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# Commitment, Community, and Consciousness: A Collaborative Autoethnography of a Doctoral Sister Circle

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*Although multiple studies acknowledge the significance of mentoring for African American women doctoral students, the literature lacks empirical support for the formation, sustainability, and outcomes of mentoring relationships. In academia, African American women are an understudied subject which leads to a paucity of educational programming and policies that address their specific learning needs. Without targeted research, educators are limited in their ability to understand African American women doctoral students' educational needs. The purpose of this collaborative autoethnography was to examine the reflections of four women participating in a doctoral sister circle called Unwavering Unity Sister Circle (UUSC). This study explored their lived experiences and ways UUSC nurtured, supported, and empowered both the students and their mentor. Data analysis showcased themes of commitment, community, and consciousness which can be instructive for other African American women doctoral students and mentors. Findings indicated that in safe spaces, such as this sister circle, where African American women are authentically concerned about each other's well being and success, their level of commitment and consciousness increases. This work has implications for educators and students because it provides a roadmap for addressing the unique learning needs of African American women through mentoring.*

**Keywords:** Collaborative autoethnography, African American doctoral women, mentoring

## Introduction

Mary Church Terrell, a pioneer African American feminist, popularized the motto, “lifting as we climb,” which was a clarion call for women to uplift the race by elevating themselves (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). This is particularly apropos as African American women pursue and acquire graduate degrees at significant rates in today’s higher education institutions. According to the most recent data from the United States Department of Education (2017), during the 2016-17 academic year, African American graduate school enrollments comprised 11.7 percent of the 3.8 million students who were enrolled. Furthermore, the Council of Graduate Schools’ (2017) report on total graduate school enrollments indicated that there were 188,838 Black students, of which 56,765 were Black men and 132,073 were Black women.

Considering the increasing number of African Americans pursuing higher education, multiple studies have acknowledged the necessity of mentoring for African American women doctoral students (Dickerson et al., 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Rasheem et al., 2018). However, the literature lacks empirical support for the formation and outcomes of mentoring relationships. In academia, African American women are an understudied subject, which leads to diminished educational programming and policies that address their specific learning needs, especially given the multiplicative jeopardies they face in American society. Without targeted research, educators are limited in their ability to understand and address African American women doctoral students’ educational needs. This research illustrates a commitment to researching, understanding, and enhancing African American women doctoral students’ lived experiences through transformative educational praxis.

Thus, the purpose of this collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is to examine the reflections of four women participating in a doctoral sister circle herein referred to by the pseudonym Unwavering Unity Sister Circle (UUSC). Neal-Barnett et al., (2011) define sister circles as “support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among African American women” (p. 266). This study explores our lived experiences and the ways UUSC has nurtured, supported, and empowered all of us within the group. Data analysis showcases themes of commitment, community, and consciousness, which can all be instructive for other African American women doctoral students and mentors as they seek solace and affinity in academia. Findings indicate that while engaging in the community of UUSC, everyone’s varying levels of commitment and consciousness increased. Therefore, this work provides a mentoring success strategy for educators and students to use as a model to address the unique learning needs of African American women, (re)visioning the role that they play in the academy. Ultimately, this research reveals how the doctoral mentoring experience of African American women unveil their unwavering commitment, engagement in authentic community, and consciousness born out of shared experiences.

## Literature Review

Being well is a primary element of personal, professional, and academic success, which is why (re)visioning the lives of African American women doctoral students through the lens of the sister circle is critical (Love, 2019). For UUSC, being well means coming together to provide support, encouragement, and motivation. Love (2019) affirms that wellness is wisdom, and choosing wellness is transformative because it allows one to be whole. Mentoring provides a pathway to being well since the extensive literature regarding the doctoral process highlights the

ways that many students struggle along the way to completion. While early research on this topic began with investigations of individual factors related to students' persistence and success (e.g., Howard, 1981; Malaney, 1988), the focus has broadened in more recent years to structural and contextual factors that impact doctoral students' experiences (Durette et al., 2016; Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2016; Skakni, 2018).

One such way that scholars have addressed the challenges students face in doctoral programs (e.g., sense of belonging, ability to persist, and the need for academic and social support) has been through emphasizing the importance of mentoring. Jordan-Zachery (2004) defines mentoring as a "relationship involving guiding, nurturing, and teaching (both formally and informally) between individuals with differing degrees of experience" (p. 875). Highlighting the unique demands of mentoring on African American women and how it has the ability to enhance or limit their success, Jordan-Zachery's (2004) findings indicate several aspects of mentoring that are informative to this work. First, mentoring is a relationship that requires a time investment. Additionally, mentees should take the initiative to find a mentor. Next, most long-standing relationships are built on sincerity. Finally, academic departments should create networks for junior and senior scholars. Similarly, Patton and Harper (2003) articulated the following in reference to the networks of African American women:

The establishment of support networks through family, friends, and the community is necessary to help women survive and excel in graduate programs. When they desire to have their issues placed at the forefront, African American women create or join networks with others who can relate to and understand their struggles, both personally and professionally. (p. 69)

Many African American women survive through the creation of support groups with other like-minded African American women who can identify with their experiences (Patton & Harper, 2003). When African American women can form a bond that constitutes a sense of family, support develops into successful partnerships and collaborations. Community is established through mentorships that operate on the premise of consciousness and understanding from a personal and professional perspective. Yet, a lack of knowledge regarding the African American woman's doctoral experience is an example of the unique challenges faced by African American women, who have been routinely ignored and excluded from the discussion of student experiences.

Discrimination against African American women is "a part of [their] everyday existence" (Brown et al., 2003, p. 94). Therefore, establishing systems that provide a space for solace and support are essential to African American women's wellness (Brown et al., 2003; Gray & Keith, 2003; Love, 2019). According to Patterson-Stephens and Hernandez (2018), when women scholars of color establish bonds among themselves, their academic and professional socialization and identity formation are positively impacted. Furthermore, the coaching, advice, and validation women of color receive in these spaces provide them with necessary affirmation that would otherwise not exist for them (Patterson-Stephens & Hernandez, 2018). Rasheem et al., (2018) assert that although emerging studies on African American women in academia acknowledge the significance of mentorship and the reality of discrimination at the intersection of race and gender, more research is needed on the formation and outcomes of mentoring relationships, specifically for African American women in doctoral education.

While research addresses mentoring and its influence at different stages of graduate study, few studies address the unique role mentoring plays in African American women's doctoral degree

completion. This gap in the literature suggests a need for additional research that addresses the role of mentoring on African American women doctoral students' persistence through doctoral programs. This study provides a context for African American women's doctoral success based on the role of mentoring relationships. Additionally, it centralizes the voices and experiences of African American women to provide empirical support for the formation and outcomes of mentoring relationships.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As a feminist perspective of critical race theory (CRT), critical race feminism (CRF), focuses on issues of power, oppression, and conflict centralized in feminist theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2017). Originally framed by Derrick Bell, constitutional law scholar, CRT analyzes and explains society and education relative to race and power (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The tenets of CRT, such as addressing essentialism, anti-essentialism, and intersectionality, as well as the normalization of race and racism, align with CRF (Collins, 2002; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Wing, 1997). CRF initially emerged as a way to address legal issues of “a significant group of people—those who are both women and members of today’s racial/ethnic minorities, as well as disproportionately poor” (Wing, 1997, p. 1). While CRF builds on CRT, it also centers the “roles, experiences, and narratives of women of color” in analyzing systems, structures, and institutions (Pratt-Clarke 2010, p. 24). More specifically, CRF draws upon both CRT and feminism in exploring social phenomena from the perspective of people doubly marginalized by both race and gender. CRF is an appropriate theoretical lens for this study because of its focus on intersections of race, class, and gender (Berry, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Wing, 1997) as well as its interdisciplinary approach to national and international social inequality (Berry, 2010).

While CRF focuses on the lived experiences of women of color who encounter different types of discrimination, it concentrates on the intersections of race, class, and gender in the system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015; Collins, 2002). CRF offers counternarratives as strength-based models of resistance to rewrite assumptions regarding marginalized groups by creating new counterstories that centralize their voices. Through critical evaluation, CRF helps others transform their realities. In “Other People’s Daughters,” Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), explore the concept of CRF in relation to the study, analysis, and critique of the educational experiences of African American female students in the United States. Asserting that CRF as a theoretical framework in educational research is a vehicle for studying, analyzing, and critiquing African American women and girls, they identify five essential elements:

Critical race feminism as a theoretical lens and movement purports that women of color’s experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women; Critical race feminism focuses on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression; Critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e., anti-essentialist); Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth; and Critical race feminism calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression. (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 20)

As an interpretive framework to cultivate meaningful, justice-oriented educational change, CRF undergirds this study because it provides a transformative perspective on the lived experiences of African American women doctoral students who encounter intersecting oppressions as they (re)vision and enact critical counterstories of their doctoral experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Pratt-Clarke, 2010).

### **Why Autoethnography?**

As a part of our sister circle, we spend a substantial amount of time sharing ideas with one another. Participant 3, lead author of this study, envisioned a project to examine how African American women perceive the role of mentoring during their doctoral journey. Collectively, we determined it was worthwhile to self- and cross-examine our experiences. Seeking to provide a source of insight into the African American woman's doctoral experience, we reflected on our experiences and perceptions of the role mentoring has played in our doctoral work. Autoethnography allows us to discover, tell, and critically examine our experiences (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Ricci, 2003).

Autoethnography is a method of analyzing personal experiences within larger social and cultural contexts, and it allows researchers to challenge societal norms by way of those personal experiences (Kim, 2016). It “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand a cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). Though autoethnography has been described in numerous ways (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Moua, 2018), in the simplest sense, it centers the writer(s) and allows them to become the subject of the study (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Chang et al., (2013) explain that autoethnography uses autobiographical stories to focus on the larger meanings and interpretations of how those stories are situated within social and cultural contexts. More specifically, Chang et al., (2013) define CAE as “a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomenon reflected in their autobiographical data” (pp. 23–24).

We embraced the collaborative approach to autoethnography because it allows participants to work both independently and collaboratively on the iterative process of creating and sharing stories, and then analyzing and interpreting the data that manifest from those stories (Chang, 2008). With this approach, we gained the benefit of having a “scholarly space to hold up mirrors to each other in a communal self-interrogation and to explore our subjectivity in the company of one another” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 26). In addition to approaching autoethnography collaboratively, we also chose to do so from a critical lens. The criticality of autoethnography allows researchers to focus on facets of identity and how those identities are often marginalized in various sociocultural contexts (Marx et al., 2017). Because critical autoethnography is rooted in critical theory, it not only requires a focus on injustice and inequality but also a prescriptive nature to offer alternatives for the transformation of oppressive social conditions and -isms. According to Adams (2017), critical autoethnography calls out violations, both on the personal and cultural level, and offers solutions for minimizing those violations. Lastly, this work is critical because theory, in this case, CRF, works in tandem with the story being illuminated (Holman Jones, 2016). As it relates to the choice of the CRF framework, we found alignment based on Few's (2007) identification of critical race feminists as being “interested in conducting activist research that has a social justice

agenda” to “foster some kind of ... transformation that benefits the people they study” and “methodologically, [they] use nontraditional data” (p. 457).

The power of autoethnography lies in its ability to disrupt the common belief that undergirds scientific research and most of academia: knowledge gained through lived experiences is incompatible with intellectual knowledge (Pathak, 2010). In some ways, autoethnography is an act of resistance because it “confronts and defies traditional investigative methods” (Chavez, 2012, p. 342). Thus, we were drawn to autoethnography because of our desire to use our own stories in a way that could challenge societal beliefs, inspire other African American women, identify the ways in which our intersectionality is evident in our individual and collective experiences, and inform educational practices at the doctoral level. This autoethnographic approach places our sister circle experiences at the forefront of research to (re)vision the experiences of African-American women in doctoral programs. After all, “the stories shared by autoethnographers are meant to resonate with others through their personal, emotional nature” (Marx et al., 2017, p. 2). As Boylorn and Orbe (2014) said, “we write as an Other, and for an Other” (p. 15).

### **Participant Profiles**

Participant 1 is a high school English teacher with proven success in culturally responsive classroom management and culturally responsive pedagogical practices. She seeks a doctoral degree based on a long term goal and a promise to herself. Participant 1’s ultimate goal is to make a difference in the lives of her students and to make a mark on the field of urban education.

Participant 2 decided it was necessary to pursue a doctorate in order to make the level of impact she envisions for education: that every student in this nation will be given access to a teacher who will ignite their civic capacity. After three years as a high school English teacher, Participant 2 entered a doctoral program, focusing her research efforts on the sustainability of Black teachers.

Participant 3 is pursuing a doctorate with interests that include culturally sustaining pedagogies, Women’s and Gender Studies, and feminist theory in African American Literature. In a broad sense, she is interested in exploring the contours of Afrocentric feminist pedagogies and curriculum reform. Her purpose is to enrich the lives of African American women and girls by serving as a social justice change agent.

The mentor is a graduate of the Participants’ current doctoral program. Like them, she was also a first-generation doctoral student. She recently completed her second year in a tenure track Assistant Professor appointment. Her cognate is Career and Technical Education and her broader research interests are centered around college and career readiness, teacher preparation, and the educational experiences of African American students.

### **Context: How UUSC Came to Be**

In the second class of Participants’ doctoral program, Mentor and a panel of her colleagues were guest presenters who shared their experiences as African American faculty in the academy. In the audience, Participants absorbed the valuable insights the panel shared such as developing a research agenda, navigating graduate school, and becoming marketable for a tenure track position. Throughout the presentation, another panelist consistently paid Mentor compliments about her awards and accomplishments. She presented as humble and honored, but not there to simply deliver a guest presentation. Mentor cared about investing in the doctoral students’ futures. After

the presentation, Participant 3 asked for her contact information because she wanted to learn from an African American woman who had already cleared a path for her.

In their initial conversation, Mentor asked outrightly, “What can I do to help you?” At that point, Participant 3 was unsure, but after several conversations decided to initiate an online messaging group with Participants 2 and 3. From there, UUSC came to be. We share tools to sharpen our practice, share information about calls for proposals, and get together to celebrate milestones; however, our primary objective is to support one another. Mentor frequently checks in as an accountability partner, an ally, and someone who affirms that Participants can and must persist. Accordingly, while UUSC began as a group of four women coming together to satisfy a need for support and guidance, it has evolved into a circle of African American women who are stronger together through our shared commitment, community, and consciousness. When any of our group members face crisis situations, we provide each other with immediate support. Without UUSC, Participants’ first year experience as doctoral students would have been limited. However, our collective participation in UUSC has operated as a vehicle for our growth and development.

### **Process and Data Collection**

To prepare for data collection, we followed the five steps outlined by Chang et al., (2013): (1) form the team, (2) decide on the research focus, (3) define the way we would collaborate, (4) define roles and boundaries, and (5) consider ethical guidelines. The formation of the team for the research occurred naturally considering our sister circle was formed in August 2018 at the beginning of the Participants’ first year of doctoral work. We used a full collaboration model (Chang et al., 2013), which means we were all involved in the research process from beginning to end (i.e., developing the research idea, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and writing the report). Roles and tasks were defined as a group by focusing on each person’s areas of strength and expertise. With a final manuscript in mind, part of this discussion centered on writing responsibilities, deadlines, and authorship. From an ethical standpoint, this collaborative effort was based on voluntary participation, was nonhierarchical, and held consensus on the research focus and project goals, which are all ethical considerations for CAE as noted by Lapadat (2017).

We collected data from a combination of personal memory data and archival data. Though memory work is a known limitation in autoethnographic work (Chang et al., 2013), we believe we had rich memories from a time standpoint considering the first year of Participants’ doctoral program had just ended. Our archival materials, those created for reasons beyond research study, included emails, text messages, and a group messaging platform that we pulled from to cross-check recollections (Chang et al., 2013). We were inspired by Ashlee et al., (2017), deciding that our approach also required reflexive writing. Likewise, we agreed critical collaborative autoethnography could operate as a form of empowerment both for ourselves and for other women in doctoral programs. Together, we came up with the prompts that would best guide our individual reflections:

1. How did you come to the decision to pursue a doctoral program?
2. What are your unique struggles as an African American woman in a doctoral program?
3. What does mentoring mean to you and why is it critical in your doctoral process specifically?
4. How does UUSC support you?

5. What experiences have you had working with African American women (and women in general) in other groups during this first year in your doctoral program?

Mentor’s reflection was less prescribed but focused on her role as the mentor of the sister circle and the ways that her doctoral and professoriate experiences impact her approach with us.

Working concurrently, we each wrote individual reflections and then exchanged them to engage in individual cross-analyses. We decided to work independently in order to grapple with our own interpretations before collectively engaging in final negotiations. Our coding process had two cycles. The first cycle was the initial coding (Saldana, 2016). We each individually reviewed all of the reflections to become familiar with the data and capture initial codes for similarities and differences across our reflections. The next step was employing pattern coding. The codes that were generated from our individual reviews were then collapsed into categories, grouping the initial summaries into broader concepts or themes (Saldana, 2016). Regarding issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability, while autoethnography does not deal with these in a traditional qualitative sense, Ellis et al., (2011) contend these measures for quality are rooted in the author(s) of the story recognizing it as truth, the utility of the story to readers, and the ways it compares to or informs the authors’ own lives.

### Findings

After individually analyzing each of our reflections for common themes, we collectively discussed the major findings. During our meeting, we sought to find connections between our stories and determine how to best articulate them without compromising the authenticity and integrity of the original data. Thus, we were able to identify three major themes that were presented in each of our reflections on our UUSC experiences. These themes represent our *Why*, our *What*, and our *How* within the sister circle (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*UUSC Themes*



## **We are Committed**

The first theme from the data regarded our reasons for being, which were recounted in terms of *why* we joined our doctoral program of study, *why* we joined the sister circle, and *why* we choose to persist, despite the barriers [racism, sexism, and classism] we encounter. Using the prompts to reflect, members of UUSC revealed our commitments to (1) meeting our personal goals, (2) highlighting the extraordinary competencies of being African American and woman, (3) advancing the success of African American women, and (4) honoring the love and sacrifices of our families.

Joining a doctoral program was a significant decision for each member of the sister circle, however common across all of our reflections was a determination to meet a personal goal. There was an emphasis on passion and purpose, evidenced in reflections such as the following statement made by Participant 3: “My ultimate desire to complete the doctorate is based on a commitment to my sons, to myself, and to my purpose.” Similarly, Participant 1 recalled knowing the doctoral degree was her destiny in high school. Each of the doctoral students feels not only a desire but a higher call to effect change in education, as evidenced by Participant 2’s reflection: “Pursuing a doctorate was necessary for me to make the level of impact that I envision for education.”

While Participants reflected on our decisions to pursue doctoral studies, Mentor recalled her decision to join the sister circle, remembering her initial feelings of self-doubt related to ineligibility. In light of Participant 3’s request for mentorship, Mentor summarized moments of inner conflict, but an ultimate commitment by stating:

What Participant 3 did not know was that I saw her email before bed but needed a moment before I responded. What makes me qualified to be a mentor I asked. After toiling with self-invalidation, I recall deciding the next morning that I had only gotten where I was because of other people who had and were mentoring me. Even more so than my professors and advisors in the program, it was previous students in cohorts before me. I valued those relationships immensely and decided that could also be beneficial for Participant 3.

Mentor’s expressed feeling of commitment to assisting in the success of African American women coming after her highlights a sentiment that was also threaded throughout the doctoral students’ reflections. This Ghanaian concept of Sankofa [SAN (return), KO (go) and FA (look, seek and take)] was evidenced in Participant 2’s reflection:

...this Ph.D. will give a salute to the work done by the generations before me; and because I will be the first person from both my parents’ families to obtain a doctorate, my completion of this program will broaden the opportunities for success for the generations that come after me.

Simply stated, the *why* for the women of UUSC is that we are all committed. While this commitment fulfills our individual desires to support each other’s wellness and meet our personal goals, findings indicate that we also hold a greater commitment to our families and communities. We all articulated an unyielding faithfulness to the doctoral journey with a purpose that extends beyond personal gain and operates as a pathway to liberation for our families and communities.

Thus, the benefits we receive from participating in UUSC (outlined in the next two sections) allow us the space and guidance we need to work toward our visions.

### **We are Engaged in Authentic Community**

The *what* of our sister circle is our engagement in an authentic community – a place where four African American women can comfortably come together to exchange ideas and collaborate. Narratives reflected a desire for community and a need for persistence in a supportive environment. Overall, the sub-themes included (1) the establishment of a safe space, (2) the need for authentic support, (3) a sense of community, (4) embracing collaboration over competition, and (5) showcasing genuine investment.

Poignantly, Participant 2 acknowledged that UUSC is a safe space that allows her the freedom “to not be okay.” Given the stresses encountered as a doctoral student, it is necessary to find solace among sister friends. Similarly, Participant 1 reflected that UUSC allows her “to be vulnerable without repercussion or judgment.” Through mentoring, she receives motivational and encouraging feedback. Mentor acknowledged that she too finds value in this safe space. By supporting the students, she is becoming more confident in her own abilities.

UUSC is a place of community where the experiences of African American women academics are at held the center, and many of our academic and personal needs are met by each other. Within this model of mentorship, members encourage each other and receive authentic support. Participant 2 reported that mentoring provides pathways to reach her goals, and it also allows her to “cheer on other Black women as they work toward” their goals. This reflects a need for support and the reciprocation of resources. For example, Participant 3 said a mentor is “someone who is invested in my personal growth and development and ... who can be a sounding board for me and provide access to opportunities as well as guidance.” In establishing an authentic community, UUSC provides a means for personal growth and development. Mentor genuinely cares about the well-being of the students, as evidenced by her frequent wellness checks, constant motivation, and unwavering support. Participant 3 concluded that “standing together with these women makes me stronger than going solo.”

Engagement in an authentic community provides a vehicle to abate the competitiveness the Participants sense in their doctoral program. Participant 1 stated, “I struggle with competing with others...each person can contribute and the collaboration can be amazing.” UUSC has provided a means for collaboration over competition with a mentor who makes a genuine investment. In the past year, we prepared abstracts together and presented at conferences. We collaborated on this article. Mentor is invaluable to us. Participant 3 shared, “I lean toward the sister circle for much-needed support [because]...I believe Black women should stick together.” The outcomes of UUSC represent a genuine investment on the part of all participants. We agree that we can just be ourselves and “know that these three women are there for us no matter what.”

### **We Operate According to our Consciousness**

From our data analysis, we found the final theme of consciousness to be woven throughout all of our narratives. Given the ways that our mentoring model has functioned over the past year, we have a heightened level of awareness of our place in the various academic spaces we occupy. As a result, we have made a place to call our own. It is *how* we function as a sister circle. We find

ourselves operating according to our consciousness in two ways: (1) the acknowledgment of our positional realities and (2) the affirmation of our unique needs. Across the narratives, we acknowledged the ways in which our positionality as African American women is inextricably linked to the ways we approach this doctoral journey. Participant 2 reflected,

So, I have struggled making sacrifices—deciding which commitment would receive my whole self, and which would have to wait for me to fully show up. As a Black woman who has always been generally able to be everything to everyone, I am not used to having to make that sort of decision. However, this year I have learned the beauty in it.

Similarly, Participant 3 shared, “I am aware of the multiplicative jeopardies I face as a Black female doctoral student. Whether ageism, racism, sexism, or classism, these intersecting oppressions are my companions daily.” These facets of our identities were not left behind the moment we entered the door of our institutions. Because of this, UUSC becomes a place where we can discuss challenges given our own lived experiences. From those experiences, both in and out of academic spaces, there has grown a desire to be sustained beyond the professional. Participant 3 further explains the role that UUSC has played in her doctoral experience:

It is important to me to dismiss some of the barriers Black women unknowingly erect. The sister circle helps me to stand with a group of women who do not have ulterior motives and whose only goal is to stand together. This explodes the myth that Black women cannot unite.

Participant 3’s point about exploding this false narrative positions the UUSC as a tool of collaboration, empowerment, and commitment which (re)visions the African American woman’s lived experience, particularly in a doctoral program. Through avenues such as Black Girls Rock, and embracing and embodying BlackGirlMagic, we hold fast to the need to transfer these conversations from popular culture to transformative praxis. So, over the course of this year, we have stood, both physically and virtually, side-by-side working to make sense of our newfound endeavors. This combined effort, as demonstrated through our reflections, shows that for us, the whole is definitely greater than the sum of its parts.

Lastly, across narratives, UUSC has allowed us to take time to articulate our need and desire for mentoring as African American women operating within an academic space. Collectively, we have agreed that mentoring matters and we were able to showcase why. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 explained its necessity due to a “thick air of competitiveness” they combat. Participant 3 said mentoring “provides access to opportunities as well as guidance in avoiding pitfalls along the way.” Similarly, Mentor pointed to the need to have a space to share “both vulnerably and confidently.” For us, who we are, the struggles we face, and how we can hold steadfast on this path to completion remain at the forefront. This sister circle manifested as a space for us, by us; a space outside of our jobs, outside of our institutions, but still inside ourselves as African American women academicians.

## **Discussion**

The process of completing this study, as well as the findings that resulted, highlight the solace, support, allegiance, and affirmation that can result from the mentorship of African

American women pursuing their doctoral degrees. Each of us spent individual time sifting through our memories, feelings, and unadulterated thoughts to reflect on our first year participating in UUSC. After allowing our vulnerability to guide our personal responses to the prompts, we shared our reflections with each other and then spent more individual time connecting with each other's stories. This is when we met and utilized our time together as a space for productivity as well as healing. For an hour and twenty-one minutes, the four of us discussed our stories, validated each other's perspectives, shared our revelations, and honored the role that we have played in each other's lives. The emotions were honest and the camaraderie was undeniable.

The findings from this study align with Shavers and Moore's (2014) research on the resilience of African American doctoral students. In our reflections, we highlighted similar convictions and desires across our experiences. Similarly, as with Patterson-Stephens and Hernandez (2018), we find our commitments, community, and consciousness highlighted and elevated as a result of UUSC. Patton and Harper (2003), emphasize the importance of establishing support networks. Like the women in that study recalled their mentoring experiences, we also recalled and identified the ways UUSC operates as a space for like-minded women to share similar challenges and successes both professionally and personally. We also highlight the significance of the mentorship we receive in UUSC as well as the significance of mentorship at large. As Jordan-Zachery (2004) attested and we have found here, mentoring does require a time investment, and the result, which is definitely an outcome of UUSC, is the development of quality relationships. Like Rasheem et al., (2018), our findings confirm the reality of intersectionality as African American women. Using a CRF perspective, we answer the call for more research on how mentoring relationships are created and sustained for African American women in doctoral programs.

According to CRF, African American women encounter multiple oppressions that regularly shape their lived experiences. This is particularly the case in doctoral study where African American women are often marginalized in classroom settings, and rarely given the same access to opportunity as their White or male peers. We could rely on UUSC to renew our commitment to doctoral study, establish a community of caring, and raise our consciousness of how these issues might affect one another. Our findings indicated that all UUSC participants joined to be included in a space that recognizes our intersectionality and welcomes learning, sharing ideas, collaborating on projects, and maximizing the doctoral experience. Several of us highlighted ways that we used UUSC as a place we could go to seek professional guidance, escape from academic distress, or share exciting victories. Furthermore, as students and faculty in predominantly White institutions, we acknowledge our race and gender cannot be separated from one another and that these two things often speak before we get a chance to do so.

As shown through these findings, our sister circle is a space for liberation because our doctoral journeys have shown us our subjugation in society did not (and do not) end with the pursuit of this advanced degree, but instead intensifies. From a CRF theoretical framework, the research co-created by informants should be centered, critical, and empowering for the informants (Few, 2007). Based on all of our reflections, UUSC is a safe space to vulnerably be African American, women, and academics. Ultimately, we see a connection between these findings and the transformative, social justice orientation of the CRF framework, because, while social justice was not the first intention of this work, we now recognize it as a byproduct. Therefore, the viability in this work is its replicability; it can serve as a model for women living this same experience.

## Recommendations

Mentoring is a strategy African American women can use to persist in a doctoral program. When they commit to a goal, establish an authentic community, they develop a higher level of consciousness that supports them internally and externally. With this in mind, we offer two recommendations to African American women entering or currently enrolled in doctoral programs, and one for those who may serve as potential mentors.

1. Ask and it shall be given. While many doctoral students expect mentorship would automatically present itself in their programs, this is often met with a reality of isolation. Individual students must consider their unique needs, wants, and goals of their doctoral experience and proactively search for mentoring opportunities. Many opportunities may require looking beyond an institution. With UUSC as one model, students can also be inspired by the ways in which social media groups and virtual mentoring and networking can offer additional supports (Ford et al., 2017).
2. Know what to look for in a mentor. With UUSC, we found a committed mentor who genuinely has our best interests at heart and wants to help. A mentor who knows what your interests are and who really tries to help you achieve your goals is an asset to you in your doctoral program and beyond. You may or may not be at the same institution. You may need to seek someone who does not travel in your circles. The ultimate challenge is to choose a mentor who takes the time to invest in you.
3. For potential mentors, lift as you climb. Michelle Obama (2009) proclaims that “as women, we must stand up for each other.” The academy is a place where women are bombarded with challenges in completing their doctoral programs and securing tenure track positions. It does not stop there. Even in tenure track positions, the need for an effective mentor is critical. Young (2017) describes how important mentorship is even after completing the degree. Mentors should provide a space to help other sisters move forward and reach higher through the creation of safe spaces like our sister circle.

For institutions committed to the success of African American doctoral students, we offer three recommendations to improve educational programming and policies to address their specific learning needs.

1. University level leadership should incorporate funding initiatives related to recruitment and retention for the initiation and support of sister circle models on their campuses at each degree level (undergraduate, masters, doctoral) and a combination for cross-group mentoring. We recommend these initiatives be responsive to student needs, by considering that students may or may not be full-time students and may have familial or career commitments. Also allowing them ownership of the structure and flow is necessary.
2. As a standard practice, Universities should match mentors to enrolled African American doctoral students. While this process is not organic, it could lead to supportive mentoring relationships. As students establish lasting connections with both African American and non-African American women faculty and staff, this process potentially promotes a culture of caring that benefits both parties.
3. In addition to committing resources to the establishment of effective mentoring programs, we also recommend institutions establish policy that addresses the multiplicative jeopardies African American women encounter in doctoral study and throughout the academy. Providing multiple resources for African American women doctoral students who experience intersecting oppressions to seek assistance (an Ombudsman or staff

person) and find support. Making these supports accessible and advertising them through course syllabi, student services, program orientations, and existing affinity groups is essential to African American student's success.

### Conclusion

The present study adds to the growing body of literature regarding how mentoring provides tools for persistence and how it (re)visions the lives of African American women doctoral students through the lens of CRF and the sister circle. For educators, this CAE identifies success strategies that provide a model for mentors and/or professors to address the unique learning needs of African American women doctoral students. To target educational programming and policies, future research should focus on the ways sister circles promote positive mental health, boundary setting, and self-care among African American women, especially given the multiplicative jeopardies they face in academia. More studies should also examine the benefits of and approaches to mentorship among African American women at an early stage in graduate study to promote their retention and graduation.

The UUSC became a sanctuary for us as African American women in academia. We are able to be vulnerable with each other and allow the wisdom that each of us brings to the table guide us into new heights of eminence. Drafting this CAE was an embodiment of that space. The formal process of developing our own narratives, analyzing each other's, understanding our commonalities, affirming our unique experiences, and situating it all into findings from the broader literature, created for us a bonding experience that will continue to guide our work with each other. As African American women determined to excel in scholarship, working together, and supporting each other within UUSC has become an anchor in this process. This is an experience that all African American women deserve. The mentorship process of feeling, knowing, and then together proving that we are part of a larger force of influence, will ultimately guide us to the completion of our degrees, and through the fulfillment of our greater contributions. This research reveals how UUSC served as a vehicle for the unwavering commitment, engagement in authentic community, and consciousness born out of shared experiences for African American women doctoral students.

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