ABSTRACT

WILDER, JENNIFER ANITA. Knowledge Construction of African American Women in an HBCU Setting. (Under the direction of Dr. Susan J. Bracken.)

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore African American women’s knowledge construction within a racially homogenous context, specifically a Historically Black College (HBCU) setting. The supporting theoretical framework was adapted from Aida Hurtado’s multicultural work on mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition. Based upon interviews with 14 female African American HBCU employees, the findings explore two primary research questions: 1) How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition? And, 2) How do African American women in an HBCU setting develop support structures for their learning? The findings present narrative analysis of how each of Hurtado’s mechanisms is a part of the participants’ knowledge construction process: anger, silence/outspokeness, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues. In general, it found that the participants were more comfortable with self-concepts as thinkers versus knowers, and that they did not necessarily withdraw into smaller female networks in the manner described in Hurtado’s work. Regarding support structures, there were three key findings: First, the women were aware of and very purposeful in navigating gender oppression as a part of the HBCU context. Next, they used spirituality and their family backgrounds as sources of strength in dealing with their ongoing knowledge construction.
Knowledge Construction of African American Women in a Historically Black College or University Setting

by
Jennifer Anita Wilder

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Higher Education Administration

Raleigh, North Carolina

2008

APPROVED BY

__________________________   ________________________  
Dr. Susan Bracken      Dr. Duane Akroyd  
Chair of Advisory Committee

________________________   ________________________  
Dr. Timothy Luckadoo    Dr. Tuere Bowles
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents Lawrence and Gloria Wilder, who instilled in me a love for learning and provided unwavering love, support and encouragement.

Also, this work is dedicated to my brother Bertrand, his wife Leslie and my nieces, Kayla Savonne and Kianna Chante Wilder, whom I pray know that they can achieve anything they set their minds to achieve.
BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Anita Wilder, daughter of Lawrence and Gloria Wilder, was born and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina. She has one brother, Lawrence Bertrand Wilder.

The author received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in 1981 and her Master of Education in Guidance and Counseling in 1983 from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She began her career in Student Affairs within residence life while an undergraduate and served as a residence director while she pursued her master’s degree. After receiving her master’s degree, she worked as a full time residence director at Spelman College. She joined the staff of Southern Methodist University as an Area Coordinator and worked her way up to Assistant Director of Residential Programs during her tenure. She returned to North Carolina to join the staff of North Carolina State University as an Assistant Director of University Housing. She began her doctoral program while employed with University Housing. She currently serves as the Director of Residential Life at the selected HBCU site. She has over 25 years of experience in Student Affairs and Residence Life at both PWIs and HBCUs.

Her personal interests include reading, cooking, singing, and spending time with family and friends.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First giving honor to God, the head of my life, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me and I know that had I not had the Lord on my side, this day would never have come.

To my parents Lawrence and Gloria Wilder, who encouraged, supported and prayed for me through this process. I could not have made it without you. Mom and Dad, I love you and thanks for keeping me encouraged when the going got rough. To my brother Bertrand, thanks for the quiet encouragement and prayers.

I would like to acknowledge my church family at First Congregational Church for their prayers and words of encouragement during my doctoral studies and dissertation process.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my committee for assisting me in my academic endeavors and professional development. Dr. Susan Bracken, thank you for agreeing to be my committee chair. Your support and guidance have been instrumental in helping me articulate new perspectives on women and knowing. Thank you, Dr. Duane Akroyd for your time as my committee chair, for introducing me to Dr. Bracken, and remaining on my committee. Dr. Timothy Luckadoo, I think you have been the one consistent committee member during my entire process. Thank you for your encouragement, support and for convening the Dissertation Support group. I hope your Dissertation Support Group family of doctors keeps growing. Dr. Tuere Bowles, thank you for stepping in. Your insights were most helpful. I appreciate your willingness to serve on my committee. Many
thanks to Dr. Christine Lash and Dr. Blythe Clinchy who taught me that graduate students can approach published authors for assistance. Dr. Audrey Toney, I say thank you for teaching me how to eat the elephant a spoonful at a time.

Additionally, thanks to the following people for participating in my mock proposal and final defenses: Tia Marie Doxey (the organizer), Dr. Frances Graham, Dr. Carolyn Moore, Dr. Phillip Mutisya, Dr. Jeanette Barker, Dr. Theodore Pikes and Ms. Janet Howard. Those trial runs were invaluable and helped me prepare for successful defenses.

I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues in the Dissertation Support Groups both the Pullen Hall group and the Saturday Morning group. I was always inspired after attending one of these meetings. The meetings kept you honest because it was so embarrassing to go to a meeting and report that you had not made any progress. To my staff in Residential Life, thanks for keeping the place going when I needed to work on school. It is so good to have a great staff.

My sisterfriends: Tia Marie Doxey, who assisted in every possible way to help me finish this dissertation. Let me count the ways. It’s your turn now; Cynthia Meekins-Mattocks, who was always willing to read and give suggestions no matter how late or how tired she was; Valerie Prince, who always had a word of prayer or encouragement for me; Faye Hooker, a lifelong friend who encouraged me to never give up and kept me entertained with stories of her children; and finally Dr. Savitri Dixon-Saxon and Dr. Stephanie Helms, who walked the path before me.

I am walking into my season.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables............................................................................................................. x  

**CHAPTER ONE STATEMENT OF PROBLEM** ................................................................................................. 1

**INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................................................ 2

**BACKGROUND OF STUDY** ......................................................................................................................... 10

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK** ....................................................................................................................... 14

**PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS** ........................................................................................................ 16

**SIGNIFICANCE** .................................................................................................................................................. 17

**DEFINITION OF TERMS** ................................................................................................................................... 17

Androcentrism ..................................................................................................................................................... 17

Afrocentric ............................................................................................................................................................ 17

Black Feminist Thought ........................................................................................................................................ 17

Constructed Knowledge ..................................................................................................................................... 18

Culture .................................................................................................................................................................. 19

Epistemology ....................................................................................................................................................... 19

Feminism ............................................................................................................................................................... 19

Feminist standpoint theory .................................................................................................................................. 19

Gender .................................................................................................................................................................. 19

Hegemony ............................................................................................................................................................. 19

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) ..................................................................................... 20

Human Development Theory ............................................................................................................................. 20

Knowing ............................................................................................................................................................... 21

Learning ............................................................................................................................................................... 21

Moral Development Theories ............................................................................................................................. 21

Oppositional Knowledge ...................................................................................................................................... 21

Predominately White Institutions(PWIs) ............................................................................................................. 21

Self-definition ....................................................................................................................................................... 21

Womanist ............................................................................................................................................................... 22

Women’s voice ..................................................................................................................................................... 22

Women’s Ways of Knowing ................................................................................................................................. 22

**SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT** ........................................................................................................................... 23

**SUMMARY** ....................................................................................................................................................... 23

**OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS** ........................................................................................................................... 23

**CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW** .......................................................................................................... 25

**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................................................................................. 25

**TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODELS** ...................................................................................................... 25

Perry .................................................................................................................................................................... 26

Kohlberg ............................................................................................................................................................... 29

Gilligan .................................................................................................................................................................. 30

**WOMEN’S WAYS OF KNOWING** ................................................................................................................... 32

Criticism and Strengths of Women’s Ways of Knowing .................................................................................... 36
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Belenky et al, Hill Collins, and Hurtado Models…………………………15
Table 2 Demographic Profile of Participants……………………………………...67
CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

African American women have a unique perspective on womanhood and being African American (Thomas, 2004). Current western conceptualizations of women’s ways of knowing or knowledge construction do not adequately define the experiences of African American women because they do not take into consideration the intersection of gender, race, and class. This intersectionality is the everyday lived experience of African American women.

This research explored African American women, their experiences and challenges as learners and knowers, as well as their strategies for changing concepts of self in a racially homogeneous setting. In this study, the racially homogenous setting was a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) campus. HBCUs are places where Black feminist epistemology can develop. In order to fully explore African American women’s experiences in an HBCU setting, we first have to understand the culture of HBCUs, including the role of gender in that environment. According to Bonner (2001), “Addressing sexism in HBCUs is particularly critical because they lag behind the predominately White institutions in their capacity to systematically address gender in higher education. Two related issues are important to consider when addressing issues of gender in the HBCU community: race and feminist ideology” (p.8).

Jean-Marie’s (2003) research on the experiences of African American women administrators in HBCUs supports the findings in Bonner’s 2001 study.
The 12 administrators she interviewed shared their perceptions that racism and sexism were reflected and reinforced in their experiences at HBCUs. Examining the narratives of these women offers a cross section of epistemologies (Black feminist and womanist thought) that characterize their defining standpoints (Jean-Marie, 2003, p. 1). The aforementioned studies focus on the experiences of African American women in a homogeneous environment in regards to racism and sexism, but not gendered knowledge construction. Further investigation allows for a better understanding of how African American women’s experiences in an HBCU environment relate to knowledge construction.

Introduction

Understanding ways of knowing for African American women is pivotal to ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory. “Epistemology derives from the Greek terms ‘episteme’ and ‘logos’ meaning ‘knowledge’ and ‘explanation’ respectively” (Cudd & Andreasen, 2005, p. 173). Epistemology, in philosophical terms, concerns the study of the nature and conditions of knowledge, knowledge production, and knowledge construction (Okeke, 2000, p. 168; Code, 2000, p. 170). Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), define epistemology as the branch of philosophy by which knowledge is acquired and validated (p. 16).

Traditionally, discussions of epistemology consider gender, in terms of knowing, to be irrelevant. The knower is just a “witness to the unfolding of knowledge” (Code, 1991; Cudd & Andreasen, 2005). Furthermore, “Early feminist research revealed an andocentric bias in the characterization of core epistemological concepts—such as knowledge, the
knowing subject, rationality, emotionality and objectivity” (Cudd & Andreasen, 2005, p. 173). In response to these issues of bias in epistemology and science, feminist philosophers began to defend the relevance of gender. They argued that knowledge is not gender neutral, but socially situated, thus reflecting the gendered perspective of the knowing agent (Cudd & Andreasen, 2005).

There is a difference of opinion among feminists about how gender situates knowers and their attitudes toward epistemology. Some feminists say the andocentric bias results in false, inaccurate, or distorted theories, while others reject the ideal of a value-free science because it is impossible to remove all biases from science (Code, 2000; Cudd & Andreasen, 2005). Further disagreements arise over the epistemic privilege of women, the concept that oppressed groups have advantages as knowers, and that any group has an advantage over any other group (Cudd & Andreasen, 2005). Some examples of the different feminist perspectives on epistemology include rationalism, empiricism, naturalized social epistemology, feminist science, and standpoint epistemology.

Rationalism characterizes reason in ways that are culturally tied to being male and emotion in ways that are culturally tied to being female. Thus, knowledge is conceptualized as masculine (Code, 2000). For example, a man who decides to stay home with the children while his wife works may be viewed as odd, because child rearing and nurturing are culturally identified as being feminine. The implicit belief is: Why would a man not want to use his skills and knowledge to be the breadwinner so his wife can stay home with the children?
“Empiricism is a theory of knowledge and a method, for which claims to know are developed, judged and justified in accordance with experience, especially sensory experience and observation” (Code, 2000, p. 163). This theory has informed most twentieth century science and philosophy of science with its emphasis on neutral, replicable observation and experimental verification. Feminist empiricism is focused on evidence gathering and justification informed by feminist ideology (Code, 2000).

Naturalized epistemology is the study of how specific knowledge is produced by real knowers in real (i.e. natural) cognitive activities. Normative principles are derived from the conditions that make knowledge possible in the real world practices (Code, 2000). A father who does not allow his daughter to continue her education past high school, because women should fall in love and get married, while his son is allowed to go to college, is an example of how gender norms influence the production of knowledge (Hurtado, 1996).

In contrast, standpoint epistemologists argue that knowledge is socially situated and choose to privilege women’s epistemic perspective. Some feminists object to the assumption that there is a single, unified epistemic perspective shared by all women; instead, they argue for a multiplicity of women’s standpoints. These standpoints include but are not limited to Black, Latina, and lesbian (Hurtado, 1996; Hill Collins, 2000). “The core idea of feminist standpoint epistemology is that knowledge is socially situated. Knowledge is influenced by non-cognitive factors such as one’s gender, cultural perspective, and socio-economic status” (Valdez, 2001, as cited in Cudd & Andreasen, p. 70). For example, two African American women, approximately the same age and working in identical positions in corporate America,
could see the world very differently because one grew up in an urban, economically
disadvantaged home and the other in a suburban, middle-class home.

Conversely, Code (1991) argues that who knows is as important as what is known.
Knowers, who believe that they are detached or objective, are in fact, attached and
subjective, and very much in tune with their social context. Code further explains, “In fact,
this disinterested knower is really a very particular, specific, interested knower who
represents the concerns of privileged White males” (p.1). Valdez (2001) supports Code’s
argument by saying that “the gender and social position of knowers are relevant to
understanding how claims are formulated, understood and legitimized” (p. 70, as cited in
Cudd & Andreasen, 2005). Therefore, the premise of producing neutral information in
traditional epistemology really “subordinates the concerns of those who are not part of the
elite group of knowers and makes invisible the conditions under which knowledge is

In traditional epistemology, “the privileged White male constructs himself as a value-
free knowing subject while simultaneously suppressing the knowledge claims of women”
(Code, 1991, p. 2). There is no such thing as value-free neutral science for the standpoint
epistemologist, because knowledge is invariably affected by social factors (Valdez, 2001, p.
70, as cited in Cudd & Andreasen, 2005). “Thus, the gender system interacts with the
knowledge production system to produce a) ways of being male and female and b) ascribed,
gendered ways of knowing. Since women are, by virtue of being female, incapable of being
objective according to traditional epistemology, then it follows women are disqualified from being knowers” (Code, 1991, p.2).

Feminist epistemology questions the andocentric standards that deny women a place as knowers. Feminists argue that women’s experiences and analyses are crucial to defining their world, which utilizes the experiences of middle-class White women as the universal basis for addressing the circumstances of all women. As a consequence, Okeke (2000) argues, early feminist scholars articulated experiences of oppression that ignored the voices of non-White women. African American women’s responses to experiences of oppression vary because of their diversity. Some of the factors that influence this diversity of responses include social class difference, sexual orientation, ethnicity and region of the country, urbanization, and age (Code, 2000).

“Black feminist thought evolved in relation to and differentiation from the two main waves of feminism as well as the male-centered 1960s American Black Power movement” (Code, 2000, p. 57). The first wave of feminism (1860-1920) presented White women’s suffrage as the predominant issue related to gender equity, which, in practice, excluded issues of race and gender for non-White women. In turn, second wave feminism (1960-1980) failed to recognize Black women’s differing understandings of patriarchy, reproduction, and work (Hill Collins, 1990). In the 1970s, Black feminists began to voice displeasure with their absence, literally and figuratively, in the feminist movement and to challenge White feminists because they failed to validate their (Black women’s) experiences (hooks, 2000). This generation of Black
females, for the most part, had never been in a subordinated position to White females as compared to Black feminists before the 1970s. Therefore, they were better positioned to critique racism and White dominance within the women’s movement. At the same time, the White women who wanted to organize the movement around the notion that women constituted a sexual class/caste, did not acknowledge the differences among women, of which race was the most obvious difference (hooks, 2000).

White women accused Black feminists of being traitors to the feminist movement because they were unwilling or ill-equipped to deal with the reality of racism and racial difference. White feminists believed Black feminists were deflecting the focus away from gender. Black feminists were forcing the movement to look at the status of females from more realistic perspectives. Feminist thinking and theory have benefited from the critical intervention of race. Even with that intervention, the problem has been translating theory into practice (hooks, 2000).

Okeke (2000) states, “Black feminist epistemology refers to the nature, theory, and production of knowledge grounded in the lived experiences of Black women, as a point of entry into the forums and constituencies where feminist knowledges are produced and evaluated” (pp. 168-169). Hill Collins, considered a leading theorist of Black feminism, writes:

Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women’s power as agents of knowledge.

By portraying African American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals
confronting race, gender and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that oppression and knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. Revealing new ways of knowing allows African American women to define their own reality (1990, p. 221).

Hill Collins’s work demonstrates the need for theory development about African American women from an Afrocentric perspective.

Likewise, “Black feminists argue African American women have not had the luxury of constructing their realities, thus erroneous views from the experience of White women (or worse, White men) have been imposed on them” (Shambley-Ebron & Boyle, 2004, p.11). bell hooks, in her 1989 book, Talking Back, shares with her class that there was a time “when almost all books written about the feminist movement were written by White men, when a vast majority of books about slavery and Black experience—were written by White people (and sometimes Black men)” (p. 92). She related this discussion to a:

... growing awareness that a dimension of the oppressor/oppressed, exploiter/exploited relationship is that those who dominate are seen as the subjects and those who are dominated objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, and name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject (hooks, 1989, p. 42).

The African American woman’s self is defined by class differences, educational levels, religious beliefs and spiritual attitudes, sexuality, physical attributes, and family
responsibilities (Dixon-Saxon, 2002). Therefore, knowledge construction for the African American woman within a racially homogeneous context encompasses every aspect of the self and the social-structural implications of the setting. Understanding how African American women uniquely construct knowledge is important because the cultural expectations and internalized cultural values sometimes conflict with who these women really want to be.

As Black feminist scholarship expands and more women ground their research in African American women’s experiences, placing African American women’s experiences at the center of an analysis of knowledge construction provides an opportunity for new insights to be revealed. Therefore, this research focuses on the exploration of African American women’s knowledge construction.

The term African American symbolizes a unique storytelling tradition that is a synthesis of values and rituals rooted in African and American societies (Faulkner, 1977; Hamilton, 1985; Stewart, 1997; as cited in Banks –Wallace, 2002). African Americans have a strong tradition of passing down wisdom through oration. In particular, African American women pass on their knowledge of the world to younger women through the gatherings of women around the table or on the porch with the little girls at their feet. While the children may be hushed as they try to enter the conversations, they are allowed to remain in the presence of the elders, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, “sistahs”, friends, and “other mothers.” Through this rite of passage these young women learn how to navigate the world. Lessons
learned at the knees of the older women translate into how they navigate school and work for
the remainder of their lives (Dixon- Saxon, 2002).

Background of the Study

Second wave feminism started in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s. This
wave of the feminist movement brought goals and perspectives with it that demanded greater
sexual freedom for women and advocated for women to control their own bodies through
legal rights. They further advocated to expand equal pay for equal work to include equal pay
for work of equal value, and promoted social activism and a new area of feminist
scholarship. The creation of women’s studies programs resulted in important “new
theoretical positions, ranging from psychoanalytic feminism to postcolonial analyses”
(McPherson, 2000).

Women’s studies programs challenge academia to include women as creators of
knowledge and as subjects in their epistemologies, sources of evidence, and categories of
analysis and interpretations. Within this push to include women as creators of knowledge,
Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986) published their seminal work on women’s
development, Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind. The
book developed out of a conversation between Tarule and Goldberger that centered on the
experiences of women in higher education, women’s studies programs, women’s
development and feminist scholarship. Those conversations led Goldberger to invite
Belenky, Clinchy, and Tarule to join her in writing a research proposal for the Fund for the
Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) on the experiences of women in higher education (Belenky et al., 1997).

Goldberger and Clinchy were in the midst of longitudinal studies tracing the development of students at their respective colleges. Belenky and Tarule, both recent doctoral graduates of Harvard where they studied with William Perry, were involved in research on women’s development with Gilligan and setting up programs for adult students, respectively. All four researchers shared a common concern about certain complaints female students had regarding their experiences in higher education. The desire to create a project that would link their public work on student development with their private work on women’s issues was the catalyst for these four women coming together (Belenky et al., 1997).

Until their coming together for the Education for Women’s Development project, feminism deeply impacted their personal lives but had not profoundly shaped their work, except perhaps for Belenky (Belenky et al., 1997). FIPSE accepted their proposal for Education for Women’s Development. Thus, Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind (WWK) was born. The authors describe the process of writing and analyzing collaboratively as working “in the women’s way” (Belenky et al., p. xii).

The importance of the Belenky et al. study to this research study is epistemology and the use of women as research participants. The work of Belenky et al. suggests women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority from five different perspectives. The authors of this book made a significant observation: “Women don’t just learn in the classroom, they learn in relationships, by juggling life demands, by dealing with crises in
families and communities. We realized together at a particular moment that education need not be narrowly defined. I [Mary Belenky] remember feeling as exhilarated by the collective discovery the group ‘ah-ha’ as I was by naming what we wanted to do: Education for Women’s Development” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. xi).

Goldberger (1996), reflecting ten years after the publishing of WWK says, by focusing on the genderization of knowledge and knowing and on the vicissitudes of women’s development in a patriarchal society, they contributed to the growing understanding of how gender is constructed in lives of diverse women. This focus on the individual and her development diverted their attention away from “individuals’ in-communities as a meaningful and useful unit of analysis” (Goldberger, p. 14). Goldberger asserts:

   Knowing is not insular. How one knows is multiply determined within the array of relationships that define the self. Meaning making is not a solitary pursuit, but is interactional and negotiable, that is knowledge is co-constructed. Persons are “situated” in communities of knowers in which the dynamics of power and status are often controlling factors in how one knows and what one knows (pp.14-15).

Belenky et al. expressed the point of view that women’s basic assumptions about the nature of truth and reality and the origins of knowledge shape the way women see the world and themselves as participants in it. The sample for the 1986 study was culturally and ethnically diverse, consisting of 135 rural and urban American women of different ages, class and ethnic backgrounds, and educational histories (Belenky et al., 1997).
Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky (1997) acknowledge that at the time WWK was published, they made the decision not to focus on class, racial, or ethnic differences. Their study relied upon a relatively small and non-representative sample. They wanted to hear what the participants had to say about the varieties of female experience before they began to make generalizations that the differences among them were related to class, race, ethnicity, and other social distinctions. For over 20 years, this research has been the basis of numerous articles and research papers that further explored women’s ways of knowing.

Hill Collins (2000) connects to Belenky et al. in her discussion of knowledge validation processes in the United States in her book, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. Hill Collins discusses four characteristics of validating knowledge: lived experience as a criterion for meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethics of caring and the ethic of personal accountability. Also, Hill Collins provides a detailed analysis of how the first three characteristics relate to Belenky et al.’s position of connected knowers.

Another researcher, Aida Hurtado (1996) explores questions surrounding feminism, women of color, and racial and ethnic identities and communities. Building on the work of Belenky et al. and Hill Collins, Hurtado recognizes the interconnection among race, class, gender and sexuality and refuses to hierarchize oppression or to fragment identities. Moreover, Hurtado emphasizes feminist theories by women of color that encourage personal and collective accountability, subject-positionality, and the creative use of anger as a form of resistance.
This research seeks to expand on the work of Hurtado by exploring African American women’s knowledge construction. Knowledge construction and African American women are seldom studied in a racially homogeneous environment where the diversity of African American women’s experiences is not viewed as deviant. Building on the work of Belenky et al., Hill Collins, and Hurtado, research on the knowledge construction of African American women adds to the overall body of research on women’s development. Table 1 shows Belenky et al.’s five epistemological perspectives, Hill Collins’s characteristics of validating knowledge and Hurtado’s mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition for women of color.

Conceptual Framework for Study

The research explored how African American women, given their unique experiences and challenges as learners and knowers, construct knowledge within an HBCU setting. Belenky et al.’s (1986) women’s ways of knowing theory focuses on the different ways women know, how they are socialized to know and how they respond to socializing forces. Hurtado’s (1996) work focuses on how multiple group memberships like gender, class, race and ethnicity create a different relationship to knowledge including its production, comprehension and integration. Hurtado builds on women’s ways of knowing theory by pointing out that gender, class, and race alone cannot provide an adequate lens for understanding the ways of knowing for women of color. Women of color, including African American women, experience race, class and gender oppression simultaneously (Goldberger, 1996). Therefore, I selected Hurtado’s mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition
for women of color combined with Women’s Ways of Knowing and Black feminist theory as my conceptual framework for this study.

Table 1. Belenky et al., Hill Collins and Hurtado Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Belenky et al. Women’s Ways of Knowing Categories</th>
<th>Hill Collins Black Feminist Thought Characteristics of Knowledge</th>
<th>Hurtado Mechanisms of Knowledge Production and Acquisition for Women of Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>Lived Experience</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Received</td>
<td>Use of Dialogue</td>
<td>Silence/Outspokenness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>The Ethics of Caring</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Procedural</td>
<td>The Ethic of Personal Accountability</td>
<td>Shifting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constructed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple Tongues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Model</td>
<td>Perceived by others to be sequential but not by the authors</td>
<td>Fluid</td>
<td>Fluid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis centered on</td>
<td>135 rural and urban ordinary American women leading ordinary lives of different ages, class and ethnic backgrounds and educational histories</td>
<td>Theoretical analysis of Black women’s experiences and ideas</td>
<td>Combined writings of Feminists of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Foundation</td>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>Afrocentric Philosophy</td>
<td>Belenky et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kohlberg</td>
<td>Feminist theory</td>
<td>Hill Collins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gilligan</td>
<td>Marxist social thought</td>
<td>hooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sociology of knowledge</td>
<td>Lorde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical theory</td>
<td>Moraga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Postmodernism</td>
<td>Anzaldúa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Davis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gándara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore African-American women’s knowledge construction within the context of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) setting. I selected an HBCU because it is a homogeneous environment for the African American woman where the diversity of her experience is not viewed as deviant (Bing & Reid, 1996).

I chose this HBCU—a liberal arts college serving a widely diverse population in terms of social class—because it is a site of learning, serves disadvantaged students, and houses an early college high school program. I am an African American female administrator at the selected site, allowing for easy access to research participants and enriched understanding of the larger context.

Analyzing experiences of African American women in an HBCU setting should allow for insight into their methods of knowledge construction. I conducted a research study that addresses the following questions:

1. How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s five mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition?

2. How do African American women in an HBCU setting develop support structures for their learning?
Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that research on this topic has not been done previously. It offers potential for new insights and revelations about African American women’s knowledge construction from gendered and racial perspectives. Additionally, using an HBCU, a site of learning, as the research context may reveal new knowledge about African American social constructions of gender. It should be noted, however, findings from this study cannot be generalized to all HBCUs or to all African American women.

Definition of Terms

**Androcentrism** refers to entrenched practices that base theory and practice on men’s experiences masquerading as human experiences and counting as unquestioned sources of knowledge in general (Code, 2000, p. 20).

**Afrocentric** references traditions of Black consciousness and racial solidarity. (Hill Collins, 2000, p.21).

**Black feminist thought** refers to the nature, theory and production of knowledge grounded in the lived experiences of Black women as a point of entry into the forums and constituencies where feminist knowledges are produced and evaluated. It speaks to the importance that oppression and knowledge play in empowering oppressed people. Black feminist thought embraces a paradigm of race, class and gender as interlocking systems of oppression contrasted with mainstream feminist knowledge production which made the experiences of middle class white women the universal basis of addressing the circumstances
of all women. In the 1970s, Black feminist began to voice their discontent with feminist knowledge that failed to validate their experiences. They argued for the black woman’s experience to be at the center of analysis.

By looking at how race, class and gender interconnect, Black feminist thought places these distinct systems under one overarching structure of domination. Secondly, it also addresses the ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory and the sociology of knowing concerning whether African American women are objects and are offered new knowledge or subjects who reveal new ways of knowing. Since the 1990s, these debates have sensitized us to the interconnections between knowledge claims and power because what is said and the location from which it is said matters.

The challenges facing Black feminist thought include de-constructing the labels imposed on Black women by feminist literature and developing knowledge bases which place Black women’s experiences at the center. Additionally, it must continue to ask questions about the origins of feminist knowledge, locations of knowers and subjects of enquiry, grounds for knowledge claims and the implications for Black women’s experiences within the larger feminist mainstream (Hill Collins, 2000, Code, 2001, Okeke, 2001).

**Constructed knowledge** is a concept in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 15).
Culture is defined as the structure and practices, especially communication practices, through which a culture produces and reproduces a particular social order by legitimizing certain values, expectations, meanings, and patterns of behavior (Wood, 1994).

Epistemology is the study of the nature and conditions of knowledge, knowledge production, and knowledge construction (Okeke, 2000).

Feminism is an activist movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and gender oppression (hooks, 1984).

Feminist standpoint theory “offers insight into how a person’s location within a culture shapes his or her life. Standpoint theory focuses on how gender, race, and class influence the circumstances of individuals’ lives, especially their positions in society and the kinds of experiences those positions foster” (Wood, 1994, p.316).

Gender is a social construction that varies across cultures, over time within a given culture, and in relation to being male or female. Gender is a social, symbolic category that reflects the meanings a society confers on biological sex (Wood, 1994).

Hegemony refers to a form of dominance which legitimates and secures the position of the ruling class based on the consent of those ruled. This form of dominance is constructed and sustained largely through ideological means which represents the interest of the ruling class as universally fair and in the best interest of society at large.

For feminists, the question of women’s collusion in what can be seen as an unequal or exploitative relationship is interlinked with the ideology of a ruling sex in both the public and private spheres: why do women acquiesce to patriarchal practices, and how are these
practices cultivated and reproduced? Michele Barrett (1980) argues that women’s passivity is constructed and it is through various ideological apparatus, i.e. schools, churches, the family, that gender roles are structured and maintained.

The feminist movement has been criticized for its own hegemonic stand in ignoring the inherent class/status, race/ethnic (even nationalist) and sex/gender difference among women (Yoke-Sum Wong, 2000).

**Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs)** are post-secondary institutions, founded prior to 1964, whose principal missions were, and are, the education of African Americans. Their creation is the result of African Americans being excluded from mainstream institutions because of slavery, racial segregation and discrimination (www.uncf.org/aboutus/hbcus.asp).

**Human development theory** refers to the knowledge, conditions, and processes that contribute to the growth, development and fulfillment of the individual throughout life as a realized person and effective, productive citizen and to the growth and development of society (Sigelman, 1999). William Perry’s (1970), a human development theorist, studied privileged White male students at Harvard in the 1950s. His scheme examines nine positions tracing the evolution of traditionally aged students’ thinking about the nature of knowledge, truth and values, and the meaning of life and responsibilities. Perry sees change as coming through cognitive conflict (Sigelman, 1999).
Knowing is an interpretive framework constructed internally by the process of integrating learning with personal histories, worldviews, and experience (Flannery, 2000, p. 112).

Learning is the specific processes of acquiring, maintaining, and changing knowledge within an interpretive framework (Flannery, 2000, p. 112).

Moral Development Theories focus on individual rights and universal concepts of justice, to include accounts based on one’s connections to, and responsibilities for caring for others (Miller, 2000). Kohlberg demonstrated that people progresses in their moral reasoning through a series of stages. He identified six stages of moral reasoning, which can be classified into three levels (Barger, 2000). Like others, Kohlberg, a major moral development theorist, built his theory on the observations of men’s lives. Gilligan broadened previous accounts by focusing on women’s lives.

Oppositional knowledge is a type of knowledge developed by, for, and/or in defense of an oppressed group’s interests. Ideally, it fosters the group’s self definition and self determination (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 299).

Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) are mainstream institutions of higher education.

Self-definition is a) a reflection of commitment and ascribed characteristics like gender and race, b) the process and act of claiming an identity for oneself and members of one’s group, and c) believing in one’s ability not to be limited in one’s efforts to change the world and the way one is reflected in it. It is also the process of maintaining that identity
publicly and privately and making choices that reflect that identity (Dixon- Saxon, 2002, p. 31).

**Womanist** coined by Alice Walker in 1967, means a Black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mother to female children “You acting womanish”, i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doing. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression “you trying to be grown.” Responsible, in charge. Serious. Also, a woman who loves other women sexually and /or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter balance of laughter) and women’s strength. “Sometimes loves individual men sexually and non –sexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

**Women’s voices** were introduced by Carol Gilligan into psychology because prior research focused predominantly on men. She asked the following four questions: Who is speaking? In what body? ; Telling what story? ; In what cultural framework is the story presented? (www.webster.edu/~woolfm/gilliaan.html).

**Women’s Ways of Knowing** (WWK) is a theory of thoughts and knowledge that is reflective of women’s voices and experiences (Belenky et al., 1986).
Subjectivity Statement

I am an African American woman, middle class and a feminist. I currently hold a position as an administrator at an HBCU. My education through ninth grade was received in integrated schools within the African American community, with the remainder of my education-taking place in predominantly White communities and institutions. In my professional career as an educator, I have worked at both HBCUs and PWIs. The difference in my interactions with African American women at HBCUs and PWIs led me to this investigation of African American women’s knowledge construction.

Summary

I was interested in how African American cultural values, the HBCU environment and the historical context affect the knowledge construction of African American women. In order to gain a better understanding, this narrative inquiry focused on the stories of 14 female faculty and staff on one HBCU campus in the Southeastern United States.

Overview of the Chapters

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One introduces the topic and includes background information on the study, definitions of key terms, research questions, purpose and significance of the work, its delimitations and limitations. Chapter Two explores literature relevant to this study. Chapter Three describes the research methodology and design method for this study, including procedures used to collect and analyze data. Chapter Four provides a presentation of the findings from the coding and analysis of data as well as presentation of institutional and participant profiles. Chapter Five gives a detailed discussion
of the findings in the broader context of the literature. Chapter Six focuses on conclusions
from the study and implications for future research related to the findings in this study.
References, the interview protocol, and the North Carolina State University Institutional
Review Board form for the use of human subjects in research are presented in the appendices
of this dissertation.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research on women’s knowledge construction explores whether there are certain conceptions of knowledge that are more easily heard in the voices of women (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997). This study focuses on exploring knowledge construction through the perspectives and voices of African American women who work in an HBCU setting. This chapter reviews the literature relevant to development of the women’s ways of knowing theory and the mechanisms (support structures) women of color utilize in knowledge production and acquisition as related to race, gender and culture. Reviews of human development, racial, ethnic, and gender identity models, HBCUs and African American women in HBCUs are included.

Traditional Development Models

Human development models are primarily based on research with White males. The foundational models most relevant to this study and to basic human development were created by Piaget, Erickson, and Mahler (Al-Mateen et al., 2000). Piaget’s model has four stages in which the child adapts by assimilation and accommodation as he/she progresses through the stages. Erickson’s eight-stage model describes how man develops psychosocially. Erickson’s model of identity development is central to understanding the development of identity in African American women because of his focus on the roles society, culture, and historical milieu play in the development of identity. Mahler’s model
focuses on the formation of object relations—how an individual comes to relate to those around her (Al-Mateen et al., 2000).

**Perry**

Historically it was assumed that female development followed the patterns of male development. A review of stage theorists Perry and Kohlberg illustrate this pattern of exclusion. William Perry launched the conversation about cognitive development and based his theory of human development on the study of privileged White male students at Harvard in the 1950s. Cognitive structural theories address a sequence of meaning-making structures through which the student perceives, organizes, and reasons about his/her experience. The stages are hierarchical and each successive stage incorporates the functional parts of the previous stage.

Perry's cognitive theory of student development examines nine positions tracing the evolution of traditionally aged students' thinking about the nature of knowledge, truth and values, the meaning of life and responsibilities. Based on Piaget's cognitive development theory, Perry lists steps by which students move from a simplistic, categorical view of the world, to a realization of: the contingent nature of knowledge, relative values, and the formation and affirmation of one's own commitments. Perry sees change as coming about through cognitive conflict.

Perry’s scheme portrays three general levels—Dualism, Relativism, and Commitment and three positions within each level. He defines a position as a structure representing a mode
or central tendency through which a person perceives the world at a given time (1970).

According to Perry's theory, individuals begin with a sense of absolute knowledge, come to believe that all knowledge and beliefs are relative, and eventually develop a set of values and an individual sense of reality (Merriman, 1984).

The three levels and three positions are as follows: Dualism is the first level where there is a sense of absolute knowledge. Position 1, Basic Dualism is where individuals believe that there are right and wrong solutions to all problems and those in positions of authority know the correct solution. Position 2, Full Dualism is where individuals believe that there are still correct solutions to the problems, but when authorities disagree, the individual has to discern which authorities to believe and which ones to ignore; and position 3, Multiplicity is where the individual learns to trust her/his inner voice rather than external authority.

Individuals now realize that there are two kinds of problems: those whose solutions we know now and those whose solutions we do not know yet. The individual must learn the right way to find the correct solution (Perry, 1970; Rapaport, 2003). A good example of Dualism is watching a first year college student navigate the space between enjoying lectures (Basic Dualism), learning how to decipher the correct solution from seminars (Full Dualism), and accepting trust of his/her inner voice to find a pathway for identifying solutions (Multiplicity).

The second level of Perry’s theory is Relativism. Position 4, Late Multiplicity is when the individual learns that most problems fall into the category of we do not know the solution yet, therefore everyone is entitled to their own opinion, or some problems are unsolvable,
therefore it does not matter which (if any) solution you choose. In position 5, Contextual Relativism, all solutions must be supported by reasons. These solutions must be viewed in context and relative to support. Depending on the context, some solutions are better than others. The task for the individual is to evaluate the solutions. As an individual moves into position 6, Pre-commitment, he/she begins to see the necessity of making choices and committing to a solution (Perry, 1970, Rapaport, 2003). As an example, the college students move from seeing the instructor as the source of knowledge to seeing the instructor as teaching them how to think for themselves (Late Multiplicity moving to Contextual Relativism). As the student practices critical thinking skills, he/she is encouraged to take responsibility for his/her own decisions (Pre-commitment).

The third level of Perry’s theory is Commitment. Position 7, Commitment is where the individual makes a choice and sticks with it. Position 8, Challenges to Commitment are where the individual experiences the implications of the choice and explores issue of responsibility. In Position 9, Post–commitment the individual realizes that commitment is an ongoing, unfolding, evolving activity (Perry, 1970; Rapaport, 2003). Rapaport (2003) gives the excellent and appropriate example of these three positions when he uses the analogy of choosing your dissertation topic (Commitment), writing and defending your dissertation (Challenges to Commitment) and becoming a researcher (Post-commitment) as writing a dissertation is an ongoing, unfolding, evolving activity.
Kohlberg

Kohlberg is one of many researchers who used Perry’s scheme as a way of understanding intellectual development in young adults in academic settings. Kohlberg, a student of human development under Perry, continued the development of stage theories with his study on moral development using White, college educated males.

Kohlberg blended the work of Dewey and Piaget into a new way of thinking about how people develop the capacity to make moral judgments. He believed that people progress through a series of stages in their moral development. Kohlberg’s theory comprises six identified stages and three levels. He views people as moving from behaving according to socially acceptable norms because they are told to by some authority figure, to seeking to gain the approval of others through abiding by the law and responding to obligations of duty, to the final stage of having a genuine interest in the welfare of others based on respect for universal principle and the demands of individual conscience (Barger, 2000).

The six stages and three levels are as follows: Pre-conventional is the first level and is generally found at the elementary school level. People behave according to socially acceptable norms in Stage 1, Obedience and Punishment Orientation, because they are told to by some authority figure (parent or teacher). They are compelled to obey by the threat or application of punishment. Stage 2, Individualism and Exchange, is characterized by a view that right behavior means acting in one’s own best interest (Barger, 2000).
The second level is Conventional and is generally found in society. Stage 3, Good Interpersonal Relationships, is characterized by an attitude that seeks to gain the approval of others. Abiding by the law and responding to obligations of duty are characteristics of Stage 4, Maintaining the Social Order (Barger, 2000).

The third level of Kohlberg’s theory is Post-conventional and one he thought few adults would reach. Stage 5, Social Contract and Individual Rights, is an understanding of social mutuality and genuine interest in the welfare of others. Stage 6, Universal Principles, is based on respect for universal principles and the demands of individual conscience (Barger, 2000).

According to Kohlberg, the stages do not unfold according to a genetic blueprint but emerge from one’s own thinking about moral problems (Crain, 1985). Additionally, Kohlberg believed that moral development occurs through social interaction because of the stimulation of mental processes. The questions and challenges of these social interactions stimulate one to come up with new and more comprehensive positions (Crain, 1985). One major limitation of Kohlberg’s work is the lack of diversity in his sample.

Gilligan

A major criticism of Kohlberg’s work is that it is gender biased, a view that has been expressed by one of his associates and co-author Carole Gilligan (1982; Crain 1985). Gilligan disagreed with his work on moral development. This disagreement stems from Kohlberg’s theory being derived exclusively from interviews with privileged White men and boys. Therefore his theory stages reflect a male orientation. The male view of advanced
moral thought revolves around rules, rights and abstract principles, and formal justice. In contrast, Gilligan sees women’s morality as being more contextualized, tied to real ongoing relationships, not abstract principles (Crain, 1985). According to Gilligan, female approaches to advanced moral thought center on interpersonal relationships, the ethic of compassion and care, and more collaborative ways of living (1982). “Gilligan says that men and women score at different stages on Kohlberg’s scale because of the sex differences. Women typically score at stage 3 with its focus on interpersonal feelings, while men commonly score at stages 4 and 5, which reflect more abstract conceptions of social organizations. Gilligan maintains that if Kohlberg’s scale was more sensitive to women’s distinctly interpersonal orientation then it would show that women also continue to develop their thinking beyond stage 3” (Crain, 1985, p. 18).

In 1982, Gilligan introduced woman’s voices into the study of human development because she felt that if half of the population was not included in a psychological research study, it was not good psychology. She conducted her own research into White women’s moral development by interviewing women who were facing a personal crisis in making a decision about whether to terminate a pregnancy. Through her research she argued that women move from a conventional to post-conventional mode of thinking: “That is, they no longer consider their responsibilities in terms of what is conventionally expected of them but in terms of their own insights into the ethics of care and responsibility” (Crain, 1985). While Gilligan brought women into the research picture, her sample did not include women of color.
During this same time period, women’s studies programs began to appear on college campuses, partially to address college curriculums that were based on male patterns of development. The first women’s studies program was organized in 1969 at San Diego State College. Boxer (1998, as cited in Franklin, 2002) found that early women’s studies courses provided the opportunity to study how women were interpreted as “other” or as victim or minority in other curriculums, academic fields. One important goal of women’s studies programs was to draw attention to the silenced voices of women.

Concurrently, the feminist movement was focused on overall structural differences in society that influenced gendered experience, as well as more fully understanding gender differences between men and women. African American women did not embrace the feminist movement because gender was viewed as the prevailing issue for White feminists, and they did not recognize the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in the oppression of women as a separate issue (hooks, 1984). hooks goes on to say that “feminist theory would have had much more to offer [Black women] if it showed ways in which racism and sexism are immutably connected, rather than pitting one struggle against the other or blatantly dismissing racism” (hooks, 1984).

Women’s Ways of Knowing

The development of women’s studies programs and the focus on the differences between men and women underscored the need for more research on women. In 1986, when Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule wrote Women’s Ways of Knowing (WWK), previous literature on human development was authored by males and
focused on White, college educated males. Women were virtually non-existent as research subjects because it was widely believed that they followed male patterns of development. Furthermore, women, in this context, referred to White females since African American women were not regarded in the same way.

The concept of women’s ways of knowing developed as a response to the work of Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, female psychologists who had devoted their lives to studying intellectual, ethical and psychological development of adolescents and adults in educational and clinical settings, became concerned about the frequency with which women students spoke about the problems and gaps in their learning and expressed doubts about their intellectual competence. They became aware of the fact that for many women the real and valued lessons learned did not necessarily come out of their academic work but in relationships with friends and teachers. In addition, they observed that women often felt alienated in academic settings and experienced formal education as either peripheral or irrelevant to their central interests and development (Belenky et al., 1986). Based on the absence of women in psychology, Belenky et al.(1986), decided to begin the process of inductively building a theory about how women know what they know based on women’s stories (Poorman, 2003).

Using Perry’s theory and research methods charting the epistemological development of students as the foundation for their study, Belenky et al. identified four stages of knowledge. The following are the stages with the corresponding Perry categories. The similarity between Belenky et al.’s Received Knowledge and Perry’s Dualism is that in both
theories the person accepts the facts as presented by the authority and they learn the information as presented. The authority is not questioned. The similarity of Subjective knowledge and Multiplicity is the acceptance that differences of opinion are acceptable. In fact, they learn that their opinion is as good as the authority figure. Procedural Knowledge and Relativism both use procedural or systematic analysis to evaluate a situation or make a decision and incorporate multiple perspectives in the process. Constructed knowledge is described as integration of the Received, Subjective, and Procedural ways of knowing in order to construct knowledge. Perry’s Commitment in Relativism is described as the intersection of facts, experience and method. Belenky et al. used Perry’s work as a road map and expanded it to be more inclusive of women.

Belenky et al. forged new ground with their work on women’s ways of knowing. Their work described the different ways women know, how women in this country are socialized to know, and how they respond to socializing forces (Goldberger, 1996, p. 8). Their work did not focus on how “persons may develop strategies for knowing that are unique to their social positionality and the history of oppression in the construction of knowledge” (Goldberger, 1996, p. 9). African American women have a history of oppression and, because of that history, have a different perspective due to being gendered and racial beings at the same time.

In 1986, Belenky et al. studied culturally and economically diverse women. It was a rarity at that time for women of color to be included in research not seeking to uncover atypical phenomena or deviance. “This effort marked an important step toward demystifying
and depathologizing women of color and poor women. It remains important to
deconstruct these ways of knowing by examining the differences that occur across the racial
and class lines and understanding how the different types of knowing may appear when
placed in a culturally dissimilar context” (Bing & Reid, 1996, p.192) as in the WWK study.

Another area where African American women’s experiences were initially ignored,
thereby rendering them invisible, is in the research on gender and social protest movements
of the 1960s. Students were a significant part of the Civil Rights, Women’s Liberation and
Black Power movements. Departments of Black Studies, Women’s Studies, Chicano Studies,
and groups for other ethnic minorities, emerged from these student protests. African
American women participated fully in these protests and enrolled in these courses in large
numbers. A review of course offerings between 1967 and 1970 showed there were few, if
any, courses devoted to the history, literature and experiences of African American women.

E. Frances White, Patricia Hill Collins, Phillip Brian Harper, Tracey Matthews and Angela
D. Leblanc-Ernest documented the “repressive” gender relations that characterized the male
dominated Black Power groups in the 1960s and early 1970s. These researchers concluded
that gender relations were often problematic and contentious because they often reflected
African American men’s and women’s responses to the negative images of Black masculinity
and Black womanhood in the society at large.

At the same time, African American women were also concerned about objectives
and practices of White women in the Women’s Liberation movement. White women wielded
power over African Americans in social, economic and political arenas and it appeared to
Black women that the predominately White women’s movement would reap the benefits the Black movement had sown. When White women advocated for their equity status or perceptions of oppression as women, African American women responded negatively to the comparison of women’s rights to the Black civil rights movement.

_Criticisms and Strengths of Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK)_

Norman (1991) finds WWK creates a paradigm shift in “thinking about thinking.” This paradigm shift was needed in order to achieve feminist goals and contributes to our understanding of knowledge as socially constructed (Code, 1991; Hartog, 1989; Lundeberg, 1989). This work opens up the larger community to feminist issues, provides expanded theory of knowledge that identifies ways not recognized in earlier developmental studies, draws our attention to relationships and causes of oppression, and has pedagogical implications for the education of women and men that warrant further research (Hartog, 1989; Holland 2002; Lundeberg, 1989; Schugurensky 1986).

Code (1991) argues that “in the conceptions of knowledge and of the subjectivity it presupposes, WWK is epistemologically and politically more problematic than promising because it is as asymmetric as the malestream epistemology that it refutes” (as cited in Norman, 1992, p.4). Other critics agree and raise the concern that the book title itself suggests the same exclusionary perspective—albeit towards males—for which earlier studies were criticized. Holland (1992) suggests “Women as Knowers” as a better choice for the title.
Belenky et al. (1986), construct knowing as a process, through stages, toward increasingly more valued ways of knowing. Code suggests calling these ways of knowing ‘strategies’ or styles of knowing, different positions that can be taken, thus making them more useful for theorizing places of political actions (Norman, 1992, p. 5). On the other hand, Schugurensky (1986) and Lundeberg (1989) believe that the authors of WWK associate connected knowing with a higher level of education, which people have interpreted to be the ideal epistemology of their theory, while the authors maintain it is not a stage theory. Belenky et al. use interview excerpts persuasively to illustrate theory and show the progression from knower as seer to knower as listener. As one journeys through the perspectives, there is an illusion of progression, which is reminiscent of stage theories (Hartog, 1989).

The diversity of the sample of the WWK study is scrutinized because the sample consists of women from universities and non-college women. Non-college women are affiliated, for the most part, with women led organizations designed for women by women (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997). There is not enough identifying information about the ethnic minority women for one to have an appreciation of the richness or complexity of their diversity. Goldberger (1996) echoes these same sentiments in the introduction of Knowledge, Difference and Power:

We did not discuss our finding in terms of class, racial or ethnic differences among the women, a decision that seemed reasonable at the time given our relatively small and non representative sample…Let us listen to the voices of diverse women, we
thought, to hear what they say about the varieties of female experience before we move to generalizations about differences among them that are related to class, race, ethnicity or other social distinctions. (p. 4)

When considering the research on knowledge construction, or women’s ways of knowing, there is very limited application to non-White American cultures. It is this missing perspective on race, class, and gender to which I am responding to in my research. Bing and Reid (1996) propose that the portrayal of women and people of color in psychology and feminist psychology is laden with problems and inaccuracies due to the following factors: (1) the adoption of a narrow lens through which people of color and women are viewed; (2) a general lack of attention to differences among women, particularly differences based on class and race/ethnicity; and (3) psychologists’ frequent use of inappropriate assumptions and strategies when they do attempt the study of women’s differences. For years, psychology silenced women and undervalued people of color by focusing on the male European populations. Researchers adopted empiricism, which emphasized observable facts and completely ignored context (Bing & Reid, 1996. p. 177). Bing and Reid describe African American women as unknown women when studying issues of gender in psychology.

The work of Patricia Hill Collins and Aida Hurtado on Black feminist thought and mechanism of knowledge production for women of color began the process of making these women visible and known. A discussion of each of their work and its relation to knowledge construction follows.
Black Feminist Thought

One of the prominent works that discusses women of color and knowledge claims is Hill Collins’s book, Black Feminist Though (2000), especially the chapter on Black feminist epistemology. Collins describes four characteristics of ways of knowing and validating knowledge that challenges the status quo. Three of the four characteristics are similar to Belenky et al.’s WWK; lived experience parallels connected knowing. “For African American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts have more credibility than those who have just read or thought about the experience” (Hill Collins, 2000, p.259). Connected knowers are drawn to knowledge that comes from first hand observation.

The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is another connection between Black feminist epistemology and WWK:

For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of the community. A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowing validation process (Hill Collins, 2000 p. 260).

The components of the ethics of caring are the value placed on individual responsiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy.
Hill Collins (2000) states that feminist perspectives on the importance of personality in connected knowing resemble the emphasis placed on expressiveness and emotion in African American communities (p. 264).

Belenky et al. (1996) point out that two contrasting orientations characterize knowing; one of separation based on impersonal procedures for establishing truth and the other of connection in which truth emerges through care. Connected knowers see personality as adding to an individual’s ideas and feel that the personality of each group member enriches a group’s understanding. The significance of individual uniqueness, personal expressiveness, and empathy in African American communities, thus resembles the importance that some feminist analyses place on women’s inner voice (Hill Collins, 2000 p. 264).

Hurtado’s Mechanisms of Knowledge Production and Acquisition for Women of Color

Hurtado expands on the concept of women of color being unknown in her 1996 essay Strategic Suspension: Feminists of Color Theorize the Production of Knowledge. This essay focuses on how positionality is manifested in the writings of feminists of color. She describes women of color as “relative knowers” who understand that knowledge is not fixed and is largely socially and politically constructed. Women of color who do not assume the role of “knower” invite disaster and annihilation. The challenge for women of color is to “know what you know” and be able to circumvent the consequences of the knowledge while being true to them.
Hurtado (1996) states, while Belenky et al., broke important conceptual ground on how gendered knowledge is produced, comprehended, and internalized, the difference between how men and women process knowledge is a function of the division of labor and the value attached to that division by categorical group memberships. Hurtado also asserts, “Being poor, of color, and a woman, results in daily experiences that create a systematically different relationship to knowledge including its production, comprehension and integration” (p. 372). She explores special mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition in the writings of feminists of color and shows how the perspectives identified in WWK overlap and differ.

Hurtado (1996) clearly sees a distinction between personal and social identity:

Personal identity is an aspect of self we think of as being composed of psychological traits and dispositions which give us personal uniqueness; whereas social identity is those aspects of an individual’s self concept that derives from one’s knowledge of being part of categories or groups, together with the values and emotional significance attached to those memberships. (Taifel, 1978, 1981; Taifel and Turner, 1979 as cited in Hurtado, 1996, p. 373)

Most people have one personal identity, but social identity is variable and susceptible to structural forces like race, class, and gender. Social groups are not valued equally nor do all social groups have access to the same amount of material resources such as education, jobs, and choices for determining one’s life.
The differences in values attached to group membership determine to a large extent what access individuals have to knowledge, what is considered knowledge, and how it is one comes to perceive oneself as knowledgeable in spite of one’s group membership (Hurtado, 1996).

This negotiation provides feminists of color with additional credibility in documenting the maneuvers necessary to obtain and generate knowledge from a range of perspectives. Traditionally, the focus has been on monocultural social and personal identity, so women of color with multiple identities have been conceptualized as deviant (Hurtado, 1996). Hurtado’s early work identifies five recurring mechanisms, articulated by feminists of color, as being essential to the generation and comprehension of knowledge: anger, silence/outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues. As an African American woman and as I negotiate my multiple group memberships, I can relate to, and have used, all of these mechanisms. The mechanisms are described as follows:

_Anger_

Anger is the first mechanism Hurtado identifies, and it is a constant companion to African American women because they learn at an early age the hatred that is reserved for them because of their identification with their race, class (as a result of race and ethnicity), and gender. This is also identified as internalized oppression (Dixon-Saxon, 2002).
Audre Lorde (1984) eloquently describes this type of hate:

I don’t like to talk about the hate. I don’t like to remember the cancellation and hatred, heavy as my wished-for –death, seen in the eyes of so many White people from the time I could see…. I had not the tools to dissect it, no language to name it.

The AA subway train to Harlem…a woman in a fur hat…. She jerks her coat closer to her …she has communicated her horror to me…. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us: it is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch. … No word has been spoken. I’m afraid to say anything to my mother because I don’t know what I have done… Something’s going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate. (pp. 147-148)

In addition to being stigmatized by mainstream society, women of color are often stigmatized by restrictions placed on them by family members (Hurtado, 1996). An example of this would be a woman of color only being allowed to attend college or have her parents pay for college if she majored in education or nursing because she could get a good job with one of those degrees. This anger must be managed to access knowledge; otherwise, the manifestation of this anger could get these women labeled negatively as oppositional, further restricting their access to knowledge. It should be noted that the same manifestations in White and privileged individuals would be viewed positively as being aggressive, competitive, driven, and motivated (Hurtado, 1996).


Silence and Outspokenness

Women tapping into and freeing their voices is central in WWK. For African American women it is about finding multiple voices. Silence and outspokenness are two strategies that represent the different communities in which African American women hold allegiances. Silence is a way to study the centers of power and learn about power without those in the center ever realizing they are being studied.

Many women use silence with a specific goal in mind and return to their own safe communities to share what they have learned and to verify the accuracy of their observations. Ultimately the knowledge obtained by remaining silent is like a reconnaissance flight into enemy territory that allows for individual and group survival. (Hurtado, 1989, p.382)

The complement to silence is outspokenness.

On the other hand, “knowing when to talk and just exactly what to say is especially effective if individuals are not expected to talk” (Hurtado, 1996, p 382). African American women test their knowledge, practice their ideas, and sharpen their debating skills through the exercise of their verbal ability. The acquisition and display of knowledge through these strategies is central to understanding how African American women negotiate private and public knowledge.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal to smaller, predominately female networks, and away from men due to structural factors in the African American community, allows women to develop their own
sense of authority and resources for survival. Women have learned how to withdraw from men without fearing for their own existence and have used it as a tactical move when it is efficient to do so (Hurtado, 1996). The rise in sister circles or African American women’s book clubs is a manifestation of withdrawal to smaller female networks for support and encouragement.

**Shifting Consciousness**

The African American woman who leaves her home in an African American neighborhood in the morning, heads to her job in predominantly White corporate America, and attends a parent teacher conference at her child’s school during her lunch time, is an example of a woman whose consciousness shifts several times during a day. “Shifting consciousness is the ability of many women of color to shift from one group’s perception of social reality to another and, at times, to be able to simultaneously perceive multiple social realities without losing their sense of self-coherence” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 384). Inherent in this concept is that women of color have knowledge for which there is no language or apparatus through which to express their thoughts accurately. There are no conceptual instruments for women of color. At the same time they know that the expression of the yearning in itself generates thought (hooks, 1990).

**Multiple Tongues**

Women of color develop multiple tongues or multiple voices (in WWK known as contextual relativists) through their ability to shift consciousness. They develop the ability to talk to different audiences without losing a sense of coherence (Hurtado, 1996, p.386).
Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), describe the ability of Black women to shift between different dialects, languages and styles of communication as the “yo-yo paradox;” they code switch. Black women feel pressured to shift back and forth in order to meet the conflicting codes, demands and expectations of different groups (p.108).

Code switching is easier for some African American women than others and provides an opportunity for them to use voices that reflect different aspects of themselves. This multilingualism can be challenging and cause African American women to be conflicted about shifting between two distinct voices. Some women choose to not to code switch and speak with one voice in all situations (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Within the African American community there is the additional challenge of not violating the “home codes.” Home codes are the:

rules and expectations about behavior within the Black community. There are ticks of the tongue, words and expressions the weave the bonds of sisterhood --- colloquialisms that let other Black women know the speaker identifies with and relates to them. Violating these codes can result in teasing, being labeled ignorant or low class or brutal criticism (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, pp.108-109).

Racial and Ethnic Identity Development

In a world where an andocentric and Eurocentric focus is seen as the dominant and correct worldview, African American women progress through the “well-known lines of human development—psychosexual, cognitive, psychosocial, object relations, interpersonal, and moral”—while understanding themselves as members of a particular racial/ethnic group
Navigating the challenges inherent in such a situation is a daunting task African American women face and handle, for the most part, successfully every day.

**Ethnic Identity**

The formation of ethnic identity involves stages of exploration and commitment. Cross’s ethnic identity model identifies four stages: Pre-encounter – where one’s racial identity attitudes are primarily pro-White and anti-Black; Encounter, when an experience challenges her view of “Blackness;” Immersion-Emersion, involves learning and experiencing the meaning and value of one’s race and unique culture; and Internalization, the stage in which the individual achieves pride and security in her race and identity (Carter & Helms, 1988, p.23). The Womanist Identity model developed by Ossana, Helms, and Leonard (1992) states that healthy identity development for women means overcoming “the tendency to use male (or female) sociological stereotypes of womanhood and defining what being a woman means” (Burgess & Brown, 2000, p. 17). Al-Mateen et al. (2000) see the Womanist Identity model as being a complement to Cross’s identity model.

Ethnic identity places an emphasis on the cultural behavior patterns, beliefs, and customs associated with being African American (Sellers et al., 1998). Helms (1990) describes ethnic identity as the sense of group identity based on the perception that one shares a common ethnic heritage with a particular ethnic group. She goes on to assert that ethnic identity development theory is concerned with the psychological implications of ethnic group membership. This includes the language, behavior, values, and knowledge of
relevant history including society’s attitudes toward the group (Phinney, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). For African American women, the knowledge of history must include the legacies of slavery, bondage, sexual exploitation, and compulsory labor (Bell, 1990 as cited in Burgess and Brown, 2000).

*Racial Identity*

The identity development of the African American woman takes place along several lines: as a human being, as an African American, and as a woman; all contribute significantly to identity and self-concept. Her identity is a confluence of the several cultures in which she lives, and the development of her identity may involve the resolution of conflicting views from each aspect of her life (Al-Mateen et al., 2000). Similarly, Brown-Collins and Susswell (1986, as cited in Al Mateen et al., 2000) describe self-concept formation in African American women as a tripartite model. The model consists of the psycho-psychological, knowledge of herself as a woman; the African America; and the “myself,” those aspects of self that pertain only to the individual, such as eye color, family history, health, etc. (p.15).

Racial identity, as it relates to African Americans, is that part of one’s definition of self that is related to the being of African descent, or more aptly, being a person who is a member of a historically oppressed group in American society (Dixon-Saxon, 2002). Racial identity deals with the thoughts associated with a person’s attempts at integrating her status as an African in America into her self-identity (Seller, Shelton, Cooke, Chavous, Johnson Rowley, & Smith 1998). Racial identity development refers to the stages or degrees of psychological identification individuals have with other members of their own race.
Gendered Identity

Identity formation in women is a learning process that is not always conceptualized as learning. There are three prevalent conceptualizations of identity formation in women that not only provide descriptions, but also prescriptions, for women’s identities: (1) the achievement of autonomy, (2) the achievement of relationships, and (3) the prevailing and interwoven social constructions of identity that are continually reinterpreted by the individuals (Flannery, 2000).

The identity formation and relationship view is built on the notion that women develop in ways distinctly different from men; toward different values and processes. Women develop and gain a sense of identity in a context of connections to others rather than through individuation and separation from others (Flannery, 2000). Gilligan (1982), following up Nancy Chodorow’s work, places the centrality of connection in women’s sense of self at the core of women’s development. Jean Baker Miller (1986) continues this research with the sense of self being linked with her or his own sense of being female or male. She maintains that an interactive sense of self is present in infants of both sexes, but that the caretaker’s culturally influenced beliefs about girls as future caregivers and boys as future providers play an important role in the development of this sense of self (as cited in Flannery, 2000).

Judith Jordan and others (1991) propose a “self in relation” model that focuses on the self as developing within relationships. A woman’s healthy self is based on mutual empowerment and maturation in a positive mother-daughter relationship.
Identity development is based on a relationship-differentiation continuum rather than a separation-individuation continuum (as cited in Flannery, 2000).

Relational models address and legitimize the connection with self and others that many women live and value. However, they fail to consider the differences among women. This approach acknowledges societal influences; yet, it fails to engage in serious discussions of societal influences on identity, such as interrelationships among family structures or interactions between female identity and issues of race and class.

In looking at identity formation and socially constructed identities, the focus is on how social forces are interwoven with individual interpretations that contribute to shifting constructions of identity. “Anderson and Hayes found expressions of positionality among oppressed people, including women, as they survived by attending to the needs and feelings of others, keeping those who had power over them happy” (as cited in Flannery, 2000, p.63). They also found differences by social class.

Just as most of human development theory is based on research on White males, most of the literature on gendered identity is really about White middle-class women, but has been extended to women of color and other classes. Women’s identity and self-esteem are interrelated with the class, cultures, and ethnic groups to which women belong. Women may be very different in how they develop and express gendered identities. For example, African American women are not expected to fit the stereotype of femininity as defined by the dominant culture (Flannery, 2000, p. 69).
However, most research takes the perspective of the dominant culture, leaving the African American woman as a vast untouched and unexplored resource. Additional research needs to be done on African American women as it relates to identity development.

“How one knows is multiply determined within the array of relationships that define the self” (Goldberger, 1996, p.14). For the African American woman, knowledge construction is determined by her racial and ethnic identity, her identity as a woman, the societal and structural influences of race, class and gender, and how she relates to those around her.

**Black Culture**

Black culture is hard to define because it encompasses a myriad of experiences. Marlon Riggs describes the richness of Black culture as a huge gumbo pot bubbling with crab, crayfish, sausage, chicken and onions in his documentary, *Black Is……….Black Ain’t*. Riggs challenges the idea that there is a single model of Blackness and asks us to accept and value Black America as an inclusive, dynamic and improvisatory world. The components of the gumbo he describes are racism, music, family, religion, sexual orientation, nationalism, intra-racial class, gender and color. The core of Black culture revolves around education. The family provides the foundation for African Americans’ belief about education and religion. Education takes place in informal and formal classrooms. Informal classrooms refer to home training, discussions with family, and sitting with and learning from the elders.
Education has been and continues to be an important part of Black culture:

Prior to the Civil War, many states developed laws prohibiting the education of Blacks, making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write. Even though these laws prohibited the education of slaves, some pursued their education and learning in secret. Some slaves were taught secretly by someone in the master’s house, by religious organizations, by other slaves or they taught themselves. (Collins, A., 2001, p.30)

The education of Black women is seen as a means of uplifting the Black race. The popular understanding of uplift, dating from anti-slavery folk religion speaks of a personal or spiritual and potentially social transcendence of worldly oppression and misery. Describing a group struggle for freedom and social advancement, uplift also suggests that African Americans have, with an almost religious fervor, regarded education as key to liberation. (Gaines, 1996, p. 1, as cited in Collins, A, 2001)

White missionaries oversaw every aspect of the Black woman’s education, and the curriculum focused on moral development, home economics and training in ladylike behaviors (Collins, A, 2001). This curriculum espouses the virtues that White men instilled in White women as to what a lady should know and do, thereby imposing a Eurocentric view of education.

White men, who hold Eurocentric perspectives of what is beautiful, primarily control television, movies, commercial catalogs, magazines, and billboards. Media images of the stereotypes of beauty also have a negative impact on women in general as it relates to body
image. When African American women appear in the media, they are usually light skinned African American women with light eyes, long straight hair, and very keen features (hooks, 1993). Light skinned women are associated with being beautiful while darker skinned women, by their absence, are associated with being ugly or at least less attractive. Some of those associations by skin color are still prevalent today in Black culture. College queen selection and sorority membership at HBCUs are sometimes unconsciously determined by skin color.

Colorism and how it relates to African American women is one issue that must be considered in the African American community. Colorism is intra-racial discrimination based on skin color. A 1991 study on skin color and self-esteem suggests “…darker skinned African American women actually experience a ‘quadruple’ oppression originating in the convergence of social inequalities based on gender, class, race, and color”(Thompson & Keith, 2001, p.353). The impact of skin tone on self-esteem is weaker for women from higher social classes. Those who have lower self-esteem scores are dark skinned women from working classes and dark skinned women who are judged unattractive (Thompson & Keith, 2001).

Luttrell’s 1993 study on how gender, race, and class shape the knowledge women define and claim for themselves found that skin tone impacted the way the group of African American women viewed their education.
Their remembrances of school are that the lighter skinned, more feminine acting students whose parents had more professional jobs got more attention from the teacher. The women who did not fit in those categories felt ignored and invisible.

Another issue of body image for African American women is sizeism. Sizeism is defined as the mistreatment of, or discrimination against, people based on their perceived (or self-perceived) size or shape. In this case, there are mixed messages. Full figured women can be seen as the contemporary Black mammy figure who takes care of everyone. In Hip Hop, women are stereotyped as attractive, scantily clad hoochies whose primary purposes in life are to please men sexually or bear the violence men perpetrate against them.

Due to the constant media messages about the Eurocentric standards of beauty, African Americans internalize those messages, and their response sometimes results in a form of internalized oppression. An April 2006 example of internalized oppression as a response to media messages is the announcement by one private HBCU business department that students in their five-year business administration program cannot wear cornrows and flowing locks. The rationale is that the clean-cut look is what is acceptable in the business world, an environment that operates from a Eurocentric perspective, which is constantly perpetuated through the media. This action devalues pride in wearing a natural hairstyle that reflects African American heritage.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as defined by the Department of Education, are degree-granting institutions established prior to 1964 whose principal
mission is the education of African Americans. These institutions were created because education for African Americans was virtually nonexistent before the Civil War. After the Civil War, private Black citizens, with support from the American Missionary Association and the Freedman’s Bureau, established private Black colleges and universities. The Morrill Land-Grant passed in 1862, giving federal land to states to open institutions of higher education. Of the institutions that opened during this time, only a few were open to Blacks. Alcorn State University in Mississippi is the only Black land grant institution established then. In 1890, the second Morrill Land-Grant Act passed, which specified that states using federal land grant funds must either make their schools open to both Blacks and Whites or allocate money for segregated Black colleges as an alternative to White schools. Sixteen exclusively Black institutions received land grant funds. Deghani (2001) writes:

> These colleges and universities continue to be a critical force in American higher education, enriching a great tradition of educational choice and diversity in this century. HBCUs inspire and enhance opportunities for leadership and citizenship by mentoring and supporting students as well as providing remedial programs that address the educational need of their communities. (pg.1)

Further, A. Collins (2001) states, “As a result of the establishment of HBCUs, Blacks developed their own intellectual communities” (p. 32).

HBCUs represent only 3% of all institutions of higher education in the United States, yet they graduate a greater percentage of African American students than PWIs. Faculties are diverse and the glass ceiling for women is in a different place than for women in PWIs.
However, there is still a chilly climate for African American women as the men still hold the majority of major leadership positions (Mabokela & Green, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2001, 72% of the staff members at HBCUs were minority group members. While 76% of the minority staff members were Black, in that same year, 58% of the staff was male and 42% was female (Black Issues in Higher Education, 2001).

**African American Women in an HBCU Setting**

Why study the knowledge construction of African American women in an HBCU setting? Studying African American women in a racially homogeneous setting allows for the development of an “ethnic model” that comes from within the culture (Stanfield, 1994). Previous research has, primarily, compared African American women at HBCUs to African American women at PWIs. In this research, I will be building on Hurtado’s existing model.

HBCUs fill the void of formal education for African Americans because mainstream institutions, due to the lingering social effects of slavery, racial segregation, and discrimination, often exclude them. HBCUs are typically seen as nurturing environments for African American students. It is also assumed there is a proper fit between HBCUs and their faculties and staff. Bonner (2001) says, “This is a particular point of tension and contention when discussing issues of gender discrimination and oppression at these institutions” (p. 180). Bonner (2001) states that in her own 1992 study of a mid-Atlantic HBCU, “women faculty members and administrators were reluctant to discuss issues of climate, mentoring, parity in employment, and educational and professional development at their campus because
they feared their identities would be revealed based on their comments” (p.178). These issues speak to the importance of the social constructions of gender in the HBCU environment.

Summary

Chapter Two discusses the relevant literature in connection to this research. Theories discussed in this chapter include traditional models of development as well as theories specific to the development of women, women of color, and identity. Additionally, this chapter explored Black culture, HBCU and African American women in an HBCU setting. Finally, this chapter provided a framework for understanding how the intersectionality of race and gender is intertwined with African American women’s knowledge production and acquisition in an HBCU setting.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the knowledge construction of African American women in an HBCU setting. This chapter outlines the research design, data gathering, and analytical methods used. In addition, I present the strengths and limitations of the study, and a discussion of issues of evidence.

Qualitative Research and Narrative Inquiry

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the participants’ world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that then make this world visible to others. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research is an appropriate choice for building knowledge about existing processes with new populations or settings (Morse & Field, 1995). In this case, since little is known about African American women’s knowledge construction in an HBCU setting, qualitative research is the appropriate method for this proposed study.

In qualitative research, hypotheses and theories emerge from the data set while data collection is in process and after data analysis has started. In other words, qualitative research is an iterative process. The most common form of data collection is through participant interviews and/or observations. Generally, qualitative studies rely upon a small number of participants. Additionally, the participants may have a trusted relationship with the researcher or be in key positions and have a special knowledge of the phenomena to be studied (Morse and Field, 1995).
Qualitative research relies on the inductive approach to building theory that identifies concepts and uncovers relationships between concepts. Typically, researchers enter into a qualitative research project without fully formulated hypotheses. Yin states:

The inductive approach to qualitative research follows these three steps: make observations, study the observations and search for a pattern (making a statement of what is occurring), and make a tentative conclusion or generalization about how some aspect of the world operates. The inductive method is a bottom up approach. (as cited in Johnson, 2006, p.1)

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) state that qualitative researchers assume the participants in it construct social reality and social reality is continuously constructed in local situations. These theoretical assumptions influenced my decision to choose a qualitative design for this research. The focus of this research is exploring the knowledge construction of African American women and the support structures women of color utilize in knowledge production and acquisition within an HBCU setting. My hope is that the research will contribute to the larger body of research on African American women’s knowledge construction and lead to further exploration of this topic within the entire work and social context in which African American women find themselves. I used qualitative study methods because I sought to understand the relationship between African American women’s knowledge construction and the HBCU environment and to share those interpretations with others.
Narrative Inquiry

It is essential to understand that narrative is a way of knowing. Narrative knowing is expressed in a narrative form we call stories (Kramp, 2004, p.106). Storytelling has been a widely used means of communication for centuries. Narrative inquiry is analysis of a chronologically told story, with a focus on how elements are sequenced, why some elements are evaluated differently from others, how the past shapes perceptions of the present, how the present shapes perceptions of the past, and how both shape perceptions of the future. In the African American community, griots are storytellers of their people and pass on the history of their people orally. It is said that when a griot dies, a library has burned to the ground. A griot is a human library, a storyteller and a historian. In many African cultures, a griot is all of these things and more – a tangible link to the past, someone who not only could be touched but could also touch you with stories and facts about who you are as a person. It is from this concept that I grasp my inspiration for this study. It is in the spirit of the griot that I use the research method of narrative inquiry.

Moreover, Reissman(1993) says, “Telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity, one of the first forms we learn as children… and is used by people of all social backgrounds in a wide array of settings”( p.3). Denzin (1989) describes a narrative as a story of a sequence of events that has significance for the narrator and her audience. Stories have a beginning, middle, and end as well as a logic that at least makes sense to the narrator. “A narrative relates events in a temporal, causal sequence. Every narrative describes a sequence of events that have happened, hence, narratives are temporal
productions” (Denzin, 1989, p 37). Narrative inquiry is seen as a more in-depth alternative to survey research than using psychological scales. Some advocates see it as an "empowering" social science methodology insofar as it gives respondents the venue to articulate their own viewpoints and evaluative standards. Narratives can be a way for people to make sense out of experience. They are meaning-making structures (Reissman, 1993).

“Narratives are a form of discourse embraced by Black feminist scholars as a powerful tool in revealing the “multilayered texture of Black women’s lives.” Gwendolyn Etter –Lewis says “personal narrative is not just personal but, also social, historical, political, and so on, therefore the collaborative endeavor of eliciting life on tape … must be viewed as representative of the fullness of the life once lived” (1993, p. xiii). Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2004), another African American researcher, says scholars doing work on women of color rely heavily on narrative inquiry because its implicitly collaborative and interactive nature remedies some of the inherent power disparities of the research process.

“The most important variable in producing an oral narrative is the relationship between the narrator and the interviewer. The collaboration itself is problematic because the author reveals self in the presence of “other” rather than in the solitude prescribed for written autobiography. There is always lingering doubt about how much and in what ways an interviewer influences both the process and the finished product” (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xiii). What is of the utmost importance is the extent to which the author/narrator and interviewer can cooperate in constructing a text that is fully representative of the narrator/author’s life.
African American women’s intersecting membership in two oppressed groups, women, and African Americans, gives them unique experiences in history, language and culture that set them apart from African American men and White women. Even in racially homogeneous settings, African American women have different experiences than African American men. Narrative inquiry allowed these women to tell their stories and share their experiences. Furthermore, it enabled me to consider how the women order and tell their experiences and why they remember and retell what they do (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

*Three Methodological Approaches to Narrative Inquiry*

Psychological, biographical, and linguistic are the three methodological approaches to narrative inquiry. These methods can be combined or used separately. Polkinghorne (1995) says the basic assumption of the psychological approach is that a person’s identity is revealed in life stories or narratives that he/she constructs.

According to Denzin (1989), the biographical approach is concerned with how society influences a person’s self-conception or identity. This approach recognizes that factors such as race and class influence the construction of narratives and the meanings derived from them. The linguistic approach has a dual focus: the written text or the spoken discourse. Because identity development is an integral part of knowledge construction, I combine Polkinghorne’s psychological approach with Denzin’s biographical approach.

The use of qualitative research methods, specifically basic interpretive design (thematic analysis) and narrative inquiry enabled me to gather the data necessary to answer the research questions. I chose this method because of my connection to the African
American community, my desire to embrace the African American tradition of oral communication, and for its suitability to the research problem.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s five mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition?

2. How do African American women in an HBCU setting develop support structures for their learning?

These questions formed the foundation of the interview protocols and guided the researcher in collecting data.

The Research Problem

I became interested in this topic when I joined the staff of my second HBCU after having worked at an all female HBCU, a private PWI in the Southwest, and a public PWI in the Southeast. At my current institution, I fostered the hope that in working with my African American sisters I would find empowered women. I observe women who, in a predominantly female environment, are articulate, assertive, and self-confident, but become passive and submissive in the presence of men. For example, a high-ranking woman in Financial Affairs is a hard taskmaster on her staff, but when she is in a public meeting with her male supervisor, she is docile and easily acquiesces to his directives. These observations lead me to ponder the influence of this HBCU on the aforementioned African American women’s knowledge construction.
Site Selection

In choosing the site for this study, my main criteria were feasibility and accessibility. Therefore, I looked for an HBCU where participants were willing to participate in the study and one where the institution itself was within reasonable geographic proximity. The HBCU I selected is located in the southeastern United States. It is one of a large number of state higher education institutions and one of five HBCUs in the university system. This HBCU is the nation’s first state supported liberal arts college for African Americans and offers 100 bachelor degrees, 41 master’s degrees, and two doctorate degrees. Sixty-six percent of the student population is female and 34% percent is male. Women represent 57% of the faculty and 61% of administrators. Of the top administrative level of management, only one of the four vice chancellors is female and she is in an interim position. I am one of the female administrators on campus. For anonymity purposes, the HBCU in this study will be referred to as Finesse University. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, I will not directly reference the institutional website or materials used for this study if they provide a direct link or identifier to the institution’s name, though the sources are a part of the original data. A more detailed profile of Finesse University appears in Chapter 4.

Participant Selection Criteria

Samples in qualitative research are generally small, nested in their context, and studied in depth. The participants were selected from the female faculty, administrators, and staff of the selected HBCU institution. I interviewed 15 participants to provide a relevant
cross section of women who are employed at this HBCU. Participants were selected on the basis of several criteria:

1. Must be female and Black/ African American descent.

2. Must have current employment of at least 10 years at the selected HBCU.

3. Must be from a range of ages and job classifications.

I used a general snowballing technique to identify a pool of participants, and then selected the narrower group of participants. To start the selection process, I generated a list of names of women I thought met the criteria I had established for participants. This list resulted in 30 names. I consulted with a colleague who had worked at the institution for a number of years but was not on my list due to our personal relationship. She was able to add some names and delete others who did not meet the 10 year criteria. I sent a blind e-mail to the entire list seeking assistance with this research project (Appendix A). I hoped that I would receive five affirmative responses each from faculty, staff and administrators. From the first e-mail, I received more positive responses from faculty and administrators than staff. I scheduled those interviews and asked those participants for the names of other women, especially support staff that might meet the criteria and be willing to help me. I sent a second blind e-mail requesting assistance from those names generated by the participants which resulted in a sample of 15 women. The participants ranged in age from 47 to 70 and included four faculty, five support staff and six administrators.

One of the participants was exceptionally reluctant to share private information, and I removed her interview from the data set for a total of 14 participants in the study. In total,
there were 24 interview (contact) hours. Contact hours included the actual interviews, follow-up contacts, and an additional meeting with one participant during the member checking process.

Data Collection

Data collection techniques for qualitative research include interviews, observations recorded as field notes, review of artifacts and documentation of everyday events (Morse & Field, 1995). Interviews are considered a strong data collection method for novice researchers (Cherry, 2000; Tellis, 1997). As a novice researcher, I chose to use in-depth semi-structured interviews for this study. Weiss (1995, as cited in Burke, 2002) defines in-depth interviewing as qualitative interviewing and points out that it is always constrained by the goals of a study and the structure of qualitative interviewing is unlike that of an ordinary conversation. For one thing, one participant takes responsibility for providing direction, the other for providing content. As the researcher, it was my job to establish rapport with each participant, be an attentive listener, create an interview protocol, ask open-ended questions and provide participants prompts as needed.

Though the participant interviews were the most substantial form of data, I also collected archival data to provide information on institutional context. The archives consisted of internal reports, public articles, institutional profiles, the institutional website, and an informal interview with one of the institutional historians.
Table 2. Demographic Background and School & Work History of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Years at Finesse</th>
<th>Job Role at Finesse</th>
<th>Self - Identified Class Origins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlene</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Upper class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Lower income group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melody</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubie</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews

An interview is a purposeful conversation, usually between two people but sometimes involving more, directed by one person who wants to gather information from the other person (Morgan, 1988 as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Bogdan and Biklen (1992), further state that interviews in qualitative research can be used in two ways. They can be the dominant strategy for data collection or they can be used in conjunction with other techniques, such as participant observation or document analysis. In both situations, “the interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so the researcher can develop insight on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (p. 96).
As the interviewer, qualitative interviews offered me considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offered the participant a chance to shape the content of the interview, which was supposed to be open-ended and flowing.

Interviews began with small talk. The small talk served the purpose of developing an accord, a place to begin to develop a relationship. At the beginning of each interview, I informed the participants of the purpose and offered assurances that what was said during the interview would be treated confidentially (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The interviews were conducted in either the participant’s personal office or a conference room to minimize interruptions.

For this research, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data on how African American women construct knowledge and manifest Hurtado’s mechanisms in an HBCU environment. The semi-structured interview, through the use of an interview guide (Appendix B), allowed me to ask probing questions to clarify the participant’s response to the open-ended questions (Morse & Field, 1995; Berg, 1998). Use of semi-structured interviews allows for the gathering of comparable data across participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In addition, the semi-structured interview is useful when direct observation of the subject is not possible (Creswell, 1994, p.150).

Each participant was informed that participation in the study was voluntary and she could terminate her participation at any time. An informed consent form (Appendix C) was provided to each participant outlining the purpose of the study, assuring her of confidentiality, and asking for permission to audiotape the interviews.
Once the participant’s questions were answered and the consent form signed, the audio taped interview began. In a few cases, the interview was split into two sessions due to scheduling issues.

At the completion of each interview, the tape was labeled with the demographic information, dated, and numbered. Analysis began immediately after the first interview, as I learned about the HBCU context and participant response to the interview protocol. The tapes were transcribed, checked for accuracy, and a file was created for each question in the interview schedule (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcripts were prepared by a professional transcription service. To ensure transcription quality, I requested a verbatim or completely unaltered transcript of every interview. Further guidelines included a request for no correction for grammar, sentence completion, or any other alterations to the written version of the interviews. As a part of the member checking process, participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to verify accuracy, to clarify information, and to include additional comments.

Reinharz and Chase (2002) look at how interview research in the social sciences deals with women. They consider “the effects of interviewing on the interviewee and interviewers, the issues of interviewer self disclosure and sisterly bonds in the research relationship and the significance of interviewers and interviewees’ complex social locations and subjectivities” (p. 225).
Traditional social science views women as invisible; therefore when I focused on interviewing women as research participants, attention was paid to the intersections of race, class and gender as well as cultural concepts of conducting a personal interview with a stranger.

Women who have been socialized to be seen and not heard may feel hesitant when given a chance to speak freely:

Interpreting any particular woman’s silence or speech is a complex task that requires a strong understanding of her social location, including her place within her community and society, the cultural constraints and resources shaping her everyday life and her particular circumstances.”(Gall, 1991: Collins, 1990:92; Tannen, 1993; as cited in Reinhart & Chase, 2002, p. 225)

As a part of the interview process, I thought about how narrative inquiry and analysis would play a role in the process. I chose narrative inquiry specifically for this research because it is conducive to exploring how African American women negotiate and perceive issues of race, gender, and class in understanding their stories within context. As an African American woman myself, I had to be cognizant of the impact the interviews had on me. My goal was to develop rapport with my interviewees rather than sisterly bonds and to be careful in my decision to self disclose or not self disclose in the context of this research project with participants.
My status as an insider or outsider in relationship to my research participants means I had to be committed to reflecting on the complexities of my own and my participants’ social locations and subjectivities (Reinharz & Chase, 2002). To this end, I kept a reflective journal which became an integral part of data analysis.

**Ethical Issues**

The most important ethical issue to consider in this research project is that I am the researcher as well as an administrator at the selected research site. None of the selected participants work in my immediate office and I do not have a direct or indirect supervisory role with any of them. All information obtained during the course of this research was kept confidential. Transcripts of interviews are identifiable by demographic information: age and job classification. Therefore, tapes and transcripts are stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home. Transcript data is presented in such a way as to maintain the confidentiality of each participant and the anonymity of the institution. Names, positions, and locations were changed where necessary to assure confidentiality.

There are numerous ethical issues to consider in this research. First, considerations were given to the worthiness of the study and my competence as a researcher. Additional considerations were given to the following participant concerns: informed consent, harm and risk, my relationship (colleagues, my insider/outsider status) and maintaining their confidentiality.
Then, last but not least, research quality, data ownership, how the results will be used and shared, and the costs and benefits associated with this research project (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Field, 1995). I worked closely with my dissertation advisor to ensure that all potential issues were examined and addressed.

Strengths of the Study

Being an African American woman conducting research on African American women provided for a culturally sensitive qualitative methodology. I have been an employee of this institution for five years; therefore, I am familiar with the culture of the campus. This shared identity seemed to enhance the data gathering process, so the findings came as close as possible to matching reality (Cherry, 2000). Defining myself in relation to my cultural and social community also defines my participation within that community, my connection and affiliation as well as my responsibility (Dillard, 2000). Therefore I self-identified as an African American female administrator of this HBCU community and chose to conduct research and make assessments of claims to knowledge of the participant group. As the research process unfolded, I simultaneously assessed my own character, values, motives, and ethics in relation to the participants. I sought understanding and meaning-making from various members of the social and/or cultural community under study (Dillard, 2000).

Limitations of the Study

As an employee of the institution where I conducted this study, I was an insider, a novice researcher, and an African American woman. Because I conducted my research within an environment that reflects my own culture, issues of power and positionality were
important considerations (Merriam et al., 2001). Positionality refers to where one stands in relation to the other; in this case, it refers to my status as the researcher in relation to the researched. I was an insider as it relates to gender and race, but I also was an outsider by virtue of my researcher status and as I related to a number of variables such as social class and education level. The positionality and power of the participants in this HBCU setting are factors that have bearing on knowledge construction (Merriam et al., 2001). As my focus was on the knowledge construction itself, I chose not to address the participants’ positionality and power issues in this research study.

Narratives are first person accounts that are particular and contextualized in time and place. “Narrative is a vital human activity that structures experience and gives it meaning” (Kramp, 2004). Narrative inquiry is generally not used for large numbers of people because of the time consuming nature of data collection and sheer volume of data to be analyzed.

In narrative inquiry, attention must be paid to subtlety, nuances of speech, organization of response, local context of production, and social discourse that shapes what is said and what cannot be spoken. Comparative work is desirable to reach theoretical levels of abstraction, yet sample sizes are small and the cases are usually drawn from unrepresentative pools. Narrative inquiry is one approach that is suitable for some research situations, such as outlined in this dissertation (Reissman, 1993).
Issues of Quality and Evidence

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability. Reliability serves the purpose of generating understanding and is concerned with the fit between what is recorded as data and what actually occurred in the setting under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Golafshani, 2003). Validity served as a qualifying check for the research study (Golafshani, 2003). This check comes in the form of questions as to whether the research findings seem accurate or reasonable to the research participants. Examples of such questions include, “Do I understand and describe what I am studying in the same way that people who live it do? Did I get it right” (LeCompte, 2000, p. 152)?

In order to establish reliability and validity, I as the researcher acknowledged and worked with my subjectivity, my biases, assumptions and theoretical orientations by recording my personal reflections in a research journal. I provided a detailed description of setting and the social context of the data collection site, and employed the triangulation approach of using multiple methods and sources to collect data (Merriman, 1998, as cited in Rosser-Mims, 2005).

Prevailing concepts of verification and for establishing validity rely on realist assumptions and consequently are largely difficult to use in narrative studies. A personal narrative is not to be read as an exact record of what happened, nor is it a mirror of the world “out there” (Reissman, 1993, p. 64).
For this reason, I chose to adapt Reissman’s approach to validation in narrative inquiry, through attention to the concepts of persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic use.

**Persuasiveness**

“Persuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants’ accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered” (Reissman, 1993, p. 65). Additionally, in looking at plausibility as well as persuasiveness, the question to ask is: Is the interpretation reasonable and convincing? In this case, I built a feedback loop into the data collection and analysis process by working with participants during the interviews in asking if I was understanding what they were sharing and soliciting their ongoing dialogue through member-checking, which is detailed in the next section.

**Correspondence**

The researcher takes her/his results back to those they studied for member checks: data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusion testing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that if the researcher’s reconstructions are recognizable as adequate representations then credibility is increased. The problems with member checks is that human stories are not static, meanings of experiences shift as consciousness changes, and they may not agree with the researcher’s interpretation. I asked participants to member-check through reviewing transcripts for overall feel, for filling in inaudible or other gaps, and for making factual or detailed corrections such as spelling of acronyms, names, and so on.
Coherence

Agar and Hobbs (1982, as cited in Reissman, 1993) say there are three kinds of coherence: global, local and themal, “to show that an interpretations is more than ad hoc, coherence must be thick as possible, ideally relating to all three levels” (p. 67). Global coherence refers to the overall goals a narrator is trying to accomplish by speaking. Local coherence is what a narrator is trying to effect in the narrative itself, such as the use of linguistic devices to relate events to one another. Themal coherence involves content: Chunks of interview text about particular themes figure importantly and repeatedly (Agar & Hobbs, 1982, as cited in Reissman, 1993, p. 67). Sometimes the three types of coherence offer different perspectives on the same problem and at other times they reinforce the same perspective. “But, if an utterance is shown to be understandable in terms of the three kinds of coherence, the interpretation is strengthened” (Agar & Hobbs, 1982, p. 29, as cited in Reissman, 1993 p. 67). I used a “back and forth” approach to check for coherence. At one level, it was a part of the member-checking process. At other levels, I built it into the data analysis and was mindful of not inserting narratives into findings without checking and reflecting upon whether they were true to the different levels of interpretation of the narratives.

Pragmatic Use

The extent to which a particular study becomes the basis for others’ work refers to the pragmatic use of this study. Pragmatic use is a validation criterion that is future oriented, collective and assumes the socially constructed nature of science. Reissman (1993) suggests
that researchers can make it possible for others to determine the trustworthiness of the research by: (a) describing how the interpretations were produced, (b) making visible what we did, (c), specifying how we accomplished successful transformations, and (d) making primary data available to other researchers (p. 68). For the purposes of this study, I provide a detailed description of the data analysis process, Appendix D, as well as a table which connects the study framework to the interview protocol in Appendix E. However, I chose not to specifically highlight primary data or make it available to other researchers due to the constraints of confidentiality.

Human Subjects

The research process followed appropriate Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University guidelines at every step of the research project. Appendix B contains the overall interview protocol. Appendix C contains a copy of the approved informed consent form, and Appendix A includes the invitation to participate in the study. The Institutional Review Board of the selected HBCU was informed of the proposed study.

Study Timeline

Pilot Phase

During March and April 2005, I conducted a pilot to prepare for the larger study. As a part of a research methods course, I interviewed four African American women who were formerly associated with HBCUs. The women who participated in this pilot phase of the project met the same demographic characteristics of the women who were in the final pool of study participants.
None of these women were included in the final pool as they do not work at nor do they currently attend an HBCU. I used this process to refine and develop an interview protocol.

Research Phase

After successfully defending the research proposal in February 2007, I applied for IRB approval and worked through the final planning details for the study. The interviews were conducted in May and June 2007, and the member-checking process was primarily concentrated during August and the early fall months of 2007, with minor follow-ups through January 2008. From fall 2007 to the present, I have been working in a data analysis and write-up phase.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense and meaning out of collected data. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) describe data analysis as “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to present what you have discovered to others” (p. 153). Miles and Huberman (1994) define data analysis as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (p. 10). Data reduction is the continuously occurring process of “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data in written-up field notes or transcriptions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.10). “Data display is an organized compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action, therefore data displays have clear implications for data reduction” (Miles and Huberman, 1994).
Conclusion drawing and verification actually starts with data collection. Conclusions are drawn from “noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows and propositions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.11). These conclusions start out as vague but become more explicit and grounded (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

First Phase of Analysis

Initially, I followed the coding phases as outlined by Baptiste (2001), combined with a profiling strategy informed by narrative inquiry (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). I initially read and re-read the transcripts over and over without explicitly coding the data. Then, I constructed a demographic table profiling the participants and wrote an individual profile for each study participant.

Next, I followed the identical process of serial tagging and labeling and tagging and labeling in parallel for an open code or thematic analysis and also for an analysis with preliminary codes based upon Hurtado’s framework. Then, I worked back and forth between the profiles, the researcher journal, and the transcripts to further tag the data.

A sample page from a transcript is included in Appendix F to illustrate the first level tagging and preliminary coding approach.

Second Phase of Analysis

For the second-level coding, I worked to better understand and define the open codes as well as to refine understanding of Hurtado’s mechanisms in relation to the data. I also reviewed the institutional supporting documents, websites, and reports and wrote an
institutional profile to include as a part of the context. After importing the documents into NVivo, I used the on-line software program to extensively label the second-level codes.

Again, the coding was done twice: once with open coding for thematic analysis and once with Hurtado’s framework. In addition to adding depth and fleshing out individual codes, I examined the codes in relationship to each other (cross-referencing) and also to seek out alternative explanations before settling upon an interpretation of data. A data analysis outline is included in Appendix D.

Summary

This chapter presents the methodological process used to investigate how African American women, given their unique experiences and problems as learners and knowers, construct knowledge in an HBCU setting. This chapter presents the qualitative research design, site and participant selection processes, and introduces the interview protocol. Furthermore, this chapter describes the narrative inquiry method, analysis techniques, validity and reliability. Concerns of trustworthiness as well as limitations and strengths of the study are discussed.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The focus of this qualitative study was to explore African American women’s knowledge construction within the context of an HBCU setting. Two questions guided the research:

1. How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s five mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition?
2. How do African American women in an HBCU setting develop support structures for their learning?

This chapter begins with an overview of the HBCU selected for the study. The next section provides descriptive data on the personal demographics of the research participants. In order to maintain the anonymity of the institution and the confidentiality of the participants, each has been given a pseudonym to protect their identity, as are other persons and organizations that might reveal the identity of the institution and of the participants. Further, this chapter provides the analysis of research questions one and two based on the findings of the interviews.

Institutional Profile

Finesse University is a historically Black University located in a southeastern state. Finesse is located northeast of the state's geographical center. The city is home to a prestigious, private, predominantly White university and a technical college. Finesse is one of five HBCUs within the institutions that comprise the State University System.
Finesse is the nation’s first state supported liberal arts college for African Americans and offers 100 bachelor degrees, 41 master’s degrees, and two doctoral degrees.

Finesse’s campus is more than 100 acres in size, but it feels a lot smaller because it is landlocked. The buildings are a mixture of modern forms and modified Georgian structures. The University recently completed a Master Plan which shows a redesign of the campus into academic, residential, and service zones and a plan for expansion through the early 2020s. Current construction projects include a new science building, renovation and enlargement of the cafeteria, and new residence halls. There is also an effort to return the grounds to the beautifully landscaped campus of yesteryear.

According to the 2006-2007 statistics of Finesse University, the student population is 66% percent female and 34% male. The University also states that:

With nearly 9,000 students enrolled, the historically Black university is diverse. International studies and exchange programs attract exchange students from more than 12 countries, including Liberia, India, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nepal, China, the Czech Republic, Nigeria, South Korea, Russia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and South Africa.

The diversity breakdown is as follows: 78.87% Black, 11.85% White, 1.65% Hispanic and 7.65% other & foreign.

From the start, Finesse University has declared its purpose to be developing young men and women of the character and sound academic training requisite for real service to the nation. Therefore, the mission of Finesse University is to prepare students academically and
professionally to become leaders. Finesse's vision is one of national recognition as one of the leading institutions for academic excellence in a diverse cultural and educational environment.

The founder of Finesse University believed in community service and made that a part of the culture of the campus and a requirement for graduation. Finesse students serve as tutors in local schools, help build Habitat for Humanity housing, assist with a variety of youth programs, promote the causes of non-profit service agencies, and volunteer in a variety of other endeavors as they meet the university's standard of 15 clock hours of community service per semester. When not involved in community service, Finesse students participate in more than 100 student organizations, student activities and/or athletics.

Finesse University is often nationally ranked in football, basketball and other school sports — enjoying regional and national recognition. Fourteen men’s and women’s sports teams participate in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) at the Division I level. Sports include: football, men’s and women’s basketball, indoor track & field, outdoor track & field, cross country, tennis; men’s baseball and golf; women’s volleyball, softball, and bowling.

A local newspaper article described Finesse as one of a number of HBCUs undergoing an extreme makeover and reinvention of itself. The focus of the article was on customer service and how HBCUs can no longer take their attractiveness to Black students for granted. The Chancellor, who is relatively new, had success at previous institutions in bringing a new emphasis on serving students and is implementing similar change at Finesse.
The goal now is to attract, retain, and graduate students. Currently, attracting students is not a problem but retention and graduation rates are in need of improvement.

Finesse University is in the midst of a paradigm shift and transformation. In the last five years, the University has experienced unprecedented growth as part of a ten-year plan set forth by the State University System. As part of the transition to a new administration, the campus is experiencing changes in staff that bring new perspectives to the University, a push for accountability, and acknowledgement that a cultural change is needed. One distressing element of the culture is not changing; women who aspire to senior leadership positions are hitting a glass ceiling just before reaching top-level positions. This distress has been exacerbated by the fact that a man has filled every vacant senior level position, with few if any qualified women given consideration. This trend continues as the advertisement for the one senior level position currently filled by a female becomes public. Women represent 57% of the faculty and staff and 61% of administrators. Men represent 43% of the faculty and staff and 39% of administrators, yet more men hold the major power positions. This dynamic is typical of African American culture where women are in the majority but men control most of the power, especially in churches and institutions of higher education (Betsch Cole & Guy –Sheftall, 2003). In Finesse’s nearly 100 years of existence, only one woman has served as the Board of Trustees chair. Nine of the ten Presidents/Chancellors of the institution have been men. A woman served as interim Chancellor for one year, 1992-1993. This institutional profile provides a snapshot of the University as a context for understanding the participant’s stories.
Participants

The 14 African American women faculty, administrators and staff in this study covered a broad spectrum. They ranged in age from 47 to 70 years of age and held university positions that included associate vice chancellor/vice provost, department chairs, faculty, dean/director, assistant dean/director, program assistant, and office manager. Academic disciplines and departments represented include education, music, public administration, business, communication, and political science. Others areas represented included the health center, academic advising, academic support, honors, financial aid, and institutional research.

Family is very important to the women in this study. Whether they come from large extended families or small families, they are connected and involved with their immediate and extended families. They describe Finesse as being like a family and carry these same family values into their work lives, as the University is part of their extended family. A substantial part of the attraction of an HBCU is the caring and nurturing environment for students. Of the 14 participants, 13 attended HBCUs or had experience working at an HBCU prior to coming to work at Finesse University. There is a sense of wanting to give back what was given to them. Education has always been stressed as a way to improve one’s condition in life; and for African American women it was especially important, as their education was seen as the mechanism for uplifting their race, foreseeing they would educate the children.

Some of the women served the role of “othermothers” for students and colleagues. “Othermothers” traditionally are women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities (Troester, 1984, as cited in Hill Collins, 2000). These responsibilities run the
gamut from keeping an eye on a relative, neighbor, or church member’s child to noticing a student or colleague in distress while offering an encouraging word. Connecting them to someone who can support their needs and challenging destructive or inappropriate behavior are priceless acts of kindness for “othermothers.” Organized, resilient, women-centered networks of blood mothers and “othermothers” are key to understanding this centrality.

While the HBCU environment is seen as nurturing and caring for students, that is not always the case for the African American female employee. In fact, it can be very discouraging. Yet, as she deals with the glass ceiling and gender oppression issues, she still is very protective of the HBCU environment. Like families, there may be disagreements internally but these women put up a united front publicly.

Interestingly, the majority of the women shared their opinion that an African American student should start their college career at an HBCU. They believe that the HBCU experience allows for a solid foundation for learning and boosting self-confidence, while also being taught by competent and caring faculty. They believe that the African American student can consequently thrive in a predominantly White institution following their attendance of an HBCU.

Those who are not classroom instructors teach the students they encounter in other ways. Each, in her way, gives instructions about proper dress, manners, behavior, and living up to expectations, discipline, and life skills. All the participants support, encourage and
challenge students every day. That is the essence and personification of the HBCU experience.

The participants believe in the importance of the HBCU environment being like a family. The family environment is what attracts and keeps students, staff, and parents supporting the institution. African American culture actively encourages the community and family atmosphere. The African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” was well known in the African American community long before Hillary Clinton made it popular elsewhere. An HBCU is like a village with everyone doing their part to raise the children. The participants’ words and actions work together to keep that family atmosphere intact.

In the tradition of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Etter-Lewis, 1993), I collected oral narratives from 14 African American women in an HBCU setting, thereby allowing them to share their own stories. A profile was created of each participant from the narratives. The following individual profiles vary in length and detail based on information shared by the study participants.

Individual Profiles

Angela

If asked to describe Angela in one word, outspoken is the ideal choice for 58-year-old support staff member. Angela is married with four children and seven grandchildren. Her background is working class and she has no trouble standing up for herself. Her associate degree is in general studies.
While I would describe Angela as outspoken it has not always been that way. She recalled a story from early adulthood:

My mother, my mother, she said, education is important, right? But, their thing was seniority; you get a job and you kept your job. So one day I told my mother, “I said I’m going to quit my job and I’m going to go to school full time.” Mother says, “Ah, no, don’t do that, jobs are hard to come by, um, and you have a little seniority.” She said, “Don’t do that”. So I did not, I didn’t buck my mom. I was like, “okay, okay.” I should have had the drive to say no I think this is best. But I didn’t; I backed off and I didn’t. I just took a class here and a class there but at the time I really wanted to go full time.

Encouraging students is important to Angela based on her personal experience with trying to complete her education. She shares her current practice with the students:

So right now when I meet someone, I am just encouraging them with whatever you do. I had a young lady in my office the other day and she was like, “I don’t know how I’ll do it.” I said, Look, I don’t care what you have to do, everybody aside, you definitely must complete; I said, “come by my office, whatever I can do to help you I will and that’s my only way of sort of like giving back but encouraging them….Short of giving them money, because I don’t have money to give them, whatever I can do I will definitely do it….Anybody that crossed my path is just, I just hate to see them give up and not finish because, I know I would have loved someone giving me those encouraging words.
On the other hand, Angela challenges students when they need it; she described a situation when she spoke out.

I don’t mind speaking up. Give you another example, Tuesday, there was some food in our conference room and we were all able to fix plates and stuff because the meeting was over and everything. Of course, you know how that is, so as I walked by the room, a student was picking up some of the rolls or something with his hand and he’d just look at it and toss it down. I went in there and I said, “young man, you don’t touch food with your hands, there are tongs provided for that, I said “you don’t”. He looked at me, sized me up, and he said, “but.” I said, “there is no but to it, there is no excuse, that is not acceptable.” He said, “I’m sorry.” So I am outspoken, I feel like addressing things at that moment before the individual can get away, you know, so I thought about it for a moment. I stood there for a moment and I thought should I say something or should I not? I said, “but no, he’s young, he needs to learn; I need to seize the moment.” I’ve let a lot of opportunities go by so I am learning how to just seize the moment. That’s when I told him, I said, “I can’t,” because there were two or three other people standing there, I can’t spare his feelings; he needed to know, so I told him.

In describing her HBCU experience Angela responded, “Good experience, like the closeness of the people, supportive of each other, smaller setting, a different climate, more intimate with colleagues than corporate. The HBCU environment is a more relaxed atmosphere for African Americans to learn. It also allows you to have a global perspective.”
Additionally, she finds that she is more understanding and looks at people from the place they are coming from. She feels more akin to her coworkers than she did when she was at other schools. What she does not like is the number of steps needed to get a job done, the number of signatures required and amount of time to get paperwork processed.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, she said:

I think I'm a pretty good thinker. Um, and I, may come from being in the academic setting versus if I was not because I can remember, in high school I worked in a hospital part time. And you know, you have your job duties and you do that, but now you have to be a thinker because you are dealing with the students. I feel like I contributed to my department in terms of some suggestions and so I think I am a pretty good thinker.

When asked how being an African American woman affects how she gets her knowledge, she replied:

Give you an example of that, I was getting ready to work on my bachelor’s at home and when I went into the advisor’s office, well first of all, the experience was when I walked into the outer office, the light was off but the person’s office light was on. So as I walked through and said hello, she was not in her office, but when she came in she looked at me like she was startled as she sat down. I was there to be advised but she was not giving me the information I needed. So I didn’t know how to read that because I was in my 20s but I did not know how to read that or relate to it, so I got discouraged and I took a class; but I just felt like I didn’t get what I needed. So, at
that time I did not have, it’s not the word I want to use, but it was experience. I didn’t have, I guess just the knowledge or the how to go around that situation to get where I needed to be to get, you know; now I would have done it differently. If I can’t get what I need from her, then I would have gone say, for instance, to the secretary to say hey, is there somebody else that can advise me?

I did not know how to navigate. I didn’t have, at that time, the confidence to do that. So the years and experiences and, I guess, I, kids today, when I look at our students today, they just have a lot more knowledge and a lot more confidence. And I don’t know where that comes from. But it’s different from when I was their age. I don’t know where that comes from. It could have been school. It could have been my home life; I just didn’t have the confidence to know how to navigate that.

When asked how she has changed over the years in how she goes about getting her knowledge at Finesse, “Asking questions, going to the source, communication,” she replied.

Arlene

The only college graduate of eight children, Arlene is 51 years old, a support staff member, married and the mother of two sons. She describes her upbringing as working class. She would persuade every African American to go to an HBCU if she could. She says you learn the academics, how to socialize and how to deal with people.

The faculty wants students to learn and they do not have to deal with hidden racism. You know what, HBCU is, someone, initially I would say, if I could, if I could persuade every African American to go to an HBCU, I would do that. Because not
only do you learn the academic parts of it, but the other parts, not just the partying
and that kind of thing, but you really learn. As I told you earlier, I was so naïve. You
learn how to deal with people and you learn how to get along with people and you
just learn how to as a matter of fact. One example was when I was here, I think I
started my sophomore year, my roommate had met some guy that lived in Fayetteville
and they wanted to go there, which they of course, they wanted me to go. I was
saying if I go Saturday or Friday, when are you all coming back? Well, they weren’t
coming back until Monday and I have a class Monday. They said, “Ah, you can miss
one class”.
See those are the things you have to learn and eventually I realized I needed to cut
them a loose because if I don’t, the purpose, the reason I came here was to get my
degree not to run up and down the road, you know, so you have to learn whether you
need to fold, and when you need to…, another great learning experience is you carry
these things throughout your life. You can talk to people and you say okay, I can see
that you are not good for me. It’s not good for me to be around you. And those are
things that I learned while I was here. Then you learn you acquire friends that are
friends for life, too, and you learn how to deal with them. Even though in different
stages of your life there are still certain things and certain friends you have to distance
or associate yourself with. So if I have to, I try to convince them to think about it too,
but attend an HBCU because it is the best experience, and then you love your school.
I love Finesse University. And even though I may say something mean, this is like
family, I may say something negative but I don’t want to hear someone that did not attend here to say something negative about it. Arlene described the working environment at Finesse for an African American female employee in the following way.

I guess it’s like that anywhere, as being a woman as well as an African American, you don’t, they don’t promote you like they would a male. There’ve been years when I’ve seen males and before you know it, they are head of the department, they’re a vice chancellor or whatever and a woman doesn’t, she doesn’t get promoted. They mainly for the female, the Black female, they normally want you to be a clerk. Until recently they have been kind of changing it to some degree. But basically, over the 23 year period of time, they want most women to be clerks. Even though you are doing higher level responsibilities and jobs, but they wanted you to be listed as a clerk.

When asked how being an African American woman has affected how she gets her knowledge, she quickly said:

How do I think about how I get it? I don’t, I don’t think there is a difference in how I get my information. I don’t think it really matters whether you are a male, female, what nationality or race. I think that if you want that information, it’s not going to matter. Now how I do, I do think there is a difference in how, if the information is given about me is different than it would be any other nationality. I think it would be different how the media world gives their report on me, on African American women. I think that would be different but not how I receive it, no.
When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, Arlene exclaimed:

Wow. Okay, as a knower I would say I wouldn’t even think of myself as a knower because you can always learn something, so to me you would limit yourself if you feel like you know everything; there is no room to grow. I am a thinker and sometimes I think I think too much, but most of the things I do I try to think them out first; I am not a spontaneous person. I do try to think things out as it relates to work as well as my family life.

When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out at Finesse, she thoughtfully said:

Okay. You know, of course, when you initially come you don’t want to make decision because you’re nervous, you’re not so sure and all but of course after you’ve been here for a while, you sometimes, you have to step up to the plate and I know I have. In the last five or six or probably longer than that, well the last ten years, when a supervisor isn’t there and a decision has to be made, I will make it whether it’s the best or not the best. And then I will explain to the supervisor, this is the reason why I made this decision and if they don’t like it then, of course, we will discuss it at that point but I do let them know, I have no problem now making a decision if they are not here. Of course, if they are here, then that’s different. Then I don’t have one, a problem making a decision. And then I know it’s for the betterment of the school.

This response indicates to me that over the years as she has become acclimated to the school and its culture, and that she is comfortable in taking her knowledge, assessing a
situation and making a decision. Her experiences and years in the environment allow her to take the risk of acting in the supervisor’s absence. She seems confident in her ability to make the right decision or to accept the consequences if it is the wrong decision.

*Barbara*

The youngest of seven children and youngest study participant, Barbara is a 47 year old administrator and divorcée with a teenage son. While her parents did not go to college they preached the importance of education to their children. Her parents were farmers and they lived in a rural area. She describes her upbringing as working class. Her bachelor’s and master’s degrees are from sister HBCUs in the State University System.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, she said:

I think I would describe myself as a knower. I have the ability to analyze things and just knowing how, not really thinking about them but kind of figuring them out. Like my professionalism and my career as an information systems person, so being able to sit down and program and analyze things and just trying to do complicated problems and things like that. I think that is one of my strengths.

Describing her HBCU experience as challenging, Barbara stated,

I have only worked at HBCUs. I can’t compare them to any other type of institution. In fact, I just feel that working in an HBCU, there is a shortage of funding. There is a shortage of personnel. In my experiences and that has complicated my job. In my area, the research area, most people don’t understand the importance of what we do so they just don’t support that area as much as they should.
You definitely have to be a dedicated person to work in my area because, from my experience, you will not get the support you need.

While she finds her HBCU experience challenging, it also gives her the desire to help others more, to help the younger generation more. She expressed that she wants to be more active in community service.

As an African American woman she finds it very challenging dealing with the standards set for women and African Americans because they are somewhat different from the standards of the majority as far as America goes, as appearance and the knowledge you have to have: The ability, um, very stressful dealing with African American males and trying to be supportive of them and understanding of them, um..., professional wise, like I said, I don’t think the opportunities are, opportunities are there but I don’t think they are as great for African American women as they are for any other ethnicities.

When asked how being an African American woman affects how she gets her knowledge and ideas, Barbara quickly responded “I don’t think it really has. Sometimes I may have to do a little bit more searching and investigating but I think the opportunities are there. Just depends on how you apply yourself with those opportunities.”

Barbara turns to prayer and other resources and research, in that order, when things are not going well for her.

When asked how she has changed over the years in how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out at Finesse, she said, “by trying to
communicate more with other departments and getting more people involved so they can be accountable, and by referring to higher ups.”

**Brenda**

As a retiree who returned to work full time as a support staff member, Brenda is a 59 year old widow with four adult children. She spent a lot of time on the campus as a child because her mother attended Finesse University which piqued her interest in working for the University.

Brenda considers her upbringing to be upper class. When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, she replied “Well, I think I am pretty assertive about a lot of things from my experience, you know, and I have learned a lot through administrators. You know the ins and outs of the university, and the system.” Brenda did not answer my question. Based on responses to other interview questions, I guess that Brenda is a thinker because she says: I am a people person and if I have ideas or anything, you know, I just go to the source and seek and find out what is what and I know, you know, what’s it like. I just love to just absorb so I can learn how to do things better, having, you know, in this situation with students, I am, help make the transition smooth for them.

When asked about her HBCU experience Brenda said, “It’s just been a great experience, it’s been meeting people, learning, you know, how to go about doing things, meeting people and, I really don’t know.” She feels her experience allows her to grow, get to know people better, communicate better and encourage students. She also feels that in this
environment, sometimes males have a hard time listening to a woman’s opinion, even if the woman has been at the institution longer. For example,

In some situations males are more likely, you know, males know more than they want to be told anything and they know, you know, that well, I’ll put it like this. There have been situations where, I’ve been here longer than some people and they ask opinions or whatever and I give that opinion but then they turn around, Naw, we got to do, we got to do the other, it doesn’t work that way. You know, try to get them to see this is the way it has to be, you know, by guidelines and all but this is the way the structure flows. You know, we’ve got to do everything according to the by-laws or rules and regulations, you know. Of course, we have people who want to bend those rules and it’s sometimes hard for a male to take it from a woman. Like, no this is the way it’s got to be.

Over the course of her career at Finesse, Brenda provided administrative support to ten different departments and academic units and is currently supporting an academic unit. Through her work experiences, she seized the opportunity to be in some of the plays presented on campus. She likes being active on the campus. When asked how being an African American woman affects how she gets her knowledge and ideas, she responded, Well, for me, I am a person who will ask questions. I listen. And I’m telling you, I have a chance to have a little input. I have a little input in the decision making process but, ah, the biggest thing was observing and asking questions and I think I’ve, done
that if you don’t know, just ask. Sometimes I just, you know, plenty of energy, you know, and then I think about it later on and I might ask, you know, what am I going to do, how am I going to solve this problem or whatever?

When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out at Finesse, she replied: Well, I try to sit down with all involved in any project situation that we have, hash things our so that things will run smoothly. I do that probably during the holidays, sit down and have staff meetings and try to iron out of the little problems that may, you know, may occur. So, basically, just sitting down, planning out activities and things that we have to, you know, do to make this transition smooth.

These are the same tactics Brenda uses when things are not going well for her.

Iris

The oldest of three children, Iris is a 52 year old divorcee and a faculty member. In describing her childhood Iris recalled, I had everything that I needed and a lot of the things that I wanted because I was the oldest of three children, so I got more. There were times that I wished my parents could do a bit better. I think we had a good upbringing; we traveled extensively.

Both her parents were the first in their families to attend college, graduating from Finesse. Iris describes her upbringing as middle class. Both parents started their master’s degrees but did not complete them. Her father taught at three HBCUs, including Finesse, which is where Iris was introduced to music and the college environment. She exceeded her
parents’ educational successes by earning her doctorate. She is currently the chair of her academic department.

Iris described her HBCU experience as a family environment. To underscore the family environment, she shared a story from when she was in charge of the Arts & Lecture Series on campus. The campus committee was working with a local sorority to bring Sweet Honey in the Rock, a music group, to a city theater. Working with the campus committee was sometimes frustrating; yet, when her father died in the midst of final preparations they rose to the challenge. Her father’s funeral was the day before the concert. The concert went off without any problems. The committee took care of the final preparations for the concert so Iris could focus on the funeral arrangements.

“I learned to make something out of nothing at HBCUs. There are good things and some things that need to be greatly improved such as the infrastructure, having written policies and procedures, and inefficient university processes.” Her observation is that at HBCUs, decision makers tend to look at friendship and relationships as more important than
problem based logical criteria. In her words this shows a lack of integrity, “You have to learn as you go because communication is not clear.” From these experiences, she has learned that you need to document everything you do thoroughly to cover yourself. It helps to know the people with whom you are working.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, she replied “Both, I’m a musician, I’m right brained.” She gets her knowledge from others, especially sister friends, her brother, research, and reading books, newspapers, and magazines. Additionally, she finds that as an African American woman she has to be more resourceful and creative in getting her knowledge. In the HBCU environment, she finds the following methods work best for her in gathering knowledge: When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge, making decisions or working things out at Finesse, she replied, “If I need to know something, I go to the source. If not satisfactory, keep seeking for the answer. Be good to everybody. Develop good working relationships across campus because through networking, you can go to people for help.”

_Linda_

Calm, quiet and soft-spoken, Linda is a 59-year-old faculty member. She is married with three adult children. Her mother earned an associate’s degree and her father did not attend college. She describes her upbringing as middle-class. Her undergraduate degree is in Psychology, her master’s degree is in Labor and Industrial Relations, and her PhD is in Political Science and Public Policy. Linda is currently serving as a full time faculty member, though at the time of the interview she was serving in a dual role of faculty/administrator.
In the interview Linda responded to the question, what is it like to be an African American woman? She shared a story from her childhood that her father shared with her before he became stricken with Alzheimer’s disease. Her father says this is who she really is rather than the person with the calm exterior that most people see. They were at the gas station with its segregated seating waiting for the bus to arrive:

We were waiting for a relative and we were sitting in the Black section and I told him that I didn’t want to sit in that section. I needed to see something and I wouldn’t see it and I wanted to sit in the White section. He said, “No, No, No, you can’t do that.” And so when his back was turned, I did it. I sat over there and looked around and no one said anything; and he came over and jerked me back and I did it again. I was drinking at the water fountain. We all did that, you know, who’s looking… You know, we’ve always been radical. You’ve always had that underneath the calm exterior. Um, I think that being a woman, an African American woman in this country, you have to have a little bit of that. You have to have a way to know what you want to do, the difference you want to make and somehow do it. Even if you have to violate policies that you know are not fair or work around them in some way. Get them, get them modified, if you see a policy, and it appears to be unfair or may have perceptions of being unfair. I tried to talk to people about it. I don’t have the authorization to change it, and then I make a suggestion to change it. African American women, as many people have, they are historians. I have said of sort, have really defined what America is.
Linda sees being a little bit radical or learning to work around a situation as her standard operating procedure at Finesse. When asked to describe her HBCU experience, Linda replied,

I think it makes you more sensitive, and more aware of the needs of our particular population of students. I think having gone to an HBCU as an undergraduate; my perspective was shaped by the HBCU experience. This perspective, as well as others I’ve gained at non-HBCUs, informs the way I think and the way I interact with other people.

Linda sees the most significant distinguishing characteristic of HBCUs as being their commitment to assisting students in their matriculation, as well as personal needs. “Instructors, as well as staff at HBCUs have to be more involved in students’ lives because we are often the primary mentor and advisor for them.”

Linda’s initial response to the thinker or a knower questions was, “I think it’s good that you separate those two. Thinkers use experiences and observations to make decisions. Knowers have gathered facts and based on those facts are able to come to some type of decision or conclusion.” Finally she said, “I am both, depending on the situation.”

Linda’s response to how being an African American woman has affected her experience at an HBCU was very thoughtful and identified the intersectionality of race and gender.

When you’re in an HBCU setting where there has been and still is, this changing of the majority of campus members, faculty, staff, students are African American; that is
changing somewhat. Your point of reference sometimes is not African American but it could be gender because it’s a given, it’s a given that this is an African American setting primarily. So I really, quite honestly haven’t thought about the fact that I am an African American woman in an HBCU setting but a woman in an African American setting and just as briefly comment, comment on that, I think I can, I’ve thought about it some. I wonder more than having come to a conclusion, wonder if gender makes a difference in terms of how, how one maybe advances, how one is responded to. You know interaction of colleagues and supervisors. I think as our setting changes here, we become more diverse, and that question probably would be more something I would think about more regularly but I think as long as there are a majority of African Americans here, faculty, staff and students, then I don’t think, I don’t think about it as much. But I think in terms of extrapolating maybe gender and other issues from the African American world.

When asked how she has changed over the years in relation to how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out at Finesse, she quickly replied,

I’ve learned that both informal and formal channels work. I think as you are, the longer you are here, you learn, in which situations and with which people formal protocol works better and in other situations, informal, and sometimes a combination. When, you know, you’re still trying to perfect reading those signs.
You know where one may be more appropriate than another. You know, have more success than the other. You know, we may need to do both.

*Louise*

Louise, age 57, is the daughter of the first woman to receive a Ph.D. from Finesse University. She is a faculty member, master educator, twice married, mother of one and grandmother of two. Louise describes her upbringing as middle class. In addition to being an instructor at Finesse, she is chairperson of the Board of Education and extends her commitment to education from the campus into the community, saying “I am dedicated to inspiring the very best in young students”.

Living near the campus as a child and now again occupying the family home, Louise states, “Historically Black schools are all I have ever known.” During her college career, she attended five HBCUs and except for a four-year gap, her entire academic career has been at Finesse.

According to Louise: My HBCU experience is like nothing else in the world. I learned for every action there is a quick and deliberate reaction. HBCUs allow you to craft opportunities, to experience and be free. You can’t do that anywhere else. HBCUs are small, intimate environments which is what makes them different. If you are confident, they are the best. You are able to receive because you’re comfortable in a caring environment taught by competent people.
Louise exclaimed, “My HBCU experience has given me a sense of confidence. I know that I know I know. I have a sense of preparedness and competence. I am able to hold my own.” At Finesse, “students are an integral part of my life. I greet students as I walk to my office. Throughout the day I am meeting with students, teaching class, writing recommendation letters, supporting athletic events and advising Miss Finesse University.” Louise’s involvement with the students is evidenced by her participation in the campus production of The Vagina Monologues.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or knower, Louise explains: I am blessed with an intuitive sense, I think from the gut level beyond textbook. I am a feelings level person. As a knower, I have the ability to perceive things at many different levels. I am an experiential thinker.

When asked “How has being an African American woman affected your experience at an HBCU?” Louise answered, “First being an African American woman is a great experience, beautiful. I have all things coveted by others, don’t see any downside.” Then she followed up with, “I can be a leader at an HBCU, a powerful, competent leader.”

When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge, or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment, Louise replied,

I have become more inclusive, not such a renegade. I listen more; I am more a part of the system, where formerly I was on the fringe. I am a more integral part of the team even though I was always a team player.
When things are not going well for her, she reads, tries to find out why, and finds someone to help her process, because words and action help to shape how people think.

Maria

An optimist, Maria is a 57-year-old administrator and a divorcee with two adult children. Her parents did not go to college, but stressed to their five children the importance of having a strong education; therefore, they exposed them to many learning opportunities. Maria said they had to go to the library after school and stay there until their mom got off work. Her mother also encouraged their growth through church, community organizations and good guidance. Maria considers her upbringing as working class on the higher edge of being middle class.

I describe Maria as an optimist because she has experienced living in limbo in terms of her position(s) at the University because of the politics of the campus. Maria chooses to embrace her current position as liaison between two programs and maintain a positive attitude. Maria echoed the optimist sentiment with her response to explaining her HBCU experience.

On a scale of 1 to 10, I would say that I’ve had an experience of about 8. And I say that because I’ve had a pretty good experience. I have been able to, to advance. I’ve been able to hold my own in positions. I’ve been able to make contributions for the success of the students—the students who are coming out of the school graduating
and assisting in ways that I thought were very helpful. So I’ve had a really good experience here.

You know, with any organization, you are going to have your highs and your lows. Certainly, some of the lows suggest connectivity with humans. Sometimes we, you know, what percentage you get with an HBCU where certain units ought to work more collaboratively together and that sort of things. Some of those have not gone as well as I would have wanted them to or as well as others seemed to, but overall it’s not been that bad because I am not one to give up. So when I found that something worked or I keep working with that person until I could get them to see my point to see if it was worth trying. So generally it’s been pretty good. I guess many of the lows is just not having enough support to do some of the things you want to do and maybe not getting into the right people to help you move in that direction.

Maria feels the HBCU environment promotes self awareness and is family oriented.

Through this environment, opportunities for growth emerged that maintained her self confidence:

You see great role models and people that you can emulate and probably do some of the same things they are doing and do them better. So I think for that reason, it is empowering to people who have aspirations and goals and things that they want to do.

This is the aspect of the environment she shares with students.
Maria is proud of being an African American woman but knows that she is going to always have to fight to make sure her voice is heard.

If your voice isn’t heard and for that reason you become very strong, you become very confident about your abilities. Um, and so it just means that you are a proud woman of, of racial class that is of an ethnic group that you hope will continue to bond together and make things work for us.

Maria offered the following comments on being an African American woman at an HBCU:

Well it certainly hasn’t limited my ability to, to stand up for what I believe. It allows me to speak up and let my voice be heard. Um, so I guess in that way it has just continued my level of confidence and my ability to express myself, to be able to communicate with people effectively and that sort of thing. Because in meetings I am given a chance to express myself; I think from that experience, I could go almost anywhere and be able to hold my own.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or knower, she said,

I am an independent thinker and however, I enjoy learning new things all the time for that reason, I am always inquisitive about how something else is working or how something else came about. I like to be involved in other learning opportunities so that helps me become more independent as a thinker; because, once I learn something else I may have my own ideas how I can make it work better.
When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out at Finesse, she exclaimed:

Oh gosh, well, you know, the internet is a wonderful tool and e-mail is another good tool. Because, and I guess, technology in itself has its rights. One of the things now is that if I can’t reach someone certainly I’ll give them reasonable time to connect with me. Generally, if I send an e-mail and copy a few people, I get feedback. So I find that, you know, it’s not that I am trying to put anybody on the spot but I find that if someone is just not responding to me, you know, you have other ways to see if they will respond to you, maybe through connecting with someone else who can push their buttons a little bit harder than you can; so, that’s one of the ways. Then of course, being, having worked in a situation and you know, um, some of the places to go and where you can go and seek information, you kind of have a heads up on how you can get what you need without having to sit around and wait for it. You know they say, and I’ll get back to you and out of habit you wait for them. I know how to navigate my way

Maria explained that when things are not going well, “I just pretty much rely on my prayers and my faith to guide me through whatever difficult situations I think I might face.”

*Martha*

The oldest of three girls, Martha is a 65-year-old administrator. She is a widow with one adult daughter. Both of her parents graduated from college. Growing up, Martha’s father was a strict disciplinarian, but Martha recounts that she did not mind and overall, enjoyed her
childhood. Martha felt that she had an advantage in attending college because her high school was on the same campus as the college she attended. Describing the importance of her high school experience and its influence on her college, Martha recounts, “It was basically a college, and we were programmed for college at that institution. We got to do things that the other students were not able to do…we got to participate in college activities.” In addition to a bachelor’s degree in physical education with a concentration in dance, she has a master’s degree in counseling education.

Over the course of her career, Martha has worked for several schools; all HBCUs in a range of academic administrative jobs, and currently directs an academic administrative area. After 14 years at Finesse University, she is close to retirement.

Martha is active on campus, and participates in civic activities and student events. While I perceived her to be soft-spoken and to have a laid-back demeanor, she told me that she “used to have a quick tongue” and has learned as she matured how to judge when to hold her tongue and when to speak out.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, Martha shared with me, “I am a thinker.” Then, after a short pause, she added:

I think I consider myself both…because thinking experience has helped me to know certain things and as I move through life up to these 65 years, I have become a knower. I am a trial and error person; therefore I get my knowledge from my experiences, reading and studying.
When asked how being an African American woman affects how she gets her knowledge and ideas, she replied,

Well it has made me, very conscious of, surroundings, conscious of life in general, conscious of African American people in general, conscious of the world. I am thinking that how I see myself and how I feel about the world was basically developed from my home life, from my upbringing. We were always taught to be, to do the right thing and be proud of yourself for doing the right thing.

Martha feels that her HBCU experiences allowed her to give back what she has received during her lifetime. She wants to bring to the students the experiences she has had, the history of the race, and what they have to look forward to. She does this in many ways. Going back to her early study of dance and love of performance, she participated with students in a campus performance of The Vagina Monologues. This type of activity allows the students to see her from a different perspective than when she is in her role in academic administration. Drawing on past experiences of the benefits of engaging students at other HBCUs, Martha consistently looks for ways to engage Finesse students.

Martha leans on prayer to get her through tough times and situations. She described her arrival at Finesse as being full of challenges as she adapted to the culture and climate of the institution. Early challenges included finding space and furniture for her department and getting a phone line installed. Only when one woman, who was from the area and established at the university, helped Martha navigate the institution, was she able to find adequate space for her department:
I really had to feel my way through and learn the climate first, because it was a totally different climate from the other HBCUs which I had worked. Strangely enough, I think it was more or less the city climate than the climate here on the campus. It took some getting used to. It was the mindset of the people here.

When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment, Martha replied,

I have mellowed quite a bit with age. Still quite energetic, however, I weigh the value of what I am doing with this stage of my life and career as well as with this generation of students. Well, I guess I am doing something differently and I think what I am doing differently is I’m older and I’m slower. I take my time in analyzing things rather than the fast pace. I am wiser so certainly I have changed in the way I handle things. The wiser you are the better you handle things.

Mary

The seventh of twelve children, Mary 61, is an administrator, married, and the mother of two daughters. While her parents did not go to college, they emphasized the importance of education:

Education was pounded into us from, I mean from, I guess as soon as we were able to talk. So I started reading at age three and probably because I am number seven of 12 children and I always saw people reading. My mom and dad read all the time and my
oldest brother was in college by the time I was in first grade and he was always bringing books and stuff home and talking about college.

Mary described herself as being in the lower income group growing up. In addition to a bachelor’s degree in home economics education with a general science minor, she has a master’s in family economics and home management, and her doctorate in home economics education, leadership and administration. Mary describes her HBCU experience as:

Delightful! Delightful! I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world, never a dull moment, always learning something. It’s always a learning experience every day, even though sometimes relationships get kind of bad; it’s usually not an ongoing thing. So, I really have enjoyed the experience. I don’t think I would have, I just wouldn’t have been in the same position in any other kind of arena because I really felt like I could be myself and whether I was liked for it or not, I think for the most part, I have been respected for what I do and that goes a long way.

When asked to describe herself as thinker or knower, she says she is an independent thinker, a critical thinker when it comes to serious issues, “I will not speak on things I do not know.” She tries to stay abreast of new developments in her areas and applies this new knowledge to make things better.

When asked how she thinks being an African American woman has affected how she gets her knowledge and ideas, Mary gave a very thoughtful response:

Well, I think it has made me feel that I’ve had, that I really have to have reliable and concrete sources so that I will have a way to justify decisions if I am questioned. If
not, I’ve found that I’ve seen it happen with other people, if you don’t have it you can easily be dragged out of the position or completely destroyed. Even though people felt good about you not making a good decision and giving them a higher rating in terms of evaluation based on nothing more than whether somebody liked you over here, when it comes to the final analysis of that, if someone is really looking at me and looking at my record, it hurts me and I think that you can lose out in terms of credibility and integrity. And those are two things that I take very seriously as an administrator. I’ve got to be credible. I’ve got to have integrity and at the end of the day, if I leave with those two things intact, that’s important to me; that way, no matter how I am questioned, I can still come out appreciating who I am and keeping my head up.

When asked how being an African American woman has affected her experience at an HBCU, Mary replied,

I am not sure whether the problems with me had to do with my being African American female or being who I was in terms of the rank as I became dean. I think a lot about that, which was understandable, because had I been a department chair for 20 years, working at this university and somebody comes here who has not been anyone but an assistant professor, I probably would have been upset too. So I think a lot of that had to do with my rank or lack thereof, but yea, so yes. It’s kind of hard. I really don’t think I have had real difficulty in a HBCU as an African American woman just, you know, with things pointed to me just because I was female. I really haven’t experienced that kind of thing.
Mary stated that when things are not going well for her as a knower or a thinker, I think I try to go back and review some things because I will feel like, you know, maybe something I missed in reading that and something that I don’t understand about retention or about graduation grades. So I’ll go back and check because it did happen when we were trying to do the last retention plan for general administration. The research person kept saying some things that were not making sense to me in regards to projections and predictions. So, what I read didn’t quite congeal with that, so I asked the research person, will you help me understand?

So I came back and looked over some past statistics and you know, particularly some that I had done as Dean on a project and I’m saying well okay. What I said was right, but then I began to understand how he was looking at it from a research perspective. So sometimes I’ve had to find myself looking at things not just from my point of view but putting myself in the other person’s shoes and trying to look at it from their perspective. And that has been helpful because, I was like, how can you even think that.

Then I said, okay as a researcher, what he’s trying to do is to get some benchmark so that he can make projections that can come to pass rather than just making projections that will be good to have. A lot of times when my predictions would be that, you know, in terms of retention, it would be good for us to have the 85% rate. But he is saying that is not possible if you only have a 70 some percent rate for the past six years. Then you’ve got to look at something different and that’s how,
you know. I said okay. Now I understand a different perspective and you do have to
sometime take time out and do some reflection, you know, in trying to understand
where people are coming from.

Mary will always try to make sure she has the correct information and correct
understanding of the information before she shares it with others in the university
community. Maintaining her integrity and credibility are of the utmost importance.

Melody

As the oldest and only female of three children, Melody is a 54-year-old support staff
member, and divorced mother of a college age daughter. Melody described growing up in a
multigenerational house and taking on a great deal of caretaking responsibilities for her
grandmother and younger brothers while her mom worked second and third shifts as a nurse.

Earning her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the early 1990s and 2000 culminated a
college career that began in the 1970s. The journey toward completing her degree started at
Finesse University. This journey included periods of stopping out, attendance at two other
universities and finally coming full circle to receive a bachelor’s degree in Public
Administration and master’s degree in Information and Educational Technology from
Finesse.

Melody describes her HBCU experience as,

A very worthwhile job, an appreciated adventure. I learned the mechanic of how to
survive in an HBCU environment such as we have. God gave me some people to help
me be stronger because I was in an environment that was totally involved with
professional development. I completed both my degrees upon working here. It has been, I would not have wanted to miss the experience.

Melody further expounded on degree attainment as she talked about the effect of her experience of being an African American woman at an HBCU.

I really think that my experience here has been affected because I think there are more women on this campus. I think we have more women on this campus than there are males. And ah, it’s a competitive force for a different job because this campus is so influenced and I find that a lot of women, who may have started here, started their employment journey here may not have had all the degrees when they walked in the door. But over a period of time, the BA/BS come into the picture, masters; some of us even get PhDs. And I can see some maneuvering across the campus as different jobs take place. As a result of the amount of women that are African American women here, I don’t think it has a lot to do with in terms of the ethnicity. If you are competent to do the job, by all means, it might be some networking what you got going on, you get it?

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, she immediately replied: Thinker 100%, knower 70 % because I am always thinking. The HBCU environment has made me a better listener and taught me to meditate before I speak. It has shaped my personality and behavior, made me more tolerant and empathetic to my fellow man, and appreciative of my upbringing. Being a woman in an HBCU environment has provided opportunities for networking.
When asked how being an African American woman has affected how she gets her knowledge and ideas, Melody responded,

I think that the resources that are available to me as a result of being an Afro-American woman may not be on a first or a primary level. I feel that my resources if I were of another persuasion, the information that I would receive would probably come more on a first hand basis as opposed to, you know, getting another being in another ethnicity.

When asked, how have you changed over the years as to how you go about getting your knowledge or making decision or working things out in this HBCU environment, Melody said,

I have a lot of people to thank, because many people have shared their ideas and creative juices with me. I’m a seasoned person because I’ve been here for a little while; therefore I have listened, watched, and taken heed to the efforts, successes, and mistakes of others.

When things are not going well for Melody as a knower or thinker, she prays.

Penny

One of nine children and the oldest daughter, Penny, an administrator, described her upbringing as working class, very strict, country. She told me, “It was hard work to work farm work. My father was a strict disciplinarian.” Both parents instilled in the children the value of education. “They told us that the only way to make it was to better yourself because they did not want us working on the farm like they did.
In addition to working the farm, each of the children drove a school bus. Penny had the additional challenge of overcoming a speech impediment—stuttering. Receiving speech therapy in high school taught her to control it.

During her 25 year employment at the University, Penny earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees while married and raising her two daughters. At 61, she married for the second time. As she prepares for retirement she is pursuing her doctoral degree at Walden University with the intent to go into the classroom upon completion.

Penny describes her HBCU experience as being like a family.

I think that it’s more nurturing. I’ve been to a lot of workshops where Whites give presentation on how their offices run and I look at our shop and what we need. I think it is a more nurturing site; it’s a more caring site. … I do get a lot of students, I get a lot of parents from the north you know, where their kids have grown up through, they come to school, and they were in the White settings high schools. You know, high schools, elementary, even kindergarten and on up and they say I want my child to go to an HBCU school. They need that family atmosphere so I think there is a difference. When asked to describe herself as a thinker or a knower, Penny first responded:

I read a lot. I read a whole lot. If I’m sitting idle, if I’m sitting, wherever I am, I make sure I take a book. I try to stay on top of the national things going on. You know, I try to, if ever a given conversation is brought to me, I try to be knowledgeable of the subject that I can provide an effort. And I, in, I do think through some things. I used to not to and that sort of got me into some trouble. You know, so I wouldn’t get into
bad trouble. But you know, you just, I didn’t think of what the consequences would be. But now, I sort of like, you know, I weigh my options now.

Penny does not think that being an African American woman has affected how she gets her knowledge and ideas. She retorted,

Has affected? I wouldn’t say being a Black woman has affected my knowledge because it’s out there. If I want to know it, I’ll either, I’ll go the library. I subscribe to magazines. I listen to the news, you know, I don’t, if I want to know it, I know where to get it from. I don’t think being Black has hindered me from getting what I want. I try to learn what I want to learn It’s up to me whether I want to or not.

Penny offers the following comment on how being an African American woman has affected her experience at an HBCU:

Well, probably a few years back, let’s say five, six years ago, it would have affected me in a sense that men were in charge but now we are having capable women that are coming on board and women to me are in better control than men. Ah, you have that stigma that women aren’t going to tell a man what to do. So they are just as educated and in control as men are so, ah, in the past, there was a stigma thing about men that, in upper positions in upper management, men were in control but now you do have women that are just as capable as, all of my bosses actually. I think, with the vice chancellor that we have now, since I’ve been here, I’ve had three women as vice chancellors and three men actually. So either/or. I just do my job.
You know, I don’t worry about what nobody else thinks and nobody is assigned to me. I do it and I do it to the best of my ability.

When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her knowledge or making decisions or working things out and at this HBCU, Penny replied, How have I changed? I try to think, I try to think like my boss. I pretty much know how my boss does things. Ah, what she is looking for, so I sort of pattern my thinking as to I know what she wants and I know what her expectations are so I focus my accomplishments for our department around her expectations. And we pretty much come to fruition, it pretty much works out the way it should work out as far as her thinking it should.

_Rubie_

Nearing the completion of 30 years at Finesse University, Rubie, a faculty member, age 61, is married and has two adult daughters. Both her parents finished high school, worked a farm and had their own entrepreneurial adventures. Rubie recalls “my family was very rich, may not be rich in money but rich in moral and spiritual values which have certainly provided stability in my life through now.” She is very much rooted spiritually and her spiritual life is the foundation that supports her goings and comings every day and her ability to withstand all forms of opposition.

After graduating with a bachelor’s in Food Administration and a masters in Nutritional Science and working at her alma mater for one year, Rubie remembers wanting to give back to the community “If I don’t do it, who will? I feel very strongly that I should be
part of the answer of helping to raise a generation of African American youth who can be future leaders in our community.” Upon completion of her doctoral degree in Vocational and Adult Education with a concentration in nutrition, she returned to her undergraduate institution for one year before joining the faculty at Finesse. She is currently the chair of an academic program. While offers to go to majority schools have come, Rubie remains true to her commitment to give back to the African American community.

When asked to describe herself as a thinker or knower, Rubie replied,

I do a lot of what I call mulling it over in my mind. I think a lot because I tend to be a long term thinker and I guess through experience you come to know, but I think a lot so my knowing is out of experience.

Rubie described her HBCU experience as very productive for her. She worked in and chaired one program for over 21 years and over the last nine years has built her current department from scratch. This latter experience speaks to who she really is because she has been able to foster partnerships with industry leaders who are willing to invest in the product they want to hire.

Rubie, like Penny, does not think that being an African American woman has affected how she gets her knowledge.

I really don’t think it has affected, I don’t think it has been a barrier because I believe that I was very gifted with having good inter-personal feelings. So even in graduate school at a majority campus, back in those days, while other Blacks may have had various, with my personality, I am one that people easily come to love so I believe
that I walk in divine favor. Yes, I can’t say that I have not experienced discrimination.
I have. But it has not stopped because when one door closes, you look for other ways
to achieve the same goals.

Rubie offered the following comments on how being an African American woman
has affected her experience at a HBCU:

My experience being an African American woman has been, it’s been good. It’s been
good. I am not, I know who I am, I like who I am and I am not ashamed of my
heritage. I am very proud of what has been imparted in me and the contributions that I
can make as diversity. When I go with my counterparts, my background and
experiences, to me, is complementary. It’s a value. I see what I bring as an African
American woman as value added.

When asked how she has changed over the years as to how she goes about getting her
knowledge or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment, Rubie
answered,

Well, I first of all learned that I cannot always share my success. I’ve also learned that
I must be flexible and patient in terms of the timing of how I get things done. I have
also learned that although I am giving out a lot that I have to take in so I found time to
get certifications. I do things that will make me grow as an individual. I am now
learning how to find a lot more balance between Finesse, my family life, my
community life and how I learn. I still go outside because this environment can be
very narrowly focused.
So I am still participating in professional development activities and communicating with my colleagues and I try to travel abroad so I can continue to put perspective in place as I grow.

*Ruth*

At age 70, Ruth is the oldest person I interviewed and has worked at Finesse the longest—38 years. She is a divorced administrator with one son and a granddaughter. Ruth describes her upbringing as humble and working class. Neither of her parents attended college but education was important. She earned a bachelor’s degree in home economics education with a general science minor in addition to a master’s degree in school counseling education.

During her tenure at Finesse, she rose through the ranks of her department from counselor to the director of the unit. She plans to work until she does not enjoy going to work anymore. She is one of the most colorful persons at the institution. She is a hardworking administrator who values some of the traditional ways of the institution, yet embraces some of the new changes. Her priority is always to do what is best for the students and to help them stay in school, even if it defies convention.

She is very direct and outspoken with students and staff. She is very aware of others’ misconceptions about her at the institution but is true to herself. Ruth describes her HBCU experience as “Positive, Positive, Positive, Positive, and Positive.” The Finesse environment nurtures and cares for the students. She is concerned that the university still agrees with her
belief that staff should continue to support and encourage the students. She lives by the motto, “If I do nothing else—let me be an instrument of positive change in somebody’s life.”

When asked how she thinks being an African American woman has affected how she gets her knowledge and ideas, Ruth lamented,

I don’t know how to describe that. Um, being an African American woman who is outspoken, one who cannot walk into a room and everybody doesn’t know that I am there. That’s because of my size and because of my color. That probably has affected how I get my ideas, I mean my knowledge. They don’t tell me what they don’t want me to know. They will be glad when I leave I don’t know. I don’t think it affected me just me as a person.

I said to a girlfriend of mine. I wish I had your demeanor sometimes because you’re like the spook who sat beside the door. Nobody knows you’re there. You can walk in and nobody knows you are there, got all the information and leave and they don’t even know you’ve been there. I can go into a room and they can have all, poles as tall as I don’t know what, and everybody knows that I am there. I can stay quiet, and my mama used to say, they would think that you were talking because they look at your eyes and sometimes people misinterpret what my eyes are saying. You follow me?

Because I have the squirrel stare and the kids would say to me, have I done something wrong. No, I may be admiring your beauty or maybe you remind me of somebody who was positive or maybe negative in my life or something about your
glasses that I like and my mother’s always said you have to watch how you look at people because they think you are evaluating them negatively.

I get up early, get up early, I ask questions. And I go to the source immediately. I’m no, you know what I mean, about going to the source? I don’t ask you about something somebody else done. I’ll ask you. That’s who I am.

When asked whether she is a thinker or a knower, Ruth describes herself as a thinker who thinks deeply, always thinking.

I’d put it this way, um, very seldom you find, as I say to my granddaughter at times, A penny for your thoughts, she’ll say I don’t have a thought. Are you living? I’ll say to her. There is always something in my mind that I am dealing with. One of the things that I find myself doing a lot, I do a lot of my best thinking early in the morning before anybody turns on anything and sometimes I will jot down key words that will make me come back to whatever it is that I need to deal with today and from yesterday.

As a result of thinking deeply, she sometimes moves slower on embracing change than others would like. One issue she continually raises questions about is moving from a paper to an electronic schedule of classes. She believes the University should have both because some of the students are from rural areas and may not own or have easy access to computers. Additionally, she sees the paper schedule of classes as an effective subtle marketing tool for people who prefer the written word. The paper schedule could easily be left all over the city increasing the exposure of the University.
When things are not going well for Ruth as a knower or thinker she mediates and moves slowly as would be characteristic of a deep thinker. Then she takes action.

Thematic Findings

In addition to the narrative profiles, the participant data is presented in relation to the framework reflected in research question number one of Hurtado’s mechanisms. Findings are presented based on each of the research questions, beginning with the first question: How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s five mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition?

Hurtado’s Mechanisms

Anger, silence/outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues are the five recurring mechanisms Hurtado (1996) identifies as being essential to the generation and comprehension of knowledge for women of color. According to Hurtado, women process knowledge differently than men. This difference is a function of the division of labor and the value attached to that division by categorical group memberships (p. 372). The common categorical group memberships of the participants of this study are African American and female. Therefore, being women of color, their relationship to knowledge, its production, comprehension and integration is systematically different from men.

Hurtado also identifies the difference between personal and social identity. Most people have one personal identity, but social identity is variable and susceptible to structural forces like race, class, and gender. Social identity comprises those aspects of an individual’s self concept that derive from one’s knowledge of being part of categories or groups, together
with the values and emotional significance attached to those memberships (Hurtado, 1996). The differences in values attached to group membership determine to a large extent what access individuals have to knowledge, what is considered knowledge, and how it is one comes to perceive oneself as knowledgeable in spite of one’s group membership (Hurtado, 1996).

Angela shared a story that is a great example of the value attached to certain social groups and access to knowledge.

You know, we attended a lot of formal affairs. People wore formal attire and that was okay because I did that back in Ohio so I, the transition to that was okay. But I found the climate to be classist among our folks. I mean virtually you had the elite and someone asked me, “Oh, what, are you a member of a sorority?” and I said, “No I am not.” And her whole expression changed immediately and, you know, she moved on. That was early on and so I was like, Oh, okay, so if you weren’t part of the I want to call it a clique, but if you weren’t part of the hob nobby and the elite but and it was all right because I’m friends with everybody.

The value the other woman associated with being in a sorority showed that she viewed Angela as not being worthy of her time to enter into a conversation and share her knowledge. For Angela, this was also a moment of anger. In the next section, we will examine some other examples of how anger is a constant companion of the study participants at Finesse University.
Anger

Hurtado (1996) identifies anger as the first mechanism because it is a constant companion to women of color. African American women realize early in life they are derogated by color and gender. The stigma attached to their social identities manifests itself as a direct attack on these women. Therefore they discover the hate reserved for them both in public spaces and within their own families (p.377).

African American women, develop an intuitive sense of danger that is primarily kept at bay through anger. Putting a bit on the anger is of primary importance for their survival. To “know” logically necessitates the strategic suspension of anger, temporarily, through an enormous amount of discipline and grit. (Hurtado, 1996, p.378)

African American women “know they are not valued as much as most White women, as most White men, and even as much as most men in their ethnic/racial group” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 378). In the homogenous environment of an HBCU, anger remains a constant companion in a place where African American women hoped they would be affirmed and valued for who they are and what they bring to the environment. For the participants of this study, most of the anger issues revolve around gender issues and the roles of women and positionality within the institution. These women do not use the label anger, but their tone of voice, inflection, body language and sense of frustration revealed that they have to deal with anger issues constantly at Finesse.
It is through the successful management and skillful handling of anger that these research participants have been able to maintain any level of success in this HBCU environment.

In dealing with these issues of anger, study participants choose various methods of coping with the anger depending on the situation. For example, Iris shared this story of dealing with a faculty member:

I scheduled a meeting with a faculty member and two administrators after I became chair. The faculty member refused a teaching assignment. The faculty member called the Dean; the Dean changed the meeting and asked the Provost to be present. I still did not get any help with the faculty member. The faculty member has mental problems and has tenure. I am still dealing with this faculty member today.

She learned from this experience that it would be better to accept the behavior of the faculty member than to continue to pursue corrective action, as she was not supported by her Dean. To continue to pursue this issue would cause her to be viewed negatively and could impact her effectiveness as chair of the department.

Melody openly acknowledged her anger about several situations during our interview. She did not label it anger, but through her passion, body language and emphasis on her word choice, I could feel the anger and frustration about this specific incident. She cited this example:

The Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs asked me to help with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation process, to see where we are and where we need to go and how do we achieve or get to a satisfaction
point. And in doing so, it was my responsibility to; we were divided up into three or four different areas where it was frustrating to me because no one else, no one else completed their section but me. And I was supposed to be coordinator of my section but also to collect the information from the other two areas, so there were three. So I had a time trying to get folks to cooperate. And once I did get at least 92% of all the information together from the other two, it became an incidental. It became like a hot potato. It was dropped, Nobody was, you know, after the work and the time invested and getting people across campus to come in and go through these evaluations and trying to make sure that they came for an hour and you served them lunch and you asked for the surveys and coming back to total them out and doing some kind of statistical, they was just dropped in thin air and nobody ever cared about what the results were. And I was thinking about the necessity of it and I worked my buns off to get it together and it was just bad.

When asked how she handled her frustration with the situation, she said “I swallowed it.” While Melody accepted that all her hard work was for naught, in telling the story, the emotion was evident.

Rubie recalled an incident in her department where there were some misconceptions among her colleagues.

There is a spirit of jealousy. If you do your work, sometimes you get, you have to fight. Why should I have to fight to do my job? And they’re just hateful. I’ll also mention to you that usually when I am given responsibilities, first I want to
understand, know that I understand what is expected and then after you’ve given me that, I want you to leave me alone and let me do it. So I am being my normal self at getting things done. I think that has created or did create some jealousy among some of my colleagues so therefore, they sat about to complain about me to my boss. And my boss listened and I got some correspondence from him that made me suggest that he had listened to them and not talked to me. So when I e-mailed him back in response to some misinformation he had e-mailed me. He called a meeting and we were, I was able to, they were able to express themselves because they certainly had some misconceptions about my motives and their perceptions of my motives. My motives meaning I used to have plenty money because I would write grants and have it so I ran this program without the help of the school. Now that the money is not there, I have to ask for the needs of the department. And every one is thinking I’ve got all this money and all of that. So having the meeting helped me to see where my colleagues were coming from as well as providing an opportunity for me to express who I am, what my motivations are, my loyalties and that kind of thing. So I was very pleased to be able to share myself, to hear what they had to say and some of the allegations so that I would clarify them and to correct them when they had forgotten I am very organized with what I do.

When given the opportunity, Rubie addressed the misconceptions in a direct manner and was able to turn the situation around.
Mary shared a story about her department chair and finishing her doctoral program:

The thing that happened though was interesting, even though my chair had been very supportive. Of course, she’s the one that gave me the fellowship information.

However, during the last year that I was working on the degree, it seemed like she was trying to make everything very difficult for me. She gave me more classes and she claimed it was because she knew I could do it and she wanted it to be done right. Then the semester that I was writing the dissertation, the very last semester, she gave me two brand new classes and one in which I had to actually write, develop and teach during that same semester and it had a lab to it in addition to lecture. So I, you know, and I often wonder if this was a test of endurance or what it meant to see if I could really handle it and I proved I could handle it because I had been doing four or five classes each semester teachings, since I had been in the doctoral program. While this incident happened years ago, you can still feel the emotion attached to the retelling of the story. I do not believe that Mary ever addressed her department chair directly regarding this issue, which raises the following questions: Was her chair reacting to pressure from the Dean? Was she trying to build up Mary’s endurance for the challenges she knew Mary would face after she obtained the terminal degree? Mary has been promoted several times since she received her doctoral degree and now is at a higher rank at the University than her then department chair.

Penny gave the following example of an issue she was angry about because she felt the Chancellor put her in an awkward position.
And, ah, I don’t know what happened but for whatever reason, the office was not looked on in a positive light and he would not go through the director for anything. He would call me as her assistant. Well, no, there was another lady too. She’s since retired. But he called me this one evening and the thing about it is if you go the Chancellor’s office, you carry you keys and your pocketbook because you are going to wait. This particular evening, he called me in his office about 4:00 o’clock over to; they called it the “White House” then. I sat in his outer office until probably about 5:30 before I got to see him. And then he called me in his office about something stupid and he wanted me to write a letter for his signature for some particular student regarding some assistance and so my remarks to Chancellor, “Are you sure you want me to write this letter and not the director.” He said, “Penny, I called you to my office. No,” he said, “Is not your name Penny?” I said, “Yes sir”. He said “Are you not a supervisor in the office?” I said, “Yes sir.” He said “If I wanted the director to do it, I would have called her.” And that put me in a very uneasy situation. I went back to my office. My director was still there and I told her exactly what he wanted me to do and she said he is the chancellor, you write the letter. And I wrote the letter and I prepared it for his signature and he signed it the next day. But that, I was so uncomfortable with doing that because I felt like he should have gone to the director.

There was some animosity there.

This is a clear example of how the politics of the campus impact the lives of the female employees directly and indirectly.
In dealing with both male and female administrators, sometimes the women find themselves being used as pawns in the oppression of other women. The way the research participants handled the anger allowed them to be survivors in this HBCU environment.

*Silence and Outspokenness*

The complementary strategies of silence and outspokenness are the second mechanism identified by Hurtado. Silence allows the participants to observe and survey the environment to determine their next step in negotiating their access to knowledge. When choosing to be outspoken, the participants decide how candid they will be in their comments because when, what, how, and where they share will have an impact on their future access to knowledge (Hurtado, 1996).

Angela clearly states her stance on silence and outspokenness,

Well, I’m at a point in my life where I just don’t take anything off anybody. I am careful how I deal with it. But I know I can, I know I would fight back if I had to. Let me put it that way. I don’t think I’m a violent person but I just don’t take anything off anybody and I will ask questions. I don’t mind speaking up.

Angela chooses to be outspoken as opposed to earlier in her life when silence was her choice. Ruth is equally clear that outspokenness has always been her choice throughout her life. Ruth also acknowledges that she has to negotiate silence and outspokenness at Finesse.

My concern is I have to make sure that people don’t think that I’m being evaluative and critical because I ask you a question. You follow me? That’s one of the things I have to monitor myself and I find myself now sometimes making the preamble to my
statement, I hope you don’t take this personally but I am asking you a question for the following reasons and especially when looking at men. Men can’t deal with it.

I am a talkative woman and most men are uncomfortable around me. I know that. Because I’m going to call a spade a spade and an ace an ace, but men like the women to be quiet and receptive of whatever they are all about. You might have the same problem. I don’t know. But when you find, when you find that you verbalize what you feel and what you think and the directions that you and there seems to be a resistance and they will try to work around you. I recognize that in this environment.

Being an African American woman who is outspoken, one who cannot walk into a room and everybody doesn’t know that I am there. That’s because of my size and because of my color. That probably has affected how I get my ideas, I mean my knowledge. They don’t tell me what they don’t want me to know.

Ruth is very aware that her outspokenness limits her access to knowledge through the formal channels, but her informal channels keep her well informed. Other women, who quietly sit in meetings, soak up all the information, then relay the information back to Ruth.

Louise scheduled a meeting with the Chancellor to discuss the salaries in her department as compared to other departments. Louise was the designated spokesperson because of her willingness to speak up on issues.

I wanted him to make the salaries on par. His response “You need to find something to do around the campus to raise your salary; you are comparing the Humanities to the Sciences.” My colleagues were in tears because they were frustrated and did not
expect his response. I found something else to do. I started advising Miss Finesse University. I took his advice and many of my colleagues followed suit.

Mary’s story of an encounter with the Chancellor when she was the Dean demonstrates an example of the use of outspokenness and silence in the same situation.

Well, okay, this I don’t why I keep going back to the science stuff but was another case where we were, it was Chancellor’s first year and we were doing, we had done a little bit of work for the Early College High School before he came but it was really getting to blossom when he first got here and so there was a meeting in Washington where they wanted, again I was still Dean of the College and this thing had to be, higher education in natural sciences because it was focused on science and math. And there was this meeting in Washington and I was invited to go. The Dean of Education and then there was the faculty member I had recommended to go to represent the Science area and Chancellor didn’t want me to go because he said he wanted somebody who knew some science. So I was trying to convince him that I knew some science, you know, and that I had a minor in science. I had taken almost as many hours, about 18 to 20 in the undergraduate program as some of the science professors and he kept, you know, he kept just denying me to attend the meeting when they had asked me specifically to go and had named somebody else who was not even on a full track, who was an adjunct professor to go and so, you know, after I had said three or four times that I did have a science background, I did have the knowledge, this and that, I just like just looked at him and said nothing but listened to what he was saying.
and tried to respect him as the leader but disagreeing very much with what he was saying and so, you asked how did I handle it?

Like I said, I tried to explain it to him as much as I could but he wasn’t listening to that. So after a while, I just got quiet and tried to listen to see if I could understand what he was really asking. I never did get that so then I talked with the Dean of Education. She said you have to go. She said they asked particularly for you and you and I are the ones that have to do this program, not the Chancellor. She said you have to go. She said so you and I are going. She said you have to. I said I’m going. I said they asked me to go, I’m going if I have to pay my own money, I can do that. I’ve got money in my budget. So we both went, and sure enough the first meeting we got to and Chancellor came in late but just as he was coming in, the lady who was talking said you cannot do this unless the Deans of Arts and Sciences and Education are together on this and they must be at this meeting. So I had no more problems after that.

Mary realized that trying to reason with the Chancellor was not working so she stopped discussing the issue with him and silently made her own plan. Fortunately, the plan worked in her favor.

Angela and Ruth have clearly chosen to use outspokenness to negotiate their knowledge acquisition, while Louise and Mary navigate between the two. All the women define for themselves which of these complementary strategies works best for them depending on the situation.
Withdrawal

Withdrawal is the third mechanism in Hurtado’s scheme. Hurtado (1996) acknowledges that women use withdrawal to female networks when it works to their advantage. In these networks women gather resources and strategize for success. The study participants did not speak of withdrawal in terms of moving to female networks, but they did speak of withdrawal to quiet places or away from Finesse’s campus for opportunities to think, reflect and to seek help from a higher power as they cope with the challenges on campus. While several of the women reported being in sororities or women’s church groups, they did not identify those groups as places of retreat from Finesse.

They discussed their participation in these groups as another aspect of their social identities. Perhaps, because I am also an African American woman, there was the assumption that I instinctively understood these groups were safe spaces so they did not feel the need to articulate that fact. Another possible explanation is that Finesse’s population is predominantly female. Therefore, they may find it easy to access those female networks or at least to connect to another female on a personal level at work. The quotes chosen for this section on withdrawal show the intersection of how spirituality is important in the daily lives of the research participants.

Rubie described her withdrawal as getting quiet.

I get quiet. I like when things are tough, I like, I don’t like to be talking and, you know, engaged in a lot of activities. I like to be quiet so that I can reflect, so I can think, so that I can hear answers to my questions. And sometimes people misconstrue
that and I resent it when they do because I am human. They think I should be, you
know, up in the air, Superwoman, and don’t think that I am human so when things are
not going well, I like to, I like to be quiet. I don’t want to talk too fast or do
something that I may regret.

Ruth likes to go fishing when she needs to withdraw.

My best thoughts come when I am on the pier with the wind blowing all around me
and the sun beaming down, in the wee hours of the morning. We would go out
sometimes two or three o’clock in the morning.

Arlene describes her withdrawal in the following way:

Pray. I actually pray. I like, I do like to, now a lot of times I will go to an area by
myself and even sometimes it can be just in the car and sometimes I like to listen to
music and then like I say, I can think because I am away from everybody and I can
just kind of think and I’m doing my thinking but to see if there was a better choice I
could have made or what can I do at this point if things are not going well. What can I
do at this point to make a difference or make a change and, but I do like to have my
little quiet time to myself in order to do that. And even sometimes you have to go out
and sometimes it’s even in the bathroom. Even if I am just in there because, you
know, most of the time people just leave you alone so then a lot of times I do have to
do that when there is so much going on but, generally I do it in my car.

Melody describes her withdrawal in the following way:
So as a result, in working in this environment, ah, I’ve had to discern personalities, even those that I have the grandest difficulty in getting along with initially, but that if I pray over it and retreat, it usually works out okay because, if I come to you with a humble spirit, it’s got to fold. It’s just got to fold positive because I am not pushing. You know, I am not making my way to get you to understand this is the way you got to go. This is what you’ve got to do. I try to sit back and watch and sometimes I find that what I thought was fair to me, that’s my concept. Whoever is in my arena may not see it that same way. So if my words cannot verbally express my feelings for me to sway you whichever way I think you should go, then my actions will be my next move. If I feel that my words cannot touch you or touch your heart or touch your mind or you are not receptive, then I can go somewhere and sit down and be quiet.

The ability to take time for quiet reflection and withdraw from the situation allows the research participants to recharge so they can prepare for the multiple social realities that they deal with everyday of their lives.

**Shifting Consciousness**

“Shifting consciousness is the ability of many women of color to shift from one group’s perception of social reality to another and, at times, to be able to simultaneously perceive multiple social realities without losing their sense of self-coherence” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 384).

Ruth, Mary, Louise and Rubie articulate their ability of being able to perceive the multiple social realities of Finesse while maintaining their self-coherence. Ruth said, “I think
men are insecure to the point that they feel you are questioning their ability to manage and lead their unit. That’s my experience with the men here.” Yet, she asks her questions when she needs answers or adds a preamble to her statements, fully aware of others’ reaction to her.

Mary fully understood the opposition to her being named Dean, but she needed to move forward with her responsibilities. After her inaugural staff meeting, she told her staff:

Well it’s a shame that it would have to come to that. I said because if you all want to know something about me, all you need to do was come to my office, ask questions. I would have gladly shared with you my philosophy, whatever else and in fact, I did go and visit each of them in their own area the same month that I became Dean. And I had no, one of the things that I could understand why several were upset with me because it probably had something to do with the fact that I was an assistant professor. I was not, was I tenured? Yea, I was tenured. I was an assistant professor. Many of them were full professors, associate professors, had been department chair, I had never been a department chair. I came straight to the dean’s office from a faculty position.

Rubie expresses her shifting consciousness in the following way:

I first of all learned that I cannot always share my success. I’ve also learned that I must be flexible and patient in terms of the timing of how I get things done. I have also learned that although I am giving out a lot that I have to take in so I found time to get certifications. I do things that will make me grow as an individual. I am now
learning how to find a lot more balance between Finesse, my family life, my community life and how I learn. I still go outside because this environment can be very narrowly focused. So I am still participating in professional development activities and communicating with my colleagues, I try to travel abroad so I can continue to put perspective in place as I grow.

Louise says it best, “[I am] blessed with an intuitive sense, think from gut level beyond textbook, feelings level person. As a knower I have the ability to perceive things at many different levels-[I am an] experiential thinker.”

With the ability to perceive things on many different levels, there is also the ability to talk to different audiences in a language that each audience understands. It seems to me that shifting consciousness and multiple tongues are intertwined concepts. It is difficult to discuss one without the other.

Multiple Tongues

The term “multiple tongues” refers to the ability to talk to different audiences without losing a sense of coherence. The language changes as a result of the shift in consciousness (Hurtado, 1996). The examples I offer here could easily fit under both concepts.

Mary and Rubie, both PhDs, shared similar experiences of being in their churches and wanting to be members of the group, not in leadership roles. Mary tries to get the other women to call her Mary, not Dr. Mary:

We have an all women’s church group and I am, I am very, very different in that group because I try not to be the professional woman, I try to be just plain Mary in
that and leave all of the university stuff. You know, even I like for them to call me
Mary and they still won’t say Mary, I say just call me that please. I like to hear my
name every now and then. So in that particular group, I really am a lot different and
try not to be in the role of leadership.

Rubie was more successful in just being a member of her church.

I was in my church when we moved here for at least ten years and no one knew I had
a doctorate. Why, it’s because I want people to love me, get to know me and love me
for who I am. Not about a degree or any position. That’s important.

Ruth shares this story about the Dean of Women at Finesse during her time as a
student:

As an administrator, she was one of the strongest women, who was able to maneuver
this system. And also for her, to deal with the parents, to deal with the students, to
have strict rules and policies, and we respected her and I can almost say we feared her
but, she was on target. She made us women. You know, she would approach any
subject with us, any subject. And we used to think that this woman is wild, but you
can’t assume that you’ve got 500 girls here and that all of them came from the same
exposure. And she didn’t make the assumption and I guess that’s where I came from.

Mary and Rubie shift between the roles of being in leadership positions at the University and
being a member of a church or church group effortlessly. In Mary’s case, other group
members try to limit her to the role she occupies at the university.
They adjust their language and their consciousness without thinking much about it because both environments are part of who they are.

As Mary was promoted to the Dean’s position, she had one hour to spend with her predecessor. She recalled the encounter:

In about an hour’s time she showed me all the files, she told me not to let them put all the work on me that they did not want to do. She then gave me about three very important points in terms of dealing with the group that I had inherited. She said you’re going to have some that will support you. There will be others that will try to tear down everything that you try to build up and then she told me, she said, “Those folk across there in the Administration Building, they’d rather have you doing half of their work and you just have to say no.”

But she gave me some of the best advice. She said, now, she said, I’m seasoned, I could do a lot of that but it is a lot of stuff you’re going to be asked to do that someone else should be doing and you’re going to have to determine, you know, which of those things you will do and how you are going to tell them that you are not going to do them. But you need to do that up front. She said because otherwise you won’t be able to do your own work because you’re going to be doing somebody else’s work. She was right. And I did have to just kind of, you know, politely decline some of the things that I was asked to do. But that was quite a unique experience. I did it because being the Dean of that college as a Black female was unique.
And because a lot of times I really didn’t know why the opposition. You know, whether it was just the tone that I had because I do have a tendency to be authoritative, assertive and I don’t apologize for it if it gets the job done because I try to also not be a micro-manager.

Linda sums up the concepts of multiple tongues and shifting consciousness:
I’ve learned that both informal and formal channels work. You learn which situations call for formal or informal protocols. Sometimes, a combination of information-seeking channels works better.

Hence, Linda adjusts her language depending on the situation.

**Identified Themes - Open Coding**

Based upon the second research question about support structures for the participants’ learning, the data revealed three overarching themes identified by the participants as to how they negotiate knowledge acquisition and construction in the racially homogeneous setting of an HBCU: navigating gender oppression, spirituality, and lessons learned from family.

Their experiences of the past and present inform how they will respond to situations they will encounter in the future. The participants are relative knowers (Belenky et al, 1986; Collins, 2000) because they relate their personal experiences to every experience in their future.

**Navigating Gender Oppression**

The intersection of race and gender is very apparent in the overall culture of the institution. While the institution is predominately racially homogeneous and female, the top
leadership, the decision makers are male. Gender oppression is clearly an issue as evidenced by the stories shared by the participants. Melody shares this story:

Ah, I have noticed one thing. And I don’t know whether you have tuned into it but when men are adamant about what they feel, the volume rises. In a situation personally that I was in not too long ago, I had done my investigation, was presenting my information, gave a scenario to depict why I felt this way you know, why I felt this way, and in essence then was told that I was taking it too personally. Now, how can it not be if, if I have done the investigation, I personally did the investigation? I told you as a result of the investigation, this is what I find. Now, if you want to take the fact and readjust them or put another role on top of them, I mean that’s your doing. But nevertheless, I am entitled to give you what information I have to share with you. And that’s speaking to a man or shall I say a male population. And then when there is no waiver, I find that the volume comes up a little bit louder.

Melody acknowledged the “loud talking” by the male but did not let that diminish her finding or her opinion.

In Mary’s experience with gender oppression, she got the promotion and the reaction to her getting the promotion was swift and strong. The harassment began immediately.

I got a taste of, I guess, envy and jealousy of me being in a position as a woman when there were men that some felt probably could better do the job or that they would prefer a man, particularly when I became Dean. The very first day I walked in with my little agenda as Dean of the college and these 21 males sitting there and one of the
females, actually it was four females, and I started to preside in this huge conference room and this one man who was probably just trying to monopolize and asked me a lot of asinine questions and I let him go on for a little bit again trying to see what he was trying to get at and after I had enough of him, after he was rattling on and off, I just kindly said to him, we will follow the agenda that I have printed. If you have another agenda which is more important than the one that I have laid out before you, then you may go and do that but you can’t do it in here and the rest of them just jumped in and followed my agenda and this man acted that way because they said that’s what they do, they put him up to try to see what I was going to do, to see if they could make me cry.

Mary simply stated her plan and gave the offender the opportunity to get on board or pursue his own agenda. In this situation, Mary had the authority as the “permission giver” to demand the respect due her position. The first incident was followed up by another by a former chair of a department whom she had to rotate out of the position during her first year as Dean.

At the Commencement, this former chair paraded around the stadium with an irate sign around his neck, belittling the Chancellor and me. Well, I missed it. It was done for my benefit but I missed it. I understand he had a sign on top of his robe that read “Chancellor is a liar and Dr. Mary doesn’t know what she’s doing” or something to that effect and he sat on the very front row of the faculty up in the stadium. With this sign on him, marched in with it on him and I guess, he thought it was going to get media attention. Well, like I said, I was on the stage. I didn’t even see him. So, you
know, he lost out if he did it for my benefit. I didn’t even see it. Because Chancellor said did you see So and So with that sign on him? I said, No, I didn’t. I’m up here trying to graduate these students. My mind is on the students. I did not even see him. But I said from, you know, after that and after he didn’t get any attention in regards to that at the graduation, we became very good friends.

In this situation, the lack of response from Mary at commencement allowed for open dialogue later.

In navigating the overriding gender oppression, the women exhibit coping strategies adapted to their view of themselves and their reasons for being at an HBCU. One of those strategies is turning to a higher power.

*Spirituality*

Spirituality emerged as a significant coping mechanism for the study population. Almost all of the 14 participants referenced a higher power, God, being Christian, prayer, attending church or women’s church groups. For example, Melody starts her day with her spiritual breakfast.

I get my Bible; I pick up my reading from where I left off the prior day. I read for about 15 minutes then after that I pray. Pray, everyday, all during the day, every waking moment my mind is saying Jesus. And when there is trouble, if I am caught in the midst of all and don’t know if I need to call somebody for some help. Jesus, he sends me, whatever I need, whether, it whatever, what would that be.

Maria stated:
I am a spiritual person so for that reason, you know, I am always seeking stuff. Special need of, of knowing that I have the faith to move forward or that thing will work out and I, I always ask prayers and my faith to guide me through whatever difficult situations I think I might face.

Louise said, “Christian, all my strength comes from the heavenly father. [I] Hope I am a role model.”

Martha spoke about power of prayer and the role of spirituality in her formative years: Pray. Yes. Prayer has been my support. Ah, a very spiritual family. We had to go to church every Sunday, starting with Sunday school on Sunday morning, Then to church service following Sunday school. Parents would drop us off at Sunday school and then meet us there at the church service. And if we didn’t go, we couldn’t do anything else for the rest of the day. You had to be there. That kind of setting.

Rubie shares:
I am also very, very much rooted spiritually and my spiritual life is really the foundation that supports my going in and coming out every day and my ability to withstand all forms of opposition. I understand where my strength comes from. I understand what hides in my heart for not only the direction of this program but my own personal life, so basically I am not moved by this and that.

Penny echoes the same sentiments:
I love my church so even though I am getting up early, I still have church responsibilities. I’m, my pastor says I’m in everything, you know, but I just love church and that’s where I get my strength from is from the church. While spirituality was a big influence in the lives of the research participants it was not the only influence.

*Lessons Learned from Family*

Consistently, the women shared how lessons learned from their families and childhoods have impacted where they are today in their careers and in how they view and acquire knowledge. No matter what the educational level of the parents, education was stressed in the homes of the study participants. Leadership skills, self confidence, self definition, work ethic, and an ethic of caring are all products of what African Americans call “home training”.

Martha shared the following thoughts:

I am thinking that how I see myself and how I feel about the world was basically developed from my home life, from my upbringing. We were always taught to be, to do the right thing and be proud of yourself for doing the right thing.

Melody talks about influences in her life that inform knowledge acquisition:

From their upbringing, their home rearing, parental guidance, my generation I would have to say extended family, neighborhood. And church. And friends. All of those mighty strong influences on who I am. My parents, my home, extended family. First
the home, parents, I was fortunate to have family growing up. Parents took grandma in to live with us.

Penny shares how she used a lesson her dad taught her to help her complete her undergraduate degree at Finesse while she was working full time:

Like my dad said, you never burn your bridges behind you because you might have to cross that bridge. So it’s like in every area on this campus, even today, I keep in contact with everybody because you never know when you might need a favor. Right. So I have some pretty nice friends work in the registrar’s office. I knew what I had to take and I took it in the order that I wanted to take them. My last year, that’s was when I was advised.

Rubie tells how secondary school taught her how to be focused and how that affects her life now:

I learned early on in a Black school, having come up in a Black secondary system where the teachers were highly committed to education, it didn’t affect me. I know how to survive. I know how to get what, you know, my teachers didn’t play that game. So that carried over to now. I know how to focus. Even when I went to graduate school and in that situation, I never took my eye off of the goal. When I went there, I knew what I was there for, why I was there and what I was going to do to get out. I never got caught up in anything else. So it’s all about knowing what you want, where you are going and stay focused to do it. I have to tell my students here now. Why are you going getting caught up on rebelling against this? Your goal was
not that. You came here for a purpose so you’ve got to stay focused and stay on your purpose. So I learned very well.

Mary recalls childhood memories of a family activity that instilled leadership skills at an early age: Most of us were kind of the leader type because what my family did, when my dad would, dad and mom would go somewhere one of us would be left in charge of the rest of the family. We lived about 12 miles from town. We didn’t have a car so we either walked or caught a bus between the two cities. So when they would go to town, knowing that it would be at least an hour and a half before they would get back, they would leave one of us in charge to take care of the others so that sort of helped us to develop the leadership skills. And I remember I took mine so seriously. I mean, when I was in charge, I was really in charge. And they would have to get permission to do everything. They did not like that. They would say you’re just bossy, but and I guess I sort of knew, be like well you know that I was developing what I was to become, you know, in terms of leadership.

Linda shared an experience from the civil rights era that greatly impacts her life now. Her family would go visit her father’s family in a small town in Virginia. While Linda is not the only one with stories from the civil rights era, she gave the most compelling example of how those experiences impacted her knowledge acquisition and construction.

We’d go down, particularly on the third Sundays whenever he was in church and we did a big gathering with family and friends and I remember, my childhood, you think
about these days in the 50s and 60s where there is unpaved road, you’d have these
country roads and dogs and it was dark, but I remember too particularly there was a
Ku Klux Klan rally in one of those days when I went. I might have been about 10 or
11 but I remember being so frightened, by my dad and friends. My mother didn’t
show fear. As we were coming back to Charlottesville, Virginia, and my dad was
driving. I remember just lying down on the back seat. I don’t know what my brothers
and sister were doing but I remember that, and I keep thinking about that. So my idea
of being African American, being African American generally and thinking of all that
history and growing up in, in during the days of desegregation, and then coming
through that and experiencing immigration when I was in high school, it really I think
colors what, what I am.

Linda is very much a social justice advocate now based on her childhood experiences.

You have to have a way to know what you want to do, the difference you want to
make and somehow do it. Even if you have to violate policies that you know are not
fair or work around them in some way. Get them, get them modified, if you see a
policy, and it appears to be unfair or may have perceptions of being unfair. I tried to
talk to people about it. I don’t have the authorization to change it, then I make a
suggestion to change it.

Summary of Findings

This chapter began with an overview of the HBCU site selected for this study and the
research participants. An institutional profile was presented followed by an individualized
profile of each participant’s narrative. The chapter then addressed both of the research questions. The first question was: How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s five mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition? The five mechanisms as set forth by Hurtado are anger; silence and outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness and multiple tongues. I addressed each mechanism separately. The research participants’ control of anger manifests itself through their body language, tone of voice, inflection of their voice, engagement in the situation. Depending on the situation and description, they “swallowed it,” accepted the situation, or figured out a way to work around the situation. The participants choose all day every day whether to be silent or speak out. Two of the participants chose outspokenness as their preferred communication style with the full knowledge of the possible outcomes of that decision. Withdrawal occurs when the participants need a quiet place for thinking, reflection and prayer. Shifting consciousness and multiple tongues intersect because as they understand the situation, they adapt their language to suit the situation.

The thematic findings addressed the second question: How do African American women in an HBCU setting develop support structures for their learning? The African American women in this study primarily construct knowledge through navigating gender oppression, spirituality, and background experiences. The examples shared are just a sampling of the myriad ways African American women acquire and construct knowledge.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Chapter Four presented the findings of the study from the perspective of the participants’ voices. This chapter seeks to discuss the findings in relation to the two overarching research questions. The discussion explores more deeply the gender hegemony within HBCUs. In response to the gender hegemony, the participants utilized the five mechanisms identified by Hurtado, spirituality, and the lessons learned from family to navigate the gender oppression and acquire knowledge.

HBCUs are considered nurturing environments for students, but the reality is that African American female faculty and staffs face the same obstacles at HBCUs as they do at PWIs in terms of the glass ceiling and a chilly climate. HBCUs lag behind PWIs in addressing gender issues. HBCUs’ religiously based foundation intertwined with the notion that they offer a respite from racism “have created a powerful torque of resistance to discussions on the manner in which women have been treated and educated at HBCUs” (Bonner, 2001, pp.180-181).

Gender Oppression within HBCUs

Gender oppression emerged as the most prominent theme identified by the participants in this research study. The findings also clearly indicate that class issues are intersecting with race and gender in this situation. In this study, I chose to more narrowly focus on the race and gender issues.

Gender is both a cultural construct and a feature of the social structure. As such, our ideas about gender are not based on any scientific or genetic imperative; rather, gender
notions are culturally based and are transmitted in the same ways that other cultural values are taught through the process of socialization (Flannery, 2000). Socialization is the process by which we, first as children and later as adults, learn and internalize values, norms and expectations of the culture and society around us. Thus gender ideas do not operate independently of the social context; rather, gender ideas are dependent variables, influenced by the dynamics of race, class, and sex in a particular setting” (Geiger, 2005, p.11). This socialization within the African American community is affected by the perpetuation of negative stereotypes by the White media (Betsch Cole & Guy- Sheftall, 2003, p. xxvi).

Hill Collins (2000) asserts, “Within the U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to African American women are used to justify oppression” (p 5). This same hegemony is present in the culture of historically Black colleges and universities.

At Finesse, women represent 57% of the faculty and staff and 61% of administrators. Men represent 43% of the faculty and staff and 39% of administrators; yet, men hold more of the major power positions. These percentages indicate that Finesse is in the 15% of HBCUs where females hold the majority of faculty positions (Geiger, 2005, p. 10), but their experiences seem to mirror their colleagues in the 85% of HBCUs where males hold the majority of faculty positions.
One of the study participants, Linda, shared her thoughts on being an African American woman at an HBCU. It is a telling statement on the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women:

Your point of reference sometimes is not African American but it could be gender because it’s a given, it’s a given that this is an African American setting primarily. So I really, quite honestly haven’t thought about the fact that I am an African American woman in an HBCU setting but a woman in an African American setting and just as briefly comment, comment on that, I think I can, I’ve thought about it some. I wonder more than having come to a conclusion, wonder if gender makes a difference in terms of how, how one maybe advances, how one is responded to. You know interaction of colleague and supervisors. I think as our setting changes here, we become more diverse, and that question probably would be more something I would think about more regularly. But I think as long as there are a majority of African Americans here, faculty, staff and students, then I don’t think, I don’t think about it as much. But I think in terms of extrapolating maybe gender and other issues from the African American world.

In 1989, Yolanda Moses posed the question; Do university officials and faculty members on HBCU campuses understand the gender issues that affect Black women (Geiger, 2005, p. 12)? Bonner’s 2001 article identifies the important issues to consider when addressing gender in the HBCU community as race and feminist ideology (p. 183). In 2005, The Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund commissioned a special report on Understanding
Gender in Public Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This special report identifies that discussions of gender are characterized by ambivalence and suspicion in the HBCU setting because some equate gender issues with female students and faculty and consider gains by females as losses by males. They argued that what HBCUs needed most was “a study to help get more Black males on campus”. The critics believed that if a gender study were done it would be tainted by the “feminist” attitudes of the researchers (Geiger, 2005, p.11). One has to assume the critics are speaking from their positions of power.

The attitudes portrayed by the critics of the Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund Special Report clearly underscore the need for the report. “Churches, families, college universities and community organizations provide African American women with the support to invoke dialog as a dimension of Black women’s epistemologies” (Jean-Marie, 2003). In response to the gender hegemony in this HBCU environment, the findings indicate the study participants share a set of support mechanisms.

Support Structures

The data revealed that the study participants share the support structures of spirituality and lessons learned from their families in their lives. These are in addition to the five mechanisms identified by Hurtado. All of these mechanisms developed during their formative years. The next section provides a detailed discussion of each mechanism. The last section presents a discussion on the participant claims of thinking or knowing, and a comparison of Hurtado to Belenky et al.
Spirituality

The participants identified spirituality as a very significant mechanism in their process of knowledge acquisition. The spiritual values extend from the church into the workplace. This finding is consistent with Jean-Marie’s 2003 study on Black women administrators in HBCUs. She found the women had a personal relationship with God and used religious/spiritual faith as their guiding force to lead, educate themselves and others, and to change repressive conditions” (pp. 20 & 22). Additionally, a second dimension of their spirituality involved their social relations developed through the church.

Jean-Marie’s (2003) findings are supported in the book Shifting, the Double Lives of Black Women in America. Seeking spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, and friends and family members is identified as one of the strategies that Black women use to cope. Black women find they can rise above the daily onslaught of sexism and racism by finding a higher purpose and building emotional connections in their lives (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 66).

The participants of this current study shared numerous stories of how their reliance on religious/spiritual faith allowed them to carve out space for themselves in the sometimes less than inviting environment of Finesse University. The women consider their religious/spiritual lives to be the source of their strength that helps them negotiate the world. Through this negotiation and renegotiation, over the years they have been able to construct a comfortable enough place that they choose to stay at Finesse.
Angela shared how she connects spiritually by turning to prayer when things are not going well.

I pray. I actually take time, step aside, pray, ask the Lord to give me some guidance and direction because what I have learned over the years is trying to handle some things myself doesn’t work very well. So, we have to stop and think about it. I’m pretty good at not just, ah, reacting. I like to take a moment to think about what’s the situation, how to handle it.

Reverend Dr. Renita Weems (2008) offers a perspective on how spirituality connects to two other support mechanisms; anger, and silence and outspokenness, as identified by Hurtado (1996).

Anger is a gift from God; anger helps you set boundaries for yourself. Anger helps you speak up and say when enough is enough. Anger is supposed to make you want to do something about what is wrong all around you.

(www.somethingwithin.com/blog/?cat=149, posted 4/18/2008)

All of the participants in the study described in their narratives the impact of anger and how they manage it in this HBCU environment. Lorde (1984) says, “Every woman has a well stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional which brought the anger into being. Focused with precision it can be a powerful source of energy and serving progress and change” (p. 127). She further states:

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world
that takes for granted our humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say symphony rather than cacophony because we had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters. (p.129)

The emphasis is on managing the anger so that it does not consume the participants, but becomes a part of how they negotiate the system to be able to survive. From the narratives, I can identify that anger is necessary for the survival of the participants in this HBCU environment.

The examples shared in Chapter Four show the participants managing their anger by the following actions: accepting the situation and leaving it alone (Iris), silently fuming (Melody), addressing the issue directly (Rubie and Penny), addressing the issue indirectly (Penny), and using it as a motivator (Mary). They learned to use the anger to survive, grow, and move on (Lorde, 1984)

Weems’s (2008) conceptualization of anger helping one speak up connects to Hurtado’s mechanism of silence and outspokenness. All the study participants describe in their narratives how they use silence and outspokenness to manage in the HBCU environment. This mechanism is often used in conjunction with controlling anger. The decision of which tactic to choose is dependent on the situation. Two of the participants, Angela and Ruth, have clearly chosen outspokenness as their overarching support
mechanism. They are fully aware that this decision limits their access to future knowledge. However, they have other ways to acquire the knowledge through networking with others. Mary’s anger at the Chancellor over their interactions regarding the early college high school program is a clear example of the anger helping you speak up. She spoke up at the beginning of this interaction and over the course of their verbal exchange, she changed her tactic to silence.

Another of Hurtado’s (1996) mechanisms is withdrawal to smaller female networks. Social factors within communities of color allow women to withdraw from men when tactically it is more efficient to do so (p. 383). The study participants withdrew to a quiet place for thinking, reflection or communing with a higher power as in the examples shared from Rubie and Arlene. Iris, Linda, and Martha are members of sororities. Mary is involved with the women’s group at her church. Martha and Linda described their female networks in their own words. Martha said, “I belong to several women’s organizations outside of campus so I have learned and been a leader for many, many years in these organizations. So that too has helped me work with students here on this campus.” Linda noted, “My Sunday school class is all women. Um, it’s comprised of all women.” In sharing this information, the participants did not discuss these activities in terms of withdrawing from men, but they do belong to and participate in smaller female networks. This withdrawal allows the women to reflect and gain perspective on the situations they face.

Hurtado describes shifting consciousness as the ability to shift from one group’s perception of social reality to another and to be able to simultaneously perceive multiple
social realities without losing their sense of self coherence. Rubie shares these lessons she has learned as her consciousness has shifted over her nearly 30 year employment at Finesse:

Well, I first of all learned that I cannot always share my success. I’ve also learned that I must be flexible and patient in terms of the timing of how I get things done. I have also learned that although I am giving out a lot that I have to take in so I found time to get certifications. I do things that will make me grow as an individual. I am now learning how to find a lot more balance between Finesse, my family life, my community life and how I learn. I still go outside because this environment can be very narrowly focused. So I am still participating in professional development activities and communicating with my colleagues and I try to travel abroad so I can continue to put perspective in place as I grow.

This relates to her story in Chapter Four where she had an opportunity to directly deal with some misconceptions among her colleagues. These changes are indicative of her growth in perceiving and understanding the multiple social realities that make up her world from her experiences at Finesse.

In addition to shifting consciousness, these women are also adept at changing their language to suit the situation. In the HBCU environment, the participants have to be bilingual within the Black community. In their work and professional roles at the university, they are expected to speak Standard English, while in their private conversations there can be a mixture of both Black English and Standard English. I share this story as an example of how
Mary moved back and forth effortlessly between Black English and Standard English during our interview:

We have an all women’s church group and I am, I am very, very different in that group because I try not to be the professional woman, I try to be just plain Mary in that and leave all of the university stuff. You know, even I like for them to call me Mary and they still won’t say Mary, I say just call me that please. I like to hear my name every now and then. So in that particular group, I really am a lot different and try not to be in the role of leadership. Just one of the group and I have to watch myself because a lot of times they do like these little Bible quizzes and I teach Sunday school. And so sometimes I even try not to get all the answers right so that I don’t be looked upon as that smart one, so somebody else can win the prize.

When Mary is speaking in public in her official role at Finesse, you will not hear her say “I don’t be.”

In this study, the mechanisms of shifting consciousness and multiple tongues were intertwined. The study participants all identify the ability to see the multiple social realities of a situation and still be grounded in their sense of self. Therefore, because of their ability to see multiple social realities, they developed the ability to adapt their language to the audience they need to address and remain grounded in their sense of self. The ability to shift consciousness and speak multiple tongues is rooted in lessons taught by the family during the formative years.
Lessons Learned from Family

The foundation of a person’s belief about education and religion is based on what the family believes. This is especially true in the African American family. The findings of this research are consistent with this idea, as the families of all the participants stressed the importance of education. It did not matter what level of education the parents obtained; the consistent message was: Education is the way to a better life. In addition to the importance of education, the families of the participants instilled life skills into them. They learned leadership, financial management, a strong work ethic, social justice, appreciation for diversity, and survival skills from their families. The lessons role modeled throughout their childhood impact their lives as adult women. Negotiation and navigation skills emerged as important to the acquisition of knowledge for the study participants.

Some of the major functions of the family are to pass on social values and gender roles. Values are demonstrated in the home by recognition of achievement, the way the family talks to each other, and by showing love and concern (Vargus, 2002). Understanding family identity helps to develop self esteem. Through story-telling, families provide an account of achievements, testimony to the struggles, courage and resilience. These stories can inspire the children. Lessons that are implanted in childhood often come to remembrance in adulthood when faced with similar situations (Vargus, 2002). In Chapter Four, Mary’s strong family identity is evident in her story of how leadership skills were taught in her home,

Family role models of how to treat one another, elders, and people in the community,
translate into how the participants treat others in the HBCU environment. While these lessons are helpful in instructing others, they can also stifle their responses to oppressive behavior in the HBCU environment. If the oppressive behavior is practiced by authority figures and you have been taught to respect authority, a shift in consciousness has to take place before these women can respond appropriately.

Maria remembers being exposed to different experiences.

She would expose us to things through church, through community organizations, and through good guidance. All of those things were connecting us with other people and serving the community. And from that you gain a lot. You learn how to help others to assist others and to make the most of yourself. You gain confidence. You know, I was able to go to Girl Scout camp and things like that.

According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), Black mothers are primarily responsible for their children. While teaching the basics like their ABCs, multiplication tables and right from wrong, they also have to teach their children how their actions are perceived by the greater society. Understanding what behavior is acceptable or unacceptable in different situations is essential to the survival of the children. “This ability to shift consciousness and adapt their language can be lifesaving” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 108). Ruth remembers how her mother pushed her:

See I’m Black Black. See there is a difference between being light skinned and being Black. Now, I saw this kind of discrimination among us in my hometown. And I
knew it so that’s why I worked so hard in school back then. I think my mother pushed us, never saying that you got to do this because you’re Black. She just pushed us but I remember when I recognized I was really, really, really different. I was in junior high, I was a junior in high school and I was inducted into the National Honor Society and that year, a young man who was Black like me, I mean skin Black like me, was in middle school and he saw me and he said Man, I’m going to be like you. I said what do you mean and he said I’m going to be in National Honor, I didn’t know him.

Ruth’s story is an example of colorism.

Hurtado (1996) identified five mechanisms that are essential to the generation and comprehension of knowledge for women of color: anger, silence and outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness and multiple tongues. The outcomes of this study invariably found that four of the five mechanisms are congruent with Hurtado’s descriptions. Withdrawal is the mechanism where the findings diverge from Hurtado and appear to be more congruent with Hill Collins’s concept of safe spaces.

Thinker / Knower

The predominant issue in this study was discerning how the participants construct knowledge in an HBCU setting. One of the interview questions asked the participants to describe themselves as a thinker or knower. Only one woman in the group identified herself as a knower: Barbara. Four identified as both; knowers and thinkers with thinker being the dominant characteristic: Linda, Iris, Martha and Melody. Their responses included: “Thinker 100%, Knower 70%”; “both dependent on the situation”; “through my thinking I have come
to know.” The other nine identified themselves as thinkers—Angela, Arlene, Brenda, Louise, Maria, Mary, Penny, Rubie, and Ruth. Some of the participants voiced the concern that saying they were knowers indicated that there was no more to learn. Linda made the following observations during her interview: “Thinkers use experiences and observations to make decisions. Knowers have gathered facts and based on those facts are able to come to some type of decision or conclusion.” I believe these comments are a good summation of how the participants acquire knowledge in this HBCU setting.

As an interesting note, the knower, Barbara, deals with facts, figures and logic in her position at Finesse. She says:

Being able to sit down and program and analyze things and just trying to do complicated problems and things like that. I think that is one of my strengths. To me that doesn’t actually require a lot of thinking per se, just knowing and being able to figure out how the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

This explains why she identifies as a knower. The four who identified as both rejected the duality of having to choose thinker over knower, while acknowledging that thinker was dominant. Yet in reality, they all are knowers but seem hesitant to claim that label. As stated previously, some voiced the concern that claiming “knower” implies that there is not more to learn. Overall, the participants’ identification as a thinker or knower is not tied to their background, education, or the roles they fill at the institution.

As we return to the women’s ways of knowing framework (Belenky et al., 1996), how does it compare to Hurtado’s mechanism of knowledge acquisition?
• Silence - where women experience themselves as mindless, voiceless and subject to the whims of authority.

• Received Knowledge- women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own.

• Subjective Knowledge- truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited.

• Procedural- women are vested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge.

• Constructed Knowledge- women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing.

Hurtado (1996) says that women of color have multiple group membership and the nuances of said membership make many of these women “relative knowers. “Knowledge is not fixed, and is largely socially and politically constructed. The challenge for women of color is to know that you know and be able to circumvent the consequences of that knowledge while being true to themselves”(p. 378). As Louise says, “I know that I know I know.” She is always true to herself.

Belenky et al. (1996) found that women in their study talked about voice and silence
as a metaphor for their intellectual and ethical development and that the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined (p.18). Hurtado (1996) states that silence and outspokenness can be powerful tactics women of color use to manage their anger. Additionally, they gain knowledge by being unobtrusive near the people in power who talk freely around them as if they are invisible. Information gathered on these reconnaissance missions is then shared with their own community (pp. 378-382). In this HBCU setting, finding a voice is tied to the development of mind and self. Silence or outspokenness is a choice that the participants make every day. They fully acknowledge that the choice they make is dependent on the situation.

The five Women’s Ways of Knowing positions (Belenky et al., 1996) are akin to Hurtado’s (1996) shifting consciousness mechanism. Each position is analogous to the Sandoval example of an “automobile clutch system of selecting, engaging and disengaging gears in the transmission of power” (Hurtado, 1996, p.385). Both frameworks should be viewed as fluid instead of hierarchical because the context of each person’s situation determines when, how, and where they choose to engage. I see the participants of this study overall as being constructed knowers. Their language encompasses words like think, believe, learn from experience, and understand. In the HBCU environment, I see them engaging invisible clutches as they shift back and forth to the place that is best for them at that point in time. Sometimes they are downshifting because that is the safest place for them to be. At other times, I see them calculating the risks, revving up the engine, and making an aggressive run for their target. It is all contextual.
As the participants continue shifting consciousness (Hurtado, 1996), their language changes with each situation; yet, they still have a sense of themselves. These women understand certain language is expected and accepted within the HBCU environment. The language within the Black community is multilingual as women navigate between their professional and personal identities and multiple group memberships (Hurtado, 1996; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Hurtado (1996) and Belenky et al. (1996) proved to be complementary models that give some insight into African American women’s knowledge construction in an HBCU setting. As I reflect on what the participants shared in their narratives in this HBCU environment, these women are experts at viewing all angles of the situation, making a decision, carefully thinking through their actions and the impact those actions will have on themselves and the campus, while using their oppositional knowledge to establish and maintain their space at Finesse University. These observations seem to parallel Belenky et al.’s constructed knowledge position, where women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (1996, p.15).
Summary

This chapter examined the intersection of race and gender within this HBCU, the manifestation of Hurtado’s mechanisms, shared support structures of spirituality, lessons learned from family, and a discussion of thinkers and knowers.

The final chapter will build upon the previous chapters in this dissertation to provide a discussion of implications for additional research based on the findings and conclusions presented in this study.
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study explored African American women’s knowledge construction within the context of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) setting. It is based on the supposition that current western definitions of women’s ways of knowing or knowledge construction do not adequately address the experiences of African American women, taking into account the intersection of race and gender. This intersectionality is the everyday lived experience of African American women; therefore, placing African American women’s experiences at the center of an analysis of knowledge construction provides an opportunity for the revelation of new insights. This chapter offers discussion, recommendations for further study, and practices based on the research questions.

Implications for Future Research

Hurtado’s Mechanisms of Knowledge Production and Acquisition

Race, gender and class oppression, especially gender, continue to be prominent in institutions of higher education and are particularly profound in HBCUs for African American women (Geiger, 2005). HBCUs are warm and inviting places for African Americans, but in reality, the intersectionality of race and gender presents many challenges for African American women. As discussed in the research findings and discussion chapters, the HBCU environment appears to value women’s contributions and participation less than men’s. Hurtado identified five mechanisms from the writings of feminists of color that
theorize how women construct knowledge. In this case, when race intersects with gender, Black women generate knowledge within the confines of their multiple group memberships.

One of the goals of this study was to explore Hurtado’s mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition for women of color. Women of color use anger, silence and outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues to cope with the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in their everyday lives. Hurtado’s model is multicultural and examines the ways in which positionality manifests in the writings of feminists of color. This study narrows the focus to African American women, specifically African American women in a racially homogenous setting of an HBCU.

Generally, the findings of this study are consistent with Hurtado’s mechanisms of anger, silence, outspokenness, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues. The participants appear to use these mechanisms as tools and as guiding forces in their own knowledge construction processes. While it is reassuring to find that Hurtado’s theory appears to bear out in practical situations, this study was small in scope and requires further work to build upon and refine interpretations and applications of Hurtado’s mechanisms.

One of the mechanisms did not manifest itself in the way that Hurtado writes about it. The participants in this study differed on the mechanism of withdrawal to smaller female networks. For example, while four of the participants are members of sororities and four participants mentioned belonging to women’s church groups, they did not refer to or conceptualize these groups as places to withdraw from men. Instead, the participants spoke of withdrawal to quiet places or away from Finesse’s campus for opportunities to think,
reflect, and seek help from a higher power as they coped with the challenges on the campus. This departure from Hurtado’s theory warrants further investigation and reflection. Collectively, research on African American women holds the potential for a future study, which isolates the way that gender identity enacts in racially homogenous settings.

Barbara Hofer and Paul Pintrich (1997) suggest more research on gender related patterns in epistemological development. They further called for more studies on minority populations including within-group variability of individuals with different gender and ethnic groups. Additionally, the Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund Special Report on Gender within Public HBCUs (Geiger, 2005) supports this call for studies on within group variability. Therefore, this research study serves as a beginning step toward this generation of research focused on African American women’s epistemology. Data compiled from an analysis of more groups of African American female faculty, staff, and administrators at the selected site and other HBCUs could prove to be invaluable.

Positionality and Roles

One of the limitations of this study was the researcher’s decision to bracket the construct of class and to focus on the intersection of race and gender. There were clear indications in the data and in the literature that class and the intersection of class, race, and gender was an important dimension to understanding women’s ways of knowing. Personally and professionally, positionality and where one sits when perceiving the world is important. In this study, there were indications that the participants felt their backgrounds and societal class were an integral part of who they were and how they experienced the world. In
addition, the broad job categories of the participants lend an explanatory filter for some of the women’s perceptions and behaviors. According to Harding (1996), some resources for generating knowledge clearly are available primarily for those in powerful positions in a culture; therefore, the African American woman’s resources for generating knowledge are dependent on her positionality in an HBCU setting.

One way to develop future studies focused upon the intersectionality of class is to include role theory as a guide for better understanding the complexities of the situation. For example, in Colbeck’s (2006) analysis of role theory as it relates to higher education, work-life balance issues provide an overview of role theory and its potential contributions for understanding how higher education employees construct their working lives. Some of the concepts that are especially relevant are roles, integration of roles, and the flexibility or permeability of boundaries within roles.

Sarbin & Allen (1968) define roles as “a specific set of behaviors expected for a specific office or position” (as cited in Colbeck, 2006, p. 34). Carol Colbeck takes a step further and suggests that individuals can assume multiple roles in the same setting. She goes on to suggest that a valuable point of analysis is integration, where individuals work to “simultaneously satisfy expectations for two or more roles” (Colbeck, 1998). Merton (1957), who writes about how individuals simultaneously hold many different roles, echoes this idea. Other scholars explore integration by focusing on boundaries. Colbeck (2006) suggests that by studying the flexibility and permeability of boundaries, we can not only better understand the choices and tolerance level individuals make, but also the potential for systemic change.
in higher education co-workers and administrators as they expect certain attitudes and behaviors from one another. Future studies on women in HBCU settings could focus upon the overlap between Hurtado’s mechanisms and the positionality relative to job classification or roles in an HBCU setting. More specifically, researchers could examine the points of role overlap and multiplicity as it influences the knowledge construction process.

**Thinker / Knower Issues in Relation to Black Culture and Gender**

The findings of this study indicate participants know and feel more comfortable identifying themselves as “thinkers” or as “thinkers and knowers” than they are willing to claim. The data further revealed the participants placed more value on being a “thinker” than a “knower,” as African American socialization processes include the belief that thinkers excel.

In this case, the African American women’s experiences tell them that claiming “thinker” is safer than claiming “knower.” Claiming “knower” for themselves would require the African American women to change their thinking and thus, their behavior. Hill Collins (2000) argues that changes in thinking may alter behavior, which may produce changes in thinking; therefore, if an African American woman in the HBCU setting changes her behavior, it will force a change in the behavior of the predominately African American male leadership of HBCUs, which may ultimately produce changes in their thinking.
Black women conditioned to think everything through before acting incur differential consequences to acting without thinking. This appears to be prevalent for the participants from Finesse University. Possibly, in the HBCU environment, the caution to think before acting is twofold: one, African American women do not want their actions to impact negatively on their ability to do their job; and two; every action is watched by the male and female students. African American women are careful because they want to be sure their actions do not perpetuate the cycle of male dominance.

Black women have a precarious relationship with the rest of society primarily due to being female and Black; their identities have been constructed and portrayed in a negative light. These societal relationships have served to silence Black women, and in some cases erased Black women altogether (Blue, 2001, p. 119). The ways in which Black women are socially constructed and defined, directly influence how those with power and/or privilege can construct and define themselves. “Because Black women are duly oppressed by axes of race, class and gender, it is necessary for them to take on the responsibility of recreating cultural identities, politicized knowledge, and theoretical assumptions based on criteria that are important and relevant to them (Blue, p. 135). In this study, the participants dealt with internalized and gender oppression. This constant self monitoring/self reflection to be visible and heard is a way of life. As role models for other African American women in an institution of higher education, their perceived roles as uplifters of their race have potentially far-reaching consequences.
Within the African American community, Black women may know something is true, but may be unable to legitimize those knowledge claims using prevailing norms and the standards acceptable to African American women. New knowledge claims must be consistent with the body of knowledge the controlling group accepts as true (Hill Collins, 2000). In HBCU settings, which largely operate under these Eurocentric structures of knowledge validation, African American women run the risk of having their knowledge questioned. Several participants shared the concern that claiming “knower” meant there was no more to learn. This hesitancy may mean participants want to protect themselves from potential negative consequences of claiming to be a “knower.” These consequences can include having their credibility questioned and their access to knowledge limited. Due to the risks associated with claiming “knower,” the participants discuss “thinking it through,” and “through their thinking they come to know.” As Belenky et al. (1997) note, the experiences of knowing involve careful observations and analysis.

According to Hill Collins (2000), “there are two types of knowing depicted from colloquialisms in the Black community—knowledge and wisdom. Living life as a Black woman requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival. African American women give such wisdom high credence in assessing knowledge claims. The distinction between knowledge and wisdom and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them is essential to Black women’s survival. In the context of intersecting oppressions, the distinction is essential. “Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the
survival of the subordinate” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 253). The powerful refers to elite white men who control the Western structures of knowledge validation and who routinely distort or exclude African American women’s experiences from what counts as knowledge. African American women also face this same subordination within the predominately African American male-controlled HBCU environment, because Black men have adopted these Eurocentric structures of knowledge validation (Hill Collins, 2000).

Institutional Strategies for Change

The findings from this study offer information for the development of institutional change strategies. The suggestions offered combine the study findings with two key authors whose focus is specifically on HBCU institutional change. The first, Sharon Washington (2007), says that on the institutional level, to bring change top leaders need to be committed. They need to walk the talk as a model to others, being cognizant of the gender issues in an HBCU setting. Leaders create a culture in concrete ways that go beyond policies and public statements. According to Washington, institutional culture is embedded in:

- what is asked and measured;
- responses to incidents and crises;
- what is modeled and coached;
- how rewards are allocated;
- criteria for deciding who to recruit and promote
The findings of this research study indicate that African American women are often asked to serve the community and subjugate their own knowledge in order to advance the agenda of a primarily male campus leadership. Women pay a price when they unconditionally continue to provide valuable service without challenge or question. At the time of the interviews, Finesse’s leadership operated from a reactive mode. This style of leadership taught the staff to provide information when asked, but not to expect any action to happen in a timely manner unless the top leadership designated it to be a priority.

The participants in this study perceive women who behave in ways more characteristic of men as receiving greater rewards than women who display characteristics that are more feminine. Several participants alluded to men’s promotions occurring more rapidly than women’s. People who are willing to do as asked regardless of the potential for going over the edge receive compensation and gain access to more resources than people who stand by their convictions.

The second resource, The Thurgood Marshall Special Report, states that there has been a need for deeper and richer conversations about gender in the African American community and in its institutions of higher education for a long time. In fact, 19 years ago, Yolanda Moses posed the following questions, which she believed participants in higher education should be asking:

1. What is the overall campus climate or environment for Black women?
2. How do their institutions treat Black women?
3. Are Black women included in the informal as well as formal aspects of university life?

4. Does the curriculum reflect the culture and contributions of Black women?

5. Do Black women students find adequate mentors to help guide their careers?

6. Are Black women faculty members and administrators treated similarly to Black men, White men, and White women in tenure and promotion processes?

7. What factors can enhance the success of female Black students, faculty members, and administrators in pursuing their career goals?

8. Do university official and faculty members on HBCU campuses understand the gender issues that affect Black women? (2005, p. 12)

Leadership on HBCU campuses should develop an ongoing process to address issues raised by Moses. One possible strategy for implementation at Finesse is the Sisters Mentoring Sisters (SISTERS) Project founded at the University of Central Florida. Designed to help Black women develop career plans and strategies for their personal growth and professional development, this initiative provided all Black women employed at the university with a structured process for developing knowledge and skills that could potentially lead to career advancement. The second goal of the project was to combat the isolation and alienation that kept Black women physically divided and emotionally estranged. Finally, it sought to create a unique, caring, positive and self-affirming village in which women take collective responsibility for and assume leadership in identifying and challenging barriers to their career development (Green & King, 2001, p.157). Due to the predominance of females on Finesse’s
campus, the physical separation and isolation are not as much of a problem as the emotional
estrangement and support of other women.

The unique aspects of this project that are appealing include:

- a focus on personal and professional development of the total employee population of
  Black women across all employment categories

- the empowerment of the Black woman by Black women such that each participant
discovers the power within herself

- the reliance on the participants to facilitate sessions, rather than experts as facilitators

- the program operates from an empowerment and Africentric conceptual framework

Africentrism “describes a worldview that acknowledges and affirms the richness of the
African culture and the validity of African beliefs and values, institutions and behaviors. This
perspective asserts that people of African descent have retained to varying degrees a number
of essential elements associated with African life and values. Proponents of Africentrism
maintain it is often inappropriate to apply Eurocentric theories in an effort to understand and
explain the needs, values and behaviors of African American people” (Green & King, 2001,
p. 160).

Eurocentric theories traditionally depict people of African descent and other people of
color as inferior or pathological in their social personality or moral development. Hill Collins
(2000) echoes that Eurocentric knowledge validation processes depict alternative
perspectives as less than credible. Africentrism does not claim or aspire to hegemony and
offers an optimistic and holistic frame of reference (Akbar, 1984; Asante, 1998; Kambon, 1992; Schiele, 1996; Swigionski, 1996; as cited in Green and King, 2001). As cited in Green and King (2001), Appleby, Colon and Hamilton note, “a significant part of victimizing females involves stereotyping them as unable to compete, more intuitive than rational and less capable of scientific achievement” (p.160). Combining the Africentrism worldview with Hurtado’s’ theory could create a more culturally and gendered way to study African American women and “other ways of knowing” to explain how Black women relate to and interact with the world (Asante, 1998, as cited in Green and King, 2001). Additionally, this combining of theories also encompasses the womanist perspective of being “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983).

Individual Strategies for Change

The findings of this study also offer information for the development of individual strategies. The suggestions offered combine the study findings with authors focused on Black women in the academy.

**Knowledge of the HBCU Culture and Role Expectations**

**Self Definition**

Mary Alfred (2001) offers guidelines that contribute to the success of African American women in White male dominated academic institutions. As stated earlier in this chapter, Black women face the same subordination within the predominately African American male controlled HBCUs as they do in PWIs; therefore, these guidelines are generally applicable to both settings.
Observations and experiences facilitate the African American woman’s understanding of the specific institutional context and culture of the HBCU where she works. By watching, observing and learning the practices of others, these women can develop a frame of reference from which to pattern their own actions and behavior. An awareness of how others play the game helps women develop the competence necessary to perform roles successfully in the HBCU culture and win the game. Identifying and interacting with significant members of the culture provides opportunities to observe behavior patterns on how others best receive information. The degree of interactions between university leadership and female employees publicly and privately are indicators of how gender issues manifest on the campus.

Alfred (2001) invokes the marginal man concept in discussing strategies for African American women’s success in the Ivory tower, because it seems to fit the status and experiences of Blacks in White America. Alfred found that Park’s (1928, as cited in Alfred, 2001) statement “He is a man {woman} on the margin of two cultures and two societies did not fit her study participants” (p. 59). Her participants saw themselves as active participants in both cultures. The participants of this study see themselves as active in the African American and HBCU cultures.

Lorde (1984) notes that in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers. Watching generates a dual consciousness in African American women, one in which Black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor. Being on the edge of the box provides Black women with a special angle of vision from which to watch and
learn the behavior of the oppressor and plan their survival strategies. (Alfred, 2001 p. 59-60)

“Because of the privilege of knowing, watching, seeing and learning, that their marginality affords them, these women should use the privilege to produce new knowledge about African American women’s experience at an HBCU” (Alfred, 2001 p. 60). Alfred further suggests Black women use their marginality in the academy to construct definitions that reflect positive rather than negative images.

Having a Place of Refuge

Alfred (2001) states, “having a safe space is a method by which the women preserve their constructed definition of the self when the environment becomes disconcerting” (p.61). The participants of this study discuss withdrawing to quiet places for thinking, reflection or communing with a higher power. Additionally, a number of the participants discussed their membership in women’s church groups or sororities. Perhaps these women’s church groups and sororities serve as safe spaces for the African American women in this study.

Refusing the Labels of Others

Alfred (2001) advocates that by refusing to accept others’ definition of their Blackness and femaleness, Black women break down the negative images that thwart their success in the Black male dominated culture of HBCUs. This suggests the African American women in HBCUs should refuse to be subordinated and objectified.
Getting to Know: The Power of Knowledge

The researcher sees this strategy as significant to this study. The power of knowledge is significant to Black women’s survival in the academic culture of an HBCU. Knowledge of the academic culture and role expectations contribute to the abilities of Black women to meet the cultural expectations (Alfred, 2001). However, meeting the cultural expectations in an HBCU has the possibility of contributing to the gender oppression prevalent at HBCUs.

The Power of Voice and Visibility

“For the Black woman, a voice is the identification, access and vehicle through which the knowledge she has constructed for herself and of her various life worlds may emerge” (Alfred, 2001, p. 69). Black women are often invisible and silenced in the academy. The issue at HBCUs has less to do with race than with gender. Emphasis on the proper use of voice is crucial for getting the male dominated leadership of HBCUs to listen to the voices of Black women, African American women must be willing to speak and challenge things in a professional manner (Alfred, 2001, p. 71). Choosing to speak out when appropriate can create a major impact within the campus environment.

Mentoring

Lisa Williams (2001), in her analysis of young Black females in the academy, addresses the importance of mentoring. African American women are the least likely group to participate in mentoring relationships. She asks who will serve as mentors for future generation of young Black women. “If an individual has not been mentored, how can the individual mentor someone else?” (p. 99) In this case, being part of the solution involves the
women setting up formal mentoring networks to transform the experiences of those who will come behind them. The SISTERS Project could be one vehicle to develop this network.

Conclusions

Embedded in the HBCU environment is the intersectionality of race, gender and class. HBCUs exert strong influence on gender relationships within the African American community. These intersecting oppressions affect African American women’s access to and experience in sharing knowledge. Hill Collins and Hurtado identify that the daily experiences of women of color create a different relationship to knowledge, which calls for them to create their own norms for accessing knowledge. Hurtado asserts that women of color understand that social and political forces influence the construction of knowledge; therefore, women of color who do not assume the role of “knower” invite disaster and annihilation.

Within the HBCU setting, the complexity of race, the value associated with women’s labor, and gender roles underscore the need for open dialogue. Race issues are more subtle but gender issues predominate African American women’s ability to access knowledge in the HBCU setting. The value African American women associate with knowing requires additional examination of African American women as knowers and thinkers.

Research Question One

1. How do African American women in a racially homogenous setting, such as an HBCU, manifest Hurtado’s five mechanisms of knowledge production and acquisition?
Based on the literature, Hurtado identified five consistent mechanisms used by women of color to construct knowledge: anger, silence/outspokenness, withdrawal, shifting consciousness and multiple tongues. The study confirms the participants’ use of four of Hurtado’s’ five mechanisms. The finding on withdrawal was inconclusive as participants used this mechanism but not as described by Hurtado.

This study on African American women in a racially homogeneous setting appears to be consistent with Hurtado’s multicultural model.

Research Question Two

2. How do African American women in an HBCU setting develop support structures for their learning?

These study findings have support in the literature and research:

The data revealed the participants developed support structures for their learning through observations and experiences. The participants identified three key support structures for their learning. These support structures are navigating gender oppression, spirituality, and lessons learned from family. The support structure of navigating gender oppression highlights the intersection of race and gender within the HBCU setting. Spirituality and lessons learned from family emerged as significant support structures for the women in this study.

Alfred’s (2001) strategy for voice and visibility relates to lessons learned from family because the women find their voice from their family and community. Colbeck (2006) role
theory supports Alfred’s strategy of getting to know, as one of the components is knowledge of role expectations. Additionally the findings support Belenky et al. women’s ways of knowing and Hill Collins characteristics of knowledge. Knowledge is a prerequisite for change and the participants demonstrate how they adapt and accommodate to situations by reaching back to the past to change and inform the future.

In conclusion, the findings present evidence of how each of Hurtado’s mechanisms is a part of the participants’ knowledge construction process: anger, silence/outspokenness, shifting consciousness, and multiple tongues. In general, it found that the participants were more comfortable with self-concepts as thinkers versus knowers, and that they did not necessarily withdraw into smaller female networks in the manner described in Hurtado’s work. Regarding support structures, there were three key findings. First, the women were aware of and very purposeful in navigating gender oppression as a part of the HBCU context. Next, they used spirituality and their family backgrounds as sources of strength in dealing with the challenges of the HBCU setting. Finally, they exhibit Hill Collins characteristics of validating knowledge in their ongoing knowledge construction.
REFERENCES


Books.


Colbeck, C. L. (2006) How female and male faculty with families manage work and
personal roles. In S. J. Bracken, J. K. Allen & D. R. Dean (Eds.), *The balancing act: Gendered perspectives in faculty roles and work lives* (pp. 31-50). VA: Stylus.


www.apa.org/pi/oema/programs/pemsi_historically_black_colleges_universities.pdf


Dillard, C. (2000). The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen:


Hull, G., Scott, P. B. & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1982). *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave*. Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press.


Dear ________________:

I am seeking your assistance. As part of my doctoral program, I am studying how African American women understand and construct knowledge in a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) setting. You have been identified as someone who might be willing to share your experiences at this HBCU as an employee.

If you agree to be in this study, I ask that you do the following:

Meet with me for a face-to-face session interview about how you understand and construct knowledge based on your experience at this HBCU. You will be asked questions about your experiences as an employee and to give examples to help in understanding what has been most important to you as an African American woman in an HBCU setting. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed, and notes will be taken throughout the interview. Subjects will be asked to review their transcripts for accuracy.

The records of this study will be kept private. This is a study for a doctoral dissertation and will be published. However, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Your responses will be completely confidential. Research records and tape recordings will be kept in a locked file; only I will have access to the records.
Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the project at any time.

If you have any questions or need clarification about the study you may contact me at (919) 530-7498 or via e-mail at jwilder1@nc.rr.com.

Sincerely,

Jennifer A. Wilder
North Carolina State University
Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Susan J. Bracken
North Carolina State University
Associate Professor
Dissertation Advisor
Appendix B

Opening Statement

I am trying to understand how African American women in an HBCU setting make sense of the world. You can help me by sharing your experiences. I would like to ask you questions about your experience at this HBCU. These questions will focus on how you think about thinking and the ways you come to know things.

First Interview

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is it like being an African American woman?
3. How would you describe yourself as a thinker or knower?
4. How do you think women in general get their knowledge and ideas?
5. And you in general, how do you usually get your knowledge and ideas?
6. How do you think being an African American woman has affected how you get your knowledge and ideas?
7. Tell me how you came to be working at an HBCU.
8. Tell me what a typical day is like for you by walking me through it.
9. If you were asked to explain your HBCU experience, how would you explain it?
10. Is there anything else you would like to talk about that I neglected to ask?

Second Interview (if needed for scheduling purposes)

1. How do you think being immersed in an HBCU setting affects how you learn?
2. How has working at an HBCU shaped how you think about yourself and the world?
3. How has being an African American woman affected your experience at an HBCU?

4. Tell me about a project or meeting that went well. What made this a positive experience?

5. Tell me about a project or meeting that frustrated you. How did you handle it? Give me an example.

6. How have you changed over the years as to how you go about getting your knowledge, or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment?

7. Thinking back over the years (your experience on this campus), who is/was particularly important to you in your growth as a learner or thinker? How are you different when you are in the presence of women only rather than when men are present at this HBCU? What about outside of this HBCU environment?

8. When things are not going well for you as a knower or thinker, what do you do?
Appendix C

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Knowledge Construction of African American women in an HBCU setting

Principal Investigator: Jennifer A. Wilder   Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Susan J. Bracken

We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of African American female employees in an HBCU setting and how they learn in that environment.

INFORMATION
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews, each about 60-90 minutes long. You will be asked questions about your experiences as an employee and to give examples to help in understanding what has been most important to you as an African American woman in an HBCU setting. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed, and notes will be taken throughout the interviews. Subjects will be asked to review their transcripts for accuracy.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort associated with your participation. All participation will be confidential and researchers will not identify any comments or feedback by name, location or anything that would make it possible for readers to identify an individual’s comments.

BENEFITS
There are no direct benefits for the subjects. Information from this research could potentially contribute to the body of research on women’s development, African American women’s perspectives on their experiences of working at an HBCU, and issues of positionality based on employment category. This knowledge could be used to enhance the experiences of African American women at HBCUs.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Audiotapes from the interviews will be retained throughout the research, and destroyed at the end of the project. Identifiers will be removed from study data such as transcripts and interview notes. Data will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet at the home of the investigator conducting the research. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.
COMPENSATION
For participating in both interviews you will receive a $10.00 gift card for a store or restaurant.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Jennifer Wilder at jwilder1@nc.rr.com or 919-530-7498 or the faculty sponsor Dr. Susan Bracken, at Campus Box 7801,300 J Poe Hall, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27645, or 919-515-6298. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. David Kaber, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-515-3086) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-513-2148).

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed at your request.

CONSENT
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.”

Subject's signature __________________________________________ Date _____________

Investigator's signature ________________________________________ Date _____________
Appendix D

*Data Analysis*

1. Submitted interview audiotapes to transcriptionist
2. Read transcripts and compared to handwritten notes
3. Listened to tapes with transcript in hand to check for missed words and fill in blanks
4. Reviewed edited transcripts for errors
5. Sent transcripts to participants for member checking
6. Created preliminary profile of each participant
7. Received transcripts back from most participants (not all chose to participate in member checking)
8. Followed up with participants and received more transcripts
9. Read transcripts five times as part of initial serial tagging/labeling of codes (Baptiste)
10. Read transcripts five times as part of initial parallel tagging/labeling of codes (Baptiste)
11. Tagged transcripts using open coding (1st level coding structure)
12. Tagged transcripts using Hurtado coding framework (1st level coding structure)
13. Tagged transcripts to mark noteworthy quotations (open)
14. Imported transcripts and early coding structures into NVivo
15. Refined and heavily coded transcripts to build a defining structure for Hurtado's mechanisms (2nd level coding)
16. Refined and heavily coded transcripts to build a defining structure for open thematic coding/support structures (2nd level coding)
17. Created institutional profile using documents, website and meeting with institutional historian
16. Wrote first draft of chapter 4 to document findings, used draft as part of iterative analysis process

*Met with advisor 1-3 times a week for review of all analysis phases, drafting of chapters, and editing (December through June)

** Met with another committee member for overall editing assistance (May)
***The researcher log and reflective journal served as a part of the data throughout the process
Appendix E  
Hurtado Matrix of Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Thinking back over the years (your experience on this campus), who was particularly important to you in your growth as a learner or thinker?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have you changed over the years as to how you go about getting your knowledge, or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How has working at an HBCU changed how you think about yourself and the world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you were asked to explain your HBCU experience by comparing it to something else, how would you explain it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence and Outspokenness</td>
<td>Thinking back over the years (your experience on this campus), who was particularly important to you in your growth as a learner or thinker?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have you changed over the years as to how you go about getting your knowledge, or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you think being immersed in an HBCU setting affects how you learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you were asked to explain your HBCU experience by comparing it to something else, how would you explain it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you believe that women learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me what a typical day is like for you by walking me through it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Withdrawal | How are you different when you are in the presence of women only rather than when men are present?  
Thinking back over the years (your experience on this campus), who was particularly important to you in your growth as a learner or thinker?  
How do you think being immersed in an HBCU setting affects how you learn?  
How do you believe that women learn?  
Tell me what a typical day is like for you by walking me through it. |
| --- | --- |
| Shifting Consciousness | What does being an African–American woman mean to you?  
Thinking back over the years (your experience on this campus), who was particularly important to you in your growth as a learner or thinker?  
How have you changed over the years as to how you go about getting your knowledge, or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment?  
How has working at an HBCU changed how you think about yourself and the world?  
If you were asked to explain your HBCU experience by comparing it to something else, how would you explain it?  
How do you believe that women learn?  
Tell me what a typical day is like for you by walking me through it. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple Tongues</th>
<th>What does being an African-American woman mean to you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking back over the years (your experience on this campus), who was particularly important to you in your growth as a learner or thinker?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have you changed over the years as to how you go about getting your knowledge, or making decisions or working things out in this HBCU environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How has working at an HBCU changed how you think about yourself and the world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you believe that women learn?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family Influence | So one day I told my mother, I said I’m going to quit my job and I’m going to go to school full time. Ah, no, don’t do that, jobs are hard to come by. Um, and you have a little seniority. She said don’t do that. So I did not, I didn’t buck my mom. I was like, okay, okay. But I should have had the drive to say, no I think this is best. But I didn’t. I backed off and I didn’t. Again, I, just being influenced by her, her panic influenced me and I look back and I, I’m upset with myself for letting all of those things happen but at the time, you just. I was a single parent

<p>| Sample Code |  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Climate</th>
<th>You know, we attended a lot of formal affairs. People wore formal attire and that was okay because I did that back in Ohio so I, the transition to that was okay. But I found the climate to be classist. I mean virtually you had the elite and someone asked me, Oh, what, are you a member of a sorority and said, no I am not. And her whole expression changed immediately and, you know, she moved on. That was early on and so I was like, Oh, okay, so if you weren’t part of the I want to call it a clique but if you weren’t part of the clique…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence and Outspokenness</td>
<td>I had one of the professors to actually, verbally attack me. He got all in my face, that close, you don’t do any work for us and then, you know, I was like but you haven’t given me any to do for you. I’d be happy to do it but you have to give me some work to do first. I said you are assuming I can’t do it because I’ve been so busy with the Chair’s work but you are assuming I can’t do it so you don’t give me any.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>