explains that she internalized this mindset prior to graduate school. She said:

I dunno, all my life, I guess I’ve been, um, trained, I guess, to have this goal to work hard and, um, or work harder than other people even and, um, and ... for a promise of, like, reward that, um, I don’t necessarily feel like I have just yet.

For Melissa, this also manifested as being unable to internalize her successes, which pushes her to work harder. She continued:

I am a, an overachiever. Um, so I think that I haven’t, um, well being used to, like, achievements and things, um, I haven’t, like, spent enough time, like, well, I haven’t learned enough how to, like, celebrate those things or acknowledge those things. Um, and a lot of that is carried over to grad school. Um, because grad school, I think feels like there’s always something, like there’s always something due, there’s always something more you can do. There’s always something that’s overdue and, um, being able to not, being able to, or not celebrating small accomplishments is a little, I guess, like, not healthy for grad school because there, there are so many, like, little, um, failures I guess, or just, like, learning experiences throughout the way. So, um, it, it feels like, um, I guess, I, I’m able to see those little failures or, or setbacks or whatever, um, a lot more clearly than the success, um, which I’ve been trying to like not do or see them evenly. Um, because I think that, like, uh, makes grad school more difficult and it’s already pretty difficult.

I found irony in the fact that Melissa identifies as an overachiever (i.e., someone who achieves more than what is expected) but is hyperfocused on her failures and setbacks. I also found

familiarity in her experience as those feelings are not foreign to me either. There is a strange cruelty in having an intense motivation to succeed that does not translate in an intense internalization of achievement.

Intense motivation to succeed can also conflict with the other subscales, such as obligation to help others. Noor, a 32-year-old Asian graduate student in arts and humanities and mother to one child, discussed this contradiction in her own scores: “And it also makes sense that, that obligation to help others is lower. Um, even though that like is sad to me. Um, but it makes sense ’cause it’s like you succeed above all else.” Eva, a 24-year-old Asian graduate student in law and government, recognized choosing not to help others in order to ensure her own success from her experience in graduate school. She refers to her field as “a very dog-eat-dog kind of world” and discussed the potential negative consequences of helping a fellow student who “you perceive or others perceive as like lower than you on the bell curve.” She said, “You’re ruining not only your own chances, but everyone else’s chances of getting a better grade.” She notes that the culture of State University’s program “is not ... quite as bad in terms of competition” compared to other top programs but circled back to the overall culture of graduate school for this discipline and the career field: “But yeah, I think that’s definitely subconsciously at least ingrained in us. Like if you help someone with anything, it might come back and bite you.” In both women’s experience, they saw success as a zero-sum game where there is only room for one or few at the top and helping others along is contradictory to success.

Rochelle shared a different experience of her conflict between the two subscales when she talked about her former marriage and her pursuit of her doctoral degree. She said:

And so I had thought that getting married was the thing I should do. And that in concert with getting my PhD, it was gonna make me successful and come to find out like it was

not. And that the pressures of everything were too much for this marriage that really wasn't based on a strong foundation. It was actually based on my obligation to help others because my son's father, um, my ex-husband was someone I'd known since college, someone who I'd seen go through over the years, you know, various, um, issues in his personal life. And also someone with whom I shared some of the experiences from childhood ... You know, I felt, like, because we had that common shared past, that we would triumph together.

I found the way she described her experience so interesting and complex as it related to these two subscales. For Rochelle, intense motivation to succeed existed in her marriage and in her academic journey—both statuses for her were indicators of success. Success for her also meant obligation to help others or “triumph[ing] together” with someone with whom she shared a common past. However, in her situation, obligation to help others contributed to Rochelle staying in an abusive marriage in which her partner resented the healing she was experiencing from being “so on purpose” in her academic program. She told me, “I knew this [program] was where I was supposed to be.” Thankfully, the words of one of her professors “broke the spell,” and she made the decision to leave. “I can leave,” she said. “I don't have to put up with the sh-, the stuff under the guise of like propriety and success.”

Earlier in my conversation with Rochelle, she spoke of “all those expectations that are placed specifically on women and then even more harshly on women of color to defy certain stereotypes.” In the stories of Noor, Eva, and Rochelle and in the ones to come later in this section, external forces define success and drive intense motivation to succeed. The women spoke about how institutional, familial, and societal expectations shaped their pursuit of success. However, they also shared stories of redefinition and pushing back against those external

pressures related to success. A dynamic relationship exists in which these women accept, negotiate, and redefine these expectations as they persist through their graduate school journey and their lives overall.

Success = Grades

Reflecting how academic institutions often define success, the participants frequently discussed success only in terms of grades. This focus on quantitative measures of success often stemmed from childhood and carried over to graduate school. Hazel, 24-year-old Multiracial graduate student in health and medicine, reflected on this experience as an undergraduate:

Um, I think part of it is that through a lot of my life, I have prioritized grades over a lot of other things. Um, and I think that's particularly true in my undergraduate experience. I had pretty unique experience. I went to a program where I lived in seven different countries over or six different countries over my four years. I was part of the very first graduating class. It was a pretty new program. Um, and there were lots of other aspects of the program that in retrospect, I think I would've benefited from spending more time on, but that at the time I didn't, because I wanted to focus on academics and my grades. And I think that's probably something I've learned from a little bit <laugh>. But I still have to like fight almost the, the urge to like only focus on or only prioritize academic, um, outcomes.

I followed up this comment from Hazel by asking her if she could identify where this intense focus on grades came from. She mentioned that her parents were high achieving—both are doctors—but that her parents did not have an expectation for her to get all As. Her comments made me reflect on my own experiences being a high achieving student. I also do not remember my own parents communicating an expectation of all As, but I do remember the validation I

received from my parents, teachers, and others around me when I did. In my conversation with Hazel, I mentioned to her that “I think for, for me growing up, a lot of my worth came from grades.” Being the “straight A student” became my identity for a long time. Without even realizing it, I was receiving messages from society, school, and family that achieving academically meant getting the highest numeric grade that I could. Although Hazel and I did not receive those explicit messages pressuring us to focus on grades, other participants did.

Eva specifically mentioned pressure from her parents to focus on grades and connected it to obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to being vulnerable. She discussed how being “laser focused” on grades can lead to less focus on emotional development. Specifically, she said:

Um, I, I would say growing up, yeah, my, my folks, um, they were very, uh, how do, how do I say this? They, they put a lot of pressure on actually, like, the last or the second to last, um, motivation to succeed educationally, to stand up on your own two feet. So kind of being, you know, laser focused in, on academics and tests, particularly those that are on a numeric scale, no qualitative measures whatsoever. Um, you know, like when all your focus is and your mindset is kind of in this way, then there’s not a lot of room for as much like emotional, um, feelings or experiences, um, development a little bit less as well. Um, so I think that’s probably where it stems from.

Dalia also mentioned the focus on grades showing up for her throughout her “entire life.” She said:

Um, I, yeah, throughout elementary, middle school, high school, undergrad, I always had really good grades. I was an honor student, all of that. Um, and I think that also ties back with, like, trying to be a good student and put forward, like, my parents and hard work

and, um, yeah. Trying to be at least something for, for their, for their work and their, um, yeah, what they sacrificed and all of that stuff for us.

I appreciated that Eva named the quantitative versus qualitative dichotomy of academic success and how a hyperfocus on grades can interfere with other, less quantifiable types of development. Similarly, Dalia's comments brought out how the identity of the "good student" is heavily tied to numerical academic achievement.

I strongly resonated with how these women referenced their experience with academia as it related to numeric grades. I am also not a stranger to the influence of family on academic aspirations. Success is never a solo journey, and the influence of others can impact the paths that journey takes. For Hazel, Eva, and Dalia, familial influence showed up in three different ways: inspiration/motivation, pressure, and obligation. Their stories and the stories of the other participants highlight the ways that success is a communal effort.

Collective Success: Succeeding for/with Others

Although these women were obviously ambitious and goal-oriented, very few mentioned internal motivation for pursuing their advanced degrees. Instead, their motivation was to make others proud, particularly family. This finding was particularly true for those who were children of immigrant parents; all the participants with this background made some reference to their immigrant background contributing to their intense motivation to succeed. Serena, a 28-year-old Asian student in the social sciences and a mother to one child, mentions her mother as one of her motivations to succeed, wanting to "prove to her that she didn't just come to this country for nothing." Noor connects her motivation to succeed to her desire to make her parents proud:

And I think, you know, it seems unrelated, but, like, the upbringing I had as, like, the daughter of immigrants is so different from my white peers. That even when it comes to

things like support systems or, like, trust in my own abilities, I think my upbringing has affected that. And that is how that shows up in like a motivation to succeed. It's, like, yes, I do really wanna succeed. But at the root of it is, like, making somebody else proud instead of an internal motivation.

Many of the participants referenced being raised in an immigrant family and how their upbringing influenced their views on success, but the last two sentences of Noor's quote sum up the overall theme of those sentiments. The sacrifices that their parents made to come to the United States and create a better life for them motivated them to do what they could to make their parents proud through education and degree attainment.

Although the desire of parents and family for their children to succeed can lead to great outcomes such as degree attainment, it can also result in the child experiencing this desire as pressure, feeling like their family's expectations were burdensome and even regretting not meeting those expectations. Furthermore, these feelings can create strain in the relationships with family. Eva mentioned feeling "a lot of pressure" from her family to "strive and succeed and break boundaries for our household." Noor referenced the tension between the "grateful" and "stressful" experiences navigating her parents' expectations of her. She said:

That motivation to succeed again, like, that my achievements are a reflection of my parents. And so it's like we have sacrificed so much so that you could have these opportunities and succeed, which I feel like is a very immigrant mindset. Um, and I'm of course, like, ... so grateful for everything that they have sacrificed. But the flip side is, like, if you don't succeed, it's like you're ungrateful. You haven't, like, taken advantage of everything that we've given you. Um, and that came out a lot. I feel like in my undergrad where they were paying for more things. And it was like very stressful

sometimes to, like, have that held against me. Like, why are you distracting yourself with, like, boyfriends or, like, whatever drama, like, you're there to study.

The parallels that Noor made between success and gratitude stood out to me; I had never heard the experience she shared worded quite that way. The additional layer of her parents' financial contribution to her academics made her success out to be, in a very real sense, paying her parents back.

Dalia mentioned making family proud as a reason to stay in graduate school even when she often felt like leaving. She explained:

Yeah, I think, um, being from an immigrant family, you really think about, um, like, from low-income immigrant family, really thinking about what it means to be able to go be in this particular space, in terms of, like, a doctoral program and what it would mean to leave a program. Um, so let's say, I always think about, like, oh, or joke around saying, I'm going to leave, I'm going to leave knowing, well, I'm not going to leave, um, my program, but if I, there are where I would really consider it and what keeps me in the program is that, like, for myself, there's no one telling me that I have to succeed or continue. My mom even says, why are you still studying? You should <laugh> stop studying. Um, but I think for myself, it's just like, I, I got, I started this, I need to finish it because yeah. There's just more, I dunno, being able to bring that, um, title, it's not just for myself, it's for my family as well, at least that's how I see it.

For Dalia, achieving this degree is not only an achievement for herself but for her family as well.

Sydney shared similar sentiments of the involvement of family and friends in her academic journey but framed her comments in terms of both support and pride. She explained

that although she is the one who will be receiving the degree, her family and friends are very much involved in helping her reach that milestone. Specifically, she said:

It's not just, like, a me journey. It's like a collective effort because I can't, though, yes, my family can't explain to you what I'm researching or necessarily do much other than say she's a grad student at [State University] doing something on race. She studies Puerto Ricans. Um, they are definitely involved in terms of even just, I mean, financially they pay for my car 'cause I don't get paid enough to pay for my own car and insurance. They hear me call and you know, do the kind of emotional work of "what's wrong?" All right. Take, let you know what's going on. I can talk to them a little bit about stuff.

Sydney credited her family with both financial and emotional support and identified those elements as essential to helping her achieve her degree. She also spoke about the encouragement she received from her friends:

Um, my friends as well, I think, that are not here, especially those that are not doing PhD programs. Um, a lot of them are familiar with, like, 'cause a lot of them came from [my undergrad]. So there's a sense of, like, yes, grad school. So they are just kind of proud, like, oh you were, you know, you did this right outta undergrad. That's a huge thing. Like, you know, we want you to do well. It's, like, really good stuff. So I feel like I have to, like, I have to finish, like I have to do it 'cause it's like representing, like, where I'm coming from. Like, my community and stuff.

Sydney's comments reflect the communal aspect of pursuing a graduate degree that exists for many women of color. Her community is both a source of support and motivation for her to finish.

The stories of these women highlight the different ways that the graduate school journey is not an individual endeavor but, for many women of color, an endeavor that is shared by family and friends in different ways. Some participants, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, experienced this communal journey as pressure from or a sense of obligation to their families. Other participants highlighted the financial and emotional support they received from family and the sense of pride their friends felt. These stories present a complex picture of the importance of community in the pursuit of a graduate degree.

Proving Worth: “Like, am I really supposed to be here?”

Many of the participants questioned their belonging at State University, felt they needed to prove that they belonged, and/or had experiences within the university context that othered and invalidated them based on one or more of their identities or roles. When discussing intense motivation to succeed, Noor mentioned her role as a mom as a more salient identity than being a woman of color and how that identity doesn’t allow her to “have the same opportunities as everyone else.” However, she did mention that State University is a PWI and the majority of her students were white. She went on to say, “I think I often think about like, whether they can relate to me as a teacher or if I can relate to them.” She then circled back to the initial question about intense motivation to succeed and shared:

And I think how motivation to succeed plays into it is, see, I think, like, I think in the moment when I think of it, I’m thinking of it on an individual level, instead of being part of a group that is graduate women of color, I’m like, I have to work harder. I have to succeed so that the faculty or whoever accepted me into this program will feel like it was a good idea to take a chance on me.

During this exchange, I saw Noor discussing her sense of belonging at State University through the lens of multiple of her identities. In fact, immediately after the quote above, she referenced her upbringing as the daughter of immigrants. Although she stated thinking of her experience on an individual level, I am able to see that her experience does indeed speak to the larger experiences of graduate women of color, especially within this study.

When asked about the pressures and conflicts she experiences as a graduate woman of color, Eva brought attention to her race and gender and the “judgmental” white male gaze she experiences. She said:

Maybe I wouldn't feel this way if I were a different individual who identified differently, but I feel like because you know, one I'm a woman, two I'm, um, a woman from, you know, Middle East area, um, I have felt, you know, the eyes of others being very judgmental, um, and, like, expecting a lot or like, even if I do the most, I can, like, the best possible job. Um, it's still, like, not enough or what I'm doing or what I'm advocating for, like annoys them or bothers them. And I particularly get this reception from, um, from white males.

For both Noor and Eva, they recognized that the predominantly white environment that they inhabited as non-white individuals contributed to them feeling as if they had to prove their worth. However, the previous comments highlight how racial and ethnic identity were more salient for Eva as she described her experience of proving her worth; being a parent was a more salient identity for Noor.

Race was a very salient identity for Serena when she discussed her sense of belonging at State University. Being in a space “surrounded by a lot of white folks” often made her feel “intimidated.” She said:

Like, am I really supposed to be here? Or, like, oh, they don't have to worry about anything. Like, they, I'm pretty sure they can do the assignment without any concerns about, you know, what's going on at home or something going on. So it's very, what's the word I'm looking for? It can be intimidating.

The racial composition of the institution made Serena feel as if she did not belong. She did not mention any specific instances of her white peers saying or doing anything to belittle her identity or her experiences. However, the mere presence of whiteness as the majority sparked doubt in her own abilities.

For Josefina de Luna, proving worth was equal to proving smartness. While discussing her experiences in classroom settings, she explained:

Um, whenever there's questions, during research seminars, I feel like I can't ask them because they're too dumb. Um, so I feel like if I do have a question, it has to be like this really in depth, like, um, like intense question, you know, to, like, show how smart I am or whatever. Um, and then I feel like I can't make any mistakes at all. Uh, because it, because, uh, like it'll prove that I don't belong here. Um, so it's like really hard to say when I made a mistake because I just feel like it reflects badly on me. Um, and then I feel like I have to get the best grades in all my classes, uh, to like prove that I belong here and, you know, things like that. Um, mostly I just strive to be perfect all the time.

Josefina de Luna starts this comment by talking about displaying smartness but ends by talking about displaying perfection. Her sense of belonging in her program is connected to not making mistakes, being perfect, and being the best. In my conversation with her, Josefina de Luna often referenced situations with her peers and colleagues where these feelings would arise.

Similarly, Sydney, who studies race in her PhD program, felt that she had to prove the worth of her scholarship in ways that her white counterparts did not. She said:

I'm feeling like I have to prove that I am, um, you know, my scholarship is worth, um, someone listening to, or being funded or, you know, whatever supported in a way that, um, my non-folks of color don't have to, it's just sort of assumed that they are they're there. They're competent. They're there.

Chapter two of this study identified being “presumed incompetent” as one of the environmental microaggressions that graduate women of color experience. Sydney, a graduate student with multiple minoritized identities, was creating scholarship outside of the bounds of white cultural normativity. She told me, “I wanna study race, and I wanna talk about Latinx folks. And I know that that is a contentious conversation, but that's the conversation I wanna have.” Standing firm on the direction of her scholarship resulted in lost opportunities for funding and awards and feelings of being “very much alone doing this work.”

Rochelle also shared an experience when she shared a paper she wrote with one of her white male professors related to her research idea that centered on Black communities and healing. She explained:

And I remember the instructor giving me feedback that was, like, this is really interesting. And I can see that you're passionate about it, but I don't really know if this is within the realm of social work research and how, you know, it might, it's not empirical enough. Like, how do you measure, you know, all these things. So, um, and that, that was just the first of several times that my work was looked at as frivolous or not within the bounds of conventional research ...

Rochelle's experience is another instance of the resistance that often occurs at PWIs to scholarship that centers non-white epistemologies. Her comments also reflect how empirical research often equates to the use of quantitative over qualitative methods. She continued:

Um, and so that, so just constantly being questioned about, um, what I very clearly could see and had experienced and, you know, could connect with, with the people that share those communities with me. Um, I had to not let, um, people convince me that, um, I wasn't intelligent enough or, um, serious enough to succeed in, in academic work to actually perform valuable research.

Rochelle's comment reflects the battle that many graduate women of color often experience: pushing back against dominant narratives of "valuable research" and keeping those narratives from breaking her spirit.

Kat, a 27-year-old Black graduate student in the social sciences, pushed back against the idea of proving her worth and belonging to the institution. She referenced challenges that she went through at State University, where she did not feel a sense of compassion and support from people in upper administration, the opposite of her experience as an undergraduate at an HBCU (historically Black college or university). She said:

And it's also like, why would I go through this if, like, I gotta explain this to you and, and tell you, like, you know, I gotta, you know, put forth this show and dance to tell you that I'm the student that needs to be here or that, you know, that I, you know, to try to humanize myself when it's like, yeah. Like, I, I gotta humanize myself now to, to, to tell you that I'm, I'm supposed to be here in this, in this space, which makes me not want to even do that. And so it's resistance towards that. So I don't know if that's me being

stubborn or I know that's me being stubborn and being resistant, but it's, like, why should I have to, like, do this, you know, like, be this vulnerable to you in this way.

Here, Kat connected her experience of resistance to proving her worth to the agents of this PWI with her resistance to being vulnerable in this space. She resented the idea of having to put her humanity as a Black woman on display in order to receive the type of support she received from her HBCU for just existing. I empathize with her discomfort and resistance to being perceived as weak or vulnerable in “this white academic space,” and I understand her perspective when she said, “Why would you wanna struggle for a place and to fit in and make people accept you when you don't have to?”

Isabelle, a 24-year-old Multiracial graduate student in health and medicine, spoke of a similar tension between proving her worth and resistance to being vulnerable as a multiracial student navigating in and out of institutional spaces not created for students of color. During my conversation with her, we had this exchange:

Isabelle: And personally, like, as someone who is white passing, um, I often feel a lot of confused feelings about whether or not I belong in those spaces. Um, and I also have to like give my like life story before to people to be like, “Hey, I'm, like, kind of one of you.” Um, like, “Let me tell you about my entire family.” To prove that I'm supposed to be here, which again means that, like, if I don't give someone, my entire life story, they don't know it. But it also means that, like, people are fine saying racist shit in front of me.

Erica: Yeah. Yeah. So it's like emotional labor either way.

I: Exactly.

E: That you have to do.

I: Yeah.

Isabelle felt compelled to a certain degree to put her vulnerability on display in order to prove her membership in and belonging to communities of color on campus. However, her appearance as white-passing but firmly acknowledging her minoritized racial/ethnic identities also created a conflict of belonging in white spaces. She felt “confused” about her place in spaces designed for students of color and uncomfortable in white-dominated spaces that created a hostile, racist environment for her and others.

For all of these situations, the participants referenced race as a factor in proving their worth to the institution. The participants shared experiences with faculty, peers, and students in their classes in which they questioned their sense of belonging. These experiences resulted in actions of resistance and resilience to counter any internal or external feelings of doubt about their place at the institution. One of the ways that many participants pushed back against these feelings was by redefining and self-defining what it means to succeed.

Redefining Success

Earlier in this section, I shared how many of the participants defined their success based on the expectations of others. They also shared stories of redefining success based on their goals and values. Noor discussed redefining success and expectations for herself as a mother and a student as she navigates her multiple roles. She shared:

I always feel, like, under pressure from something, but I think, well, okay. Yes, that’s true. But also I feel, like, because I can’t control a lot of the circumstances. I think I’ve really tried to switch my mindset to, okay, I’m not gonna be that mom who, like, has dinner on the table at 6:00 PM every night. And like family dinner is just not gonna be a thing right now because, like, life is crazy. And so I think just adjusting expectations for

all of those roles. So I'm just gonna be, like, if my son is relatively happy, then great.

Like, if he has to watch TV during dinner, it's fine.

Noor indicated that being a mother was the most salient identity for her when she thought about navigating multiple roles and identities as a graduate student. Here, her comments show her releasing herself from the societal expectations or stereotypes of what family or motherhood is supposed to look like and prioritizing her son's happiness as her focus. Noor also talked about her peers who were on the "tenure-track merry-go-round" and removing herself from those externally defined expectations of what should be the PhD experience. She said:

'Cause I got a lot of friends losing sleep. <laugh> Like, yeah, staying up all night to, like, get the stuff written, and I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna be okay at things, which again is, like, very historically like against my personality. I think for a lot of PhD students, like, we're used to being the best and, like, the smartest and having to let go of that or, like, intentionally letting go of that has been, I think, what's keeping me sane. <laugh>

Although I am not yet a mother, I still resonated with her experience. Noor demonstrates one way of dealing with the toll: balancing multiple roles and responsibilities as a graduate student, she prioritized being the overall best, holistic version of herself over being the best scholar.

Noor's comments also showed how letting go of the expectations of what a doctoral student should be can make way for a better sense of mental health and wellness.

Hazel reevaluated the priority she once placed on grades and academic outcomes. She explained:

Uh, in terms of how I balanced my time, I still prioritize academics. Uh, like, that is the baseline is I want to achieve the best that I can to the point that it benefits my learning. And I think that that last point is something that I've added, where before it was to the

best of my ability as in get the highest grade I could possibly get. And you can spend an unlimited amount of time doing that. Whereas the, the benefit goes down <laugh> as the amount of time goes up at some point. So I think that's something that I've shifted a little bit to.

These comments highlighted the contrast between learning and grades. The cost-benefit analysis that Hazel engaged in, to “achieve the best [she] can to the point that it benefits her learning,” speaks to how achievement and learning are separate processes, although they are often thought of as the same. She mentioned how learning through work and practical experiences during her graduate program has supplemented her classroom learning. She said:

And I think that's something where, other than the first semester, I've worked through my whole grad program and think that a lot of the benefit I have gotten through my grad program has been because I've been doing both at the same time, because my work is very related to my academics. Um, I think it's, yeah. It's supplemented what I've been learning a lot in doing it that way.

Hazel sharing her role as a research assistant highlighted the importance of experiential learning in addition to traditional classroom learning. Although time-consuming, she found that balancing both work and school was very beneficial for her overall graduate school experience.

Rochelle shared an experience with me that involved not only redefining success for herself but for her students as well. She taught a class based on her research which challenged and reframed the purpose of a final exam:

Um, and their exam yesterday was a party, like, we called it an exam jam. So we set up on [the quad] with, you know, a boombox, and they had, they all had to make playlists as their final assignment in class, playlists based on the music we have been studying over

the course of the semester. And so I just played, you know, snippets of their own playlists that they created. We had some refreshments, and we were out there dancing on the quad, you know, in the middle of exam period. And all of them at the end talked about how much better they felt, how relaxed they were, how glad they were that they had this experience. Like, whereas exams are, you know, typically seen as like the highest stress, make or break moment that an undergraduate student can have in their career, we flipped it, and we made the exam time to connect and release and take care of ourselves and invite others to participate and celebrate, like, that is what our final exam was.

In this action, I believe that Rochelle not only redefined the possibility of what a final exam could be for her students but also redefined what success can look like for her students. Grades are only one measure of success. Prioritizing connection, wellness, and celebration of self and others as measures of success as important as well. Rochelle continued:

And that was just so heartening to me. I told them this was my dream. I'm, like, y'all don't even understand, this is my dream come true. That we were able to conclude our class like this. So, um, I guess that's how I'm making meaning of it. Like I'm taking every little thing that I, um, hoped for and that maybe was pushed back against and was made more difficult than I felt that it had to be. I'm taking it all and giving it right back in a way that I hope is generative for students.

Her hopes and dreams of liberation and possibility for herself motivated her to create a space of liberation and possibility for her students. In this way, Rochelle turned her pain into purpose.

Noor, Hazel, and Rochelle's experiences are examples of the outcomes of resisting expectations and defining success for themselves. In all of their stories, resistance is a central theme as they pushed back against external expectations to discover the possibilities of what

success could look like for them. They show that there is a multiplicity of ways to achieve success.

Overall, intense motivation to succeed was a complex concept for the participants that encompassed many factors. Often, in the context of being a graduate student, success equaled getting the best grades in their classes and encouraged a hyperfocus on quantitative measures of achievement. The participants identified a communal aspect to success in sharing their stories of receiving both pressure and support from family and friends; these women were not succeeding for themselves alone. Because of different aspects of the campus environment, these graduate women of color often felt the need to prove their worth as a valid and valuable member of the community of scholars. Finally, many participants pushed back against external definitions of success and achievement to create self-defined measures that generated new possibilities for themselves and others.

Managing Our/Their Emotions and Resisting Weakness

For this study, resistance to being vulnerable was the second highest endorsed subscale, and obligation to suppress emotions tied for the least endorsed subscale along with obligation to help others. One thing I found interesting was that, although resistance to being vulnerable and obligation to suppress emotions were defined as separate constructs in Giscombé's (2010) Superwoman Schema framework, participants did not distinguish them as separate when talking about them during the interviews. The changes in the range of participants' scores between the two subscales also revealed interesting findings. In all but four of the participants, the range that their scores fell in (low, moderate, high) were the same for both subscales. For the remaining four participants, the scores for obligation to suppress emotions were in the moderate range but the scores for resistance to being vulnerable were in the high range. The survey items related to

obligation to suppress emotions focused on internalizing or hiding feelings or external displays of perceived negative emotions, such as tears, while the items related to resistance to being vulnerable focused on self-reliance and not depending on or trusting others.

Expressing Emotions as a Sign of Weakness

Similar to the results of Giscombé's (2010) original study, the participants in this study saw displaying emotions that were perceived as negative as a sign of weakness. Sydney acknowledged that often this finding is particularly the case for women of color:

I know often there's, like, a lot of like association between, um, or I don't know if I'm making this up, but this is just what I understand generally, like, we think women of color and like expressing these emotions, that will be like a sign of weakness.

Sydney made this statement as a Latina, emphasizing one of the goals of this study: to discuss the applicability of Giscombé's work to women from other communities of color. Josefina de Luna echoed the sentiment of emotions as a sign of weakness when she discussed her feelings around crying at work. She said:

I've also heard people, like, criticize, especially women, when they cry at work. Um, so that's like another thing, um, like my first year I think was the worst. Uh, I feel like I always had to hide when I was crying, like, to escape to the restroom and, like, get it all out or else, like, no one would take me seriously if they saw me.

Here, Josefina de Luna made the correlation between her tears and her perceived professionalism and work competence. With this in mind, I completely understood why she and other women of color feel the need to hide their emotions in these settings. Showing their tears can often be another way that women of color are labeled and stereotyped at work or in the classroom.

Other participants, such as Melissa and Noor, also referenced expressing emotions being seen as a weakness and shared that they learned this lesson from family members, particularly the women. During our interview, Melissa mentioned that she was “raised to, to show strength or to specifically I guess, like not show weakness or, um, negative emotions.” Noor recalled a situation that happened with her mother:

Um, actually an example of this happened really recently where I was making my mom watch *The Bachelor* with me, and she was so, I could tell she was like physically uncomfortable and disgusted by like the displays of emotion. Especially from the women, like she was like, “Why is she sharing so much? Like why is she wearing her heart on her sleeve like that?” And I was, like, “you know, mom, like people have these conversations, especially.” And she was like, “No.” And I’m, like, well I know you don’t <laugh> like, you never have <laugh>. So yeah, like the lesson was that showing emotion is weakness. People will use it against you.

Giscombé (2010) discussed how lessons from foremothers was a contributing contextual factor to the development of the superwoman role. In the comment above and during other parts of my conversation with Noor, she mentioned ways that she observed her mother exhibiting all the characteristics of the Superwoman Schema.

Rochelle also mentioned her childhood when talking about her experience with resistance to being vulnerable. She referenced feeling like she had to be “jumped in” to the world of existing as a Black woman in society, comparing her experience to being a new initiate to a gang. Specifically, she said:

Um, resistance to being vulnerable is something that I’ve always been acutely aware of.
Um, and that is partially because as a child, I was chastised for being too sensitive and I

feel like people, this is probably a poor ... it's actually, it's an effective analogy, but it's sad to say, but I felt like I had to be jumped in to the, to the world of, like, this is what it is to be a black woman in society. Like, you better get tough, you better not let them see you, you know, um, fold or cry or, um, give up in any kind of way.

My sensitivity also often resulted in my being disciplined as a child, so Rochelle's comments hit home in a very real way for me. I cried when I did not have the words to articulate my feelings and was often told to "toughen up." Here, Rochelle made the connection between her identity as a Black woman and the harsh environment of the society she was entering into that "required" her to be tough.

For Kat, resistance to being vulnerable meant independence and not relying on others to do things for you. She shared that her mother raised her to be self-sufficient and juxtaposed her experience with her friends' displays of vulnerability. She shared:

I remember, you know, going throughout my life and even, with some of my friends, sometimes I roll my eyes at them being so vulnerable or crying or, like, you know, not being able to do things themselves, like 'cause I consider myself to be self-sufficient. That's the way my mother raised me. You know, she needed something done, like, she did it herself. Like, there's somethings she couldn't do physically because of her health conditions ... I can't think of like numerous things, but I just know that my mom is, like, you know, do it yourself. If you see something, like, you know, do it yourself, you know?

Two things stood out to me from what Kat shared. First, the contributing contextual factor of lessons from foremothers appears again. Kat credited her mother with raising her to be self-sufficient, a characteristic that she contrasts with vulnerability. The disapproval that Kat felt for

women who display vulnerability also caught my attention when listening to her story. She continued by saying:

Um, or I had uncles and brothers around me who taught me how to do things myself. Like, you know, I don't know how to really change my oil, but if I had to, I could figure it out. I haven't changed a tire before, but if I had to, I'd figure it out. Whereas I know that I've been around other female counterparts in my life and they just wanna wait until help comes. And that damsel in distress act, um, it's something that I guess where I'm, like, I'd rather not be a damsel in distress. I'd rather be a strong woman, figure it out myself, than be a damsel in distress. For me, that's, like, I don't wanna do that, but I know for some women that's where their femininity comes from of, of, like, oh, I need a man to do things for me. And I'm like, you know, yeah. But I can do it myself too because I'm wasting time waiting for someone to come along to fix my tire or to fix whatever it is or to lift this thing, you know.

Here, Kat connected suppressing emotions and resisting vulnerability to being a “strong woman” and asking for or waiting to receive help as being a “damsel in distress.” She also referred to vulnerability being the root of the femininity for some women. However, race and ethnicity can bring some complexity to this notion. Society often sees white women as the prototype for femininity, and they are expected and allowed to show emotion and vulnerability. On the other hand, Black women and other women of color are often penalized for showing vulnerability, and our emotions are not given equal attention and value (Seaton, 2017; Awesomely Luvvie, 2018). Kat's comments also show how male-identified family members can also contribute to messages that young girls receive about vulnerability and independence.

Many of the women in this study suppressed their emotions because they were perceived as signs of weakness. The participants shared experiences of negative reinforcement that they received for displaying emotions and vulnerability in both personal and professional settings. They received these messages early in their lives, first from family members, particularly mothers. The findings also highlighted the differences in the way that showing emotions and vulnerability is perceived for women of color specifically.

Emotional Labor and Management

In addition to feeling like displaying emotions is a weakness, many participants referenced the emotional labor and management they have to do to make others comfortable around them. In my conversation with Sydney, she referenced how some emotions are more welcome than other depending on the situation and the audience. She shared:

I've also found that there are certain emotions that I'm allowed to express more than others that are more, I don't know, acceptable to folks ... I've been thinking also my interactions with just men of color in particular, whether it be in my professional or my personal life. Um, a lot are very receptive to me crying or showing some kind of emotion related to sadness or being, feeling a little defeated or down, as opposed to me expressing anger or frustration or something seen as a little more aggressive. Um, that's I, I get two different responses. So with the first one it's like, "Oh, oh, like, let me, are you okay?" And like, "What's wrong?" And like, kind of like that whole, imagine, like, a hug or, like, a pat on the back, whatever that is in, like, the appropriate context and the other, I get more like a, like a defensive, like, "Whoa, like, calm down. All right. We're not gonna deal with you right now. I don't know what's happening," like, sort of thing.

Sydney's comments brought gendered and racialized nuances into the conversation when she spoke about how men of color receive or experience her display of emotions. She spoke about receiving comfort or support when displaying more traditionally feminine emotions—displays of emotion that Kat would refer to as being a “damsel in distress.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, when Sydney displayed more traditionally masculine emotions, she experienced being reprimanded or pushed away. Later in the conversation, Sydney shared how she feels in those moments as she negotiates what and how much emotional expression to give and the potential outcomes of how that expression could be received. Specifically, she said:

I have to do a lot of emotional management. So while, like, I think, like, when we were talking about earlier while yes, I find a lot of spaces where I can like express some of, like, the more, uh, vulnerable or uncomfortable emotions, I still find that I have to manage, like, how much I'm saying, who I'm saying it to, the implications of that. Um, yeah. Um, so sometimes feeling also like people want my emotional expression. Even sometimes when I don't wanna give, it's what they want, sometimes they don't when I have, when I have them.

Sydney's comments highlighted how often women of color often weigh the potential outcomes of displaying their emotions in certain spaces and to certain people because they know that often those displays can come with negative consequences. She also brought attention to how others can feel like they have a right to her emotional expression, engaging in what I would name as “policing” by determining what emotions she should express, when she should express them and how should express them.

A common thread in the participants who spoke about engaging in emotional labor and/or management was the desire to appear a certain way for others. For Talia, a 23-year-old

Multiracial graduate student in STEM, the desire was to appear resilient in the face of the many challenges and setbacks of graduate school. She explained:

Like everyone tells you, you know, you get critiqued all the time in grad school and stuff like that. And, like, regardless of how much those critiques are, like, not getting a grant funded or not getting what, even an interview to a certain graduate program. Like, I, I feel like I am [supposed to] keep all the negative feelings, uh, to myself and don't necessarily express those. And if I do it's to, like, very select people.

Hearing Talia talk about the expectation of keeping her negative feelings inside made me sad, but it was not an unfamiliar feeling for me. Thankfully, Talia had some people that she felt she could be vulnerable with, but the expectation of keeping disappointment and other negative emotions inside while dealing with the pressures of the many critiques experienced during graduate school can be overwhelming.

Noor also employed emotional management in her interactions in graduate school through a strategy she referred to as "hiding behind openness." This strategy allowed her to "seem open on the surface [so that] people don't really like dig deeper." She shared:

I think at school, I think I'm a very open person, but I don't ... Actually, I'm, like, open without being vulnerable. And I think I kind of hide behind, like, oh, if I openly share things that I'm going through, then I'll be relatable to people. Um, and, like, I can empathize with them, but I don't actually let them see me going through it or, like, suffering. It's always, like, I've gone through this. Like, I've put a bow on it. Let me, like, present it to you. So that you'll know, I empathize with you not in, like, a manipulative way, but I think I still, like, I still really have trouble, like, letting people see negative emotions from me unless I know them really well.

Noor's comments created a distinction between vulnerability and relatability that I did not think about before. Relatability only involves surface level interactions and information. Vulnerability requires a certain level of closeness where people are allowed access to "dig deeper." I see relatability as a two-way mirror; it allows people to look at you and see themselves but not see you. Vulnerability is like looking through a window where each person can see the other. Noor used "hiding behind openness" as an emotional management strategy that gives the receiver the resemblance of vulnerability that they are looking for while at the same time protecting her emotions.

The participants felt the need to make strategic decisions on which emotions to display, how to display them, and to whom to display them. Referencing the findings of the previous sections, the participants often made these decisions in order to show competence or resilience and to avoid showing weakness. They showed an awareness and sensitivity of who was on the receiving end of their displays of emotions and vulnerabilities; those who were close in relationship to the participants received their vulnerability and those who were not received a curated display of strength and socially acceptable emotions.

Resisting and Embracing Vulnerability

These participants varied between resisting and embracing vulnerability, both among the group and within the same conversation with a single participant. Kat was one of the participants where this tension existed. She acknowledged her lack of vulnerability and the desire to work to become more vulnerable. Kat explained:

If it, I think about it, um, I guess the feelings I'm having around that right now have been, I guess, feelings that, or thoughts I would say, especially the vulnerability one, are things I've been trying to challenge myself to be more vulnerable in certain ways.

Despite showing a sense of disapproval in earlier comments, she recognized that it can be beneficial for her to be vulnerable. As it related to her graduate school experience specifically, Kat connected her lack of vulnerability with her discomfort in being in “this white academic space.” She said:

Um, I, I, in some ways I’m vulnerable, and in some ways I’m not at all. Um, and that just comes to access of personal information. Um, I don’t know. There is a slight discomfort still being in, in that academic space and this white academic space that, yeah, there are Black faces, but it’s, it, it feels different. It feels different.

Kat’s comments show that her discomfort with being vulnerable in graduate school is due to more than just the presence of white people and that the mere presence of “Black faces” does not lessen the “discomfort” that she feels. “This white academic space” spoke more to the ideology of whiteness and sociohistorical context of the institution. Because Kat completed her undergraduate degree at an HBCU, it makes sense that this environment “feels different.”

As a STEM scholar, Talia also acknowledged existing in a white male academic space. However, for her having a woman of color faculty mentor as a role model in vulnerability was instrumental. During our conversation, I specifically asked Talia if her mentor being a woman contributed to her being more comfortable with vulnerability:

Erica: And it’s really great that you have that type of like supportive relationship with, with your mentor. Do you think that the fact that she also is a woman contributes to that, you know, feeling of I can be vulnerable with her?

Talia: I, I definitely think so. My, my previous two mentors were both males. Um, and so I did come into, when I was looking for rotations, it was kind of interesting to me just rotating with, with women PIs, um, because that was an experience I didn’t necessarily

have before. Um, but I do think that that definitely plays into it. Um, and also, you know, like, her personality type. Um, because she is one that communicates to her lab, like, the type of thing she's feeling, like she'll send Slack messages, like "Oh, I'm so frustrated about this and this and this," just to, like, the whole lab. Um, so I think she, that she's a woman definitely plays into it, but also that, that is more what she's predisposed to, I guess.

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative> so, so modeling that type of like vulnerability for you all encourages you to be able to model that back to her.

T: Yes, for sure.

Similar to Kat, Talia also had a contrasting academic experience; however, hers was related to gender instead of race. She noted the differences between working with male and female faculty members. Beyond also being a woman, Talia's mentor also gave her a model to emulate as a woman in STEM who displays vulnerability in the workplace. Having her faculty mentor display vulnerability in her lab contributed to Talia feeling comfortable displaying vulnerability as well.

Although participants referenced the ways that they resisted vulnerability, they also acknowledged the benefits of vulnerability. The academic environment contributed to the degree of comfortability the participants had with showing vulnerability in graduate school settings. Participants specifically mentioned racial and gendered dynamics that influenced their perception of if the environment was safe for them to be vulnerable in. Lastly, having models of vulnerability, especially from individuals with similar identities, encouraged the participants to embrace vulnerability themselves.

In summary, the participants in this study spoke about obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to being vulnerable in ways that were not distinct constructs as outlined in the

SWS but as overlapping and connecting. Many participants saw expressing emotions as a sign of weakness and felt the need to not only manage their own emotions but also manage the emotions of others to make the situation or environment comfortable for all involved. Although they struggled with showing vulnerability, the participants shared the desire to be more authentic with their emotions and move toward embracing vulnerability instead of putting up an emotional façade for others.

Wearing the Mask of Strength

Obligation to present an image of strength was the third most endorsed subscale with eight of the 12 participants scoring in the high range for the scale. In my conversations with the participants about this construct, their comments often connected and overlapped with intense motivation to succeed, resistance to being vulnerable, and obligation to suppress emotions. For many of them, they expressed the necessity to be—or at least appear—strong and resilient in order to be successful, and for them, showing weakness or emotion did not present an image of strength. The survey items related to obligation to present an image of strength focused on showing up as strong in different contexts (i.e., work, family) and gendered, cultural, and racial motivators for strength.

The operating word for this construct is “image.” Merriam-Webster gives many definitions for image including “a visual *representation* of something,” “the optical *counterpart* of an object produced by an optical device or an electronic device,” “a mental *picture* or *impression* of something,” and “a *reproduction* or *imitation* of the form of a person or thing” (emphasis added). All of these definitions reveal that an image of a thing or person cannot capture the fullness of what the thing or who the person; it is a type of fragmentation. Hurtado (2003) speaks of the experience of fragmentation as not only having “these ‘two unreconciled

strivings' [as DuBois described] between how [people of color] see themselves and how others see them" but also questioning how others perceived them and making decisions based on all these perceptions. Sydney shared how she experienced presenting an image of herself in her graduate school context:

Um, and, like, feeling like, I don't have an adjective, but just kind of having to, feeling like I have to play. Like I, like, I can't fully be like, I can't fully be myself in all, in each situation trying to balance and sort of playing politics. And um, also just, I don't know, feeling like sometimes, like, who I am get gets pulled in different directions so much that I've had to, like, had many times where I have to come back and try to come back to center. So I feel like almost, like, sometimes decentered from myself 'cause I'm trying to, like, yeah, strangely be myself, but within a particular context and having to try to manage, um, a lot of other folks', like, expectations for me and my behavior and all of that.

Sydney's comments echo some of the earlier participants' comments related to emotional management but take them to a new level. She mentioned not being able to "fully be [her]self" and feeling "decentered from [her]self." When Sydney said she was not able to "fully be [her]self and felt she had to "play," her comments reminded me of an actor putting on a performance for an audience, as if the "good graduate student" was the role she was trying to play for the various "folks" that she mentioned had these "expectations for her and her behavior." These outside expectations contributed to Sydney feeling "decentered from [her]self." The decentered feeling she described shows a discrepancy between the image she was being pulled on to present and her core identity.

Seeing strength as competence emerged as a major subtheme within obligation to present an image of strength. As this study focuses on the experience of women of color in the context of academia, I found this parallel to be fitting. Finding that the participants perceived an incompatibility between strength and vulnerability was equally as impactful. Additionally, some participants shared the ways they went about redefining strength for themselves

Competence = Strength ≠ Vulnerability

For many of the participants, in the context of their academic pursuits, presenting an image of strength meant presenting an image of competence to their peers and faculty. Isabelle explicitly made this connection when she explained:

Yeah, I would say that for kind of obligation to present an image of strength. I also interpret that as like an image of competence. Just, like, constantly being concerned that like my advisor or the people I'm researching under, or my fellow grad students, I want them to feel like I'm good at what I do. That I'm able to take on a lot of work and, like, do work of a very high quality and just manage my time well, and kind of, you know, make it seem that even though, like, my plate is very full, that I am always able to do more.

Isabelle's comments also reminded me of the earlier subtheme of proving worth. She felt that by taking on "a lot of work" and "always [being] able to do more" others would see her as a valuable in this academic space. Her competence as a graduate student was connected to exceeding expectations no matter what other responsibilities she had.

In this way, the image of strength Isabelle and other participants presented was directly connected to their intense motivation to succeed academically. When I asked Dalia how

obligation to present an image of strength showed up for her, she made the direct connection to intense motivation to succeed:

Erica: And so the other category that you scored really high in was the obligation to present an image of strength. So can you describe how that shows up for you as a graduate woman of color?

Dalia: Yeah, I think for me, I see that going along with this motivation to succeed, um, because I don't know if there's sort of, again, there's nobody telling me that I have to do this, but I'm putting on myself of, you know, I have to be, I dunno, present myself in a certain way or feel like I need to know everything or read everything that's out there. Um, knowing that that's also, like, impossible to do, um, something that I came to terms with in my exams last week. Like, there's no way going to read everything. So, <sound distorted> and yeah, I think that's sort of how I see that in terms of strength.

These comments show how Dalia uses the mask of being a “super student” as a way to display to others her intense motivation to succeed. Other participants also expressed similar sentiments, whether the mask was put on them (external pressures and expectations) or they chose to wear the mask (internal pressures and expectations).

Participants also connected obligation to present an image of strength and resistance to being vulnerable, where vulnerability and strength were polar opposites. In my conversation with Melissa, she shared, “I think that I was raised to, to show strength or to specifically I guess, like not show weakness or, um, negative emotions.” Kat echoed similar sentiments when speaking about relationships with her family and friends:

And, and while I do suppress my emotions or don't be as vulnerable because I won't show up as this, um, stronger figure for them ... Sometimes I feel as though I have some

people in my life that I love them and I want them in my life, but I feel as though I have some people that I don't think I can show that vulnerability in because they need me for to help them ... emotionally and to be there for them. So it's kind of hard to show that for them, when it's like you trust me to be that strong person for you, and maybe that's a, I think, maybe a disillusion of myself that they can't handle it. And so I kind of know where that comes from, but I still don't trust it to, to not move past it for some of these relationships.

Here, Kat literally said that, for her, strength is the opposite of showing emotions and vulnerability and that showing vulnerability and emotion can discredit the image of strength that others have of her. Kat also recognized that this idea may be an internal feeling that she is projecting on her loved ones but still holds fast to that feeling. Both Melissa and Kat define strength as the absence of vulnerability, and Kat's comments illuminate how the perception of the relationship can determine how and to whom that strength is displayed.

These differences in perception also showed up for Noor when I brought up the discrepancy in her score for Obligation to Present an Image of Strength versus her comments on how the construct is very present in her life:

Noor: Um, yeah. I just re-- I just really don't wanna be seen as weak. I think is what it comes down to.

Erica: Mm-hmm <affirmative>, mm-hmm <affirmative> which is so interesting because your score on the, the obligation to present an image of strength is very low.

N: Yeah.

E: That's really,

N: I'm surprised to see that. Um, and I wonder if, when I was taking the survey, I don't know. I might have been thinking of like, ideally what I would wanna do versus what I actually do. Um, or again, that like hiding behind openness. I'm like, oh, I, my image is, like, people would, people would say that I keep it real. Like, so maybe my image is not one of, like, I have it all together, but internally I'm like, y'all, don't really see <laugh> like, what's going on.

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

N: Yeah. So maybe in my mind that is part of my image of strength.

Noor's comments again draw a connection between strength and competence—or, in her words, “keep[ing] it real” or “hav[ing] it all together—and the need to present an image to others despite it not being the reality that she experiences. Even in responding to the survey, she may have been thinking about presenting an image of strength and competence.

For Josefina de Luna, showing strength and competence meant having a “cool exterior.”

She said:

Like, uh, it's like, especially in student seminars where you present your research and you get, like, a really hard question that kind of stumps you. Like, I have a fear of that because I notice, like, they'll start attacking almost like just trying to pinpoint, like, your weak spots. Um, so, like, you always have to have, like, a cool, uh, what's the word I'm looking for? Like exterior almost, like you can't show anyone that you're tripped up or stumped in any way.

This comment reminded me of Dr. Richard Majors's (1993) writings on black men and the “cool pose”—putting on a tough exterior to obscure negative feelings—that they often use as a coping mechanism in a society filled with racism and discrimination. An article in the *Baltimore Sun*

defined the “cool pose” as “a bit of posturing that insulates [young Black men] from an otherwise overwhelming social reality” and “a way for [B]lack youths to maintain a sense of integrity and suppress rage at being blocked from usual routes to esteem and success” (New York News Service, 1992). Josefina’s comments also reminded me of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s (1913) famous poem so I asked her, “Would you say that those situations, it feels like you're wearing like a mask?” She agreed with my assessment.

The participants found it important to display an appearance of strength for those around them even if it was contrary to how they actually felt and how they actually experienced their situations. For the graduate student experience in particular, displaying an image of strength meant displaying an image of competence, and competence and vulnerability were incompatible. These displays of strength were comparable to putting on a mask when it was time to “perform” strength for whatever audience. Participants saw this mask as a protective measure to prevent outsiders from seeing their struggles and vulnerabilities.

Mask Off: Redefining Strength

Although many of the participants acknowledged the mask of strength that they wear in their day-to-day interactions, some of them also shared their attempts at redefining what strength looks like for them. Melissa credited therapy with her low score for Obligation to Present an Image of Strength and for helping her reframe strength as vulnerability. She said:

I think that I was raised to, to show strength or to, specifically I guess, like, not show weakness or, um, negative emotions. Um, and I think that, um, that it's low now just because of some therapy and things. Um, I really leaned into like, um, like acknowledging strength in vulnerability, um, seeing that as like, I guess true signs of strength, being able to share and like communicate emotions and, um, and ask for help, I

guess, is something that I'm, we're still work that part, I'm still working on, but, um, just, yeah, just acknowledging that, that there's a lot of strength in vulnerability now after some work.

Melissa's comments and her lower subscale scores highlights the transformative impact of therapy in countering the socialization of her childhood. Three other participants also mentioned utilizing therapy either through State University's counseling center or outside counseling services, and all of them found it to be helpful for them.

Isabelle, one of the participants who sought out therapy, felt it was important to let people to see behind the façade of strength to create opportunities for connections. She shared:

I'd say that the obligation to present an image of strength is definitely one that I feel really strongly. Um, yeah. And I, I think that that's definitely something that I've worked on, like trying to bring down over time because I recognize that, like, that's not necessarily sustainable and also isn't necessarily helpful to the people around me that I also want to support, if that makes sense, like making everything look flawless and effortless isn't great. When, you know, you have other people who are looking at you or looking up to you and saying, like, "How did you manage to do that?" Like, letting other people in on the work that goes into it can be, can be a good thing and can be a way to like connect with other people.

Strain in interpersonal relationships is one of the perceived liabilities of the Superwoman role identified by Giscombé (2010). Isabelle highlighted how often presenting an image of strength can create unrealistic expectations to those it is presented to. Strength displayed in this way can be a barrier in connection and closeness to others, while vulnerability can serve as an invitation.

Kat was the only participant who explicitly indicated being somewhat “resistant” to therapy, although she did encourage her friends to seek out a mental health professional when they were dealing with challenges. Even without the support of therapy, Kat also found ways to push back against the ideal of strength, specifically being responsible for the behaviors and actions of others. When speaking metaphorically about her relationships with some of her friends, she said:

Um, but I’m not gonna be pulling that string to get you up anymore. I’m connected to you. I’m with you on this ride. We’re just going along that together, and we’re just still moving together around that time period. But you’re still here. I’m willing to do that with you. As long as it’s not distracting my own self-being and, like, my own, um, my own self-peace. I’m willing to keep it with you. You wanna still stay there and not reach that pace. I’m still connected with you, but I am not gonna do that work to, to pull you up because you have to, you gotta pull yourself up. And um, so that’s kind of where I’m at overall.

Part of Kat’s image of strength involved always being a support for the people in her life despite the stress it caused her. She referenced being “burnt out and burdened” from a relationship with a friend in which she was “an unpaid therapist for over 10 years.” Knowing this situation brought more context for me to her comment about being resistant to therapy. Instead of continuously being “burdened” by her relationships with others, Kat made the choice to “protect her peace” and prioritize self-care.

Some of the participants of this study reframed strength as vulnerability and self-care. They recognized that they presented strength in ways that were not sustainable, helpful, or healthy. For some, this redefining process involved therapy and for others it involved self-

reflection and self-awareness. The overall goal of these efforts was to create more authentic connections with themselves and others.

Although obligation to present an image of strength was the third most endorsed subscale, its co-occurrence with the four other subscales make it more impactful than the scores themselves show it to be. Participants often mentioned their displays of strength in conjunction with talking about being motivated to succeed, suppressing emotions and resistance to vulnerability. In fact, the many participants saw strength and vulnerability as opposites, while some were able to reframe this notion and embrace vulnerability as an authentic display of strength.

Last on the List: Helping Others Over Caring for Self

Obligation to help others was the least endorsed subscale with only five of the 12 participants scoring in the high range for this subscale. My conversations with the participants about this subscale touched on the role of caregiver, self-care and selfishness, and occupational responsibilities. Their comments also showed an inverse relationship between obligation to help others and intense motivation to succeed, as I discussed earlier in this chapter. The survey items related to this subscale focused on taking on too many roles and responsibilities, giving priority to the needs of others, and neglecting well-being.

The obligation to put the needs of others before themselves resonated with many participants. Rochelle shared how caregivers emphasized putting others before self during her upbringing and the blessing that the pandemic brought in helping her reframe those notions. She explained:

Yeah. It's, it's really the pandemic that has given me the, the time and the opportunity to focus on myself and really, like, understand what that means. Um, because I was raised to

think that it was selfish to do things for yourself. Um, and I, and I'm sure that comes from, well, now I understand that it comes from a communal orientation to, you know, um, survival that is cultural, and that is not honored in the way that it should be in this mainstream society, but also, you know, growing up in low-resource environments where, um, you gotta share, you gotta support, you can't um, yeah. Being selfish was, was one of the worst things that you could do.

Rochelle, like many of us, equated self-care with selfishness. She also identified a root of this concept that she likely shares with many other women of color. Many racial/ethnic minoritized groups share the “communal orientation to survival” that she spoke of. This ideal, combined with how communities of color specifically socialize women, create a complex obligation of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. Motherhood is a prime example of this intersection.

Although Noor scored low in this subscale, she identified her mother as someone who would have scored very high. She said:

Um, and then that obligation to help others. I know I scored low on that, but I think my mom would score really high because she doesn't take care of herself and she just will, she will give a lot to others, even if it harms her, and then she will like fall apart and get resentful. And then you're like, “Mom, I didn't ask you to do that. And I don't want you to, if it's gonna harm you.”

Noor's reflection on her mother showed how putting others before yourself can be detrimental to both parties. She described a situation in which her mom experiences harm and resentment and her relationship with her mom is also strained.

When speaking with Serena, the subscale obligation to help others resonated with her the most and connected strongly with the theme of motherhood. During our conversation we had the following exchange:

Erica: Um, so among the, the three categories where you score the highest, so obligation to present an image of strength, um, what was the second one, intense motivation succeed and obligation to help others over your own self-care. Is there one of those categories that you think resonates most with you?

Serena: Um, obligation to help others over self-care resonates with me the most

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Can you tell me a little bit about why that is?

S: Uh, well, I, like, since the pandemic started, like, I've taken on a lot of roles, um, as a mother, I mean, that's something I can't let go of.

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

S: Um, but another role that I've taken on during the pandemic is a caregiver role too. My mom, um, she has dementia, so everything has just been put to the side. Um, when I say put to the side, like, you know, I don't prioritize myself or, um, focus on like my study.

So my, like, focus is mainly making sure that my mom and my daughter's okay.

Here, Serena only mentions two roles other than her role as a student but refers to them as “a lot of roles.” I interpret this comment as the extent of these roles being “a lot” and not necessarily the number. The feeling of “a lot” also came through in other ways during my conversation with Serena. I distinctly remember her sounding tired, overwhelmed, and even somewhat defeated, which may have also contributed to how short my conversation was with her compared to the other participants.

After expressing empathy for her experience, I asked Serena to expound on how the roles of mother and caregiver impacted her student role. She shared:

So, um, I just, I guess as a student, I'm not as, like, motivated or, like, I'm not really focused on the material. Like, I find myself like unable to concentrate on the content that's being presented. Like, I'm thinking about something else, like, oh, did my mom eat or did she take her medication? And it, it just goes elsewhere. Or, um, like, by the time I'm done doing all the stuff, just like at home, like cooking or doing laundry, um, I get, I get so tired and I don't even wanna look at a computer. Um, and try to find some time for myself. So I, I haven't really been able to concentrate all my schoolwork and, uh, just haven't had the motivation.

Even though Serena scored very high in intense motivation to succeed, these comments clearly show how her obligation to help others lessened her motivation to succeed in school. Her experience also reminded me of Maslow's (1943, 1954) Hierarchy of Needs. Serena prioritized basic needs (food, water, warmth, etc.) and psychological needs (relationships with her daughter and mother) over her self-fulfillment needs (pursuit of a graduate degree). Although Maslow (1987) later refined his theory to be less rigid than the originally proposed order, Serena's experience gives an example of the validity of the initial hierarchy. While an individual does not necessarily have to fulfill the lower needs on the hierarchy before reaching self-fulfillment, not fulfilling those needs can interfere with or delay actions to reach those goals. Serena made the decision to prioritize the things that would keep her and her family alive and comfortable over realizing personal potential and self-fulfillment by working towards her degree.

Many of the participants in the study were in service or helping professions. Isabelle shared part of her experience as a social worker and how it had impacted her approach to self-care. She explained:

And then the obligation to help others over self-care is something that I also feel, um, very familiar with and is also something I've tried to work really hard on, especially having worked in mental health treatment for a long time. Um, I was a social worker. I was responsible for like 65 to 90 clients at a time. All of whom are chronically homeless and had severe and persistent mental health, uh, needs. And so, like, just the, the idea that like you can't, you can't necessarily, like, set yourself on fire to keep other people warm. Yeah. It's something I'm familiar with, but also something that, like, I don't always do well all the time.

Isabelle's quote about "setting yourself on fire to keep other people warm" is an impactful metaphor that speaks to the personal cost of giving so much of herself to others. My conversation with Isabelle made me wonder if women of color who choose academic and career paths in more traditional helping professions, such as medicine and education, may be more likely to exhibit characteristics of the superwoman role and score higher on the survey. As a woman of color who spent many years working in a traditional education space, I often experienced the tension between self-care and overworking myself for the benefit of the students. This tension was fueled both by internal motivations to support the students and institutional expectations to "do more with less."

In her original study, Giscombé (2010) also identified that neglecting well-being was a consequence for some of the participants who felt obligated to help others over attending to their own self-care. Although this finding was not salient in the current study, this concept did emerge

in the experience of one of the participants. In addition to wondering how her role as a caregiver would impact her life post-graduate school, Serena also shared how her obligation to help others impacted her physical health and well-being. She said:

Um, well I know I don't, I don't get a[n] adequate amount of sleep. Um, I don't have, like, I try to go for, like, [a] physical and, like, get checked, checked on whatever physically, but I know, like, as far as eating, I do remember to eat, which is a good thing. Um, but as far as, like, getting out and exercise and get moving, I don't, I have no energy for that.

Due to her responsibilities to her mom and daughter, Serena often neglects some of the routine tasks to maintain and improve not only physical health but overall well-being, such as sleep and exercise. She says that she has “no energy for [exercise],” but I also imagine that it is also difficult for her to find the time. Serena constantly is engaged in making decisions balancing the well-being of those in her care, her own well-being, and her fulfillment goals, such as completing graduate school.

Although obligation to help others was the least highly endorsed subscale, the participants shared experiences that illuminated how this facet of the superwoman role impacts their relationships with others and influences their graduate school experience. The participants often found themselves last on their own list, prioritizing the well-being of others over their own. These decisions are often rooted in familial or cultural expectations of self-sacrifice which, in many ways, can be necessary for the group's survival. A connection may also exist between these expectations and the choices the participants and other women of color make to pursue helping or service professions.

Acceptance or Rejection of the Superwoman Role

To close each interview, I asked the participant the following question: “Do you feel that the term ‘superwoman’ is an accurate term to reflect your experience navigating multiple identities and multiple roles?” They answered in a variety of different ways. Some rejected the term, despite their scores on the survey and how they described their experiences with each of the subscales. Others hesitantly or reluctantly admitted that the term was a fit. There were also those who completely agreed with the term as reflective of their experience. Ironically, the participants’ responses divided evenly within these three categories.

Noor, Talia, Hazel, and Eva all rejected the label superwoman for various reasons. Noor acknowledged that outwardly her experience could look like that of a superwoman but that is not how she feels inwardly. When I asked her my closing question, she replied:

I’ve had people say that to me and I’m always like, thanks, but like inwardly I’m like, no, ’cause I, I think relating to this, I don’t, I don’t strive to make it look easy. Like, if it looks, if it looks easy, it’s not me that’s making it look easy. Um, ’cause I’m like, especially to like my real friends, like I’m all out there with, like, the difficulty in my life. And so I think I often have trouble remembering that what I’m doing is, like, pretty awesome. Um, I don’t think about that a lot, so I don’t know if that, I don’t think that it reflects my experience. Um, it’s not how I feel, but I can also see how it would look that way on the outside.

Noor pointed out that while her experience may look similar to that of a superwoman, she does not “strive to make it look easy” and shares her struggles and vulnerability with her “real friends.” For Noor, an important part of being a superwoman is intentionally putting out the appearance of being super, and she does not resonate with that.

Talia rejected the term superwoman her life as a whole but stated that she would like to be a superwoman only in her academic life. She shared:

I feel like I wouldn't give myself that much credit to say superwoman, but I do think that is an accurate term for, for something that I kind of like aspire to be within grad student or graduate school. Um, like, I'd really like to be able to be productive and, and produce good science. Um, yeah. I don't know. I don't know that I'll ever actually get to the point where I can like consider myself as superwoman or whatever.

Talia's comments made me wonder if the superwoman role could be confined to just one sector of life. Is there the possibility of being able to activate our superpowers in work or school and then take off our capes with our loved ones? I do not have an answer for this question but am hesitant to think that the superwoman switch could be flipped on and off so easily and that activating it in one area would not have consequences for other areas.

The remaining two participants in this category rejected the label superwoman because of comparisons to their peers who they felt were more deserving of the title. Hazel discussed the privileges she has that others may not. She shared:

I think I'm good at it, but I wouldn't say like a superwoman. I see other people in my program who are caretakers and work three jobs and are in grad school ... first gen, like all these other things stacked against them. Um, I think that's a superwoman. I think I do a good job, but I also think that the cards were stacked in my favor. Uh, I have all of these different support systems. I am financially stable and have, you know, something to fall back on if I can't work, for example, uh, and I think that, that, you know, obviously that's nice in practice, but it also is a weight off of the stress of having to achieve at a certain level, um, that a lot of people don't have the luxury of.

Hazel highlighted some identities and roles that present barriers to persistence in graduate school, such as being a primary caretaker for children or other family members, working multiple jobs, and being a first-generation college student. She acknowledged having various supports that not only assist her in her graduate school journey but also take the “weight of the stress of having to achieve at a certain level” that those in the situations she mentioned may not have access to. Eva provided a similar comparison of situations between her and her peers in her response. In sharing why she does not identify with the term superwoman, she explained:

I don't think so. Okay. I don't know what I would describe it as I, I think, and that might just be, um, a confidence thing, but I think when I see other people doing it and I'm comparing myself relative, you know, to other women, um, you know, firstly, um, who have struggled a lot harder in terms of socioeconomic status and, or they're, you know, they're becoming a mother during their studies or, um, you know, just struggling with, like, different, you know, God forbid, like, sexual abuse, trauma, and PTSD and all these things. Um, so I, I consider myself very lucky that I feel like thank by the grace of God. I'm, like, very capable of what I've taken on. And although it's, it's stressful and it's busy. Um, I, I think it's just, uh, it's enough on my plate that I can handle it. So I wouldn't consider myself, um, a superwoman. I think I'm just doing the best I can.
<laugh>.

Eva identified socioeconomic status, motherhood, and experiencing trauma as barriers to persistence to graduate school and considered people who were able to manage these roles and experiences in addition to pursuing a graduate degree to be superwomen. She named her experience as “stressful” and “busy” but felt equipped to handle it. Hazel and Eva's responses show me that they determined their level of accepting the label of superwoman through

comparison of those around them and not just a single definition or collection of constructs.

Although Eva scored in the high range of the G-SWS-Q, she deferred the superwoman title to those who had more barriers to overcome than she did.

The participants in the second category saw how the term superwoman applied to their experiences but could not fully embrace it. Sydney was first unsure in her response before she agreed with the term. When asked the closing question, she replied:

Um, yes. Let me think about that. Um, yes. Um, I think I'm, so, I'm not really sure. I don't, like, well, I guess that encompasses it right. 'Cause superwoman would mean I kind of, um, do I do every role. I'd probably do every role really well, so I think, like, yes.

Melissa agreed with the term because of qualities that other people in her life saw in her, even if she did not see these qualities in herself. She said:

Um, yeah, I think, I think so. I think, um, there's, like, um, there's a lot of people who, like, um, I guess admire me and look up to me and think that I, like, have, um, these superpowers that I don't necessarily think that I do.

Dalia seemed to resonate more with the description of the experience more than the label of "superwoman." She responded to the closing question by saying:

I think so. <laugh>, I don't think I ever thought about it in that way. I don't think I ever really named it or anything. Um, but I think, yeah, thinking about that or having a name to it could be helpful in that sense. Maybe in both like calming me down when I am trying to do everything all at once. Um, and being okay with, you know, not being a superwoman and just being <laugh> myself.

While Dalia saw the term “superwoman” as a useful naming tool that could help her give language to her experience, she still made the distinction between being a superwoman and being herself: the two were not the same.

On the other hand, Kat very much identified with the term superwoman but expressed sadness in doing so. She said:

Um, it’s a little sad that I am this way. Um, and I don’t know, maybe it’s the superwoman thing coming out of, of like, hmm. You know, I know that I can handle it more than anyone else. Like, um, I have the capacity for more and I know that’s a dangerous mindset, but I do, I do feel that way in some cases, some relationships and this, this, yeah, I do. So, um, but I don’t want to be that way.

In speaking with Kat, I picked up on a sense of pride in being a superwoman while simultaneously recognizing how the role can be detrimental and not “want[ing] to be that way.” She concisely explained a tension that I am sure many women of color, including myself, also experience.

Of the final four participants who responded with acceptance of the superwoman role, Serena provided the simplest response. In response to my closing question, she replied, “Yeah, somewhat. Yeah, absolutely. <laugh>. Mm-hmm <affirmative> feeling like I have to do a lot.”

Josefina de Luna echoed Serena’s feelings of “hav[ing] to do a lot” in her response. She said:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I feel like I have to do it all. <laugh> And, um, like, I look at my, even my lab mates and, like, they’re having a great time because all they have to worry about is being a student and learning.

Here, Josefina de Luna compared her experience to that of her peers and drew the conclusion that the quality of her experience could be improved if she had fewer roles and responsibilities to

balance with her being a student. Isabelle's response brought an added complexity to having multiple roles and responsibilities:

Uh, yes. Um, you know, in part, because I feel like I have to be superwoman in order to just get everything done that needs to be done. But also feeling this responsibility to make it look effortless and easy in a lot of ways. Right. Um, to kind of not only get things done, but do them so well that no one can question my place here. Right. Or do it so well that it's, yeah. To like kind of prove that I've earned what I've earned.

For Isabelle, being a superwoman meant more than just having multiple roles and responsibilities but also the pressures of "mak[ing] it look effortless and easy." A superwoman must not only *be* super but must *appear* super as well. Rochelle's comments provided a fitting summation of the sentiments of these women and brought in the specific context of higher education. She responded:

Yes. In its most simplest form, because it requires, it requires just everything that you don't know you're capable of. Um, it requires, you know, all of your powers to be summoned in the service of survival. And I'm gonna use the word *success* because it's part of the, uh, <laugh> the scale, even though success in itself is, is a problematic term. Because when we, especially when we look at education and higher education, you know, success is defined along these very narrow lines of again, like, what the men said and what the white folks said and what, you know, um, logical positivism says. And so I would say, yes, you have to be a superwoman <laugh> to make it through all of that and still have something to say. And still have your sense of purpose, you know?

Rochelle identified the environment of higher education as presenting barriers to survival and success. I include both terms here because succeeding in higher education is often a means of

survival in life. She speaks to the perceived incompatibility of the experiences of women of color and the higher education context at a PWI and the superhuman ability it takes to come out on the other side with your degree and your sense of self and purpose intact.

The 12 participants expressed differing perspectives on if the term superwoman resonated with them and their experience. They were evenly divided among rejecting the term, reluctantly accepting or acknowledging tension in accepting, and fully embracing the term as applicable to their experience. I noticed some discrepancies in the way participants scored on the survey and the way they answered the closing question in the interview. While all four participants who embraced the term also scored in the high range of the survey, the other two categories showed incongruencies between the quantitative scores and the qualitative responses. For the participants in the middle response category of reluctant acceptance, half of them scored in the high range and half in the moderate range of the survey. Participants in the rejection response category were also split half and half with two participants scoring in the high range of the survey and two in the moderate range. The content of the responses provided insight into why these contradictions exist. The acknowledgment of taking on the superwoman role but wanting to feel and behave differently caused some aversion to fully embracing the superwoman role while comparison to others and naming their privilege resulted in rejection of the title of superwoman altogether.

Chapter Summary

The first question of my research study aims to explore if graduate women of color at one PWI identified with the characteristics of the superwoman role as defined by Woods-Giscombé (2010). Based on my findings, I would answer both yes and no. Without knowing the purpose of the survey, all of the participants responded within the moderate or high ranges of the scale. Additionally, all of the participants scored in the high range for intense motivation to succeed. In

my conversations with them, the participants shared one or more of the subscales that resonated with them. However, their responses did not always align with the ways that the Woods-Giscombé's (2010) describes the subscales in the initial framework. Specifically, the participants did not distinguish between obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to vulnerability as they are described in the framework.

Evaluating if I could apply the Superwoman Schema framework to the experiences non-Black women of color was a central goal of my study. The quantitative and qualitative results seem to support my assumption. However, I was surprised and intrigued at the patterns around race that emerged. Because the framework was developed based on the experiences of Black women, I expected Black women to score the highest on the survey and to resonate most with the superwoman role. This assumption was not the case. The two participants who scored the highest on the survey identified as Latina and Asian. In addition to these two participants, two of the three Black women scored in the high range of all five subscales. The four participants who rejected the label of superwoman identified as Asian and Multiracial. This finding did not surprise me due to the racial hierarchy in the United States, with Asian Americans being positioned as the “model minority” and many multiracial folks, particularly those with one white parent as was the case for these participants, being more easily able to assimilate in majority culture.

Although not explicitly related to race, the immigrant experience and its impact on enacting the superwoman role arose as a common theme for many of the participants. Those participants who shared that they came from an immigrant background expressed the desire to succeed because of their parents' sacrifices and goals for them and shared examples of how they were taught or shown to suppress their emotions and resist vulnerability. I see the immigrant

experience as another layer of the sociocultural and historical contexts that influence the development of the superwoman role for women of color.

Overall, this chapter shows that graduate women of color from multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds identify with elements of the SWS even if not in the specific way that the framework was constructed. All participants saw intense motivation to succeed as relevant to their experience. Since being a graduate student is the identity that unifies all the participants, this finding is significant. The next chapter aims to further explore how these graduate women of color negotiate their multiple identities and roles within the context of their institution and how those negotiations influence their student experience.

CHAPTER VI: ROLES, CONFLICTS, AND PRESSURES

In this chapter, I share qualitative findings regarding participants' student experience and perception of campus dynamics, addressing RQ2a: What are the various identities and roles that women of color negotiate within the context of their experiences as students? I begin with an overview of role multiplicity and role conflict and the findings for the number and types of roles that the participants indicated that they negotiate with their role as a graduate student. I then categorize the findings within the following primary roles/relationships mentioned by the participants: role within family of origin, role as a mother, role as a spouse or intimate partner, and campus involvement roles. I end the chapter with reflections from the participants on how they manage the various pressures and tensions they experience from occupying and navigating these multiple roles. Overall, these themes give insight into the many roles and responsibilities that graduate women of color negotiate in order to persist through their graduate school journey and how they make meaning of these experiences.

Role Multiplicity and Role Conflict

The concepts of role multiplicity and role conflict assist us in examining the different types of roles and relationships the participants endeavor to balance with their role as a graduate student. Most graduate students negotiate multiple roles, but because of how women are socialized in the United States, the role conflict that female graduate students experience presents a different type of difficulty for them than their male counterparts (Gilbert & Holahan, 1982; Johnston & Bailey, 1984; Younes & Asay, 1998). The female graduate student participants in the study conducted by Younes and Asay (1998) shared accounts of their struggles to navigate their multiple roles along with their role as a student in hopes of achieving a sense of role integration. Excelling in their personal and professional lives often felt incompatible due to "the commitment

and obligation that these women [felt] towards their families while trying to nurture their educational needs and career aspirations” (Younes & Asay, 1998, p. 460). The women in the current study expressed similar feelings and often experienced mental and emotional strain from being pulled in different directions by their commitments and obligations to their multiple roles.

The initial survey from the quantitative phase asked the 44 respondents to list the roles that they “negotiate” or “balance” with their role as a student. The respondents listed between 0 and 14 roles, with an average of 4.45 roles for this sample. In my conversations with the 12 participants in the qualitative phase, I asked them a similar version of this same question. The majority of the roles they named related to familial or intimate relationships, including sister, daughter, niece, granddaughter, girlfriend, friend, wife, and mother (to children or pets). The participants also named roles related to campus, work, or community involvement, including teacher, teaching assistant, research supervisor, full-time employee, tutor, class president, and committee member. Some participants also responded with other salient identities such as being a Christian, being queer, and having ADHD. The following themes focus on the roles and relationships that the participants highlighted as most significant to them with regard to navigating conflict with their role as a graduate student: family, motherhood, intimate relationships, and co-curricular and extracurricular campus involvements.

Family (Dis)Connections

Familial roles and commitment to family were prominent themes when the participants spoke of their multiple roles and the role conflict that often resulted from them. For example, Josefina de Luna spoke of her roles in her family in terms of being a caretaker and “family leader.” She said:

Um, so I'm the oldest child in my family, like on both sides, my mom and dad's. Um, so I grew up with a lot of responsibility of raising my cousins. Um, and my, I have a younger brother and sister, um, and my parents don't speak a lot of English. So I'm often like a translator for them as well. Um, and also like a mother figure to a lot of my cousins and my brother and my sister.

Josefina de Luna has taken on the role that many oldest daughters in families of color take on: being a second mother. Additionally, her role as a translator for her parents is an experience unique to many children of immigrants. Hearing her talk about the important role she plays in her family dynamic made me wonder about the internal conflict she experiences pursuing her own personal goals and living many states away from her family. I imagine that this tension must create an emotional toll.

Dalia also spoke about her role as an older sibling, specifically being a career counselor for her younger brother. She explained:

Well, I have a younger brother who just is about to graduate from undergrad. Um, and I feel like he, I'm, I've been trying to guide him throughout his undergraduate career, um, because he's also interested in like public health and all this other stuff. Um, so yeah, I feel like since I have already had that career and had that background, um, I'm able to at least provide him with something that I didn't have. Um, so again, I feel like that's another, like, pressure I put upon myself, but I feel like I, I have to do it. Um, I want to do it.

In addition to being an older sibling, Dalia is also a first-generation undergraduate student and first-generation graduate student. When I asked her to name the roles and responsibilities she negotiates with being a graduate student, her role as a guide for her younger brother was the first

thing she mentioned. Sharing that she feels like she “ha[s] to do it” and “want[s] to do it” tells me that she has a sense of obligation and that she places a high priority on ensuring that the family members coming behind her are successful.

The sibling dynamic was not the only type of familial relationship that participants had to negotiate with their experience as a graduate student. Hazel referenced the role conflict she experienced between school and family, specifically with her aging grandparents. She shared:

I have elderly grandparents. This summer before I started this program, I, uh, was a caretaker for my grandma for a month when she couldn't find another caretaker. Uh, and I think that that's something where throughout my time in grad school, I have wanted to spend more time there. I just, you know, they're getting older, they have issues. I'd like to spend that time, um, and maybe have done less than I would've liked, given all of my other commitments.

Time is one of our most limited resources: once it is gone, you can never get it back. Here, Hazel reflects on the time she spent on academics, the potential time she has left with her grandparents, and the cost of spending that time in either place. She expresses the desire to give that time to her aging grandparents but recognizes how her other commitments may suffer because of that choice.

Many of the participants expressed experiencing pressure or conflict between balancing their graduate school responsibilities and spending time with their families. Eva explained the dual and conflicting pressures she received from her family both to “strive and succeed and break boundaries for [their] household” and to be a present and involved member of the household. She shared:

But, um, yeah, I think a lot of the pressure I feel, and from my family as well, just to kind of, um, strive and succeed and break boundaries for our household. There's a lot of pressure there. Um, obviously, and, um, I think most of all, I, I put a lot of pressure on myself, um, in order to, like, avoid conflicts, like you mentioned, like, to organize my time really well, to get all, everything I'm working on, projects, and in classes and everything very organized so that I'm not, um, you know, faltering in any way or defective in any kind of outcome that I can give. Um, a lot of pressure with my family and in life and school-life balance and working as well. Um, just feeling like, you know, I'm not giving them enough time or I'm not giving them enough help, um, even when I'm, I'm trying my best.

Here, trying to both “succeed and break boundaries” through her accomplishments and to give her family enough time and help presents a high-pressure situation for Eva, both internally and externally. She mentioned trying to “avoid conflicts” so that she is not “faltering in any way or defective in any kind of outcome.” These comments made me wonder if avoiding conflicts is even possible and how much or how often Eva feels that she is faltering or presenting “defective” outcomes.

During my conversation with Josefina de Luna, she shared the conflict she experienced in the relationship with her parents as a result of her decision to move away for both undergraduate and graduate school.

Josefina de Luna: So coming to grad school is a big step. Um, moving, I think it's almost, like, a thousand miles away from home. Uh, so I didn't tell my parents at all when I was applying and then I didn't tell them when I got accepted and that I was gonna leave until maybe, like, a couple weeks before.

Erica: Oh wow.

J: And yeah, they, they got so upset. They didn't speak with me for, like, six months.

E: Oh no.

Josefina de Luna: Um, yeah, <laugh> they got really offended. Uh, they came around eventually, but, like, I do kind of have to do these things whenever I'm doing a big jump.

It was the, sort of the same when I left for college, I moved like maybe an hour away.

Um, and to them that was like almost the end of the world because it's a whole hour.

Yeah. Uh, luckily, like, they found, figured out, that it's not that far. Um, I visit, visited, like, every weekend, so it was fine.

Earlier in this section, I shared how Josefina de Luna spoke of herself as a “family leader” and the responsibilities she had as a mother figure and translator. Josefina de Luna’s story reminded me of Lydia Ledesema-Reese’s (1999) article about the Latina/Chicana superwoman in which she highlighted the cultural belief among many Latino and Hispanic families that, for the women, career and family are in conflict. Ledesema-Reese (1999) says, “A burden thus settles on the shoulder of the Chicana. The higher her aspirations, the greater the conflict. Children and family are put forth as a primary obligation; higher education and career success are discounted” (p. 48). With the aforementioned cultural belief system in mind, I understand how Josefina de Luna’s parents felt upset, offended, and blindsided by her decision. She played such an integral role in the way their family functioned at that time. However, I also understand Josefina de Luna’s decision as well. Ledesema-Reese (1999) also discussed the guilt that many Latinas experience from seeing themselves as more than just *gente* [a part of the family] but as individuals with goals and aspirations of their own. Josefina de Luna was able to make a

compromise for her undergraduate degree; she went to school only an hour away and came home every weekend. However, this was not the case for graduate school. She shared:

But this time it was a little different. Um, and so with these kinds of things, I have to kind of ignore, like, the familial consequences and think about what I wanna do and, like, just do it anyway. Um, so now I haven't gone back to see them in, what am I, three years? Almost three years. Um, and so I get, like, guilt trip all the time. Like, when you gonna come back? When are you gonna come see us? Um, and yeah, it's hard because I can't exactly take a whole bunch of time off from the program. So I, I just like have to tell them, like, I'm doing this for me. I'll come back. It's not forever, you know. I'm off to get my education.

Josefina de Luna and other women of color in her position experience a type of “double consciousness” (Dunbar, 1913) through their struggle to be and feel like an active member of their collectivist cultures of origin and to be and feel like an individual who is free to make decisions for their personal benefit. This struggle often results in avoidant behaviors, such as Josefina de Luna delaying sharing her decisions about school, to escape the guilt trips from family and loved ones.

Isabelle expressed similar feelings of guilt for not being able to spend time with her family during graduate school. She said:

Um, I think that, you know, it's been hard, I think, to impress upon my parents, that grad school requires of me. Um, my dad had a job in [the same state] for a bit. My parents live in [on the west coast], but he was here for a bit and he wanted to see me every weekend and I'm, like, I have homework. Like, I can't, I can't see you every weekend. Um, and just feeling really guilty about that because it's, like, and feeling like I was making

excuses not to see him and I'm, like, wait, no, actually, like, I have to write a whole thesis.

Like Josefina de Luna, Isabelle also experienced the tension in choosing to invest time in her goals instead of spending time with her family. She had to reframe her actions from “making excuses” not to see her father to making a choice that would benefit her future. Isabelle continued to talk about the disconnect she felt from her family while also not feeling connected to her “new world of [graduate] school”:

There's been, like, a lot of family stuff going on, which a large part has been my family not really understanding what I do and where I am and what my goals are and what things are important to me. Um, and so just feeling like a growing disconnect from, like, my family but also, like, not necessarily feeling connected with, like, my new world of school and also uprooting from all my friends to here. Graduate school requires that you move to an entirely new place and put down new roots.

Isabelle spoke to this feeling of occupying two worlds on a few different levels. In addition to what she shared above, she spoke to her multiracial, white-passing identity and how it impacted various interactions and sense of belonging at graduate school. Here, she discusses the disconnect she feels from her community of origin and her new community of graduate school, a feeling that is common to many groups that are marginalized or underrepresented in higher education (i.e., students of color, first-generation college students, students from low-income backgrounds, etc.).

The participants spoke about negotiating family relationships with their graduate student experience in ways that highlighted the struggle of maintaining connection and setting priorities. They felt a sense of responsibility and obligation to show up for their families that often

conflicted with their responsibilities and obligations as a graduate student. Although the participants shared the decisions they made to move away from family for school or to do homework instead of spending time with family, they frequently experienced guilt as a result of these decisions that felt like choosing their academic and career goals over their families. Overall, their stories showed that family relationships were extremely important to them and presented various levels of conflict in maintaining those relationships with accompanying feelings of guilt while pursuing their academic and career goals.

Mothering while Studenting

The role of motherhood emerged as a salient identity for some of the participants. Three of the 12 participants in the second phase of the study shared that they were mothers. As an extension of the importance of family, motherhood was an identity that greatly influenced the decisions that these women made related to their graduate student experience. Part of the reason why Rochelle chose to pursue a second master's degree at State University was because of the flexibility it gave her as a single mother. She shared:

I also valued the opportunity that being a graduate student allowed me as a single parent to be more present and involved as a mother. So I'm looking kind of like macro level, like, how do you survive in this, um, grind culture, and still be able to parent your own children rather than working, just to outsource their care to others. So that was, like, the underlying value of why, um, graduate school fit my life at that time.

Even in her career pursuits, Rochelle's priority was her role as a mother. "Parenting [her] own children" was important to her, and as a single parent, working a full-time job would have made being "present and involved as a mother" much more difficult for her. Although her choice may

have made her and her children's lives "somewhat precarious financially," as she called it later in our conversation, it gave her time with her children, which was obviously more valuable to her.

Serena also spoke to prioritizing her role as a mother, even as she also had responsibilities as a caretaker for her ailing mother. She explained:

So, um, I, like, as far as like my thought process, um, like, I like, priority wise, like, I, like, think that like my daughter has to be okay first. and then, um, you know, I also realize that there are certain things that my mom can do, um, even with her conditions.

So, like, she would be less on my like priority list. And then, like, as far as school, like being a student, a grad, a woman of color, um, in the graduate program, like that would be, like, my second priority. Like, like, I know I made the sacrifice to, uh, be in school.

Um, so I, I feel like I just tell myself that I have to suck it up and just show up to the best of your ability. Whatever that looks like.

Here, Serena shares her list of priorities of who gets her time and energy. Because her mother has dementia, "everything has just been put to the side." Serena mentioned that she doesn't prioritize herself or focus on her studies; her focus is "making sure that [her] mom and [her] daughter's okay." She places priority on caring for her daughter and her mom, noting that there are things that her mom can do on her own. Serena's story differs from other participants like Josefina de Luna and Isabelle not only because of her role as a mother but also because she chose family over her academic pursuits. Serena's lack of motivation for her academics was one of the most noticeable differences in my conversation with her. Although the other participants shared struggles, there was a sense of excitement about what they were learning and the opportunities that lie ahead of them. In this quote above, Serena puts her role as a graduate student last and sees it as a "sacrifice" and something where she has to "suck it up and just show up to the best of

[her] ability.” Her graduate school pursuits were last on the list and received whatever she had left after caring for her daughter and mother.

Noor spoke about being proactive and explicitly asking her program faculty before she started how her being a mother would impact her student experience, knowing that “a lot of departments are not so family-friendly.” She said:

That was something that I specifically asked, like, during my interview. Um, I had, I think I felt probably because I had been there for my master’s and they had known me before I had a child. I was, like, look, I have a kid now, am I still gonna be able to do this? Or, like, are y’all gonna make my life difficult basically. <laugh> yeah. And, like, fortunately for me personally, like, I got a lot of support.

And although she did identify some privileges that she had that other students without children may not have had, such as not scheduling her teaching timeslot very early or very late in the day, the support she received did not negate the role conflict she experienced between being a mother and being a student. Noor explained:

It’s not like the requirements go away or like they change anything official for me. It’s like, I, I’m still on my own when it comes to balancing things like, okay, like, am I gonna say no again to this event? Cause I’m need to be home for bedtime cause that’s my choice, and, like, just the way that things are scheduled is not very like parent-friendly. Or, or you have to make the choice to, like, not put your family first and to put your, to put your career first and say, like, okay, I’m gonna go to this anyway.

Noor’s comments speak to the idea that women often cannot have it all, at least not all at once. Graduate school constantly presents conflicts and choices between family and career that she and other women of color with families have to navigate. Noor then went on to share about a friend

in her program who often made the choice to put her career first and the role of the faculty who often overtly put student-parents in a position to where they have to choose:

Um, one of my friends in the program, who's also a mom, like, the faculty member that she works for, keeps scheduling things on like Friday at 5:30 PM or like a Sunday mid-morning. I'm like, what are you doing? And she has a son, she has a son, but it's like, I'm still gonna go do all these things. And of course, like, she has a superstar resume because she's choosing her choices. Um, so that, that's the kind of thing that I get frustrated with, that you would put a parent in that situation where they would have to choose to, like, leave their family on a Sunday morning to advance their career.

Although the choice is ultimately up to the graduate student mother to make in situations that create conflict between career and family, the institution is not a blameless, neutral party in making these choices more difficult. Here, Noor recalled a situation where the faculty member made scheduling choices that put Noor's friend in situations that presented a challenge to her having some type of balance between her academic life and personal life.

Although only a quarter of the participants identified as being mothers, I felt it was important to highlight this role due to the priority these graduate women of color placed on their motherhood identity and how it impacted their decision-making while in graduate school. The participants shared how the decision to attend graduate school was a way to pursue career advancement while not having to outsource childcare and how they are often presented with situations in graduate school where they have to choose between their child and their career. These conversations also emphasized the role of the institution in making these choices manageable or more difficult. Overall, the stories of Rochelle, Isabelle, and Noor reveal that

motherhood is an important identity and role that many graduate women of color negotiate with their role as a student and that impacts their student experience.

Showing Up as Spouses and Partners

In addition to familial relationships, the women of color in this study spoke about their intimate relationships and how they navigated them as a graduate student. Seven of the 12 participants indicated that they were either in a committed intimate relationship or married. Noor, the only married participant, brought up her role as a wife when speaking about the physical versus mental demands of the various roles she occupies. She explained:

So I think motherhood definitely has like more physical, physical demands. Um, teaching has physical demands. Like, I need to go to campus, I need to, like, prepare my slides. I need to physically speak in front of a class. So I think maybe that's how I think of it. It's like the physical load versus the mental load. And being a wife, like, doesn't, I mean, I should probably be thinking of it more than I do. <laughs> Because it's not very, like, demanding of me. I don't, I don't, like, feel that role just cause I'm, like, in it.

Noor shared that her role as a wife is a role that she occupies but does not necessarily “feel.” She addressed other roles that had more physical and mental demands, such as motherhood and teaching. I thought it was very reflective of her to acknowledge that she “should probably be thinking of it more than [she does],” but I also understood her perspective.

On the other hand, Josefina de Luna did speak about the physical load of being in a relationship with her boyfriend. She shared:

Um, also, I, I live with my partner and I often feel like a housekeeper because he doesn't pick up after himself ... and as far as like the housekeeping aspect, um, I try to keep a schedule, like I'm going to be in charge with these chores, you do the other ones because

I'm busy. Um, and then there's, like, some conflict with how well those chores are done because, you know, apparently it's bad to have standards of cleanliness <laugh>. Um, so I just, like, try to pick my battles <laugh> because I do have more important things to worry about than cleaning <laugh>.

Here, Josefina de Luna describes her dual role in her relationship as a partner and housekeeper. This duality causes some conflict in the division of labor and the execution of the household as her partner often either did not complete the chores or did not do them well. Josefina de Luna's dynamic with her partner reminded me of how the domestic and household duties are often labeled as "women's work."

Isabelle, the only participant who shared that she is in a queer relationship, presented a different experience of the division of labor in the household with her partner. She explained:

But also, like, one of the great things about being in a queer relationship is, like, equal division of household labor. <laugh> ... Like, I was reflecting the other day, I'm like, I don't think my dad has folded his own laundry in, like, 40 years, as my girlfriend and I were like folding laundry together <laugh>. But anyway, so, like, I have a very supportive partner who, you know, makes sure that if I am overwhelmed with other things, like, I can take a bit of a break on the housework and focus on that if I need to ... If I felt responsible for the entire running of this household, again, there's just two of us, like no kids involved, I would go bananas.

Isabelle's experience of shared household responsibility presents a different picture than the one painted by Josefina de Luna. Isabelle and her partner collaborate on the domestic duties in contrast to what she grew up seeing her parents doing. In Josefina de Luna's relationship, she describes having to "pick her battles" in terms of conflicts over household duties because of her

other duties and responsibilities. On the other hand, Isabelle not only did chores with her partner but was able to step away from household responsibilities when she was overwhelmed, knowing her partner would pick up the slack. This type of supportive dynamic is not exclusive to queer relationships, but it was important to highlight since Isabelle is the only participant in this type of relationship.

Isabelle also shared that being a “good,” “supportive,” and contributing partner was important to her and showed appreciation to her partner for showing up in the same way for her. In speaking about her partner, who is also completing a PhD program, she said:

I think I’m really lucky also to have a partner who understands what graduate school is like, because we’re both, you know, she’s doing her PhD ... right now. Um, so like we both have a lot of demands on our time ... My partner is really amazing. Um, we’ve been together for six and a half years. We’ve lived together for eight years. Um, she’s family at this point. Like, so it feels good having a supportive person in my life who understands what I’m doing and, like, you know, luckily we’ve been kind of able to, like when one person’s in a lot of stuff, you know, someone else can take up the work.

Isabelle seemed to have a less difficult time negotiating her role as a graduate student with her role as a partner because 1) her partner was able to empathize with her experience as a PhD student and 2) she and her partner share the load and pick up the slack for the other when needed. Her experience shows the importance of external support in navigating the graduate school journey.

Similarly, Hazel shared that her boyfriend is also in graduate school and discussed how they provide mental and emotional support for each other despite having a long-distance

relationship. In responding to my question about how she negotiates the pressures and conflicts she experienced as a result of role conflict, she explained:

So like, this is something, um, my partner and I balance all the time, because we're both in grad school, we're both doing long distance relationship and being really explicitly clear, clear about what we want, what we need. Um, how we're feeling. So, you know, if one of us is snippy because we're sleep deprived and overcommitted and stressed and whatever, just saying that.

Hazel echoed Isabelle's experience of having a supportive partner but takes it a step further. Here, she shared how clear and explicit communication with her partner is integral to balancing their relationship with their roles as graduate students along with their other roles and responsibilities. She also shared how her partner influenced the way she managed her time in addressing role conflict:

And the other piece that I'll mention here, just cause I do think it fits into this balancing act is my partner moved in last year and we lived together for about a year before he moved back [home] for his grad program, and I think that really helped me live my values and how I think it's important to spend time when I don't do it myself. Uh, I think that's something where I really struggled; struggled means I even attempted, I didn't really try that hard <laugh>. Prior to that, to separate work and life, like, the work-life balance was really just non-existent for me, there was no cutoff in time of day when I would or wouldn't work or wouldn't respond to emails or whatever, and I think having him here didn't change my values at all, but it, it, I think, kept me accountable to, to spending my time, the way that I actually wanted to or thought I should.

Although negotiating multiple roles can be challenging, Hazel illuminated a benefit: keeping her accountable to not spending all her time and energy in only one role. Having roles that involve relationships with others or personal interests and goals can bring a holistic balance to the lives of graduate women of color, ensuring that more than just their academic and career cup is being filled.

Dalia, who is also in a long-distance relationship, talked about the support she received from her partner and the feeling of being “at ease” in the space of her relationship. Towards the end of our conversation, she wanted to make sure that she mentioned her relationship as a significant role in her life:

Let’s see. Um, so I, maybe something else to add is that I’m also in a relationship. So I feel like that’s another role that, um, I have as well and what it is to be present and be there for my partner. And, um, yeah, we’re also long distance. So like, um, that’s another thing and, um, yeah, trying to both do be yeah. Be a student plus all these other identities while also being, um, in a relationship. Um, yeah, I think I’m, that’s another thing to add to, um, yeah, but I feel like, um, I have had a lot of support from my partner and, um, yeah, I think that’s maybe where, um, things are maybe, um, more at ease. Um, in that sense that’s definitely, like, another role that I do, like, think about and consider, and am I stopping to do work so I can just do FaceTime or all of that.

Dalia brought up an important point about this particular role she occupied. Because she feels “support” and “more at ease” in her relationship, she gives it priority and consideration when negotiating her identities and roles, even to the point of stopping work to give time to the role and space where she feels that support and ease. I resonate with this decision making. I find myself frequently choosing to spend time with my partner when I could be dedicating time to

work or school because that role adds to my well-being in ways that the other two do not.

Without that role in my life and the support from my partner, my roles as a student and employee would be infinitely more stressful.

In addition to experiences of support, participants also shared experiences of conflict within their romantic relationships as they were pursuing their graduate degrees. Sydney brought up a recent conflict in her relationship and noted the difficulty of finding the appropriate time to address it. She said:

Um, and also like, uh, this is actually dealing with this at this, this week, like within my, my romantic relationship. Like, if there's a conflict that we have, trying to figure out when to deal with it, or if that's even possible, sometimes things just happen and it's, like, bad timing, but it's like, okay, do, can I give emotional energy and time to this today? Or tonight when I know I have to go to sleep, cause tomorrow I gotta wake up and do a meeting or, and just trying to, it's just a, it's a hard balancing act, honestly.

Sydney's comments highlight a question I believe each participant asks themselves when trying to negotiate their relationships with others along with their other roles: "[C]an I give emotional energy and time to this today?" I imagine that conflict makes this question more difficult to answer when it feels like the conflict is taking away from an already limited supply of emotional energy and time.

Talia shared her experience of how prioritizing her role as a graduate student has negatively impacted her relationship with her boyfriend. When sharing her struggle in keeping up with relationship with loved ones, she said the following about her relationship:

Um, I, I think that has, I, I've definitely struggled in that aspect, um, especially 'cause my boyfriend and I have been going through kind of a rough patch. So, like, he'll text me

something like try to start a conversation when I'm at work. And it's really hard for me to be able to do both of those things at once. Um, so I often find myself like pushing off conversations or not responding to texts from friends for a few days or whatever, because I need to focus on what I need to get done at, in, in lab. Um, yeah. So I feel like that would be the main thing is just kind of minimizing those other roles in order to do well in my role as a graduate student.

Where some participants found the benefit in navigating their multiple roles, Talia found it difficult and felt the need to minimize the personal relationships in order to be a successful student. Her comments reminded me of the traditional, western, Eurocentric approach to education that focuses on the individual and independence versus education practices rooted in communities of color that value collaboration and interdependence. Additionally, traditional educational environments also promote the idea that students of color can only be successful if they distance themselves from their communities of origin and fully integrate into the institutional environment (Tierney, 1999). Knowing these frameworks, I empathize with Talia's struggle to balance her multiple roles.

In conclusion, the participants described their relationships with their spouse or partners in ways that showed both benefit and conflict for them as they pursued their graduate degrees. These women discussed navigating gender roles, giving and receiving support, and managing relationship conflict as important factors in the ways they negotiate their roles as a partner in an intimate relationship with their role as a graduate student. While some felt their role as a partner brought balance to their lives, others noted that this balancing act was difficult for both them and their partner. As support is an important element to graduate student persistence, the stories of the participants and their interactions with their intimate partners give insight into benefits and

barriers for this type of support during their graduate school experience. As it relates to the participants navigating their relationships with families and partners while in graduate school, how the hidden curriculum affects the loved ones of the graduate students is another perspective to consider. Many family members do not understand the norms and expectations of graduate school. In a sense, being a graduate student can feel more like a job than going to school. In addition to attending classes and writing papers, graduate students hold teaching and research roles and are involved in other campus efforts that add to their overall graduate school experience. The following section shares experiences from the participants that illuminate the campus roles that they occupy in addition to the traditional student role.

Campus and Community Involvement

In addition to the various interpersonal roles they held, the participants also shared the various roles they held on campus and within the community. Nine of the 12 participants indicated that they held a teaching, research, or graduate assistantship (TA, RA, GA) that provided funding for their education. These women were also involved in unpaid research projects, university committees, and other campus efforts where they gave their time. Sometimes they occupied multiple of these roles either simultaneously or at some point throughout their graduate school journey. Sydney shared with me, “Um, I was teaching. I’m not teaching right now. This semester, I’m a research assistant right now. I’m also a research supervisor right now for an undergraduate student.” When I asked Isabelle about the roles that she balanced with being a student, she named researcher as one of them. She said:

Um, researcher, I think is a big one. Um, I am an unpaid research assistant on like two major projects that take up a lot of my time. Um, maybe, maybe three, that one’s kind of on hold, but like a lot of different research projects require my time and attention.

While Isabelle and the other participants who engage in these assistantships or other projects are undoubtedly receiving a monetary and/or intellectual benefit, the university also benefits greatly from their intellectual labor. In my conversation with Dalia, she shared her campus commitments and reflected on the time she invested in them. She shared:

Um, like, my first year [I] was a TA and then, but I was also tutoring, and then I was also like a grad assistant. Um, and then, yeah, second and this year I've also been grad, a grad assistant. Um, but yeah, it's just, and on top of many others, serving on like committee meeting, uh, like university committees. And yeah, I've always tell, every year I tell myself I need to leave something, so I have more time to do my work, but then somehow I find myself on something new and I'm like, how did this happen? Why am I still crazy busy? Um, yeah.

I have definitely been in Dalia's predicament. During my master's program, I had a graduate assistantship, a local part-time job, a tutoring job, an unpaid research assistantship, and two other paid campus involvement opportunities on top of my school work. In my case, my involvements had both financial and resume-building benefit, and I am sure that for Dalia and other graduate women of color, the reasons may be similar. Often, one assistantship does not provide enough funds for a student to be financially stable. Additionally, many times we as women of color internalize Papa Pope's words to Olivia on *Scandal*: "You have to be twice as good to get half of what they have." So, we work harder and take on more to add to our resumes and to become superwomen in academia and our careers.

In addition to campus involvements that have a direct benefit to their academic and career success, some participants also shared commitments where they advocated for people from marginalized communities and those with similar backgrounds to their own. When sharing the

roles that she balances with being a graduate student, Isabelle spoke about her “obligations to [her] different communities.” She explained:

Um, and um, also like, I feel like I have a lot of obligations to my different communities. Like I, you know, tutor a middle schooler and I’m in this mentorship program and I’m, you know, on the DEI committees. And I think of those things kind of under the grouping of trying to make the world a better place. Um, and, like, do things that I’m passionate about. But also those things require like time and energy. Um, and then I also have like, kind of, not like side jobs, but also, like, I have a like position on a monitoring board with the UN for SD 2030 [United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030]. So, like, you know, I have to, like, go to those meetings and, like, advocate for people.

Preservation of one’s community is a perceived benefit of the SWS. Here, Isabelle talks about her many commitments that are in service to “trying to make the world a better place.” She acknowledges the time and energy that these commitments take but feels like she has to be involved and “advocate for people.”

When discussing her commitments, Eva also shared about her involvement in advocating for those from marginalized backgrounds in law and the importance of representation. She said:

So, um, I serve, um, as the, uh, class president for my cohort, um, and that is a very taxing role. Um, it’s, it’s a lot of, um, fundraising event planning, graduation coordination, um, you know, just doing a lot of administrative things, meetings, um, and I’ve really enjoyed it. Um, my position, I think I’m one of the few, I’m probably the first woman [from my ethnic background] who has taken seat. Um, and that’s been really, it’s been, um, yeah, it’s been really rewarding, and I know the next woman who, uh, has won the election is also, um, a woman of color, which I absolutely love.

Eva's descriptions of her class president role as both "taxing" and "rewarding" speaks to the complex dynamic of negotiating multiple identities and roles. In re-listening to my conversation with her, I could hear the sense of pride and accomplishment in her voice when she spoke about being the first from her ethnic background to be class president and how her successor would also be a woman of color. She continued:

Um, and I also partake in a group. I'm a program coordinator for first-generation, um, [occupation] at [State University] ... Um, so kind of in a similar role it's, um, event planning, doing things that help, um, promote resources, um, and aid for, um, first-generation, uh, law students, as well as undergraduate students here at [State University]. Um, particularly those from, um, marginalized backgrounds and low-income backgrounds. Um, so love that.

Eva is also a first-generation graduate student herself. Similar to Isabelle, her commitment to this first-generation student group highlights preservation of her community as a benefit of the superwoman role. Both spoke about these commitments in a way that did not just take time and energy away from them but also poured back into them. These types of mutually beneficial and restorative commitments can be sustaining forces through the graduate school journey.

Overall, the participants identified campus and community involvements as important roles they negotiate with their role as a graduate student. In some instances, these roles are mutually beneficial, such as graduate, research or teaching assistant roles that the participants needed for funding to continue graduate school. These women also received academic or career benefits from these experiences as well. Additionally, some participants selected involvements that supported similar marginalized identities in order to give back to their communities. In both instances, the institution also received the benefit of the physical, intellectual, and emotional

labor of these women of color. Ultimately, the involvements of these women of color present both benefits and barriers to their holistic well-being and their success as a graduate student.

Managing the Pressures and Tensions

The previous sections give examples of the different roles that the women of color in this study occupy that they negotiate with their role as a student. These obligations put demands on their time and energy and often presented conflict with their student role. These women talked about the pressure and tension they experienced from having these multiple roles and feeling the need to excel in them all. When I asked Josefina de Luna about the feelings she associates with balancing all of her different roles, she responded, “A lot of pressure. Um, a lot of like perfectionism where I feel like I can’t neglect any one of those roles, uh, because I feel like I need to be strong enough to take care of all these people.” Josefina de Luna’s comment speaks to why multiple role conflict is integrally connected to the superwoman role in the lives of these women of color. She specifically mentioned “pressure” and “perfectionism” as the feelings she experiences, and she connected them to needing to “be strong enough” for everyone around her. I found almost all five of the characteristics of the superwoman role—obligation to present an image of strength, obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable, intense motivation to succeed, and obligation to help others— in her statement.

As a mother, spouse, teaching assistant, and graduate student, Noor spoke about her role conflicts and being pulled in different directions. She explained:

I think mostly, I feel like I’m never fully in one role. Like, I’m always like, no matter what I’m doing, there’s something from another role in my head. It’s, it’s really rare that I can be like, okay, like here I am, as a student, I need to work. Um, and that may be like

a common thing, but yeah, I think probably, probably the things that are the most difficult to balance are the things with the most demands.

Noor illuminates one of the most challenging aspects of negotiating multiple roles: “[You] are never fully in one role.” Navigating multiple roles and identities, graduate women of color juggle multiple universes which are constantly colliding with each other. I asked Noor how she navigated her multiple roles. She answered:

I don’t think I’ve figured it out. <laugh> I think I’m, I always feel like under pressure from something, but I think, well, okay, yes, that’s true. But also, I feel like because I can’t control a lot of the circumstances. I think I’ve really tried to switch my mindset to, okay, I’m not gonna be that mom who like has dinner on the table at 6:00 PM every night. And like family dinner is just not gonna be a thing right now because like life is crazy. And so, I think, just adjusting expectations for all of those roles.

Here, Noor emphasized how changing her perspective of how she sees her roles helps her manage the pressures she feels. Society has certain expectations of how mothers should be and what they should do. Noor addresses releasing those perceived societal expectations of motherhood and “adjusting expectations” for her role as a mother and her other roles based on the current state of her life. She continued:

Um, so just not having to go so hard in every role, I think helps me, helps me balance the day-to-day, because I can be more reasonable with, like, what I can expect for myself ... ‘Cause I got a lot of friends losing sleep. <laugh> Like, yeah, staying up all night to, like, get the stuff written and I’m just gonna, I’m just gonna be okay at things, which again is like very historically like against my personality. I think for a lot of PhD students, like

we're used to being the best and like the smartest and having to let go of that or like intentionally letting go of that has been, I think what's keeping me sane. <laugh>

Noor's words echo her previous comments about "adjusting expectations." Here, she talked about adjusting her expectations of herself as a student and made a comparison between her experience and some of her other graduate school friends. Letting go of those expectations of being the "best" and "smartest" student allowed her to have more of a balance in her life holistically.

Melissa also shared her experience of redefining the expectations of her role as a student to manage the pressures she deals with negotiating multiple roles. When I asked her how she manages the conflicts, she responded:

Um, it's been really hard. Um, I don't know that I balance it well, but I aim to, um, I try to, um, I've been really good at saying no, I guess, or been trying to, that was, like, one of my New Year's resolutions. Um, so I think that has materialized itself into, like, me turning things in late for coursework or, um, me, like, um, canceling a meeting every here now and then, um, just so, just so like, I don't know if I'm just sitting there and it's like 11:30 and I have an assignment due at midnight or it's 10:30 and I have an assignment due at midnight and I'm like not gonna finish or I'm gonna keep myself up all night working on it. I will just go to sleep instead and try again tomorrow. So, um, I can turn it in and have, like, um, I guess more of a like collective thought instead of just turning something in.

For Melissa, saying "no" to tasks and responsibilities that represent the archetype of the "good student" allowed her to say "yes" to herself and her well-being. Although the behaviors she mentions, on the surface, appear to be negative and not in favor of her success as a student,

Melissa reframes the narrative of the “good student” to be the one who knows when to say “no” to take care of herself in order to present the best work she can. I have been in similar situations, working full-time and managing a full-time graduate school course load, where I have been burnt out from my multiple commitments and have chosen either to turn in a project that I felt was not my best work or to turn in a project late to give myself more time. Both Noor and Melissa’s stories show how they redefine the expectations of a “good [insert role here]” as a strategy to manage the pressures and tensions associated with that role.

Hazel took more of an active approach in managing the pressures she experiences by involving the people that she is accountable to in these roles. During our conversations, I asked her about she manages those pressures and conflicts. Our exchange went as follows:

Erica: So I’m sure there are times where, you know, some of your roles, conflict and you experience, you know, pressure to choose one or the other. So how do you negotiate those things when you are experiencing those pressures and conflicts?

Hazel: I think that I have at least tried to make it very clear to the people that are, I am accountable to in these different roles where my values lie. And if they’re it, it’s not so much a conflict of responsibilities so much as a conflict of value alignment. Um, and just having really explicit conversations when that does come up. So like for example, this week, uh, my, my boss, my PI on my research project was expecting too much <laugh>, and I, like, I had told her at the beginning of the semester, in order for me to do what I want to do and need to do academically, I cannot work more than 10 to 15 hours per week, even though I was doing much more than that last semester, she says, that’s fine. Last week I worked 25 hours. I was like, “red flag.” Um, and just, I think being really

proactive about having those explicit conversations when things are not aligning and, and asking for the support that you need in those different roles.

Hazel's example of her research project and her interactions with her supervisor showed her managing pressures at the start of a role and throughout the duration of that role. Here, she modeled a dynamic process that brings others in and responds to and adjusts role expectations as situations unfold. Her comments about the pressures not being "a conflict of responsibilities so much as a conflict of value alignment" resonated with me. Seeing multiple-role conflict through Hazel's lens, the tasks and responsibilities do not cause the pressures: the value we place on the tasks and responsibilities are what cause the pressures. For Hazel, going back to her values when there were pressures or things felt out of alignment for her empowered her to have conversations with those around her to bring her roles back in alignment with her values.

Noor had so much insight to share regarding managing the pressures and tensions of negotiating multiple roles. In addition to her own practices and reflections, she talked about the lessons she learned from Black women faculty on social media. She explained:

And like, honestly, in this area, I've, from social media especially, like I've learned so much from Black women who are faculty, um, who are professors who are just saying like, don't give your life to these institutions because they are not gonna, like, be there for you at the end of the day, like, you're replaceable. Um, so I think that mindset has been really helpful for me in thinking like how much do I really wanna give to a job? How much do I really wanna give to school? Like, I'm not gonna give everything. Like, if I give everything, it's gonna be, like, to my husband and my son. Um, so that, like, learning, learning from other women of color who are, like, higher up than me and like really taking that advice to heart, um, has been really helpful.

“Don’t give your life to these institutions” is powerful advice for women of color to keep in mind as they navigate graduate school. Many institutions today are run as a business and do not consider the well-being of their students to the degree that they should. Additionally, PWIs like State University never imagined the presence of women of color students as a part of their norm. For these institutions, students are consumers and producers first before anything else. Noor takes this advice from women of color faculty to help prioritize where and how much of her energy to direct to institutions who see her as “replaceable.”

The participants’ stories show that managing the pressures and tensions of negotiating multiple roles can be difficult. They spoke of feeling pulled in different directions and having multiple simultaneous obligations, but these women of color were able to navigate this multiplicity by rejecting or reframing societal expectations for the roles that they occupy. By creating their own definitions of what a “good mom” or a “good student” looks like, the participants created lives for themselves that brought harmony to their multiple worlds. The obligations still existed, but the pressures lessened when they let go of outside expectations and made choices in alignment with their values and a holistic view of their lives.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I shared the salient roles within the lives of these graduate women of color that they attempt to integrate with their role as a student. Navigating various familial and intimate relationships presented various types of conflicts, including time-and-energy-based conflicts, work-based conflicts, and behavior-based conflicts (Vergara, 1999). These women frequently mentioned the constraints on their time that required them to make hard choices about how to spend their time and how much mental and emotional energy to invest into their commitments. Balancing the physical tasks of preparing lesson plans, completing housework, or

planning an event presented conflicts with other tasks that they could not do simultaneously. Additionally, the participants also encountered internal and external behavior-based role expectations (i.e., being a “good mom,” “good partner,” or “good student”). In an effort to achieve a sense of role integration, many of these graduate women of color incorporated self-defined expectations for themselves and their roles by prioritizing their time, reframing societal expectations, making decisions in alignment with their values, and taking lessons from women of color who came before them. Some participants negotiated their roles more successfully than others, while some were more successful in certain contexts than others (i.e., more successful in motherhood than being a spouse).

CHAPTER VII: GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

In this chapter, I share qualitative findings regarding participants' experiences and perceptions of campus dynamics articulated in RQ2b: How do these negotiations influence their experiences as students? I categorize these findings within the following themes: campus climate, navigating mental health, finances, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of campus climate highlights participants' interactions with peers and faculty and subcultures of campus support. Participants repeatedly mentioned the impact to their mental health that they encountered in their negotiations of their roles and responsibilities as a graduate woman of color. They also highlighted financial strains and considerations that impacted their student experience. Overall, these themes give insight into the various campus dynamics that graduate women of color encounter and negotiate in order to persist through their graduate school journey.

Perceptions of Campus Climate

Only a few participants spoke about the overall campus climate of State University; most of them spoke about the campus climate within their academic department. In many cases, particularly at larger universities, graduate students can feel removed and disconnected from university campus life. To give myself as an example, although to-date I have been enrolled in my program for six years; I only attended classes on campus for the first two years. However, even in those two years, I only set foot in the two or three buildings on campus that I had classes in. Outside of my program, I cannot say that I understand campus life or the campus climate at my university. Many graduate students likely have a similar experience.

Kat's perspective of the campus climate of State University was neutral or ambivalent. When asked to describe the campus climate, she responded:

I don't know. Uh, 'cause I, um, the campus environment, um, I mean, I don't, I can't say there was like a culture or anything negative or positive. Um, it just felt like a, um, it, it definitely felt like a system.

Kat's comments about State University feeling like a "system" versus a "culture" stood out to me. Although I did not have the opportunity to ask her exactly what she meant, she spoke about her undergraduate experience at her HBCU directly after those comments, which helped me gain a better understanding. She continued:

Um, like, I knew there was not gonna be, like, you know, it, when I was a student, I knew that, you know, Tuesday and Thursdays there gonna be like a little hour break on campus where I'm gonna see a lot of students and, you know, we're gonna socialize and there may or may not be music, or there may or may not be, um, you know, something out there to entertain us. Um, you know, I knew that I knew, um, you know, there was only one cafeteria, so I knew how to get to the cafeteria on campus and, and, and how to navigate that.

When I think of the comparison Kat made between a system and a culture, a "system" gives the image of something that is mechanical, procedural, structural and methodical. A "culture" gives the image of something human, social, dynamic, and collective. A system feels cold and rigid; a culture feels alive and experiential. Based on this dichotomy, Kat shared that her experience at State University has been just "okay":

But, like, for so far, I mean it was an okay experience. The, I guess the climate, the experience was okay. There's nothing that stood out to me, negative or positive, um, that I can, like, recall at this moment, um, you know, it just kind of felt, I don't know if, if I had any, I think maybe I had some expectations, but nothing that I could probably like

verbalize right now, maybe it was a feeling that I thought I was gonna feel or something like that that didn't really come of, like of, like, oh, this is [State University], this magical place. And maybe that I hear that lot from undergraduate students of, of, uh, I love my experience at [State University] and, you know, blah, blah, blah. But I guess I didn't feel that euphoric feeling that I was gonna feel, like. Oh, it just felt like, okay, this is, this is cool, um, yeah, this is okay. Um, and maybe even in [my academic department], like, I don't know if I felt that either. Um, yeah, I don't know if I, what I felt from them either. Like, I don't think I felt like this, you know, this, this, uh, we are a village of, of [profession] practitioners and we're gonna do these great things. You know, it felt, it felt very siloed.

“Siloed” is a nice way of saying “isolated”; Kat felt that her experience at State University was isolating. She talked about how the undergraduate students she worked with talked about their experience at State University with excitement, but she did not have that same feeling. As I alluded to earlier in this section, at larger universities, graduate students are often on the periphery of campus life, and campus culture revolves around the undergraduate population. However, even within her experience with her academic department, Kat's comments show that she was somewhat hopeful of having a “village of public health practitioners” but that she did not experience the feel of a community.

Rochelle attended State University for her undergraduate and graduate degree and had insight into the campus climate that spanned many years. When I asked her how she would describe the campus climate, she explained:

So, um, I would say that the camp-, the climate has been tenuous and difficult and, um, just strange the whole time that I've been there. And certainly before that also, but in

concert with just a much more macro level public, um, need to confront issues of race and injustice in society. Um, [State University] has really, uh, a lot of lights have been shone in different ways and the university has done its dance to try to avoid all the scrutiny, but it fails every time, you know, because people now have the language to, to talk about it and people have done the research to support it.

Rochelle's comments speak to the larger sociocultural/sociopolitical dynamics happening at State University that have impacted the student experience at State University for many students, particularly students from marginalized backgrounds. She later names "the racist infrastructure of the university" and talks about the mass exodus of faculty and staff of color that occurred "in the wake of so many public acknowledgements of the wrong the university has done to and at the exclusion of people of color throughout its history." These comments show that a student's experience is impacted by more than just the present people and policies but by the legacies of people and policies from the university's inception.

Perceptions of campus environment and campus climate can also change based on the picture that agents of the institution sell to a student as a prospective student versus the actual experience of a student once they enroll. Sydney compared her experience being recruited to what she experienced as a student of State University so far. She shared:

So it's just really interesting, like how, as, you know, a grad student, like, I think about how I was recruited when I got in and it seemed, folks seemed like they were really excited in the department, like, oh, I, your research sounds so interesting and we can do this for you and that for you, you know, they kind of sold [State University] and the department as a place that was very welcoming and, like, we really need your research and we want it. But I found that once I was actually here, that wasn't the case.

Once Sydney began her graduate student journey at State University, she found that there was little to no interest in her research. Sydney felt that because she focused her research on race (specifically Latinx populations), used qualitative methods (in “a very quantitative department”), and submitted for publication in journals other than the department’s recognized “top journals”, the faculty have “less interest in [her] work” and do not see her “as like a very rigorous scholar.” Sydney said, “[P]eople aren’t thinking anything about me pretty much. It’s just, I’m sort of there.”

Isabelle brought up the challenges with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in her department, specifically naming the disconnect between what they say is important and what money goes toward. She said:

I feel like the department doesn’t put their money where their mouth is. Because they talk a lot about wanting to improve DEI, but they won’t spend any money on it. Right. They, um, you know, talk about recruiting diverse candidates and they also don’t give any funding. Um, and so I feel like it’s hard to, you know, they had students a few years ago, like revamp the syllabi and include more women of color and more content about race. Um, and they’re like, isn’t this amazing. And the students are like, we had to fight you for five years to get permission to do this.

Here, Isabelle illuminates a few of the structural barriers to DEI efforts on campus: funding and curriculum. Later in this chapter, I share the participants’ insights about negotiating finances and the impact on their graduate student experience. However, we know that attending graduate school is costly, and programs that are able to provide substantial funding for their students are better able to attract diverse talent. Additionally, two things stood out to me from Isabelle’s comments about “revamp[ing] the syllabi” to be more reflective of students of color: the

gaslighting from the faculty/and or administration and the students taking on the intellectual labor of the department. The department's response of "isn't this amazing" minimizes the pushback they gave students for five years. The onus of making those changes should not have been the students' responsibility in the first place; however, institutional agents often shift the labor of DEI to the students when the administration has no desire to see change.

When Dalia spoke about her perception of the campus climate in her department, she shared her discomfort with attending in-person department events. She explained:

Um, well, in my department there are maybe only like three or four women of color in my department. Um, I also don't go off, I think that is one of the reasons why, um, and overall just like people of color in my department, it's just like a handful of us. Um, and I think that's one of the reasons why I don't go to department things in person. Um, yeah, we, I mean, we haven't really had that many departmental events because of the pandemic. Um, but when we do I, yeah. I think it's one of the reasons I do not go. Um, yeah, not that I don't feel welcome, but it still feels, I dunno. <laugh> Yeah, I dunno. I just don't maybe I, I dunno. I just don't, I'm, I'm okay with not being present at departmental events.

Dalia stated here that the demographics of her department influences her desire to engage with in-person departmental events. Although she said she did not feel that way because she did not feel welcome, I felt that there may be more to her reasoning. As she continued, I understood more:

And, um, there are other spaces on campus where, um, so we have the [group to support underrepresented racial/ethnic graduate students] at, um, [State University] and there, like whenever there are events being held through [the support group], I am, yeah. I am

present either virtually or in person because, um, I feel more comfortable in that setting than in my own departmental setting. Um, and yeah, I feel maybe less judged, less of a gaze on me <laugh> in that setting versus like in my department. Um, and I mean, [State University] overall again. Yeah. I mean, we've seen how horrible [State University] has [been], continues to be to women of color. And yeah, I think, again, if I don't have to be on campus, I'm not on campus because I, yeah. Um, and yeah, I think, yeah, I feel, I dunno, <laugh> I dunno to put into words, but yeah. I think that's really what pushes me to not want to be on campus. Um, if I don't have to be there, especially now that things are virtual.

Although Dalia said she did not feel unwelcome at departmental events, her comments above clearly show that there are spaces where she does feel welcome and “more comfortable.” She mentioned feeling “less judged” and having “less of a gaze on [her]” in the context of the diverse graduate student support group. These comments speak to a heightened level of visibility that women of color often experience in predominantly white spaces. In these spaces, women of color may wonder how people perceive them, how people are “reading” them and, in Dalia's case, if they are being judged.

After taking classes in other departments, Melissa gave credit to her academic department for taking an approach that was more social justice oriented. She explained:

And I also think, um, in general, I guess, um, the, the [academic program] is a little, I would, I mean, like I would say pretty left-leaning, um, like the readings and things that we have in class of the discussions in general. So I think that the program, um, while there, you know, are always areas where they can improve, um, are very, um, forthcoming about like wanting people to be, um, considerate, um, of like their

positionalities and their, um, privileges and things. So that helps, which is like, not the case, I guess I've taken a couple classes in other, um, departments or just like on general [State University's] campus. I wouldn't necessarily say the same is true.

Here, Melissa's comments contribute to the idea that the content of the curriculum is an important factor of the graduate student experience for many graduate women of color. Her perception of her academic program as "left-leaning" is based on the class readings and discussions. Melissa acknowledged that while program leaders can make improvements, her program attempts to create an environment where issues of power and privilege are acknowledged.

Talia also spoke positively about her department and shared an experience where department leadership responded effectively to student feedback about DEI issues. She shared:

Um, and I think last year when I was a first year was their first year trying to implement some type of diversity-related like training, um, similar to like the bystander training that I'm sure you and many of other people have gone through. Um, and there were a lot of people that were frustrated with how that material was being presented, because it was just, um, being presented through the faculty leaders of each like specific class, which a lot of the time are white men. Um, and so they felt like, you know, some faculty would make some comments that were perhaps insensitive, that a lot of people within the class would turn to those, um, underrepresented minorities and, like, ask for their experiences. So, so those people were kind of being put on the spot. Um, so they went to [the department] with that, and expressed how they were unhappy with how that was going and the year or so, I guess this year, they just completely booted it. And they're like currently in the process of reworking it, I think. So I do feel like, you know, even though

it's not perfect, they are receptive to the feedback. Um, you know, I would hate, I would hate to see them continue to do the same thing, even with people complaining. So I think that is really great to see that they are at least doing what they can.

The experience that Talia shared gave a concrete example of a situation where graduate women of color may encounter negative experiences rooted in cultural insensitivities from faculty. However, this experience is also an example of the department being receptive to student feedback and making changes based on that feedback—a positive outcome from a negative situation that will hopefully impact future students.

Eva, who also attended State University for both undergraduate and graduate school, felt that, generally, State University has a welcoming climate, while acknowledging “isolated incidents” of race- and/or gender-based discrimination. She explained:

I think there at least outwardly is, you know, space for women of color to like give feedback to, um, the deans and administration on issues that they are feeling, things like, you know, the pink tax and, um, things that like motherhood and things like that where, you know, people are in different stages of their life, women, particularly in different stages of their life when they're coming to attend any graduate program. Um, and I, I, I do feel like, um, there isn't much, like, there isn't neglect of that, I think on, in terms of like at the school level. Um, I think in terms of like the cohorts, like, each year, class of 2020 class of whatever, um, there's a little bit greater, um, perceptions of even subconscious, like comments, like, that are slightly racist or slightly misogynistic, um, that I've heard either like personally or just through the grapevine, I guess. Um, so that's a bit discouraging, um, but it's not necessarily unexpected, like, where based on where we live and based on just the general population makeup, um, of who attends here. Um,

but yeah, I would, I would generally say that's not the case. Like those are more isolated incidents than anything else. Um, but yeah, I, I, I would say generally it's, it's a welcoming climate. It's not, it's, it's not at least on its face one that I feel uncomfortable associating myself with.

Here, Eva makes the distinction on the differing influence of “deans and administration” and peers within the cohorts. From her perspective, the administration within her academic program creates space for women of color to voice their concerns. She also notes increasing racism and misogyny from peers in the department. Based on these comments, Eva seems to credit the administration with efforts to make positive change for students while attributing the more negative experiences that women of color may have to incidents with their peers. This perspective is in opposition to earlier comments from Rochelle, Dalia, and Isabelle citing that the negative environmental factors at State University are systemic and not just “isolated incidents.” Eva did not deny that State University has issues or the many times they have “messed up” in the past but felt that “efforts to kind of improve this image ... are genuine and ... come from a place of wanting a genuine change for positive effects for women of color, for people of color in general.”

The participants shared their perspectives on the campus climate of State University overall as well as their perception of the campus climate within their various academic departments. The social, cultural, and political history of State University as a PWI influenced the environment and policies of the university, impacting today's students. Many participants acknowledged this reality, with the most extreme acknowledgment from a participant who labeled State University as “a racist institution.” In the following sections, I explore how

interactions with faculty and peers influenced the participants' perspectives on campus climates most directly.

Relationships with Faculty: Facilitators or Hinderers of Student Success

Faculty are an integral part of the graduate school experience, and the interactions that graduate students have with their professors can either facilitate or hinder their progress in their program. The participants in this study shared various experiences of positive and challenging relationships they had with faculty members. Sydney, for example, made a comparison between her relationships with faculty at State University and her relationships with faculty in other contexts. I asked her about how her vulnerability and emotions show up in academic spaces, and she responded with the following:

Sydney: Um, the faculty with faculty, it's funny. I, I don't feel comfortable doing that [being vulnerable] with pretty much anybody at [State University].

Erica: Interesting.

Sydney: Um, so there's mentors I've had over years that have generally either known me since undergrad or I just met them and they've, I've stayed in contact with them at, throughout graduate school, but they're not at [State University] interestingly that I can do that with at different capacities. I feel a genuine mentor-mentee relationship. Like it's okay for me to say, oh, this dissertation is driving me nuts. Um, do you have advice on how to like, organize this? I just feel X, Y, and Z, and it's taken in good faith. Um, but the faculty at [State University], especially in my department, I don't feel, I don't, I can't do that. And especially with my advisor, um, just because, uh, she's not receptive to it.

Here, Sydney discussed relationships she has with previous professors and mentors in her life and compares them to the relationships she has with faculty at State University. For her, the

ability for her to be vulnerable and the capacity of those faculty to receive her vulnerability is a major component that is missing from her relationships with State University faculty. In these relationships, Sydney only has the option of hiding her emotions, either through not sharing at all or disguising her true emotions beneath an image of strength and competence because those are the only presentations of self that her faculty could accept.

Sometimes relationships between faculty and graduate women of color can lead to microaggressions and impediments to the student's sense of belonging. Rochelle shared a frustrating experience with a white male professor who ended up not grading one of her papers, causing her to receive an incomplete in the class. While meeting with the professor to get feedback on her paper, he questioned her motivation to get a PhD. She explained:

But when I went to meet with him, um, he did not wanna talk about my paper at all. He first started telling me a story about how he became a PhD student and his, and this is a white male, you know, older, maybe 60-ish professor ... And then at the end of his whole little spiel, he says to me, so why do you want a PhD? And I'm thinking to myself, like, I'm sorry, I didn't know this was a career counseling session, a therapy session. Like, nobody asked you, like, I'm already, I've been in the program for a whole year already. Like why, you know, in my mind, of course, but then here's where the vulnerable comes in. So I'm sitting there and I'm fuming on the inside, but I'm having to like channel that through my fingers and just like, look diligent and compose myself.

I can only imagine how Rochelle felt to go to her professor's office to ask about how she can improve her paper only to have her existence in the academy questioned. She mentioned "fuming on the inside" while looking "diligent and compose[d]" on the outside to mask her vulnerability

and emotions from the unwanted and unwarranted judgment of this professor. She said later that she could “feel the racism and misogyny in the interaction.” She continued:

And so I took a deep breath and repeated the question and was like, why do I want a PhD? And then I said, well, and I proceeded to tell him something. I don't even remember exactly what I said, but I knew that I needed to include certain, you know, buzz words and make it sound legible to him. And at the end of what I said, I was like, okay, and so now can we get to my paper? And then he really didn't have actual feedback on the paper. He just, you know, pretty much wanted me to, I don't know, do something and then turn it in again. And so I did, but in that moment, I was just like, I couldn't get outta his office fast enough. And then it was like months before I could even revisit the paper. I was just so angry.

In this situation, Rochelle engaged in a negotiation process where she had to shift her responses and behavior for self-preservation and preservation of a semblance of a relationship with this person in power who has influence over her academic career. The level of emotional management that Rochelle engaged in during that encounter had a lasting impact, interfering with her revising the paper. Rochelle shared a lot more to this story. The professor continued to create barriers for her which resulted in her failing the class and becoming academically ineligible. This situation made Rochelle feel as if the professor “literally wanted [her] to fail” and that she “wasn't important enough and [her] work wasn't worth his attention.” Interactions with faculty like the one Rochelle experienced can be discouraging, disempowering, and derailing to a student's experience.

Thankfully, some participants also shared positive experiences with their faculty. Talia talked about the impactful conversation that she had with her now-advisor during her interview for her graduate program at State University. She explained:

So I had actually interviewed with her before, um, for my interview for [State University] and that's one of the reasons I became really interested in rotating with her. I might be going on a tangent now, but whatever. Um, and one of the questions she asked me during my interview was what I looked for in a mentor, which really stood out to me because that was the only time that any faculty had to ask me, you know, like, what do I wanna get out of grad school? Not like, why will I be able to succeed in grad school? Or why would I be able to produce good work for like them? Um, so yeah, that's been very great. She's also a, uh, woman of color herself. She was born in [the Middle East]. So she has, you know, those types of experiences, um, that I can relate to. And she also, uh, she's on the board of the like [academic department] specific diversity committee, um, is always encouraging lab members to participate in diversity-related events.

Talia's faculty advisor saw her as more than just a means of academic production from their initial interaction. The faculty member asking Talia the question "What do you want to get out of graduate school?" centers Talia's experience as a student instead of her output as a student. Talia also mentioned her faculty advisor's identity as a woman of color. Of course, that alone is not a guarantee of a positive faculty experience. However, throughout my conversations with the participants, I saw a difference in the experiences of participants like Talia, who had mentors and advisors who were either women of color or white women who were culturally aware, versus participants like Sydney and Rochelle, who had interactions with faculty who were either

ignorant or averse to their cultural identities and the perspectives they were attempting to bring to their academic work.

Hazel's faculty advisor is also a woman of color. During my conversation with Hazel, she talked about her advisor and the comfort she has navigating the hierarchy and power dynamics of that relationship. She shared:

I also think in terms of like, why I felt comfortable doing that with my PI is we have a longstanding relationship now. I think she, I'll say one thing, she is also a woman of color. Uh, she is, has done a remarkably good job of setting the precedent herself where at like, she was snippy in a meeting and afterwards, like the day later, she's like, "just wanted to send an email to you guys. You guys are doing great work. Apologies. If I was like, you know, snippier than usual, too many things on my plate, having a bad day. Let me know if there's anything I can do to support you." Um, and I think her having set that precedent made it much easier for me to do the same, even if it wasn't, you know, retroactive, it was more proactive.

In the dynamic between Hazel and her faculty advisor, the advisor's ability to model vulnerable behaviors and language had an impact on Hazel and how she showed up to academic spaces.

This approach from her advisor made Hazel feel comfortable to be proactive and having conversations about what type of support she needs.

Dalia also spoke about her relationship with her advisor and other professors and their role in modeling a different way of showing up in academia. She shared:

I think what has helped me has definitely been my advisor, uh, advisor, um, and the, some of my professors that I've taken classes with, um, people in my committee as well in the work that they do. Like they're on my committee for a reason. And it's because

I'm, I see them being able to, you know, navigate the academic space in a certain way that I really admire. And they're still keeping to their values in terms of still doing community-based work within [the local area] um, while also, you know, trying to figure out what, what it means to be a university or [State University] professor.

Dalia's comments highlight the importance of the role of faculty in modeling the behavior of what it means to be in academia. The faculty that Dalia spoke about exist in the ivory tower of academia but have not lost their connection to the community. For graduate women of color and other students who value using their academic knowledge to make practical change in their communities, seeing faculty around them who prioritize that orientation is integral to their success because it is countercultural to the dominant norms of the academy.

Overall, the stories shared by these participants show that interactions with faculty have a substantial impact on graduate students' academic experience. Faculty have decision-making power that can have a direct influence on the course of students' academic careers, as shown in Rochelle's story. Faculty behaviors and responses can either encourage or discourage vulnerability, as shown with Hazel and Sydney, respectively. Additionally, faculty model what it means to exist in the academy. Having an advisor who is a woman of color, like Talia, or who is a culturally-aware ally, like Dalia, provides necessary encouragement and support for and perspectives on what is possible for a career in academia.

Finding a Community of Peers

Many participants shared stories about their interactions with peers and how those interactions influenced their graduate school experiences. Some participants had a number of students of color in their cohorts and talked about how it influenced the culture of their program. Isabelle said:

And I think that I'm really lucky because my like kind of real cohort that I entered with has, like, multiple Black women in it. Like, there's only two white women in it. That's it, which is outta seven of us, um, which feels like really like a good community. Um, and so that's been good.

Having a graduate cohort at a PWI with a majority of women of color is likely a rare occurrence. Isabelle felt "really lucky" to have a "good community" of peers for her cohort. Her comments show that having that close proximity to and community with other women of color is a valuable part of the graduate school experience.

I asked Melissa specifically about the demographics of her cohort. She gave me a breakdown of the racial and gender demographics of her cohort and the interactions among them. Our exchange went as follows:

Erica: And I'm not sure if you know, but what's kind of like the, the demographics of like the folks who are in your program?

Melissa: Um, so there are nine people in my cohort. Um, two of them are men. Um, seven of them are women. There is, there are two people who identify as Latinx, um, both women. Um, there's one woman who is Indian, another Black woman. And, um, one man who is, um, well, one of his parents is Filipino and one of his parents is from, um, Jordan. So I don't know what he would consider himself, but, um, so the other three people are there's one white man and two white women.

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>. So the majority of the folks in your cohort are people of color or non-white

M: Yes.

E: Do you feel like that influences like the, the culture of your program? Just that, that, those demographics?

M: Yeah, I do. Um, we hang out, um, well I'm not in [state of institution] anymore, but we used to hang out once a month. Um, and I think that, and one person is in charge of like setting up the thing, the event. Um, I think we've, we've, um, learned a lot about each other and have a pretty, um, diverse set of perspectives. Um, and I think that just in class, um, that has led to like a lot of different, um, conversations. Um, a lot of, I guess our classes are discussion-based. So, um, that's led to a lot of different conversations, um, as well as like, I guess advocacy and, um, um, like a couple of people are international students, um, and just fighting for, I guess, um, for people of color, but also, like, specifically international students, um, asking for more consideration in the program, um, and things like that.

I enjoyed hearing about Melissa's experience with the peers in her cohort from many diverse identities. The group was able to spend time together both inside and outside of the classroom, which likely encouraged the development of their relationships both personally and professionally. Melissa also shared with me that the structure of their program facilitated conversations among her peers, encouraging them to be "considerate of their positionalities and their privileges." Coming from a program with similar considerations, I recognize how important that was in cultivating relationships with my peers based on understanding and respect.

Unfortunately, Josefina de Luna had a different experience. While we were talking about how the SWS construct of obligation to suppress emotions showed up for her in her graduate student experience, she talked about not expressing her opinion because she feels her peers do not take her seriously. I asked her for an example:

Erica: Have you had experiences in this program where, like, maybe like you took a chance to like make a comment or express an opinion and you were, like, just, just shut down or ignored?

Josefina de Luna: Yeah, absolutely. Like it's so frustrating. Um, like I can give an example where we just got like this half-million-dollar instrument and we were in our lab space mapping out where it would go. And so I get in and I'm immediately like guys here is like the perfect spot for it. Like I don't think it's, um, it's gonna go anywhere else. And like, no one listened to me and they do all their little measurements with the tape measure, trying to scope it out in the end and in the end, it like, they ended up putting it where I initially said to put it and just wasted a whole bunch of time.

Erica: Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Josefina de Luna: Um, so it's like these little things like that where it's like, well, what's the point of saying anything if I'm not being listened to anyway.

“Frustrating” is a fitting word for an experience when women of color graduate students do not feel heard, our opinions are not considered, and ultimately we are not viewed as a valuable contributor to the team. I had a suspicion of who possibly made up this group that ignored Josefina de Luna and made her feel invisible, but I still asked the question to confirm:

Erica: And I'm curious in, in that particular situation, kind of what were the demographics of, of the folks who were in that group?

Josefina de Luna: Mostly men, mostly white men. <laugh>

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>

J: Uh, one other woman, um, who kind of listened to me, but like there's not much you can do when you have all these guys like doing their own thing, so.

Josefina de Luna's experience is an example of racial and gendered microaggressions. Research shows that the perpetrators of these incidents on PWIs are most often white men (Vianden, 2020; Lozano et al., 2021). From the outside, overlooking her comments to the group could seem subtle and unimportant. The white men in that situation may have been oblivious to their actions and impact; however, Josefina de Luna left that interaction feeling undermined and undervalued.

Sydney spoke about mixed experiences with her peers as it relates to her vulnerability and comfort with them. She shared:

Peers, it's 50/50. Um, I think, so thinking about fellow graduate students, um, like I can be comfortable to do that, but I will not, I will, how do I say. I'll start to do that, be myself and express something, but I also wait to see how that person's going to respond and I might give it like a few tries, you know, with different conversations and if the person is not willing to open up back, I usually just go, okay, this is not gonna be that. And I just, I'll be a, I'll be a little more, I'll withhold a little more if I'm interacting with that person. But if they're, um, also willing to just, and I have like, really, I have really good colleagues, we were just working this morning. We were just like, look, our advisors are driving us nuts and we can kind of just do that together. Then I feel comfortable.

Sydney's comments give insight into her thought process of how she approaches and negotiates relationships with her peers. She appears to have a level of comfortability with cautious vulnerability and makes informed decisions based on the response from the other person. I see this as a healthy approach to vulnerability and building relationships that protect the individual's emotional safety and well-being.

Overall, the participants shared both positive and challenging relationships and interactions with their peers. They highlighted the value of having other women of color or people of color in their cohorts with whom to connect and share academic experiences. An example of racial and gendered microaggressions showed how often white males can be unaware of the challenges of being a woman of color in the academy and be the offenders of harmful behaviors that perpetuate those challenges. Navigating relationships with peers often required trial and error to give time and space to evaluate if the other person can receive and reciprocate vulnerability.

Relationships with faculty and peers have a significant impact on the quality of the overall graduate school experience. The positive interactions and relationships that participants had with faculty and peers encouraged feelings of support and community. Difficult interactions with faculty and peers caused the participants to question their belonging and created barriers to persistence. In situations of conflict, these graduate women of color engaged in responses that aided in self-preservation such as self-silencing and hiding their emotions. As perception of overall graduate school experience often includes interactions with faculty and peers, highlighting these relationships was an important aspect of exploring campus dynamics for graduate women of color at State University.

Networks of Campus Support

The majority of the participants shared that, overall, their graduate school experience was positive. They attributed a large part of their positive experience to the support they received from various people and organizations on campus within and beyond their department. Often, these spaces of support were related to the participants various underrepresented or marginalized identities. Noor discussed finding support on campus specifically related to her motherhood

identity. Earlier in this chapter, she shared that she had conversations with her department during her interview about navigating graduate school as a mother and received a lot of support. She also acknowledged that is not always the case for other departments. She explained:

I wanna say that again, like, I personally have had a pretty good experience, but I feel like in general campus is not that friendly toward grad student parents. Um, I was lucky to have a couple other parents in my cohort just to, like, share with, but I feel, like, for other, um, other types of programs, especially a lot of departments are not so family-friendly.

In addition to the support she received from department leaders, Noor highlighted the importance of finding a community of other student parents in her cohort. Having connections with others from similar backgrounds, identities, and experiences can be helpful for graduate student persistence.

Other participants also shared stories of finding support on campus related to their various backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Talia shared how finding these support systems influenced her decision to attend State University. She mentioned the Initiative for Maximizing Student Development (IMSD), a research-training program held on many universities sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that aims “to develop a diverse pool of scientists earning a PhD” (National Institute of General Medical Sciences, n.d.). When talking about her decision to attend State University, Talia said:

Um, I was also, I, I had been a part of my IMSD program ... at my undergrad, but, um, I was drawn to the fact that they had an IMSD program at [State University] and that they were very, um, I don't know, let, letting students know that they, um, diversity and inclusion was something that was important to them and that they were working on.

Attending an institution that values diversity was important to Talia in selecting where she would pursue her graduate studies. The IMSD program provided a support system for Talia that was at the intersection of her social identities and academic interests.

When I asked Melissa about the places or people where she found support on campus, she talked about people and groups related to her identity as a Black woman, including a group for women of color on campus and a group for Black graduate students. She also discussed her involvement in a group that integrated her Black identity with her research interests. She shared:

I, um, do community, um, participatory research. Um, and a lot of those projects are, a lot of those researchers. I mean, they, well that focus on Black, um, community. So a lot of those researchers are Black women and I've, um, found a lot of great mentors through some of the research projects I've been able to be on, um, who have been there to like guide me and, um, give me advice and advocate for me, like on funding fronts and on like, um, credit fronts and things and bring up issues that I otherwise wouldn't have or even known about. So I was, I'm really thankful to, um, some of the people that, um, do the research that I wanna do.

Melissa found a community of Black women researchers who was able to provide support and to help her uncover the hidden curriculum of graduate school. As a first-generation undergraduate and graduate student, she likely would not have had the same access to information about funding and credits had she not had the support of these Black women.

Talia found her support within her academic department. When she spoke about her positive experience at State University, Talia attributed a great deal of that to her faculty mentor and the environment in her lab. She explained:

I've, I've had a, I've been really happy with my experience at [State University], um, and like all places I do think there are things that could be better, but I think, you know, and I'm [going to] repeat myself now, but my mentor that I chose in the lab that I chose really is because that is the environment that I'm in all the time and that is a super supportive environment, um, and diverse environment. So I feel like that plays probably the largest role in why I do feel so supported and happy with my time in graduate school. Um, yeah. So I feel like if I, you know, ended up in a lab that I wasn't, didn't have that same type of support, I would probably be in a, a very different mental state most times. <laugh>

Talia's experience shows the level of influence that individual faculty members can have on creating a positive experience for graduate students. Separate from the previous section on faculty relationships which focuses the one-on-one interactions, this experience emphasized the network of scholars and the overall "supportive environment" facilitated by her faculty mentor. Here, Talia attributed her feelings of happiness, support, and satisfaction with her graduate experience to the environment that her faculty advisor created, which she described as "super supportive" and "diverse." To further emphasize her point, Talia shared that she believes that, had she not been in this type of environment, her mental health would have likely been negatively impacted.

On the other hand, some participants, like Josefina de Luna went outside of her department to find the support that she needed since she did not feel supported by her own department. She shared that she gets her support from another department across campus. I asked her what about that department's resources did she find helpful. She explained:

They have like an actual community of students of color that, um, like I interact with and I talk with, um, I also feel like the faculty are a lot nicer <laugh>. Um, 'cause here, like

people just don't care at all. Like, um, we have a [student group within department], um, and so they had like some sort of meet-and-greet with the faculty and like two professors showed up out of like 20 that are here so like they obviously don't care <laugh> um, and meanwhile, like on the other side of campus, like a whole bunch of faculty go to these sorts of meetings.

Like Talia's earlier comments, Josefina de Luna's story shows that graduate students' experience with their faculty can make or break students' overall experience. She feels that the faculty in her department "just don't care at all" and gives a comparison of how one department shows their students support by showing up while the faculty in her department do not. These faculty did not even have to do anything spectacular for Josefina de Luna to feel supported. All they did was be present, show up for their students, and come across as nice.

Eva presented a unique perspective as someone who attended State University for both undergraduate and graduate school. When asked about the level of support she experienced as a graduate student, she replied:

Um, I, I feel, um, overall, um, from [State University], uh, very supported. I feel, um, you know, if I struggled and I reached, I, I didn't necessarily do this on my own, but I feel confident that if I was struggling, um, and efforts that [State University] has made to kind of create safe spaces for individuals like myself and other, um, and other people of color, um, like they're willing to do this. They've just made a space, like a prayer room and a meditation space in the school, for example, um, they've thrown different events to kind of raise awareness of self-care and mental health. Um, so I, I feel greatly supported by my, by the community in terms of gen— like broadly administration. Um, so yeah, I, I, I feel like it's, it's been despite like the few here and there incidents or comments from,

um, some of my peers, um, I feel generally like supported. I feel like I've, I've been given a great opportunity and I feel like, um, that's something I'm very appreciative and I'm not sure I would be available in, in other schools or context really.

Although Eva did not mention any particular situation that happened to her personally, she highlighted her graduate program's efforts to create a supportive environment for their students through creating inclusive physical spaces and events for students. Overall, she felt supported as a student by the administration of the that unit. I then asked her if she felt similarly as an undergraduate student. She responded:

Uh, as an undergrad? Uh, I would say it, it was less, no, it, I, I did feel similar support. I think it was because the school is so large that I didn't feel that the support was coming directly as directly as it is from like my deans now. Um, so it felt like there was more space or layers between where I was.

Her comments about the "space or layers" that existed for her during her undergraduate experience made sense to me. I understand how it may be easier to feel the support more directly in a smaller, more focused academic environment like graduate school. Eva continued to expound on the differences in support between her undergraduate and graduate school experiences. She said:

Um, but yeah, I, I felt, I would say I felt more supported by, you know, certain individual professors versus, um, more higher up administrative, um, folks. Um, I felt like friends in that space, um, and social situations were more supportive as opposed to now. Um, yeah, I do feel a bit like isolated in terms of, um, my cohorts now, because you know, a lot of them, you know, if you look in the classroom, there's like one or two brown people, one or two Asian people, you know, one or two African American people and the, and the

rest 50, a 100 room classes, um, full of white folks. Um, so it's, it's, it's difficult to make friends. Um, it's difficult to kind of find support in people who can kind of relate on my same level in terms of the academic stressors.

For Eva's undergraduate career at State University, she felt more direct support from peers and individual professors than "more higher up administration." In contrast, her graduate experience provided more support from her deans and less from her peers. She mentioned feeling "isolated" as a graduate student, with few students of color in her cohort and not being able to find connection to and support in peers "who can kind of relate on [her] same level in terms of the academic stressors." Again, the focus here is not on the individual peer-to-peer interactions or relationships but on a peer network of support. Her comments highlight that there are unique academic stressors that students of color experience in higher education and the importance of having peers that can relate to those experiences.

During their graduate school experience, the participants sought out and found different support networks on campus. Many of these niches of campus support were related to the intersections of the participants' academic interests and their marginalized or underrepresented identities. Participants found these support networks within their department, in other departments, within their cohorts, and from co-curricular opportunities in which they participated. The relationships that the participants developed through these networks provided them with access to information and resources that would benefit their academic and career journeys as well as mental and emotional support to get through the stress of graduate school.

Navigating Mental Health

Many of the participants described their negotiations of their roles and responsibilities as a graduate student impacting their mental health. During my conversations with the participants,

I asked them in what ways does balancing their multiple roles and responsibilities impact them psychologically or mentally. Serena shared the following in response to that question:

Um, I feel like it impacts me like, um, I'm at a point right now where I feel like even though, like, I feel stuck sometimes, or I feel numb, like I can't, like, move forward sometimes and it has, I don't know what it has, what has to happen for me to keep, like, pushing forward to get that degree. Um, so I feel like it impacts me, like, you know, I have anxiety on whether I'm gonna graduate or if I'm even gonna find a job. And if like, you know, my roles as, even as a graduate student will like follow me, um, and a caregiver, all that stuff, like will that impact my job? So there's a lot of anxiety. Um, and I feel guilty all the time. So there's some depression in there too with all these transitions of roles.

Serena mentioned feeling the gamut of challenging emotions: stuck, numb, anxious, guilty, depressed. Navigating her multiple roles had an obvious impact on her mental health. I remember that Serena was my first interview. Other than my conversation with her being the shortest, the melancholy sound of her voice stood out the most to me. I could hear in her voice that she was tired, overwhelmed, and stressed.

Sharing a different perspective, Isabelle mentioned how being at State University and feeling like she did not belong impacts her mental health. She said:

And so, yeah, I think that the impact of my mental health has been like increased anxiety for sure ... Um, and so I feel like part of it is the anxiety of like, not feeling like I belong here, not feeling I'm good enough to be here.

Isabelle shared how part of her anxiety came from the environment around her. She lacked a sense of belonging, which influenced her mental health. As Isabelle, Serena, and the other

participants shared their reflections on their mental health, certain common descriptors emerged. Additionally, some participants shared how therapy was a resource they utilized to help them cope and make sense of their multiple roles and their graduate school environment.

Feeling Overwhelmed and Stressed

When asked about the feelings associated with the experience of navigating multiple roles and responsibilities, graduate students mentioned *overwhelming* and *stressful* as descriptors the most. For example, in my conversation with Sydney, I asked her:

Erica: So overall, when you think about your experiences as a graduate woman of color and all of the, the different roles and identities that you have to balance and negotiate, how do you feel like, what is it, what are the feelings associated with that experience?

Sydney: Um, overwhelmed.

Josefina de Luna responded to that same question with the following:

A lot of pressure. Um, a lot of, like, perfectionism where I feel like I can't neglect any one of those roles, uh, because I feel like I need to be strong enough to take care of all these people. Um, and certainly a lot of stress.

Josefina de Luna connected her feelings of stress to perfectionism and obligation to present an image of strength. The pressure she felt was rooted in caring for her loved ones and feeling she needed to take on these other roles in order to fulfill that goal.

Talia discussed the stress of "all of the things" she has to do and not feeling like there is adequate time to ever complete these tasks. When I asked about the feelings she associates with the experience of navigating multiple roles and responsibilities, she answered:

Stress? <laugh> Um, yeah, I feel, I feel like for me it really manifests as stress and just thinking about all these things I need to do and all the things I've been putting off for so

long, but not really ever finding a good break to be able to work on these things. And even when I do have a break, I feel like I'm kind of, you know, just mentally dead and don't want to do these extra things. Um, yeah. I, I don't think I'd say like frustration necessarily for me. I do, do think it manifests primarily as stress. Um, yeah. I feel like all, all emotions I could think of, like, relate back to stress being stressed.

I completely related to Talia's experience of ruminating on all of the tasks that need to be done, not feeling like there is time to get to them, and being too exhausted when there is time. Those feelings can be disempowering and paralyzing and only increase the level of stress. Talia's use of the phrase "mentally dead" stood out to me and shows the extent of the mental toll that these roles and responsibilities can have. Isabelle echoed these sentiments: "Yeah. I think that if I think about all the things I have on my plate for too long, I'll get like really overwhelmed. <laugh> It's just like one thing at a time." She mentions trying to focus on "one thing at a time," but I imagine that might be easier said than done.

Some participants also experienced the tension of their experience as being both overwhelming and fulfilling and, to some degree, fulfilling because it was overwhelming. In my conversation with Serena, she acknowledged this tension in her experience navigating multiple identities and roles. She said:

Um, it's I feel like it's, uh, it's, um, mmm, it can be overwhelming at times, but I feel like it, it's very enriching. I don't know. I honestly dunno. Yeah. Just trying to navigate different spaces while also staying true to your identity can be very overwhelming.

Even though Serena mentioned that navigating her multiple roles was "enriching," she was still conflicted. She was not confident in her answer and immediately followed her "enriching" comment with "I don't know." She also brought up another dimension of tension in

acknowledging the challenge in staying true to herself while moving through “different spaces.” The multiple roles of student, employee, parent, etc., each come with its own environment where students have to make decisions about how to show up and present their identities. Navigating environments where those identities are not represented or valued can absolutely be overwhelming.

Eva also acknowledged the stress that comes from her multiple roles and responsibilities, but she focused on the benefits she gained. She shared:

Um, I think all of these roles, they, I personally think they impact me positively. I think that, um, you know, it makes me feel fulfilled. It makes me feel productive. Um, it makes me feel like, um, you know, from a community that one I’ve lived so long to it’s, it’s offered me great benefits and the ability to study and get a great education, um, for, you know, decent price and everything. Um, it, it feels like it’s an opportunity to give back, um, which I, which I really enjoy about the roles. Um, obviously I think they’re stressful positions and, um, you know, sometimes it’s prefaced in a way that seems like perhaps it would be lighter and, uh, based on, you know, previous people who I knew who were in these positions, they didn’t seem like they tried as hard maybe or may, or maybe they just played it off.

Eva said that her multiple roles make her feel “fulfilled” and “productive.” She took pride in giving back to a community that has given so much to her. In talking about how the roles can also be stressful, Eva noted how people may wear a mask and present themselves in roles in ways that are not reflective or truthful to the stress that they actually experience in those roles.

Dalia shared an example of a situation she encountered which illustrated the tension between feeling overwhelmed and fulfilled. She had conflicting priorities one weekend where

she had to attend a conference for a trainee program that provided funding for school and to co-organize a summit for a fellowship program she was a part of. She was able to fulfill both commitments by attending the summit in person while attending the conference virtually. In reflecting on that particular experience and how navigating multiple roles influences her student experience overall, she said:

Um, I think it can be very overwhelming. Um, and I've used the word stressful often, but it does feel like that. Um, sometimes I think once, once, maybe, so let's say the summit that, um, once that ended, it felt really, um, what's the word like, like beneficial and I was so happy that I had been a part of it because it was just a really wonderful discussion, um, that we had. Um, but building up to all of that time, it feels overwhelming and stressful and at the same time having to read and do schoolwork and all of these other things, um, do my graduate assistantship work as well. Um, but yeah, I think once, once certain things are over, I'm like, wow, I'm, I'm happy I stayed. And I didn't, you know, didn't leave this thing, um, for, for something else. So, yeah.

Dalia's example shows that often there is a light at the end of the tunnel of these multiple, stressful roles. For her, the journey was "overwhelming and stressful" but the outcome was beneficial. These experiences do not have to be one or the other; they have the potential to be both overwhelming and beneficial.

Later in our conversation, Dalia mentioned again that navigating multiple identities and roles can be overwhelming and stressful, but she also highlighted the rewarding parts of that experience. In response to my asking her about how it feels to be in that experience, she answered:

Overwhelming <laugh>, that's always my number one, overwhelming, stressful. Um, but I think it can also feel at times rewarding, like I mentioned before. Um, and yeah, I feel like I'm, I'm also learning so much and growing so much and yes, just seeing maybe a different part of myself and that I didn't know before. And I, yeah, I think that's something that I've been yeah, really, um, been noticing, um, my growth through and I grow throughout this program.

For Dalia, growth emerged out of the overwhelm and stress. Even in student development theory, challenge is necessary for growth (Sanford, 1962). Finding the growth and rewarding parts of the overwhelming and stressful experience of navigating multiple roles can aid in the persistence of graduate women of color.

In summary, the participants in this study frequently described their experience navigating multiple roles as overwhelming and stressful. They noted that the pressure of navigating multiple roles and responsibilities is mentally draining. However, many participants also saw the rewards of balancing their multiple roles. These participants felt fulfilled and productive, valued opportunities to give back to their community, and reflected on the learning and growth they experienced as a result of these roles. Although the participants acknowledged the benefits, the pressures did have an impact on their mental health, causing many to seek out therapy.

Utilizing Therapy

At least four participants mentioned therapy as a resource that they used. During our conversation, Eva said, "I do therapy once a week. Um, just kind of discussing, um, different struggles I've had with, um, interpersonal relationships and stuff like that, that I think is super helpful." Josefina de Luna shared that she received an initial assessment through State

University's counseling center and then was referred to a counselor outside of the institution. She mentioned how having a therapist was helpful in processing her feelings of overwhelm related to her navigating her various roles and responsibilities. She said:

Uh, I recently started going to therapy. Um, I think I've been in for like almost six months. Yeah. And that sort of has helped me process some of the really over feeling, overwhelming feelings that I've been getting recently. Um, and so just having like a person to talk to every two weeks, um, gets rid of, like, not well, not gets rid of, but helps me process the emotional baggage with trying to juggle all of these different things.

In the previous section, Josefina de Luna talked about the pressures she experienced as a result of her multiple roles. Here, she talks about how going to therapy has helped her to process the pressure and "emotional baggage" that she experiences. She made sure to point out that seeing her therapist does not get rid of the overwhelming feelings but is an important resource in helping to manage the feelings.

Sydney talked about how her therapist, a woman of color, influenced how she navigated vulnerability and authenticity for her students. She explained:

Um, and it wasn't like til I started working with a new therapist, a woman of color, so not surprising. We really started getting into stuff. And, um, I remember a conversation where she kind of pushed me to think about, well, what would be so bad about you just, like, you know, relating to your students and expressing your own stress and frustration. Like, if that's honoring who you are, then what, what, what are you afraid of? Like, what would, what would be the consequence of that? And I said, oh, actually I don't really know. She was like, that's something to consider to try.

The value I see that the woman of color therapist bringing to Sydney in this scenario lies in the therapist encouraging Sydney to remove the mask of strength that she was showing to her students. Earlier in the conversation, she spoke about wanting to fit this “imaginary model of what professionalism looked like in the classroom,” but that model was inauthentic to who she was, creating an experience of fragmentation. Taking the advice of the therapist, Sydney “felt more at ease as an instructor” showing up as more of her authentic self, and her students resonated with that.

Isabelle also shared her experience of seeking help from the university’s counseling center and the impact of not only having a therapist but also “consistency with the same therapist.” She recounted her situation to me:

Isabelle: Um, <laugh> so, um, I was not doing great and I sought help at the counseling center at [State University] and the, you know, they have the like multicultural therapist, like you get like an extra five sessions. And literally at the end of that, the therapist I was seeing was like, so I’m offering you a pro bono spot in my clinic.

Erica: Oh wow.

Isabelle: For the length of time that you’re a student because you need it <laugh>. I was like, you know, I cried cause I was like, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me.

Erica: Yeah.

Isabelle: But like, you know yeah. Having access to like reliable therapy has been great. Um, and also like consistency with the same therapist has been really fantastic, but also, like, [I] was diagnosed with, like, anxiety and, like, started medication for mental health, which was also like a whole thing. Like, I literally spent two years telling people to take their meds and had such a hard time doing it myself.

Isabelle's story highlights the importance of counseling as a university resource and the importance of making sure that counseling services are fully resourced. She emphasized how "access to reliable therapy" and "consistency with the same therapist" impacted her life. I wonder what her experience would have been like if the therapist was unable to continue seeing her. Most university counseling centers are under-resourced and only have the capacity to see a certain number of students for a certain number of sessions. This reality can limit the ability of graduate women of color to address their mental health concerns.

Eva, Josefina de Luna, Sydney and Isabelle shared experiences that show the value of therapy in addressing the overwhelming and stressful feelings they experience navigating multiple roles and responsibilities. The participants found it beneficial to have someone to speak with on a regular basis about their roles and relationships and the pressures around them. Therapy did not make these pressures go away but provided an outlet to help the participants show up more authentically as themselves. Their stories normalize counseling for women of color and highlight the importance of universities having accessible, reliable, and consistent mental health resources to support students as they navigate and integrate their various roles to help them be successful students.

To conclude this theme, the participants' negotiations of their multiple roles and responsibilities influenced their mental health. When asked about the feelings they associated with navigating their multiple roles and responsibilities, "overwhelming" and "stressful" were the words that the participants mentioned most often. Constantly thinking about their various roles and responsibilities brought on feelings of anxiety, stress, and perfectionism in some of the participants. Other participants balanced the feelings of stress with positive feelings of growth and productivity. They utilized therapy through the university's counseling as a resource to help

them process their various feelings around their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Since these resources are often limited, universities should consider how they can expand or supplement mental health resources on campus to enhance the well-being of graduate women of color and all students on campus.

Finances

Financial support or lack thereof greatly influenced the student experience of the participants. Money influenced why the participants chose their graduate program, the possibility of leaving their program, participation in academic and co-curricular opportunities during their program, and general quality of life during their graduate program. When I asked Dalia why she chose State University for her graduate program, she replied:

Honestly, the funding <laugh>, that's what I always tell people is the funding, because that's the truth. Um, I was accepted to a different, um, program, which was my undergraduate program ... um, which would've been a lot closer to family as well to my parents as well, but the funding was nothing, was not comparable to the funding at State University.

Dalia's comments emphasize how important funding for graduate school was for her. Later in our conversation, she did mention that although the department at the other institution probably also would only have a few women of color, the familiarity of campus and having people she knew in the area would have made the experience more comfortable for her. Dalia's comments show that ultimately funding was more important than comfort in her choice for graduate school.

Josefina de Luna spoke about the hidden curriculum of graduate school as it relates to finances. When I asked her what her department could do to create a more welcoming environment for students of color, she was reflective about her own experience and the financial

toll she experienced and also hopeful that future students could have a better experience than she had. She shared:

Um, so I work with my boss to like implement this summer program that takes, like, incoming students of color, and like it's a, you apply for it, but you get like a thousand dollars to move here and then, like, a new laptop. So I think that would've been really great for me. I wish there was like a retroactive award for that, um, but, like, I'm just hoping that the next cohort of students come in don't have to deal with any of the things that I had to deal with. Um, and it's just like these little, uh, like, these little things a department can do to show that they care, I think, are really meaningful just by having, like, the scholarships that you can apply to, to help offset, like, all the money it takes to get here. Like, I never realized how important that would've been for me when I applied. Um, because like I had, I had to save up money for a whole year before I could move here. Uh, so these sort of like initiatives, I feel like would've been, would show that department is really supportive.

I empathize with Josefina de Luna's experience as someone who has had to navigate financial planning for graduate school. After working in higher education for many years, I have realized that there are many resources to assist students trying to find funding sources for their undergraduate education but significantly fewer resources to assist students in finding funding for graduate education. It is one of those necessary steps for graduate school that students are expected to know but no one really talks about. I agree with Josephina de Luna that if departments want to show their students that they support them, sharing in the burden of securing funding would be a great step.

Isabelle spoke about how the lack of financial support from the university impacted her academic course choices. During our conversation, she shared that she was taking double the full graduate course load because of the minimal funding. Our exchange went as follows:

Isabelle: And also like, you know, a full graduate course load at [State University] is nine credits, and I'm taking 18 this semester.

Erica: Oh my gosh.

I: Yeah. And last semester I took 15 or 16, the semester before that I took 18 or 19. Like I have overloaded almost every semester.

E: <laugh> Oh my gosh. Is there, is there a reason why you made that decision?

I: Um, money fears. Uh, [State University] only offers one year of funding.

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

I: Um, and I was doing this [masters] to PhD and I was like, well, worst case scenario, if I don't get funding for the second year 'cause they couldn't guarantee anything. Right.

Um, I'll only have six more credits of the masters to do and then I can pay for that out of pocket, wrap it up and work.

E: mm-hmm <affirmative>.

I: Um, and drop out of a PhD if I need to

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative> mm-hmm <affirmative>.

I: ...And go do a PhD somewhere else where I'll have funding.

E: Yeah. Yeah.

I: So like luckily I got funding, but like that was I think my main concern at the time.

E: Yeah. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Wow.

I: Just like a backup plan

Thankfully, Isabelle worked for two years prior to starting graduate school and had savings to supplement her \$15,000 a year stipend. However, the fact that the financial strain of graduate school influenced Isabelle to take double the full course load both surprised and frustrated me. Hearing her story made me think that this had to be a stressful experience for her, basically having to take a gamble on how or if she could afford her graduate degrees.

Opportunities do exist throughout the graduate school tenure to gain additional funding through research and teaching positions. However, those roles are often few and far between and difficult to find. I asked Melissa about her experience searching for research opportunities:

Erica: And has it been pretty easy for you to find those research opportunities?

Melissa: Um, I wouldn't say okay. I wouldn't say it's easy as, like, they make it seem because, um, everyone's always looking for, um, a research opportunity or TA-ships to, to provide funding. Um, so like when you apply, they make it seem like it's pretty easy. Um, and um, when in reality, I, I guess they come eventually, um, like, do a lot of work and send a lot of emails and reach out to some people. I think that I've been more fortunate than other people, um, in my program, um, because a couple of my like peers who are women, haven't had a chance to work, um, with, um, well with one their advisors, but two with like, um, other people on campus. Um, and when they do, I would say I've been involved on two or three, three projects on campus. Um, and only one of them was in, like, was in a project that I really wanted to work on, and the other two were kind of just, like, so I could have funding.

Melissa's comments highlight not only the difficulty of finding funding opportunities in general but the difficulty finding funding opportunities that are also related to her career interests. This dynamic presents a barrier to students gaining important co-curricular experiences that would

add to their classroom learning, even in cases where funding is provided. Beyond the scarcity of those opportunities, Melissa also speaks to how the hidden curriculum of graduate school manifests by acknowledging the challenge of even knowing how to identify those opportunities in the first place.

Additionally, being a productive and successful academic scholar often requires graduate students to spend additional financial resources. Isabelle and I lamented over this additional financial burden:

Isabelle: Yes. And, like, you know, I'm so glad I worked for two years before going or otherwise I would've barely had any savings and I would be much more financially strapped than I am already making \$15K a year as a grad student. And again, like, also my partner's a grad student. Other people in my program, they're like, oh yeah, my husband's a software engineer. Like, great.

Erica: Good for you <sarcasm>.

I: No wonder you can go to all the conferences all the time.

E: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's the other thing like with, in terms of cost, like of course, like there's the cost of, like, tuition fees and books, but, like, if you want to be, you know, competitive in your field, you have to go to these conferences and ...

I: Publishing fees.

E: Yeah.

Having additional financial support from a spouse or other family can greatly alleviate financial stress for a graduate student, and it gives the freedom and space to be able to pursue other co-curricular, career-advancing opportunities that require additional funds, such as attending

conferences. Again, these are other hidden costs that potential graduate students are unaware of when they are deciding to pursue a graduate degree.

Isabelle also enlightened me to the financial and wellness challenges that university-sponsored health insurance presents for graduate students. She shared:

But again, when we talk about grad school, um, the way they do our health insurance, they reset every semester. So our deductible resets to zero and so I had to pay a whole bunch more money out of pocket than I should have in order to get like treatment for [a women's health issue]. And so I feel like the way the, the institution is set up things like health insurance makes it harder for us to take care of our mental and physical health. I would not be able to afford therapy if my therapist hadn't been, like, oh, you, you need this. And like given me a pro bono spot in her clinic.

As a graduate student myself, I knew that Isabelle's comments about health insurance was a true reflection of how the institution operated. However, until I heard her story, I did not realize the financial burden that reset policy places on students. Health emergencies cannot be planned, but a graduate student who has health costs that are spread out over the course of an academic year could likely end up paying more out-of-pocket costs than someone who has calendar-year health insurance due to the deductible resetting each semester. This creates another financial stressor.

Melissa also echoed Josefina de Luna's earlier comments about receiving financial support from the institution and the impact that finances had on her student experience. She said:

Um, okay. Well, I mean, first I, I think that paying us more is important. Um, it's really hard to, because I started to look for full-time positions, um, specifically because I was working more than 20 hours, which isn't allowed. And, um, they found out that I was working more than 20 hours, which isn't allowed. And so I had to like let go of one of the

positions. Um, but, um, I needed that position to, you know, pay my bills to still be in the program. So I think, like, balancing, just paying people better is, like, would be the biggest encourager for, um, having more women of color or supporting, um, students of color better.

Many graduate students still have the same type of bills and financial responsibilities as someone who works a typical 40 hour a week, full-time job, such as rent, groceries, phone bill, car payment, etc. However, many assistantship roles do not provide the amount of funding to cover those financial responsibilities without taking out student loans. In Melissa's case, State University also had policies in place that created barriers to her finding on-campus solutions to that issue. Having graduate students fill these on campus roles is an important way that the institution functions. As a former university administrator who employed multiple graduate students, I can say from personal experience that graduate student labor is essential, but it needs to be compensated appropriately. If things do not change, I foresee more students taking the route that Melissa did and finding opportunities outside of the institution to help cover their expenses while in graduate school. This outcome would be catastrophic for the institution that relies on graduate students to make up a significant portion of its workforce but may be the better option for the student faced with a financial dilemma.

Paying graduate students more also has the potential to influence overall student wellness and persistence. Isabelle highlighted how financial difficulties often impact students of color differently. She said:

Yeah. And I honestly think that one of the things that has shocked me so much is how disproportionately the financial burdens are born by students of color who don't necessarily have, you know, family wealth to help them in this time and you know,

financial burdens translate into stress. Right. And when those stresses are disproportionately born by certain students, right. It's, it pushes people out of programs. Um, because you can't, it's not sustainable. And so the department could provide better funding <laugh> right.

As it relates to those financial burdens, Black, Latinx, and Native American student loan borrowers had higher unmet financial need, took on more student loan debt, and, in 2020, were more likely to cite finances as a barrier to staying in school (Williams, n.d.). According to the Education Data Initiative (Hanson, 2023), Black people with at least a bachelor's degree have an average of \$52,000 in student loan debt, and 45% of this debt is from graduate school student loans. To provide some additional context around race, 40% of Black graduate students have graduate student loan debt compared to 22% for their white counterparts (Hanson, 2023). These statistics enhance Isabelle's comments and show that finances often are a barrier to degree completion for graduate students of color.

Dalia even named finances as the main reason she considered leaving her program. The thought of her leaving her program came up early in our conversation, ironically, as we discussed her maxing out the intense motivation to succeed scale. After she mentioned joking around about leaving her program, I asked her:

Erica: So I, I guess for you kind of, what are, what are the things that make you even, like, consider leaving?

Dalia: Um, definitely financial is always number one. Um, you know, I worked for several years prior, to which you shared that you did too, um, prior to beginning a PhD program and coming into this program and we're not getting paid, this is a stipend. And I think that's always what I have to remind myself. Like, this is a stipend, this is not

payment and it's still like significantly less than what I was making. And I think, I always think about, oh, I always think about that. It's always something that's present in my mind. And it brings a lot of stress in thinking about like finances and moving forward because, you know, yeah. It's, it's stressful and that's it. So definitely that ... Um, but yeah, and also not knowing like what I'm going to do afterwards and, um, yeah, already knowing that I don't want to be in the university because of all of both, like, financially and thinking about how, what university, what professors make or what they earn, what their salary is, again, just goes back into financial and moving forward and succeeding and what that means.

During our conversation, I shared some of my graduate school journey with Dalia. I have been working full-time throughout my doctoral program. Not wanting to go back to living on a graduate school stipend as I did for my master's degree was the primary reason I made that decision. Dalia's comments echo some of the previous participants in showing that finances are a source of stress for graduate students and an influence of their decisions while in graduate school. Additionally, she brought to the forefront how lack of finances is also a reason why some people hesitate to commit to a career in academia. Thus, money is not just an issue for the current state of graduate student support but also an issue for the future state of academia.

Participants in this study named finances and financial decisions as one of the negotiations that influence their graduate student experience. One participant cited finances as the reason she chose to attend State University in the first place. Finances often dictate various co-curricular involvements, including choosing to participate in paid opportunities even if they were not related to their academic or career interests. Available financial aid from the university influences decisions participants made about how many courses to take. Another participant

named finances as the reason she considered leaving the program and academia as a whole. Additional institutional financial support could go a long way in the retention of these and other women of color. Students of color often bear additional financial barriers to funding their higher education pursuits, and it would be a mutually beneficial opportunity if institutions would make a larger financial investment in supporting these students.

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, graduate women of color named various factors that they negotiated and that impacted their graduate school experience, including campus climate, mental health, and finances. In the literature I reviewed earlier, scholars emphasized the ways that campus climate can influence the experiences of women of color through various environmental microaggressions. We saw some of these microaggressions, such as being presumed incompetent and invisibility, represented in the stories of participants' interactions with faculty and peers. Additionally, prior research also illuminated the ways that experiencing these microaggressions can impact mental and emotional health. The participants shared both their positive and challenging interactions with the overall campus environment, faculty, and peers; the support they received; and the decisions they made for self-preservation. They discussed the ways that their graduate school experience impacted their mental health, citing feeling overwhelmed and stressed as descriptors. Some participants also disclosed that they sought out therapy. Additionally, these women also shared that finances greatly impacted their graduate school experience, including naming financial stress as a contributor to mental health challenges, a factor in the decision to attend or leave graduate school, and an influence in overall quality of life while in graduate school.

CHAPTER VIII: IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The data for this study was collected in 2020, towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, three years later, various academic communities are still dealing with the impact that the pandemic had on education including college and university closures, the toll on students' well-being and mental health, challenges with remote learning, and barriers to entry and degree completion (Department of Education, 2021). As I would be remiss to not address the experiences of the participants that resulted from the pandemic, I included the following question in the initial survey to the participants after the questions related to the Superwoman Schema: To what extent has COVID-19 impacted your responses to the previous survey questions? Only six participants (13.6%) responded that the pandemic had no effect at all on their responses. More than half of the participants (56.8%) responded that the pandemic had a "little" or "moderate" effect on their responses.

I followed up this quantitative question with a qualitative, open-ended response question for participants to share more: In what ways has COVID-19 impacted your responses to the previous survey questions? The impact of the pandemic also emerged within my conversations with the participants who took part in the qualitative phase as well, without my prompting them. The survey respondents and the 12 participants in the qualitative phase acknowledged the various ways they have experienced the pandemic. Many referenced challenges and difficulties such as navigating the virtual academic environment, managing social connections, having more responsibilities and less time for self, blurring the lines of work/school/personal, and experiencing negative mental and physical health effects. However, some participants also found the benefit within the pandemic in regards to giving necessary attention to their own self-care and well-being.

Virtual Academic Experiences

I was working on a college campus at the time of the nationwide shutdown due to the COVID-19. I remember the announcement from institutional leadership regarding extending spring break, hoping that this “thing” would resolve itself quickly. I also remember the announcement of the campus shutdown for the remainder of the semester and the shift to virtual learning and wondering how this change in the learning environment would impact students and the people like me who supported those students.

During my conversations with the participants in the qualitative phase, many of them shared that my questions about their student experience were difficult to answer due to the impact of the pandemic. In her response to the question of to what extent COVID-19 impacted her responses, Dalia answered “a great deal” and said, “I feel overwhelmed with Zoom calls and looking at my laptop.” Eva spoke about the virtual learning environment and how it impacted connections with people, specifically related to the SWS construct obligation to suppress emotions. She said:

Um, I would say my experience is first of all, markedly distinct from any previous cohort that you might have that you might test or even in the future that you might test because, um, it was all very virtual. So I think that that helped with, um, you know, to some degree on a screen, it’s easier to kind of conceal just like with anything, social media, anything it’s kind of easy to conceal how you’re feeling or if you’re feeling frustrated or defeated or, um, you know, any negative kind of emotions that you wouldn’t want other people to, um, to view you in that light.

Eva’s comments emphasize why the impact of the pandemic is an important theme for this study. I agree with her assessment that the results and insights from these participants would likely

differ from a pre-COVID or post-COVID sample of students. She also highlighted how virtual learning created an environment where it was easier to resist vulnerability and suppress emotions.

Kat shared how her online graduate experience impacted her overall integration into campus life. She said:

But also like a lot of my experience my first year was completely online. So, I don't know how it would've been then. And then that second year things are just kind of opening back up. So, I don't know fully to the extent of how, so it's like a little leeway to say, oh, I didn't really do much on campus or wasn't a lot to do. Well, I think like I have to be honest and say, you know, the pandemic kind of, um, altered that experience, that viewpoint of what it would've been.

During my conversation with Kat, she often made comparisons between her time in undergrad at an HBCU and her graduate school experience at State University, citing that her HBCU had a more vibrant campus life and closer-knit community connections. I appreciated that she at least noted in this quote that the pandemic “altered that experience” at State University.

Other participants also noted the impact of the pandemic on their graduate school experience and how they responded to my questions. Talia was one of the participants who started her graduate program “in the middle of COVID.” She said:

I do think to a certain extent, this is like, questions about graduate school are kind of hard because I did start in the middle of COVID. So, you know, my first year I went without even really meeting anyone at all, just the people in my lab, um, and the labs I was rotated in.

Talia's experience of little to no social interaction is reflective of almost all students during the beginning of the pandemic. The fact that she mentioned not "even really meeting anyone at all" shows how connection and community can shape the graduate school experience.

These graduate women of color's stories of their virtual academic experiences reveal how a major impact of the pandemic was the physical isolation from others and from the physical campus space. This isolation impacted integration into campus life and overall perception of the graduate school experience. As it related to this study, the context of my conducting research during the pandemic cannot be ignored as a factor that directly influenced the findings. As Eva alluded in her earlier quote, the findings from this sample would likely differ had I gathered my data a year prior or a few years after, when students returned to in-person learning. As such, the time and social context of the COVID-19 pandemic is instrumental in interpreting the results of this study.

Lack of Social Connection

A major result of the pandemic that affected the participants both within and outside the graduate school context was a lack of social connection. Beginning in March 2020, students were sent home from campus, and virtual learning replaced all in-person instruction. Additionally, shelter-in-place orders prevented many students from having face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and loved ones. In responding how the pandemic impacted her answers, one survey respondent shared, "I can't really socialize or meet new people." Another wrote, "I am limited on when I can see my dad of whom I am the primary caretaker for." My conversations with the qualitative participants highlighted the lack of social connection and support that resulted from the pandemic.

The abrupt switch from in-person learning to virtual learning not only impacted instruction methods but also social dynamics among students and faculty. Noor talked about the “weird” shift that happened in her cohort after switching to virtual learning. She said:

I think, I mean, obviously the pandemic has made this all, so like much more weird because my cohort used to be very tight knit and I was in, I was halfway through my first year and then that spring, um, we all went virtual. So after that, I feel like we all kind of drifted apart a little bit.

Noor’s comment emphasizes how physical proximity was important in building and sustaining relationships. She went on to talk about the vulnerability she felt “because of everything that has happened over the last couple of years” and feeling as if she had to be more cautious about what she shared with people. She explained, “Just because I wasn't able to develop like that closeness with many of my peers and not have that like constant interaction with faculty.” Not having the physical proximity and time spent with peers and faculty kept up barriers to vulnerability for Noor. Barriers to vulnerability are also barriers to receiving support.

Isabelle spoke about the difficulties of creating community, particularly with other students of color, during the pandemic. When I asked her how she would describe the campus climate for graduate women of color, she replied:

Yeah. Um, part of me says, like, I don’t know, because it's all been pretty much virtual <laugh>. And I think that format has made it very hard to connect with other students of color in the program.

Isabelle and a few other participants also felt that they could not fully respond to that question due to the conditions created by the pandemic. When speaking on how the institutional environment influenced her student experience, Isabelle spoke about the “difficulty navigating

community spaces” due to the virtual environment. She also referenced her own mental health challenges and the negative impact from lack of connection on campus due to a lack of in-person interactions. Our exchange on that topic went as follows:

Isabelle: And so, yeah, I think that the impact of my mental health has been like increased anxiety for sure. Um, but also like really struggling to make those connections that would make that better because isn't the stat like something you need like 50 hours of like direct face to face in-person contact before someone's like a friend.

Erica: Yeah. <laugh> Yeah.

Isabelle: And so it's really hard to get that like first 50 hours then with people that you are on a Zoom call with twice a week for an hour.

Erica: Right.

Isabelle: Versus it's much easier when you like, hang out after class or go grab lunch or start talking for a while before class starts.

The circumstances of the pandemic already made it difficult to find opportunities for in-person connection with others. The activities that Isabelle mentioned—hanging out after class, grabbing lunch, small talk before or after class—are extremely difficult to replicate in the virtual space. Zoom and virtual learning impacted the ways students could connect with their peers and professors at the intersections of their academics and social experiences.

Additionally, I looked into the statistic that Isabelle referenced, and she was correct. A 2019 study conducted by Dr. Jeffrey Hall, a communications study professor at the University of Kansas, suggested that it takes about 30 hours spent with someone before they are considered a casual friend, 50 hours before they are a friend, and 140 hours before they are a good friend.

Time spent was self-reported by the participants in this study and was defined as “the hours you are actually in their company or communicating with them” (Hall, 2019, p. 1284).

As I continued to read the article, I found more interesting data. The statistic that Isabelle referenced came from a study about adult geographic relocation and friendship, but the article also referenced a second study about longitudinal friendship in first-year students. The findings from this study suggested that “[t]he proportion of time spent talking did not predict friendship closeness or changes in friendship closeness, but forms of everyday talk identified as striving behaviors predicted increased closeness” and “[i]ncreased small talk predicted decreased closeness” (Hall, 2019, p. 1290). Striving behaviors are “behaviors enacted to satiate any given need” (Hall, 2018, p. 382), such as loneliness. Hall (2018) said that “striving behaviors toward satisfying the need to belong should attend to an in-the-moment need to feel connected *and* make possible for the need to belong to be satisfied through in the formation and continuance or relationships” (p. 382, original emphasis).

Hall’s findings show how the quality and quantity of connection, with an emphasis on physical proximity, impacts closeness. Examples of people engaging in striving behaviors would be talking about what has been going on since they last saw each other or what happened during the day or joking with each other and engaging in playful, fun conversation (Hall, 2019). On the opposite end, talking about current events, sports, movies, etc. to pass the time would be an example of small talk (Hall, 2019). Earlier, Noor shared how her cohort was close-knit before the pandemic, but they drifted apart. The circumstances of the pandemic decreased the amount of time spent and the quality of time spent together. She also mentioned that the lack of “constant interaction” decreased closeness and ability to be vulnerable. Noor’s experience is in line with

Isabelle's comments that it is difficult to build that closeness and vulnerability "with people that you are on a Zoom call with twice a week for an hour."

On top of the lack of in-person interactions, Isabelle also shared an experience that highlighted the impact of scheduling multiple virtual events at the same time:

Isabelle: Um, and I remember panicking like the week before classes started, um, and just like feeling just so out of place because there was like, um, a Zoom, cause it was COVID right. Like a Zoom reception for women of color, um, specifically Black women, I think kind of like a, you know, welcome to new graduate students. Like, you know, let's have Zoom rooms and introductions and let you know what programs are available for you. And like that kind of supportive space and the mandatory PhD orientation for my PhD was scheduled right on top of that. So I had to ...

Erica: Wow.

I: I could only attend one. And I was like, that just shows me that there's no woman of color or no people of color even

E: Yeah.

I: On the group of students who decided when that [the PhD orientation] was gonna be held, who could have been like, oh, actually there's a conflicting event for new students at that time.

E: Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

I: And I was just feeling like, what have I gotten myself into?

Isabelle's story shows how the institutional structure and systems can also create additional barriers for connection, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. In an environment that was already isolating, Isabell attempted to create some type of connection with

other women of color but encountered a conflict with a mandatory event for her department. Had there been better representation among the organizers of the departmental event or better communication between the organizers of both events, this type of conflict could have easily been avoided. Often, institutional or departmental leaders bend over backwards to avoid scheduling events that conflict with athletic events as they are seen as central to university life. However, these leaders often push points of connection and support for women or color and other marginalized groups to the margins.

Melissa made the decision to move back home to finish her program due to the lack of support she felt on campus. She brought up moving back home earlier in our conversation, and when I asked her why she moved, she said:

Um, yes well, I would say the biggest reason that I decided to move back to [home city] was just because, um, I had been in [state of institution] before the pandemic started, but a lot of people kind of like all shifted and I didn't feel like I like had a support system there. So I would say like family and friends.

Melissa likely had similar experiences to Noor and Isabelle as it relates to connections with peers and faculty. She mentioned how things “shifted,” which led her to the decision to move back home and be around the support of her family and friends. Melissa’s decision highlights the importance of connection and support not only on her graduate school journey but on her well-being as a human.

Lack of social connection was a major impact of the pandemic for many students, including searching for virtual opportunities to connect with other graduate students from similar backgrounds or making the decision to move back home to be close to their primary support system. Through exploring connected research that one of the participants shared, I also learned

that the quality and quantity of social connection influences the perceived degree of closeness a person feels (Hall, 2018, 2019). Furthermore, the closeness a person feels with another influences their vulnerability or resistance to vulnerability, a construct of the SWS. As such, based on the stories shared by the participants, the lack of social connection that participants experienced due to the pandemic influenced both their graduate student experience and the ways they enacted the superwoman role.

Blurred Lines between School/Work/Personal

Before the pandemic, segregating the time for work, school, and personal life may not have been easy, but there was at least a bit more structure and actual physical separation to when those commitments began and ended. The pandemic made separating these commitments significantly more challenging. Although this theme did not come out explicitly in my conversations with the participants in the qualitative phase, the survey respondents spoke to this topic extensively, so I thought it was important for me to include it in the findings of this study.

One survey respondent noted, “Because we work from home, there is an assumption that we have time for more, and I am not good at stopping this assumption.” Another shared, “COVID has warped my sense of productivity. Because we are working from home, I feel the need to constantly produce and exacerbated guilt for taking breaks. It is something I am actively working on but [it’s] not easy.” Both Dalia and Isabelle addressed this notion in their survey responses: “There is no distinction of when work ends; I feel overwhelmed with Zoom calls and looking at my laptop,” and “I think that is has been easier to give more time to work/school without transition time and without a commute,” respectively.

The pandemic broke down the physical boundaries that existed between work, school, and personal for many of us prior. The lack of those physical boundaries also turned into a lack

of mental and emotional boundaries. Feelings of needing to be productive and feelings of guilt for not being productive made reinforcing those boundaries challenging. Additionally, external expectations from work or school that made assumptions and demands on their time also presented barriers to healthy boundaries.

These blurred lines also meant less time for self and more responsibilities for many participants who were mothers, caregivers, and partners who took on the “burden of domestic work.” One survey respondent noted, “I’m a mom to a toddler so my world was thrown into chaos by the pandemic ... [P]articularly being a new mom and going back to school in a pandemic has made it really hard to make time for myself.” When asked how COVID impacted her survey responses, another respondent shared, “Less help with childcare (kids staying home from school/daycare) and the same amount of responsibilities have made it so I have to be stronger and have less time for myself to express vulnerable feelings.” Serena answered, “Caring for my aging mother on top of raising my daughter.” Another respondent also spoke of caretaking responsibilities, saying, “There has been added pressure to take care of others due to many around being at high risk or serious illness if COVID-19 is contracted.” An additional survey respondent spoke of caregiving through domestic labor. She said, “Partner moved in during pandemic and burden of domestic work (cleaning, meal planning and prepping, house maintenance, etc.) left to me, even though they try to help.” The experiences of these participants show how the pandemic added additional personal responsibilities, took away some resources for support, and decreased time for self. The additional or changed responsibilities of caring for others in addition to being a graduate student was a major result of the pandemic that influenced the results of participants’ perception of themselves taking on the superwoman role.

Overall, the pandemic resulted in the lack of discrete boundaries for the various personal, school, and work roles that the participants occupied. This shift in the lives of the participants removed outside resources, such as childcare, and time buffers, such as the commute from work or school to home, that were helpful transition points in shifting from one role to another and facilitating role integrations. The participants spoke in detail about their roles as caregivers and the impact of those duties on their experiences. These blurred lines also have implications on the mental and physical health of participants that will be discussed in the next section.

Declining Mental and Physical Health

I separated the comments about mental health specific to the pandemic from the comments about mental health in the previous section related to the overall graduate school experience. Many of the survey respondents noted the pandemic's negative influence on their mental health. One survey respondent connected her experience directly to the SWS constructs: "I don't remember all the questions asked to be honest but the feeling of I can't ask for help has been very closely connected to feeling more overwhelmed during the pandemic." Another respondent shared:

The awareness of these emotions is heightened. The ways I approach work, school, and family obligations have shifted throughout the pandemic and increased my overall anxiety and depression without as many social outlets as I am used to. Self-care has become more mainstream and a common topic of conversation, but I feel like since everyone is struggling, the extra burdens I carry as a female POC don't really matter as much to those around me. As a result, I am harsher on myself.

Here, this respondent makes a direct connection between the blurred lines between work, school, and personal that was brought up in the previous section and the state of her mental health. She

also highlights how the lack of social connections contributed to her declining mental health during the pandemic. Additionally, the respondent mentions her internalized invisibility and negative self-talk, from feeling as if her pain and struggles do not matter “since everyone is struggling.”

Another respondent discussed how anxiety from the pandemic impacted her school experience. She said, “[The] pandemic also created a lot of anxiety, making it difficult to do work and putting me behind, further perpetuating [the] cycle of anxiety around school.” Yet another put her experience simply: “I have allowed my mental health to deteriorate.” The comments from the survey respondents show how the pandemic impacted the mental health of graduate women of color in their multiple roles and how many of them felt powerless and responsible for those outcomes.

Survey respondents also mentioned the physical health implications of the pandemic, particularly as it related to familial health issues. One respondent shared, “Dealing with familial health issues related to COVID-19 while neglecting my own self and work. Needing to appear to be a pillar of strength and like I have it all together.” This graduate woman of color draws a connection between the physical health impact of COVID-19 to two of the SWS subscales, obligation to help others at the expense of self and obligation to present an image of strength. Josefina de Luna shared how COVID-19 impacted her family both in the survey and within our conversation. In answering the how the pandemic impacted her responses to the survey, she explained:

I’m originally from a community that was devastated by COVID-19 and have lost many family members to the virus. I feel that since my peers are not experiencing these

tragedies and could not possibly know the mental toll COVID-19 has been on people like me, I have to stay quiet about what I'm going through to ensure the comfort of others.

The COVID-19 virus had a disproportionate effect on people of color versus white people in the United States, particularly Black, Indigenous and Latinx populations. According to the COVID Racial Data Tracker, a collaboration between the COVID Tracking Project and the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research, Black people accounted for 15 percent of COVID deaths where race is known, and they died at 1.4 times the rate of white people, during the data collection period of April 12, 2020 and March 7, 2021 (Covid Tracking Project, 2021).

According to the same dataset, Hispanic or Latinx people died at 1.2 times the rate of white people. Josefina de Luna's comments that she felt that she "[had] to stay quiet about what [she was] going through to ensure the comfort of others" stood out to me the most. Many women of color, especially in predominantly white spaces, may feel that we have to silence ourselves and our pain to make those around us feel comfortable. Others often see our emotions as inconvenient and a burden. We do not want to be perceived as dramatic or that we exaggerate. In other situations, we fear that our strong emotions can make us invisible to others and that they will not understand us. This perceived conflict in experiences demonstrates the complexity of existing as a woman of color: being simultaneously invisible and hypervisible.

During my conversation with her, Josefina de Luna also spoke about the guilt she felt for being in a completely different state pursuing her degree instead of being at home with her family during those hard times. She shared:

I did feel a ton of guilt for just leaving them. Um, and then when COVID hit, um, like I had a lot of family members pass away during that. And so it was hard. Like I felt like I

should have been there to help support my family, but I wasn't. Um, and so that took me a very long time to process. Yeah. And I'd say now, like, I do feel bad.

I cannot begin to imagine the grief and the guilt that Josefina de Luna felt dealing with the tragedies in her family. In the previous chapter, she talked about negotiating her role in her family with her role as a graduate student and the choice she made to move away. I wonder if she regretted her already difficult decision during this time. The physical toll that the virus had on her family ultimately also had toll on Josefina de Luna's mental and emotional health and well-being.

Overall, the participants highlighted how the pandemic created very unique mental and physical health challenges for them and others around them. Many commented on how they felt the need to silence themselves and their emotions and not being able to ask for help—two of the constructs from the SWS. The COVID-19 virus also had a ravaging impact on communities of color, resulting in a higher rate of infections and deaths than their white counterparts. Because of this disparity, some participants had the additional mental and emotional burden of dealing with grief and guilt from loved ones dying. These stories explain the unique impact of the pandemic on the mental health of graduate women of color separate from mental health challenges more directly connected to the graduate school experience.

Greater Attention to Self-care

In addition to these challenges, the pandemic also brought the opportunity for reflection for many of the survey respondents as well. In the midst of the chaos, many also found time, space, and awareness to attend to their own self-care. Sydney discussed the additional stresses during the pandemic, including the online work environment, illness and death in her family

from the virus, and the “tumultuous politics and continued racial violence” in her survey responses. She wrote:

Perhaps ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced me to learn how to take breaks and put myself and my health/well-being first. The online work environment has been overwhelming at times. Various friends and family members have contracted the virus and/or passed away. The pandemic has also been a time of tumultuous politics and continued racial violence that has negatively impacted me. I had to figure out how to manage the stress while living far away from family and close friends, who I have not seen in person since 2019. The pandemic marks an improvement in my prioritization of self-care multiple times a week, every week.

For Sydney, all of the chaos going on around her forced her to give attention to self-care. She mentioned various aspects of her life during the pandemic that she had little to no control over. In response, she made the decision to attend to aspects of her life that she can have some control of, such as taking breaks and prioritizing her mental health and well-being “multiple times a week, every week.”

Some survey respondents mentioned that the pandemic allowed them to “slow down.” One respondent said, “Being in the pandemic has forced me to slow down and allowed me to have more time for myself. It’s allowed me to build health habits for myself that I don’t think I could have otherwise.” Another survey respondent shared:

I don’t say this too loudly, but COVID actually made it possible and acceptable for me to go home, be with my family, and take care of myself after eight years of grad school and giving away all my strength. COVID “allowed” me the space to slow down and re-evaluate my priorities.

In many ways, the pandemic put a stop to the hustle culture that we are all a part of and allowed us to make choices, like the ones mentioned by the respondent above, that helped us to stop and reflect. As much as the pandemic took away from all of us, I appreciate this perspective of what some have gained from it.

Rochelle shared similar sentiments in our conversation, she said, “It’s, it’s really the pandemic that has given me the, the time and the opportunity to focus on myself and really like, understand what that means.” In answering the survey question of how the pandemic impacted her responses, Rochelle expanded more on these feelings. She wrote:

I have had the relative time and space to think about myself and all of the above aspects of my life. As I prepare to conclude this phase of life as a graduate student, I am more aware in the absence of sustained contact with the institution of what my needs actually are and how my well-being could/can be enhanced by the rethinking of “normal” work and academic constraints.

Here, Rochelle finds value in the “absence of sustained contact with the institution” to re-prioritize her own needs. Graduate school often places expectations on the time and energy of graduate students that are in line with institutional interests and benefits but not necessarily the interests and benefits of the students. Rochelle speaks to rethinking the hidden curriculum of academia and work that dictates what we view as “normal.” She continued:

While I knew based on my experience as a WOC in a PWI that strength and isolation were part of the package, I hadn't imagined an otherwise. I am actually grateful for the disruptions and transitions brought on by the pandemic to allow me to slow down and notice all my various roles and how they constitute survival for myself, family and

community. I am currently in a better position to choose where to direct my energies than before.

I appreciate how Rochelle talked about the benefits she found in the pandemic and how it provided her the time and space to rethink the possibilities. She mentioned how she did not imagine her experience as a woman of color at a PWI outside of strength and isolation. The pandemic disrupted the thoughts and actions that went along with the initial expectation of what that experience would or should be. Rochelle now sees her roles in a different light and is empowered to make different choices that are in service of herself, her family, and her community.

Irony exists in participants developing better self-care practices in the midst of the pandemic. However, tensions and conflicts have become a theme of this study. The survey responses and interview conversations show the resilience of these women of color and how they used these collective experiences of tragedy and trauma to empower them to fortify themselves mentally and emotionally through self-care. Their stories represent the possibilities and the knowledge that graduate women of color can create from their position along the margins.

The Overall Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic was an important aspect of the context and timing of this study that I had to address. I addressed the impact of the pandemic on the participants explicitly in the survey questions, and the participants also brought up experiences related to the pandemic in my conversations with them. The combination of both sources of qualitative data shows that the virtual learning environment and lack of social connection created by the pandemic resulted in blurred boundaries between the participants' school, work, and personal lives; declines in mental and emotional health; and, for some, a new approach to self-care. Additionally, the impact of the

pandemic on the experiences of the participants also adds to the literature related to SWS.

According to Woods-Giscombé (2010), the superwoman role for Black women developed out of a sociocultural climate of adversity and trauma as a tool of resistance. COVID-19 also created an environment of adversity and trauma that required these tools as well. This correlation speaks to the type of environments or social contexts where women of color may enact the superwoman role as a tool for survival.

CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION

As I write this final chapter, I exist in a very different world than the one I inhabited when I began this study. We are now “post-pandemic”; although COVID-19 still exists, the societal social distancing mandates and complete virtual learning environments no longer are in effect. I am no longer a higher education professional but now “higher ed adjacent” as a campus recruiter in the private sector. However, I still care deeply about the experiences students have in higher education, especially women of color.

Because my identities fall within the criteria for the sample of my study, I went into this research process with an idea of what I would learn but open to exploring wherever the numbers and stories would take me. Amplifying the stories and experiences of women of color in the academy was of central importance to me as I began this dissertation process. This passion emerged as an undergraduate sociology major, strengthened as a counselor education master’s student supporting a peer mentoring program for students of color, and solidified as a higher education professional who co-created a campus-wide initiative to build community among women of color. Because of this foundation, I knew coming into my doctoral program that I wanted to focus my studies and my research through the lens of the experiences of women of color.

As we have reached the conclusion of my research, I would like to restate the initial intent of this study by revisiting my research questions:

- Q1a: Do graduate women of color at one PWI identify with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by Woods-Giscombé’s (2010) Superwoman Schema (SWS) Conceptual Framework? [QUANTITATIVE/QUALITATIVE]

- Q1b: Are there statistical differences in adherence to SWS by race/ethnicity?
[QUANTITATIVE]
- Q2a: What are the various identities and roles that women of color negotiate within the context of their experiences as students? [QUALITATIVE]
- Q2b: How do these negotiations influence their experiences as students?
[QUALITATIVE]

To explore these questions, I utilized the explanatory sequential mixed methods research design through an initial quantitative phase of data collection followed by a qualitative phase. I collected the quantitative data through the G-SWS-Q, which measured to what degree the participants identified with the five characteristics of the SWS Conceptual Framework: obligation to present an image of strength, obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable, intense motivation to succeed, and obligation to help others (over self-care). Based on the screening criteria, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 graduate women of color who responded to the initial survey to understand how they negotiate their multiple roles and identities within the context of their experiences as students.

Incorporating a mixed methods approach allowed me to incorporate numbers and stories to create a fuller picture of the lived experiences of graduate women of color at State University who negotiate multiple identities and roles. Below is a summary of the main findings from the previous four chapters:

- The participants within the study endorsed the characteristics of the superwoman role to some degree both quantitatively and qualitatively. The mean score of 76.57 fell in the moderate to high range of SWS scores. Among the qualitative participants, they endorsed intense motivation to succeed the most and obligation to help others the

least. Additionally, they spoke about obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to vulnerability simultaneously instead of as distinct characteristics.

- The quantitative data showed that statistically significant differences in SWS scores by race/ethnicity did not exist. However, although I assumed that Black women would have the highest SWS scores, Hispanic/Latina women had the largest percentage of high SWS scores (75%). Additionally, the highest scores (101) were from participants who identified as Asian and Hispanic/Latina.
- Participants in the qualitative phase negotiated the following roles and relationships within the context of their experience as a student: family, motherhood, spouse/partner, and campus and community involvement.
- The qualitative participants also named various factors they negotiated that influenced their student experience, including campus climate, mental health, and finances.
- The virtual learning environment and lack of social connection created by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the participants' experience and responses to the questions asked during the study, particularly as it related to boundaries with work, school, and personal and challenges with mental health.

The data collection for this study was rich in stories and insights from the participants that could not all be contained within the findings of one dissertation. As such, I make no attempt to provide any definitive claims or conclusions. Although an incomplete work, my dissertation adds a unique perspective to the growing tapestry of literature that intends to paint a picture of the experiences of women of color in higher education. In this chapter, I will make connections between my research findings and the prior research and theoretical framework from Chapter 2, including acknowledging alignment, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Revisiting Chapter 1, I

will answer my research questions and the goals I expressed for my research. Strengths and limitations of my research will follow. I will share my insights on how my research contributes to the field of education and thoughts about future directions for this work. Finally, I will give my final thoughts and reflections of what I have learned throughout this research process.

Connections Between Theoretical Framework, Prior Literature, and Current Findings

As a reminder, a combination of the following theoretical and conceptual approaches informed this study: Critical Geography, Figured Worlds, Critical Race Feminism (CRF), and the Superwoman Schema (SWS). Critical Geography and Figured Worlds helped to frame State University as a dynamic social system with historical, political, and cultural influences in order to highlight the interactions between the participants and their institutional environment. This environment influenced the participants' presentation of self and the degree to which they negotiated their various roles and identities. Figured Worlds, specifically, speaks to the tension that can exist for graduate women of color operating within and between worlds or roles and how higher education is a site where both hegemonic power and opportunity for systemic change exist.

While Critical Geography and Figured Worlds speak to the institutional environment, CRF and SWS speak to the identities and experiences of women of color. Including CRF in the theoretical framework for this study required me to be attentive to multiplicity—multiple identities, multiple roles, and multiple intersecting experiences. As storytelling is one of the key constructs of CRF, I endeavored not only to amplify parts of each participant's story in their own words and in their own voice but also to weave together a collective story of all the participants that speaks to their shared experiences. CRF scholars also discuss the concept of "spirit-murder," which informed my bringing attention to the mental and emotional impact of intersectional forms

of oppression. Additionally, because of CRF's focus on praxis, I will address implications for future practice later in this chapter. SWS informed both the quantitative and qualitative data collection and findings—Chapters four and five. The G-SWS-Q implemented in the quantitative data collection was based on the SWS conceptual framework and served as a measure of the degree to which the participants endorsed the five SWS constructs: obligation to present an image of strength, obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable, intense motivation to succeed, and obligation to help others. The qualitative findings give an in-depth perspective on how the participants actualize those constructs and how they feel overall about enacting the superwoman role. As in prior research, participants in the current study exhibited various degrees of accepting and rejecting the superwoman role and experienced tensions due to the perceived benefits and liabilities of the role.

Various aspects of the prior research related to graduate women of color negotiating multiplicity informed the findings of this study outlined in Chapters six and seven. The literature review revealed the roles of spouse, mother, employee, and family/community member as significant roles that graduate women of color negotiate alongside their student role; all of these roles also emerged within the findings of the current study. Additionally, prior research also mentioned the influence of social identities other than race and gender such as sexuality, class, and first-generation college student status, which also emerged in the current study. The literature review highlighted gendered and racialized cultural behaviors and expectations as contributors to perceived conflicts in roles and identities; the stories of various participants, including Josefina de Luna and Kat, emphasized these conflicts.

The previous scholars who wrote about the hegemonic environment of higher education and the impact on the experiences of women of color at PWIs helped frame the findings outlined

in Chapter 7. I saw contradictory consciousness exhibited through the words of many of the participants as they spoke about how they navigated State University as students from non-dominant groups. The participants spoke about how they perceived and navigated campus climate and how environmental microaggressions of presumed incompetence, invisibility, and hypervisibility showed up for them. Specific examples that they named that prior researchers also outlined in the literature included social isolation, cultural bias in the curriculum, lack of representation, and having their worth and the value of their scholarship questioned.

The impact on well-being, the acts of resistance, and the types of coping strategies mentioned in the literature review showed up throughout the qualitative findings chapters. What participants mentioned related to the impact on their mental health is included in Chapters seven and eight. They mentioned feeling stressed and overwhelmed as a salient theme, and some participants also shared the impact to their physical health as well. The experience of shifting—the “internal, invisible ... chipping away at [the] sense of self and ... feeling of wholeness and centeredness”—that previous scholars wrote about can result from environmental microaggressions (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 7). To address this shifting loss of sense of self, participants in this study spoke about various methods of self-preservation previously outlined in the literature review, including wearing an “academic mask,” resisting external expectations, questioning their abilities, proving “them” wrong, self-isolation from perceived harmful environments, finding spaces of support, and redefining expectations.

My findings show that a relationship exists between the individual perceptions and behaviors of graduate women of color and the environmental context. As such, building a theoretical framework that accounts for both the individual and environment is important. Because of my desire to do research exploring the experiences of women of color, inclusive of

non-Black racialized identities, CRF was an appropriate theory to include. CRF allowed me to not only include the gendered-racial identities of these graduate women of color but the multiplicity of their other identities and roles as well. The findings also show that SWS is applicable to the experiences of non-Black women of color. Regarding the various populations of graduate women of color, my study shares some insight on the existing literature regarding the experiences of multiracial students and how their unique racialized identities may shape their experiences differently than other participants within the study.

The fact that the participants did not—both quantitatively and qualitatively—perceive the variables and constructs within the G-SWS-Q and SWS as distinct was the most prominent ambiguity or inconsistency within the study. An exploratory factor analysis of the quantitative data showed that participants' responses to the survey did not line up with the distinct constructs outlined in the SWS conceptual framework; multiple of the survey items loaded to multiple different constructs instead of the 1:1 item-to-construct correlation that the original framework outlines. In other words, the participants did not see the constructs as mutually exclusive, and their qualitative responses affirmed this idea as well. Participants frequently spoke about their experiences within the five SWS constructs interchangeably, most notably with obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to being vulnerable.

Overall, the current research study illuminates the various individual experiences of the participants, shares commonalities among the experiences of different racial/ethnic populations of women of color, and explores the role of the institutional context as a barrier or catalyst to success and persistence in graduate school and to holistic well-being. Although the research acknowledges the many challenges of navigating multiple identities and roles, I also share experiences of the participants that speak to the productive potential of these negotiations. My

study also expands the definition of who is considered to be a woman of color through the inclusion of women who identify as Asian and Multiracial. Additionally, this research adds to the literature about SWS through being one of the first studies to operationalize the G-SWS-Q and using a mixed methods approach to explore the experiences of graduate women of color. It also highlights the influence of the hidden curriculum on their experiences as students and their motivation to enact the superwoman role.

Do Graduate Women of Color at State University Identify with the Superwoman Role?

I used both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the first research question. Through both research approaches, I found that the participants identified with the characteristics of the superwoman role, as defined by the SWS Conceptual Framework, to some degree. Quantitatively, the participants in the overall sample had an average score of 76.57 on the G-SWS-Q. This average fell in the high range of the originally-defined range of SWS scores and in the moderate range of the redefined range of scores for this sample. Intense motivation to succeed was the highest endorsed subscale and obligation to suppress emotions was the least endorsed subscale. The participants, on average, also scored high in the obligation to present an image of strength subscale.

Additionally, certain individual survey items garnered a strong response from the participants. The statement “I put pressure on myself to achieve a certain level of accomplishment,” corresponding to the intense motivation to succeed subscale, was the most highly endorsed survey item among this sample of graduate women of color. Also, within the same subscale, the survey statement “No matter how hard I work, I feel like I should do more” was rated as the statement that bothered participants the most overall. Other survey items that participants felt strongly as applicable for them fell within the resistance to being vulnerable

subscale. I expected that because I was researching the experiences of graduate women of color, the participants would resonate with intense motivation to succeed. However, the findings around resistance to being vulnerable were a bit more surprising to me. Because of the literature about Black women's strength and emotions, I anticipated resonance with resistance to being vulnerable, but this finding being inclusive of the majority of women of color in the sample stood out to me. The stories and experiences shared by the qualitative participants added additional context to these findings.

The 12 participants in the qualitative phase resonated with various characteristics of the SWS. However, this resonance did not always align with the initial SWS framework. Specifically, the participants did not speak about obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to vulnerability as distinct constructs; they often spoke about them both simultaneously. Within the quantitative responses for these 12 participants, they all identified intense motivation to succeed as the most endorsed subscale and obligation to help others as the least endorsed subscale. In my conversations with the participants, they all felt that at least some truth existed in the survey results that I shared with them.

In conversation the participants in the qualitative phase shared stories of externally defined expectations of success through grades, the desires of others, and proving their worth to the institution. Many participants saw showing their emotions as showing weakness and spoke about the emotional labor they often did to make others around them comfortable. In the context of their student experience, the participants spoke about strength being equal to competence and the opposite of vulnerability. They also spoke about prioritizing the well-being of others before their own. Additionally, the immigrant identities of many of the participants were salient as they spoke about the influence of the SWS constructs in their lives. Within all of the subscales except

for obligation to help others, the participants created counternarratives where they implemented self-defined expectations for themselves and resisted external expectations imposed on them. This redefinition shows the agency of these women and the opportunities for creating knowledge from the margins.

For the final question of each conversation, I asked the participants if they felt that the term “superwoman” accurately reflected their experiences, and their collective responses to this question stood out to me the most of anything from this phase of the analysis. Their responses were evenly divided within the categories of rejection, reluctant or hesitant acceptance, and acceptance. The participants’ responses of rejection or reluctance were incongruent with their scores on the survey. Some participants experienced this incongruence because of the desire to feel or behave differently and others because of comparing their situation to others who were “worse off.” As a reminder, the participants did not know the name or purpose of the survey other than an attempt to understand the experiences of graduate women of color. Based on the conflicting feelings the participants had once the underlying purpose of the survey was revealed, I wondered if they had known up front that the survey attempts to understand if they identify with the superwoman role if their responses would have been different. The term *superwoman* seems to hold an understandable connotation of both being a burden and being placed on a pedestal. The tension between these two understandings were apparent for the participants.

All things considered, the graduate women of color in this study did identify with the superwoman role as defined by the SWS Conceptual Framework—some characteristics more strongly than others and some characteristics in different ways than the original definitions. The participants resonated more strongly overall when speaking about the individual constructs than they did when speaking about them as a unified definition of the superwoman role. If I went back

to the beginning of data collection, I may have asked the participants how they defined a superwoman before sharing their survey results and explaining the SWS. I wonder how that would have influenced their responses to the closing question. With that said, the discovery that “superwoman” is a loaded and conflicting label was a discovery for me in itself.

Are There Statistical Differences in Adherence to SWS by Race/Ethnicity?

Based on my own personal experience and the prior literature on the SWS and Strong Black Woman identity, I went into this study assuming that Black women would have higher scores and that the data would show overall differences in scores. However, the quantitative data showed that statistically significant differences in SWS scores by race/ethnicity did not exist. However, the data did show some observed differences that are worth noting. As a reminder, the race/ethnicity breakdown of the survey participants was as follows: 9 Asian, 14 Black/African American, 14 Hispanic/Latina, and 7 Multiracial. The two participants who received the highest SWS scores identified as Asian and Latina. Additionally, Hispanic/Latina women had the largest percentage of participants who scored the highest in overall SWS endorsement (75%). Conversely, Black women represented the largest percentage of participants who scored in the low and moderate ranges of SWS (50% and 30.8%, respectively). These percentages in addition to the lack of statistical significance by race/ethnicity enhances the finding that SWS is indeed applicable to non-Black women of color.

What Are the Identities and Roles Graduate Women of Color Negotiate within Their Experiences as Students?

During the quantitative phase, survey respondents listed between 0 and 14 roles that they negotiated with their role as a graduate student, including roles related to familial or intimate relationships; roles related to campus, work or community involvement; and salient social

identities. Participants in the qualitative phase negotiated the following roles and relationships within the context of their graduate student experience: family, motherhood, spouse/partner, and campus and community involvement. In conversations about familial relationships, participants spoke about navigating relationships with their siblings, parents, and grandparents. These relationships were very important to the participants, but they experienced conflict and feelings of guilt attempting to preserve those connections while excelling in their academic and career pursuits. Additionally, a quarter of the qualitative participants identified as mothers. These women placed extreme importance on this role, which influenced many of their decisions as a graduate student. More than half of the participants shared that they were either in a committed intimate relationship or married. These roles presented both conflict and benefit for the participants as they spoke about navigating gender roles, giving and receiving support, and managing relationship conflict.

Through these relationships with family and intimate partners, many of the participants had to navigate the hidden curriculum of graduate school on multiple levels—first, for themselves, and second, for and with their loved ones. Many of the participants’ loved ones did not understand the demands and expectations that graduate school placed on the students’ time and mental and emotional energy. This lack of understanding often caused conflict. Scholars who write about the experience of first-generation undergraduate students or minoritized students attending college often speak about the perceived incongruity between students’ community of origin and their new community of school. However, we should also realize that this dichotomy often affects graduate students as well, just in different ways.

Lastly, three-quarters of the participants spoke about holding one or more on-campus assistantship roles that provided funding for their education. Additionally, they also gave their

time to other campus and community involvements that were either academic/career-related or advocacy-related. Not negating the conflicts presented, the participants spoke about both types of involvements as mutually beneficial in different ways. They benefitted from their assistantship roles through receiving funding and gaining experiences that benefitted their academic and career pursuits and from their other involvements through giving back to communities that matter to them and recharging their energy. The participants acknowledged that managing the pressures and tensions of these various roles and relationships was not easy and spoke of feeling pulled in different directions. However, these graduate women of color employed practices of self-definition to reframe external expectations on the various roles they occupied to bring balance and well-being to their lives.

How Do these Negotiations Influence Their Experiences as Students?

In describing how their various negotiations influenced their experiences as students, participants in the qualitative phase focused their comments on campus climate, mental health, and finances. When speaking about the campus climate, many participants focused on the dynamics within their academic departments, specifically about relationships and interactions with faculty and peers. The few that commented on State University as a whole spoke to it feeling like a “system” instead of a “culture” and acknowledged the historical, cultural and political dynamics of the university, naming its “racist infrastructure.” Issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion were at the root of many of the participants’ comments, including the lack of asset-based diversity content in the curriculum, mismatched perceptions as a prospective student versus an enrolled student, and the challenges of experiencing the “white gaze.” However, some participants shared positive feedback on their program or department and many said that their overall experience has been positive.

Additionally, the participants shared both beneficial and challenging experiences with faculty and peers. They spoke about how the decision-making power, behavior and responses of faculty can influence a graduate student's experience—for better or for worse. With regard to peer relationships, the participants valued the connections they made with other people of color and used trial and error to evaluate if a peer was a safe space for their vulnerability. They spoke about networks of campus support that contributed to their positive experience. These networks were often related to one or more of the participants' marginalized or underrepresented identities and provided benefits for them in supporting their academics, career, and overall well-being.

The various negotiations the participants experienced impacted their mental health and well-being. The participants mentioned both the challenges of navigating their multiple roles and responsibilities and also a lack of sense of belonging at State University as contributors to negative mental health experiences. They used the words “overwhelmed” and “stressed” most often as descriptors of what their experience feels like for them. Additionally, the participants acknowledged that these experiences were simultaneously also rewarding and enriching. A third of the participants referenced therapy as a resource they utilized to support their mental health.

Lastly, the graduate women of color in this study named finances as a key influencer of how they negotiated their various roles and responsibilities as a student. They shared stories of the impact that the lack of financial support had on their student experience and on their mental health. Money choices influenced the timing of starting graduate school, choice of school, thoughts of leaving school, course load, research opportunities, and some of the hidden costs of graduate school such as conferences and publishing fees. I shared how students of color—particularly Black, Latinx, and Native American students—carry the majority of the student loan debt in the United States to contextualize the shared experiences of the participants to show the

barrier that finances present for students both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Many participants expressed the desire for State University to provide better financial aid to help fund their academics and ease their financial-related stress.

Strengths and Limitations

In addressing the strengths and limitations of my research, I will bring attention to my positionality as a researcher, the situation of the participants, and how these shaped my research process. The level of interactional context I was able to bring by acknowledging my positionality as a graduate woman of color with multiple identities and roles both in my writing and to the participants during the interviews is a strength of this research. Through the use of detailed interview transcriptions, I connected all of my analytical claims to excerpts of those transcripts and presented them throughout my dissertation for the readers to evaluate for themselves. Additionally, I included audio clips from the interviews with the participants within the qualitative findings chapters to amplify literally the voices of these graduate women of color, allowing their experiences to come alive and create a multisensory research experience.

At the beginning of my research, I intended to include a sonic narrative mapping activity, inspired by the work of Gershon (2013) and Wozolek (2018) as an additional aspect to the qualitative phase to allow the participants identify the roles and identities they negotiate and the meaning they attribute to these negotiations through visuals and sound. Unfortunately, I learned at the beginning of conducting interviews that this additional ask would be too much for the participants. Considering the population I was researching—graduate women of color navigating multiple roles and responsibilities—I decided to honor the participants' time and desire to participate in my research by removing this component from my research methods. Although this activity would have added a different dimension to the research by having the

participants more directly share what was important to them about their experience, I greatly appreciate the time they were able to commit to speaking with me; they shared amazing insights that allowed me to speak to various aspects of their experiences within this study.

The small number of participants in the quantitative phase was another limitation that made analysis challenging. I aimed to have at least 100 responses to the initial survey but ended up with only 44. Small sample sizes in quantitative studies can reduce the power of the study and increase margin of error. Additionally, the confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses found that the model of the SWS Conceptual Framework, operationalized by the G-SWS-Q, was not a good fit for the collected data for this study, meaning that this data set does not represent the data I would expect to find in the actual population. Because of both of these limitations, I limited my interpretation to the overall questionnaire level and did not do in-depth analysis at the subscale level other than reporting mean scores. Additionally, I intended to use a one-way ANOVA analysis and post-hoc tests to address any statistical differences in SWS by race/ethnicity (RQ1b) but ended up using a chi-square analyses based on the data I collected.

Although I do believe that the participants were honest and forthright with me about the experiences they shared during the interviews, I have to acknowledge that hesitancy and caution about where the information they shared would go and how it would be presented limited what they shared. I recall multiple interviews when participants asked me how much they were allowed to say, if their names would be attached to what they said, and who the information would be shared with. Even with these hesitations in mind, they consented and trusted me to present their voices in a way that shared their stories while protecting their confidentiality.

Additionally, some participants, after sharing some insights about State University that may be perceived as negative, made it a point to emphasize that they have had a great experience

and that they felt those negative aspects were not a reflection of the institution as a whole. Because of the positioning of graduate students within the hierarchy of the university and some of the experiences these participants shared during the interviews, I completely understand why they may have these questions or choose not to share some of their true feelings. In addition to using pseudonyms to identify the participants, I also only use overall academic disciplines to contextualize participants experiences instead of naming specific programs within academic departments. I also only use the university categories of race/ethnicity instead of specific ethnic identities that participants shared with me during our conversations. Through these efforts, I intended to achieve researcher transparency while preserving participant confidentiality.

I situate my analyses and the claims I make within this research study in the particular research context (i.e., place, time, and participants; [Taylor, 2001]). As mentioned in Chapter 8, the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the participants' experiences of graduate school and their responses to survey and interview questions. Additionally, this research represents the experiences of 12 to 44 graduate women of color in multiple academic departments at one PWI. As such the analyses shared only gives partial insights into any overall assessments of those academic departments, State University, and the experiences of graduate women of color in the United States. However, although the results of this study are limited by the research context, the findings do provide some understanding of the cultural context of graduate women of color at PWIs. Finally, my attempt to disclose limitations and challenges with this study is also incomplete; I addressed some of these considerations here but identifying all constraints is an impossible feat.

Contribution to the Field: Implications for Practice and Research

The findings from this study add to the growing body of literature on the experiences of women of color at PWIs. While the majority of research on women of color in higher education focus on the experiences of undergraduate students or faculty, my research looks specifically at the experiences of graduate women of color, an often-overlooked population within these conversations. Additionally, the majority of these studies also focus on the experiences of women who identify as Black or Latina. The current research study also includes the perspectives of women who identify as Asian and Multiracial. This inclusion allows the readers to see the commonalities and differences in the experiences of different populations of women of color. Additionally, my study illuminates the many identities and roles that graduate women of color negotiate within the context of their student experience and the benefits and challenges within those negotiations.

Implications for Practice: What Can State University Do?

Circling back to the focus on praxis identified in CRF, one of my goals as a researcher is to “[be] involved in the solutions to the problems that affect women of color through [suggesting] ‘comprehensive and practical strategies’” (Pratt-Clarke, 2010, p. 24). The findings of this study point to several implications for practice for higher education professionals—administration, faculty, and staff—to better support graduate women of color. During my conversations with the qualitative participants, they had many recommendations about what State University could do to mitigate the harmful effects of SWS and negotiating multiple roles and identities. To continue the goal of this research in amplifying the voices of women of color, I will include their recommendations alongside my own.

1. Program structure considerations: The structure of the academic program—including scheduling, amount and type of assignments, deadlines, etc.—can influence the number of and degree of conflicts that the student role has with other roles that graduate women of color hold. Implementing flexibility in scheduling and deadlines, where reasonable, can help lift the burden that many women experience because of rigid policies that can ask them to sacrifice unnecessarily in another role or in managing their self-care.
2. Uncovering the hidden curriculum of graduate school: Many institutions create intentional programs and efforts for first-generation undergraduate college students as there is an understanding that they may be unaware of many of the norms and expectations of navigating college. The same considerations should be given for graduate students. Graduate women of color would greatly benefit from systems and structures to inform them about the expectations and assumptions of a graduate student within their discipline (i.e., What are comps? What are the primary journals in the field? How do I participate in research with a faculty member?)
3. Better institution-sponsored financial support: As stated earlier in this dissertation, funding is a major barrier to persistence and well-being for graduate students. Better university-sponsored funding for assistantships, technology stipends, moving stipends, professional development, and research opportunities would alleviate financial-related stress.
4. Improving academic diversity-related effort and initiatives: The participants mentioned that increasing efforts to recruit and retain both students of color and faculty of color within graduate programs would help improve their experience. The qualitative findings spoke to the value that connections with faculty and peers from similar backgrounds and

experiences brought to the participants' overall graduate school experience. Additionally, participants highlighted the benefits of incorporating race and other minoritized identities into the curriculum from a positive or empowering standpoint instead of a deficit standpoint. Lastly, department-specific diversity support groups and efforts would reduce feelings of isolation and the need for participants to seek support outside of their department or outside of the university.

5. Expanding access to counseling services: The participants' stories emphasized the importance of accessible, affordable, and culturally-conscious mental health services. To better support graduate women of color and all students on campus, institutions should invest in hiring more counseling staff (especially staff from minoritized backgrounds), increase the number of sessions available for students, and partner with therapists and mental health non-profit organizations in the community to fill the gaps that the university counseling staff may not be able to support.

During my conversation with Noor, she had an impactful response to my question of what State University could do to better support graduate students who are mothers that I think can apply to supporting all students. She said:

I'm always of the mind that requirements and policies should be geared towards the people who need the most things. And like others can add extras if they want. So even things like having three classes be required per semester and you can take four or five if you want. Um, the timings of things. So like after like comprehensive exams, five four-hour exams within a two-week period, like, how, and I know that that is, like, a larger systemic, like graduate program thing, but, like, how do you expect me to schedule that around parenting stuff? Like, I, I need to drop my kid at daycare. I need to pick him up at

a certain time. Like, you're asking for a lot. Um, so probably more flexibility based on situation. One of my friends has a child with special needs and often she will have to leave, like, at the drop of a hat. So just, like, understanding for stuff like that, without it having to be such a big deal to ask for that type of thing would be great. And, like, recognizing that people have lives outside of school <laugh> and they're not, they're not willing to just like pretend that they don't have a life outside of school, which I think a lot of people are willing to do but I don't want them to 'cause it makes it harder for the rest of us.

“[R]equirements and policies should be geared towards the people who need the most things.”

These are wise words by Noor that all policy-makers should keep in mind when making decisions. When institutional leaders approach decisions with empathy and understanding of those who are the most impacted by those decisions, the outcomes are more equitable for all.

Implications for Research

As this is one of the only studies that incorporates a mixed methods approach to exploring the experiences of graduate women of color through the use of the G-SWS-Q, the opportunities for future research building from this study are abundant. Replicating the current study with a larger qualitative sample to address any statistical errors that arose during this study from using a smaller sample would allow the results to be more generalizable. During my initial planning of the study, I had the idea of doing a multi-campus study but decided against it in favor of prioritizing one institutional context; researchers can compare and contrast experiences at different universities using this approach. Additionally, this research methodology could be used to explore the experiences of women of color within a particular academic discipline (i.e., STEM).

The participant demographic backgrounds represented within the current study also present various opportunities for future research. Future studies that include Native American women in their sample of women of color will add to the nuances of the participants' diverse experiences. Within the current study, the participants mentioned various other social identities—such as class, sexuality, and religious identity—that I did not fully explore. Subsequent studies should explore how these and other social identities influence their perception of the superwoman role and how they negotiate their multiple identities. Specifically, exploring how the superwoman role manifests in the experiences of transwomen of color, queer women of color, and gender-non-conforming folks of color can bring an additional perspective to this body of research and expand opportunities for inclusion.

An overarching theme throughout this research has been tension, and this remains true for methodological considerations. The small sample size for this study created tension between contextualization and statistical power. Confining the research to one institution provided rich institutionally-specific insights that I could not have achieved otherwise. Conversely, this decision also resulted in a limited number of students within the demographic of interest (graduate women of color) who were even available to participate, making the findings less generalizable. The tension within this research between contextualization and statistical power is not necessarily a limitation but does require negotiation. I chose to prioritize contextualization over statistical power. Another researcher could choose the opposite and also discover valuable findings.

In any of these methodological choices, researchers should ask the following questions: How do we design a research study to be least intrusive? How can we integrate the research within participants' natural experiences? These questions are important to consider in any

research endeavor but particularly for those focused on marginalized populations. I wrestled with the tensions between my intended research goals and plan and the participants' multiple responsibilities and availability to participate in the research very early in my process. I chose to adjust my research plan to prioritize and respect the many commitments the participants had within their multiverse. Upon reflecting after completion of the research, I wondered how this kind of research could be shifted so as not to add an extra item to the already busy lives of the women. One thought I had was to conduct this study within the context of a course. In this way, the different aspects of the originally intended research plan—survey, map of identities, self-recorded voice memos, and interviews—would be integrated within the course and would create mutual benefit for the participants and the researcher.

Another purpose of utilizing mixed methods research is to corroborate data from both quantitative and qualitative sources. Although my research showed many convergent findings between the results of the G-SWS-Q and the findings from the interviews with the participants in the qualitative phase, many divergent findings also emerged as well. The fact that the participants' experiences did not fit the model of SWS was an overarching divergent finding that was reflected both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, the SWS conceptual framework was not a good model fit for the G-SWS-Q data that I collected from the research sample, and discriminant validity did not exist among the five SWS constructs. The qualitative data reflected this divergence as well. The participants did not see these constructs as distinct and discrete. This lack of distinction was particularly true for obligation to suppress emotions and resistance to being vulnerable, but it also existed to some degree among all the constructs and for the participants' responses related to acceptance or rejection of the superwoman role. These divergent findings made me wonder: Why are my results so different from the original SWS

studies? Did my inclusion of non-Black women of color have an influence on the divergence? Did my focus on graduate women of color and the higher education context contribute to divergence? I am leaving this research with more questions than I began with.

I am also leaving this research with interesting insights and possibilities for using qualitative methods to further validate and confirm quantitative constructs. Relying exclusively on survey data can be concerning when exploring a phenomenon, particularly when used as a tool to interpret the experiences of minoritized populations. Surveys do not allow for any type of nuance or complexity in interpretation. Because of this lack of nuance and complexity, many minoritized individuals may automatically assume that their responses may be interpreted in a way that does not reflect their intention or experiences. Additionally, from a post-positive perspective, survey interpretation requires the researcher to eliminate the outliers to achieve a model-fit for the data based on the mean and standard deviation. However, these outliers are not just numbers; they are people with experiences that are being excluded. For this research project, I made the choice to exclude responses from graduate women of color who identified as Native American and Middle Eastern in the effort to achieve a model fit, which I did not even achieve with this exclusion. Looking back, I wonder how including these voices could have added to the story I was able to tell in this research.

In Chapter 3, I shared that this study is situated in the transformative research paradigm with goals to understand and interpret and to critique and transform. Through this lens, if we as researchers are not careful in the creation of our boundaries of interpretation of survey (i.e., whose experiences we include or exclude and the meaning we extract from a Likert scale response with no additional context), our results will not matter in a meaningful way. Instead, we will leave the research process with “generalizable” data that further enforces the status quo

whether that is our intention or not. Using quantitative or qualitative methods alone creates an incomplete picture of the experiences of a group. However, higher education over-prioritizes and overutilizes quantitative data to assert definitive findings and practitioners then make decisions based on those findings that often can impact students negatively, particularly minoritized students. My research has shown that through incorporating a mixed methods research approach, qualitative methods can help fill the gaps and answer the questions that quantitative methods cannot achieve or resolve. Overall, ample opportunities exist for next steps in building on this research related to methodological choices and participant inclusion.

Final Thoughts: Meaning-making, Redefinition, and Possibility

As I have reached the finale of this research, I am filled with mixed and conflicting feelings, much like the participants of this study. On one hand, I am physically, emotional, and mentally exhausted as I feel I have poured out so much of myself to reach this point in my scholarly journey. On the other hand, I am so proud of myself and grateful for all this experience has taught me. As I reflect on all the time and effort that has gone on to this dissertation, I realized that this research not only tells part of the stories of the dynamic women of color I had the privilege to engage with, but it also tells part of my story; I have had to reflect on what the superwoman role means for me as well.

Throughout this study, I saw myself in parts of the stories of the participants, and there were other parts that I could not relate to. I thought about the barriers that presented for each of us within our different experiences and with our different identities. I felt a sense of isolation at many points throughout my graduate school experience—not because I felt that my experience was particularly unique but because I felt the need to present an external image of being okay. The conversations I had with the participants in my study served a much larger purpose than just

gathering data. They were healing for me and made me feel less alone. Those 12 women gave me a gift that I did not even know I needed. I think about the importance of coalition building among women of color so we can see our commonalities, grow empathy for our differences, and come together to support each other and tear down the institutional structures that create barriers for our success.

Although my occupation is no longer in the formalized education space, I have learned many things that will inform my values and practices moving forward. The importance of mixed methods research—of including numbers and stories—is a practice that I will continue in any project that asks me to explore the experiences of a population. Each method adds to the strengths and compensates for the limitations of the other. This project has helped me to look beyond the deficit narratives created for us, to find the complexities in our experiences, and to see the possibilities that we can create from the margins. Additionally, this study has made me value even more the necessity to build solidarity among various groups of women of color, and I will continue to seek out ways to do that. To achieve that goal, I also continue to confront my discomfort with vulnerability and my desire to always be seen as strong and competent as these are barriers to true, authentic connections. With this in mind, I share the words of Chicana scholar Lydia Ledesema-Reese (1999) to myself and other graduate women of color:

We place pressure on ourselves to be everything to everyone—superwoman, super girlfriend, super wife, mom, daughter, sister, friend. We expect to be super students, super employees, super good-looking, super thin, super sexy. It is not possible. And the expectation of supernatural achievements belittles our actual achievements. It is a destructive myth. We should challenge it not only for ourselves but for those who follow.

(p. 48)

Navigating the multiverse of my multiple identities and roles will likely always be a part of my lived experience, and there will be many times where taking on the superwoman role will be necessary for my own survival and the survival of my communities. However, like America Chavez said at the end of *The Multiverse of Madness* (2022), “I think I’ll spend some time in this universe.” This superwoman season for me is ending, and I am looking forward to have time to lean more into vulnerability and into my community and to spend time redefining success and achievement for myself. Mask off, cape down...for now. It is time for this superwoman to rest.

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APPENDIX A: SEARCH FOR RELEVANT LITERATURE

Databases

Academic Search Complete (EBSCO)

Education Source

ERIC

Gender Studies Database

APA PsycArticles

APA PsycInfo

SocIndex

Search 1

Keywords

graduate student OR masters student OR doctoral student OR phd or doctorate

AND

women OR female OR gender

AND

minority OR of color OR rac* OR ethnic* OR culture OR Black OR Hispanic OR African

American OR Latin* OR Chican* or Asian OR Indigenous OR Native American OR American

Indian or multiracial or biracial

AND

College or university or institution or academ* or predominantly white

AND

Negotiat* identit* or negotiate* role

Articles identified by database search: 51

Articles in peer-reviewed journals: 32

Articles with full-text: 12

After initial screening: 1

Search 2

Keywords

graduate student OR masters student OR doctoral student OR phd or doctorate

AND

women OR female OR gender

AND

minority OR of color OR rac* OR ethnic* OR culture OR Black OR Hispanic OR African

American OR Latin* OR Chican* or Asian OR Indigenous OR Native American OR American

Indian or multiracial or biracial

AND

College or university or institution or academ*

AND

multiple role

Articles identified by database search: 26

Articles in peer-reviewed journals: 12

Articles with full-text: 7

After initial screening: 1 (same article as search 1)

Search 3

Keywords

graduate student OR masters student OR doctoral student OR phd or doctorate

AND

women OR female OR gender

AND

minority OR of color OR rac* OR ethnic* OR culture OR Black OR Hispanic OR African

American OR Latin* OR Chican* or Asian OR Indigenous OR Native American OR American

Indian or multiracial or biracial

AND

College or university or institution or academ*

AND

Multiple identit*

Articles identified by database search: 58

Articles in peer-reviewed journals: 19

Articles with full-text: 10

After initial screening: 2 (one article same article as search 1)

Search 4

Keywords

graduate student OR masters student OR doctoral student OR phd or doctorate

AND

women OR female OR gender

AND

minority OR of color OR rac* OR ethnic* OR culture OR Black OR Hispanic OR African
American OR Latin* OR Chican* or Asian OR Indigenous OR Native American OR American
Indian or multiracial or biracial

AND

Predominantly white institutions or predominantly white universities or pwi

Articles identified by database search: 189

Articles in peer-reviewed journals: 136

Articles in English: 135

Articles since 2000: 128

Articles with full-text: 74

After initial screening: 17

Search 5

Keywords

graduate student OR masters student OR doctoral student OR phd or doctorate

AND

women OR female OR gender

AND

minority OR of color OR rac* OR ethnic* OR culture OR Black OR Hispanic OR African
American OR Latin* OR Chican* or Asian OR Indigenous OR Native American OR American
Indian or multiracial or biracial

AND

College or university or institution or academ*

Articles identified by database search: 9265

Articles in peer-reviewed journals: 5745

Articles in English: 5591

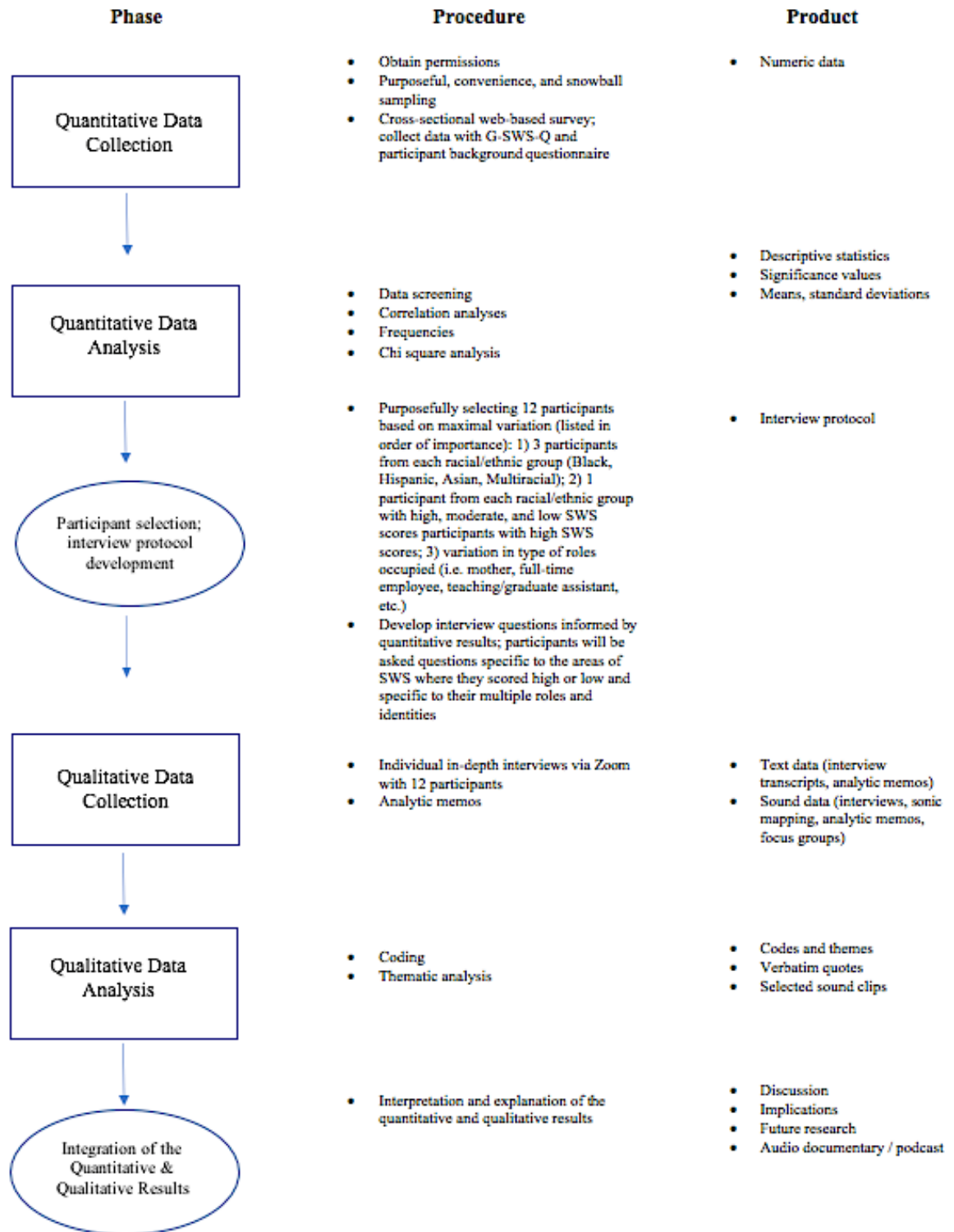
Articles since 2000: 4948

Articles with full-text: 3107

Articles after duplicates removed: 2406

After initial screening: 20

APPENDIX B: EXPLANATORY SEQUENTIAL CASE STUDY DESIGN DIAGRAM







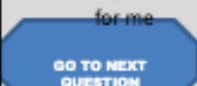
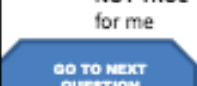
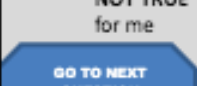
APPENDIX C: GISCOMBÉ SUPERWOMAN SCHEMA QUESTIONNAIRE (G-SWS-Q)

INSTRUCTIONS: The following is a list of items that may or may not be relevant for you. Some of the questions may sound similar, but each is important. Please read and complete each item to the best of your ability using the response scale provided.

			If you checked the TRUE box, please indicate how undesirable or disturbing this statement is for you by checking one of the boxes below.
8. I keep my problems bottled up inside.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
9. I hide my stress.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
10. Expressing emotions is difficult for me.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
11. It's hard for me to accept help from others.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
12. I have a hard time trusting others.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
13. I wait until I am overwhelmed to ask for help.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
14. Asking for help is difficult for me.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much







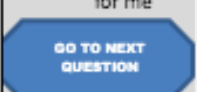
CWG-SWS 1

INSTRUCTIONS: The following is a list of items that may or may not be relevant for you. Some of the questions may sound similar, but each is important. Please read and complete each item to the best of your ability using the response scale provided.

			If you checked the TRUE box, please indicate how undesirable or disturbing this statement is for you by checking one of the boxes below.
15. I resist help to prove that I can make it on my own.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
16. If I want things done right, I do them myself.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
17. I accomplish my goals with limited resources.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
18. It is very important to me to be the best at the things that I do.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
19. No matter how hard I work, I feel like I should do more.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
20. I put pressure on myself to achieve a certain level of accomplishment.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
21. I take on roles and responsibilities when I am already overwhelmed.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much




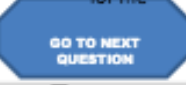



CWG-SWS 2

INSTRUCTIONS: The following is a list of items that may or may not be relevant for you. Some of the questions may sound similar, but each is important. Please read and complete each item to the best of your ability using the response scale provided.

			If you checked the TRUE box, please indicate how undesirable or disturbing this statement is for you by checking one of the boxes below.
22. I take on too many responsibilities in my family.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
23. I put everyone else's' needs before mine.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
24. I feel obligated to take care of others.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
25. When others ask for my help, I say yes when I should say no.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
26. I neglect my health (e.g., I don't exercise or eat like I should). In what specific ways do you think that you neglect your health? _____	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
27. I neglect the things that bring me joy.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
28. I feel guilty when I take time for myself.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much

CWG-SWS 3

INSTRUCTIONS: The following is a list of items that may or may not be relevant for you. Some of the questions may sound similar, but each is important. Please read and complete each item to the best of your ability using the response scale provided.

			If you checked the TRUE box, please indicate how undesirable or disturbing this statement is for you by checking one of the boxes below.
29. The struggles of my ancestors require me to be strong.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
30. I keep my problems to myself to prevent burdening others.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
31. I do things by myself without asking for help.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
32. The only way for me to be successful is to work hard.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
33. I am a perfectionist.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
34. There is no time for me, because I am always taking care of others.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much
35. I have to be strong because I am a woman.	<input type="checkbox"/> This is NOT TRUE for me 	This is TRUE for me <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> All the time	This bothers me: <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat <input type="checkbox"/> Very much

CWG-SWS 4

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

1. Please choose a pseudonym that will be used to identify you during this research study.
2. What type of graduate degree program are you enrolled in?
 - a. Masters
 - b. Doctoral
 - c. Other professional degree
3. What general field are you enrolled in?
 - a. Arts & Humanities
 - b. Business
 - c. Education
 - d. Health & Medicine
 - e. Multi-Interdisciplinary Studies
 - f. Public & Social Services
 - g. Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM)
 - h. Social Sciences
 - i. Other (please specify)
4. How many years have you been enrolled in your graduate program
5. Were you a first-generation undergraduate student?
6. Are you a first-generation graduate student?
7. Please check the race/ethnicity category with which you most closely identify.
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American

- d. Hispanic
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. Two or More Races
8. How do you describe your race/ethnicity?
9. Please indicate your age.
10. Which of the following best describes your current marital or relationship status?
- a. Married
 - b. Not married but living with a romantic partner
 - c. In a romantic relationship but not living together
 - d. Married but separated
 - e. Divorced
 - f. Widowed
 - g. Single/never married
11. How many children do you have?
- a. (if n>0) I am raising my child(ren) as a single mother while going to school.
 - i. This is not true for me.
 - ii. This is true for me.
12. I am responsible for the care of elderly relatives or other family members (other than my own children).
- a. This is not true for me.
 - b. This is true for me.
13. Which of the following best describes your current employment status?
- a. Teaching Assistant/Graduate Assistant/Research Assistant

- b. Working full-time for wages
 - c. Working part-time for wages (non-TA/GA/RA)
 - d. Not working
14. I do not have the financial support from others to accomplish my goals (e.g., go to school, start a business, buy a house, etc.)
- a. This is not true for me.
 - b. This is true for me.
15. I am a member of groups or organizations that require my time and commitment.
- a. This is not true for me.
 - b. This is true for me.
16. If so, please indicate how many organizations.
17. What are the roles that you currently occupy that you “negotiate” or “balance” with your role as a student?