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THE LOVE OF MY SISTERS: EXPLORING BLACK WOMEN ACADEMICS'
NARRATIVES ON THE USES AND BENEFITS OF SISTER CIRCLES

by

LAVETTE BURNETTE

Under the Direction of Patricia Davis, PhD

ABSTRACT

This study explored how Black women academics (BWA) use formal and informal networks to overcome cultural violence and social injustices within the academy. BWA documentation of the hegemonic pressures of the universal teacher myth in the classroom and troublesome interactions with fellow faculty members offer scholars the opportunity to question how BWA foster and maintain beneficial networks of support. The researcher used social capital theory evolution to fictive kin networks (FKN) to frame the study. The FKN framework allowed the researcher to understand how the strength of network ties helps BWA create and maintain beneficial systems. Through the lens of selected principles from Black feminist thought (BFT), intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory (CRT), I use personal narratives taken from

my reflexive analytic autoethnography and fifteen interviews of BWA who are part of either formal or informal networks.

Data analysis was conducted through a modified purposeful constant comparative method to fulfill the primary goal of the study to offer a realistic process of network creation. The findings of this study indicated BWA are part of diverse networks through deliberate interactions that create individual benefits. The findings challenged the notion that informal networks were more beneficial than a formal network. This exploratory study created a direct linkage to BWA and FKN, as well as introduced the concept of a network circle to aid BWA to overcome hegemonic pressures experienced in the academy.

INDEX WORDS: Black women, academy, network circles, sister circles, fictive kin networks, Black feminist thought, Critical Race theory, social capital theory

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LAVETTE BURNETTE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

To Edna Mai, I dedicate this to you. I love you old lady.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my wife, Zenique, thank you for your encouragement and making me laugh. I choose you.

To my family, Momma, Daddy, DaWanda, and Robert, I love you. To my sisters of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., thank you for helping this dove fly. To my dearest friends, thank you for loving me when I did not love myself.

To the women who shared their story with me, thank you. You gave me the courage to share my own story. You are my Sheros. I send love and light to you.

I extend my complete gratitude to my dissertation committee: Dr. Patricia Davis, thank you for agreeing to be my chair in the middle of my process. You were my source of calm when I was in a whirlwind. You taught me to be steady and sure of myself to achieve my goals. Dr. Carrie Packwood Freeman and Dr. Jennifer Esposito, thank you both for jumping on board with fresh eyes and energy to my study. Dr. Marian Meyers, thank you for helping me see the value of my own voice.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This study explored how Black women academics (BWA) use formal and informal networks to overcome cultural violence and social injustices within the academy. I used social capital theory (SCT) evolution to fictive kin networks (FKN) to understand how BWA create and maintain beneficial systems. Through the lens of selected principles from Black feminist thought (BFT), intersectionality, and Critical race theory (CRT), I used personal narratives taken from my reflexive analytic autoethnography and fifteen interviews of BWA who are part of either formal or informal networks. The primary goal of the study was to extend the exploratory association of sister circles with BWA and offer a realistic process to create beneficial linkages.

Black women academics (BWA) accounted for 3% of the overall post-secondary faculty in 2009 with a slight decrease to 2% in 2015 (NCES, 2009; NCES, 2015). In 2016, BWA accounted for 3% of the overall post-secondary faculty (NCES, 2016). Black women excelled in doctoral attainment with 28% more doctoral degrees earned than Black men, 12% more than white women and 16% more than white men in 2014 (NCES, 2016). BWA are hired as faculty at a higher rate than Black men (Edwards, Beverly, & Snow, 2011) and are visibly working in all areas of higher education (Harley, 2008). Despite being more educated than other groups, hired at higher rates, and visible in all areas of the academy, BWA unfortunately remain outside the inner circles of power within the academy (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014).

As a Black feminist scholar, I often felt powerless, silenced, and devalued by the academy. I began my teaching career with a master's degree and worked tirelessly to prove myself as an asset to my academic community. I focused on my teaching as my life calling and gave my time and energy relentlessly in service. These efforts were sufficient until I left for an

institution that underwent multiple organizational consolidations and restructuring. Based on the “new normal” ushered into the new institution, I could no longer be an extraordinary professor or dutiful servant. I needed more to be a change agent within the academy. After several hurtful experiences, I soon felt broken, angry, hostile, and hurt.

To heal and resist the urge to leave higher education altogether, I decided to embrace my perceived oppressed position of a BWA. I accepted my positionality within the academy because it gave me subjugated knowledge to “talk back” to the hurt I felt (hooks, 1989). Collins (2000) explains subjugated knowledge is based on one’s societal position that offers a wider perspective of injustice. This wider vision is considered a unique position because it allows Black women multiple angles of seeing the effects on the oppressed and behavior of the oppressor. From this wider perspective, I began to survey the benefits and obstacles of my positionality as a Black woman academic. I wanted to use my subjugated knowledge to help other Black women with similar feelings and issues.

1.1 Background of the Problem

It would be prudent to provide context of how the academy (used interchangeably with higher education) is historically structured and how the role of the academy is to support the state policies with liberal ideologies. To maintain order and power within the academic structure, faculty and students must assimilate to the hegemonic culture of the academy. Fergerson (2012) argued that the academy was intended to shape the national culture and created internal structures to minoritize people and knowledges to make those subjects respect the power and its “law.” Lowe (2015) contends those who benefitted from law were those who were deemed as citizens. In the academy “lawful citizens” are those that fall within the normative structure and politics. Those who are part of the privileged collective received benefits; however, outsiders of

the collective were socially excluded. Social exclusion is structuralized, and embedded in normative values upheld by legal and psychological apparatuses that are often applied to marginalized groups or those considered savages/ineligible for personhood. To be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death that defines who matters (Cacho, 2012). This simple statement embodies the delicate division of the protection and prosecution on being recognized as a lawful citizen. The social exclusion based on race, gender and class is way to ensure those who are placed within the margins assimilate or be discarded. The academy employs various technologies to control its socially excluded citizens that ultimately protect hegemonic interests.

The effects of such an oppressed position manifests as challenging obstacles for BWA in obtaining the rewards of tenure (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005), promotion (Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013), and feelings of belonging in the academy (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wallace, et al., 2014). To describe the obstacles, Black women scholars across disciplines use the widely cited “outsider-within” metaphor (Collins, 2000) to document frustrations (Tyson, 2001), anger (Alexander-Floyd, 2009), and emotional stress (Davis, 2010). Other scholars used the matrix of domination (Collins, 1999) of race and sex as contributing factors in BWA reporting feelings of being devalued by peers and supervisors (Edwards, et al. 2011), isolation (Neal-Barrett, et al., 2011; Sulé, 2011), lack of socialization (Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013) and the need for mentoring (Jarmon, 2001; Patitu & Harmon, 2003; Tillman, 2001). Both “outsider-within” and matrix of domination metaphors refer to the treatment of Black women in regards to the combination of white supremacy and sexism within the Black community. Instead of experiencing oppression as separate entities like Black men or White women, BWA experience oppression as interlocking (Collins, 1999; 2000).

Black women scholars began to describe the difficulties of being Black and women at a predominately white institution (PWI) as the “maid syndrome.” The maid syndrome metaphor describes how BWA are often relegated to the helping positions and used to “cleanup” the messes of their employer while appearing to not suffer from the injustices of intersections of being Black females of a different class (Harley, 2008). In the academy, BWA embody the maid syndrome metaphor as liaisons from the Black/underprepared/underprivileged community into the academy. We are expected to help prepare the unprepared and acclimate Black students to white culture. Wallace, et al. (2014) noted BWA fill the fictive kin role to serve as mothers or aunts because of their strong connections to the Black community. They accept the role of the double-consciousness of being an “insider” to the academy as being Black in a white academic environment, but “outsider” because of race and gender. Black women fulfill the role as a fictive kin family member within the institution by offering advice for success, being an advocate, and sharing physical and emotional expressions of care (Harley, 2008; Mawhinney, 2011). BWA experiences cannot be essentialized to one metaphor such as the matrix of domination, outsider-within, or the maid syndrome metaphor. The commonalities of the stories of the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism (Collins, 2000; Cook & Williams, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991) create a record of how the academy as an institution oppresses Black women (Williams, 2001).

BWA enter into the academy aware of the social exclusion technologies that they must endure within the organizational culture characterized by Gatlung (1990) as structurally and culturally violent. Unlike direct violence that physically threatens ones’ life, the academy oppresses BWA with structural violence that hinders equal access to the spoils of the academy. Cultural violence represents the existence of prevailing or prominent social norms that mark instances of structural violence as “natural,” “right,” or acceptable (Gatlung, 1990). The idea of

rightness or naturalness is mirrored in the cultural studies concept of hegemony. Gramsci (2009) postulates hegemony as the dominant group's power to influence the values, norms, ideals, expectations, and worldviews of the rest of the society. In this example, hegemony is achieved when the bourgeoisie (the academy) propagates values and norms that function as (cultural violence) "common sense" for Black women to follow. BWA accept the dominant ideology without question (consent), and if the "common sense" was resisted, they could be persuaded by force (coercion) (Peter, 2011; Petitt, 2009). I drew from Gatlung (1990) and Gramsci (2009) to assert the academy displays cultural violence toward BWA through negation by students and interaction with colleagues.

1.1.1 Classroom Negation

In the classroom, the faculty member should be seen as the authority figure. BWA challenge this ideal in a study of power relationships within the classroom to disapprove of the universal teacher myth. The universal teacher myth asserts faculty are not judged by students based on race or gender and classroom interactions are not affected by race or gender (Brown, Crevero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000). The stereotypical professor is assumed to be a middle-aged White heterosexual male. To disprove the myth, Brown, Crevero, and Johnson-Bailey (2000) conducted in-depth interviews and observations to understand how positionality and the intersection of race and gender affect BWA in the classroom. The myth was debunked in regards to BWA. The researchers found due to race and gender, BWA experience issues of initial credibility with students and classroom management issues. Directly related to my study, disapproving of the universal teacher myth exemplifies how BWA are treated differently based on positionality. One informant from the study disclosed how a White male student went "over her head to her department chair to complain about her because she was not teaching like a male

colleague" (Brown, Crevero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000, p. 276). This one incident is similar to other narratives of BWA and exemplifies a larger problem with Black women in the classroom because students often question their credibility (Perlow, Bethea, & Wheeler, 2014). Despite their credentials, BWA are not immediately seen as credible when they walk in the classroom because of stereotypes of the universal teacher myth and the “outsider-within” position.

Due to the constant breakdown of the BWA status in the classroom, they must work harder to establish credibility and prove their ability as teachers (Evans, 2007; Perlow, Bethea, & Wheeler, 2014). Carter-Obayuwana (1995) concluded students hold negative assumptions and resent the presence of BWA in the classroom; therefore, they challenge and undermine Black women's credentials by searching for "correctness" from White male faculty. Although troublesome and disheartening, the negation of BWA not only happens in the classroom, but with fellow members of the academy.

1.1.2 Interaction with Colleagues

Often serving as the “only” within an academic department, the position of BWA can be characterized as a double solo. Carter-Obayuwana (1995) explains a double solo represents a person who is the only member of one's gender and racial group in a work situation. The double solo position contributes to reports of isolation because other faculty members ignore the voice of BWA or are blinded by white privilege. Allen (1998) discussed her experiences as a “twofer” or double solo with her interactions with coworkers, mistrust of White counterparts, and effects of these experiences. She detailed a disturbing event of how the department head instituted her unacknowledged recommendation after a White male colleague made the same recommendation. The pretense of white privilege (Evans, 2007) and blatant ignorance permeated the example when a White female faculty member asked her at a social gathering "to sing a Negro spiritual

that she loved" (Allen, 1998, p. 581). To combat these egregious displays of racism, Black women often "try to anticipate difficulties and screen out unacceptable aspects of their heritage or female values, or try to manage the disturbance they create" (Allen, 1998, p. 584). BWA make a cognitive choice to not reinforce the "angry Black woman" trope. The fear of appearing over-bearing, aggressive, loud and/or emasculating can cause BWA to overthink and withdraw from the academic community (Cole and Guy-Sheftall, 2003). The suppressed anger and cautious demeanor adds to their feeling overly sensitive and ultimately complicate their effectiveness and productivity (Griffin, 2012).

To this point, I have shown how the academy is culturally violent through the hegemonic pressures of the universal teacher myth and the double solo position that negate BWA in the classroom, along with troublesome interactions with fellow faculty members. I used these examples as motivation to unearth ways to support BWA. During the course of my research, I gathered suggestions from Black feminist research, institutions' initiatives, and from other academic researchers. The recommendations fall within three categories: 1) institutional efforts, 2) academic community efforts, and 3) Black women's efforts.

1.1.3 Institutional Efforts

Allen (1998) offers suggestions on how institutions can effectively recruit Black women prospective faculty by "trying to paint a realistic picture of your institution and your department, particularly regarding issues related to race and gender" (p. 268). Often in recruitment efforts for minority faculty, institutions "put their best foot forward" in ways that do not include information on low numbers of minority faculty or low numbers of minority faculty with tenure at that institution. As a recommendation to all new recruits within the university, Allen (1998) suggests implementing a mentoring program to ensure no one is singled out. By implementing a

mentoring program, the institution creates cohesive community amongst the academic members (Smith & Crawford, 2005).

Institutions should create a self-examination process to assess how Black women view their institution (Morgan, 1996; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). The evaluations should allow Black women to anonymously comment on institutional efforts that may or may not be responsive to their needs (p. 21). The analysis of the university efforts could empower BWA to create change within the university without risking negative criticism from other university members (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). As Morgan (1996) contends, institutions should re-evaluate the standards for faculty-to-student behavior in the classroom to combat the universal teacher myth. Understandably, change happens slowly in hierarchical structures like higher education; therefore, deliberate awareness and actions of cultural sensitivity amongst fellow faculty members could elicit recognizable results.

1.1.4 Academic Community Efforts

First, non-Black female faculty need to evaluate their views on race, gender, and the combination thereof to avoid social injustices mentioned previously (Epps, 2008). Morgan (1996) details this recommendation with suggestions that "faculty members should avoid jokes, analogies, and language that assume common experiences of a diverse group" (p. 21). Secondly, it is a poignant recommendation that fellow academics should try to view Black women as individuals and understand that this group of minorities is as diverse as any other minority (Epps, 2008). It is advised to treat each person as an individual person and not assume that all Black women are the same. Nor is it advisable that the academic community assumes all Black women primarily want to focus on diversity issues (Brown, 2014). The assumption that BWA only want to "talk about Black folks" pigeonholes research interests and disallows Black women faculty the

freedom to express other areas of expertise and skill. Time constraints and dismissal of research interest are unaccounted barriers BWA face within the academic community. Along with the negation of research interest, the issues are compounded with obligations of numerous non-academic activities and committees (Brown, 2014; Peters, 2011). The academic community could alleviate these issues by acknowledging the diverse interest of BWA and being aware of social injustices or issues with colleagues.

1.1.5 Black women's efforts

To effectively cope with and overcome hegemonic pressures of the academy, BWA must understand the importance and the need for networking (Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Jarmon, 2001; Perlow, Bethea, & Wheeler, 2014; Weems, 2003). Steele (1994) notes that "Black women's networks keep you on course and focused" (p. 127). The foundation of networking provides a means to "support each other's efforts, share their resources, and lend advice and counsel" as well as cultivates the "collective memory" as a coping mechanism (Steele, 1994, p. 127). To simplify the concept, Clemmitt (1996) proclaims that "networking is not about making contacts, it is about sustaining real connections" (p. 18). In my study, I define formal networks as institutionally sanctioned mediated programs such as mentoring with senior/seasoned faculty, professional development meetings, and conference memberships.

Research revealed formal networks offer inter-disciplinary collaboration benefits, but BWA are shut out of influential network opportunities (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Jarmon, 2001; Weems, 2003). Comparatively, I define informal networks as small groups such as sororities, study groups, writing groups, church groups, or sister circles used for emotional and other forms of support. Even though the recommendations to join or create networks are well documented (Chang, et al., 2013; Hughes &

Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013), the suggestions are void of specific information about what kinds of networks are the most beneficial, or how to access or maintain these networks.

1.2 Purpose of Study

The overarching purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to elicit practical approaches to beneficial networks. To achieve this goal, my research questions are as follows:

1. In what kinds of networks are BWA involved?
2. How are these associations formed and maintained?
3. What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women?
4. What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks?

As a BWA, I participated in formal and informal groups that were beneficial in every stage of my career. As a junior faculty, I had a White male senior faculty member mentor. During our scheduled meetings, he provided insight into classroom management, recommended ways to navigate departmental politics, and suggested effective teaching strategies. He became a confidant and friend during and after my time at the institution.

The relationship was less fruitful when I faced blatant racism from students in my classroom, and/or he could not understand or sympathize with my issues based on my positionality as a BWA. His lack of understanding compounded my feelings of anger. Congruent with recommendations of finding a support system (Peters, 2011), I relied heavily on my informal networks as means of support to deal with the pressures of which he was ignorant. My informal network was comprised of a group of three BWA at different institutions. I connected with women as undergraduates after I pledged a sorority; however, one member was a childhood friend. We continued our sisterhood outside the sorority as we entered into our

respective masters' programs at the same institution. We encouraged each other during stressful periods of our program, shared research interests and ideas, exchanged teaching techniques, and offered each other guidance on how to handle stressful situations through phone calls and email exchanges.

Although both formal and informal networks were useful, I needed guidance on how to use my formal networks to work to my advantage and how to maintain my informal networks. Peters (2011) noted these types of informal networks have a significant impact on retention and feelings of belonging. Informal networks create a space for BWA to construct a shared meaning of experience to counteract the hegemonic pressures. BWA serve in fictive kin roles as mothers and aunts for students; there is a lack of understanding of the role of sister for one another. I define fictive kin networks as informal groups of like-minded individuals to elicit different types of support. I prematurely define sister circles as a small group of women who foster strong bonding and bridging ties that manifests into mutual trust and emotional support for one another. I revised the definition after I conducted the study. I argue sister circles are essential and are personally and professionally beneficial to BWA.

1.3 Significance of Study

Research on the cultural violence and social injustice enacted towards BWA in the academy explicitly tells us to create supportive networks (Chang, et al., 2013; Hughes, 2003; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; and Peters, 2011), but lacks clear direction on how to achieve this goal. My project is significant as it fills the gap of theory to practice. Grounded in a combination of BFT, intersectionality, and CRT, I use personal narratives extracted from my reflexive analytic autoethnography and in-depth interviews to explore how BWA use networks to survive the pressures of the academy. My overall aims are to

extend the understanding of fictive kin networks (specifically sister circles) associated with BWA and offer a concrete strategy to create and participate in such groups.

1.4 Review of Chapters

In the introduction, I discussed the problems that BWA face due to her positionality within the academy. These issues manifest in the classroom and with colleagues that can be overcome with supportive networks. My research questions include (1) In what kinds of networks are BWA involved, (2) How are these associations formed and maintained, (3) What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women, and (4) What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks? I explained the purpose of the study is to create a tangible artifact for other Black women, as well as outlined the significance of this study.

Chapter two is the literature review with two primary purposes. The first is to outline the SCT evolution to fictive kin networks (FKN) with emphasis on the benefits of social ties. I illustrate how SCT lacks substantive evidence on the ways in which BWA can create and use informal networks as a way to survive pressures in the academy. By connecting FKN to BWA struggles within the academy, I carve out space to question how BWA use networks within the academy and to discover the most beneficial kinds of networks. The second objective is to justify the use of BFT, intersectionality, and CRT as theoretical frameworks with which to use my positionality as a means to explore the problem and offer a solution. I present relevant literature by BWA and scholars on the intersection of race and gender along with a reconceptualization of class to justify the need for formal and informal networks.

Chapter three is the methodology chapter in which I justify the use of naturalistic inquiry in the form of narratives extracted from my autoethnography and in-depth interviews. I conclude the chapter with details on my data collection method and modified constant comparative

method for data analysis and interpretation. Chapter four includes my autoethnography and responses from the in-depth interviews. I accept the responsibility outlined by Collins (1986) that the role for Black female intellectuals is to produce facts, accounts, and theories about our experiences that will clarify our standpoint in order to ultimately establish common themes and remedies to opposition. As a Black feminist scholar, I chose Black women as my object of study. I situated myself as part of the subject of study. The insertion of myself as a subject of study allows me to use inclusive language like “us” and “we” when refereeing to BWA in this study. Instead of presenting the data separately, I present my experiences along with my participants as a cohesive data set. I chose this form as a counter-narrative to challenge the traditional positivist paradigm that the researcher should be separate from the participants. I end the chapter with preliminary findings and emerging themes.

Chapter five will serve as the interpretation of my findings and observations. I outline the praxis component to build beneficial networks, connect the major findings to the theoretical framework, outline limitations of the study, and end with possible avenues of future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted in the introduction, research on the cultural violence in the classroom and social injustice of tokenism of BWA in the academy explicitly tell us to create supportive networks to survive (Chang, et al., 2013; Hughes, 2003; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; and Peters, 2011). Although these recommendations are well documented, there is a lack of clear direction on how to create a beneficial and profitable network. Chapter two presents the significance of the importance to create clear and concrete guidelines with two primary goals. Chapter two outlines the historical context of SCT shift to FKN. I explain how bridging and bonding research serves as the catalyst to apply FKN (specifically sister circles) to BWA including a discussion on how current research uses social media as a viable tool to increase social capital. The second objective is to present my theoretical framework of BFT, intersectionality, and CRT. I use selected principles of each to justify my position as a researcher and the use of narratives from my autoethnography and in-depth interviews. I isolate ways in which BWA are oppressed, as well as etch out a safe space for us to discuss ways to navigate within the academy.

2.1 Social Capital Theory to Fictive Kin Networks

The basic principles of SCT are complicated and muddled because of interdisciplinary use and multiple angles of conceptualization. Current research encompasses the basic principles and broad dimensions with emphasis on the structural dimension of networks. As scholars fail to return to the core essence of the interplay of the cognitive, relational, and structural, the theory has lost momentum in research. SCT has expanded from merely defining resources and profit to questioning the interplay of how social networks are built and maintained. A recent question posed in SCT literature relates to how individuals develop and sustain groups that are successful

in marginalized spaces. BWA face discrimination and challenging situations within the academy, and to cope with these issues, a common recommendation is to build strong networks (French, et al. 2013). Due to the lack of research on marginalized group networking within the SCT framework, a discussion is warranted to fill this particular void. In the following section, I explore the historical context of SCT, then discuss the trends of research, and conclude with a discussion of how Black women academics can use fictive kin networks to build and maintain social capital and support.

2.1.1 Social Capital Theory Origins

The early conceptualization of SCT is often credited to Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam (1995) with expansions of the theory by Lin and Fields (Alfred, 2009; Mahmood, 2015; Portes & Landolt, 1996). Noted to be "popular" (Edwards & Foley, 1998), to "emerging" (Adler & Kwon, 2002) to "matured" (Kwon & Adler, 2014), social capital relates to the context productivity of the individual. Depending on the discipline, social capital was conceptualized differently to inquire how social interactions influence contexts and individuals. SCT's early application centered on economics, business, management, marketing, and other business-related disciplines, as well as to social sciences such as sociology and political science. In later years, SCT was used in education, health sciences, and communication that provided alternative uses and definitions of key concepts and terms of the theory.

The conceptualization of social capital began as a theory applied to different social science fields. Social scientists defined social capital as "the ability to create and sustain voluntary associations to the idea that a healthy community is essential to prosperity" (Portes, et al., 1996). Lin (1999) simplified the definition to be "investment in social relations with expected returns" (p. 30). As the theory extended to the education field, social capital was

defined as “a person's family, friends, and associates that constitute an important asset that can be capitalized in times of need, leveraged for capital gain, and enjoyed purely for the human interaction it affords” (Alfred, 2009, p. 5). Kwon and Adler (2014) defined social capital as the goodwill available to individuals and groups and the benefits of these relations. Mahmood (2015) refocused social capital within the management and organizational research to offer the current definition of social capital “in terms of the networks, social norms and trust, and the way these allow individuals and organizations to be more operative in achieving their goals” (p. 114). The common thread through each definition is the individual’s relationship to the group and how the relationship benefits both the individual and the group.

The lack of consistent conceptualization dilutes SCT usefulness because the dimension of the core principles varies by discipline. Initially, SCT dimensions included cognitive, relational, and structural (CRS). Mathews and Marzec (2012) credited Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) from the management field with the first outline of social capital in these three dimensions to understand the symbolic relationship between an individual and group. Mahmood (2015) further explains that Nahapiet and Ghoshal’s (1998) dimensions were used to assess the measurable variables through empirical research of “anticipation of value, the motivation of individuals, the ability of the organization, and access to parties” (p. 244). The variables operationalized the abstract dimensions, but scholars found it difficult to articulate each dimension consistently.

The cognitive dimension focused on the knowledge formulated and shared through cultural practices, codes, and language. The relational aspect includes the roots of social norms of trust, respect, and goodwill that form from frequent connections. The structural dimension focused on the strength and maintenance of contacts made with the group (Kwon & Adler, 2014; Mahmood, 2015; Mathews and Marzec, 2012). Kwon and Adler (2014) reformatted the

dimensions as sources of social capital to be applied to the marketing field as opportunity, motivation, and ability (OMA). Each element of OMA directly coordinates with the traditional CRS model. In the reformatted version, opportunities (O) provided to the network were synonymous with the cognitive dimension. The structural dimension is congruent with motivations to induce the norms and value that influence the intent to maintain connections. The relational dimension refers to the abilities concept that each person of the network can be mobilized by trust and goodwill. The reformat allowed researchers to use the principles of SCT in different disciplines. Kwon and Adler (2014) noted the OMA is common in marketing research, while CRS continues to be widely used across other disciplines.

As research on social capital expanded from the basic dimensions of CRS to OMA, humanities scholars focused on the structural dimension to understand how the strength of ties influenced the other dimensions (Lin, 1999). The distinction of the three dimensions was minimized when scholars questioned how the interplay of social capital and social networks functions. The emphasis on social networks ushered in an alternate perspective to study causal effects of social capital. The structural dimension included the network or resources afforded to an individual. The multidisciplinary conceptualization of the theory produced two opposing perspectives of individual influence in network membership. Lin (1999) explained one perspective to question whether profits are generated from social capital of the individual compared to the alternate view, which posits that profits are direct byproducts of group membership. Simply, scholars began to question whether profit is generated from the individual or group. Kwon and Adler (2014) acknowledged that SCT and network research began to cross-fertilize because of the divided perspectives.

2.1.2 Individual Influence Profit or Group Membership Profit

Early social capital theorists debated whether individuals were the nexus of profit. The notion that the individual was the reason for the profit or benefit from the group came from (1) how the person invested in the group and (2) how the individual acquired these benefits (Lin, 1999). The individual perspective is firmly ingrained in the human relations dimension because the intangible assets of norms and values held by individuals become the tangible social capital benefits of the ability to manipulate group dynamics. A fiscally wealthy individual has more social capital in certain groups because they have more financial assets to influence group dynamics and activities. The person is able to set boundaries and limitations because of the tangible assets of money. However, critiques of this individualistic perspective began to question how an individual could have social capital within a group if the context of group membership is not considered (Edwards and Foley, 1998).

Portes (1998) credited Bourdieu and Coleman as the first to question whether social capital is a byproduct of the resources of individuals because of social group membership. As the theory matured, Putnum (1995) started to question if social capital was primarily generated from the individual abilities or the group association. For social capital to be profitable, there must be the ability to benefit from resources of the quality of the interaction within the group and the ability to manipulate the resources by the members. The person has no social capital if they do not have a group with whom to associate. In a qualitative survey study, Berrou and Combarous (2011) successfully connected social capital theory discussion to networks. The researchers outlined the two interrelated perspectives while discussing African economics. Berrou and Combarous (2011) posited high social status through networks enabled “more efficient instrumental action” (p. 1217). The researchers claimed to be one of the first to use

empirical research to question the role of social standing in African networks and found individual resources have no significant positive impact on economic growth. The findings further strengthened the premise that social capital profit can only be measured and understood within the context of group member relationships. Lin (1999) warned that, rather than questioning if closed or open networks are required to be successful, it would be better to use empirical research to explore what conditions within the group might generate more return and examine the recursive relationship between group impact and mutual gain.

Although Berrou and Combarous (2011) did not strengthen the argument that profit of social capital is from individual influence within a group, they successfully identified three salient dimensions of a network. A network is a physical or virtual structure categorized by size, density, and strength of ties amongst the group membership. The group has frequent contact that results in meaningful and mutual benefits. Following the Putnam lineage, network profits are the byproducts of group interactions. The strength of ties can be strong or weak (Lin, 1999). A strong tie means dependable reliance on other group members. A weak tie is less frequent and not as dependable. The measurement of the strength of ties is a useful way to research group connections. Lin (1999) proposed to measure the efforts of ties by noting that researchers must measure the embedded resources of the individual (wealth, power and status) within the context of the network and contact resources (access to the people in the various positions in the group).

There is strong evidence that network and contact resources can be empirically tested and proven (Lin, 1999, p. 37). Tain (2016) tested weak and strong ties of job searches in China to find weak ties consistently increased while inquiring about a job, but the probability of jobs located through strong ties increased. The strength of connection in a group, the ability to access those resources, and the sheer number of possible resources solidified the idea that an individual

does not hold social capital without measuring the context of group membership. Alfred (2009) adds that bonding nuances the connection to the group through values and group homogeneity, but the bridging function directly relates to the linkages within the networks. Bridging occurs when an exchange when the group members make connections within and between social networks that offer the social capital profit of resources exchange, but lacked the connection lack depth or the potential for emotional support. Bonding is the reciprocal connections between members described in terms of strength. A strong bond consists of frequent and meaningful interactions with the potential of emotional support. A weak bond implies infrequent and inconsequential interactions that do not yield much support of any kind (Williams, 2001).

The benefit of group membership is clear in the bonding literature highlighting how profitable group membership facilitated the flow of information, influenced those in powerful positions to behave favorably toward those who do not have ties as strong, and allow gatekeeping for group membership of non-members to reinforce group identification and visibility (Alfred, 2009). Within the group, an individual can serve as information and membership gatekeeper. To this end, scholars ask whether a person profits from the benefits of a group, or does the amount of profit resources hinge on the ability to access the information or ties within the group. Rivera, et al., (2010) contend those with more social capital may benefit from group membership, but the profit comes from the strength of ties within the group, rather than the number of ties within a group. Put another way, if a person has a large network, the benefit will only be positive if there are strong ties of close and frequent contact with group members throughout the network.

Although the benefits of networks offer group members profits, some scholars warn network inequality can lead to high-status people getting more benefit from group membership

than other members. Smith, et al. (2011) argued higher status individuals activate more of the network than low-status individuals because of the perception of more tangible resources. Portes (1988) acknowledged the possibility that not all members have equal access to group resources while conceding that the ability to be a gatekeeper of information and membership also allowed leaders to exclude outsiders from group membership. As more researchers started to investigate the negative consequences of social network inequity, newer streams of literature began to take shape.

The inequity of admission or lack of resources to gain equitable benefit from group membership has been a topic of literature focused on women's networks, social movements, and civic engagement. Bruegel (2005) discussed the structural distribution of social capital and how women challenge the opposition. Surveying the strength of ties like previous researchers, Bruegel (2005) argued social capital developed from collective experiences and can transform values and goals to affect societal change. Lister (2005) introduced feminist citizenship theory that originated from the transformational effect of social capital. As an alternative to the classic perspective on individual and group dynamics influenced by Putnam and Bourdieu, feminist citizenship theory advocated the individual and collective impact that underlined the importance of process in tandem with the outcome. The idea of difference in understanding how individual groups deal with division and adversity differs from the dominant strand of SCT research because it equated strong social capital with group cohesion. Alfred (2009) summarized the feminist perspective on social capital to include those social divisions of gender, age, and class closely related to an equal distribution of resources and access to networks.

To this point, I have shown the lineage of core concepts of the SCT that leads to a discussion of the ways in which the structural dimension of networking and inequity can

manifest in group formation and interaction. SCT theory began within social science to examine whether individual effort or group membership create profitable social capital gains. As the theory moved across disciplines, this parallel discussion continued as scholars explored how SCT is used to question how marginalized groups in intimate informal networks or social media can build and fortify social capital in hostile or unwelcoming environments.

2.1.3 Fictive Kin Networks

Tangible benefits to the group (Putnam, 1995) or the individual (Lin, 1999) directly correlate to the bridging and bonding literature. Tangible group benefits are characterized as the strength of group influence, size or ability to influence benefits to members. It closely manifests as bridging because if a group member creates meaningful connections within and between other members or groups then these meaningful connections build resources such as information exchange or group mobility. Individual tangible benefits are capital gains, emotional support, and social mobility that manifest as bonding through reciprocal connections between the members categorized as strong (often) or weak ties (Williams, 2006).

As researchers started to focus more on the byproducts from the strength of ties, an alternate angle allowed research on kinship terminology to be introduced in research (Balatti & Falk, 2002). Credited to early work by Stack (1974), fictive kin relationships are defined as networks that consist of people not related by blood but constructed of like-minded individuals for social and psychological support. Seminal work on SCT and social capital originated within sociology research on the fictive kin relationship within immigrant communities (Stack, 1986). Ebaugh and Curry (2000) used Bourdieu's social capital framework to explore how fictive kin relationships expand the network of the individual through social and economic capital.

The researchers conducted an exploratory qualitative study of in-depth interviews with a New York Yoruba community and select religious groups in Houston, Texas. Fictive kin networks (FKN) were used in developing the spirituality of younger members, teaching rules of society, and providing emotional and financial support (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000, p. 199). These findings are echoed in other qualitative studies noting fictive kin relationships benefit the individual with socialization into new environments (Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013; Patitu & Hinton, 2003) and emotional support (Cook & Williams, 2015; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003). Early work on FKN addressed various objects of study and contexts; these studies did not directly focus on Black women and the effects of social capital and networks.

Current research reviewed how social capital influenced the health concerns of Black women (Dean, et al. 2014), the social capital of peer mentoring networks (Esnard, et al., 2015), and social capital's relationship to Black women's voting behavior (Farris & Holman, 2014). Other studies have addressed Black women's membership in sororities and faith-based organizations (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014) and non-profit organizations (Adesaogum, Flottemesch, & Ibrahim-DeVries, 2015) as means of building and maintaining social capital, as well as social capital's relationship to the intersectionality of race and gender (Anthias, 2013; Saddler, et al. 2013). Other researchers outlined the crisis of Black women in academia (Davis, et al., 2012; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011), but failed to directly link social capital, networking, and Black women in academia.

Cook and Williams (2015) explicitly used fictive kinship networks (FKN) as a theoretical framework to examine the recruitment and retention of BWA at PWIs while focusing on the individual benefit. The researchers concluded BWA reported feelings of belonging and

community that enabled the women to have stronger self-efficacy and self-care. BWA used FKN to nurture and embrace BWA intellect in unwelcoming environments and as an “unapologetic acknowledgement of our right to be in these spaces” (Cook & Williams, 2015, p. 165). Terminology of fictive kin relationship/networks shifted to “sister circles” as BWA began to use personal narratives and auto-ethnographies to explore the benefits and uses of FKN (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; McCray, 2011; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Work on sister circles failed to provide definitive conceptualizations of the term. Therefore, I define sister circles as a small group of women who foster strong bonding and bridging ties that manifest into mutual trust and emotional support.

The idea of a group of women who develop strong ties through regular contact and interaction is explored in a study on Indian women in communication. Bhopal (2011) sought to uncover how marginalized women use sister circles to survive in higher education. After extensive in-depth interviews of British Indian women, Bhopal (2011) found sister circles served to reinforce and strengthen community ties with regular contact, shared language, and overwhelming reports of feelings of freedom to be authentic and connections to the overall academic community. The findings solidified the idea that sister circles are beneficial to marginalized groups on the micro level as a safe space for emotional support and the macro level in enhancing feelings of connections to the academic community.

2.1.4 Social Media

Although social media and online interactions are not central to my research questions, it is prudent to discuss how a subset of research on social networks and social media help foster sustainable social capital gains. The opening to examine how people create and maintain networks extends to online interactions as scholars start to investigate the quality of ties on social

networking sites. Shah et al. (2001) used an annual mail survey to examine whether patterns of new media provided information or contained the possibility of strengthening bonding ties related to the individual level production of social capital (p. 145). Reminiscent of the early work on SCT, researchers' revisited how social capital is the nexus of individual effort; however, Shah, et al. (2001) did not support this hypothesis. The researchers noted, "if the Internet is to become an important variable in research on social capital, our findings indicate that it must be conceptualized to better care" (p. 154). Other scholars echoed the sentiment because much of the early research on online communities assumed individuals used new media to seek and share information. The concentration of research moved from information gatekeeping to connecting to others based on shared identities or interests regardless of location (Nie, 2001; Donath & boyd, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Social media is noted to be a powerful way to provide an infrastructure to build communities. Fiesler and Fleck (2013) explain the lineage of social capital's direct linkage to social media use; however, the strongest contribution was the metaphor provided to describe the lineage. Social capital is a metaphor can be described as an individual performance of an actor within a network, the performance of groups or certain clusters within the network, or the overall performance of the network (Fiesler and Fleck, 2013, p. 762). Based on previous recommendations by Shah et al, (2001), researchers have now collapsed social capital to be synonymous with individual effort within a network and the resources and benefits of such networks. Reminiscent of early SCT research, scholars argued that the multidisciplinary approach to social capital has caused the conceptualization of key terms to be slippery (Williams, 2006; Resnick 2001; Ellison et al. 2007). It is no longer seen as a process of getting to but a tangible resource that is operationalized to measure the profit (outcome) on online interactions.

Williams (2006) noted that the resources of social capital are byproducts of interactions and connections with group members. Resnick (2001) charted the cyclical approaches of SCT to apply the concept of socio-technical capital as a framework for generating and evaluating social media interactions. The researcher explained social capital works to provide a context for how the Internet is used to achieve certain outcomes. Broadly, social capital is used to exchange resources (information or goods), development relationships, and facilitate civic engagement. Resnick (2001) identified socio-technical capital as an immediate outcome that could be measured as the independent variable. The variables to study social capital online refocused back to the bridging and bonding aspects of the traditional SCT research. Social media research supports the interactional relationship of bridging and bonding as tangible outcomes of an online network and is a measurable indicator of social capital.

A comprehensive study by Ellison, et al (2007) was one of the first to address whether social media interactions affect the bridging and bonding aspects of social capital. The researcher hypothesized that intense social media usage will positively associate with the individual-perceived bonding in bridging aspects of social capital. Surveying college students with an electronic survey found a positive relationship in regards to bridging and bonding aspects of social capital and social media use. From these findings the products of social capital is synonymous with networking. By using social media and networking sites, a person can make more connections and meaningful connections to the greatest benefit.

To this point, I have shown the lineage of core concepts of social capital theory that lead to a discussion of the structural dimension of FKN and how social capital and networking are studied and measured. SCT began within social science to examine the possibility that individual effort or group membership may create profitable social capital gains. As the theory

was used across disciplines, the theory changed directions, with more study on the structural dimensions of networks. The refocus created a recursive and cyclical reasoning applied to FKN that social capital is profitable and beneficial to an individual who uses a combination of resources within multiple and meaningful connections to networks. The connections could occur through various interpersonal settings, whether face-to-face or social media-based. I created Figure 1 to represent the recursive relationship of how social capital gains are accomplished. The recursive nature exists as BWA use of resources through FKN of face-to-face or social media interactions that ultimately create benefits of knowledge, emotional support, and a sense of belonging.

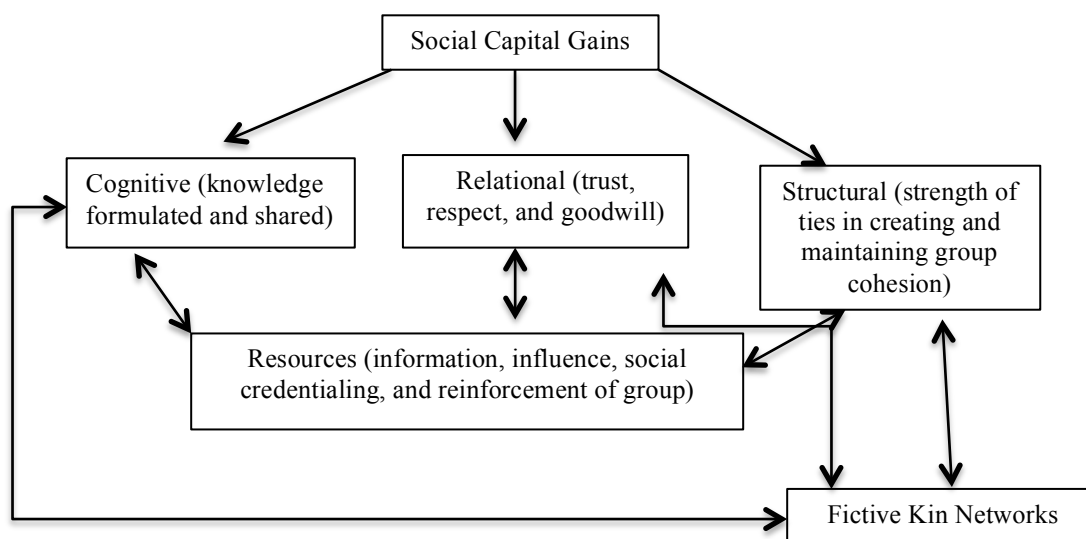


Figure 1.1 Recursive relationships of SCT and FKN

Arguably, SCT redirected focus from classic research of human and cultural dimensions to mainly focus on the structural dimensions of networking. The historical application of SCT may seem to fall outside the scope of this study, but a clear path of research within the context of FKN is applicable. My work is reclamation of SCT historically dominated by White men in an attempt to use the tools of the master to dismantle and call attention to injustices. Lorde (2003)

warns, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change...I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here” (p. 1). I started with my personal story and the use of narratives from BWA to “reach down into the deep place of knowledge” to explore our pain and struggles. I challenge Lorde’s argument that by reclaiming a highly cited theory by the privileged, I manually and boldly carve our space for BWA. I reclaimed the theory in the spirit of “the master’s tools won’t destroy his house, because they’re only his tools so long as he controls them. Once they are reclaimed, they belong to all of us. And our tools can do anything” (Robinson, 2017).

My study contributes to the SCT developments as a way of broadening the scope of the theory and articulating new paths to knowledge to encourage theory maturity. By tracing the lineage of SCT to FKN, I established a valid area of study of BWA use of FKN to build and maintain networks via intentional interactions. FKN research offers promise as a safe space for BWA to learn how to create and maintain networks of support that can ultimately benefit the overall academic institution.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and Critical Race Theory

Black feminist thought theorized Black women have access to alternate views of oppression because of the combination of being Black and female. The unique position is not a universal truth or reality, but a wider perspective (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) insisted the usefulness of identifying and using one's standpoint in researching to produce a descriptive analysis of race, gender, and class is essential to understanding power and culture. Crenshaw

(1989) used BFT to argue Black women's experiences cannot be contained as simply being a woman or Black, but must include the intersection of these two marginalized groups. Harris-Lacewell (2004) suggested the compound effect of the matrix of domination is a catalyst for BFT to provide a space to negotiate the meanings of multiple oppressions affecting Black women.

The business of Black women carving spaces to encourage “heterogeneous dialogue so that, in the end, diversely rich understanding of Black womanhood can be heard” is the crux of BFT (Coleman, 2013). Harris-Perry (2011) contended that the primary goal of BFT is to create a space to give voice to Black women to acknowledge the challenges they face and seek to understand the language, and experiences that can mentally and physically emancipate them. In their efforts to fully articulate the magnitude and severity of the matrix of domination facing Black women within the academy, BFT scholars employed intersectionality of race and gender (Collins, 2000; Gines, 2011). Intersectionality positions itself as a theoretical advance from BFT. The concept not only foregrounds the oppression of marginalized groups, but extends the tradition of articulating the identity development and struggles of the multiple oppressive positions in which Black women reside (Nash, 2008).

A common mistake in research using intersectionality involves crediting Crenshaw (1989) with the “coining” of the term. Collins and Bilge (2014) point out the “coining” was not the inception of intersectionality as a theory but served the purpose of academic norms of ownership of cultural capital (p. 81). Crenshaw (1989) used the term “intersectionality” as a theoretical advance from BFT to articulate Black women's unique perspective on race, gender, and class. She argued that Black women's struggles cannot be contained as simply being a woman or Black, but the intersection of these two marginalized groups. Black feminist scholars

and practitioners theorized the concept of intersectionality as an interconnected web of sexism, racism, and separation based on class (Collins, 2000).

Gines (2011) argued that intersectionality is not a new term but a framework built on the pleas of inclusion from Black feminist pioneers like Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Elise Johnson-McDougald, Frances Beale, bell hooks, Audré Lorde, Alice Walker, Deborah King, Angela Davis, and more. These women articulated the multi-dimensional struggle of Black women in different time periods and contexts, but the conjoining undercurrent of each was that Black women are placed in subjugated spaces by a combination of racism, classism, and sexism. According to Carbado et. al (2013) intersectionality is a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool. The researchers outline the history of the intersectionality theory from law to how the theory can be used as a resistant method:

In the 1989 landmark essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term to address the marginalization of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics. Two years later, Crenshaw (1991) further elaborated the framework in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” There, she employed intersectionality to highlight the ways in which social movement organization and advocacy around violence against women elided the vulnerabilities of women of color, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities...She exposed and sought to dismantle the instantiations of marginalization that operated within institutionalized discourses that legitimized existing power relations (e.g., law); and at the same time, she placed into sharp relief how discourses of resistance (e.g., feminism and antiracism) could themselves function as sites that produced and legitimized marginalization.

Agreeing with Carbado et al (2013) that the uses of the framework of intersectionality is “never done” and a “work in progress” allows a reimagining of terms to be applied to various contexts outside of law. Collins and Bilge (2016) explains intersectionality is often used to “solve problems that they or others face” (p. 3). Guided by Cho, et al (2013), I go straight to the

crux of framework to use intersectionality as an analytic tool to explore what the combination of race, gender, and my reconceptualization of class *does* to BWA rather than merely discussing the interlocking oppression of the BWA identity (p. 5). Instead of using class in regard to social economic positioning as traditional theorists (Crenshaw 1989, 1991, Cho, et al. 2013), I conceptualized the concept of class to emphasize the injustice of faculty ranks. I defined “class” within the intersectionality context as the faculty rank system that bequeaths preferential treatment to those with advanced degrees. To this end, as intersectionality can include any combination of identities that can present various set issues, I privilege race, gender, and faculty ranking (class) as the primary focus because Black women are “simultaneously black and female and workers” (Collins & Bilge, p. 3).

Crawford, et al. (2012) noted university faculty rank systems create hierarchical structures and each step in promotion is based on the institutional criteria (p. 42). To achieve tenure and/or promotion a faculty member must excel in scholarship, service, and teaching (Edwards & Foley, 2011). Within the scholarship category, BWA without a doctorate degree fall short and must overcompensate in other areas such as teaching and service. Evans (2007) noted that Black women are usually relegated to lower ranks, do more non-scholarship activities like student advising/mentoring, and provide more service to the college and community (p. 132). The idea of class is further compounded by what Meyers (2012) explained as the hierarchical system of dominance that disadvantages marginalized groups because academic culture serves the interest of White men. The professorate is considered a “gentlemen’s club” designated for those with the required and accepted credentials, and “outsiders need not apply” (Evans, 2007, p. 132). The combination of BWA entrusted to do tasks not considered in the

tenure process and the historical hierarchical structure of the academy informs my conceptualization of class as an extension of the use of the intersectionality framework.

Intersectionality as a concept offers a perspective separate from racial and feminist observations because Black women are described as saddled with oppression due to the intersection of race, gender, and the reconceptualization of class in the academy. To use intersectionality as a theoretical framework to analyze the struggles of Black women, Alexander-Floyd (2012) established three requirements:

1. Intersectionality research must focus on women of color as political subjects and the impact on their lives.
2. The study should center on the voice and stories of women of color by women of color.
3. The methodology should challenge traditional ways of research. (p. 19)

Using the idea of the voices of women of color to offer counter-narratives provides a clear connection to critical race theory. CRT originated from the critical legal studies of the 1970's and the academic response to the civil rights movement. Critical race theorists questioned how the ideology of racism became ingrained in the judicial system, but the tenets of CRT can be applied to other contexts. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain CRT is grounded in the idea of legal indeterminacy, which means the notion that not every legal case has one correct outcome. The basic tenets note racism as the foundation of democracy, (and as such, it is difficult to eradicate because it benefits the majority), critique the ideal of liberalism, and use counter-narratives of minorities as revisionist history.

Ferguson (2012) notes the initial conception of the academy was intended to teach the dominant liberal ideologies of democracy to educate "good citizens." Higher education's

mission was to defend national identity and shape the national culture. To protect the hegemonic interests of the state, the academy mimicked societal structures of oppression, reified the racial boundaries of minority groups and privileged “proper” subjects. Howard-Baptiste and Harris (2014) calls out the falsehood of the liberal ideology by saying that “not only is academe an unreceptive environment, it intentionally fails to acknowledge the experience of Black women” (p. 9). The counter-narratives of institutional barriers counters what Fergerson (2012) notes is the purpose of the academy. The use of narrative and counter-narratives are essential tools to challenge racism within the academy (Ladson-Billing, 2000). I use the CRT tenet of accepting racism as inevitable to freely/boldly/unabashedly articulate instances of racism and other forms of oppression that offer a revisionist account of the academy from my perspective. From our collective voices, we isolate ways in which Black women experience cultural violence within the academy.

Heavily informed by BFT, intersectionality, and CRT, I use narratives from BWA as psychic preservation of the oppressed, a challenge to the hegemonic ideology of research, and a tool to offer a solution to the problem. The collections of the theoretical traditions unite around not only creating a space to speak truth to power, but articulating an exploration of the problem along with a call for a solution. The use of narratives collected through autoethnographies and in-depth interviews are critical in "dismantling hegemonic knowledge and discourse" (Cook & Williams, 2015) because stories allow us to look at the problem from multiple angles and challenge power.

The literature review outlined the historical evolution of SCT evolution to FKN with a discussion on how relevant bridging and bonding research creates a space to apply sister circles to BWA. I explained my theoretical framework derived from a combination of BFT,

intersectionality, and CRT to justify my positionality as a researcher and methodology. Due to the lack of concrete research on BWA and beneficial networks, I use the narratives of BWA taken from my autoethnography and in-depth interviews to address this problem. The following chapter provides methodological information on reflexive analytic autoethnography and in-depth interviews. The chapter concludes with a discussion of my data collection and analysis.

3 METHODOLOGY

The phenomenology of sister circles is understood to be advantageous (Bhopal, 2011; McCray 2011), but current research on BWA and sister circles lacks a concrete example of practice (Cook & Williams, 2015; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; McCray, 2011; Patitu & Hinton; 2003). To fill this void, this study explored the lived experiences of BWA extrapolated from narratives to elicit a tangible method of creating and maintaining beneficial networks. I used a combination of principles from BFT, intersectionality, and CRT that included (1) Black women at the center as political subjects, (2) the use of narratives and counter narratives as the psychic preservation of the oppressed, (3) a challenge to the hegemonic ideology of traditional research utilizing “lived experiences” as data, and (4) the proposition of a solution to the problem. In compliance with my framework, I directly inserted myself into the study in the form of a reflexive analytic autoethnography to add to the collective voice of other BWA. I interviewed fifteen BWA to gather information of their experiences within the academy. I focused on sister circles because I believed informal networks were more beneficial in the individual profits of emotional and communal support. My research questions were:

- 1 In what kinds of networks are BWA involved?
- 2 How are these associations formed and maintained?
- 3 What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women?
- 4 What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks?

The void of praxis pertaining to BWA and sister circles in current research warrants the use the naturalistic inquiry of autoethnography and in-depth interviews. Chapter 3 provides information on naturalistic inquiry, autoethnography and in-depth interview rationales, data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1 Naturalistic Qualitative Research Design

Naturalistic inquiry is used to explore how people perceive their lived experiences and use the detailed descriptions of everyday life to answer research questions (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Naturalistic inquiry uses the voices of the participants in the form of narratives (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Lindolf & Taylor, 2000). Ideally, narratives offer a way to explore the marginalized and silenced lives through the words of the subject of study (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Bochner (2012) explains, "By emphasizing the stories people tell about their lives; these writers construct narratives as both a means of knowing and a way of telling about the social world" (p. 155). The telling of stories to analyze social situations is why so many feminists use ethnographies as an approach to systematically employ personal experiences in the juxtaposition of the cultural experiences (Raab, 2013). My research fits naturalistic inquiry based on the parameters of using real life to understand the culture of oppression within the context. I use the voice of the informants to reconstruct the effects of oppression (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000).

This study personifies "embodied practice" since I placed myself as part of the study and the primary instrument for data collection (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) state for a study to fall within the naturalistic assumptions, the researcher should study the phenomena within a real context, use multiple methodological procedures, use purposeful sampling with an emergent design, and engage in member checks when analyzing the data. My study falls within the naturalistic assumptions because I used my experiences within the academy to understand my complex traumas with students and colleagues. Along with my own experiences, I interviewed other BWA to use different kinds of data collection methods. My purposeful sample were BWA who were part of formal or informal networks. As I conducted

the research, I constantly reflected on what I was learning from these women, while comparing our experiences.

To use emergent design in accordance with naturalistic inquiry, I realized I needed to revise the member check approach during the data collection phase of my project on how I presented my data. Initially, I intended to present the autoethnography separately from the interview data as distinct chapters. To adhere to my theoretical framework of inserting myself as the subject and to present my experiences alongside my participants, I decided to present the data as a collective set. I used a separate narrative and analysis structure (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000) in the form of a reflexive analytic autoethnography and the collective experiences of the participants as answers to the research questions from the interviews. I presented the findings separately in Chapter 5 that analyzed the data as a collective.

Autoethnographies and personal narratives acquired through in-depth interviews are commonly used to study BWA (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Edwards, et al., 2011; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Wallace, et al., 2014; Jarmon, 2001). Specifically, Jarmon (2001) detailed her experiences with an autoethnographic study to “contextualize my journey as a Black woman scholar in the academy” that shared her teaching, community service, research and scholarship journey (p. 177). From the discussion of her difficulties within the academy, Jarmon (2001) implored the academy to support BWA with formal mentoring opportunities. The use of her own story added to the collective voices of BWA and call to action (Myers, 2002; Ross, 2003). Similarly, Chang, et al. (2013) collected data from 28 tenure-track women of color through critical ethnographic in-depth interviews finding that BWA need formal mentoring opportunities, as well as sister circles for emotional support.

3.2 Autoethnography

As a method, autoethnographies allow the researcher to use herself as the product of study. The use of oneself as the focus enables the researcher to use autoethnographies as both a process (doing ethnographic research) and product (writing an ethnography) (Ellis, et al., 2011). The researcher uses a magnifying glass on a lived experience to better understand the culture (Raab, 2013), but more importantly, to provide distance from the experiences to give an objective analysis. Bochner (2012) clarifies "doing" autoethnographies uses the first person perspective to tell a personal story that discloses hidden details with a single case that cannot or should not be generalized (p. 158). It is widely understood and accepted that qualitative research is not generalizable (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011).

The personal and emotional connection of the story allows the research to be “self-reflective.” Raab (2013) expounds self- reflexivity involves living in the moment and continuously fostering an ongoing conversation with the self about the lived experience. Humphreys (2005) uses self-reflection in *Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes* to describe his personal story of a career change. The author uses autoethnographies as a method to attempt to "construct a window so the reader can view some pleasure and pain" (p. 842). Humphreys describes himself as the subject and identifies the audience as other qualitative researchers and breaks tradition of objectivity by engaging the reader with direct references to the reader perspective and interpretation. Bochner (2012) contends reflexivity is the heart of autoethnographic research because self-reflexivity is looking inward for meaning while acknowledging the dangers in the possibility of being self-indulgent and narcissistic.

The product is not just an account of a situation, phenomenon, or event, but what Ellis, et al. (2011) call an “epiphany” or filling in the gap in current research. The use of rich

descriptions of the experiences through the facets of storytelling makes autoethnography distinct from other methodologies. The purpose of thick descriptions facilitates an understanding of a culture to move the reader to feel emotions expressed in the writing and understand the viewpoint or lived experience of the researcher (Ellis, et al., 2011). As previously stated, the gap in research on BWA and sister circles is a suitable topic for the use of autoethnographies. To this end, I used my life in a form of a story with rich detail to share my experiences and to understand my view of the academic culture.

There are several documented approaches to autoethnography such as reflexive, personal narrative, and analytical autoethnography. Researchers conducting reflexive autoethnography are changed as a result of doing the observational study and fieldwork. Personal narratives are stories about the author that focused on different facets of life. Narrative autoethnography presents data as texts that incorporate the researcher's experiences into ethnographic description and analysis (Ellis, et al., 2011). Pace (2012) explains that analytic autoethnography allows the researcher to visibly be the subject of the study, a member of the culture, allows reflexivity, engages with the reader directly, and uses theory to learn from and about the situation. Each kind of autoethnography can be used to analyze personal experiences about culture, identity, and power.

My autoethnography is a reflexive analytic autoethnography because as a member of the subject of study, I used myself as the main character in my stories to understand academic culture. More important, the analysis of my reflexive analytic autoethnography changed how I see myself in the academy. Initially, I chose stories that I deemed as trauma points in my career. The first story was a major event in my career because it not only involved a student, but interactions with my mentor, chair, and members of my sister circle. I chose the content for the

second story because during the four-year period, I withdrew from the institution that began a downward spiral of depression. I chose my journal entries during this period to provide context of my emotional and psychological state.

By telling and reliving some of the most traumatic experiences in my academic career as stories, my reflexive analytic autoethnography exposed my strengths, weaknesses, and innermost fears. Forber-Pratt (2015) noted that autoethnographic writing is like standing naked for the academic community to critique. I risked vulnerability in my stories to understand my pain and use those experiences as a catalyst for overall change within the academy. I wanted to present a unique position on how certain experiences with students and colleagues shaped me as a BWA. The advantage of using my own story as a starting point allowed me an opportunity to reconfigure my experiences to ultimately transform myself (Chang, 2008). In an attempt to avoid the autoethnographic pitfall of accusations of being narcissistic (Forber-Pratt, 2015), and to resist being a passive recipient of my results, I used select recommendations by Crang and Cook (2007):

- 1 Write in first person, address the reader directly, and refer to the subject community as “us.”
- 2 Write the autoethnography as stories to be accessible to a wider audience.
- 3 Write the autoethnography as “truthful fictions” by using real situations presented as fictional writing with characters, storylines, subtexts, dialogues and monologues.

I told each story in first person while addressing the reader directly. Even though my stories are part of my dissertation, I wanted my stories to be accessible by non-academic readers to convey how I experienced the academy. I do not assert that my narratives are the only

account of a BWA; however, each is a story of how I felt during difficult periods of my career to offer an additional representation of the life of BWA.

3.3 In-depth Interviews

Bathmaker (2010) recommends multiple angles of construction in a study that consists of the researcher, respondent (subject of the study), and the reader. To this end, I use a common method of acquiring the stories through in-depth interviews of BWA who are part of either formal mentoring or sister circle groups (Andrews, et al., 2002; Frey, Botan, and Kreps, 2000). In-depth interviews are one-on-one interactions or a “conversation with a purpose” meant to reveal secrets and hidden revelations for participants within a context of the study (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). The major purpose of in-depth interviewing is to understand the social actor's experience, knowledge, and worldview as a social process of gathering information within a certain cultural context (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011).

Data collected from in-depth interviews allows the subject to tell her story in her own words. I used the words of participants to ensure trustworthiness and integrity of data collection and analysis. I used direct quotes from their accounts of significant experiences that shaped their lives. Lemberger-Truelove (2018) notes that through narratives “and verbal sketches, which constitute the data, the researcher is able to interpret, clarify, and understand the lived experiences of another” (p. 78). Narratives extrapolated from in-depth interviews document the life experiences of individuals situated within a group or organizational context can provide nuanced data that can help understand complex inter-relationships (Bathmaker, 2010; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). In-depth interviews allowed me to use the language used by BWA, gather information about what they see, ask about the past, and validate information from other sources.

In-depth interviews can be conducted in three different formats. A structured interview consists of a strict interview question sequence and protocol (Baxter and Babbie, 2003). An unstructured interview provides the greatest freedom for the researcher to ask questions to follow any line of inquiry that may be of interest (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). The benefits of using a highly structured interview protocol insures each participant has equal opportunity to address the questions, whereas unstructured interviews allow more flexibility to explore certain points and build a stronger rapport with participants (Van Zoonen, 1994; Baxter & Babbie, 2003). The disadvantage of either interview structure stifles the ability of the researcher. The structured interview does not offer the opportunity for the researcher to explore answers in depth and primarily focus on the researchers' point of view. The unstructured interview does not yield consistent data from the interview because the researcher may ask different questions to each participant (Baxter & Babbie, 2003).

To mediate the pros and cons, qualitative researchers use semi-structured interviews by outlining the questions and improvising probing questions during the interview (Frey, Botan, and Kreps, 2000). Semi-structured interviews are preferable due to the latitude afforded to the researcher that allows enough consistency to make explicit comparisons of participants' responses (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). As Van Zoonen (1994) explains, "the planned nature of the semi-structured interview is to be taken quite loosely, however, since the final aim remains to reconstruct people's experiences and interpretations of their own terms" (p. 137). For this reason, I chose to use semi-structured interviews that asked the same questions of each participant and followed-up on any lines of inquiry that needed clarification.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 *Autoethnography*

Autoethnography as a method can be difficult (Forber-Pratt, 2015) but rewarding (Dyson, 2007). The difficulty comes from trying to understand others. It is a complicated shift of perspective that must be wedged in the need to tell stories of the soul that open the perspective to understand others (Ellis, 2004). I love to tell stories, therefore this why I chose to use my own story as a starting point presented as an autoethnographic timeline. Chang (2008) explains an autoethnographical time “documents extraordinary events of moments of life and routines represented the ordinaries of life” (p. 74). I selected difficult and life altering experiences in my career in regards to my positionality as a BWA. Since autoethnographies are viable means of data collection, I wanted to ensure the integrity of the data collection process by following Ellis’s (2004) guidance of writing my narrative once I have established some distance from the lived experience to preserve the integrity of the story. I allowed enough chronological distance to be bold enough to document and share these painful experiences.

Autoethnographic data collection methods include narratives, co-constructed narratives, or layered accounts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My intention was to paint a vivid picture of my interactions with students, colleagues and administrators. The first story was from my point of view in a narrative with characters, storylines, and dialogue. The second story was mainly an internal monologue of vignettes over a three-year period. For both narratives, I used my personal journal as field notes. Raab (2012) notes observations include journals, personal notes, or professional correspondence. I have kept a personal journal since the age of twelve. During my early teaching career, I heavily documented interactions with students and colleagues for therapeutic purposes. I wrote about issues I had in class, familial relationships, and my spiritual

growth. I used my journal as an outlet when I felt alone, isolated, confused, or angry. I used my journals to remind me of the lessons I needed to learn and issues to overcome, and assist in memory recall (Goodall, 2000). This approach enabled me to be truthful and authentic in retelling these stories.

Ellis (2004) noted that to use the back and forth gaze, the researcher must focus outwardly on social and cultural aspects of a story. The back and forth gaze allows the researcher to focus on one's story from different chronological angles to present a fully developed story. In the first story, I used the story of my experience with a White male student to represent the difficulties I faced as a BWA. I detailed my experience with my formal and informal networks from a voyeur perspective as a story. I wanted to show the outward aspects of my experience. The second portion of my reflexive analytic autoethnography is presented as first person monologues with segments from my journal. I chose to change from a story to a running commentary to represent the forward gaze. I shifted from my past experience to my inner dialogue to "expose a vulnerable self" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). I shared my feelings and fears during an institutional restructuring. The progression from looking at my experiences as a BWA from the wide view of watching/telling a story to shifting to my inner turmoil, allowed me as the researcher to articulate how I managed to deal with the hegemonic pressures of the academy.

Cho and Trent (2006) suggest to ensure validity in autoethnographic writing, the researcher must employ member checks. I adapted the member check process created by Forber-Pratt (2015) to ask (a) if it makes sense to me, (b) if it makes sense to my sister circle members, and (c) if it makes sense to an outside reader. I used the questions as guidelines to first read, reread, revise, and then reread my autoethnography in its entirety to see if I had a sense of anything missing. I wanted to ensure my characters in the first story truly represented how I saw

the situation and the factual timeline of events. During the sister circle member check, Nakia amended my memory recall of events in regards to our discussions in the first story. She reminded me of the sequence of events, which entailed my talking to the chair first, instead of my mentor. Nakia has the innate ability to remember minor details and dates; therefore I trusted her recall with the sequence of conversations. In the second story, she noted that felt guarded because the journal entries were summarized rather than written verbatim. It did not “feel” authentic. Trinity insisted that I include the nonverbal aspects of my interaction with the chair to show possible power dynamics in the first story. River offered structural reformatting of the second story to help the flow. The final member check involved a friend enrolled in the same doctoral program as my outside reader. She did not know me during the time period of the autoethnography; therefore, I believed she could offer an objective view as to whether I told an interesting and compelling story. She questioned the layout and wording in the first story and the presentation layout of the second story.

My goal was to be authentic and transparent in my autoethnography; therefore, I revised each story according to my member check suggestions. Cho and Trent (2006) recommend that I remain truthful in my account even when I felt the representation was negative. I wanted my readers to see/feel my feelings and relate the characters to show the pain I felt. Based on the layers of member checks, I included my journal entries verbatim, not as summaries. I revised the timeline of events, included more nonverbal details in the first story, and altered initial layout for accuracy of events.

3.4.2 In Depth Interviews

To gather data for the in-depth interviews, I used a mixed purposeful sample of the women in my sister circle (Lemberger-Truelove, 2018; McCray, 2011). A mixed purposeful

sample includes a small number of “informants” that can suggest other participants in the study through snowball sampling (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Self-identified BWA who participated in formal or informal networks were selected as participants. My sister circle met the criteria. Once receiving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission from Georgia State University (Appendix A), I interviewed each member of my sister circle. After each interview, I sent recruitment verbiage for additional participants to be forwarded to future recruits (Appendix B). After each recruited participant, I repeated the practice of forwarding recruitment verbiage for more participants until I reached twelve including my sister circle members. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) recommended twelve participants to reach saturation for in-depth interviews. After I reached saturation, I was contacted by three additional women who wanted to participate. I ended with fifteen (3 sister circle and 12 outside women) participants in the study.

Each participant gave verbal informed consent because the study had an IRB classification of Expedited 6 noting “collection of the data or image recording make for speech purposes” and Expedited 7 of “research on individuals or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus groups, program evaluation, human factor evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.” I was granted a waiver for documented consent per 45CF46.117(c):

An IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

I conducted each interview via telephone and recorded with the recording app on my computer. Interviews lasted an average of 65 minutes. The shortest interview was 35 minutes and the longest was 95 minutes. To be transparent, the longest interview was 111 minutes with 16 minutes off the record per the participant's request. Information from the off-the-record discussion was not included in this dissertation. I wrote notes during the interview on my initial impressions of each participant, possible follow-up questions, notable quotes, and personal observations of the interview. I used my interview notes to assign pseudonyms for each participant. I assigned each participant a female super hero (e.g. SheRo) name from my favorite movie, television show, or comic. Names were assigned based on each respondent's personality and how she matched the name selected. I verified names with participants after the interview to ensure she did not have a name previously selected. Only two participants had preselected names; therefore, I used the participants' selection. Any information gleaned from the interview that could compromise or increase risk to the participants was intentionally omitted from this dissertation. At no time were real names used on my interview logs or recordings. During transcription any identifying characteristics were intentionally omitted. All participants were formally interviewed once.

Lindolf and Taylor (2000) contend that a logical protocol for transcription is imperative to avoid inaccuracy, inconsistencies, and imprecise transcripts. I used REV[®], an online transcription service after all interviews were complete. I ordered verbatim transcripts. Lindolf and Taylor (2000) explain verbatim means "cleaning up much of the linguistic clutter so that the content of what the subject said comes through clearly" (p. 2015). Upon receipt, I verified each transcript to the recording for accuracy and corrected any words mistakenly transcribed in the automated service. My primary focus was on accuracy of the words used by these women, not

manipulation or reinterpretation on my behalf. Lindolf and Taylor (2000) recommend each transcript should be consistently uniformed in format and function. I assigned myself the pseudonym of “Lelu,” the heroine from the 1999 *Fifth Element* movie, as the interviewer. I used participants’ SheRo pseudonyms as the interviewee.

3.5 Data analysis

Traditionally, qualitative research analysis included six basics of preparing and organizing the raw data, coding the data, gathering themes from codes, presenting the findings, interpreting meaning, and validating findings (Creswell, 2008). Ground in the theoretical framework of challenging traditional methodology, I chose to analyze my data from what Chang (2008) called “zooming in and out.” The basic naturalistic data analysis process did not offer me the latitude for the depth of analysis I wanted. I wanted to be able to extrapolate a tangible artifact to help other BWA who could identify with any portion of my study. Chang (2008) explains that “zooming in and out” does not isolate analysis from interpretation, but rather entails a simultaneous process of fractioning and connecting. Fractioning is basically coding the data, whereas connection identifies a relationship to the codes. Codes identify concepts or abstractions of incident in the data (Pace 2012). It is a balancing act of zooming out to look at all the data to compare one data set to another. Chang (2008) clarifies, “the zooming-out approach privileges you with a bird’s eye view of data, which will enable you to see how your own case is related to others, how your case is connected to its context, and how the past has left traces in the present” (p. 129).

Chang (2008) outlined strategies that I simplified to dictate the zooming in and out reminiscent of the constant comparative method (CCM) to “create and compare exhaustive categories” to explain the data (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Kolb (2012) explains CCM is used

to develop themes from the data by coding and analyzing at the same time. Traditionally, CCM consists of comparing incidents applicable to each category, reducing codes, then writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Boeije (2002) lengthened the CCM process, coining the method “purposeful CCM” to include multiple layers of comparison through open coding each data set then comparing the condensed data from various angles. In the following section, I detail the recursive process of my modified zooming in and out method that included these steps:

1. Organized and openly coded each interview and autoethnography (zoom in)
2. Categorized themes (zoom out)
3. Identified exceptional occurrences (zoom in)
4. Analyzed relations of self to others (zoom out)
5. Framed the findings within theory (zoom in).

I organized the data by creating separate folders for the autoethnography and interview materials. The autoethnography folder included copies of relative journal pages, narrative outlines, story lines, timelines, poems, associated research, drafts, and notes from member checks. The second folder included interview protocol, consent verbiage, all transcripts, and interview logs. During the first round of coding, I reviewed all transcripts and interview notes with one-word and/or phrase codes. I went through the transcripts a second time to verify my initial code designation. After I coded the interviews, I coded my autoethnography by looking for the similarities to the participants of the study. I assigned any recognizable codes I saw in my stories. To make sense of the random codes, I categorized random codes with a master Excel spreadsheet with separate sheets for biographical data and research questions one through four. I reread the spreadsheet and compared the transcript-coded pages to ensure I did not miss any codes.

The categorization of the codes into preliminary themes occurred as a zooming out with a “bird’s-eye” perspective on the master spreadsheet. I combined similar or redundant words or phrases into categories from the interviews and autoethnography that could answer each research questions. My final zoom in of the themes produced exceptional occurrences of the additional data to consider outside of my research questions. I added another sheet to the master spreadsheet. These data topics stood out as points of interest that should be discussed (Chang, 2008). I presented this data in Chapter 4.

The final portion of the analysis/interpretation occurred as I compared my autoethnography to the preliminary themes from the research questions. I was able to extrapolate the overall contextual and theoretical implication of the study. I asked myself the following questions, “how is my experience similar to the stories these women shared” and “what benefits did I get from interviewing and talking with these women?” By comparing myself to others, I was able analyze the findings from a much wider zoomed out perspective. Chang (2008) suggested looking at similarities and differences to extend “to other analysis and interpretation strategies such as cross-case comparisons and broader contextualization” (p. 135). I finalized the analysis and interpretation by zooming in the data to relate my overall findings to the theoretical framework of SCT and sister circles. I discuss the broader contextualization and theoretical framework associations in Chapter 5. From the zooming in and out process, I created a practical approach to address the aims of the study.

3.5.1 Trustworthiness, Rigor, and Quality

Golafshani (2003) painstakingly compared various conceptualization of reliability and validity in qualitative research to conclude that “reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality” (p. 604). Instead of searching for repeatability or

generalizability, qualitative research displays trustworthiness, rigor, and quality by using the voice of the participants, member checks, triangulation and examination of previous research. In this study, I used the direct words from the participants in quotes from the interviews. In each stage, I checked and rechecked transcripts and notes for authentication. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that member checks are the best way to enhance credibility of the study. I employed member checks by sharing my findings with participants. I revised the exceptional occurrences with clarification from two participants who corrected quotes. I triangulated the data using the modified zoom in and out method to look at the raw data from multiple perspectives.

Chapter 3 provided an overview of naturalistic inquiry, autoethnography and in-depth interview rationales, data collection and analysis procedures. The following chapter will include my autoethnography, interview data, and exceptional occurrence data.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The ultimate goal of this research was to gather information on how to create and maintain beneficial networks. I designed the study to fill the gap of theory to practice. I used selected principles of BFT, intersectionality, and CRT frameworks to justify the use of personal narratives extracted from my autoethnography and in-depth interviews. To achieve this goal, my research questions were:

1. In what kinds of networks are BWA involved?
2. How are these associations formed and maintained?
3. What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women?
4. What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks?

I started the findings chapter with my autoethnography. The first narrative is the story of my interactions with a White male student, my formal mentor, chair, and members of my sister circle. The second portion is a running commentary of events detailing the emotions, frustrations, and hardships I endured during an institutional restructuring along with journal entry segments.

4.1 Look Back at It: My Story Part 1

*I'm*Visible
 Climbing back into my skin.
 It has been far too long of a journey
 where I departed to follow my soul.
 Gathering the scattered pieces strewn across this earth.
 My spirit has died again
 and again,
 bursting through the flames,
 shedding the red target of my skin.

I am climbing back in.
 Now can you see me?
 You all walk through me,
 Black bodies lost in a sea of white on this campus.

You see through me.
I am invisible.

I am climbing back in.
No you cannot wear me.
You cannot touch me.
I am real.
I am here.
Strength,
in the flesh.

I am climbing back into my skin.
Embracing my identities,
pieces falling beautifully B(l)ack together.
I am climbing back into the power of my wholeness (Fields & Martin, 2017, p. 81)

I started my full-time teaching career at a two-year Southern community college. I spent four years as adjunct at various institutions, but the first few years in the South challenged how I related to students and faculty members. Early on I was visible, radiant, and proud. I felt whole in my purpose, strong, confident, and ready. As a junior faculty member, I wanted to project authority and confidence to my students. I would set lofty (unrealistic) goals to engage each and every student with creativity and innovative teaching. I wanted to ensure that each student would respect and see me as a legitimate scholar. As grand as this may sound, I failed to realize during more than 15 years of teaching that deep down I wanted to be liked by my students. I believed that if my students liked me, they would learn from me. I saw the give and take between student and myself as a basketball game. The more points I could win early in the semester with humor and levity, I could earn their respect and win them over to like me.

I would enter the first day of class with my professorial uniform of stylish business attire. My overall style is classic tailored pieces accented with trendy accessories. Accepting the advice from seasoned faculty, I tried to look more like a traditional faculty member with a professional business suit and minimal jewelry. I look ten years my junior and was often confused by faculty

for a student, not a colleague. I learned early in my teaching career I needed to maintain professional boundaries with students. I had instances in which students try to take advantage of my “fun” and “cool” personality by abusing the attendance policy or tried to submit assignments late. By the time I started this particular semester, I learned how to naturally be myself within the confines of my role as the head of the classroom. At least I thought.

First day of school. I stood in front of the large classroom of uniformed rows of 30 students. I adopted the practice to get to the classroom early to mingle with students as they enter the room. I started class promptly on time. Once I finish the class roll, I introduced myself with my teaching background, teaching philosophy, and finish with “my name is LaVette Burnette. It rhymes so it is easy to remember like a song ‘ta-da-da-da’.” The students giggled. A few actually practiced it. *Score one.* I continued, “I am from Louisville, Kentucky and graduated from Western Kentucky University with my Masters in Communication. Bowling Green, Kentucky is the home of the Corvette, so you can imagine the teasing I endured while in college of ‘little red Lavette’ (in a Prince singing voice).” They laughed again. *Score two.* I finished my introduction with “feel free to call me Ms. Burnette or Professor Burnette. I plan to call you Mr. or Ms. to elicit professionalism and recognizing that you are co-creators in our classroom experience.” Again using classroom management strategies from my mentor and other seasoned faculty, I used titles as a technique to encourage mutual respect and foster a feeling of ownership in their learning experience.

By the third laughter outburst, I knew I had engaged them and felt confident as I moved on to classroom rules and expectations. I felt visible. In the middle of my explanation of how I expected each student to respect one another, a White male student in a camouflage baseball cap with a fishing hook on the side of the brim abruptly said, “LaVette, is this class hard?” The

classroom went silent. My immediate thought was I heard him incorrectly (my name does rhyme). I already went over the preferred way to address me; therefore, I must have been mistaken.

I smiled. "I did not hear your question, what did you say?"

He returned my smile. "I said, LaVette is this class hard? I mean, I heard you were cool, but seriously I don't want this class if you are going to try to be a hard ass. I don't need a hard class."

I frowned and in a firm voice I said, "Let me be very clear. My name is Ms. Burnette or Professor Burnette to you. I ask for your respect as a faculty member and if you cannot abide by this simple request, this may not be the right class for you. To answer your question, this class is not hard. I try to lay out the material in ways you can understand and use in your real life. However, it is only hard if you make it that way."

By this point, I was ready to smack the shit out of this kid. He leaned back in his chair then moved forward to grab his dirty camouflage bag and said, "I heard you were cool, so I thought it would be cool to call you LaVette. Besides, I thought I only had to call teachers with a Ph.D. professor. Not you because you ain't got one. I don't need this shit." He stood and stormed out without a word.

Clutch pearls.

Wide-eyed, the students stared at me. I had to take a deep breath and try to regain my composure and temper. I felt challenged and somewhat like I lost all the points I earned early in the class. I was convinced if I were a White man, he would have not assumed he could call me by my first name. I lost my composure and feared I solidified the "angry Black woman" stereotype that I desperately try to not portray. As I stood there in front of my students, I

apologized for my behavior with a weak statement of “folks, I am so sorry for the outburst. If you would like to discuss any concerns, please see me after class or in my office during office hours.” No one stayed or came to my office.

I lost them. I lost the game.

A few days later, the department chair stopped me in the hallway. He was a White middle-aged self-proclaimed feminist who prided himself on being fair to his faculty and staff; I liked him. I appreciated how he tried to be a buffer in the battle between administrative bureaucracy and faculty academic freedom. He tapped my arm. “Follow me to my office.”

I followed.

“LaVette, have a seat. I got a complaint from a student that you yelled at him in front of the class,” as he said as he stood over me with his arms crossed leaning back on his desk with a wry grin on his face. I clasped my hands in my lap to not portray the fury I felt. I returned his smile saying in steady voice “No, I told a disrespectful student the correct way to address me. I told the class the proper way to address me, but he refused and used profanity in my class.”

He dismissed the statement with a faint wave. He said, “maybe he was joking. You know how kids are these days. He felt like you took it too serious.” All I could think was *stay calm*. *Do not be ABW*. If I snapped, I would confirm his accusation that I was over-reacting.

“I will consider that angle. I have to get ready for my next class.” I stood to leave.

“Just relax, LaVette. Do not worry about it. Kids will be kids.” He stood and reached out to put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I nodded as I backed away to avoid his unsolicited touch. I felt justified in my reaction to the student but at that moment I felt dismissed. As I walked from the chair’s office, Teddy, a 50-ish year old White male who is five years from retirement beckoned me into his office. Teddy was my assigned mentor as part of the new

faculty program early in the year. To this point our interactions were quite fruitful with advice on the shortcuts to getting my computer fixed quickly to teaching me efficient tactics to streamline my grading.

“LaVette, I heard about your run-in with a student. Do you have a minute?”

My eyes widen. My heartbeat quickened. I slowly turned around. As I walked in his office and shut the door I said, “How did you hear about it? I did not know it was public knowledge. I mean it just happened early this week.” He sat behind his desk and crossed his legs. “He came to see me after going to the chair. I had him for another class last semester. He asked me if you were a hard-ass.” He chuckled. “I told him you were an excellent teacher. I was concerned about your outburst though.”

I stiffened. “Did he tell you that he called me by my first name, openly disrespected me in class, and stormed out? I do not think it is fair to assume I had an outburst for no good reason. I am sure he did not call you Teddy on the first day of class. Why is it acceptable for him to call me LaVette after I told the class to call me Ms. Burnette? How is that fair?”

Teddy nodded his head but refocused the discussion on my “outburst.” “Why did you react that way? It is just not professional. LaVette, sometimes students are just assholes. No, he never called me Teddy, but seriously is it really a big deal what he calls you? You are the professor. Never forget that. I am sure this will blow over. Just keep your cool and don’t let these kids push your buttons.”

At this point, I felt like I am not being heard or clearly articulating the point that I should not have to accept disrespectful behavior such as dismissing my authority in the classroom. My position in the classroom is not this issue here. “No problem. I will remember that. In case he

returns to you, please tell him I look forward to working with him.” I left without waiting for a response.

I returned to my office and locked my door. Tears streamed down my face as questions swirled in my head. I replayed the conversation with the chair and Teddy. How could they not understand this kid challenged me in class? Why could they not see it? Why am I at fault here? I cried in my office until I realized I had another class. I reapplied my make-up, regained my wits and prepared for class.

That night I called Nakia. A friend since we were teens, Nakia and I talked regularly. We attended the same university, pledged the same sorority, and followed the same professional path as academics. Our friendship matured in graduate school as we formed a study group with two other BWA, Trinity and River. Over the years, we all maintained contact through phone calls and face-time chats due to living in different states. Nakia, Trinity, and River had affiliations outside our sister circle. Trinity and River pledged our sorority at the same time two years prior and served as “big sisters.” As a collective, we talked as a group occasionally, but the bulk of our interactions were one-on-one interactions. I received calls when one of my sisters needed information on classroom management or teaching techniques. I was the first in our group to teach full time. Nakia offered conflict resolution management with her degree in counseling and working with first year at-risk students. Trinity served as a gatekeeper of contacts in different areas of higher education. She worked in various parts of private institutions and understood academic politics. River had insight to networking strategy, marketing, and communication.

“Sup, sis?” I said as I stretched out on my bed trying to get comfortable. Our conversation could last a while.

“Hi, honey. What are you up to? You sound weird, what’s wrong?” Nakia said in her calming husky voice. I can hear her settling into her leather couch.

I spill it. I told her everything. The more I talked the angrier I got. I told her how camo boy ran to the chair, how the chair dismissed me with a wave, and tried to “comfort” me. I told her how Teddy heard about it and told me I was overacting. I ended my rant with, “am I wrong?”

I could hear Nakia grin. She said, “Do you feel like you were wrong?”

“No.”

“Really?”

Annoyed, I reply, “no. I mean that little shit was just being an ass.”

“LaVette, yeah he should have not called you by your name. You know how micro-aggression works. Yeah, he was disrespectful, but sis, you are overly sensitive sometimes. You don’t like to be challenged. Remember what happened with that other White boy. Why are you acting like you don’t know the game? I mean for real, you know what the kid was doing, why fall for it? You are smarter than that.”

I felt briefly vindicated, then scolded. In my early teaching experience, I had a White male student wait for me after class to discuss a grade. The discussion escalated quickly because he challenged the speech grade and would not accept my explanation. He yelled at me that I was not being fair. I yelled back. I quickly regained my emotions, apologized and tried to de-escalate the situation. The student was not responsive to my attempt and dropped my class. I felt threatened by him, but after reflection I believe my aggression worsened the situation. Nakia reminded me I had an issue with being challenged and reacting with aggression. Since both of these occurrences involved White male students, I justified my feeling of disrespect as racially motivated.

Unwilling to yield, I said, “Do you think he would call Teddy by his first name?”

She sighed. “No, most likely not. But, what does that have to do with you. Sis, you know the game. Why are you acting brand new? You are the teacher, you set the example. You cannot take one situation as disrespect. You have to let them hang themselves. Do not react to ignorance. You know better. I know you.”

Through tears, I told her how I felt belittled because no one understood why I was angry. I replayed the situation, but after a lengthy discussion I began to try to accept my experience with racism and sexism in the academy and recognize how it influenced my perception. We moved on to other topics. In the back of my mind, I questioned if the situation was not solely centered around on racism or sexism, but my reaction. We ended laughing as we co-watched a sitcom. I ended the call feeling better because of the laughter.

The next day, I walked into my class to find camo-boy back in my class. I conducted class as if I did not notice his absence or return. He came to me after class. He adjusted his hat. “LaVette,” he coughed and then said, “I mean, Professor Burnette. I am sorry about the other day. I was out of line.”

I looked him in the eyes and smiled. “I am sorry as well. I should not have taken it personally and reacted so poorly. I had problems in the past with looking so young, I thought it would be one of those situations.”

We both exhaled. As we talked, I asked him why he felt so comfortable to call me by my first name. He explained that he had never had a professor “like me” and really did not know how to react to me. He had limited experiences with people of color and ended with “but I am not racist though.” I reassured him I did not think he was racist. We were both at fault and it spoke to his character for coming to me to apologize. As I left the classroom, I told him I really

appreciated him coming to me and I learned to not automatically assign malicious intent. I felt empowered to listen as I heard Nakia's voice in my head, "*You know the game.*"

At that moment, talking to cam-boy, I felt visible.

4.2 Look Back at Me: My Story Part 2

I am a Black woman
 tall as a cypress
 strong
 beyond all definition still
 defying place
 and time
 and circumstance
 assailed
 impervious
 indestructible
 Look
 on me and be
 renewed (*Evans, 2004*).

I am a Black female full-time tenured faculty member at a growing state university. I once felt like a cypress. Rooted and dedicated to the institutional mission. I was proud of my teaching record and stellar departmental chair annual evaluations. As a state college, the emphasis was on teaching and service. I excelled in both. I taught five to six classes a semester, served on departmental committees, chaired college-wide committees, and chaired hiring committees, along with being an active advisor for two minority student organizations. I spent three to four hours on weeknights with my student organizations. I was grounded in my mission to teach and uplift my students in and out of the classroom. I was rewarded for my hard work with a college-wide student appreciation award given to one faculty member a year. I made a point to be present on campus and do all that was asked of me to secure my roots in my university.

My teaching and service record overshadowed the scholarship category because scholarship was narrowly redefined after the institutional restructuring as publishing in peer-reviewed journals. I understood scholarship to include participation in professional development and presentations at conferences. I presented at local conferences and participated in our departmental and institutional professional development opportunities. My time was mainly spent teaching and engaging in service. I did not focus on research because it did not hold my interest; my primary mission was teaching and service. I did not have the time to commit to research projects teaching five (sometimes six) classes a semester. I was confident in my record and my lack of scholarship did not hinder my chances for promotion to Associate Professor or the acquisition of tenure. I was awarded both.

To my dismay, the institutional mission shifted during the consolidation with a similarly sized institution. Even with the changes, I wanted to be part of the “new normal.” During our initial meetings with our counterparts, I felt negated by the questions of my credentials and lack of scholarship. Instead of teaching and service, credentials and scholarship were the focus of promotion and tenure. At the time, I held a master’s degree but served as committee chair to hire both “junior” faculty who earned doctorates. Based on the historical precedence and my understanding of seniority, I thought I outranked them based on time, but as the mission and priorities shifted, my *seniority* status was reclassified.

Standing in line awaiting my name to be called, I smiled at my friend and fellow faculty member. We chatted about the year, celebrated submitting grades and shared our hopes for the much needed summer vacations. I enjoyed graduations. It was an opportunity for me to see faculty from across the institution. I loved seeing my graduating students at the ceremony. I used those special opportunities to wish my communication students a proper farewell.

Historically, faculty line-up was designated by seniority with those who were at the institution the longest by marching in the front of the line. That year, I was moving my way to the front with the “old white haired” crew. I dubbed them the “old white haired crew” because all of them had grey hair and had no less than twenty years with our institution respectively. An unspoken perk of marching in first was understood. You had influence to set the pace and tone for other faculty. I wanted to set that pace.

As I watched her sashay up and down the line with her magical clipboard putting faculty in their place, all I could think was I am finally getting my chance. One row closer. I anxiously listened for my name of where I expected to be called. She smiled at me and passed me by. By row three, where I knew I should be, I noticed confusion on the faces of some faculty because we were no longer in order by seniority. I looked dismayed as I realized I stood in front of a faculty member in my department that I hired and a new faculty member from another department. The two faculty members I hired with doctorates were placed several slots ahead of me. I asked Ms. Sashay with the magical clipboard why I was placed at the end of the line.

She looked at me, back to the clipboard, then frowned. She said, “Sorry, this is the updated line up from the vice president. It was changed to start with degree then seniority. Sorry, honey.” She hustled away to put the remaining faculty in line as final call for graduation line-up began.

The restructuring of the institutional ranking affected me so deeply; I questioned my value as a professor and person. I wrote in my journal:

I need my doctorate. Why have I not gone back? Maybe because I am lazy and scared. I am complacent in my abilities. So what am I going to do? I don't want to fail or look stupid, but I am so angry now that I have to do something. I am pissed because I basically hired our faculty and I was put at the end of the graduation line. I am no longer senior faculty because they redefined rank. How can they do this and not say anything? This is some bullshit. If I had my

doctorate, I would be where I belong. How can I get ahead when they keep changing the rules?

Over the next summer, I tried to reconcile my feelings about reconsidering the pursuit of an advanced degree for my career. I desperately wanted to be valuable to my school. I loved my students and I loved teaching. My job signified who I was and my value as a person. I had no intention of leaving but I started to fear my position was no longer secure. What I felt as a slight at graduation, manifested over to my interactions with my new chair, “The Boss.” “The Boss” was not one individual, but those I encountered within the administration who I felt did not value me or see me as a vital part of the faculty. They were the women and men I believed did not want or understand me. Before the consolidation, I had a strong and healthy relationship with my chair. Whatever he asked for, I made a point to oblige. The consolidation ushered in what I considered “their” people. Therefore, my long-time chair no longer conducted my yearly faculty evaluations. I was apprehensive of the “The Boss” conducting my evaluation because my interactions were limited and sometimes strained. I was a vocal oppositional voice during the consolidation. I did not have a “feel” for how the evaluation would go. I did not believe “The Boss” could fairly evaluate my performance.

Faculty evaluations traditionally focused on teaching, service, scholarship, and advising with a faculty self-designated weighted system. I could put more weight on the categories in which I wanted to be evaluated. In my evolution I laid out how I believed I exceeded expectations in each category with more weight on my teaching, service, and advising. I explained how I exceeded expectations in teaching with outstanding ratings on student evaluations, exceeded expectations in service as I chaired several active committees and served as faculty advisor to two active minority student organizations. I conceded that the expectation of scholarship was met with my local conference participation, but the large portion of my time

was given to teaching and service. This formula worked with the previous six years, including superior ratings from my chair on my evaluations noting my exceptional teaching, relentless service, and exceptional student advising. It did not work this time.

I anxiously read the remarks and started to question how could they evaluate me having never visited any of my classes? In the evaluation, The Boss elegantly dismissed the observations of the assistant chair, who actually conducted a class observation. It read, "although there is some mention of the observation of the previous chair about 'positive group energy', it does not seem clear." The assistant chair, a man I considered a mentor and friend, came to my classes and commented on the positive energy and exchanges with my students. During his class observation, I engaged my students with humor and active discussion/debate activity. In that particular class, I openly questioned students using "what would you do" scenarios based on the content we were covering. I purposefully moved around the room. I rarely sit behind a desk and lecture because I find it boring. I cultivated interactive and vibrant group energy that had my students answering and asking questions while engaging with the lesson of the day. I was proud of the work I did in my classes, but the dismissal in the opening statement should have clued me into the most hurtful part.

As I continued to read, I was congratulated for service on a state-wide committee, my active presence on departmental and college-wide committees but the tone of the evaluation left me feeling dismissed, isolated, and frustrated. I was outright angry. I sat staring at the following words "with the consolidation [of the two institutions] we are faced with new opportunities and challenges. The emphasis on scholarship increases each year, and you are encouraged to...explore options to align your scholarship with the current standards." As I continued to read, tears dripped on the page. I felt defeated, dejected, dismissed, and sad. The few days

later, I met with “The Boss” to discuss any concerns. I hid my feelings. I calmly shared my thanks for such kind words, intentionally completely leaving out the parts that made me cry and left. The next morning, I wrote in my journal:

I awoke with a sense of dread. I met yesterday to discuss my evaluation. I could not even talk without the fear of crying. I just do not want to be the angry Black chick. But, I am angry. Maybe I took it entirely too personally. I really do not know how I feel because I am just angry. I am angry that I am not good enough for what they want but good enough to do all the work they ask of me. Why am I stressing myself over doing this job when they do not even care about me? Should they? Hell, I don't know, but I need to figure out my life. Do I get my doctorate just to satisfy my job? Why have I not done it so far? I was teaching a million classes and advising students. I never wanted to do research because I just love to teach. I really need to figure it out because I cannot continue like this.

I started the next term feeling somewhat lost and sad. I talked with Nakia, Trinity, and River to help me stay motivated. Nakia constantly reassured me that I had a place in the new institution. Each took time to fortify my thoughts against negativity with discussions on how I could survive in an environment in which I did not feel valued. I still was not buying it. I called River to vent. During our conversation she told me to rethink how I see the politics of the academy. She reminded me that the academy is what we make it, not what it does to us. She went on (for some time) to outline the reality of not having a doctorate and what that does to my value and position. By the end of the conversation I felt better but not completely confident in position for the next semester.

As the semester started, I made a conscious effort to not be the angry Black woman. The idea of validating that stereotype horrified me because I felt a sense of responsibility to act like I belonged. I wanted to be seen as valuable. I taught my classes, conducted my required office hours and left. I did not volunteer for committees or try to ingratiate myself with “those” folks. I made it through the term by keeping my head down. I made special efforts to not go to large departmental meetings (unless required) and do exactly what was asked of me. In essence, I

withdrew. By the end of the term, I thought I had a handle on how to work within the evolving culture. Again, I failed.

Sitting across from “The Boss,” I questioned the actions of the institution that lead to this point. I had a one-income household that used summer pay to supplement the two months we are not paid our regular salary. At the previous institution, classes were awarded on seniority and demand for the course. As senior faculty on my campus (I hired all three Communication faculty on our campus), I was scheduled to teach two online courses for May session and second session. I normally taught both courses online. “The Boss” decided to put one of my online classes on a satellite campus because it was believed speech should be taught face-to-face. I openly and respectfully questioned those thoughts, considering that I had taught online speech successfully for several years. I was furious and frustrated because I was not consulted, nor informed, on the change.

In email correspondence, I protested but was told that if I wanted the class (and pay) I needed to teach the class where it was scheduled. To ensure the class had enough students to not be canceled (classes with less than 10 were canceled), I reached out to advisors (a Black female I knew from another student organizations) on the satellite campus to recruit students to my class. The week before the class was to start, this class was taken from me and given to a Ph.D. faculty member whose class had not met the student quota.

I was FURIOUS. Super pissed. They were playing with my money.

I met with “The Boss” to fix the problem. The explanation I received in the meeting was “this is a practice we used before to be fair to all faculty.” I protested that it was not fair to me because I recruited students for the class. I thought I had an ace up my sleeve when I reminded “The Boss” I outranked the professor to whom they gave “my” class. I was quickly corrected

that she held a doctorate, thus according to the “new normal” there was a new standard of ranking. For this reason, in the new institution, she outranked me even though I had served more time than she had. “The Boss” went on to reiterate that I needed to embrace the new direction of the institution if I wanted to remain. By the end of the meeting, I was even more pissed. I was ready to quit. “The Boss” could not explain how the decision was fair to me and the matter remained unresolved during that meeting.

I left the meeting still pissed. I called Trinity to figure out my next step. She talked me off the self-destruction ledge and helped me craft a follow-up email that started my paper trail.

I sent the email to “The Boss”:

Thank you for meeting with me today. I wanted to summarize the meeting to ensure an understanding. The practice of reallocating summer courses has been a common practice in the past institution. This is not a practice with which I am familiar or have experienced. The contract does not clearly articulate this reallocation practice and was not clearly communicated to the new institution. I understand to be “fair” I was initially offered a different online course to allow another faculty member to teach at the satellite campus. I would have taken the online course if I knew this practice existed. I am penalized for not having the institutional history of this practice.

It was also discussed that the contract signed by me is not valid until signed by all parties. I stand by my earlier statement that taking my course after I signed the contract is a clear breach. I signed the contract knowing there was “no guarantee” of enrollment, not that a course can be reallocated. I recommend to not have faculty sign a contract with the false assumption they are legally binding. They are not. This is evident.

You are correct that me expressing a division or campus preference is a waste of emotion. I appreciate your empathy, however, this situation confirms to me this consolidation only merged schools, not corporate cultures. The lack of understanding of institutional history on both sides has continued to be an issue. I appreciate your warmth today and I know this was a difficult decision to make. I know this is a small issue in the sea of your responsibilities, but I await your decision on the possible second session course.

I hit send, knowing I would receive a canned response. I got one.

Thank you. I recognize the validity of your position, although I do not share the same conclusions. Still, I will also recommend that the College reviews the language of its contracts. For now, let me emphasize what we have said for at least two years to faculty—nothing is certain with summer teaching. I will communicate a decision about a second session speech class soon, but at this point nothing convinces me that it's a good move.

Feeling dejected, I wrote in my journal:

Injustice just pisses me off. I am angry that I feel worthless at that place. I have no value because I am not compensated for the work I do. Yesterday, “The Boss” told me they are taking my class to give to another faculty member. I mentally understand why, but it is a blatant disrespect. Should I fight or let it go? I want to believe I work for an institution that cares for me, but it is evident they don't. I am going to fight this shit because it is wrong.

They keep hinting that I need a doctorate but keep giving me side projects to do. How can you ask me to lead advising efforts but don't want to pay me for this extra shit? Seriously? Here are the facts. Teaching is a great way to connect and share who I am. I have so much to give, but how can I give it and get nothing in return. For real! I do the same work as they do at the other campus, but they are valued and I am not. I do not have my doctorate. It is clear to me that for me to level the field I must go back to school. I have no idea how I can go to school and work at the same time.

The next week, I received a call to solve the issue. I was offered a second session online course. The course filled immediately with several students dropping my “stolen” class. I felt vindicated, resentful, pissed, and completely dismissed all at the same time. My anger festered throughout the next school year. I decided to use my anger as the driving force for returning to graduate school to pursue my PhD.

4.3 Interview Responses to Research Questions

Research on the problems BWA face in the academy is ongoing (Hughes, 2003; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; and Peters, 2011), but these accounts fail to explicitly tell us how to create supportive networks. This section of the chapter provides findings from fifteen interviews with BWA. The purpose of the study was to explore the life experiences of BWA to create a practical approach to build and maintain beneficial sister circles.

I used interviews to gather information on formal and informal network involvement and uses of and approaches to formation. In the following section, I provide participant profiles and themes associated with each research question.

4.3.1 Participant Profiles

All participants self-identified as Black female faculty members. Twelve of the fifteen women are junior faculty while three hold full professor rank. Five women held doctorate degrees, with the remaining with master's degrees. Two of the master level BWA were in the last phase of their respective doctoral programs. The average age was 40-45 with an average of 10-15 years teaching experience. The BWA interviewed were part of various academic disciplines including business administration, communication, criminal justice, African-American studies, history, marketing, management, public relations, human resources, higher education, and mathematics. Table 1 offers an overview of fifteen BWA interviews that includes SheRo identity, description of name selection, age range, regional teaching experience and highest degree.

Table 1 Participants' Profiles

SheRo Identity	Name Description	Age	Region	Teaching experience	Degree
Nakia	Relentless warrior princess in <i>Black Panther</i>	40-45	South	5 to 10	Masters
Trinity	Courageous fighter and female lead in <i>The Matrix</i>	40-45	South	5 to 10	ABD
River Song	The clever and resourceful wife of <i>Dr. Who</i>	40-45	North	5 to 10	ABD
Luna	Loyal and intelligent friend of <i>Harry Potter</i>	35-39	South	5 to 10	Masters
Shuri	Smartest and youngest character in <i>Black Panther</i>	35-39	South	5 to 10	Masters
Storm	Goddess who is able to control environmental factors in <i>X-Men</i>	40-45	North	11 to 15	PhD

Nubia	Amazon princess and warrior in <i>DC Comics</i> . Sister to Wonder Woman	40-45	Midwest	11 to 15	PhD
Clara	Witty and initiative companion in <i>Dr. Who</i>	35-39	South	11 to 15	Masters
Okoye	Fierce warrior and commander in <i>Black Panther</i>	40-45	Midwest	20 to 25	PhD
Ramanda	Wise and elegant Mother of <i>Black Panther</i>	55-60	South	30 to 35	PhD
Annisa "Thunda"	Champion for justice in <i>Black Lightning</i>	30-34	South	less than 5	Masters
Jennifer "Lightening"	Resourceful younger sister of Thunda in <i>Black Lightning</i>	30-34	South	less than 5	Masters
Denise Huxtable	Free spirit daughter on <i>The Cosby Show</i>	40-45	Midwest	11 to 15	Masters
Lynn Pierce	Distinguished mother of Thunda and Lightening in <i>Black Lightning</i>	40-45	South	11 to 15	Masters
Felicity Smoak	Tech-savvy genius in <i>The Arrow</i>	40-45	South	11 to 15	PhD

4.3.2 Research question 1: In what kinds of networks are BWA involved?

Formal networks. The participants reported to be part of formal networks such as professional organizations, and institutional mentoring opportunities. Informal networks included groups such as sister circles, sorority involvement, church affiliation, and community involvement. All fifteen participants are actively involved in some sort of formal network such as a professional organization. Thirteen of the fifteen admitted to having formally- assigned mentors or institutionally-mandated mentoring experiences. Within the mentor relationships, ten mentors were other Black women, while the remaining were three White men and three White women. Participants explained that there were multiple mentoring relationships throughout their careers; these mentoring totals were higher. Table 2 depicts formal networks affiliations answered during the interview that include professional organization membership and description of mentors.

Table 2 Formal Network Involvement of Professional Organization and Mentorship

SheRo Identity	Professional Organization	Mentor	Mentor Description
Nakia	Not mentioned	Yes	Black Female
Trinity	National Black MBA Association (NMBBAA) Society for Human Resource Management (SCHRM)	No	
River Song	National Black MBA Association (NMBBAA)	Yes	Black Female
Luna	Georgia Communication Association (GCA)	Yes	Black Female and White Female
Shuri	Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)	Yes	Black Female
Storm	National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice (NABCJ) National Crime Justice Association (NCJA)	Yes	White Male Allies
Nubia	Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) National Communication Association (NCA) National Association of Black Journalist (NABJ)	Yes	Two Black Females
Clara	National Association of Mathematicians (NAM)	No	
Okoye	Delta Delta Honor Society	Yes	Black Female and White Female
Ramanda	Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars	Yes	Black Female and White Female
Annisa "Thunda"	Grant Professional Association (GPA)	Yes	Black Female
Jennifer "Lightening"	<i>Not mentioned</i>	Yes	Black Male and White Male
Denise H.	National Association of Black Journalist (NABJ)	Yes	Black Female
Lynn P.	<i>Not mentioned</i>	Yes	Black Female
Felicity S.	National Communication Association (NCA) Black Caucus and African American Division of NCA	Yes	White Male

Informal networks. Thirteen of the fifteen participants were members of historically Black sororities, a national service sorority, or a religious sorority. The historical Black sororities are Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. The service sorority is Gamma Sigma Sigma National Service Sorority. The religious group is The Order of Eastern Star. Eight of the participants who are part of a sorority are currently active in respective graduate chapters or serve as undergraduate advisors. Thirteen of the participants are part of some sort of sister circle ranging from two to six members. Six women only mentioned one significant sister circle while seven women further explained they had multiple sister circles to serve different purposes. Table 3 is an overview of the sorority affiliations and descriptions of sister group formation.

Table 3 Informal Networks

SheRo Identity	Sorority Membership	Sir Cir	Description of Group
Nakia	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Order of Eastern Star	Yes	Four member group Three member group 8 member group names "Truth Book Club"
Trinity	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Order of Eastern Star	Yes	Two different groups of four women
River Song	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. Order of Eastern Star	Yes	Three to six member group named "Just for Girls" and Four Member Group
Luna	No Affiliation	No	Co-worker (former mentor)
Shuri	Gamma Sigma Sigma National Service Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Three to six member group
Storm	Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Order of Eastern Star	Yes	Three to six member group
Nubia	Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Three member group
Clara	Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Two member group

Okoye	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Three to six member group named “Just for Girls” and five member group
Ramanda	No Affiliation	Yes	Four member group named “Red Wine Club” and four other groups of three to five members
Annisa "Thunda"	Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Three to four member group
Jennifer "Lightening"	Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Six member group
Denise Huxtable	Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.	Yes	Three to six member group
Lynn Pierce	Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.	No	
Felicity Smoak	No Affiliation	Yes	Four member group named “Ph Divas”

4.3.3 Research question 2: How are these associations formed and maintained?

Professional Organizations. Participants reported to form formal network associations through discipline associations, community engagement, chair assignments, and conference attendance. Informal associations were formed through sorority involvement, and interactions with classmates. The corresponding interview questions inquired how the participants become part of professional organizations. All participants, except Ramanda, mentioned being part of formal professional organizations through paid membership dues, or professional affiliations. Ramanda was the only participant who explained that she created an organization because she could not find an organization to meet her needs or interests:

I formed a network of women to look at education in my area and how we might improve it, reform it based on the conversations that we had had from leadership. And in that process, I ended up going through the process and being selected to be one of the board members. And that whole journey was, it was a network, the network journey (Ramanda, July 26, 2018).

Participants said professional organizations were joined because of discipline or professional interest. Storm said, “I am a member of most of our academic affiliated organizations within criminal justice. In the major national organizations and I am part of

Subset, like for minority faculty or the women's division. I pay my dues for a big organization for the smaller organization that deal with the diversity, the faculty of color, and students of color." Denise said, "I have been a member of the National Association of Black Journalists for 20 years. In fact, we helped spearhead a campus level National Association of Black Journalists. I'm a member of the local press club and we get together and we have a really big event and it is really about informing the public about what the purpose of the media."

Four of the fifteen said she used community engagements as a way to join organizations. Trinity said, "I look at events happening around the city and I try to stay abreast of those. Anytime there are networking events that are held by like the local Chamber of Commerce, I'll go to the different events that they have to establish some relationship with community members and officials. I use these events to join relevant organizations in my area. She goes on to add that "Once I am there I'm able to network and then I have been able to create mentoring relationships and contacts."

Conference attendance was the most mentioned method of maintenance of engagement in professional organizations. Nubia said, "I go to my AEJMC conference, that's my conference I go to pretty much every year." Two participants said they used alternate plans to engage with professional organizations through retreats. River said she used retreats and smaller trainings to make intimate and meaningful connections outside the larger conferences. River said, "I like to go to retreats and pre-conferences to be able to really talk to people. Big conferences can be overwhelming, so I am able to stay abreast of what's going on."

Formal Mentorships. Three of the fifteen answered that they started their formal mentorships by department chair assignment. Seven of the fifteen met their mentors as a result of professional development through opportunities developed at conferences. Four participants

developed mentoring relationships with graduate school faculty members. Nubia shared, “my favorite professor from my master's still mentors me and two of my favorite professors from my PhD program still mentors me. All three are Black women.”

Interaction with formal mentors was maintained through electronic and phone interactions and face-to-face meetings. All participants said she maintained contact through phone call or cellphone text messaging. Face-to-face interactions were coded as “seldom” for less than 5 times a year, “sometimes” for 6 to 10 times a year, and “often” for over 11 times a year. Eight participants seldom met with their formal mentors face-to-face, three met sometimes, and four met often. Table 5 depicts the formation and maintenance of formal mentorship.

Table 4 Formal Mentorship Formation and Maintenance

SheRo Identity	Pro Org formed	Pro Org Maintained	Mentorship formation	Method of interaction/contact with mentor	Face-to-face (seldom = less than 5 times a year sometimes = 5 to 10 a year often = 10 or more)
Nakia	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met as a result of professional development	call or text	seldom
Trinity	Paid membership fees and seek out community activities	Conferences and community involvement	N/A	call or text	seldom
River Song	Paid membership fees	Conferences and retreats	Met as a result of professional development	call or text	often
Luna	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Assigned by chair	call or text	seldom

Shuri	Paid membership fees and seek out community activities	Conferences	Met as a result of professional development	call or text	often
Storm	Paid membership fees and seek out community activities	Conferences, retreats, and community involvement	Met during graduate school	call or text	seldom
Nubia	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met as a result of professional development	call or text	sometimes
Clara	Paid membership fees	Conferences	N/A	call or text	sometimes
Okoye	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met as a result of professional development	call or text	sometimes
Ramanda	N/A		Met as a result of professional development	call or text	seldom
Annisa "Thunda"	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met during graduate school	call or text	seldom
Jennifer "Lightening"	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met during graduate school	call or text	seldom
Denise Huxtable	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met during graduate school	call or text	often
Lynn Pierce	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Met during position	call or text	often
Felicity Smoak	Paid membership fees	Conferences	Assigned by chair	call or text	seldom

Informal Networks. Sister circles were formed through sorority involvement, graduate school classmates, community involvement, and formal mentoring relationships. Twelve participants said their sister circles were comprised of members of their respective sororities. Okoye said, "We created a sisterhood. I went to college with my small circle. It lasted after that

because of the friendship and bond.” Lightning concurs, “From my sorority, we started a sister circle of six. We actually recently created this within the last few months. Six of us are women of color who are at different places in our careers.” Twelve participants said their sister circles were comprised of members that met during graduate school studies. Clara said, “I met her my sophomore year. We became friends that helped each other with classes and we've been inseparable since.” One participant, Luna, said her one-person sister circle formed from her formal mentoring relationship. “Even though she started off as my assigned mentor, it went beyond that. Our friendship is deep and meaningful because we are each other’s support system that goes beyond the office. It happened organically and grew over time because we have a similar sense of humor and interest.”

All participants with sister circles said they maintained contact through telephone calls or text messaging. Eleven women specifically mentioned social media as a way to maintain contact. Lightning said, “I love a good Group-Me.” GroupMe is a group text messaging app. Nakia explained that her sister circle used Marco Polo, a video recording group messaging app, to talk with her group, along with Zoom and GroupMe text service. Felicity added that even though her sister circle, P.H. Divas, frequently used GroupMe, “we still send each other texts every once in a while to ask for advice or just pick up the phone and call. I prefer texting because we are all so busy.”

Face-to-face interactions were coded as “seldom” for less than 5 times a year, “sometimes” for 6 to 10 times a year, and “often” for over 11 times a year. Seven participants seldom met with their formal mentors face-to-face, three met sometimes, and five met often. The five women noted their sister circle groups met often with monthly events such as Just for Girls Meet-up and Red Wine Club. Ramanda said, “I have my sister girlfriends that I've made

here who come from higher education and the government sector. And so we get together and we have the red wine club and we talk about growth and development and professional opportunities. Oh yes, over wine. Good wine.” Okeye said, “The ladies in Just for Girls motivate each other and we get together once a month. We do all kinds of activities, such as a spa day, we may go out to a comedy show or meet at someone’s house for professional builders like investment seminars.” Table 5 depicts the various formation tactics and method of interaction.

Table 5 Informal Network Formation and Maintenance

SheRo Identity	Sister Group Formation	Method of interaction/contact of sister group
Nakia	Sorority involvement and graduate school	Social media, calls and text
Trinity	Sorority involvement and graduate school	Social media, calls and text
River Song	Sorority involvement and graduate school	Conference trips together, Social media, calls and text
Luna	Sorority involvement and graduate school, community involvement	Conference trips together, Social media, calls and text, social event
Shuri	Grew from mentor relationship	calls and text
Storm	Sorority involvement and graduate school	Social media, calls, and text
Nubia	Sorority involvement and graduate school	Conferences, Social media, calls and text
Clara	Sorority involvement, employment and graduate school	social media and calls
Okoye	Sorority involvement and graduate school	calls and text
Ramanda	Sorority involvement, community involvement	Social media, calls and text, social events
Annisa "Thunda"	Graduate school and employment	Call and text
Jennifer "Lightening"	Sorority involvement and graduate school	Call and text

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Denise Huxtable	Sorority involvement and graduate school	conferences, Social media, calls and text
Lynn Pierce	Sorority involvement and graduate school	social media and calls
Felicity Smoak	Graduate school and employment	Calls and text social media and calls

4.3.4 Research question 3: What are the benefits of formal and informal networks?

Formal networks. Participants reported benefits of formal and informal networks as the possibility to create partnerships, gatekeeping possibilities, emotional support, the opportunity to be authentic, and utilitarian reasons. Participants acknowledged multiple benefits to being part of professional organizations. Eleven of the fifteen noted that being part of professional organizations helped them create partnerships with people in different geographical areas. Within this category, participants mentioned how they used these new connections outside the institution to build research partnerships. These cultivated partnerships offer ways to gather information about possible employment:

I'm able to connect with individuals that I would have never been able to connect with and may be interested in the same areas or doing those areas at their institutions. Um, that's a plus, but then I'm just connecting with individuals, but then you're looking at sessions that there may be some things that you're learning that you never thought about, you know, the thought that it could be possible at your institution and now you're looking. That is someone that's up there presenting an assessment with the same institution and demographics that you have. And they did it. It's like, man, that's amazing. And they're showing you the ins and outs of that program and they usually email out, um, presentations as well. So you can take content and actually apply it to your institution. (Nakia, July 10, 2018)

It is very important to me to attend a conference. A few years ago, I attended a conference with an entire section dedicated to the African American community from all over the country. We get to the conference for a day and it's just amazing being able to share the challenges and network with each other and then maintaining those communications afterwards. The ladies I met there we took it to be maintaining for about a year and some of them I'm still friends with on

Facebook. A major side benefit for me was I was able to stay connected to some of these women and they were able to share tips on the interview process and my past job search. (Shuri, July 16, 2018)

I attended a session that really helped navigate my career. I went into it knowing that a doctorate degree was something that I was interested in pursuing one day, but I think they influenced me and gave that feedback on what that search looks like, providing feedback on my materials, helping me hone in on like what do I want my career trajectory to look like, and then we talk about personal life too. (Lightening, August 1, 2018)

Seven of the fifteen suggested a major benefit to attending conference sponsored by professional organization. Attending these types of events is an effective way to stay current in their fields. Thunda noted she stays current in her field, but also used conferences to learn new skills. River said, “So if you want it some type of training or just to stay abreast of what's going on, it's a good way to do that.” She goes on to state, “Conference gives exposure to other things that are going on. I get to see different ways of teaching. I meet these people, join these groups and start to gather more and more information that just keeps on helping me. I wouldn't know what was going on and you know, Georgia or Alabama or Florida or these different things if I don't get these updates because they send sometimes daily, sometimes weekly. You get these messages or what different things going on. It's like, Oh wow, I had no idea.”

Three participants used their social capital within professional organizations to serve as gatekeepers for other BWA. Trinity explained that because of her partnerships and role as a mentor with those in the community, she was “chosen to be a table host for a huge yearly city-wide event. I am always entering into mentoring relationships with other women, so I was one of the 100 wise women featured. At that table, connected sisters based on similarities like interests, occupations, and backgrounds.” Ramanda said she used her position as a mentor “to create opportunities for her mentees to talk about our challenges, our opportunities to get additional training to move through the academy. I would not say I am just a mentor, but it is a peer-to-

peer mentoring relationship that we all benefit that occurred in our formal and informal sessions. That was fantastic.”

Mentoring. Nine participants suggested that the primary benefit of mentoring relationships was that the mentor served as a gatekeeper for information on integral parts of the academy like publishing, classroom management, job market, salary negotiation, and the hostile academic environments. Felicity said, “I think the benefits are freaking huge. Like changed my life huge. My favorite professor from undergraduate still mentors me and I am not sure where I would be without her.” Nakia explained how her mentor helped her navigate the academic environment, stating that “they teach me how to do me the best way possible and make me feel unapologetic. Unapologetically unashamed.” Clara said, “my mentor (White male), he was the one that actually told me to pursue a math degree. He has really helped me out a lot figuring out what I wanted to do with my career.”

Storm, who also had male mentors, said, “My mentors got me invited into the circle and it goes back to my master's degree program when my, when my professors just saw something in me and they kept up with me. When I started going to the academic conferences they introduced me to everybody. They were like, blah, blah blah, you know, um, and they were really proud of me and wanted to help me.” Storm also explained that these newly found contacts were instrumental in her first publishing endeavors. Lightening had a Black male mentor who “connected me with others in our field to help me connect to other Black women. He was instrumental in urging me to go to conferences to meet new people. Once we were there, he introduced me to key people in our field. I really appreciate his help.”

A secondary benefit was the encouragement and emotional support from the mentor. Four participants said their mentors were constant source of emotional support and

encouragement when they were discouraged. Three participants said that, in addition to encouragement/emotional support, the mentor protected them from other faculty or academic pressures.

My mentors have been extremely helpful with me professionally. I mean without a doubt. I would say they have, they speak truth and life into me. They hold me accountable. And like I said, they helped me to get the best me. So they, they don't let me get comfortable or sit in. I'm doing this. Well, they always pushed me and I loved it. Then they, they protect me too, so if I'm being done wrong, they're like, no, this is how you need to react or you know. Here's some options for you when you choose which option you want to take don't ever, you know, allow anyone to make you think your back is up against the wall because there's always a way out, you know. So they helped me to navigate that in a world I never thought was possible. (Nakia, July 10, 2018)

My mentor is amazing. We used to meet maybe like once a month. Now we meet once a semester, and she does not allow me to sugar coat anything. It's just like, I can be really transparent with her, which is really great when you can talk with somebody and just tell them exactly what's going on. It is hard to be politically correct especially at the institution. So we have of course many challenges with our budget cut and things like that and there were time I felt really frustrated. And so I can't, you know, for awhile I was like, why can't I get a job somewhere else. She would say, no, maybe, maybe you know, this God telling you this is where you are supposed to be and you know, it's okay. It doesn't have this hour, the next day, you know, when it's time, it's time. She also being supportive in terms of, you know, no question that she has been an advocate for me behind closed doors. You know, I never know what the conversation is but it is awesome to just be able to pick her ear about where she's has done because she has done some amazing things on campus and off campus and just maintaining the positive spirit overall. (Shuri, July 16, 2018)

My mentor helps with me keeping my head on straight. It can be the day-to-day stuff, you know, but she also talks to me about thinking about my future. She often tells me what I may need to consider for the future and how to navigate my career. I mean, she's just a good resource to have in general, just in life and you know, talking about school, talking about work, talking about your future, you know, things you need to be working on. (Lynn, August 22, 2018)

Informal Networks. The benefits of sister circles range from authenticity, emotional support, and utilitarian. Twelve of the fifteen participants said their respective sister circles are places where they can be open without judgment. The feeling of being open fostered a feeling of

authenticity of being able to laugh and cry to release frustrations or emotions without judgment. Storm said that she used her sister circle as a sounding board because she can be honest without worrying about academic politics. “I’m not going to the White male allies venting or complaining about my journal article being whitewashed by an editor. I’m going to my Black folks to say felony disenfranchisement is racist and they don’t mean to like the article and I don’t want to change it, but I need it published, you know. I can just vent without worrying.” River said, “I do not know where I would be without my sisters. I need that space to just vent. I know they got my back.” Luna said, “Our friendship happened organically because we just were open and honest about how we felt in our jobs. We needed that safe space to share.”

Ten participants stated a major benefit involves the physical and emotional support from their sister circles. Physical support was characterized as caregiving during a health crisis. Ramanda said, “I had to have surgery. I came up with my own surgery post-surgery plan. My family was like, Huh? I said, no, this sister girlfriend who’s a nurse will be here to take care of me for this amount of time. Then they are going to transfer me to this sister girlfriend who’s also a nurse; who better to take care of me than these two?” She further explained, “They are my advocates. They have been my caregivers. When my husband died, they figured out amongst themselves who would be with me. My immediate family was stunned. I told my family I was not coming home for Christmas. I’m going to Ohio because my sister girlfriends invited me and they knew what Christmas meant to me.”

The emotional support was reported as direct supportive feedback and motivation during difficult periods. Nakia shares, “I’m able to bounce stuff off of my sister circles that I wouldn’t otherwise be able to share with anybody at work. My sisters give me a place to really connect and have those real honest conversations.” Trinity said “We laugh together, we cried together,

we celebrate together and encourage each other. So every time I have been facing a new challenge I received that encouragement. That extra boost to say you can when you say you can't." Shuri shared, "I am able to be completely honest with them. I am very private, so my sisters help me and push me to be a little more open." Thunda said, "I talk to my sister about if something was just wracking my nerves or I feel I wasn't treated fairly. I think one thing that we have in common is our belief in God and our background as it relates to Christianity. So in that case, I know that I could trust her and you could talk openly so we can pray for each other. If I called her tonight, I'll go here and we are going to pray. So that's one thing I think that keeps us connected."

The utilitarian benefits include using the sister circles for access to other networks for publishing and creation of research partnerships with members with similar research interests. Lightning said, "We're just a sounding board or sharing opportunities, but they were also looking at ways, how we can connect what we're doing professionally and be a resource to each other professionally and for our sorority." Storm explained she used her contacts from her mentors to position one member of her sister circle to get an article accepted to a journal. She said, "She got in the loop through me because I knew the White men that were the editors." Storm noted her friend was about to make publishing contacts because of the network ties.

Nubia combines her research interest and support:

One of my sisters was working on a book project and we would get together and eat sushi. We would start talking about our project then will start talking about life. We talked about how much we hate our jobs and she was really the person that I could talk to about my job. It was the one on one conversations because I'm in place in this space with one person who understands how much I hate my job and nobody gets that. She was a faculty member just like me and she understood me. Until you talked to somebody who is in the same predicament you are you may not understand. (Nubia, July 21, 2018)

4.3.5 Research question 4: What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks?

The BWA who participated in the study addressed this question in a combination of two questions during the interview: “how would you create the ideal group” and “what advice would you give other BWA in the academy?” The questions were intended to illicit strategies to create beneficial formal and informal networks. The answers mainly focused on how to create beneficial sister circles along with a few points related to formal networks such as mentoring or adjusting to a new environment. Three key responses were gleaned from the questions that included start with you, use what you have and choose wisely.

Start with you. Nine of the fifteen participants answered you must take control of what you need, be clear on what you want, and have clear expectation from networks. This includes knowing your purpose in the academy and being bold. Nubia bluntly advised, “Number one, I would ask why the hell are you doing this? This is an honest question. I literally became a professor because I thought I'd have time to write my novels and I could be a bestselling author in romance, mystery, whatever. I thought I could be an author. Really know what the hell you are getting yourself into.” Lightening uses a softer approach with “making sure you're truly knowing who you are and what your goals are so you don't lose sight of that. It goes back to not allowing others in leadership roles to define you. It is about who you are and what you want for you. It really is important to take time for self-reflection.” Trinity provided a clearer direction saying “The first step I would say I'd have to take a look within. Then determine who I would need in that particular circle to really strengthen and pour into me. I would have to explore what I needed to feel supported and successful. This includes how much time I am willing to give to be part of this group.”

Five of the fifteen participant explicated use of the phrase “be bold,” referring to being proactive in group formation, initiating contact, and maintaining networks. Trinity notes, “I have to go boldly forward seeking some of those relationships.” She mentions one should not be afraid to create opportunities for what is needed if it is not available at the respective institution. Okoye agrees that we must initiate contact with “I had to go in ask and be bold. Sometimes we have to do that.” Two women mentioned they are reluctant to be so bold. Clara explained she is naturally shy and finds it difficult to meet new people, resulting in feeling left out of the information loop in her department. Shuri articulates the point clearer with the following:

I naturally want to be by myself in certain situations. I live alone and require quiet time on a regular basis. And for that reason I have to challenge myself each time I network. I have to make a conscious effort to say I am going to talk to these people. I tell myself I am going to say these things. It's not always easy, but it always into turns out beneficial. So I try. I know myself. I have found myself sometimes avoiding meetings or going to events or places where I don't have a specific role because I do not want to talk. And so I have to make a conscious effort to be there. (Shuri, July 16, 2018)

Use what you have. Eight of the participants suggested looking in your immediate environment for allies and networks by the key players the key players in the department and institution. Denise said, “So you gotta get one of those key players. They're supportive of your vision.” Ramanda explains, “We have to focus on getting more information about the players. And we can't wait for authority to give us that information because authority may be intentionally holding that information back to use it as an opportunity to divide. Does that make sense?” The feeling of mistrust of administration was evident in Ramanda’s quote, echoed by Okeye who said “all skin folks ain’t kinfolk.” The thread of mistrust was an undercurrent in four interviews that warned one must be aware of the surroundings and always be observant. Storm and Nubia both agree you must find key players you can trust. Each noted that you must connect

to administrative assistants because these are the individuals who normally have vital information on how to navigate the institution.

Knowing the key players within the institution is critical, as it is wise to connect to those outside of the academy. Participants encouraged others to use social media as a way to connect if you feel isolated. Thunda indicated, "I have a LinkedIn Account and look at profiles to see who might have a common interest, even though they're not all in the academy." Nubia, Lynn, and Felicity stressed the importance of use social media platform like Twitter or Facebook to keep in touch with people from conferences or graduate school. Nubia states, "social media has been a huge help to me in some aspects because I was able to find community. I was the only Black woman in my department, so I had to reach out online. Living in rural Texas, I have no choice."

Choose Wisely. According to eleven of the fifteen participants you must choose wisely whom you want to include in your formal and informal networks. Lightening shared information from her mentor that "my mentors mentioned to always be thinking about the 'next-next', um, and making sure that whatever my 'next-next' is that there's people in the group and it is important to having diversity in that space." A theme that emerged early involved creating a diverse group based on purpose, experience, position, interest, and skill level. As Nakia explained, some people in your network may serve different purposes. She stated,

I have friends that I'm going to call, we kick it. We hang out. I also have friends that when I'm dog tired, damn crying, I'm going to call them. I have some friends that when I really want thought provoking conversations I call them. And it doesn't mean anything bad for my friends, it just means that different people give you what you needed. Difference time. That's okay. That's how my sister circles are formed. So even though they may not be friends with each other or they might be for instance each other, but they all have made a significant difference in my book (July 10, 2018).

I will look for people who are in different levels of their career. Someone just starting out because someone may have fresh ideas and they're kind of seeing this from a different perspective versus someone who's been in five to 10 years. There's someone who's been in the industry 30 years, you know, so I think the diversity of the levels of where people are in their careers, I will have a group that was more diverse like that. You need women in different disciplines Yes, we're professors and teaching, but the other parts of higher education that may be useful like students service, administration, or staff. (River, July 11, 2018)

I am so organized I would probably map out what I wanted. So what I'm envisioning, I will probably jot that down for myself. And then and I think I would make the next step invite some other people that I consider my sister group to maybe a lunch. (Shuri, July 16, 2018)

I think I would need multiple people, um, and I think it would look like, so maybe it's like that everywhere, but I know it well. At least the places that I've been, it's been like this. And so when we split up our 100 percent effort every year, then part of the teaching part of the scholarship department service, I feel like I would need someone who was excellent at all of those things to help me balance what I needed to do. Look for someone who is an excellent researcher with contacts in the research arena. Look for a person who is an excellent person in the community. So I would say that I would need someone from someone who excelled and all those different places to support me. (Storm, July 20, 2018)

I'd do an all call to my colleagues um, women of color. I do an all call and say, 'Hey, I'm thinking about how we might normally support a young sister's coming into the academy irrespective of their location. I would ask for their best thinking?' And then I asked for a half dozen women willing to mentor regardless if they are teaching or in administration. I think that there's still mentoring support and collectively we decide what that looks like. Is that a monthly phone call? Is that being on, you know, on standby to take a call to take an email, what you know, what can you in the bandwidth that you have, what can you reasonably do? (Ramanda, July 26, 2018)

4.3.6 Exceptional Occurrences

To this point, I addressed each research question that revealed themes from the interviews and autoethnography. Conducting the final zoom-in on the themes, two exceptional occurrences surface. As Chang (2008) contends, exceptional occurrences are points of data not expected by the researcher that “change a course of life and make major impacts” (p. 133). Two themes of

non-Black allies and stated significance emerged that changed my perspective of sister circles and how I approached the study.

Non-Black Allies. Six of the fifteen participants explicitly mentioned how BWA must not only carve out a space for their Blackness with other Black women, but must be open to the usefulness and positive benefits of non-Black allies. Clara expressed amazement at how a White male teacher helped her in graduate school. She said:

I failed the first test and I cried because I never scored that low on a test and this was a Caucasian teacher. And so I went to him and I talked to him and I told him I have never scored that low on test before. So this is my first semester. He told me, he said, 'I see that you're trying to constantly come to my office and say I'm going to throw that first test out and see how you're doing on the rest of the test.' So you know, I was just amazed, you know, normally you wouldn't think that from another race. I was so amazed you know, a lot of that was very helpful to me (July 17, 2018).

White male allies were named more frequently as gatekeepers of information and acquisition of resources. Nubia stated, "I had a White male chair who was very supportive of me. He was a really decent person that really cared. He made a point to show me the ropes of the institution." Whereas Storm offered a deeper explanation of how a White male helped her advance her career:

The most beneficial it's going to be the White male allies as far as career advantages. However, if I didn't have my informal network, I don't know if I could, I could be as good as I am doing the, you know, doing my job and I say that because I'm not going to the White male allies venting or complaining about my journal article being whitewashed by an editor. I'm going to my Black folks, felony disenfranchisement is racist and they don't mean to like the article and I don't want to change it, but I need it published you know, I think like I said, the White male allies were the most beneficial to, to catapult me (July 20, 2018).

White allies proved to be beneficial within sister circles, and these resources and benefits are just as substantial. Denise and Ramanda both noted that they had White females as part of

their sister circles. The idea of mistrust resurfaced as Ramanda stated, “I think we must do a cross cultural collaboration. My dean and fellow faculty member are both White women. Do I trust them? And are they in my circle, absolutely. I trust them in my circle. But they had to earn that trust.” Denise expanded on the idea of supportive trust that members of her sister circle offered during a difficult period of her career:

As I said, all skin folk ain’t kinfolk and they really can make it difficult for you. The administrative assistant in my department took me under her wing and she was very, very supportive of me. And I’ll be honest with you, the people that were in my department were so supportive. Again I was the only Black person there. One of my White female friends let me stay in her house for nine months due to the hurricane. She was like, ‘you can stay here.’ I don’t want you to pay anything. She offered me a place to stay when I had no other options for my family. Because of this she and my former student came to my wedding, the two White folks there. Yes, you have to have Black women to have a strong sister circle, but also be open to getting some advice from others that may not look like you. Do not assume they aren’t supportive of you, like don’t automatically shut them out because they’re, you know, you all don’t see or share the same race for me. They helped me in more ways that I could ever imagine (August 15, 2018).

Stated Significance. Seven of the fifteen women offered unsolicited comments of encouragement and statements about their perception of the significance of my study. Ramanda stated at the beginning of the interview, “Well, what you’re doing is so important and we talk about it and we come around it, but we’re not attending to it in a collective way. And so you’re creating this and I’m just so excited.” The sentiments of appreciation were echoed by Thunda, Lightening, and Felicity. Nubia interjected early in her interview stating, “I’ve been thinking about your study and I know it’s going to be good and I can’t wait to read it. I am proud of you.” The most encouraging occurrence came from River. Her remarks she personified my intended significance of the study by saying “I do think that this is a viable research that you are doing because it is something that doesn’t necessarily outright said. It is information we need to know

and don't know we need to know. You are giving us a space to create the information that really helps us out.”

4.4 Summary of Emerging Themes

In general, the findings from the interviews revealed three major themes that (1) BWA are part of a diverse group of networks (2) through deliberate interactions within immediate resources and opportunities that (3) provide tangible individual benefits. Instead of identifying the emerging themes with the corresponding research questions, the themes were interwoven but were readily identifiable after formulating a table. Table 6 is a summary of the emerging themes from the research question codes, to categories, and to themes that answers the following research questions:

1. In what kinds of networks are BWA involved?
2. How are these associations formed and maintained?
3. What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women?
4. What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks?

The three themes will be discussed after further analysis in relation to my autoethnography in Chapter 5 in the last phase of the zooming in and out method the influenced the creation of the practical approach.

Table 6: Progression from code to themes

RQ#	Codes	Categories	Themes
1	Professional Organization Institutional/Organizational sanctioned mentoring Sister Circles Sorority Involvement Church Affiliation Community Involvement	Formal Groups Informal Groups	Secure a formal and informal network
2	Discipline Community Engagement	Formal resources/opportunities	Deliberate Interactions

	Chair Assignments Conference attendance Sorority involvement Classmates	Informal resources/opportunities	
3	Create partnerships Gatekeeping possibilities Emotional support Authenticity Utilitarian reasons	Individual benefits from weak ties Individual benefits from strong ties	Tangible Individual Benefits
4	Start with you Use what you have Choose Wisely		Deliberate Interactions
EO	Non-Black Allies Stated Significance		Tangible Individual benefits

Chapter 4 explains the methodological approach to achieve the ultimate goal, creating a tangible article that instructs how to create and maintain beneficial networks. From personal narratives extracted from my autoethnography and in-depth interviews that explore if and how BWA use networks to survive the pressures of the academy, I start the chapter with my two-part autoethnography and present the preliminary categories associated with each research question. The final segment discusses exceptional occurrences from the emergent themes. Chapter 5 provides the broader contextualization and implication to theory of the findings, and presents the practical approach, limitations of the study, possible future research and my final thoughts.

5 CONCLUSION

Chapter five serves as the interpretation of my findings and observations. I start with a discussion of the broader contextualization of zooming out comparing the narratives of the participants to my autoethnography, discuss key implications of the connection of SCT to BWA and sister circles, outline a clear plan to create beneficial networks that emerged from the themes. I end the chapter with the limitations of the study, offer possible future streams of research and share my final thoughts. My overarching purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to create a plan to create supportive networks.

I used selected principles from BFT, intersectionality, and CRT that (1) use Black women as the subject of study, (2) use of narratives and counter narratives as the psychic preservation of the oppressed, (3) challenge hegemonic ideology of traditional research utilizing “lived experiences” as data, and (4) offer a solution to the stated problem. I followed the parameters by directly inserting myself into the study in the form of a reflexive analytic autoethnography and conducted interviews with BWA to gather information on how to build a supportive network.

My research questions were:

1. In what kinds of networks are BWA involved?
2. How are these associations formed and maintained?
3. What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women?
4. What are the practical approaches to creating beneficial networks?

The findings of this study answered these questions, as well as challenged my preconceived perception regarding sister circles benefits.

4.5 Contextualization and Theoretical Implications

To synthesize the data from my autoethnography and interviews, I used a modified zooming-in and out method of breaking down the data and reconnecting the themes from different perspectives. In Chapter 4, I provided the preliminary themes to answer the research questions and exposed the exceptional occurrences from the zooming-in and out method outlined in Table 6. With the final zooming out and zoom in, I compared myself to the three emergent themes from interviews. I used Chang's (2008) strategy to analyze and interpret my autoethnography by comparing my story to my participants. To conduct the cross-case comparison, I first asked myself, "how is my experience similar to my participants" and "what benefits did I get from my interactions with these women" in relation to the themes of (1) BWA are part of a formal and informal networks (2) through deliberate interactions within immediate resources and opportunities that (3) provide tangible individual benefits. From these comparisons, I was able to see how this study relates to the broader cultural context of BWA and the theoretical implication that connects SCT, BWA and sister circles.

5.1.1 Similarity of Experiences

The first point of comparison came as I reviewed the emergent themes of "BWA are part of a formal and informal networks." My experiences are directly similar to participants in regards to formal network involvement of professional organizations, but they differ in terms of not utilizing a former mentor. I am a member of professional organizations by paying dues and attending yearly conferences. I attend state and regional conferences to present papers but fail to use conference attendance to learn new skills or make research partnership connections. Unlike the fourteen participants with formal mentors, I currently do not have a mentor. I did not make

an effort to connect to other Black women because I relied on my small sister circle for the mentor benefits outlined by participants.

The second theme of “deliberate contact with immediate resources and opportunities” and third theme of “tangible benefits” directly correlated to the bridging and bonding literature. Williams (2001) reports bridging occurs when group members make and maintain connections within and between social networks. These bridges offer the social capital profit of resources exchange but are not used for emotional support. Bonding occurs as reciprocal connections between members as strong bond characterized as frequent and meaningful interactions with the potential of emotional support or weak ties categorized as infrequent and inconsequential interaction that do not yield much support of any kind. I greatly profited from the bridging and bonding with my sister circle.

The most significant benefit of my sister circle was its bridging aspects. This is congruent with Riveria, et al.’s (2010) findings that those with more social capital may benefit from group membership but the profit comes from the strength of ties within the group, not the number of ties within a group. I made a conscious decision to use my sister circle members as immediate resources and opportunities due to the strong ties and diversification of group affiliation. Without a doubt, my study would have failed if not for the connections of River. River has a formidable network outside our group. Her strong ties to her Just for Girls group, Order of Eastern Star, and other BWA at her institution yielded six willing participants for my study. Nakia and Trinity connected me with participants; undoubtedly, River’s social capital was beneficial to me as a member of her network.

In relation to the last emergent theme of “tangible individual benefits,” I found yet another similarity to my participants’ and Bhopal’s (2011) findings that concluded sister circles

were beneficial to those within a marginalized group as a safe space. I individually profited greatly from my sister circle of being able to express frustrations and vulnerabilities without judgment was exemplified in *Look Back At It: Part 1*. Through bonding, I was provided a safe space for emotional support, transparency, vulnerability and guidance. Nakia allowed me to express my feelings and use her as a sounding board. More importantly, she offered guidance by challenging me to rethink how I handled the situation with *camo-boy*. She outright questioned my shortcomings in the situation and helped me see my personal responsibility in the situation. In *Look Back at Me: My Story Part 2*, I heavily relied on my sisters. I talked with Nakia, Trinity, and River to help me stay motivated. Nakia constantly reassured me that I had a place in the new institution. Each took time to fortify my thoughts against negativity with discussions on how I could survive in an environment that I did not feel valued.

Surveying my similarities with my participants, I able to contextualize to the larger context of how I relate to other BWA. I realized I was not alone in feeling devalued (Edwards, 2011) shown in the depiction of my evaluation experience with “The Boss,” isolation (Sule, 2011) as I tried to deal with my disappointments during the consolidation, and the need for an active mentor (Patitu & Harmon; 2003, Tillman; 2001) evident in my need for an outside perspective and guidance. I experienced the structural violence (Gatlung, 1990) of being held back from financial security due to the lower class of only having a master’s degree. The story of class reassignment shows the cultural violence I experienced that ultimately influenced my decision to purse a doctoral degree.

I felt the pain of the universal teacher myth in my interactions and questioning of my credentials with White male students in my first story. I marked similarities in the stories of my participants, specifically those foregrounding the ways in which our credentials and abilities are

questioned. Storm remarked, “I’ve had to put articles I wrote on the syllabus to outright show students I am legit. I am still amazed when students automatically assume I’m not qualified in their eyes for whatever reason.” The questioning of ability was evident as Thunda shared a heart-wrenching story of her master’s thesis chair accusing her of plagiarism.

So when I was working on my master's degree, I've always been a pretty good writer. Of course we all need assistance in certain areas, but I was doing really well on my thesis. When it came time to meet with my faculty members, I met with the chair first. She couldn't believe that I wrote it. I kid you not. I was sitting at a table and she was reading and before she was done she threw it across the table at me saying there was no way I wrote it. She outright accused me of plagiarism. Wow. I was able to prove that I didn't cheat and show her my draft. That really messed me up to doubt my abilities as a teacher” (Thunda, August 3, 2018).

Thunda had to go through the proper channels to handle the situation, but the most applicable segment of her story is how she remarked how she constantly stayed vigilant in order to avoid being perceived as angry or bitter. A fear of perpetuating the “angry Black woman” stereotype (Cole and Guy-Shetall 2003; Griffin, 2012) was illustrated in my interactions with camo-boy and with my chair. Denise said, “I never ever ever want to be what they see in a movie; they're just going to naturally assume that's exactly what we're like. I just do not want to show that stereotype, so I had to, in my mind kind of temper myself a little bit because I had a feeling that I would just play into what they think, you know, the angry Black woman. We cannot prove them right.” Trinity simply explained the ABW stereotype is common within the academy and should be expected. She advised to accept the stereotype, be aware of its presence, and not feed or fall into that trap.

5.1.2 Difference of Experiences

In direct opposition to the first emergent theme “secure a formal and informal network,” my perception that sister circles were more advantageous than formal networks was challenged.

Nine of the fifteen contributors noted that, to be successful in the academy, you need both formal and informal networks. Each serves its own purpose. I relied so heavily on my sister circle, I projected that my experience was universal. I failed to see the need for mentors. This sentiment was similar to that of Lynn, who stated that she “regretted not having a formal mentor or sister circle” because she did not take the time to establish these relationships. She noted how there was information of which she was ignorant because she did not have access to information networks. I sought out a former mentor following the suggestion of Nubia of seeking women in the “next-next” stage of my career. I will look for women who are seasoned full professors for advice on how to build my research skills and professional development.

4.6 Practical Approach

Reflecting back to Chapter 1, I presented ways to assist BWA in the academy with institutional, academic community, and Black women’s efforts. From a macro perspective, the most influential change could occur if the academy and the academic community deliberately examined how BWA are treated. Regretfully, BWA are present in the academy, but often do not have the influence to change its culture. The only piece we can control is ourselves. Nubia reminded me, “we know all the bullshit in the academy, so let’s focus on what we can do as Black women. Together.” We must be bold and be proactive in our own change, internally, and externally. For this reason, it is imperative to create networks (Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Jarmon, 2001; Perlow, Bethea, & Wheeler, 2014; Weems, 2003) to increase the personal benefits of sharing information and emotional support (Steele, 1994).

Fulfilling the aim of this study, I developed the concept of a network circle after the finalization of the overall zooming in and out analysis. The themes of (1) BWA are part of formal and informal networks (2) through deliberate interactions within immediate resources and

opportunities that (3) provide tangible individual benefits all fall within the contextualization and theoretical confines of this study. I formally present a network circle that consists of weak ties with professional organizations, strong ties with a mentor or mentors, and strong ties and bonding with a cultivated informal sister circle through deliberate interaction. The network circle’s primary focus is to support you. A network circle has the potential to increase social capital by increasing possibilities to access various types of information across the academy, connect you to influential gatekeepers, and provide emotional and psychological support (Bhopall, 2011; Riveria, 2010). Although the recommendations were created to aid BWA new to the academy or who have felt any variance of the cultural violence described in this project, I also offer this approach to other women of color in the broader academic community. To clarify, the concept of the network circle emerged from the themes, comparisons, and contextualization of theory. Figure 2 offers a visual presentation of how the network circle emerged.

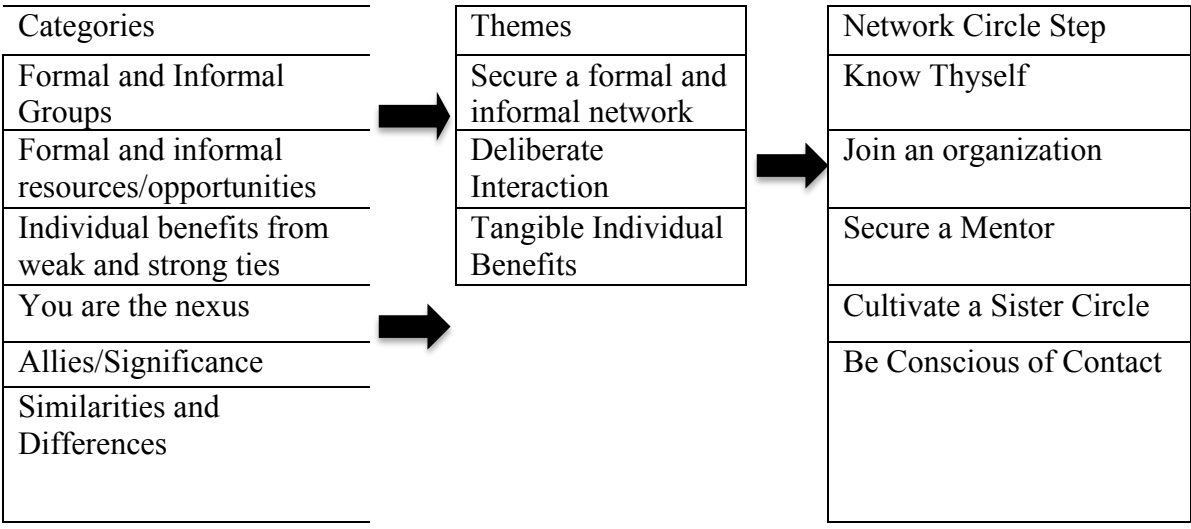


Figure 2.1 Birth of a Network Circle

I recommend the following steps in creating a network circle if you are new to the academy or missing either a formal or informal network:

1. *Know thyself.* Know your purpose and your goals for your participation in the academy. Take time to question what you want from the academy and what you are willing to endure to be able to identify potential benefits and acknowledgment of meeting your intended goals. More important, look internally for your vulnerabilities and fears to know who and what you need in your network.
2. *Establish formal connection to a professional organization.* Join professional organizations in your discipline or area. Make an effort to be visible and active. Be bold by attending smaller conferences at your institution or in your state to build intimate connections. Make the effort to go to mixers to meet people.
3. *Secure a mentor.* Secure a mentor by reaching out to a former professor you felt was beneficial to you. Look for someone in your department or institution that you believe would be willing to mentor you. In your initial discussion, articulate clear goals for your career and what you are asking from the mentor. Be clear on the time needed and your expectations of the relationship. Be willing to volunteer time to help your mentor while learning.
4. *Cultivate your sister circle.* Initially, I defined sister circles as a small group of women who foster strong bonding and bridging ties that manifest into mutual trust and emotional support. Based on the findings of this research, I redefine sister circles as members that you select for the primary purpose of the individual benefits of resource exchange and emotional support. Each sister circle is a type of individual network. These women could be members of a sorority, church group, fellow faculty members, family, former

classmates, or community members. Be open to anyone you feel could benefit you. The members of your circle do not need to be friends or know each other. They are assembled for you because each may have her own sister circles outside of you.

Remember, different people serve different purposes. Therefore, be open to what you need and look for people to fill that need. Be sure to reciprocate the effort from your circle members that can increase overall group benefits.

5. *Be Conscious of contact.* Make deliberate contact through face-to-face interaction, text messaging, and social media. Actively use social media to create and maintain your network circle. Establish and maintain weak ties by periodically contacting those in the selected professional organizations. Initiate contact with your mentor and schedule regular interactions to strengthen ties. Connect with your sister circle members via face-to-face meetings, social media, or phone calls to strengthen ties and bonds.

4.7 Limitations

My study was successful as I was able to create a practical recommendation to create a beneficial network circle. I purposely sought out BWA who were part of formal or informal networks, but I could have gathered richer data if I included Black women in administration or staff. The alternative view of the academy could provide more insight to other difficulties Black women face in the academy. Several participants mentioned how members of administration and staff were supportive and helpful in their journey. Another limitation with the sample used in this study was the number of women who were part of a sorority. Twelve of the fifteen participants were members of a sorority. Sorority membership could have skewed data because these women were predisposed to “sisterhood” formation. I needed more women who were not part of a sorority to offer suggestions to women who chose not to join a sorority. As is evident

through Luna's and Ramanda's experiences, sorority involvement is not a prerequisite for sister circle formation.

Aside from issues with the subjects of study, a major limitation was the time constraints of this study. As a full-time faculty member pursuing a doctoral degree, it was imperative to gather information from my participants within a specific timeframe to complete my degree. If I could replicate the study, I would have interviewed the women a second time to explore how their resilience and commitment to the academy contribute to their experiences within the academy.

A noteworthy limitation in the study was researcher bias. I believed sister circles were more beneficial than formal networks because of my own sister circle experience. I initiated the study with a sole focus on Black women when the emerging themes indicated we must use all the resources afforded to us to be successful in the academy. My bias was reflected in my mistrust of White men stemming from my past experiences. My internal struggle contributed to the complications I endured, as described in my narratives. As I talked to the participants, I reaffirmed the possibility that I needed to look within to change how I perceived those interactions. If I deal with my internal feelings, I would have been able to have a broader perspective and not concede to tunnel vision in my hypothesis. I willfully acknowledge my experiences as an "angry Black women" contributed to how I approached my study. To combat this significant limitation, I openly disclosed my bias as a form of being transparent, trustworthy, and credible.

4.8 Future Research

The study's findings and praxis application of creating a network circle offer alternate streams of inquiry as it relates to solidifying the connection of FKN and BWA, as well as the

expansion of the theoretical exploration of the uses of social media and network formation. My research findings build on the already established understanding that ties with multiple networks can increase social capital (Tain, 2016; Brugel, 2005). The ability to serve as a gatekeeper to other women entering in the field and have access to those with more resources is essential for BWA to acquire.

I made a point to trace the SCT evolution to FKN; it would be prudent to ask two essential questions of how marginalized groups like BWA benefit from network circles on a micro and macro level. First, the research findings add the line of research that says the use of social media can produce individual profits within the process of group formation (Resnick, 2001). The sole purpose of the network circle is to increase the individual benefits to the BWA. If a BWA carefully crafts the network circle from the feminist citizenship prospective (Lister, 2009), she could enhance the bonding with network circle members, while strengthening the bridging benefits with multiple groups. BWA could increase her social capital within the academy if she could foster strong ties of close and frequent contact with multiple groups (Riveria et al., 2010). However, it would be interesting to question if social media use could produce valuable bridging benefits if the BWA were part of multiple online groups.

The second question could ask how social networks behave in online environments as a safe space to create and maintain multiple network circles for macro-level benefits. Instead of primarily focusing on social media use on the micro level of the network circle, it would be advantageous to explore the overlapping bridging ties of members to see how these cross-connections affect BWA as a whole. A study to explore multiple network circles and how they connect could yield information on how BWA combat group inequality by uniting multiple network circles.

I used selected principles of BFT, intersectionality, and CRT, but the reconceptualization of class within the academy as I defined it as faculty rank offers promise. BFT and CRT are widely used as the lens to expose and heal from injustices (Alexander-Floyd, 2009; Collins, 2000; Davis, 2010; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Tyson, 2001; Wallace, et al., 2014;). A major limitation of the study was the lack of inquiry into how faculty rank affected participants. I chose the story of the graduation line to start the discussion of how faculty rank affects BWA, however it would be advantageous to open new lines of inquiry with my reconceptualization of class as faculty rank to understand and overcome these challenges. If we shift our focus to question how the disparities within faculty rank impede BWA in the acquisition of tenure and promotion, we can use the silenced voices to “talk back” to the cultural violence documented in higher education.

Carving out a space for BWA is an ongoing quest that is continuously expanding as we focus on our positionality as BWA. My research used the intersectional lens of the combination of race, gender, and faculty rank as a class, but it would be prudent to offer a more comprehensive expression of identities within the interpersonal communication. BWA should not and cannot be essentialized as just being Black women or one specific existence; therefore, intersectionality can be used to look at the combination of multiple identities. Black women are complex and should be allowed to fully express and explore all identities in any combination to understand how their varying social positions affect their experiences within the academy.

The use of personal narratives extracted through a reflexive analytic autoethnography and fifteen interviews yielded promising findings, however, it would be advantageous to replicate this study without the autoethnography portion. Although I directly emotionally profited from this study, information from other types of interviews such as focus groups could

be beneficial. It would be useful to replicate the study with multiple focus groups of BWA with varying degrees of teaching experience. Focus groups are used to encourage people to “piggyback on others’ ideas, which sometime makes it easier for reluctant communicators to participate” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 219). Lightning and Clara were both particularly reluctant to express any negative information about their current positions in the academy. Each felt she was constantly being scrutinized and watched. If these women were part of a focus group, they would be able to piggyback off someone else’s story in spite of their mistrust of the academy. Focus groups would be advantageous by the data that could offer different strategies to create network circles, uncover topics/issues not thought of by the researcher, and serve as a starting place to stimulate weak ties in early network circle formation.

An alternate line of research could focus on BWA strategies used to circumvent the problems of being a “twofer.” What strategies could be implemented to avoid consciously or unconsciously fulfilling the maid of the academe persona? Junior faculty are inundated with tasks not considered in the tenure and promotion process. The demands on time and fear of saying no to requests can be detrimental. I made an effort to fill the void of providing a tangible artifact to create supportive networks; it would be helpful to explore research on how to navigate problems stemming from being a twofer or “outsider-within.”

The final future research topic emerged directly from a participant. Ramanda hypothesized that women who attended HBCUs were more likely than those from PWI to be willing to be mentors or mentored. She questioned whether school origination (HBCU or PWI) contributed to how women engaged in networks and which were the most valuable. Ramanda, Storm, Nubia, Clara, and Felicity all attended HBCUs for their master’s program. All of these women had former mentorships with Black female mentors and acknowledged these connections

as paramount to their success as faculty members. It would be beneficial to explore whether school originations influenced rates of mentorship participation and success.

4.9 My Final Thoughts

Echoes of *my* VOICE

When I'm stressed out or have a lot to do,
why do I put an imaginary hand gun to my head
and say, "shoot me"?

Real guns are killing my people.

When I make a mistake or cause someone to
feel some type of way, why do I say, "sorry"?
My people are stereotyped as sorry.
I am not sorry. We are not sorry.

I am climbing back into my skin.
I am using language to uplift me.
I am no longer being violent to myself.

I am climbing back into my skin.
I am not using my identities to limit me.
I am no longer allowing others to define my capabilities.

I am climbing back into my skin.
I am going to be true to myself.
I am no longer assimilating to dominant culture.

It hurts me that I am not accepted for who I am.
It hurts me that I am a woman.
It hurts me that I am Black.
It hurts me that I feel I cannot be a Black woman.

Let me climb back into my skin.
No, I do not have to ask for anyone's permission.
I do not need anyone to make space for me.
I will claim my space.

I AM CLIMBING BACK INTO MY SKIN (Fields & Martin, 2017, p. 82)

After completing this study, I am able to “climb back into my skin.” My research project taught me the value of reflection. The perceived culturally violent acts did indeed occur, but the magnitude was, in fact, akin to putting “an imaginary gun to my head.” Instead of looking within myself to acknowledge the feelings of unworthiness and fear, I used my anger to protect myself. I literally victimized myself. From this study, I now use “language to uplift me” and “no longer be violent to myself.” I am able to acknowledge I am the creator of my experience and my interpretation directly affects the outcome. I am forever grateful to the women of this study because by hearing and analyzing their stories I saw glimpses of myself. In each interview, I could see myself in their struggles and victories. I learned I was more than my fears. Due to my own fears and negative experiences, I decided to pursue a doctoral degree to assimilate to the “new normal.” I desperately wanted to be accepted. I am not disillusioned that a doctoral degree will magically afford me the same rights and privileges of White men. I no longer strive for acceptance. I now have the ability to put myself in a position to be an influential gatekeeper to benefit other BWA. I am no longer bound by searching for the approval of others; I reflect an evolution to “claiming my space.”

Upon reflection, I acknowledge the depiction of camo-boy, Ms. Sashay, and “Boss Man” could be seen as disrespectful. I became the oppressor as the writer of my story because the descriptions of these characters were unconsciously intended to vilify those I perceived as having hurt me. My anger clouded the fact that the young man in my class may not have intentionally disrespected me or the possibility that the administrative assistant responsible for line up was aware of the former graduation traditions. More importantly, I failed to account for the “Boss Man’s” stressors from an unprecedented organizational cultural shift that may have contributed to decisions. I was so focused on the perceived injustices that I failed to see other possible

contributing factors. Each of these people did not intentionally hurt me. It was my anger that led me to use such negative language to describe them as I told the story.

Collins (2000) insists “reclaiming Black women’s ideas involves discovering, reinterpreting, and in many cases analyzing for the first time the works of individual U.S. Black women thinkers who were so extraordinary that they managed to have their ideas preserved” (p. 13). I challenge you to reclaim your space. Look within. Expose what holds you back. Secure a network circle. Spread your message through your own words because we all have the right to be heard, understood, and cherished. For us to preserve our extraordinary ideas, we must be willing to be vulnerable, bold in our cries, advocate for our stories, voice our struggles, and scream our victories. The women in this study taught me change starts with you. Finally, each poem used in this project speaks to the evolution we all must take. I leave you with:

Climb back into your greatness,

be as tall as a cypress

that defies all odds

to reclaim

your

space.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: IRB Approval Information**

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Mail: P.O. Box 3999
Atlanta, Georgia 30302-3999

In Person: Dahlberg Hall
30 Courtland St,
Suite 217

Phone: 404/413-3500
Fax: 404/413-3504

June 08, 2018

Principal Investigator: Patricia Davis

Key Personnel: Burnette, LaVette; Davis, Patricia; Lisby,

Gregory Study Department: Communication

Study Title: For the Love of My Sisters: Exploring Black Women Academics' Narratives on the Uses and Benefits of Fictive Kin Networks

Review Type: Expedited Category 6, 7

IRB Number: H18531, Reference Number: 349499

Approval Date:

06/07/2018 Expiration

Date: 06/06/2019

The Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the above referenced study in accordance with 45 CFR 46.111. The IRB has reviewed and approved the study and any informed consent forms, recruitment materials, and other research materials that are marked as approved in the application. The approval period is listed above. Research that has been approved by the IRB may be subject to further appropriate review and approval or disapproval by officials of the Institution.

Federal regulations require researchers to follow specific procedures in a timely manner. For the protection of all concerned, the IRB calls your attention to the following obligations that

you have as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. For any changes to the study (except to protect the safety of participants), an Amendment Application must be submitted to the IRB. The Amendment Application must be reviewed and approved before any changes can take place.
2. Any unanticipated/adverse events or problems occurring as a result of participation in this study must be reported immediately to the IRB using the Unanticipated/Adverse Event Form.
3. Principal investigators are responsible for ensuring that informed consent is properly documented in accordance with 45 CFR 46.116.
 - A Waiver of Documentation of Consent has been approved for this study in accordance with the requirements set forth in 45 CFR 46.117 c.
4. For any research that is conducted beyond the approval period, a Renewal Application must be submitted at least 30 days prior to the expiration date. The Renewal Application must be approved by the IRB before the expiration date else automatic termination of this study will occur. If the study expires, all research activities associated with the study must cease and a new application must be approved before any work can continue.
5. When the study is completed, a Study Closure Report must be submitted to the IRB.

All of the above referenced forms are available online at <http://protocol.gsu.edu>. Please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Research Integrity (404-413-3500) if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Susan Vogtner, IRB Vice-Chair

Federal Wide Assurance Number: 00000129

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Georgia State University
Department of Communication Informed Consent

Title: For the Love of My Sisters: Exploring Black Women Academics' Narratives on the Uses and Benefits of Fictive Kin Networks

Principal Investigator: Dr. Patricia Davis, Assistant Professor of Communication

Student Principal Investigator: Mrs. LaVette M. Burnette, Communication Doctoral Candidate

Purpose The purpose of the research study is to look at what kinds of support networks Black women academics use and look at how these groups can be helpful. You will be asked questions on benefits and uses of these groups. The goal is to gather information to give a practical approach for group formation. You are invited to participate because you are a tenured tracked Black woman academic that is or has been part of a formal or informal network. You will be one of twelve (12) participants recruited for this study.

Procedures

What: The interview will last two-hours. If we do not get to all of the questions, I will follow-up with a one-hour interview.

Where: Interviews will be conducted over the telephone. The recording will be audio recorded and transcribed.

When: Interviews will be done during July and August.

Voluntary Participation, Withdrawal and Alternatives You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study or change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time and refuse to answer any questions. The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Risks In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

Benefits This study may not directly benefit you. We hope to get information to help others create beneficial formal or informal groups.

Confidentiality We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. We will use pseudonyms rather than your name on study records. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you. Research records will be stored on password protected computer. Code sheets and key codes will be password protected and stored separately. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

LaVette M. Burnette and Dr. Patricia Davis
 GSU Institutional Review Board
 Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

IRB NUMBER: H18531
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 06/07/2018
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 06/06/2019

Contact Information

LaVette M. Burnette at 478-952-4624 or lburnette1@student.gsu.edu

GSU
APPROVED

Dr. Patricia Davis at 478-413-5670 or pdavis20@gsu.edu
GSU Office of Human Research Protections at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Consent

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please continue with the interview. If you would like a copy of the consent document, one will be emailed to you.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Research questions:

1. What kinds of networks are Black women academic involved?
2. How are these associations formed and maintained?
3. What are the benefits of formal and informal networks for these women?
4. What are the practical approaches to creating a beneficial network?

Script before the interview:

I'd like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As I have mentioned to you before, my research seeks to understand how Black women academics create, use, and maintain formal and informal social networks to combat pressures in the academy. The investigation ultimately aims to help create a practical approach to building and maintaining supportive networks. Our interview today will last approximately two-hours during which I will be asking you about what kinds of groups you are part, the benefits, and drawbacks of these groups, and elicit practical approaches to group formations.

As a Black woman in a tenure-track position who has been part of a formal or informal network, do you agree to the consent information of confidentiality, possible risks/benefits of participating, the knowledge you will be assigned a pseudonym read to you?

1. If yes, continue.
2. If no, thank you for your time.

I will audio record our session for transcription purposes. If you at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record, please let me know. Also, keep in mind do not use any identifiable information of your institution or other people during our recorded interview.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? If any problems (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time.

Questions:

1. What would you say are some of the significant victories and challenges you've had so far in navigating the academy as a Black woman?
2. What kinds of formal networking groups such as mentoring programs or institutional mandated retreats are/were you a member?
 - a. How did you become part of this group?
 - b. What were some benefits or positive by-products from this association?
 - c. What were some issues or drawbacks you encountered during this experience?
3. What kinds of informal networking groups such as ongoing writing groups, informal mentorships, sorority involvement, religious groups and/or sister circles are/were you a member?
 - a. How did you become part of this group?
 - b. What were some benefits or positive by-products from this association?
 - c. What were some issues or drawbacks you encountered during this experience?
4. Which group (formal or informal) do you believe was the most beneficial to you and why?

5. What advice would you give young Black women entering the academy in regards to navigating the academy?
6. If you could create an ideal group to help support you within the academy, what steps would you take to create it? Maintain it?
7. Is there anything you would like to add?

Post-interview Script:

Thank you so much for all of your insight and time. I appreciate your help, and I hope to talk to you again soon.