

---

Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

---

2015

## It takes a village : exploring African American women's experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being

Lyana M. Murrel  
*Smith College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Murrel, Lyana M., "It takes a village : exploring African American women's experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being" (2015). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/680>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu).

Lyana Murrell  
It Takes a Village: Exploring African  
American Women's Experiences  
with Collective Identity, Racism, and  
Well-being

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study sought to explore African American women's understandings about collective identity in their lives and, specifically, in their encounters with racism that impacted their well-being. African American women hold rich traditions of healing that encompass their communities and are influenced by their early bonds of sisterhood. In the United States of America, these traditions of connectedness between Black folks have supported Black women, communities, and families against the pressures of racist domination. Ten self-identified African American women between the ages of 34 and 69 shared rich narratives about how they experienced a collective sense of self, racism, and well-being. This study's findings were identified as they relate to participants' lived experiences of and intersections between collective identity and the following: (a) racial pride and multiculturalism, (b) community as an important African American value that feels under threat, (c) protecting and proliferating Black female expression, (d) learning "racism at a distance," and (e) the effects of bearing witness.

**IT TAKES A VILLAGE: EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S  
EXPERIENCES WITH COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, RACISM, AND WELL-BEING**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Lyana Murrell  
2015

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to the ten exceptional women who put their voices and experiences into this research. It was an act of courage, expression, and possibility.

Thank you to my family and friends, whose connectedness and love made this all possible.

Thank you to my research advisor, whose patience and creativity helped guide me in this process.

Thank you to the individuals and communities who supported this research. Your efforts are deeply appreciated and valuable.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
III. METHODOLOGY .....	32
IV. FINDINGS .....	40
V. DISCUSSION.....	63
REFERENCES .....	73
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Interview Guide .....	80
Appendix B: Human Subjects Review (HSR) Protocol Change Form.....	82
Appendix C: Human Subjects Review (HSR) Protocol Change Approval Letter.....	84
Appendix D: Human Subjects Review (HSR) Committee Letter of Approval .....	85
Appendix E: Study Flyer .....	86
Appendix F: Social Media Announcement .....	87
Appendix G: Email for Known Networks .....	88
Appendix H: Recruitment Message to Organizations.....	89
Appendix I: Agency or Institution Approval Letter .....	90
Appendix J: Informed Consent Form .....	91

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Women have shown a natural capacity for healing since the dawn of time (Comas-Diaz & Weiner, 2011a). Comas-Diaz and Weiner (2011b) described traditions of women nurturing themselves and others as a bonding process. This bonding process is still celebrated today as a healing one due to its ability to increase productions of oxytocin within an individual and improve their sense of well-being. Amongst African American women, these rich traditions of healing and nurturing encompass their communities and are influenced by their early examples and bonds of sisterhood. In the United States of America, these traditions of connectedness between Black (i.e., to be used interchangeably with African American in this study, but in recognition that other cultures of the African diaspora may identify as Black) folks have protected women, families, and communities against the pressures of racist domination. Historically, the bonds between Black individuals started through collective dependability and affection amongst female kin and were centered in Black homes (McDonald, 2007). Legislative and social expansions of the past century ensured Black women's experiences of Black collective enterprise, or perhaps a unique Black collective identity, had moved beyond the homeplace. Accordingly, current mental health research should increasingly examine if and how African American women's experiences with collective identity operate in their worlds. Thus, this study sought to explore how African American women experience a Black collective identity in their encounters with racism that may impact their psychological and emotional well-

being.

Considering Black women's encounters with traditions of connectedness, healing, and resistance, their experiences of Black collective identity merit further understanding. Then and now, Black women are the developers and nurturers of the homeplace. hooks (1990) wrote:

In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were Black women. (p. 41)

In hooks' descriptions of the homeplace, Black women performed additional roles of resistance and liberation. hooks (1990) acknowledged:

It was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that “homeplace,” most often created and kept by Black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared by Black women globally, especially Black women in white supremacist societies. (p. 42)

hooks described the practical motivations fueling African American women's investments in a homeplace as a space of resistance to racist aggression and for nurturing the souls of all Black folk. During the past century, Black women's homeplaces have expanded beyond the home as their rights to other forms of public discourse, participation, and leadership have also grown.

Meanwhile, their capacities for nurturing, connectedness, and resistance continue to hold strong.

In this study, collective identity is defined as follows:

A shared sense of “one-ness” or “we-ness” anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one more actual or imagined sets of others. Embedded within the shared sense of we is a corresponding sense of collective agency... Thus, it can be argued that collective identity is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of “we-ness” and collective agency.

(Snow, 2001, Conceptualization section, para. 4)

This study engaged Black women to bring their experiences and knowledge about collective identity to research.

Since society has not yet found an antidote for racism, it continues to be a common and harmful force that marks the lives of many African Americans. Harrell’s (2000) definition of racist ideology or racism applies in this study as:

A system of dominance, power and privilege based on racialized group designations; rooted in the historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or equal access to societal resources. (p. 43)

Accordingly, perceived racial discrimination (i.e., to be used synonymously with the term perceived racism in this study) is defined as perceptions of negative treatment based on racist ideology (West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2010). D’Souza (1996) argued that race no longer matters in a post-racial American society. Today, the president is Black. More precisely, Barack Obama



is the first African American to hold this office as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Ever since Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2008, some experts have continued to support the position of North American society having moved beyond race and racism has ended. Ikuenobe (2013) wrote the core idea of a post racial era is race as a classification system is senseless because society has moved away from treating individuals differently based on race, racial categories, racism, or racial grouping. Unfortunately, perceived racial discrimination indeed does leave indelible marks on and obstructs optimal growth in African Americans (Stevens-Watkins, Perry, Pullen, Jewell, & Oser, 2014; West et al., 2010).

While perceived racial discrimination is a common occurrence for many African Americans, a wide range of differences exists in how Black women specifically experience their psychological and emotional well-being (i.e., to be used synonymously with mental and emotional well-being or mental health outcomes in this study) impacted by perceptions of racism. Empirical research has shown perceived racial discrimination is largely associated with negative mental health outcomes for African Americans (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2014; West et al., 2010). For Black women, the literature has shown perceived racism contributes to a range of adverse mental health outcomes including general psychological distress, weighted self-esteem or sense of well-being, depression, and anxiety (Paradies, 2006; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). However, the literature cannot yet explain why some Black women are less adversely impacted than others when considering the range of effects on Black women's well-being associated with perceived racial discrimination. To explain these differences more thoroughly, Black women's psychological and emotional well-being will not be defined in this study. Instead, this study engaged African American women as experts who could define their own mental health outcomes as well as the nature (e.g., harmful, beneficial, etc.) of those

outcomes, as they explored their experience of collective identity.

This study addressed important gaps in the literature. First, current and future mental health research needs to identify and explore a variety of influencing factors to explain the differences in mental health outcomes associated with perceptions of racism amongst African Americans in general and Black women specifically (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000; Pieterse, Carter, & Ray, 2013; Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). Simultaneously, Black women's voices need to be increasingly represented in research to address the dearth of literature examining African American women's beliefs about mental health, especially in their own words (Stevens-Watkins, Sharma, & Knighton, 2013; Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009). Ultimately, engaging unexamined elements in Black women's lived experiences with collective identity and well-being can fill the gap in the literature incorporating African American women's views about these phenomena.

Conducting a study aimed to fill the previously discussed gap in literature also fulfilled an important aim of social work practice: to increasingly practice cultural consciousness and competence. The National Association of Social Worker's (NASW) Code of Ethics (2008) declared:

Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability (Cultural Competency and Social Diversity section, para. 3).

In compliance with the NASW Code of Ethics, this study worked to increase the scope of research available to mental health clinicians or social workers about the historical and

contemporary forces (i.e., both healing and harmful) that impact the daily lives of Black women.. Even more, this study sought to inform interventions that address African American accounts about lack of cultural competence in mental health services (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2009) by pursuing a deeper understanding of African American collective experiences and mental health needs in a Black informed or inclusive manner (i.e., by their own accounts). Ultimately, this researcher sought to fulfill these ethical obligations by engaging African American women, bearing witness to their stories, and representing their experiences of collective identity, perceived racism, and well-being in research.

In closing, the intent of this study is to help bring attention to the unique living experiences of African American women. Following this introduction, Chapter II will further summarize literature about collective identity, a unique Black collective identity, and the connections between perceived racial discrimination and well-being. Chapter III will follow to describe the study's guiding framework, design, sample, recruitment strategies, data collection, and analysis methods. A synopsis of the study's findings will then be covered in Chapter IV. Finally, a discussion of the findings will be presented in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

This study will explore the following research question: How do African American women experience a Black collective identity in their encounters with racism that may impact their psychological and emotional well-being? The first section of the literature review will focus on collective identity broadly; this includes a review of conceptual precursors for collective identity theory, developments of the concept in social-psychological literature, focus on the role of conflict in the formation of collective identity, and importance of generational memory. The next section will provide an overview of the formation of a unique African American/Black collective identity, including a review of traditions of Black political thought, a summary of various critiques of African American collective identity, and an evaluation of how African American experiences of collective identity have or have not been conceptualized in mental health empirical research. Additionally, I will review the literature to establish a clear understanding of what perceived racism is; how it has been understood in conceptual models in the literature; and how its relationship with mental health outcomes has been examined in empirical mental health research.

#### **Collective Identity**

Collective identity has been broadly conceptualized since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, but no single definition or understanding of the theory exists (Snow, 2001). The concept of collective identity refers to the shared definition and feelings of “we” amongst group members with

common interests, experiences, and solidarity (Snow, 2001, Conceptualization section, para. 4; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Notably, the theory of collective identity has two important components in the overall bodies of literature: the first component has been in identity theory related research that shows it is part of an individual's personal identity. Contributions to social movement literature by researchers such as Melucci (1995) and Snow (2001) have presented the action component of collective identity and described it as an emergent process of collective movement action. Snow emphasized that collective identity has an emancipatory spirit or collective agency element that suggests it is a source and product of collective movement action. Hunt and Benford (2004) agreed that collective identity incorporates "kindred concepts such as solidarity and commitment" (p. 433). To include the personal identity and collective agency components of the concept, collective identity is formally defined in this study as:

A shared sense of "one-ness" or "we-ness" anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one more actual or imagined sets of others. Embedded within the shared sense of we is a corresponding sense of collective agency... Thus, it can be argued that collective identity is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of "we-ness" and collective agency.

(Snow, 2001, Conceptualization section, para. 4)

To be clearer, collective identity has been described in the research as an emergent process of individual identity development and collective protest participation. Collective identity as a process gains relevance as well as power from an individual's identification with and of the group; dialectical recognition of special concern(s); solidarity and mutual trust with other group members; commitment to the collective will or shared goals; and feelings or sense of common history, language, commemorations, and values (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, &

Sztompka, 2004; Melucci, 1995; Shelby, 2005; Snow, 2001).

Ultimately, collective identity has many benefits and limits. It has been a tool for researchers to learn how people make sense of their world, produce meaning, and define themselves and their relationship to the environment. More dynamic and beneficial dimensions of collective identity include its emancipatory function that enables individuals to be a liberated and unified agents who control their actions with a collective; enables individuals to recognize and take credit for the history and outcomes of actions taken; and enables individuals to feel a sense of durability as the collective provides group members with orientations or maps of past, present and future (Melucci, 1995). More static dimensions of collective identity include the importance of the collective's orientation toward agreement, often valued over debate, and its essentialized or narrow expressions of group-definition that isolate members who do not fit in with the collective's shared definition.

**Classical foundations of collective identity.** Fominaya (2010) explained the roots of collective identity include sociological explorations by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber respectively examined how extraordinary challenges to unjust institutionalized authority were achieved in society. Today, institutional authority can be described as the policies and practices found in larger systems or institutions such as legal systems, schools, housing developments, and company/employment environments. Specifically, each theorist explored how unbalanced structural conditions, which refer to the interactions between societal institutions that promote inequality, influenced the emergence of collective identities in protest participation and collective movement action. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber also correspondingly emphasized that conflict between two or more groups was a vital factor for increasing individual feelings of solidarity with a group and commitment to collective action.

Each theorist acknowledged that conflict between groups arises because all individuals get assigned a place in the social world; this makes individuals social objects that can be defined in relation to their similarities with a group and by their differences from another group. Marx, Durkheim and Weber's explorations on the interactions between society and collective action are evident in collective identity theory today.

According to the Marxist tradition, class consciousness is required for working-class groups to build solidarity and cohesiveness as well as to overthrow the ruling-class's state protected oppression (Ware, 1983). In theories of Marxism, shared social experiences of production (e.g., class struggles, class divisions, etc.) in a market economy are considered a primary source of group identification; this implies processes of production and class define an individual's place in the social world. Marx argued that working class members with shared social conflicts need conversations to recognize themselves as a class sharing common grievances against a capitalistic system and then as opposed to the ruling class. Marx emphasized that change from a class "in-itself" to a class "for itself" was thus a necessary condition for revolutionary class action (Hunt & Benford, 2008, p. 434). To be clear, a class "in-itself" refers to a class of people who collectively recognize their commonalities of grievances in a capitalistic system; in contrast, a class "for it-self" refers to a class of people who collectively recognize their opposition to the bourgeoisie- or a privileged, ruling class- in a capitalistic system (Hunt & Benford, 2008).

Weber (1978) disagreed with Marx's emphasis on class as the primary basis for group identification and argued that actually three important sources exists for group identification and collective action including class, status and party. Weber described individuals in the same class share common life chances, or access to resources, ownership and production. In particular,

Weber emphasized social classes, or status groups, were a strong basis for revolutionary action. Status groups include individuals sharing common social prestige, identity, or lifestyles rooted in shared social characteristics. Weber argued that social status is likely to have a most prominent impact on individual levels or consciousness; this impact at the individual level is needed to motivate individuals to invest in community or collective interests in lieu of their own interests (Breen, 2005). Weber also highlighted that parties were important for creating shared definitions of the collective with intent to gain power and influence. Finally, Weber believed charismatic leaders were key to creating revolutionary attitudes in times of institutional turmoil, inequitable distribution of resources, dullness or despair. The role of the charismatic leader is to express ideas to shock or disturb the routine structure of everyday life to motivate individuals to change.

Similar to Marx, Durkheim, Cosman, and Cladis (2001) agreed that mutuality, consciousness, and solidarity were important conditions for collective action and are derived from an affective experience. Specifically, Durkheim introduced the idea of collective effervescence to describe how bringing people into close proximity and moral unity “generates a kind of electricity that quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation” (Durkheim et al., 2001, p. 162). Durkheim et al. reasoned that social bonds as well as moral communities are reaffirmed when a collective is moved by their common passions and euphoria; collective effervescence thus allows individuals to create feelings and actions that are not available on their own. Durkheim believed that collective effervescence increased group solidarity, which can lead to the increased collective consciousness (i.e., defined as the creation of normative collective viewpoints that increase group cohesion). Once collective consciousness was present, Durkheim suggested that mutuality grew as collectives continued to share goals, morals, cognitive maps, and emotional meanings. Durkheim’s work emphasized collective



effervescence and its derivatives as process in which a unique, living, breathing, distinct collective feeling that motivates action emerges.

**Social psychological developments on collective identity.** Social-psychological theorists increasingly conceptualized the interplay between personal identities and society in collective identity theory. Early explorations by Mead (1934) examined symbolic interactionism, which refers to the dialectical exchange between the social structures, meanings, and contexts and an individual's identity development. Mead suggested that symbolic interactionism is a process that guides individual identity development, prioritizes language as important in social interaction, and ensures that the individual and society are continuously influencing the other's development. Contributions like Mead's research have affirmed collective identity is not only a given or intentionally built product but is also a process in which an individual's (i.e., one who may eventually become part of a collective) identity is influenced by society and the individual in exchange influences new forms of society. These dialectical interactions (meaning the activities and conversations people engage in to express opposite ideas in order to find the truth) between the individual and society are processes that create collective identity and constantly change it.

Theories in identity development have bridged a gap in the literature on the connection between the formation of collective action movements and individual motivation. Identity is "our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally other people's understanding of themselves and others" (van Stekelenburg, 2013, p. 1). Klandermans and De Weerd (2000) explained that people's understandings of themselves are generated on three levels: individual, social, and collective group levels. Researchers have argued a more personal level includes the individual identity, which refers to the characteristics and meanings

individuals uses for self-definition, and many social identities, which refers to the chosen or assigned attributes of individuals that place them in the social order (Snow, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The process of group identification creates a link between collective and social identity; therefore, it is also a bridge between individual and collective identity (Klandermans & De Weerd, 2000). The important relationship between individual and collective identity is evident in various social contexts, when a strong collective identity becomes the main one an individual identifies with even more than their own individual identity.

**The role of conflict in collective identity.** Collective identity is also considered a process in which developments in individuals' identities and their social experiences are linked; this relationship means that collective identity is a process in which individuals access collective agency to address social conflicts (Melucci, 1995). Melucci (1995) noted that conflicts in society importantly affect the interaction between social practices and an individual's daily experience of life and identity:

In the past twenty years emerging social conflicts in advanced societies have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices. The crucial dimensions of daily life (time, space, interpersonal relations, individual and group identity) have been involved in these conflicts, and new actors have laid claim to their autonomy in making sense of their lives (p. 41).

Melucci suggested intersecting and structural realities enhance this sense of belonging to a particular group to become privileged over other aspects of individual's personal identity; in this way formation of collective identity is not a fixed production or process. Thus, Melucci emphasized the emotional or affective ties between an individual and a collective in facilitating

the formation of collective identity. Melucci wrote, “the empirical unity of a social movement should be considered as a result rather than a starting point” (p. 43). So Melucci defined the gap between social conflicts and collective identity formation as an intermediate process, in which cognitive definition, active relationships, and emotional investments are formed and contribute to the individual motivation for collective movement actions.

Similar to Melucci, Alexander et al. (2004) explained there are cognitive, emotional, and moral sources of meaning-making that facilitate the process of collective identity. Alexander et al. succinctly described the interim process in which a collective identity develops as a time when actual cultural trauma occurs if there is large-scale or national failure to acknowledge and repair the reality of a relevant major social conflict. To clarify, Alexander et al. defined cultural trauma as follows:

A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society’s existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions. (p. 44)

Alexander et al. described cultural trauma as an experience that allows impacted populations not only to conceptualize the existence and sources of trauma but also assume a sense of moral responsibility for its presence. Alexander et al. emphasized the power of collective recognition of special concerns about oppression (i.e., the consequences of institutional, structural, and interpersonal racism) to create an affective bond:

Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others. (p.1)

In order to nurture development of collective bonds and identity, Alexander et al. introduced the idea of carrier groups in which individuals, businesses, advocates, theorists, literary agents, and other social actors- who are members of the impacted social group- make meaning of the special concerns or start a claim of national injury during the latency period between event and representation. Ultimately, these researches were able to highlight the connections between conflict, dialogue, and emotional-cognitive-moral bonding during the development of collective identities.

Melucci (1995) and Alexander et al. (2004) presented several critical characteristics of collective identity formation. The first characteristic is a meaning-making process that reflects the group's shared languages, history, rituals, goals, and other cultural artifacts. The second is that members of the collective do not have to align in beliefs, interests, goals, or ideologies if the collective identity is privileged in individuals. With these characteristics in mind, the collective then has to have a vested interest in distinguishing itself from the dominant group and the ability to be recognized by the dominant group. Collective identity then becomes rooted in conflict rather than shared interests, and this can support the group's consolidation and solidarity (Melucci, 2005). Upon realization of group solidarity, collective identity then can take on a liberatory function.

To better understand how collective identity becomes more salient, scholars determined the vitality of any given collective increases during periods of sociocultural disorder, socioeconomic exclusion, and political transformation. Upon formation, collective identity is a sense of belonging that is highly prioritized within an individual's understanding of who they are, often maintained by the cultural symbols or emblems that represent the collective's beliefs, languages, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. The existence of a collective identity is maintained

by two important processes: by the persistence of the dominant group's effort to position the minority group as inferior and by the continuity of the marginalized group members' responses to such continued domination. The important implication is collective identity is not an absolute or staple experience for every individual who can identify with or who is assigned membership to a collective. When applicable however, collective identity has functioned as a tool of liberation or a vessel for redefinition, power, and pride for oppressed groups.

With importance of conflict and shared definitions of the collective in mind, Snow (2001) explained the formation of collective identity has been understood in the context of three unique perspectives, including primordialism, structuralism, and constructionism. Considered essentialist approaches, primordialist points of view contend that a collective identity derives from some defining essence or set of characteristics (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and structuralist viewpoints hold that it is based on commonality in social categories (e.g., class, nationality, etc.) (Snow, 2001). In contrast, constructionist perspectives emphasize that collective identities are invented, created, and reconstituted (Snow, 2001); this latter position has received considerable support for its distinguished utility in understanding collective identities (Snow, 2001). Polletta and Jasper (2001) explained the three approaches described by Snow (2001) are generated through the group's participation in and representation of culture, traditions, and languages. The authors, however, also explained that the origin of collective, precipitated by the group or outside of the group, is not as important as member's acceptance of the identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In this way individuals' acceptance of a collective identity, rather than recognitions of the source event that necessitated the identity, is most important for the emergence of agency-oriented (i.e., can be radical, resistant, and/or protective in nature) components of collective identity.

**Generational memory and collective identity.** Collective memory is significant in understanding collective identity. The literature today has shown collective memory is “supraindividual” or not primarily focused on individual histories (Edmunds & Turner, 2002, p. 57). In actuality, individual memories can act as a barrier to the formation of a collective identity when the individual must privilege the collective’s history and will over their own histories or daily routines to achieve extraordinary collective action and collective identity salience (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). Prior to Edmunds and Turner’s research, Radley (1990) showed that memory is located within the discourse of people talking together about the past, but felt that the overemphasis on discourse left out the importance of material objects and culture (e.g., in shaping memory (p. 46). The term *culture* refers to languages, norms, objects, values, rituals, and symbols that are characteristic of or distinguishing about a group of people, and the term *material object* refers to physical objects produced by humans (i.e., money, houses, food, etc.). Halbwachs (1950/1992) emphasized ideological, generational, positional or political contexts are important because they represent the environments in which individual conversations of social conflict take place and in which individuals participate in cultural productions. To be clearer, collective memory is defined as:

Recollections of a shared past... passed on in either an ongoing process of what might be called public commemoration, in which officially sanctioned rituals are engaged to establish a shared past or through discourse more specific to a particular group or collective. (Edmunds & Turner, 2002, p. 57)

As seen in the quote, collective memory is a way to commemorate the past (i.e., counter narrative making, public commemorations, historical recording) and create solidarity in the present (i.e., establishing shared fate). Biographical memories are rooted in collective history;

thus collective memory can provide individuals with cognitive maps for present behavior (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). Ultimately, society and individuals can be assumed unable to exist without collective memory.

Generational memory is important for the refreshing of collective memory. Each generation has a role of recycling the collective memory; this means their direct interactions with significant events of their adolescent and young adult selves become decisive in ridding the collective memory of what is not needed and sustaining what yet needs to be achieved (Eyerman, 2001). The work of the collective is to create a temporal map, in which the collective and the individual cohesively know their history, present conditions, and will for the future (Alexander et al., 2004). The concept of generational memory suggests that the past is collectively shaped, even when it is not collectively experienced. Generational memory then represents the process by which the collective's past becomes selectively exploited, rather than literally constructed (Schwartz, 1982).

### **Toward a Unique African American Collective Identity**

*We are one with you under the ban of prejudice and proscription—one with you under the slander of inferiority—one with you in social and political disfranchisement. What you suffer, we suffer; what you endure, we endure. We are indissolubly united, and must fall or flourish together. (Douglass, 1847)*

African American scholars, theorists, and writers have long defended and/or implicitly relied upon collective identity theory and kinship concepts such as solidarity and commitment in understanding the lived experiences of Black folks. One meaningful theme that has been produced in this segment of the literature is that Black collective identity is constantly reproduced through stories and memories within the collective –and in relation to the collective's

dialectal exchange with other societal actors- highlights a polarizing conflict in the lives of African Americans. This conflict is rooted in a struggle with a dominant group whose exaggerated negative attitudes and behaviors threatens as well as necessitates the preservation of a collective consciousness or identity (Morrison, 1997; Shelby, 2005). The historical origin of this conflict is United States slavery.

Angelou (1976) identified the collective memory of slavery as the source that defines African American individuals as a race member. Collective identity theory can be distinguished from other identity theories for its emancipatory and/or political spirit as well as its focus on the group's identity, rather than on individual aspects of identity that impact a person's identification with a group. Shelby (2005) described the liberatory spirit of a distinct African American collective identity as follows:

Viewing one another as Black brothers and sisters with a shared social identity in Blackness may, like the familiar motivating force of kinship relations, make Blacks more inclined to help each other in a movement to eradicate racial injustice and its negative consequences. (p. 204)

Shelby acknowledged collective identity has positive potential to motivate an individual's participation in social change against racial injustice. Similarly, More (2009) posited that Black collective identity and solidarity is an appropriate response to a classification system in which a dominant group hostilely constitutes a marginalized group into a collective founded on a common characteristic. The focal point of reference in this segment of the literature is an African American collective identity is rooted in a national injury that demands justice (Alexander et al., 2004). In this way, African American collective identity can be experienced as a consciously bounded social group that transforms a stigmatized racial identity into a source of resistance,



utility, and pride (Fordham, 2010; Ogbu, 2004).

**Black solidarity in traditions of Black political thought.** Black leaders have long debated how African Americans can realize full freedom and equality from racial injustice. These philosophical traditions have consistently determined that “racist consciousness always operates at the level of collectives” (More, 2009, p. 34). Given that the United States is plagued by social injustice, proponents of collective identity have suggested Black individuals are united by a shared experience of racial oppression and solidarity of commitment to resist it.

Black nationalism is remarked to be an old and enduring African American political tradition and conceptual precursor for Black collective identity (Shelby, 2005). Black nationalism incorporates core principles including Black self-determination, racial solidarity, group self-reliance, voluntary racial separation, pride in African legacies, Black self-love, militant or strategic resistance to White supremacy, preservation of a distinct Black culture and identity, and recognition of Africa as the homeland of peoples of African descent (Shelby, 2005). Black nationality conceptualizations are ever-changing, with early considerations (i.e., 18050s to 1920s) featuring the intrinsic goal of Black liberation, sovereignty, and dominion outside of or away from the United States (Shelby, 20005). Later theorists (i.e., 1920s-present) increasingly emphasized Black nationalism as a political strategy that resists racial injustice through Black liberation, sovereignty, and dominion within the United States (Shelby, 2005). Ultimately, the shifting dynamisms of Black nationalistic political traditions seem to have focused on distinguishing Blackness, identifying a collective will, maintaining Black solidarity, and politically mobilizing Black self-determination (i.e., separation from White, European society).

Du Bois (1903/1999) proposed a different and popular path to addressing the effects of slavery and racial oppression. Du Bois asserted that Black individuals could experience a divided

self due to the severe alienation imposed by White domination. Du Bois disagreed with idea of eradication of an American identity that Black nationalism called for. Du Bois proposed that for the Black individuals to realize their truer selves, the divided American and African parts of a Black individual must be incorporated without losing any one state of self, respectively. This integration was achieved through Black individual realization of full American citizenship and freedom as well as through the independent development of Black ethics, cultures, ideals, politics, education, economics, and ideals; this balanced state would require concerted and intentional Black effort (Du Bois, 1903/1999). Ultimately, Du Bois put forth a position that denounced interracial conflict as the prime concern of African American collective identity and privileged Black recovery as the central focus.

The emergence of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s was a reaction to the ambivalence of Black individual's about the United States as a home site and called for less dramatic restructuring than Black nationalism (Shelby, 2005). Essentially, the Black Power Movement was less focused on addressing diaspora issues by relocation to Africa than demonstrated by proponents of Black nationalism; instead, the movement was essentially a back to Africa campaign that would be located on a United States platform (Shelby, 2005). Thus, distinct sovereign Black communities sought full incorporation (i.e., of access to resources or social mobility, production possibilities, representations in institutions, supported cultural and historical productions, leadership and ownership, etc.) in United States societies during the Black Power Movement.

After the Black Power Movement, scholarly works nuancing the nature of racism and distinguishing sources of oppression became increasingly prevalent; these works will be discussed in the next section.

**Critiques of Black collective identity.** This section will discuss the limits of a Black collective identity for Black folks, briefly, and for Black women in more depth. Four areas of critique include examinations about (a) boundaries to defining Blackness, (b) multiculturalism in the lives of Black folks, (c) intersectionality of multiple oppressions in Black womanhood, and (d) lack of representation for other sources of extraordinary bonding in the lives of Black folks.

Anti-essentialism is a growing theme in the literature. Melucci (2005) wrote, “Collective identity establishes the limits of the actor in relation to the field: it regulates membership of individuals and defines the requisites for joining the movement” (p. 49). When a collective identity has been established and is so rooted in conflict due to the systematically supported authority of the dominant group, the very nature of how the non-dominant group was established in terms of essentialized or common characteristics can be confining. To be sure, collective productions of meaning, community, and culture can maintain or preserve a collective identity while also resisting White, patriarchal, racist domination (West, 1992). With roots in Marx’s understandings about a class in-itself versus one for-itself, the identification of a collective is a dual process: it is identified within or by the members of the collective and is identifiable to other social groups, actors, and collectives. One common dichotomy born of that dual process is White and Black distinctions of being. Once Blackness is identified, with sets of criteria for what Blackness means, boundaries and Blackness become specific. If a person’s sense of identity exists outside of inclusion criteria, that individual is at risk for harm to their sense of self or self-concept or self-representation (Shelby, 2005). Thus, collective identity may not be as salient for individuals who cannot internally feel as one with the will and identity of the collective. Without full representation, identification, and commitment, Black individuals cannot be expected to privilege the collective that they are not wholly cherished and understood by (Shelby, 2005).

Ultimately, defining Blackness is problematic for individuals who do meet inclusion criteria.

Multiculturalism and post-racial arguments are rising as cultures, ethnicities, and races blend or become more incorporated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Grillo (1995) cautioned that race is not a biological concept, but a social and historical construct.

If we accept the definition of Black we have been given, a definition which historically defined anyone with the “one drop of Black blood” as Black- we ignore the existence of multiracial people. We ignore people whose experiences may be different from those experiences, which have been defined as constituting the Black experience- that is the essentialized Black experience...Of course, multiracial people will try to find a place to call home if they cannot be at home being Black. (p. 25)

Post-racial arguments like Grillo’s are in response to the growing incorporation of cultures, ethnicities, and races in interracial families, global technology exchanges, and even youth social movements. Robinson (2000) noted the problem of essentialized or rigid notions of Blackness was partly found in the individual’s and collective’s preoccupations with race thinking, or externalizing race, which actually creates, reinforces, and sustains racist ideologies. In addition, the Black diaspora to North America from a recognized ancestral homeland (i.e., Africa) means that not all Black individuals in the country identify with the United States ancestral slave struggle, southern roots, and the formative Great Migration that underpin traditional African American identity. African American in this study is used synonymously with Black, but it is important to recognize distinctions amongst Black cultures coming from countries in Africa or the United States.

The intersection of gender, race and, increasingly, class for Black women has never been fully represented in White women’s feminist narratives or White and Black male narratives

(Harris-Perry, 2011). These unrepresented aspects of their experience have led Black women to privilege their true and diverse abilities for expression, which are indeed political in nature.

Harris-Perry (2011) wrote:

Formal participation in government is only one part of a more encompassing effort to be recognized within the nation. The struggle for recognition is the nexus of human identity and national identity, where much of the most important work of politics occurs... To understand Black women's politics, we must explore their often unspoken experiences of hurt, rejection, faith, and search for identity... The internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of Black women are inherently political. They are political because Black women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity. These assumptions shape the social world that Black women must accommodate or resist in an effort to preserve their authentic selves and to secure recognition as citizens. (pp. 4-5)

Harris-Perry (2011) described Black women's struggles for recognition in the metaphor of the crooked room: "When they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up" (p. 29). Harris-Perry's metaphor of the crooked room alluded to Black women's consistent tasks to make sense of non-sense in their lives. Harris (2001) explained the consequences and acknowledged the strengths of Black women's journeys for true representation:

These suprahuman women have been denied the "luxuries" of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences, or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, multidimensional characters. They must swallow their pain, gird their loins against trouble . . . and persist in spite of adversity. (p. 12)

Accordingly, Lorde (1985) eloquently named exactly what Black women were resisting:

It is not the destiny of Black America to repeat white America's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life. If Black men continue to define "femininity" instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic European terms, they restrict our access to each other's energies. Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism. As Black women and men, we cannot hope to begin dialogue by denying the oppressive nature of male privilege. And if Black males choose to assume that privilege for whatever reason—raping, brutalizing, and killing Black women—then ignoring these acts of Black male oppression within our communities can only serve our destroyers. One oppression does not justify another. It has been said that Black men cannot be denied their personal choice of the woman who meets their need to dominate. In that case, Black women also cannot be denied our personal choices, and those choices are becomingly increasingly self-assertive and female-oriented. (p. 47).

This segment of the research ultimately highlighted that oppressions cannot be dismantled separately because they mutually reinforce each other. As such, Black female expression is a radical aspect of Black womanhood that works to distort or eradicate the impacts of those intersecting oppressions.

Black women have historically bonded collectively in a variety of ways. These unrepresented aspects of their experience have led to collective bonds and sources of identity that do not operate in conventional political spheres, but are indeed political in nature. Other types of bonding include rich histories with the church, music, and lived experiences of ancestors.

Ntloedibe (2006) noted the importance of spirituality, dance, and music:

[Dance and music] served as guiding and organizing principles through which enslaved Africans, irrespective of their ethnicity achieved cultural oneness... baptismal and funeral ceremonies reinforced a strong sense of communalism... served as a source of substantial group cohesiveness because it allowed for people of different languages and religious perspectives to engage in the ceremony at the same time. (pp. 408-409)

These long histories of revolutionary bonding and ancestral observance have created collective communities that are not only distinguished in terms of Blackness. Even more, Collins (2009) discussed the power of love and morality as new possibilities honored by Black women to combat the distortions of human feelings and values in systems of oppression. Collins celebrated how love, justice, and community informed Black women's senses of strength, lent them a special form of ethics, enriched their collective uniqueness, and prepared them to oppose the dehumanizing realities of racist domination. Ultimately, Black collective identity is a bonding process in which individuals and their collective group can be held together; however, such experiences of identity are held together by many sources so that it does not have to be bound (West, 1992).

### **African American Collective Identity and Mental Health Research**

Mental health research has not largely explored African Americans experiences of collective identity. Robnett (2007) conducted a national cross-sectional, attitudinal survey with a multiple frame, random-digit probability sample of 1205 African American adults on the utility of collective identity in understanding political participation amongst African Americans. Robnett wrote, "common fate is considered essential to Black collective identity, solidarity, and mobilization" (p. 1). While social psychological literature has largely examined processes and mechanisms of collective identity (i.e., formation, sustenance, and outcomes), Robnett's study

focused on collective identity theory as a predictor of political participation with high consideration given to biographical and structural contexts that influence such participation. The study found that collective identity was not a significant predictor of conventional political participation, but it was positively found to predict participation in certain unconventional political activities (e.g., signing petitions) for African Americans. The strengths of the study include the its examination of common fate at the individual level, and how that translates into group activity. The limits of this study include its focus on collective identity within a political lens.

### **Perceived Racism in Lives of African American Women**

Racism as an ideology with a principle tenet of racial superiority can manifest within individual, institutional, and cultural domains as prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behavior by the dominant group against a group characterized as inferior (Jones 1997; Jones & Carter, 1996; Neville & Pieterse, 2009; Pieterse et al., 2012). Over the past 60 years, the way African American lives have been impacted by racism has undergone substantial change. To be clear, perceived racial discrimination (i.e., to be used synonymously with the term perceived racism in this study) is defined as perceptions of negative treatment based on racist ideology (West et al., 2010). Also, Harrell (2000) articulately defined racism as follows:

A system of dominance, power and privilege based on racialized group designations; rooted in the historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable; and occurring in circumstances where members of the dominant group create or accept their societal privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant-group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or



equal access to societal resources. (p. 43)

Prior to the development of these two definitions, Davis (1999) posited that today “racism is a much more clandestine, much more hidden kind of phenomenon, but at the same time it's perhaps far more terrible than it's ever been” (para. 4). Like Davis, West et al. (2010) explained that while overt racial discrimination (e.g., institutional segregation, lynching, etc.) has declined, a simultaneous increase in covert racial discrimination has occurred (e.g., disparities in employment or income, health care, and access to higher education institutions, etc.). Regardless if perceptions of racism are experienced overtly (i.e., defined as macroassaults or macroaggressions) or covertly (i.e., defined as microaggressions), findings in social psychology research indicated that perceived racial discrimination was a commonly reported occurrence amongst African Americans (Carr, Szymanski, Taha, West, & Kaslow, 2014; West et al., 2010). Harrell (2000) described the weight and complexity of racism as follows:

While, within the context of racism, there have always been abundant examples of resilience, strength of character, capacity for love and giving, joy, fulfillment and success, there remain far too many examples of despair, dysfunction, isolation, hopelessness, destructiveness, and spiritual depletion. (p. 42)

The scope of racism as a system within individual, institutional, and cultural domains demonstrates that inequitable treatment is highly represented in the lived experiences of individuals who are identified as or who identify with a non-dominant group. To be clear, *oppressive dominant groups* in this study refer to groups of individuals with privilege and power to inflict neoliberal, patriarchal, and White supremacist ideologies on others (i.e., non-dominant groups). Perceived racism, therefore, can also exist in these multiple domains; it also can be considered a stressor in the lived experiences of members of non-dominant groups (Pieterse et

al., 2012).

### **Perceived Racism in Mental Health Research**

In accordance with conceptual models that will be discussed, as well as other substantial contributions in meta-analysis (Lee & Ahn, 2011; Pascoe & Richmond, 2009) and narrative reviews (Paradies, 2006), the general as well as international trend that has been observed is that perceived racism or other discriminatory behavior has an adverse relationship to mental health outcomes in individuals who are members of marginalized groups. For African Americans specifically, Pieterse et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analytic review of 66 published studies investigating the associations between racism and mental health for African Americans. Their study's purpose was to understand the magnitude of the relationship between perceived racism and mental health among Black adults (Pieterse et al., 2012). The inclusion criteria for the study included studies that focused on the mental health markers associated with perceptions of racism, studies that were focused on African American adults, and peer reviewed publications and dissertations conducted between 1996 and 2011. Pieterse et al. (2012) found that higher exposure and recognition of racism was positively correlated with higher reporting of mental distress amongst African Americans and that self-esteem and life satisfaction were not impacted to the degree that psychiatric symptoms and general distress were by racism for African Americans. The limits to their study included their use of depression and anxiety as mental health measures. This limit was a reflection of the larger body of literature that also lacked comparisons across outcomes beyond specific assessments of depression and anxiety (i.e., both self-reported and observed). Also, Pieterse et al. (2012) noted that there are a bevy of moderators that still require exploration to strengthen research about the role of racism in the lives of African Americans.

Accordingly, Clark et al. (1999) and Harrell (2000) developed conceptual models that

allowed for more systematic study of the moderators and mediators of racism-related stress in the lives of African Americans and other communities experiencing racism. Clark et al. and Harrell intended the models to be guides for analyzing experiences amongst Black folks and in communities of color that are not fully understood or even identified, but do facilitate how racism is experienced in individuals' lives. Clark et al. (1999) examined the biological, psychological, and social (i.e. biopsychosocial) effects of African Americans' perceptions of intergroup and intragroup racism. Specifically, that exploration intended to review how racism had been conceptualized in scientific literature, evaluate prior research on intergroup and intragroup racism, and propose a "conceptual model for systematic studies of the biopsychosocial effects of perceived racism among African Americans" (Clark et al., p. 805). Drawing heavily on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transaction model of stress, Clark et al.'s biopsychosocial model of racism posited that perceptions of racist forces in an individual's environment cause immoderate psychological and biological stress responses that are mediated by the following contextual factors: constitutional, behavioral, demographic, psychological, and coping responses. When such stress responses are persistent, Clark et al. determined that there is an impact on health outcomes (i.e. mental health included) for the individual.

Along the same lines as Clark et al. (1999), Harrell (2000) created a multidimensional model for understanding racism-related stress and mental health that integrated existing research on the relationship between racism and health, a theory of multiculturalism in mental health. and the stress process (p. 42). Of note, Harrell's model is not as specific to African Americans as Clark et al.'s model; still, Harrell's model was intended to identify with any group (i.e. multicultural). Harrell posited that there are culture-based variables that mediate the relationship between perceived racism and well-being. In essence, Clark et al.'s and Harrell's contributions to

research support this study's exploration of collective identity in Black women's lives, encounters with racism, and journeys for well-being.

### **Summary**

Ultimately, the literature suggests an adverse relationship exists between perceived racism and psychological and emotional well-being for individuals experiencing racism. The literature also indicates that research should explore other factors influencing the link between perceived racism and mental health to create more accurate understandings. Furthermore, the literature has established in theory and writings how collective identity has been a product of Black production and experienced, at times, in a highly liberating and protective manner. Together, these suggestions represent the utility in this study to understand other factors that may influence the link between perceived racism and mental health outcomes, to explore how collective identity as a factor is experienced as supportive or not in that relationship by Black women, and to fill the dearth in literature about and by African American women regarding their beliefs about mental health and themselves.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study sought to explore how African American women experience an African American collective identity in their lives and in their encounters with racism that may impact their psychological and emotional well-being. This chapter will provide greater detail about the study's research design and guiding framework, sample, data collection, and data analysis. Informed by the works of Melucci (1995), Snow (2001), Alexander et al. (2004), and Shelby (2005), I created the following operational definition for Black collective identity that was used in this study: Black people's (i.e., as a collective) feelings of unity and solidarity with one another; it may be that feeling of them and us. Together, the collective can protect Black individuals, Black cultures, and other parts of Black communities by challenging the harm that racism or other oppressions bring.

#### **Guiding Framework and Research Design**

The rationale for a qualitative study with semi-structured, intensive interviews was based on the need to develop in-depth understandings of the meanings made by African American women about the intersections between their experiences with collective identity, encounters with racism, and maintenance of well-being. Black women's understandings of collective identity are not really represented in mental health research. When an experience is so unknown, qualitative research is useful to delve into deeper and theoretically rich meanings of particular human experiences that are not easily reduced to numbers (Rubin & Babbie, 2009). Intensive

interviewing was used in this study to explore participants' rich worlds in their own terms (see Appendix A for interview guide). I approached participants with curiosity. Their narratives offered an expanded understanding about certain elements of Black women's lives. Subsequent analysis of participants' narratives was an inductive process that identified themes, patterns, relationships, and frequencies in their experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being.

Furthermore, this study used an ethno-political psychological (EP) approach to working with people of color to inform the data collection process and formulation of research questions. For clarification, qualitative research paradigms are models or frameworks shared by a scientific community that guide how a researcher acts with regard to inquiry. Comas-Diaz (2007) wrote that mainstream traditions of psychology "continue to be limited in addressing people of color's needs through the neglect of their historical and political context of behavior" (p. 91). To challenge mainstream psychology's monocultural foundations, an ethno-political psychological approach to working with people of color studies how human behavior intersects with ethnicity and political ideology in a national arena (Comas-Diaz, 2007). Accordingly, researchers need to be aware that sociopolitical, gender, racial, and ethnic realities are constantly interacting with environmental, psychological, historical, and socioeconomic factors in Black women's lives (Comas-Diaz, 2007). Given all those different interacting factors, an ethno-political psychology practitioner's role is to encourage transformation and healing as well as be open to "social justice, racial equity, and solidarity as psychosocial outcomes" (p. 93). To do so, an ethno-political psychology practitioner should accompany the speaker, bear witness, and promote cultural consciousness as well as sociopolitical action. So, I gathered data in a manner that privileged Black women's stories and with awareness that multiple systems impact their lives.

To illustrate, development of the following interview question was guided by an ethnopolitical psychological approach to working with people of color: “What stories were you told growing up about what it means to be Black or African American? Please share stories from family, friends, acquaintances, the media, and so forth.” This question was developed with the intention to gather information about how representations of African Americans vary by source (e.g., family, community, media, etc.), about the limits and strengths in those various representations, and about the traditions of storytelling and community that were described in the literature review. A different interview question, “What does it mean to you to be mentally and emotionally healthy?,” demonstrates how Black women’s definitions and autonomy were privileged in this study’s research about their well-being. Ultimately, the questions allowed the researcher to accompany the participants, bear witness to their stories, discuss topics that promote critical consciousness, and examine a topic (i.e., collective identity) with sociopolitical foundations.

Prior to the first interview conducted in the study, one question in the interview guide was changed (see Appendix B for protocol change form and Appendix C for protocol change approval letter). The original question stated, “You may have experienced acts of racism that are obvious to you and anyone who is looking. These have been called macroassaults. Have you ever experienced racism that was clearly racist? If so, please share a few stories.” Upon approval from the Human Subjects Review (HSR) committee, the new question stated, “You may have experienced acts of racism that are obvious to you and anyone who is looking. These have been called macroassaults. Have you ever experienced racism that was clearly racist? If so, what did you learn from those experiences with macroassaults?” This change was requested because merely asking participants to share details of their encounters with racism did not fully serve the purpose of the study and also unduly focused on the unconstructive aspects racism. The intent to

approach participants as experts who can share how they navigated undesired conditions in their life was more exemplified in the new question.

## **Sample**

Prior to beginning the recruitment process, the study's proposal underwent the Smith College Human Subjects Review (HSR) application to confirm the study was in accordance with federal guidelines for research with human participants. As directed by the HSR Committee, study revisions were made and re-submitted until final committee approval was granted (see Appendix D for HSR approval letter).

In this study, purposive sampling was used to engage a variety of professional, personal, and social networks for recruitment. Specifically, this study gathered data through a non-probability, snowball sampling technique. The sampling method and technique was employed because it was cost efficient and supported access of hard-to-reach populations (Engel & Schutte, 2013); this method offered an opportunity to recruit enough participants to meet minimum sample size expectations. In regard to this study, African American women can be considered hard-to-reach due to the contemporary and historical distrust of medical institutions amongst African Americans (Okeke, 2013). As a result, snowball sampling was of assistance because individuals who were familiar with, close to, or sharing qualities with potential participants made referrals. Also, the referral process unfolded digitally and by a nationally scattered network so data was collected from participants across a wide range of geographical locations.

**Recruitment strategies.** This study's recruitment strategies included a study flyer that was posted locally (see Appendix E), an announcement on Facebook and Instagram (see Appendix F), a composed email detailing the study that was circulated through known networks (see Appendix G), a recruitment permission request email for internet group administrators or



leaders (see Appendix H), and a letter for agencies/organizations requesting permission to conduct my study with varying levels of their support (see Appendix I).

**Characteristics of participants.** Important considerations about gender, generation, and cultural competence were used to develop this study's inclusion criteria. To start, narratives were gathered from ten self-identified African American women, between the ages of 34 and 69 or who were born between 1946 and 1980. Originally, the study sought to collect data from self-identified African American women between the ages of 40 and 60 (or born between 1955-1975). During the recruitment process however, this researcher encountered some barriers to recruitment. First, there were three individual who participated in the screening process, but who did not fit in the original age inclusion criteria; two of those individuals wondered about the partial representation of ages for two generations of women (i.e., baby boomers and generation X). Thus, the researcher requested a change in protocol from the HSR committee to fully represent the time frames for two generations and to expand my recruitment efforts due to other barriers (see Appendix B for protocol change form and Appendix C for protocol change approval letter). The second barrier to recruitment was reflected in the some individuals' caution about the use of the research. Specifically, potential and actual participants' wondered who controlled the findings of the research and how it could be used to represent them or their communities. Many participants in the study expressed a sense of comfort knowing their efforts were represented by an a research who is an African American woman; the participants' inquiries alluded to the controversial relationship between Black communities and medicine, historically and at present.

This study focused on African American women for two reasons. First, their representation in mental health or social work literature continues to be concernedly low. Even more, racism can be gender specific, and impact Black women and men differently (Harrell,

2000, p. 49). In particular, this study sought to hold space for deep exploration of the realities in African American women's lives and their experiences with intersecting oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, etc.).

Furthermore, the possibility of generational impacts on participant experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being were used to determine the age ranges included in the study. Participants born between 1946 and 1965 (n=5) are identified as baby boomers, born in a postwar boom, and having experienced a young adulthood characterized as work focused and politically active in events like the Civil Rights Movement (McCrinkle & Wolfinger, 2010, p. 9). Participants born between 1966 and 1979 (n=5) are identified as generation X, whose young adult years were characterized by both peace and prosperity as well as political apathy (Halstead, 1999, p. 33). These two generations were selected for the following reasons: to account for generational differences as impacted by post-racial developments; to offer parameters for understanding the link between collective identity and sociopolitical agency; to account for the uniqueness of generational memory in collective identity; and to expand the literature on differences in African American mental health outcomes amongst different age groups.

Finally, the study's sample criteria sought to expand inclusion and culturally competent support of diverse populations in mental health; the NASW Code of Ethics supports this need. However, participants' were not required to disclose their history of participation in mental health services as the intent of this study was to explore their experiences of well-being rather than specific engagement with mental health services.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were asked to participate in two encounters to complete the interview process. The first encounter allowed the participant and researcher to begin familiarizing with

one another; verify screening requirements; set up a way to exchange informed consent forms (see Appendix J); address participant questions; and schedule the main interview. The screening or first encounter with participants was conducted by phone (n=8) or in person (n=2). During screening and throughout the data collection process, the method of contact was always based on the preferences of each participant. As for informed consent forms, participants whose interviews were conducted in person reviewed and approved informed consent at the beginning of the main interview (n=6). For those participants out of area, informed consent forms were gathered using the following options: (a) participants received informed consent forms by email and mailed the signed form back to the researcher (n=2) or (b) participants received and returned the signed form by mail (n=2).

The main interview provided a second encounter with participants, and each interview lasted between twenty-six to ninety minutes. Participants were asked 13 interview questions in total. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in private reserved rooms in public settings (n=4) and/or secluded spaces in food service establishments (n=2). Also, participants who were not in the area participated in interviews using phone (n=2) or Skype (n=2). All interviews were informal in nature and dictated by participants' needs. With each participant's permission, interviews were recorded for data analysis using an audio recorder. Upon completion of each interview, the recording was saved to a secure file on the researcher's hard drive and a backup USB drive to be used for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data gathered in this study were audio recorded and analyzed manually, incorporating a phenomenological analysis approach. Specifically, a thematic analysis was conducted after the interviews were completed and partially transcribed. Examining partial transcriptions, pulling out

striking quotes, and highlighting patterned ideas allowed me to identify themes pertinent to the research question. Following that coding process, similarities, differences, and frequencies among themes were recognized, organized, and discussed. Finally, multiple readings were done to understand the data collected as well as ensure its accuracy and quality.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore African American women's understandings about collective identity in their lives and, specifically, in their encounters with racism that impacted their well-being. The study revealed a wide spectrum of responses in narratives gathered from ten participants. In this chapter, demographic information about participants and study findings are presented.

Participants shared rich narratives about how they experienced a collective sense of self, racism, and well-being. The study's findings were identified as they relate to five areas in participants' lived experiences including: racial pride and multiculturalism, community as an important African American value that feels under threat, the protection and proliferation of Black female expression, learning "racism at a distance," and the effects of bearing witness. Collective experiences that generated racial pride and promoted multiculturalism were an important part of participants' journeys to develop, understand, enrich, and protect their ideas of self. Community, as an important African American value that feels under threat, was a common concern amongst participants who valued doing community to navigate racism and, more broadly, life. Also, participants' described the proliferation of Black female expression as a liberated, treasured, and valued aspect of their collective and individual understandings of self. They specifically shared how their uninhibited expression functioned as a tool to celebrate

themselves, as well as challenge undesired aspects within Black communities and larger society. Furthermore, participants appreciated the power of their shared senses of “we” to provide agreement, validation, and connection as they learned to navigate subtle and deeply rooted forms of racism (i.e., otherwise referred to as “racism at a distance”). Finally, participants comprehensively identified the effects of bearing witness to communal encounters with racism on their bodies, beliefs, and practices.

### **Demographic Information**

The study gathered narratives from ten women who identified as African American. The ages of the participants ranged from 36 to 64. Five of the participants were between ages 36-48 (i.e., considered to represent generation X) and the other five were between ages 49-64 (i.e., considered to represent baby boomer generations); the average age was 49. The participants were born and spent parts of their youth in states all around the country including New York (n=2), California (n=2), Washington (n=1), Ohio (n=1), Pennsylvania (n=1), Alabama (n=1), Texas (n=1), and New Jersey (n=1). Cities that participants were born and lived in included New York City (NY), Buffalo (NY), Palm Springs (CA), Los Angeles (CA), Cincinnati (OH), Pittsburgh (PA), Mobile (AL), Waco (TX), Seattle (WA), and Livingston (NJ). At the time of the study, participants had moved to and/or currently lived in the following states including North Carolina (n=1), Maryland (n=1), Washington (n=5), Pennsylvania (n=1), and California (n=2). Five participants resided in Seattle, Washington, during the study. Prior to the study, three participants also reported living for a significant period of time of their lives in other places including Nigeria, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles.

## **Racial Pride and Multiculturalism**

Participants reflected on the rich ways they learned about, understood, and felt safe in their African American identity. Participants also described how their experiences of greater racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity within their families and their communities impacted their identity development. Participants experienced racial pride and multiculturalism in many ways.

**Beyond ambiguity about racial pride.** Nine out of ten participants stated their African American identity was extremely important because it was, quite simply, part of who they were. Participants' considered their African American identity to be a descriptor of parts of themselves and of their ancestral histories. Participants also revealed a rich quality for acceptance and love of the complexities--or positive and negative representations--of an African American identity. One participant eloquently explained the depth of meaning she assigned to her African American identity:

It's extremely crucial because... (a) If I don't personally know and validate my own sense of self, then I will allow others to... (b) If I lose the identity of who I am as an African American, then I would deny my ancestors the credit of their struggles, pains, strengths, and many-many victories... (c) I want to dispel the lies and myths about the identity of African Americans... and (d) I want the identity of my people to not be stripped of their contributions to America and the world.

This participant's complex understanding of her African American identity was similar to others; their narratives highlighted a shared understanding that their African American identities were not something to do, but to just be. To that end they deeply honored the work of their ancestors so that they could be who they wanted to be. Of note, there was one participant who did not feel that an African American identity was critical to how she conceptualized herself. Her narrative

offered an important reminder that identity is complex and determined at such personal, individual levels of being too. Thus, that participant's reasons for not favoring her African American identity will be further discussed in the subsection on boundaries to representation.

**Learning by being.** Seven participants revealed their ability to know rich developments and understandings about themselves and the lives of African Americans largely came from within them or from their self-directed efforts. They shared their meanings for self were implicitly understood through subtle cues and cultural practices, more so than by explicit stories shared amongst family, friends, in communities, or in institutions. To illustrate, one participant explored her parents' habitual assurances that her possibilities in life were limitless. She described her parents' encouraging practices as ambitious, resilient, and promising representations of what she would be able to achieve. She also explained her need or wish for their stories to more pragmatically reflect the racial complexity and encounters with oppression in the lives of African Americans. She explained:

There were no discussions... or that's not fair... more like active discussions of race.

There was some discussion of race, but it was never like it was okay to be. Or my mom just constantly told us... you can be anyone you want to be... you can do whatever you want to do. But in reality it didn't always sync up.

The participant noted that it would have been helpful if there had been widely proliferated, cohesive, and transparent narratives in larger Black communities about being African American that could have supported her family's explicit discussions about race.

Another participant shared her reasoning for not having direct conversations with family about what it means to be African American. She said, "It was confusing at times... being kept in dark about a lot of our past because it was such an ugly experience for our parents to talk



about.” The participant’s perspective highlighted the histories of personal and larger African American struggles that her parents had to accept, had to heal from, and had to summarize when trying to discuss race with newer generations of family.

Furthermore, participants revealed that their own experiences and observations as Black women provided plenty of opportunities to explore aspects of their African American identity. One participant described the impact of cultural images and community on how she learned about her African American identity. She described how social cues influenced her positive self-image and racial pride in the following excerpt, “Positive messages of self came from watching a neighbor... soul train... and it was the 70s so there was the Black and Beautiful Movement... that imagery was strong for me.” Another participant revealed how strong, supported, and inspired she felt by witnessing other Black people’s hard earned successes or power in a society that would not offer her equitable treatment. She shared the following example:

My mom was the first African American woman that became an [career title] in [place]. She always instilled in her children that they can do anything they want to do and be anything they want to be... this was strong, especially coming from the South. This taught me to be very proud.

This participant’s response revealed the experiential nature of learning about aspects of African American identities and of self in some of the participant’s lives.

**Proud traditions of safekeeping.** Four participants also emphasized the importance of storytelling, wisdom sharing, and learning about what it means to be African American to guarantee safety and to handle difficult conditions. To illustrate, one participant recalled a conversation she witnessed between her aunt and mother after her aunt caught her playing with a White kid in the neighborhood:

I remember my aunt turned to my mother and it was like a stern conversation with my mother... you need to teach these kids the ways of the South... while she was scolding my mother... she [aunt] wasn't saying it in a way... that she felt we as a Black people were inferior... but more like White people's twisted perceptions of who they think they are in comparison.

These four participants shared that they were given instructions on how to behave to prepare for the difficulties they may encounter by being African American. One participant discussed her grandmother's belief in and modeling of the "strong Black woman" to society and for Black communities: "There were stories about how people wouldn't always treat you well. So mostly, my mother and grandmother talked about the myth of the strong Black woman." Another participant shared a popular affirmation that is known and used by other Black folks, "The struggle is real and you have to work twice as hard to get what you want." Another participant confirmed the popularity of shared stories for safety amongst family:

My grandmother taught... always be representative of the family or don't be like this in front of White people. This was done because there could be serious or backlash responses. It wasn't to control our behavior, but to keep us safe.

The same participant also shared the reality and possible motivations for her grandmothers' hyper-vigilance, and how that compared to the opinions of her parents who were raised in different times and conditions:

My grandmothers were from the South. Both were literally chased up to the North. One was chased by the KKK and the other was chased by White men with sticks... literally... from the South to the North. So while Grandmother was like watch yourself and stay low

for safety, my mom learned and taught do what you want to even if it makes White people uncomfortable.

Overall, these responses revealed how participants wanted to represent history and knowledge of self in both positive and transparent ways, while still meeting the demands for safety that racism generated in their lives.

**Responsibilities as educators.** Seven participants also noted formal education about what it means to be African American happened when they went to college or were old enough to join a particular activist interest (e.g., a Black student union, a civil rights related campaign, etc.). As a result, their narratives revealed the immense pressure on Black families and communities to provide this education. One participant reflected, “I probably didn’t even know what African American was until college.” Another participant elaborated on the gravity of the situation in the following quote, “We don’t exist in school. We don’t exist in history. Women don’t exist in history. So we end up having to teach our children... it can get a little exhausting sometimes.” This theme showed how participants balanced the gravity of their tasks as they pursued their own education and taught others about the richness of their African American identity.

**Boundaries to representation.** Four participants discussed their feelings about the boundaries to full representation in shared understandings about an African American identity. One participant shared the following discovery:

It’s grown more and more important over the years. And it’s probably because I became more aware of my Blackness over the years. And at times, I became aware of how not Black I felt sometimes because I grew up in spaces where there was diversity.

This participant was referring to how she sometimes identified more closely with her childhood friends who were White (i.e., Italian and Irish) or who did not identify as Black (i.e., Puerto Rican). The same participant and others elaborated by explaining their understandings of an African American identity were complex and contained a variety of meanings; some of those meaning they were able to identify with, but some felt confining or untrue. A different participant discussed how certain understandings about and prescriptions of behavior for African American women (i.e., the strong Black woman) were undesired at times:

You can't cry... you can't do this. You are always supposed to be the strong person. You are not really supposed to be hoping, you're supposed to be doing. These things come up against each other... identity and how it comes up against the need to be a strong Black woman. So it's like... "Does she lose her Blackness if she pities herself or isn't strong?" Especially with a grandmother who is like, "I literally had to run from White men."

This participant was in fact appreciative of and committed to her strengths and ability to represent endurance, longevity, and support for her family. She was also able to hold that the responsibility of acting as the emotional and physical source of strength, health, support, and endurance (i.e., acting as the "rock" or "strong Black woman" in her family) for her loved ones was overwhelming. Another participant echoed a similar complexity in identifying with an African American identity as she explained her feelings or definition for it is different than popular conceptualizations of an African American identity rooted in United States slavery. She described he feelings as follows:

So the African American part of me, I feel, is almost literally African and American. I feel like I do have an *African*... like it's a different definition for me. African American... it's like my American side and my African side combined is how I view

African American. So when I see that on a list of options to check... I feel like... okay I'm going to check that. Because it literally is me! As opposed to, I think, how a lot of people assume it means you have American, African roots that you may or may not know about through United States slavery. So yes, I do identify as African American but not in the way many other people do.

The participant did not identify with the legacy of slavery in the United States. In actuality, her father's dreams, hard work, and achievements were rooted in a desire to move from Africa to the United States. Her father's perspective or visions as well as choice to move to the United States influenced this participant's understanding of her African American identity, which at the time of the study was not as important to her as other aspects of her identity. Overall, the input of these four participants highlighted that there are experiences in which common understandings about African American identity garner feelings of isolation, inauthentic representation, or a desire to reject an identity that is not wholly encompassing or authentic feeling. The same responses also highlighted that acceptance of an African American label is still possible for individuals even when they experience inconsistencies in feeling truly represented by an African American collective identity.

**Desiring proximity.** Five participants also shared their feelings on the strengths found in and concerns about lack of proximity to other Black folks in their experiences of identity development. One participant noted how her Black identity felt more salient because she was often the only African American in her classes from grade school to college. She described her experience as follows: "I remember being aware [of being African American] because I had to be... there were only 10 children, Black children, total in my classes all throughout school to

[high school] graduation.” Another participant explained how her lack of proximity to other Black folks contributed to how she identified more closely with White cultures sometimes:

My friends growing up were Irish, Italian, Hispanic... Like Puerto Rican, Hispanic. I think I had one or two Black friends, but there weren't that many. I grew up not necessarily getting what I think other kids were getting along the way.

This same participant shared how coming into closer proximity with more Black folks led her to a journey in discovering her Blackness. She explained:

I grew to understand my Blackness through my youngest daughter's father. And through friends of mine in the LGBT community, who simply identified more closely to who they really were. What's interesting I guess about that statement even as I make it... I think that Whites identify with who they are... but they are also White. It's like a whole different world. That's kind of what I learned... I was sort of identifying in the same way that my White friends were, even though I'm not White.

Another participant shared how she benefited from having other Black folks around while growing up, to learn and to know more about what she was. She said, “Community has been nurturing and helped me to know more of self and of culture.” Participants' responses showed how they had intuitively recognized or had experienced the benefits of living with or near other Black individuals to feel their African American identities more saliently. At the same time they were also often called on to navigate and grow in environments with low numbers of other Black individuals.

### **Community as an Important African American Value Under Threat**

Participants' narratives revealed how they valued community with other Black folks as an opportunity to transcend everyday experiences of self through a connection beyond words and in

the presence of great ancestral success. At the same time there were participants who were concerned with dwindling sites of active, mutually maintained, and heavily occupied Black communities. The following sections will discuss participants' experiences with the strengths and deficits of community.

**A connection beyond words.** Five participants expressed an appreciation for the spiritual connection of feeling they had with other Black folks. One participant described the sense of connection she felt with other Black individuals; she celebrated her ability to have a spiritual, moral, and emotional level of connection and communication with them beyond words.

There is a certain feel... a certain awareness... certain understanding... an extreme familiarity that sometimes even goes beyond words. There is a simple things Blacks do... like the nodding head for my generation... it's a weird connection. I think it is culture. I think it's knowing the past. Eating the same foods. Understanding the same music. Sometimes you can't explain it... it's just there. Even the negative parts I still understand, in most cases, where they [other African Americans] are coming from. Why they do what they do.

Two other participants described their spiritual or wordless level of connection with other African Americans, which they believed was strong due to Black folks' daily achievements in difficult conditions. One participant concisely described her sense of connection to other Black folks when she said, "I feel connected because we have to go through this crap." Another participant shared her connection to other Black folks gave her greater power to fight the good fight for a longer period of time or until change was achieved. She explained the connection with other Black folks:

Their love and their connectedness. Their food...and their coming together for celebrations... or for causes... and for life or when children are being killed. They come together because they know we still have a long ways to go.

Another participant shared how she felt uniquely connected to or understood by other Black women in both non-verbal and verbal ways.

I can sit down with them [i.e., her Black sisters], talk with them, and feel they really understood the struggle. All the time we talked about it... it was a heightened awareness... or even more... understanding that it [i.e., the Black struggle] just is and we should talk about it because it is.

These participants' highlighted their feelings of unique comfort, easiness, and appreciation in understanding and feeling known by other Black folks; interestingly, this sense of knowing happened with or without words.

**Shared understandings of history as sites of connection.** Nine of ten participants explained how important it was to honor the pains, joys, and successes of their ancestors' struggles; they described this shared responsibility to honor ancestors as a strong source of connection with other Black folks. One participant described her sense of reverence as follows:

Being proud of the strides they made... risking their lives... dying for the equality... trying to make us better. My admiration is that someone would be willing to give their lives for that kind of cause.

Another participant emphasized her desire for greater honoring of her ancestors: "We created so much. They don't tell us how much we [Black people] have done." Other participants specifically referenced the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, progress in access to education, and voting rights as hard examples of what their ancestors had made possible.



Overall, the wide referencing of historical events suggests that many of the participants wished to honor the history of long struggle for African Americans, and gained a sense of connection to others through this aspiration.

Four participants' emphasis on honoring ancestors often was accompanied by references to the rich history, love, creativity, and connection to music amongst African Americans, in the past and at present. One participant described it was a way she connected with ancestral as well as familial love and success. She shared, "It was a family thing. Music was a love." Another participant elaborated on how the music of her ancestors increased her feelings of connection to her history, to other Black folks, and to her embodied emotions:

The history of blues and jazz coming out of the pain that Blacks, especially in the South, experienced is moving and it has always kind of reached me in ways that I couldn't always say what it was but I knew if I heard it I would connect to it. The rhythm of blues music almost takes me back. As if I can hear the sounds of my ancestors. The gospel music... my mom played it in the house all the time, and it was extraordinary... like listening to it today can make me cry. So for me it's connecting to the music and hearing my history coming through the rhythm and the sound and the drums and horns. Cause there's pain in there... there's a lot of joy, but there's also pain. Also the sense that somehow these people created sound without official instruments... without official anything and they did this while they were experiencing extraordinary pain. It's absolutely amazing. The strength of an individual or individuals who do that ... could create something that is absolutely beautiful and that would transcend them and last forever. It's mind blowing for me.

These four participants noted the power of music to bond them to their rich histories, ancestors, and present day communities.

**Finding the pockets of community.** Four participants reflected on their concerns that African Americans do not *do*--that is act in or with proximity--community or culture cohesively, consistently, or largely with other Black individuals the way they once did. One participant eloquently described her idea of fragmentation in *doing* community:

We do and we don't community anymore. The village has been set to fire and ashed. But now there are pockets left. The image I have in my mind is folks standing in these pockets of the village... looking out... some with serenity... some overwhelmed with how we rebuild and connect. So in those pockets with people standing, I feel very connected.

Another participant shared her concerns about how community fragmentation lands on future generations of Black individuals, "We don't sit around and talk... we don't tell stories.... the younger kids lose out on the education and history this provides." One participant eloquently described her pain when she lived in a fragmented Black community as follows: "A rupture. When you feel you need help... and to not get help from other Black people when I can get help from White people... is hard." These participants' shared how they were required to seek out, work hard for, and intentionally engage culture and community; thus, their connections to other Black individuals were not taken for granted or assumed. As a result, the participants showed a strong desire and commitment to improve community doing amongst Black folks.

### **The Protection and Proliferation of Black Female Expression**

Participants' narratives revealed the importance of self-determination, accuracy, and authenticity in the representations and expectations of who they were as Black women. The

following sections will elaborate on how the participants understood their needs to express themselves on their terms and against communities or individuals who did not honor their self-determination.

**Moving beyond unrealistic expectations.** Six participants shared they determined their senses of self without consideration for society's expectations because the expectations were low, undermining, or oppressive. One participant revealed why she completely disregarded and never thought about larger society's expectations as follows, "[Society expects]...we shouldn't be complaining about nothing because that [deep racism] is long past." Another participant explained that she believed society would like Black women's silence so they could continue to control how society understood Black women. She described the inability of society's expectations to honor or represent the complexity of Black women's spirits and lives in the following passage:

I don't know, and I don't care what society expects. Black woman in this society started as property to be raped and used for more property... she then became something to be ogled and used sexually... she then became something to be used for diva-ship and sex... then she became diva... then she disappeared... then she became professional Black woman... right now she is a question mark. I think Black women are invisible to society... unless we see the sassafras and jezebel. Also, what do you do for the Black women who don't fit that? What do you do with them? There is such complexity in us. There's all kinds of women. We have the right to be that.

Ultimately, many participants refused to accept pejorative images or demands for silence that compromised their own or the world's ability to appreciate their complexity. One participant

eloquently described her energy and motivations for disregarding certain unrealistic, unfair, or undesired societal imaginings of Black women:

I think the larger society expects me not to be the person I present as. I think larger society actually wants me to be quiet. That they want me not to be argumentative... to have an opinion that's slightly different, but not too different. I think the larger society wants something from me that is unrealistic.

**Challenging the status quo.** Five participants discussed how they challenged unrealistic expectations from larger society and within Black communities by rejecting certain labels and acting in favor of the truth. To illustrate, one participant criticized the role patriarchy sometimes played in her and other Black women's lives, both in larger society and in some Black communities:

There are parts of our culture that show here that don't resonate with me... the bitches and hos. The... I need to be thug. I need to be respected. I don't identify with that because there's no love... no respect there. My ability to have perspective is a challenge. So I have to check my perspective at the door. But I will say my truth... I don't want to keep passing on the toxicity.

The participant did not give credence to and challenged undesirable conceptualizations of Black women. Another participant described how committed she was to eradicating toxic behaviors within Black communities, in order to uphold the valuable African American collective traditions or expectations she loved. One valuable expectation that three participants emphasized was the expectation amongst Black folks to show up and be true. One participant explained, "I think they expect me to stand up. They expect me to struggle against the sense of conformity that others want to place on us." These five particular narratives conveyed participants' energies of

irreverence, confidence, and pride in challenging status quos that felt unrepresentative, unrealistic, or disparaging.

### **Learning “Racism at a Distance”**

Eight participant stories and definitions about racism revealed no consensus amongst the participants on what racism was, how it looked, and how it could be handled in a manner best suited to their goals for well-being. In fact, participants’ narratives revealed two levels of understanding about racism and how it operated in their lives. Five participants defined racism by locating it in the individual’s character. For example, one participant defined racism in the context of one person’s “ignorance and moral lack of education.” The other five participants recognized racism systemically, citing the presence and need of power to breed racism. To illustrate, another participant defined racism as “having the power to inflict your bigotry on others.” For eight participants, these varying definitions revealed the confusing nature of racism in their lives and provided a notable theme: that is navigating subtle, covert, and institutional forms of racism, which one participant eloquently termed “racism at a distance.”

Furthermore, participants described the overwhelming processes they encountered as the navigated racism at a distance in open, calm, judicial, and forgiving manners. One participant described the overwhelming nature of subtle, institutional racism as follows:

Everyone wanted to say it in Ferguson and again in St. Louis. We can say it. And then we can’t say it because we don’t have proof. It’s all based in supposition. We need some white person to validate it for us. Even we aren’t believing what we are seeing.... So people can say... we have made progress... and we have. But that’s because somebody’s moving the ceiling... they’ve changed the parameters. They got you in a box, but they’ve

made the box bigger now. My mom's box was small. Not anymore. And they are in the box, but they feel they get to control it.

One participant discussed the power and burden she felt knowing that validation of her encounters with racism would have to come from within her and, to a lesser extent, from within Black or other marginalized communities. She affirmed her drive to combat racism with examples of strategies she valued:

Racism... it's like we are wearing a sweater. And the racism is so deeply woven in the sweater that we can't see the threads. We don't even know they are there because they are part of the sweater. So sometimes we know, sometimes we don't, sometimes we do. So we need to be writing... and proliferate. We need to be going to schools and protesting bad history books... If you're going to teach it... Teach it true. It's ugly to look at ourselves but we are going to do it anyways. Because it is wrong to lie about ourselves.

Participants were prepared for the unknown so that they could manage what one participant described as the "many little cuts of racism at a distance." One participant described how she identified and processed subtle forms of racism. She explained, "It doesn't matter if it's obvious or subtle, I think the feelings are the same. It's still racism... because it feels the same whether it's [macro or micro]. That's how you know." Other participants' narratives offered examples of what exactly addressing subtle racism required, including being prepared to walk away or to accept abuse, to act as a teacher to your perpetrator, to consider the history of the perpetrator, to tolerate the privileging of White validation for African American struggles, and to practice non-defensive repair.

## **The Effects of Bearing Witness**

Participants revealed their rich understandings about the products of their connectedness and collectiveness with other Black folks. Specifically, participants shared what they had gained and lost as they bore witness to other Black folks multiple, repetitive encounters with racism. The following sections present participants' rich experiences in well-being, finding healing when faced with racism, and bearing witness.

**Definitions of well-being.** Participants shared a wide range of understandings about what psychological and emotional well-being meant to them. Five participants located their idea of mental and emotional health in their abilities to manage their internal states and nurture values true to their senses of self. Their responses included prioritizing being “emotional and true to all feelings,” “unconditional self-love,” a “calm state of mind and control of feelings,” “keeping one’s own counsel” effectively, and “attunement and focus.” Another participant noted how uncertain she felt about what being emotionally and mentally healthy meant in her life. Another participant located her strong sense of well-being in how she nurtured her spirituality or relationship with God. Another participant explained she was best emotionally and mentally healthy when she was located in community or kept space with others; she shared that loneliness or isolation was extremely undesired. The final two participants explained their well-being was best met when their basic material, living, and structural needs were met.

**Traditions of perseverance.** Five participants shared that racism in their own and other Black folks' lives increased their determination and sense of perseverance when faced with obstacles. One participant shared her journey of perseverance. She explained how her current experiences with racism fueled her desire to not revisit the youthful loneliness and depression that she experienced when faced with racism in the past:

It used to affect me a lot. Growing up in a White community with White parents... they didn't get it. I was depressed and lonely. Lonely hurts a lot, I don't want it. Then something transcended with racism as well... It helped me tap in to my spirit and realize what my ancestors have given me.

Two participants explained that racism increased and reinforced their feelings of faith and spirituality with God.

Three participants shared how their sense of well-being was protected from the harsh impacts of racism. One participant reasoned she had gained enough power and privilege to escape certain risks of racist treatment. Another shared that she related to others on such different levels of identity and thus, rarely interpreted any type of negative treatment in her life as racist. Finally, one participant did not feel that her ability to meet her basic needs was overly impacted by structural inequalities.

**In agreement, we shall overcome.** Six participants discussed how being in agreement with other Black folks was a strong experience of comfort, healing, and validation when handling racism. One participant described the depth of understanding she felt with other Black folks as a feeling or knowing that was greater than tangible reality could fully represent: "It's like the soul of ancestry is present in the room. What we are going to do now... we do together. That's vital... it's how we have survived." Another two participants explained that being in agreement positively impacted their internal reserves of motivation and vicarious gains in strength. One participant stated:

I know then I am of sound mind. Having other people to be in agreement along with some facts and statistics about what we agree... I think that is very helpful. It creates a



greater desire for us to move forward and keep pressing forward. This is helpful for us to press forward. Knowing you are not alone. You have a team.

The participant's response showed how collective agreement helped her access new and healthier emotions or ideas when she maneuvered inequitable conditions. Two other participants shared how engagement in church and the nurturing of their spiritual lives--that they had learned from valued relatives and elders--encouraged healing and connectedness when faced with the greatest trials or tribulations. Finally, one participant shared that her ability to resist racist domination was strong when she felt mutual dependability and trust with other Black folks; she also described how much pain she felt when this was not offered by Black folks. Finally, one participant expressed aversion for the "victimhood" narrative of United States slavery, and found she needed to distance herself from other Black folks who displayed a preoccupation with racism that she did not relate to.

**The influence of racism on chronic health conditions.** An outlying and unique experience was illustrated in one participant's description about the compounding effect persistent experiences with racism had on her chronic health conditions. The participant noted that having serious medical conditions and being African American had been a long stressful experience in her life. She described her feelings about the intersection of health care and race in her life as follows:

It makes me feel like something is always going on over my shoulder with a White person. It has been a double sword being sick and Black... I am thinking that they will say she's Black and she's sick... and not give me care.

The participant described the steps she had taken in her life to never let her medical conditions be visible or deter her performance in mixed (i.e., non-Black) company. She hoped such

vigilance would prevent her being held back from her goals or being in a position where she depended on but was denied help in medical emergencies.

**Vicarious gains and pains.** Half of the participants discussed the power they gained from knowing and witnessing family, friends, and other African Americans continue work twice as hard as the average person. Two of these five participants explained that bearing witness to other Black folks' experiences with racism gave them standards or ideas for addressing inequitable, hostile, and bigoted situations. For example, one participant shared how bearing witness helped her gain perspective on how to not internalize the negative messages directed towards her during racist encounters. She described the lessons she learned as follows:

I saw how to call people on their racism... not being afraid to call it out. I don't own that... that's not mine. Telling them you have no power here. Telling myself... you don't have to take that in to yourself.

Two participants explained bearing witness was a form of wisdom sharing and a powerful way to pass on traditions of perseverance and preparedness from generation to generation. Another participant noted that bearing witness to her own mother's journey of professional success taught her how to overcome overwhelming feelings of defeat or despair so that greater possibilities could be always be imagined.

Similarly, two participants discussed their understandings about the impact of racism on generational exchanges within Black families and communities. One participant discussed the idea of vicarious pain, and the import of knowing her needs as she prepared to support others who were suffering from racism. One participant discussed her beliefs about racist treatment by certain people in Congress towards Barack Obama. She shared her pain in the following quote, "It's so disheartening and destructive to the nation. I don't know what I learned from it. I am

trying to continue to stepping on it, whatever it is. But everyday... you can be surprised by the hate.” Another participant explained how she believed the intergeneration transmission of racism-related suffering impacted Black folks:

Feels like it hasn't been taking care of... we haven't got our six mules and acres. They are still in pain. It's no wonder people have lost minds or gone crazy. We know now that the state of anger, the pain, has been passed down. It's so engrained.... Passed down generations to generations.

The participants abilities to hold rich traditions of perseverance and to manage intergenerational transmissions of suffering due to racism highlighted the ways they privileged present and ancestral experiences of connectedness, self-determination, and resilience.

### **Summary**

Participants' narratives revealed the complexity, fluidity, and richness of their lives. One participant declared her sense of victory as follows, “I live a fortunate life. But I live a deliberate one.” Another participant reflected, “The second half of life is becoming. The first half of life is surviving. But for many folks, it's all surviving. For me, this has been becoming.” These two quotes and the study's findings revealed the balances, compromises, and strengths born of Black women's experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

As previously stated, the study sought to explore African American women's understandings about collective identity in their lives and in their encounters with racism that impacted their psychological and emotional well-being. Ten African American women participated in the study. Their narratives offered insight into their experiences of racial pride and multiculturalism, community as an important African American value that feels under threat, protecting and proliferating Black female expression, learning racism at a distance, and the effects of bearing witness.

In the following chapter, the study's findings are discussed in comparison to existent literature. Furthermore, the implications for social work are presented followed by the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter will conclude with directions for future research.

### **Findings and their Relevance to Existing Literature**

The literature showed collective identity is an aspect of individual identity that gains salience during times of great social conflict (e.g., sociocultural disorder, socioeconomic exclusion, political transformation, etc.), and through a process of collective existence and meaning-making (i.e., the process of collective identity formation). Different elements of collective identity formation include an individual's (a) identification with a group, (b) acknowledgment and participation in the spoken, logical opposition of the collectives' special concern(s) (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism, etc.), (c) feelings of solidarity and mutual trust with

other group members, (d) commitment to the collective will or shared goals, and (e) enjoyment of common history, language, commemorations, and values with other members of their collective (Alexander et al., 2004; Melucci, 1995; Shelby, 2005; Snow, 2001). The narratives of the participants showcased a wealth of experiences about how they felt a sense of “we” or collective identity. Some examples of experiences of collective identity in the participants’ lives included their sense of spiritual and affective connection to other Black folks that was beyond words, as well as their reality transcending connections to history and ancestral struggles. Another example was some participants’ energies of irreverence in challenging status quos or unrealistic expectations from society. The intentional opposition strengthened participants’ feelings of connections with other Black folks and felt important to their senses of identity, expression, and well-being. Also, participants’ described the vitality, value, and love for sources of community and collectivity (e.g., church, music, and ancestral perseverance and success) in their lives that generated shared feelings of connection, mutuality, and health with other African Americans. Participants’ narratives about learned traditions of resiliency and the benefits of being in agreement with other Black folks to handle racism were additionally supported by the literature. Finally, participants’ strong senses of racial pride and commitment to improving their own and other African American lives were a vital characteristic of their personal and collective definitions of self.

In contrast, some participants shared their feelings about the barriers in their lives that did not help them to feel a collective sense of we; these responses were also represented in the literature. Some participants shared their feelings of isolation, unfamiliarity, or rejection when they did not fit in with common notions of Blackness. The literature revealed the compromises or risks to an individual’s personal identity when faced with undesired, but popular definitions of a

collective identity. Shelby (2005) explained that Black individuals could not be expected to privilege the collective in which they were not wholly cherished and understood. Another important theme in participants' narratives was their experiences in handling "racism at a distance." Davis (1999) explored the phenomena of subtle forms of racism and found "racism is a much more clandestine, much more hidden kind of phenomenon, but at the same time it's perhaps far more terrible than it's ever been" (speech, para. 4). Ultimately, participants' explained handling racism at a distance was an overwhelming task that encompassed having to accept they could not easily recognize microaggressions or subtle forms of racism, having to walk away or prove their truth when their gut feelings told them an injustice had occurred, and having the power of agreement with other Black folks to reconcile subtle and obvious forms of racism.

Furthermore, some participants' experiences were not represented in or disagreed with the literature. In regard to participants' reported sense of responsibility and burden as educators about African American life and special concerns, the literature described a different possibility for the less burdensome distribution of this responsibility. Alexander et al. (2004) explored the responsibility that falls on oppressed communities to provide education to youth, other Black folks, and larger society about special concerns (i.e., description and nature of collective conflict in society) and about rich elements of African American life and culture (i.e., focus on Black recovery, autonomy, and development). Specifically, Alexander et al. and earlier theorists like Durkheim emphasized the importance of carrier groups and charismatic leaders in delivering or supporting communal attempts at Black-centered education; this education was achieved by carrier groups and charismatics leaders offering a cohesive narrative of history, reality, and future intentions that were shared by the collective. As for participants' desires for greater

proximity to more Black folks, relevant literature revealed how multiculturalism made defining Blackness complicated within the context of collective identity. Grillo (1995) argued that the increase in experiences of multiculturalism for people living in the United States highlighted a large-scale public desire to move beyond race. However, participants' narratives conveyed that lack of proximity to other Black folks due to multiculturalism made defining Blackness and themselves a confusing journey. Even more, some participant's displayed feelings of mourning for what they had not known about aspects of their history, culture, and selves due to lack of highly occupied Black communities.

Finally, participants' narratives introduced completely new, interesting, and important ideas. First, some participants spoke of their despair for diminishing active and intentional community doing amongst African Americans or within Black communities. Also, participants' narratives revealed rich new examples of how they nurtured themselves and their souls in their collective experiences of we. They highlighted the vicarious pains and strengths as well as intergenerational impacts of racism they had learned to endure for their families and communities. Please see the section on possible directions for future research for a more thorough discussion on these two new, interesting topics.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice with African American Women**

Participants' celebrated their collective experiences of perseverance, safekeeping, music, community, pain, demands for hard work, bearing witness, and learning self and racial pride. Participants also described the subtle scope of racism in their spiritual lives, senses of self, abilities to meet their basic needs, responsibilities to educate their children or communities about broader or unacknowledged aspects of history, interpersonal interactions, and constant feelings of determination. Their stories necessitate a level of mindfulness about their shared traditions,

which arose from their communities over many generations, in social work practice. Ultimately, the following implications for social work practice may support African American women whose well-being is influenced by racism and whose collective identity is activated.

**Privileging Black women's diverse expressions.** Participants unapologetically celebrated and protected their ability to speak their truths. Collins (2009) wrote:

Resisting by doing something that “is not expected” could not have occurred without Black women's long-standing rejection of mummies, matriarch, and other controlling images. When combined, these individual acts of resistance suggest a distinctive, collective Black women's consciousness exists. (p. 108)

Collins described how wide-ranging, honest, and self-loving representations of Black womanhood are valued in a Black collective identity and by Black women. Against the pressures of racist domination specifically, diverse expression of self, community, and Blackness are inherently political and healing in the lives of African American women. As previously mentioned, Harris-Perry (2011) wrote:

To understand Black women's politics, we must explore their often unspoken experiences of hurt, rejection, faith, and search for identity...The internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of Black women are inherently political. They are political because Black women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity. (p. 4)

Black women's uninhibited expression is radical and healing because it disrupts long cycles of Black individuals' not being allowed to define and repair their shared struggles. Instead, Black female expression reinforces their abilities to honor ancestors, to challenge stigma or stereotypes, to acknowledge differences within Black communities and larger society, to determine positive



self-representations, and to direct therapeutic treatment. Simultaneously, Black women's expression also allows them to challenge some institutions of Black civil society that perpetuate homophobic, racist, sexist, and elitist ideals. Thus, social work practice should value self-directed expressions by Black women to support their collective and individual celebrations of self.

**Possibilities of community-oriented healing.** Participants' experiences of collective identity conveyed their liberation was intimately tied to other Black folks' and communities' liberation; the same was true of their pain. This narrative of connected liberation was evident when participants described how their senses of well-being were maintained with, in, and for their communities. Collins (2009) described a critical reason for Black women's mutual dependence and support with their communities as follows:

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition of Black women's resistance. Extended families, churches, and African American communities are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur. (p. 111)

Some of the study's participants recognized their communities' efforts to provide safe spaces for healing; safe spaces and forces they valued included their music, churches, and bonds in sisterhood as some of many examples. Most notably, participants described the power, validation, and reassurance generated by being in agreement about racism with other Black folks. At the same time participants shared a sense of mourning about the limits in how Black folks are doing community; this suggests large-scale efforts need to address what one participant described as "the broken pockets of community." The value of community agreements, reality of

vicarious burdens, and desire for healed communities suggests that Black women's maintenance of well-being might be best supported alongside their communities own healing processes. Ultimately, communal support and political repair as psychosocial outcomes should be valued when working with African American women and their communities.

**Proper preparation for racism at a distance.** Davis (1999) posited that the insidious nature of racism is extremely problematic in the lives of African Americans. The literature also showed the importance of meaning-making processes to accurately identify experiences of oppression, to create resistances against racist domination, and to generate healing for Black folks. Participants' responses revealed that meaning-making about subtle and institutional forms racism was not very present in their lives. Specifically, they noted a there were not any popular narratives or Black leaders who named the issues. Also, lack of proximity to other Black folks did not allow meaning-making processes to happen more organically or consistently. At worst, the inability of Black folks to make meaning of their racism-related suffering undermines their ability to resist such transgressions and to access collective identity. Thus, holding space for analysis, identification, and meaning-making about racism would be supportive for Black women who wish to resist racist domination as well as maintain a psychological and emotional balance.

**Holding what is not all theirs.** Black women's matriarchal qualities—of mother, protector, provider—are valued in African American communities and collective identities; this can be rewarding in transcending the injustices characterized by oppression, but it can also come at high personal cost. Collins (2009) wrote:

By emphasizing African American women's contribution to their families well-being, such as keeping families together and teaching children survival skills (Martin and

Martin, 1978; Davis, 1981), such scholarship suggests that Black women see the unpaid work that they do for their families more as a form of resistance to oppression than as a form of exploitation by men. (p. 52)

The level of pathologization in White, patriarchal, supremacist cultures directed towards the make up and functioning of Black families and communities--and the roles that Black women take on as supporters, rocks, architects, and maintainers of those systems--can feel oppressive. Working with women to not pathologize the processes of familial or communal collectivity, while attending to the pressures or burdens that also exist can be supportive. Such an approach may also begin to offer greater comfort in engagement of traditional therapeutic services to Black women who feel their authentic experiences can be honestly, non-judgmentally, and effectively heard and represented.

### **Strengths and Limits of the Study**

There were several strengths and limits to the study. The study was limited by a small sample size (n=10) of participants and non-random sampling, which makes the study difficult to generalize to other studies about African American women. Furthermore, efforts to recruit 12 to 15 participants were more difficult than anticipated due to several participants' feelings of distrust or unfamiliarity with medical research. Several screening and study participants shared their concerns about who would own or be able to access this research about them and their communities as well as their sense of comfort in participating because the researcher was an African American woman. The caution displayed by participants towards the study's recruitment efforts seemed to have impacted the study's representation of minimum twelve to fifteen participants.

Also, there were several strengths to this study. The strengths of the study included the widely spread demographic locations of the participants, which offered insight into experiences and distinctions of different regions around the country in participants' lives. Also, the opportunity to gather qualitative narratives in a private setting provided a rich window into African American women's experiences of well-being.

### **Possible Directions for Future Research**

The intergenerational transmission of racism-related outputs is a suggestion for direction of future research. Participants' narratives revealed two unique and impactful experiences in their lives about experiencing vicarious strength and pain when living in support of others who are faced with habitual suffering; and also about inheriting the emotional, economic, spiritual, and health consequences related to racism experienced by previous generations. Accordingly, racism-related outputs are the emotional, economic, spiritual, and health consequences related to racism described by participants such as traditions of keeping safe (i.e., hyper-vigilance in White communities, learning perseverance, etc.). Another example of a racism-related output is best described in the following participant's description of the current and inherited stress of racism in a past situation where she required medical support:

I went to [university] on a basketball scholarship... I had health issues but I didn't report to my coach because something bad could happen... I didn't want that. Also, my parents told me not to tell my coach... so then my health was starting to show how hard it was... what I had to do... go, always go... and eventually I had to leave the team anyway.

This participant explored so many consequences of that situation including her constant caution or tenseness living in the scope of discriminatory treatment, her frustration with institutional limitation of choices for addressing the situation, her handling of her parent's own racism-related

cautionary behavior, and finally the impact to her educational goals and health. Overall, the participants' commitments to community with other Black people also imply their access to bonds with other individuals who may experience racism. Thus, this is an area worth further investigation to explore how Black women may desire or benefit from social work support when 1) they habitually act in community with or support of individuals that also experience racism-related suffering; and/or 2) the psychosocial outcomes of previous generations affect their current mental health.

Another direction for future research is the exploration of possibilities of collaboration between Black-led churches and social work services as well therapy. As previously stated, participant narratives revealed the importance of healing *in* and *with* community. Also, church and spiritual well-being was discussed amongst participants as vital to their sense of self, well-being, and traditions of community. Thus, future research on the possible integration of social work services with the services already provided by churches in Black communities is recommended to better engage Black women in mental health services that reflect their lives and needs.

## **Conclusion**

Ten African American women provided rich insights into the diversity, connectedness, and fluidity of their lives; their narratives celebrated their many truths, expressions, and practices. Participants shed light on their experiences of community, pain, perseverance, tradition, and health. It is hoped that the study's findings of African American women's experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being will serve as reminders of the traditions of resilience, preparedness, collectivity, and love of Black women and their communities.

## References

- Alexander, J. C., Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N., & Sztompka, P. (2004). *Cultural trauma and collective identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Angelou, M. (1976). *Singin' and swingin' and gettin' merry like Christmas*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Breen, R. (2005). Foundations of a neo-Weberian class analysis. In E. O. Wright (Ed.), *Approaches to class analysis* (pp. 31-50). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Carr, E., Szymanski, D., Taha, F., West, L., & Kaslow, N. (2014). Understanding the link between multiple oppressions and depression among African American women: The role of internalization. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 38(2), 233-245.  
doi:10.1177/0361684313499900
- Clark, R., Anderson, N. B., Clark, V. R., & Williams, D. R. (1999). Racism as a stressor for African Americans: A biopsychosocial model. *American Psychologist*, 54(10), 805-816. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.54.10.805
- Collins, P. (2009). *Black feminist thought*. New York, NY: Routledge Classics
- Comas-Diaz, L. (2007). Ethnopolitical psychology: Healing and transformation. In E. Aldarondo (Ed.), *Advancing social justice through clinical practice* (pp. 91-118). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Comas-Díaz, L. (2011a). Introduction. In L. Comas-Díaz & M. B. Weiner (Eds.), *Women psychotherapists [electronic resource]: Journeys in healing* (pp. xi-xiii). Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.
- Comas-Díaz, L. (2011b). Transcultural woman: Healing in a strange land. In L. Comas-Díaz & M. B. Weiner (Eds.), *Women psychotherapists [electronic resource]: Journeys in healing*

- (pp. 81- 95). Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.
- Davis, A. (1999, May 25). *Interview with Angela Davis*. (Interviewer: J. Byrne). *ABC Foreign Correspondent*. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/stories/s70350.htm>
- Douglass, F. (1847, December 3). To Our Oppressed Countrymen. *North Star*. Retrieved from [http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/resources\\_files/byrne\\_douglass.pdf](http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/resources_files/byrne_douglass.pdf)
- D'Souza, D. (1996). *The end of racism*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1999). *The souls of Black folk*. Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co. (Original work published 1903)
- Durkheim, E., Cosman, C., & Cladis, M. S. (2001). *The elementary forms of religious life*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Edmunds, J., & Turner, B. (2002). *Generations, culture and society*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Engel, R. J., & Schutte, R.K. (2013). *The practice of research in social work* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Eyerman, R. (2001). *Cultural trauma: Slavery and the formation of an African American identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fominaya, C. F. (2010). Collective identity in social movements: Central concepts and debates. *Sociology Compass*, 4(6), 393-404. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00287.x
- Fordham, S. (2010). Passin' for Black: Race, identity, and bone memory in postracial America. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(1), 4-29.
- Grillo, T. (1995). Anti-essentialism and intersectionality: Tools to dismantle the master's house. *Berkeley Women's Law Journal*, 10, 16-30.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. (L. Coser, Ed. & Trans.). Chicago, IL: University

- of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1950)
- Halstead, T. (1999). A politics for generation X. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 284(2), 33-42.
- Harrell, S. P. (2000). A multidimensional conceptualization of racism-related stress: Implications for the well-being of people of color. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70(1), 42-57. doi:10.1037/h0087722
- Harris, T. (2001). *Saints, sinners, saviors: Strong Black women in African American literature*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- hooks, B. (1990). Homeplace: A site of resistance. In b. Hooks (Ed.), *Yearning: Race, gender, & cultural politics* (pp. 41-49). Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Hunt, S., & Benford, R. (2004). Collective identity, solidarity and commitment. In D. Snow, S. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 433-457). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ikuenobe, P. (2013). Conceptualizing and theorizing about the idea of a 'post-racial' era. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 43(4), 446-468.
- Jones, J. M. (1997). *Prejudice and racism* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Jones, J. M., & Carter, R. T. (1996). Racism and White racial identity: Merging realities. In B. Bowser & R. Hunt (Eds.), *Impacts of racism on white America* (pp. 1-23). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press.
- Klandermans, B., & De Weerd, M. (2000) Group identification and political protest. In S. Stryker, T. J. Owens, and R.W. White (Eds.), *Self, identity, and social movements* (pp. 68-92). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.



- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Lee, D. L., & Ahn, S. (2011). Racial discrimination and Asian mental health: A meta-analysis. *Counseling Psychologist, 39*, 463–489. doi:10.1177/0011000010381791
- Lorde, A. (1985). *I am your sister: Collected and unpublished writings of Audre Lorde*. R. Byrd, J. Cole, & B. Guy-Sheftall (Eds.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McCrinkle, M., & Wolfinger, E. (2010). Generations defined. *Ethos, 18*(1), 8-13.
- McDonald, K. (2007). *Embracing sisterhood: Class, identity, and contemporary Black women*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Mead, G., (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans, *Social Movements and Culture* (pp. 41–63). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- More, M. P. (2009). Black solidarity: A philosophical defense. *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory, 56*(120), 20-43. doi:10.3167/th.2009.5612003
- Morrison, T. (1997). *Paradise*. New York, NY: Random House.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2008). Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Retrieved from <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>
- Neville, H. A., & Pieterse, A. L. (2009). Racism, white supremacy, and resistance: Contextualizing Black American experiences. In H. A. Neville, B. N. Tynes, & S. O. Utsey (Eds.), *Handbook of African American Psychology* (pp. 159–174). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ntloedibe, F. (2006). A question of origins: the social and cultural roots of African American culture. *The Journal of African American History, 91*(4), 401-412.
- Ogbu, J. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of “acting White” in Black history,

- community, and education. *Urban Review*, 36(1), 1-35.
- Okeke, A. (2013) A culture of stigma: Black women and mental health. *Undergraduate Research Awards*, 13. Retrieved from:  
[http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=univ\\_lib\\_ura](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=univ_lib_ura)
- Paradies, Y. (2006). A systematic review of empirical research on self-reported racism and health. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, 888–901. doi:10.1093/ije/dyl056
- Pascoe, E. A., & Richman, L. S. (2009). Perceived discrimination and health: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135, 531–554. doi:10.1037/a0016059
- Pieterse, A. L., Carter, R. T., & Ray, K. V. (2013). Racism-related stress, general life stress, and psychological functioning among Black American women. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 41(1), 36-46.
- Pieterse, A. L., Todd, N. R., Neville, H. A., & Carter, R. T. (2012). Perceived racism and mental health among Black American adults: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 59(1), 1-9. doi:10.1037/a0026208
- Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. (2001). Collective identity and social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 283–305
- Radley, A. (1990). *Artifacts, memory and a sense of the past*. In D. Middleton & D. Edwards (Eds.), *Collective remembering* (pp. 47-69). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Robinson, R (2000). The shifting race-consciousness matrix and the multiracial category movement: A critical reply to professor Hernandez. *Boston College Third World Law Journal*, 20(2), 231-289.
- Robnett, B. (2007) Does collective identity matter?: African American conventional and unconventional participation. *Center for the Study of Democracy*. Irvine, CA: Center for

- the Study of Democracy. Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3d9477vm>
- Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. R. (2009) *Essential Research methods for social work* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.
- Schwartz, B. (1982). The social context of commemoration: A study in collective memory. *Social Forces*, 61(2), 374-402.
- Shelby, T. (2005). *We who are dark: The philosophical foundations of Black solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Retrieved from <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10318359>
- Snow, D. (2001). Collective identity and expressive forms. *Center for the Study of Democracy*. Irvine, CA: Center for the Study of Democracy. Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2zn1t7bj>
- Stevens-Watkins, D., Perry, B., Pullen, E., Jewell, J., & Oser, C. B. (2014). Examining the associations of racism, sexism, and stressful life events on psychological distress among African-American women. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 20(4), 561-569. doi:10.1037/a0036700
- Stevens-Watkins, D., Sharma, S., & Knighton, J. S. (2013). Examining cultural correlates of active coping among African American female trauma survivors. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6, 328-336.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979) An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In S. Worchel & W.G. Austin (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. E. (1992). Collective identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilization. In: A. Morris & C. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers of social*

- movement theory* (pp. 104–129). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- van Stekelenburg, J. (2013). Collective identity. In D. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements* (Volume 1).
- Ward, E. C., Clark, L., & Heidrich, S. (2009). African American women's beliefs, coping behaviors, and barriers to seeking mental health services. *Qualitative Health Research, 19*, 1589-1601.
- Ware, R. (1983). Marx, the theory of class consciousness, and revolutionary organization. *Praxis International, 3*(3), 262-273.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society* (Volumes 1-2). G. Roth & C. Wittich (Eds.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- West, C. (1992). A matter of life and death. *October, 61*, 20-23. Retrieved From: <http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/catalog/ac%3A157361>
- West, L., Donovan, R., & Roemer, L. (2010). Coping with racism: What works and doesn't work for Black women. *Journal of Black Psychology, 36*, 332-349.
- Williams, D. R., Neighbors, H. W., & Jackson, J. S. (2003). Racial/ethnic discrimination and health: Findings from community studies. *American Journal of Public Health, 93*(2), 200–208.

## Appendix A Interview Guide

### **Introductory demographic questions:**

How old are you?

Where were you born?

Where do you live now?

### **Questions about Black Collective Identity**

1. What stories were you told growing up about what it means to be Black or an African American? Please share stories from family, friends, acquaintances, the media, and so forth.
2. How important is that African American identity to you, in your life? Please explain.
3. Other groups have said that the past influences where they are now. What important parts of African American history do you feel have shaped your views about African Americans today? Why?
4. How connected do you feel to other Black people?
5. What expectations do you think larger society has for you as a Black woman? Please share stories you have heard from family, friends, at work, in the media, and so on.
  - a. What expectations do you think other Black people have for you as a Black woman?

### **Questions about Racism**

6. How would you define the word racism?
7. You may have experienced acts of racism that are obvious to you and anyone who is looking. These have been called macroassaults. Have you ever experienced racism that was clearly racist? If so, what did you learn from those experiences with macroassaults?
8. You may have experienced acts of racism that are not obviously racist to others, but that you felt were racist. These have been called microaggressions. Does this sound true for you? What did you learn from those experiences with microaggressions?

### **Questions about Well-being**

9. What does it mean to you to be mentally and emotionally healthy?
10. In what ways do you think your experiences with racism impact your well-being? If you'd like, please share some specific stories of this in your own life.
11. How might your feelings of "we" or solidarity with other Black folk help you handle racism?

12. Have you ever seen or heard stories from your relatives or other Black folk about their experiences with racism? What did you learn from them about how to handle racism?
13. Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B  
Human Subjects Review (HSR) Protocol Change Form

**RESEARCH PROJECT CHANGE OF PROTOCOL FORM – School for Social Work**

You are presently the researcher on the following *approved* research project by the Human Subjects Committee (HSR) of Smith College School for Social Work:

**«Project\_Name»  
Lyana Murrell  
Mary Beth Averill**

.....

I am requesting changes to the study protocols, as they were originally approved by the HSR Committee of Smith College School for Social Work. These changes are as follows:

1) I am requesting permission to change my eligibility requirements to include any self identified African American woman between the ages of 34 and 69 (or born between 1946-80). In my original proposal, I expected to collect data from self identified African American women between the ages of 40 and 60 (or born between 1955-1975). After receiving feedback in my recruiting process, it did not seem practical or fair to partially represent time frames for the two generations (i.e., baby boomers and generation X) engaged in my study. By expanding the dates, I fully include both generations established time frames. This will also help enrich the recruiting process, by expanding inclusion criteria and allowing more individuals to be eligible.

2) I would like to change one of my interview questions (#7 in Appendix G) from: *You may have experienced acts of racism that are obvious to you and anyone who is looking. These have been called macroassaults. Have you ever experienced racism that was clearly racist? **If so, please share a few stories.***

To: *You may have experienced acts of racism that are obvious to you and anyone who is looking. These have been called macroassaults. Have you ever experienced racism that was clearly racist? **If so, what did you learn from those experiences with macroassaults?***

This change is requested because merely asking the women to share details of their encounters with racism does not fully serve the purpose of the study and also unduly focuses on the unconstructive aspects of the situation. The intent to approach participants as experts who can share what they have learned from undesired conditions in their life is more exemplified in the new question.

3) I wish to change my options for participants to return informed consent forms by return-scanning. I would like to change it to a) receive by scanning but return by my mailing or b) receive/return by mail entirely, to ensure that I gather "wet" signatures from all participants; this is to comply with my understanding that I must get wet signatures on all forms once the study begins.

.....

I understand that these proposed changes in protocol will be reviewed by the Committee.

I also understand that any proposed changes in protocol being requested in this form cannot be implemented until they have been fully approved by the HSR Committee.

I have discussed these changes with my Research Advisor and he/she has approved them.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above.

**Signature of Researcher: Lyana Murrell (Electronic signature on 3/5/15)**

**Name of Researcher (PLEASE PRINT): Lyana Murrell    Date: 3/5/2015**

PLEASE RETURN THIS SIGNED & COMPLETED FORM TO Laura Wyman at [LWyman@smith.edu](mailto:LWyman@smith.edu) or to Lilly Hall Room 115.

*\*\*\*Include your Research Advisor/Doctoral Committee Chair in the 'cc'. Once the Advisor/Chair writes acknowledging and approving this change, the Committee review will be initiated.*

.....

Updated: 9/25/13



Appendix C  
Human Subjects Review (HSR) Protocol Change Approval Letter



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 6, 2015

Lyana Murrell

Dear Lyana,

I have reviewed your amendments and they look fine. These amendments to your study are therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Beth Averill, Research Advisor

Appendix D  
Human Subjects Review (HSR) Committee Letter of Approval



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 24, 2015

Lyana Murrell

Dear Lyana,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Beth Averill, Research Advisor



Appendix F  
Social Media Announcement

“Sometimes, I feel discriminated against...it merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.”

–Zora Neale Hurston

---

Are you...

- 1) An African American woman?
- 2) Between the ages of 34 and 69 (or born between 1946 and 1980)?
- 3) Interested in discussing your experiences with collective identity, racism, and well-being?

If you feel you meet the description above or know someone who does, please contact me or share my contact information with the woman you have in mind. I hope to hear about their rich traditions of community, healing, nurturing, resistance, and liberation.

I am recruiting participants for my Master’s thesis in order to fulfill requirements for my MSW from Smith College School for Social Work this coming summer (2015). *Specifically, I am conducting a study to explore how African American women experience a Black collective identity in their encounters with racism that may affect their psychological and emotional well-being.* Black collective identity may refer to Black people’s feelings of unity and solidarity with one another; it may be that feeling of them and us. Together the collective can protect Black individuals, Black culture, and other facets of Black communities by challenging the harm that racism or other types of oppression bring.

To that end Black women should be treated as experts on their own experiences of collective identity, racism, and well-being. It is important to note that these ideas may not ring true for every Black woman, and each participant will be encouraged to express whatever they want. So please contact me or forward this information on. It would be greatly appreciated!

In solidarity,  
Lyana Murrell

Appendix G  
Email for Known Networks

“Sometimes, I feel discriminated against...it merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.”

–Zora Neale Hurston

---

Dear [colleagues, friends, and/or family],

I hope that you are well and in good spirits. I am a 2015 MSW candidate at Smith College School for Social Work, and am currently working to complete my Master’s thesis. I am reaching out to you because our lengthy and memorable -or with some, brief- encounters have made an impact on me. For that reason, I want to reach out and ask for your help to find potential participants for my study. I am looking for anyone who identifies as an African American woman and who is between the ages of 34 and 69 (or born between 1946-1980). I hope they would be willing to do an interview over the phone, on video chat, or in person. Information will be confidential and I will not interview anyone I know.

I am conducting a study to explore how African American women experience a Black collective identity in their encounters with racism that may affect their psychological and emotional well-being. Black collective identity may refer to Black people’s feelings of unity and solidarity with one another; it may be that feeling of them and us. Together, the collective can protect Black individuals, Black culture, and other facets of Black communities by challenging the harm that racism or other types of oppression bring. With that said, I am curious how African American women experience Black collective identity or if they even do? What does that specific aspect (i.e., collective identity) of African American women’s lives mean for their emotional and psychological well-being, given their possible encounters with racism?

These are themes I hope to explore with 12 to 15 African American women. It is important to note that these ideas may not ring true for every Black woman, and expressing that is important as well. Ultimately, I am excited for an opportunity to learn and know other’s stories. I want to hear their truth, and represent that in research. If you know anyone who might be interested in volunteering for my study, or have interest in this topic, it would be greatly appreciated if you could forward this on. I am looking to interview people until April 15, 2015. Thank you for your time and consideration. Feel free to contact me if you have any follow up questions or concerns. If this has been forwarded on to you, please let me know if you are interested? I look forward to hearing these important stories!

In solidarity and with thanks,  
Lyana Murrell

Appendix H  
Recruitment Message to Organizations

“Sometimes, I feel discriminated against...it merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.”  
–Zora Neale Hurston

---

Dear [organization/group],

My name is Lyana Murrell and I am a 2015 MSW candidate at Smith College School for Social Work. I recognize that your organization does important work with the African American community. For that reason, I am reaching out to ask for your help in finding potential participants for my study.

I am conducting a study to explore how African American women experience a Black collective identity in their encounters with racism that may affect their psychological and emotional well-being. In the study, Black collective identity refers to Black people’s feelings of unity and solidarity with one another; it may be that feeling of them and us. Together, the collective can protect Black individuals, Black culture, and other facets of Black communities by challenging the harm that racism or other types of oppression bring. With that said, I am curious how African American women experience Black collective identity or if they even do? I also am curious what this specific aspect (i.e., collective identity) of African American women’s lives mean for their emotional and psychological well-being, given their possible encounters with racism?

These are themes I hope to explore with 12 to 15 African American women. If you know anyone who would benefit or like to participate in this study, who identifies as an African American woman, and who is between the ages of 34 and 69 (or born between 1946-1980), please forward this message and/or the attached flier to that individual. They will be asked to complete an interview over the phone, on video chat, or in person. Information will be confidential, and I will not interview anyone I know. I am looking to interview people until April 15, 2015.

It is important to note that these ideas may not ring true for every Black woman, and expressing that is important as well. Ultimately, I am excited for an opportunity to learn and know other’s stories. I want to hear their truth, and represent that in research. Thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me if you have any follow up questions or concerns.

With thanks,  
Lyana Murrell

Appendix I  
Agency or Institution Approval Letter

AGENCY LETTERHEAD MIGHT BE PLACED HERE

Date

Smith College  
School for Social Work  
Lilly Hall  
Northampton, MA 01063

To Whom It May Concern:

**(Agency or Institution Name)** gives permission for Lyana Murrell to locate her research in this agency (institution). We do not have a Human Subjects Review Board and, therefore, request that Smith College School for Social Work's (SSW) Human Subject Review Committee (HSR) perform a review of the research proposed by Lyana Murrell. **(Agency or Institution Name)** will abide by the standards related to the protection of all participants in the research approved by SSW HSR Committee.

Sincerely,

Signature & Title  
**(Agency or Institution Director)**  
**(Name of program, if applicable)**

Appendix J  
Informed Consent



# SMITH COLLEGE

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....  
**Title of Study:** It Takes A Village: Exploring African American Women’s Experiences With Collective Identity, Racism, and Well-being (Working Title)

**Investigators:** Lyana Murrell, Master of Social Work Candidate 2015, [REDACTED]

.....

Dear Potential Research Participant,

### **Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study of your views about a Black collective identity, racism, and well-being.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as an African American woman and are between the ages of 34 and 69 or were born between 1946-1980.
- I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

### **Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of this study is to explore how African American women (you) experience a Black collective identity in your encounters with racism that may affect your psychological and emotional well-being.
  - Black collective identity may be your feelings of unity and solidarity with other Black people; it may be that feeling of them and us. Together, the collective (that includes you and other Black people) can protect you, your culture, and Black communities by challenging the harm that racism or other types of oppression bring.
  - Perceived racism is how you have experienced unfair treatment due to racism.
  - Psychological and emotional well-being refers to your mental and emotional health. This will be your choice to define in this study. You can share the good, the not so good, or nothing at all. *It is entirely up to you!*
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master’s in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

### **Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:



- Talk about (if needed) and return this signed form to Lyana Murrell by mail using the return postage that came with this form. When mailing, please use the following address:
  - Lyana Murrell  
[REDACTED]
- Complete an interview that may last between thirty to ninety minutes. The interview can happen in person, over the phone, or on video chat. If you agree, the interview will be audio taped. If audiotaping is not an option, I will take hand written notes of the interview.
  - Phone Contact: [REDACTED]
  - Skype (video chat) Contact: [REDACTED]

### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- The study has the following risks. First, this study may bring up some uncomfortable thoughts, experiences, feelings, or stories about collective identity and being African American in a society that does have racism. I ask that you be open and prepared for personal questions about collective identity, mental and emotional health, and how you see racism given your experiences as an African American woman. Please remember, however, that you can refuse to answer any questions and/or leave from this study at any time. If you do experience any discomfort related to your participation in this study, below is a list of referrals for support that are specific to African Americans:
  1. National Directory of Mental Health Providers: [AfricanAmericanTherapists.com](http://www.africanamericantherapists.com)
  2. National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide: <http://www.nopcas.org/>
  3. Black Mental Health Alliance: <http://www.Blackmentalhealth.com/> or (410) 338-2642
  4. National Association of Black Social Workers: <http://nabsw.org/> or 202-678-4570
  5. Black Counselors: <http://www.Blackcounselors.com/>
  6. Black Psychiatrists of America: <http://www.Blackpsych.org/>
  7. Black Women’s Health: <http://www.Blackwomenshealth.com>
- I also encourage you to seek out healing from other sources that you have previously used or that are in your community; this may include –but is not limited to– your family, members from any church that you are a part of, and/or other trusted people in your life.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- There may be significant benefits to participation in this study. Personally, this study may act as a liberatory and meaningful personal experience for you to re-evaluate your own experiences of collective identity and perceptions of racism. It may also serve as an opportunity to express your own truth, have your story heard, enrich your sense of self, and improve your representation and understanding from other people. You may also use this study to think more critically about what it means to live in a society as an African American who encounters the realities of racism; this study may offer up insight into how to protect your own mental health and challenge such conditions.
- The benefits to social work/society are potentially great. First, your stories can contribute to the overall body of knowledge about African American lives. Specifically, your feedback may increase understanding about African Americans after you define different parts of your

life that impact your psychological and emotional well being (also called mental health in this study), and bring attention to areas in your life of strength and healing. Your contributions may also inform future mental health practices and strategies for service, engagement, and policy making. There will be no monetary or other material compensation for participation in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your participation will be kept confidential; no one will know your name or connect you to this study except myself. To guarantee this, I will assign you a participant code when we begin to meet and all information gathered will be presented not in specific details about you but in a general analysis of all participants' interviews. Your participant code will be used to label audiotapes, narratives, and other collected data. Signed consent forms will be locked up separately from any other data so your name and data cannot be connected. As for interviews, phone and video chats will be conducted in the privacy of my home; in-person interviews will take place at a publicly agreed upon place that offers privacy (i.e., park, reserved library study room, or coffee shop). Any quotes and examples will be written in a manner that does not reveal information that could identify you.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. Again, I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Payments/gift**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation. However, I will purchase your beverage and an accompanying item if we meet at a coffee shop.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 15, 2015. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis.
- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Lyana Murrell by telephone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by email at [Blackwomenscollectivestudy@gmail.com](mailto:Blackwomenscollectivestudy@gmail.com). If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.**

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_