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# From Midterms to Naptime: An Autoethnography of the Affects of Intersectionality of an African American Single Parent College Student

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**FROM MIDTERMS TO NAPTIME:  
AN AUTOETHONOGRAPHY OF THE AFFECTS OF INTERSECTIONALITY  
ON AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE PARENT COLLEGE STUDENT.**

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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ABSTRACT

According to United States Census (2016), Women in female-headed households with no spouse experienced higher rates of poverty (35.6 percent) than women in married-couple families (6.6 percent) and men in male-headed households. Having an education would significantly increase their chances of obtaining suitable employment which would also grant them income and benefits that could improve the overall quality of life for their families.

Today women are the majority on college campuses. According to The United States Census Bureau (2011), women make up 56% of college enrollment. Though the percentage of women attending college is increasing, the challenges that they face while on campus have yet to recede (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Shaw, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), 12 percent of undergraduate students are single parents; 78 percent of those students are considered low income. Students who are also parents face dealing with the responsibilities of parenting while also having to work and attend class. Time management, healthcare, childcare, and financial obligations are barriers that make persistence especially difficult for single parent college students.

Those barriers are especially apparent for women of color (Knight, 2007). Knight (2007), suggests that, “These concerns are significant when conceptualizing issues related to Black females as racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and inequality shape school experiences and outcomes, and are triple threats to academic achievement” (p.2).

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore the author's experience as an African American single parent college student and as a member of a sorority designed for students with similar backgrounds. More specifically, this study aimed to give light to the effects that intersectionality had on the author's ability to persist in a higher education setting. This study explored the author's personal experience in relationship to other African American single mother college students' experiences during their academic tenure. This study aimed to answer the following research questions: How did the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism affect the persistence of the author? This dissertation also sought to answer what was the impact that a sorority dedicated to mothers in higher education had on the author personally, socially, and academically?

This research utilized critical race feminist theory and mat to describe the microaggressions experienced by the author and other members of the sorority. The counter-stories dove deeper into the core of the single parent college student experience. They uncovered the social isolation, the lack of understanding from faculty and staff members, and the extensive pressure to succeed despite all odds. Findings revealed that the author suffered from the consequences of multiple intersections of racism, sexism, and classism. She not only had to deal with external indicators of oppression but internal as well. Additional finding suggest that African American women are essentially using education to camouflage themselves in order to adopt the power of White privilege; specifically, the rights to enjoyment and the rights of reputation. The application of this camouflage is how African American single mothers are coping with the layers of oppression placed upon them by making it more difficult for individuals to devalue them

without exposing their own racial propaganda. Providing support for this growing population is essential for student connectivity, student development, and persistence.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Background to the Study**

It was a typical afternoon in my General Chemistry class. There were at least 300 students in this class, and I sat in the third row. Though I do recall copying the notes on the board, my mind was somewhere else. It was difficult not to think that for the first time, I couldn't button-up my pants. I had also become very preoccupied with the fact that I was feeling as if I was going to lose my lunch at any moment. I was aware of my instructor's policy about arriving late and leaving early; she locked the doors once class started and no one was brave enough to let you back in. I eventually got sick enough that I had to leave class. This was a pattern that would unfortunately continue for the rest of the semester. I wanted so badly to explain the fact that I was expecting a child and would need to excuse myself to go the restroom. However, there was a stigma that existed amongst all the African American students at this prestigious pharmacy school. Most of the African American students didn't make it past their second year at this school; in addition, they were also thought of as trouble makers. I felt that I had no one to talk to about what I was going through and the pressure that it was putting on my academic performance. Though I managed to get through that semester, the remainder of my time there, I felt insecure and unwanted. I did eventually transfer out of this school in to another that I thought was a little more understanding and flexible, the community college. What I noticed was that the instructors were more understanding of my situation and that there was an entire department devoted to helping with my needs as a single parent student. However, once I transferred into a public-four-year institution, I saw that there was less support offered to fit my needs. Classes that appeared to have more



traditional age students also had instructors who were less understanding of my situation. While the classes that had more diversity in terms of age, had instructors who were more understanding of issues specific to non-traditional students.

As an undergraduate student, I had a desire to be involved on campus; however, I found that many of the student organizations required time and money that I was not always able to provide. Despite those boundaries, I still desired to get involved on campus and started looking into sororities. The sorority that I was interested in did not have a chapter on my campus, so I attended a meet and greet event sponsored by another local university. I remember sitting in the back of the room observing all the girls in their pink and green shirts. I even spotted a young lady holding her infant son. I thought to myself, wow, if she can be a member, then maybe I can to. As the event concluded, I walked over to the group of girls and introduced myself. I told them that I was really interested in becoming a member. They informed me about the time commitments, academic requirements, parties, and financial obligations associated with membership. Even though I was optimistic, I couldn't help but wonder if my son would be allowed to attend some of those required meetings. So, I got up enough courage to ask if the young lady that I saw with her son could bring him to the events. They said, "No, he isn't allowed and actually lives with his grandmother." I thought to myself, as much as I want to fit in and experience the college life like the rest of my peers, it wasn't worth giving up being a mother to my young son. According to Jones & Shorter-Gooden (2004) African American women often deal with discrimination and oppression by living a double life. According to Dorris (1995), single parent students find managing multiple roles especially challenging if they feel their college is not sensitive to their needs. If a student

doesn't feel as if they belong, they will be less likely to integrate socially or academically at a level that is conducive for persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Being involved and having a sense of belonging on my college campus was a long and painful quest due to my increasing responsibilities as a single mother. However, once I became a member of a sorority designed for single mothers, my desire and appreciation for higher education soared. This sorority's members were predominately low income African American women. As a member, I not only benefited from the shared resources but also from the bond that I acquired with the other members.

Even after the completion of my undergraduate degree, the bond that I have with the other members of the sorority remains strong as we continue to support the members who are still enrolled and others who are young professionals. Through phone calls and social media, we not only encourage each other to continue our education, but we wish all the kids' happy birthdays and attend each other's little league games. We continue to get involved in issues that not only affect our own children but our communities such as autism, teenage pregnancy, and prenatal birth prevention.

As an African American single parent student, I found myself fighting for and against certain titles. Through higher education, I wanted to be known as a scholar, a title usually associated with wealthy Caucasians (Watkins, 2009). However, I found that because of the color of my skin and my self-identification as a single mother, a title usually associated with poor African American women, (Mundy, 2013), being known as a scholar was something, I thought would not be convincing to neither my peers nor my faculty. When I described myself as a doctoral student and a single mother, I often got

weird looks and jaw drops and a demand for an explanation of how such a thing can exist. As painful as it may be to explain how the two titles can coexist in one individual, I continue to do so. Pratt (2000), describes this as the contact zone, “an unsafe location that is filled with many emotions (i.e., “rage, in-comprehension, and pain), where people are often misunderstood and hurt” (p.586).

There became a time, during my graduate studies, when I considered delaying my self- identification as a single mother until I had established myself as a scholar first. I felt that to be more readily accepted into the academic community, I had to alienate myself from the title of single mother a title, in any other situation; I would easily embrace and defend. However, being involved in this sorority allowed me to merge what seemed to be two very distant parts of my life, the academy and family. It created a safe place for me to be able to talk about some of the issues that occur because of being a single parent, a student, and an African woman. These safe houses as described by Pratt (2007,) are, “places for hearing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone” (p. 587). This membership gave me the confidence to not only embrace my title as a single mother, including all the negativity associated with that word, but also to be an example of how higher education can be socially, economically, and culturally beneficial.

As enlightening as this membership was for me, it was not without adversities. We often spoke of the stigma associated with being an African American single mom on campus and in our communities. Many of the members were adamant about distaining themselves from the characteristics often associated with being a single mom such as

being lazy, promiscuous, poor, undesirable, and undeserving. According to Gilliam (1999), the welfare queen, a term coined by Ronald Reagan described welfare recipients as generally African American women who have multiple children, are promiscuous, and content with doing less than nothing. We absolutely didn't want to be known as the group of welfare queens. We even declared it in our oath that as members we would be held to the highest standards in relation to acceptable behavior as respectable women and mothers. Many of the members pursued higher education so that they could separate themselves from those stereotypes. There was a consensus that higher education was our golden road to freedom. However, this very issue would eventually dissolve the organization. One of the founding members was expelled from the organization due to her welfare queen behavior. As a member, I could understand that her behavior was simply a violation of our oath, and disciplinary action had to take place; however, as a researcher, it made me question whether or not she was simply a victim of stereotype threat; a term coined by Steele (1997), which refers to the concept that minority groups often internalize the stereotypes inflicted on them by the majority. Were we doing her a dis-service by expelling her? Had we become part of the oppressive system by ridiculing and depriving her of the support she obviously needed? Was she a victim of internalized oppression? Had we blamed the victim? It was through my introduction to Critical Race Feminist theory that would inspire me to find answers to those questions. In addition, it fueled the need for my own self-reflection in the areas of race, gender and intersectionality.

## **Purpose Statement**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), 12 percent of undergraduate students are single parents; 78 percent of those students are considered low income. My experience as an African American single parent college student can give insight on issues that other students with similar backgrounds may face during their post-secondary careers. My hope with this research was to examine my experiences through a Critical Race Feminist lens in order to dissect ways that I encountered and navigated through multiple layers of oppression.

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore my experience as an African American single parent college student and as a member of a sorority designed for students with similar backgrounds as mine. More specifically, this study aimed to give light to the affects that intersectionality had on my ability to persist in a higher education setting. This research analyzed my encounters with discriminatory experiences. These discriminatory experiences often involve hidden derogatory messages towards marginalized groups. According to Sue (2010), “Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (para. 2). This study focused on microaggressions that I encountered and how they were intensified due to having multiple identifiable traits; being African American; being a woman; and being low income. I investigated my perception of intersectionality through personal reflections and recollection of encounters through my higher education career.

As previously mentioned, I am an African American single parent college student who has had to endure the many prejudices of racism, sexism and classism. I had to constantly battle and or avoid attacks of discrimination by shifting between multiple identities and levels of consciousness. Being able to be involved in a sorority designed for African American single mothers was an asset to my experience; however, the group wasn't immune to its own set of microaggressions. I hope that by sharing my experiences of race, gender and class intersectionality, I can give insight to issues affecting other students with similar backgrounds as well as ways that support groups can be beneficial and inhibitory.

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore the discriminatory intersections that I have experienced during my academic career. My primary sources of data included personal reflections and memories of social encounters throughout my academic tenure. I also included interviews from other members of the sorority. This dissertation sought to answer the following research questions. How did the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism affect the persistence of the author? This dissertation also sought to answer what was the impact that a sorority dedicated to single mothers in higher education had on the author personally, socially, and academically? This study analyzed the author's own perspective as an African American single mother in furtherance of contributing more information to the literature concerning the affects that intersectionality of racism, classism, and sexism has on persistence

## **Rational for the Study**

Female headed households have become a societal normality, especially in the United States. High divorce rates and the prevalence of single mother births have fueled the restructuring of the American family. Unfortunately, many of the female headed households are living below the national poverty lines. If the single mother is of a minority, the probability of her family living below poverty is even more significant (Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011). The rising cost of health care and housing; coupled with low minimum wage and lack of adequate child care will only worsen the phenomenon. Obtaining a college degree could significantly improve the financial stability of single parent homes. According to Miller, Gault, and Thorman (2011), “Expanding educational opportunities available to low-income parents—especially single parents, whose children’s outcomes are particularly dependent on the resources and education of their only parent—can dramatically improve children’s chances of escaping poverty” (p. 9).

Today women are the majority on college campuses. According to The United States Census Bureau (2011), women make up 56% of college enrollment. Though the percentage of women attending college is increasing, the challenges that they face while on campus have yet to recede (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Shaw, 2004).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), 12 percent of undergraduate students are single parents; 78 percent of those students are considered low income. Students who are also parents face dealing with the responsibilities of parenting while also having to work and attend class. Statistics indicate that students who work or have family obligations are less likely to persist (Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011).

According to Miller et.al (2011), "...student parents-across institutional types, are more likely to have left post-secondary education (49.7% without degree and no longer attending) after six years than are non -parents (31.1% without degree and no longer attending)" (p.2). If other indicators such as a minority status or low income are present, the possibility of persisting year to year is challenging (Knight, 2007).

Though the human capital theory (Becker, 1964), would suggest that the more education an individual has, the more likely the individual will have sustainable employment; obtaining that education is a challenge for today's single mom. Limited financial resources as well as strict welfare reform policies often limit the amount of education that a single mother can obtain. Some of the policies in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) limit a single parent's opportunity to receive an education by limiting the amount of time that education can be considered an acceptable alternative to work. Such punitive time limitations decrease the likelihood that a student can pursue a four-year degree; and drives them to two-year education and vocational training and lowering aspirations.

Though many barriers exist for these students, many continue to enroll in all forms of education. Those barriers are especially apparent for women of color (Knight, 2007). Knight (2007), suggests that, "These concerns are significant when conceptualizing issues related to Black females as racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and inequality shape school experiences and outcomes, and are triple threats to academic achievement" (p.2). African American women are essentially using education to camouflage themselves in order to adopt the power of White privilege; specifically, the rights to enjoyment and the rights of reputation. The application of this



camouflage is how African American single mothers are coping with the layers of oppression placed upon them by making it more difficult for individuals to devalue them without exposing their own racial propaganda.

Support services, including peer groups, should be put in place so that those students can have not only have an outlet, but an inspiring network. By increasing the opportunities for single mothers to obtain an education, especially a four-year education, the feminization of poverty could be diminished. However, there are minimal efforts and resources being put towards support services for single moms on college campuses. Just like any other at-risk student population such as minorities, students with disabilities, veterans, and transgender students who are provided with additional sources to be successful in college, the same should be done for African American single mothers.

This study should provide a framework for administrators who are interested in providing student support services for African American single parent students on their campuses. It should also demonstrate retention efforts that could be employed in pursuance of retaining African American single parent students. Administrators could also use this information to evaluate the effectiveness of their marketing efforts toward this population and to evaluate whether faculty and staff development needs to be implemented to successfully accommodate these students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I found it quite challenging to discover an existing theoretical framework that fit this study. Although there has been substantial intellectual progression in the areas of race and gender; there are still very large gaps in the literature regarding that of single

Black mothers who are also college students. However; during this study, I discovered Crotty's (2003) theory of research design which states that there are four basic elements that govern the structure of research: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. The theoretical framework for this study resides within the Critical Race Feminist Theory. Critical Race Feminist Theory is a spin-off of Critical Race Theory, which is originally a discipline in legal studies that revealed the unjust and inequitable practices of law in the United States (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2012). Researchers have since applied critical race theory concepts into other fields such as education, political science, gender studies, etc. (Dixson, & Rousseau, 2006; Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). According to Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), U.S. society is based on property rights and it is through race that this inequitable system is exposed. Hassler (2010), states, "Whites benefit from the manipulation of political, legislative, and educational policy" (p.13). Much attention has focused on the affects that racism and white privilege have had on education; especially regarding how the voice of those affected can impact reform (Delpit, 1988; Hassler, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Hassler (2010), "... by giving voice to those affected by racial practices, wounds can begin to heal, and the realities of those practices can be exposed thereby revealing and correcting oppressive behavior from members of the dominant group" (p.14). Allowing those affected by racism to tell their own stories gives them the opportunity to reflect and make sense of their own values, beliefs, and solutions (Trahar, 2009). Critical Race Feminist Theory emerged from Critical Race Theory in order to more closely identify the microaggressions experienced by Black women who are often battling multiple layers of oppression. The added dimensions of Critical Race Feminist

Theory include the unique challenges of having combined race and gender inequalities. According to Evans-Winters and Esposito, (2010) Critical Feminist Theory affects Black Women in the following ways,

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. 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. (p.20)

The issues faced by Black women are unique from that of Black Men and White Women. Having specific ways in which to view and analyze those experiences was essential for this study. Within this study, Critical Race Feminist Theory also allowed me to examine my own views on the intersections of race and gender inequality. It also served as the theoretical framework that provided a structure for me to view and analyze my own micro aggressive experiences.

As mentioned previously, I have had my own struggles regarding navigating through the oppressive natures of the higher education system. My personal experience has given me insight that cannot be told simply in numbers. Through my narrative, I hope to expose some of the injustices that I have experienced; but also, to analyze ways

in which those experiences have transformed me. This narrative defined as autoethnography (Hassler, 2010), describes the combination of the self-reflection and storytelling of an autobiography with the observation of culture, beliefs, and norms of ethnography. The use of autoethnography allows one to share their experiences. Autoethnography also allows one to reflect on how those experiences are shaped by their surroundings and how those surroundings are altered by those experiences. “Like ethnography, autoethnography pursues the ultimate goal of cultural understanding underlying autobiographical experiences” (Chang, 2007, p.4).

Due to the nature of this dissertation, I believe an autoethnography would be the best analytic methodology. By utilizing autoethnography, I will be able to share my experiences as a single parent student but also my perception of how those experiences changed my environment.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to United States Census (2016), female headed households are more likely to live in poverty (35.6%) than married households (6.6%). These statistics are even more significant for women of color. African American female headed households have a greater chance of living in poverty (38.8%) versus Caucasian female headed households. (United States Census, 2016). Having an education would significantly increase their chances of obtaining suitable employment which would also grant them income and benefits that would improve the overall quality of life for their families. However, significant barriers exist for these women both on and off campus. PWORA

restrictions may guide more women into two- year institutions, thus limiting employment and educational options.

Administrators, legislators, institutional researchers, and advocates of student support services need to understand factors that contribute to the persistence of African American single mothers and perhaps how much capital should be distributed for retention initiatives. Administrators and legislators need to become more aware of the presence of this population of students on higher education campuses and devote more attention to their needs. Institutional researchers also need to recognize the need for this population to be studied to improve retention efforts. Advocates of student support services, such as employees who work in student life, would benefit from this study because it would give them feedback on some of the programs and services that they are offering as well as ideas for more effective programs.

This study adds to the limited literature on the persistence of African American single mothers who attend four-year institutions. This dissertation should result in a model useful for evaluating the effectiveness of retention initiatives directed toward African American single mothers or perhaps help to create efficient programs for this population. Many institutions provide support for other at-risk populations such as minorities; students with disabilities; and students with limited income; however, they provide little support for students who are coping with multiple discriminatory characteristics. This study will provide a model for administrators and legislators to use when they are deciding what programs are needed for this population of students at their institutions.

## **Limitations**

There are limitations relevant to the use of autoethnography as a research tool. Critical race theory relies on the “voice” of the individual. This voice may or may not reflect accurate or factual information. According to Hassler (2010), “The fact that I am, both the researcher and the researched prohibited traditional measures of verification generally employed in qualitative and quantitative studies” (p.47). Autoethnography doesn’t employ traditional measurable data such as samples, graphs or charts. The primary data relies heavily on memory. The researcher may be limited by her own memory recognition. Due to the nature of the research, an auto-ethnography only allows for the researcher’s reflection; however, that reflection represents her truth.

This auto ethnographic study of a specialty sorority for single mothers had additional limitations. This research was limited to only African American women. Single parent college students of other races and ethnicities as well as men were excluded from this study. However, this study focused solely on single parent college students who have experienced maximum racial intersections. The sample size for this research only consisted of four participants. Such a small sample size is not enough to generalize the findings to all African American single mother college students. However, qualitative research doesn’t necessarily require such a result.

The data collected for the study also produced inherited limitations. Much of the data came from participants memories. According to Walford (2004) “If people wish to write fiction, they have every right to do so, but no every right to call it research” (p.411). Some would also argue that the use of auto-ethnography is highly subjective, and that valid research demonstrates an objective truth. According to Mendez (2013)

Thus, the richness of auto ethnography is in those realities that emerge from the interaction between the self and its own experiences that reflect the cultural and social context in which those events took place. It is through this representation that understanding of a particular phenomenon is accomplished. (p.283)

Researchers maintain that everyone's reality is subjective; it is their own account of how they experience a phenomenon. It is the collection of those experience that creates an objective truth.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms will be used in this dissertation:

**Autoethnography-** I chose to use autoethnography for the methodology of this study because there is a wealth of knowledge in our own individual experiences. The use of autoethnography allows one to share their experiences. Autoethnography also allows one to reflect on how those experiences are shaped by their surroundings and how those surroundings are altered by those experiences (Chang, 2007).

**Counter-Stories-** Counter-Story is a concept that arose from Critical Race Theory that gave individuals an opportunity to express their own truth. According to Negron, (2013) "So, counter-stories can be used to expose, analyze, as well as challenge deeply-entrenched narratives and characterizations of racial privilege, sex, etc."(para. 1).

**Critical Race Feminist Theory.** Critical Feminist Theory emerged from Critical Race Theory in order to more closely identify the microaggressions experienced by Black women who are often battling multiple layers of oppression. I choose to include

elements of this theory because it helped me illustrate ways in which my experiences were unique from white women and black men (Evans-Winters and Esposito, 2010).

**Critical Race Theory-** Critical race theory is an analysis of how race is embedded in almost every aspect of the U.S. society. According to Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), U.S. society is based on property rights and it is through race that this inequitable system is exposed. Critical race theory allowed me to use my voice in order to uncover the multiple layers of microaggressions that I experienced as an African American single parent college student.

**Master-Narrative-** The master narrative describes what the majority, (White, Male, Middle Class, &Heterosexual) would consider to be normative or universal. In this research, the master narrative described the way in which the dominant group portrayed the single parent college student, specifically African American single parent college students. “A master narrative essentializes and wipes out the complexities and richness of a group’s cultural life” (Montecinos, 1995, pp. 293-294).

**Microaggressions-** According to Sue (2010), “Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” The data for this research relied heavily on my narrative of various microaggressions that I have encountered during my academic tenure.-



## **Summary**

This introductory chapter discussed the background of barriers that single mother college students face while trying to pursue an education, the effects of welfare reform on higher education attainment, the feminization of poverty and how the use of critical race theory can aid in analyzing ways to change some of these inequalities. The nature of this dissertation requires that a qualitative methodology which includes storytelling and self-reflection be utilized to answer the research questions. The next chapter will discuss relevant literature. The third chapter will focus on the methodology for this study including data collection and analysis. Chapter four will present the findings of the data collected and, Chapter five will discuss the implications of this study on legislation, policy, practice, as well as future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

The enrollment of single parents on college campuses is increasing. According to the U.S Department of Education (2009), more than 12 percent of college students are single parents. Though there is evidence that single parent students are enrolling in all types of higher education institutions, Miller, Gault & Thornton (2011), report, “At four-year institutions, only 13 percent of students are parents and six percent are single parents; at community colleges, 29 percent of students are parents, and 14 percent are single parents” (p.15).

Though the human capital theory would suggest that obtaining an education would increase one’s earning potential, it is uncertain that obtaining a technical or two-year degree is sufficient for sustaining a family income; therefore, perpetuating the cycle of the feminization of poverty (Tiamiya & Mitchell, 2001). Congress initiated the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 to stabilize and improve the financial independence of female headed households plagued by poverty; however, these programs enable their participants’ ability to gain financial independence through education because obtaining employment is the number one priority. In addition, challenges such as obtaining suitable housing, childcare, and financial independence also inhibit single parent students’ persistence. The NCES (2002), conducted a study on the demographic and persistence trends of non-traditional students in higher education institutions. The findings revealed that non- traditional students, such as single mothers, are less likely to be enrolled in higher education after three years. The NCES reported, “While 76 percent

of traditional students were still enrolled in 4-year institutions, the percentage dropped to 51 percent for minimally nontraditional students and even lower percentages for moderately and highly nontraditional students (28 and 26 percent, respectively)” (p. 18). In other words, the more “non-traditional indicators” the students had, such as financial independence, part time enrollment, full-time employment, dependents, etc. the more likely they would no longer be enrolled in that institutions in three years. According to the NCES (2010), single parent students will identify themselves with at least three non-traditional characteristics: single parenthood, having dependents, and financial independence; therefore, they will be considered highly non-traditional and less likely to persist (p.10).

Today women are the majority on college campuses. According to The United States Census Bureau (2011), women make up 56% of college enrollment. Though the percentage of women attending college is increasing, the challenges that they face while on campus have yet to recede (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Shaw, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), 12 percent of undergraduate students are single parents; 78 percent of those students are considered low income. Students who are also parents face dealing with the responsibilities of parenting while also having to work and attend class. Time management, healthcare, childcare, and financial obligations are barriers that make persistence especially difficult for single parent college students.

Those barriers are especially apparent for women of color (Knight, 2007). Knight (2007), suggests that, “These concerns are significant when conceptualizing issues related

to Black females as racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and inequality shape school experiences and outcomes, and are triple threats to academic achievement” (p.2).

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore my experience as an African American single parent college student and as a member of a sorority designed for students with similar backgrounds. More specifically, this study aimed to give light to the affects that intersectionality had on my ability to persist in a higher education setting. This study explored my personal experience in relationship to other African American single mother college students’ experiences during their academic tenure.

This chapter will examine the literature on the feminization of poverty and its relation to Personal Work and Responsibility Act of 1996. Factors that contribute to college choice will then be discussed. This paper will also explore the theoretical frames of the Critical race theory and Critical race feminist theory. This chapter will also discuss barriers that single parent college students face with attending during their academic careers. Finally, special attention will be granted to theories regarding Greek organizations.

### **Feminization of Poverty**

Diana Pearce (1978), defined feminization of poverty as a phenomenon that illustrates the significant increase in female headed households that live below the poverty line. Thibos, Lavin Loucks and Martin (2007), suggested that there are two factors that contribute to women’s prevalence below the poverty line. One contributing factor is the change in the family structure. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009), the birth rate for unmarried women rose 21 percent between

2002 and 2007. Women not only have to bear most of the expenses of their children, but they are also responsible for the child rearing; which may directly or indirectly inhibit the type of employment they can obtain. Ehrenreich and Piven (1984) stated:

Yet the assumption of the family wage system remains firmly embedded in a wage structure that offers women, hour for hour, only 60 percent of the average male wage.

What is usually called “the breakdown of the family” occurred without equalizing changes in the labor market, and this accounts for the disproportionate impoverishment of women. (p.46)

The breakdown of the family that the researchers refer to is the concept that the family structure has evolved from being led by two people to more than likely being led by one person (Adair&Dahlberg, 2003; Ehrenreich &Piven, 1984). According to Ehrenreich and Piven (1984), “...80 percent of the children of divorced parents remain with their mothers” (p. 46). Child support limitations have only exaggerated the problem. According to the US Census Bureau (2009), only 53.4 percent of single mothers are awarded child support, with the average award around \$4,800.

In addition to the change in the family dynamic, shifts in the economy have also created gender segregation within the labor market, also known as pink collar jobs. According to Thibos et. al. (2007), “The economic restructuring argument posits that shifts in the nation’s economy essentially created a concentration of poverty and a lasting inequality in labor market participation and income for families, especially those headed by women” (p.3). This theory focused more on the loss of manufacturing jobs and outsourcing to other countries as contributors to the increase in women working in low-skill, low-paying positions.

Ehrenreich and Piven (1984), argue that the cause of the feminization of poverty is linked to the “family wage system”. According to Ehrenreich and Piven (1984), the family wage system, which is dated back to the nineteenth century, grants a male worker enough money to support his entire family. While the women who did obtain employment, were usually only granted part time jobs at a lower pay. The researchers stated that because of the family wage system women, have never been able to gain equal pay in the workforce. More homes are being led by women (Adair&Dahlberg, 2003; Ehrenreich & Piven, 1984). Women need to earn a family income to sustain their families independently (Kahn, Butler, Stromer Deprez, &Polakow, 2009).

### **The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996**

Abramovitz (2000), stated that by the 1990’s the number of recipients on welfare was at an all-time high at 14.2 million people. This increase in the number of individuals requiring public assistance wasn’t unwarranted seeing that the economy had recently declined and unemployment was on a rise. In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA); which went into effect July 1, 1997. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1998), the purposes of the PRWORA were “to provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes; to reduce dependency by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; to prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” (p.1). One of the major differences in this regulation and its predecessors is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program which encourages its

participants to be employed by limiting their aid to five years. There were several conditions established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1998):

1. Work Requirements: Thirty percent of all families in each state must be engaged in work activities or have left welfare rolls in fiscal year 1998, rising to 50% in fiscal year 2002.
2. Work Activities: Participants are required to engage in employment, on-the-job training, work experience, community service, up to 12 months of remedial or vocational training or provide child-care services to individuals who are participating in community service.
3. Lifetime limits: Families who receive assistance for 5 cumulative years will be ineligible for cash aid.

Though the PRWORA was put in place to improve the living conditions of those affected by poverty, some researchers would argue that it only inhibits their growth toward financial independence by forcing them into low-wage female labor and enforcing marriage to end poverty (Abramovitz, 2000; Miller, 1989; Stevens, 2002). The passage of the PRWORA has caused a decline in the percentage of welfare recipients who are enrolled in college because of its work first policies (Finney, 1998; Madison, 1998; Shaw, 2004; Yakaboski, 2010).

Though there is a clause that allows education to substitute for work, it is very limited. PRWORA restrictions may guide more women into two-year institutions, thus limiting employment and educational options. Madison (1998), suggested that the federal government needs to allow four years of benefits for women who want to pursue an undergraduate degree instead of the two years that they currently offer. By increasing

the opportunities for single mothers to obtain an education, especially a four-year education, the feminization of poverty could be diminished.

### **Situational and Demographic Characteristics that Affect College Choice**

Making the decision to attend college can be a very rewarding and challenging experience for a student. There are many factors to be considered when deciding whether college is an option. Financial implications play an important role in college choice because there are many expenditures that emerge because of college enrollment such as: tuition, room and board, books and supplies, transportation, as well as personal needs (St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). Another very important factor that a student needs to consider before enrolling is whether the benefits associated with enrolling in college outweigh the consequences.

According to the American Council on Education (2009), 12% of all undergraduate women are single mothers. Though there are many barriers that would make it difficult for single mothers to pursue higher education, some of them still enroll. This section will highlight the literature on what factors are considered when a student decides to attend college.

When a student decides to enroll into college, several considerations are made. One very significant consideration is making sure that the student is compatible with the institution that they choose to attend (Tinto, 1975). There are several factors such as background, expectational, and motivational attributes that determine compatibility between a student and a prospective institution (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). Some of the background characteristics associated with college choice include: socioeconomic status



(SES), family background, gender, race, and previous educational experiences (Tinto, 1975). According to Tinto (1975), students are also motivated by the level of expectation that they have for the collegiate experience as well as factors such as family expectation and career goals.

### **College choice theories based on gender.**

Many theories have developed solely on those individual characteristics, addressed by Tinto, that contribute to college choice. Some of those theories are specific to one characteristic, while others are focused on multiple characteristics. Shank and Beasley (1998) conducted a quantitative study on how gender affects college selection. They were more interested in researching the variations in collegiate characteristics and personal influences that effected enrollment choices between male and female students. The results of this research were very similar to other college choice research data. Shank and Beasley (1998), stated that, "...cost, quality of faculty; quality of majors variety of courses offered; and locations where the most significant factors" (p. 66). However, the data also suggests that female students where significantly more concerned with, "...campus safety; a diverse student population, a favorable student to teacher ratio, a wide variety of course offerings, and a college that is located close to home" (Shank & Beasley, 1998, p. 66).

Another significant finding was that female students were more likely to rely on their parents as a source of information for college decisions. The researchers suggested that if institutions are interested in recruiting women to their campuses, they need to

create market strategies that highlight their academic strengths, campus safety, and diversity.

### **College choice theories based on economics.**

Though Shank and Beasley (1998), focused on one background characteristic, a significant amount of the literature on college choice can be divided into three theoretical groups: economic, social, and integrated. St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey (1996), suggest that some students and their parents approach college choice as investment arrangements. Students want to make sure that their college education will translate into a career that will justify the investment of paying for tuition and all other related expenditures, this is also known as the economic theory (Shank & Beasley, 2007). The economic theory also suggests that students' college choice depends on whether they can actually afford to pay for the expenses associated with college attendance. There is an abundance of literature that suggests that students with higher SES are more likely to attend college (Jackson, 1978; Shank and Beasley, 1998; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith (1998). In addition, those students who come from higher SES backgrounds, are often more academically competitive, which also is a factor that broadens the choice of prospective institutions and increases persistence (Burd, 2002; Harrington and Sum, 1999; Thomas, 2011).

### **Social theories.**

In addition to the economic factors that influence college choice, some research suggests that social factors have significance in terms of college choice (Jackson, 1978).

Many students decide to attend college to obtain membership into a higher

socioeconomic status. Earning a college degree facilitates the process of obtaining higher socioeconomic status by awarding the student with multiple forms of capital often displayed by individuals in higher socioeconomic levels.

Other social perspectives involve the significance of family influence as a deciding factor for college attendance. According to Richardson (1986), a student's desire to attend college as well as other social aspirations are directly related to his/her parents' influence (p. 97). Richardson (1986), also suggests that the higher the educational attainment of the parents, the greater the possibility that the children will also attain high levels of education. Parents who have high levels of education are more capable of guiding their children through the processes involved with college enrollment than parents who have low levels of college education (Lippman, Guzman, Dombrowski, Kinukawa, Shwalb, Trends & Tice, 2008). In addition, parents who have higher levels of education also expect their children to attend college more than those parents who have low levels of education (Lippman et. al, 2008).

### **Integrated theories.**

Hossler and Gallagher (1987), integrated economic and social factors as being equal contributors toward college choice. They developed a three-part model that describes the process in which a student migrates when selecting a college. This model considers background characteristics; family encouragement; socioeconomic status; and institutional characteristics as indicators of college choice.

Though Hossler and Gallagher (1987), were able to develop a college choice model based on integrated economic and social factors, adding additional factors such as

race and ethnicity explain in more detail issues that are culturally based. Freeman (1999), studied the impact of ethnicity and race as indicators of college choice. He studied the perception that African American high school students have on college entrance. The findings suggest that there are similarities in influences amongst African Americans high school students and students of other races such as parental involvement, SES, and academic ability. However, the difference is what actually influences African Americans to attend college or not attend. According to Freeman (1999), the participants were able to summarize their beliefs on how race affects college entrance into three categories: family or self-influences, psychological or social barriers, and cultural awareness (p. 17). Freeman (1999) goes on to state that African American students are often first-generation college students and bare the weight of the family because their college status has made them an automatic role model. Many of these students attend college because they want to live better than they did while growing up. Freeman (1999), refers to this phenomenon as negative motivation. Freeman's (1999), research suggests that African American students in this study were influenced not only by their background characteristics, such as SES, but also by psychological and social issues embedded in their culture.

Though Freeman (1999), discussed the impact that SES has on African American students' decision to attend college, Carter, Paulsen and St. John (2005), explored the impact that financial aid and tuition costs has on different ethnicities. Their findings suggest that African Americans college choice is more sensitive to the net price of tuition as well as financial aid packages offered by institutions. This study suggests that African

American students, especially those within the lowest SES bracket, are more dependent on their financial aid when choosing an institution.

Researchers have also studied the impact that integrated factors such as gender and ethnicity play on college choice (Butner, Caldera, Herrera, Kennedy, Frame & Childers, 2001). Butner et. al. (2001), studied the impact that gender and ethnicity have on a student's decision to enroll in college. Through a qualitative study, Butner et. al. (2001), examined what factors African American and Hispanic women felt contributed to their decision to attend college. Three themes emerged from this research: familial influences; the quintessential American Dream; and striving to overcome.

The familial influences experienced by African American and Hispanic women presented itself as a form of obedience. A part of the reason some of these women decided to go to college was because their parents told them that they had to go. Even though there were personal goals that also contributed to college enrollment, some of the women expressed wanting to please their parents by attending college. The familial influences expressed in the data suggest that these women valued and respected the relationships that they had with their families; and those relationships are significant in terms of decision making.

Butner et. al. (2001), describe the Quintessential American Dream as the idea that a person can accomplish and be successful at anything that they desire. The success described in the American dream is often a result of higher education. Many of the participants believed that a college degree would lead to a life that is better than the one

they had as a child. The participants saw education as a vehicle that could move them up the economic and social ladder.

Participants describe striving to overcome as the ability to be successful despite the numerous barriers that exist for women and minorities. Some of the Hispanic participants discussed the pressures from their extended families to stay at home and help take care of the family instead of going to college. However, the participants also discussed the importance that mentors played in hurdling over those barriers.

### **Capital Theory**

St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey (1996), suggest that some students and their parents approach college choice as an investment arrangement. Students want to make sure that their college education will translate into a career that will justify the investment of paying for tuition and all other related expenditures. This concept is especially prevalent for single parent students. Not only does an education have to pay for itself, it must translate to future earnings sufficient enough to support a family. The concept of obtaining an education to increase one's earning potential is defined by Gary Becker (1975), as the human capital theory. Though the human capital concept is focused more on the monetary gains of obtaining an education, there are other forms of capital that can be acquired as well. This section will focus on the following types of capital: economic, social, cultural, and human capital.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986), describes capital as a resource that can be used by individuals to survive and thrive in a given environment. According to Bourdieu (1986), there are three types of capital: economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. This

research will go a step further and discuss the human capital theory. Bourdieu (1986), defines these resources as:

Capital, which in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. (p.241)

### **Economic capital.**

Bourdieu (1986), describes economic capital as one of those resources used by individuals that can be exchanged for goods. Some of the common forms of economic capital are currency, property, stocks, bonds, credit and other types of possessions.

Economic capital is often acquired by providing some type of service through employment. Individuals can also acquire economic services through the exchange of goods. Economic capital is often what sets the foundations for the other types of capital such as human capital, social capital and cultural capital.

### **Social capital.**

Social capital theory “refers to features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putman, 1993; Settle, 2005). Social capital can be described as the value an individual gain from belonging to an organization, association, or another type of group such as a family.

A good example of this would be the benefits of belonging to a Greek organization. Many students who are members of fraternities and sororities acquire a

sense of belonging when they join these organizations. This sense of belonging transforms into a significant level of support that affects persistence while in college and aids in career networking after graduation.

Social capital can be best described by Woolcock and Narayan (2000), as, “It’s not what you know it’s who you know” (p.226). Acquiring social capital depends greatly on an individual’s ability to gain acceptance into memberships that generate sufficient support for that individual to thrive in a society.

### **Cultural capital.**

There is an abundance of literature that suggests there is a positive relationship between cultural capital and academic preparedness (Berger, 2000; Cheadle, 2008; Jaeger, 2010; Wells, 2008). According to Bourdieu (1956/1986), cultural capital is defined as “convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications” (p. 243). Bourdieu stated that there are three types of cultural capital: Embodied cultural capital; objectified cultural capital; and institutionalized cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu (1956/1986), embodied cultural capital is a state of being that a person is both consciously and unconsciously aware of. It consists of a form of enrichment that is acquired from exposure to rich traditions such as art, music, and language. It can be inherited in the sense, that a child, whose parents have cultural capital, will also expose their children to the same cultural experiences.

Objectified cultural capital reflects that concept of some form of culture being symbolized into an object. One can obtain objectified cultural capital by simply owning



that object. Objectified cultural capital often comes in the form of paintings, statues, writings, clothing, technological instruments, amongst other types of artifacts.

Objectified cultural capital can be easily transformed into economic capital and is often obtained for that purpose.

According to Bourdieu (1956/1986), institutionalized cultural capital is a form of wealth that is obtained when an organization has certain credentials. This is often noticed with prestigious educational institutions or successful corporate organizations. For example, if a student obtains a four-year degree from a prestigious four-year institution such as Yale or Harvard, an employer will value that more than a four-year degree from an average four-year public institution. Institutions such as Harvard and Yale have an excellent reputation for providing a stellar education and producing many of the leaders in this country. Therefore, a degree from one of those institutions is going to be more highly favored than a degree from a less reputable institution.

Berger (2000), further explored Bourdieu's (1986), theory on the effects of cultural capital on organizations and developed a theory indicating the relationship between cultural capital and persistence in higher education. Berger (2000), stated that "students with higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to persist, across all types of institutions, than are students with less access to cultural capital" (p.114). Berger (2000), also suggested that "Students with higher levels of cultural capital are most likely to persist at institutions with correspondingly high levels of organizational cultural capital" (p. 115). It has also been found that students who report lower levels of cultural capital have higher persistence at community college than at four-year institutions (Wells,

2008). This finding supports other research that suggests that four-year institutions are failing to meet the needs of their students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Human capital.**

There are many factors that contribute to an individual's decision to invest in education. Factors such as academic readiness; parental involvement; socioeconomic status; personal goals and motivation contribute to the decision of whether an individual will invest in education (Berger, 2000; Cheadle, 2008; Wells, 2008). The amount of education (determined by years attended) as well as the type of education, (private four-year institution or community college) determine how much should be invested.

Just like any other type of investment, a return is expected. The human capital theory would suggest that the return on an investment in education would be higher wages. In other words, the more education an individual acquires the more money they are going to expect to make because of that investment. If an organization invests in workforce development, they will expect that their employees will be more productive as a result.

Though economic capital is often expected because of an investment in education, there are other benefits reported because of education. Individuals who invest in education often have higher job security; better benefits such as vacation time and bonuses; and a sense of personal accomplishment. The human capital theory also suggests that individuals who invest in education also acquire additional social capital as well. In other words, the more education an individual has, the more likely they are to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

## **Barriers**

In addition to barriers caused by welfare reform, others exist, such as, juggling school and work schedules, obtaining and maintaining health care, child care issues, and financial independence inhibit the persistence of single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Shaw, 2004). The following section will examine the impact that those barriers have on the ability for single mother students to obtain a college degree.

### **Time management.**

The logistics of balancing multiple roles can be very challenging for a single parent college student. Not only do they have to balance their class schedules, they also must make time for work, take care of the home, raise their children, study, and, if they are lucky, schedule personal time; all of which could be quite overwhelming (Carney-Crompton, & Tan, 2002). Considering that all those roles are significant, it can be quite difficult to neglect one to accomplish the other. In many cases, taking care of the children and home takes priority over attending classes and studying (Howard & Levine, 2004; McMillan, 2003). According to Dorris (1995), single parent students find managing multiple roles especially challenging if they feel their college is not sensitive to their needs. If a student doesn't feel as if they belong on their college campus, they are less likely to integrate socially or academically at a level that is conducive for persistence (Tinto, 1975). Christie (2002), suggests that it would be beneficial for single parent students to be more engaged on their campuses to ensure a sense of belonging; however, time constraints and conflicting schedules do not always allow for these students to

participate in activities outside of the classroom. Therefore, it is imperative for administrators to create a culture on their campus that is accepting and accommodating to single parent students. Making sure that faculty and staff are trained on how to deal with the unique demands of single parent students could assist in making adapting to college life a bit easier for the single parent population, as well as having activities on campus that are family friendly and accessible in morning and evening sessions.

### **Childcare.**

Obtaining suitable childcare is a substantial concern for parents who want to attend post-secondary education. Not only is childcare terribly expensive, but it is also difficult to obtain on an hourly basis or in the evening. Though there are some institutions that offer child care to their students, many are operating at a loss and are at risk of being eliminated. Goldrick-Rab (2010) stated:

While surveys consistently indicate that a lack of high-quality, affordable, on-campus childcare prevents full engagement in college life, only half of all institutions of postsecondary education provide any form of child care on campus, and most are over-enrolled. (p.5)

According to the Department of Education (2010), programs such as Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) have suffered a decline in federal funding leaving many parent students without the support they need to attend classes. Not to mention that students who work during the day and attend class in the evening may have some reservations about allowing their child to be in a day care setting for such an extended period.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory, originally a discipline in legal studies, revealed the unjust and inequitable practices of law in the United States (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). According to Hassler (2010), “The contributions from these schools of thought helped shape CRT into an activist and scholarly movement determined to create a new paradigm that seeks to correct the negative impact of racism in all areas of our society” (p.25). Researchers have since applied critical race theory concepts into other fields such as education, political science, gender studies, etc. (Dixson, & Rousseau, 2006; Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). Critical race theorists unleash the, often unheard, voice of those individuals who have been victimized by the oppressive nature of the American Dream. The American Dream is a subjective concept that illustrates every citizen's rights via the Constitution. Those rights include being able to live your life however you choose such as having the right to practice whatever religion you want, marry whomever you want, have an education, buy property, elect your own leader amongst other things. Unfortunately for minorities, the obtainment of that “dream” is as unrealistic today as it was when the Constitution was sworn in.

The Critical race theorists would suggest that although lynching, cross burning and cotton picking are no longer normative, racism still has a devastating and debilitating effect on African Americans and other minorities (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011).

According to Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), U.S. society is based on property rights and it is through race that this inequitable system is exposed. Harris (1993), describes property as whiteness. She goes on to state, “...many theorists hold that,

historically within U.S. society, property is a right rather than a physical object” (Harris, 1993, p.32). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) evaluate the presence of whiteness in our education system:

In, schooling, the absolute right to exclude was demonstrated initially by denying blacks access to schooling altogether. Later, it was demonstrated by the creation and maintenance of separate schools. More recently it has been demonstrated by white flight and the growing insistence on vouchers, public funding of private schools, and schools on choice. Within schools, absolute right to exclude is demonstrated by resegregation via tracking. (p.60)

This system only perpetuates the cycle of disproportional educational opportunities between those who possess property whiteness and those who don't. With the possession of whiteness comes several rights and privileges. Some of those rights include, “transferability, the right to use and enjoyment, reputation rights, and the right to exclude others” (Dixson&Rousseau, 2006, p. 101). Being able to transfer whiteness from one generation to another ensures that all the entitlements associated with such a status can be maintained. Having physical characteristics associated with whiteness portrays a sense of power, attractiveness, and acceptance. When those physical traits are compromised, such as in multiracial groups, the power and entitlement associated with whiteness become jeopardized and possibly obsolete. In the case of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), a man, who was only one eighth African and had minimal African physical characteristics, was arrested for sitting in a seat reserved for Caucasian. According to Dixson and Rousseau (2006). “The courts could not allow the reputation of whiteness be destroyed by letting a man of Negro ancestry to be labeled white” (p. 107). This case

legalizes the concept that if a person's "whiteness" has been tainted by that of an African, they are by default African Americans and excluded from the rights and privileges associated with such a title.

In addition to having the right to transfer whiteness comes the right to use and enjoyment. With the possession of whiteness one can assume a certain amount of power and influence. Power and influence often stimulates monetary gains, additional resources, and a better quality of life. According to Harris (1995), whiteness is "something that can both be experienced and deployed as a resource" (p.282). A sure way to uphold the resources and privileges acquired with whiteness is to keep them out of the hands of non-whites.

Another property right is that of having a reputation. Whiteness is a status symbol socially, culturally, and economically and it has been well preserved. "The property rights of reputation involve establishing whiteness as the most socially desirable race and thus the most reputable" (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006, p. 104). Reputation as a property right is also prevalent in social policy. The image of the Welfare Queen was heavily marketed during the Bush Administration of the 1980's. Black single mothers were portrayed as the financial leaches of the American people. They were accused of being promiscuous, robbing the welfare system, raising children who would be more prone to criminal activity, and choosing to be uneducated, amongst other things. The media has been instrumental in coordinating the single mother with that of a Welfare Queen. However, in the past decade, there has been an increase in divorce rates and an increase in women putting off child-rearing for their education and careers; coincidentally the 21<sup>st</sup> century single mother has been born.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century single mother is one who is divorced, educated, financially stable, mid to late 30's, self-sufficient, and white (MacLanahan, 1994; Monnat, 2010). According to Usdansky and McLanahan (2003), white single mothers are often described as divorced, educated, financially supported, and in more control of their reproductive behavior. The researchers also noted that white single mothers are portrayed as women whose biological clocks were ticking and as a result, they elected to become single parents. This idea depicts a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. However, the researchers mentioned that, black single mothers are typically younger, dependent on welfare, and had an unwanted pregnancy. Although there is an evolution in the ideation of the single mother, this only applies to those who are white. African American single mothers are still feeling the welts of the Welfare Queen conceptualization.

The right to reputation and status is one that helps to portray an image of whiteness that is superior, opportunistic, and desired. This property right is perpetuated by the right to exclude. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), the right to exclude has been demonstrated by segregation, white-flight, gifted programs, and predominately white institutions. Those who possess whiteness have the right to exclude non-whites from their associations. Though there has been some evidence of inclusion through structured programs such as affirmative action and desegregation, it is more than often controlled by those who hold the right to exclude and is accompanied with stipulations, regulations, and inhibitory behaviors that make it virtually impossible for those few included non-whites to succeed.

The right to exclude is also evident in PWORA policies. The PWORA states that women are allowed to substitute work for education, however, they are only limited to a



two-year time frame. In other words, those who possess the right to exclude have decided to include some African American single mothers into their world of higher education, but only at its most infantile state. They allow those mothers to earn the lowest degrees such as certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees; then they force them into low paying service jobs. Allowing those single mothers the opportunity to pursue higher degrees such as a MBA or Ph.D., would grant them access to faculty, administrative and executive positions; which are often associated with power, autonomy, and whiteness. For those who possess whiteness, this contamination may pose a risk to all the property rights.

### **Critical Race Feminist Theory**

Critical Race Feminist Theory emerged from Critical Race Theory in order to more closely identify the microaggressions experienced by Black women who are often battling multiple layers of oppression. The added dimensions of Critical Race Feminist Theory include the unique challenges of having combined race and gender inequalities. According to Evans-Winters and Esposito, (2010) Critical Feminist Theory affects Black Women in the following ways,

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. 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.

According to Crenshaw (2001), Critical race feminist theory focuses on the multiple voices of women of color. Critical race feminism asserts that the experiences of women of color are very distinct from that of men of color and White women. According to Bell (1992), Racism is a permanent fixture in American society that perpetuates systematic structures that keep those of color, especially women of color at the bottom of societal hierarchy. Within those system structure exist both intentional and unintentional oppressive forces. Those forces are defined by Williams (1991) as spirit murder. According to Carter (2012), “These small fractures on the spirit lead to the eventual “murdering” of the life force of women of color”. Consistent acts of spirit murder often contribute to racial battle fatigue and stereotype threat.

### **African American Greek Membership**

According to Patton, Bridges, and Flowers (2011), “African American college students who have an interest in becoming involved on campus often join student organizations such as Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs), which have had a presence on campuses dating back to the early 1900s” (p. 113). Membership in African American Greek organizations increases student engagement, persistence, and leadership obtainment (Patton et al., 2011). Affiliation with those organizations also fosters a safe community where members can resist racial oppression, mold self-identities, and provide an environment in which participants can become agents of change. This section will

discuss the correlation between African American Greek organization membership, student engagement and leadership. Then it will analyze the affects that African American sororities have on the retention, engagement, and socialization of its members.

According to Smith (2016), African American communities have a long history of developing oppositional cultures to resist oppression, refute stereotypical societal expectations, and celebrate and maintain aspects of their own cultures”. African American college students often join Greek organizations in pursuance of engaging with their institutions, coping with racially charged institutional pressures but also, they join with the expectation that their membership will foster as a supplement to their primary support group, family.

Studies suggest that being engaged on campus helps students develop leadership skills, improves academic performance, and social awareness (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Croom Beatty, Acker & Butler, 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Students of color often decide to engage on campus through Greek organization memberships. In addition to the benefits previously described, African American Greek organization memberships provide students with a safe place to analyze shared microaggressions and to discuss ways to cope with the oppression. According to Croom et. Al (2017),

These counter-spaces ostensibly serve as sites where students can not only engage in productive academic and social identity development processes but also grapple with intersectional analysis of systemic oppression occurring in the context of their respective campus environments. (p. 217)

Although the needs for such safe houses are apparent for students of color, it is even more necessary for African American single mothers. This particular population not only experiences the microaggressions of being Black, but also those of being a woman, low income and of being a single mother. According to Knight (2008), “The idea of triple threat implies that Black females inherit three major entangled social realities that are assessed negatively by the larger society-being Black, being female, and being poor” (p.24). Providing safe houses for these women gives them the opportunity to engage with other single parent students. It gives them the opportunity to see that they are not alone; that other women are sharing their struggles and their dreams. Bringing these women together will not only provide positive role models but will expand their wealth of resources and support systems as well.

Unfortunately, there aren't many organizations that foster the needs of African American single mothers. They often must find refuge in organizations that are just for African Americans or just for women. It is difficult to find one place where they can find support for all their needs. Croom et. al. (2017), found that African American women often engage in Sister Circle type associations. During a qualitative study, Croom et. al. (2017) discovered three themes that represent motivational factors for sister circle memberships: observation, finding role models, and being whole. These students were looking to observe the social interactions of women whose life experiences mirrored their own. They were looking to find role models that persevered and accomplished similar goals. Through “sister circle” memberships, participants were also able to be themselves. Such memberships are vital to the success of African American single mother students. It gives them the opportunity to examine other students who are upper classmen and

graduate students. This examination could make their academic goals seem more attainable. They could be able to engage about family friendly faculty members and staff. They could exchange information about affordable childcare and resources available both on and off campus. They can share their micro aggressive stories and confront stereotypes. They could discuss any internalized racism, classism, and sexism in which they may have become victims to.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology**

According to United States Census (2016), female headed households are more likely to live poverty (35.6%) than married households (6.6%). These statistics are even more significant for women of color. African American female headed households have a greater chance of living in poverty (38.8%) versus Caucasian female headed households. (United States Census, 2016). Having an education would significantly increase their chances of obtaining suitable employment. This would also grant them the income and benefits that would improve the overall quality of life for their families.

Though the human capital theory (Becker, 1975), would suggest that the more education an individual has, the more likely the individual will have sustainable employment; obtaining that education is a challenge for today's single mom. Limited financial resources as well as strict welfare reform policies often limit the amount of education that a single mother can obtain. Some of those policies in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) limit a single parent's opportunity to receive an education by limiting the amount of time that education can be considered an acceptable alternative to work. Such punitive time limitations decrease the likelihood that a student can pursue a four-year degree; and drives them to two- year education and vocational training and ultimately lowered aspirations.

Though many barriers exist for these students, many continue to enroll in all forms of education. Those barriers are especially apparent for women of color (Knight, 2007). Knight (2007), suggests that, "These concerns are significant when

conceptualizing issues related to Black females as racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and inequality shape school experiences and outcomes, and are triple threats to academic achievement” (2007, p. 2). Support services, including peer groups, should be put in place so that those students can have not only an outlet, but an inspiring network.

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore my experience as an African American single parent college student and as a member of a sorority designed for students with similar backgrounds. More specifically, this study aimed to give light to the affects that intersectionality had on my ability to persist in a higher education setting. This study explored my personal experience in relationship to other African American single mother college students’ experiences during their academic tenure.

### **Research Design**

I decided to utilize auto ethnography for this research because it allowed me to reflect on my experiences and analyze my perceptions through a critical race lens. Through my own narrative, I evaluated my own subjective disclosures and the affect that it had on my educational, personal, and social outcomes. According to Berg (2007), “This reflexive characteristic implies that the researcher understands that he or she is part of the social world(s) that he or she investigates” (p.178). Ellis and Bochner (2000) stated:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autobiographers’ gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle-lens, focusing outward

on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation. (p.739)

The use of autoethnography allows the researcher to combine autobiography and ethnography. Through storytelling the researcher can use an autobiographical lens to describe their experience, their emotional, physical, and psychological responses to that experience; then, they can utilize ethnography to explain how this experience transforms the culture of those who shared the phenomenon or are directly/indirectly affected by it.

Sharing my experience as a member of this sorority allowed me to be the subject and the object of the research. According to Chang (2008), "...culture and individuals are intricately intertwined (p.46). By retracting the memories that I have of my experience in the sorority, I can give my readers a more in-depth comprehension of how such an occurrence can shape post-secondary normality.

Most of my data came from two sources: autobiographical memories of micro-aggressive encounters and transcripts from semi-structured interviews that I conducted with other members of the sorority. Through a critical race feminist lens, I used storytelling and counter-storytelling to gain and analyze my data. Storytelling, as defined by Dyson and Genishi (1994), is achieved when we, "...organize our experiences into important happenings" (p. 2). I used the semi-structured interviews and partnered it with supportive academic literature to triangulate my perspective. According to Merriam (2009):



Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people. (p.216)

Providing multiple perspectives thickens the description of the data and assists with the affirmation of our perspectives.

### **Master Narratives**

The master narrative describes what the majority, (White, Male, Middle Class, &Heterosexual) would consider to be normative or universal. The master narrative described the way in which the dominant group portrayed the single parent college student, specifically African American single parent college students. The master narrative painted the picture of the African American single parent college student as one who is unprepared academically, is a victim of stereotype threat, financially restricted and scholastically uncommitted.

### **Counter-Stories.**

I have experienced numerous micro-aggressions during my academic career. For the purpose of this research, I chose two vital experiences to analyze. The first incident occurred when our sorority was contacted by multiple media outlets including Star Jones and People magazine. As excited as we were about the exposure, the pressure of portraying the ideal image became overwhelming. We began to seriously question what the ideal image really was. Our decision narrowed down to what we were versus what we wanted people to believe that we were. We only had one member who was married,

so we chose her to conduct our interviews. Naturally, we chose our founder to do many of the interviews as well. However, this would eventually cause extreme turmoil within the group. I utilized the critical race theory tool, storytelling and counter-storytelling to dissect the microaggressions that I occurred during this experience. The second narrative describes the isolation that I felt once I accepted the interim Vice President position of the sorority and needed to contact the Office of Student Affairs for assistance. My intentions were to consult with the university on ways in which we could restructure our organization after the expulsion of our previous president. However, after numerous attempts we were simply dismissed by the Office of Student Affairs. Our sorority had gained positive national attention in a matter of months and the university made little effort to support us during the transition. Through storytelling and counter-storytelling, I will analyze the microaggression that I experience during these encounters.

### **Semi-structured Interview.**

I conducted three semi-structured interviews from a purposeful criterion- based sample. The three participants were African American women between the ages of 30-40 who were members of the sorority. All interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. I recorded the phone interviews. Then, I transcribed, coded and analyzed them for reoccurring themes. I decided not to conduct a structured interview because I felt that it would guide too strictly what my participants would talk about. However, because I was interested in certain experiences, I had an interview schedule prepared to be sure that those concepts were addressed. To maintain confidentiality, the names of the participants and university were not used. I also made

sure that the students understood their rights as research participants. Each participant was given the choice of a \$20 gift card to Target or Walmart.

### **Data Analysis: Grounded Theory.**

I analyzed my interviews utilizing a grounded theory approach. According to Merriam (2009), grounded theory is a methodology that generates a theory based on the data collected. Although grounded theory has its similarities to other qualitative research methodologies, such as utilizing mostly interviews, observations for data collection and having the researcher serve as the data collector, there are very distinct differences that make it unique. According to Merriam (2009), “What differentiates grounded theory from other types of qualitative research is its focus on building theory” (p.30). Merriam (2009), also states that grounded theory generally focuses on the process of real-world situations and how they change over time. In other words, grounded theory is used more when addressing more practical situations. Merriam states (2009), “The type of theory is called substantive theory-theory that applies to a specific aspect of practice” (p.200).

Like other qualitative methodologies, grounded theory utilizes a specific procedure when analyzing data collected. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), “The procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well-integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study” (p.5). The data analysis begins with open coding; which establishes concepts. Concepts are ideas about the scenario or situations being researched. According to Glaser and Straus (1998), “It is an abstract representation of an event, object, or action/interaction that a researcher identifies as being significant in the data” (p.103). After open coding, the

researcher performs axial coding; which groups concepts into categories with the use of the constant comparative method. According to Merriam (2009), "...the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (p. 30). Through constant comparative analysis, the researcher will identify themes across interviews (categories) but will also relate unique features with the participants' stories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Categories are the summation of concepts based on similarities and differences. According to Merriam (2009), "Categories are conceptual elements that cover or span many individual examples (or bits or units of the data you previously identified) of the category" (p.181). Finally, the researcher will conduct selective coding; which establishes the core category. According to Merriam (2009), "The core category is like the hub of a wheel; it is the central defining aspect of the phenomenon to which all other categories and hypothesis are related or interconnect" (p.200). Through the core category, the researcher will then identify a theory that is grounded in the data.

### **Grounded theory sampling.**

When conducting a grounded theory study, a researcher must first decide which phenomenon they wish to study (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Then they must select a sample or population who is familiar with and can give reliable data about the phenomenon. According to Merriam (2009), "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p.77).

Another key component of grounded theory sampling is allowing the analyzed data to determine what type of data will be collected next. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), “theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them” (p.45). In other words, after each analysis, the researcher determines who and what should be researched next based on the previous data collected. Therefore, allowing a researcher to change the direction of their study with each new finding. Even though a researcher may start off with a specific sample, due to constant analysis, the data may point them in a different direction causing for a new sample, interview schedule, location, etc.

### **Open coding.**

Data analysis begins with the examination of data collected. The researcher analyzed the data line by line to identify key phrases or words. During this examination, the researcher jotted down notes, comments, or observations in which they feel are relevant to the phenomenon in question. According to Merriam (2009), “This process of making notations next to bits of data that strike you as potentially relevant for answering your research questions is also called coding” (p.178). These jottings are also referred to as a code book. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), “In open coding, events/actions/interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences” (p. 12). During the coding process, the groupings of codes were labeled or named based on the overall theme of the collective codes. Corbin and Strauss (1990), state, “...the conceptual name or label should be suggested by the context in which an event is located.’ ‘By “context,” we mean the conditional background or situation in which the

event is embedded” (p.106). Meaning, the name or label of the concepts must be relevant to key concepts of the phenomenon. Based on similar themes, the researcher then was able to group the concepts together to form categories and subcategories.

### **Axial coding.**

Once categories were established, the researcher then further analyzed the data by comparing those categories against each other to look for commonalities. According to Merriam (2009), “Axial coding is the process of relating categories and properties to each other, refining the category scheme” (p.200). During axial coding, the researcher looked for schemes that repeated in the data over and over again and how they related to previously formed categories if at all. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), “Procedurally, axial coding is the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (p.124). Properties and dimensions are used to further classify and describe the categories as well as how those characteristics fall on a range. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), “...properties are the general or specific characteristics or attributes of a category, dimensions represent the location of a property along a continuum or range” (p.117). The researcher utilized a concept map to identify the properties and dimensions assigned to all categories.

Through axial coding, the researcher further identified the phenomenon at question by being able to answer who, what, where, when and why (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). “Put another way, by answering the questions of who, when where, why how, and with what consequences, analysts are able to relate structure with process” (Strauss and

Corbin, 1998, p.127). In other words, this process brings the researcher closer to forming a hypothesis or proposition about the phenomenon at question.

### **Selective coding.**

The final stage of grounded theory is identifying a core category. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), “Selective coding is the process by which all categories are unified around a core category, and categories that need further explication are filled-in with descriptive detail” (p. 14). Developing the core category is the initial step in developing a theory. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), there are several techniques that should be incorporated when deciding on a core category: writing the storyline; moving from description to conceptualization; using diagrams; and reviewing and sorting through memos. Writing a story involves the researcher going back through the data and re-writing it in terms of its depth or meaning. Moving from description to conceptualization involves re-writing the storyline using the categories already established to describe the phenomenon. The researcher should be able to demonstrate the correlation between the categories that form a central or core category (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The use of diagrams to explain the correlation between categories is optional. In this study, the researcher utilized a concept map to show all categories; their properties and dimensions. The process of reviewing and sorting through memos involved going back through notes and code books. Usually memos can be sorted into categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Straus and Corbin (1998), state, “By reviewing and sorting memos according to categories and then for their cross dimensional linkages, researchers should be able to arrive at a considerable amount of integration” (p.155).

Through this collection of processes, the researcher was able to construct a theory or proposition regarding the phenomenon examined.

Because this research is not grounded theory, there are several components of the grounded theory analysis process that will not be incorporated in this study. It is not foreseen that this research will require a theoretical sample. Each participant will be given the same structured interview. Neither the participants nor the interview schedule will change based on data analysis. Another component of grounded theory that will not be utilized during this research is the discovery of a theory. The other members were not the primary focus of this research; therefore, the data collected from the semi-structured interviews will only be used to triangulate the primary autoethnographic data.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations relevant to the use of autoethnography as a research tool. Critical race theory relies on the “voice” of the individual. This voice may or may not reflect accurate or factual information. According to Hassler (2010), “The fact that I am, both the researcher and the researched prohibited traditional measures of verification generally employed in qualitative and quantitative studies” (p.47). Autoethnography doesn’t employ traditional measurable data such as samples, graphs or charts. The primary data relies heavily on memory. The researcher may be limited by her own memory recognition. Due to the nature of the research, an auto-ethnography only allows for the researcher’s reflection; however, that reflection represents her truth.



**Ethics**

This research will follow the policies and procedures established by the University of Missouri's Office of Research Administration. The proposal will go through the Institutional Review Board committee who will then examine the proposal for ethical standards. Though it is not foreseen that this research will cause any mental stress, the researcher will be sure to provide resources for all participants requesting it. All participants will be given anonymity. The researcher will keep all information confidential.

**Trustworthiness**

During this study, the researcher will utilize triangulation to establish reliability and validity. According to Merriam (2009), "Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different time or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people" (p.216). In the study, I used the semi-structured interviews and partnered it with supportive academic literature to triangulate my perspective.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this autoethnography was to explore my experience as an African American single parent college student and as a member of a sorority designed for students with similar backgrounds. More specifically, this study aimed to give light to the affects that intersectionality of race, gender, and classism had on my ability to persist in a higher education setting. This study explored my personal experience in relationship to other African American single mother college students' experiences during their academic tenure. This dissertation sought to answer the following research questions. How did the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism affect the persistence of the author? This dissertation also sought to answer what was the impact that a sorority dedicated to single mothers in higher education had on the author personally, socially, and academically

The theoretical framework for this study resides within the Critical Race Feminist Theory. Critical Race Feminist Theory is a spin-off of Critical Race Theory, which is originally a discipline in legal studies that revealed the unjust and inequitable practices of law in the United States (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2012). According to Evans-Winters and Esposito, (2010) Critical Feminist Theory has four essential principles:

1. 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.

2. 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.
3. Critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color.
4. Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth and calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression.

I used a Critical race feminist lens in order to analyze my data. In addition to using critical race feminist theory analytical tools, this chapter utilized the master narrative and counter-story to further dissect the experiences told by the participants. Providing a master narrative of the dominant group and the counter-narrative of the oppressed group, permits a more defined discourse of the microaggression. According to Adams-Wiggins (as cited in DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) "...counter-stories have become the principal means of unmasking and evaluating normalized dialogues that have led to stereotypes" (p.80). Counter-stories give a voice to those who have been forcefully muted. According to Negron, (2013)

So, counter-stories can be used to expose, analyze, as well as challenge deeply-entrenched narratives and characterizations of racial privilege, sex, etc. In this sense, counter-stories can help promote social justice by putting a human face to the experiences of often-marginalized groups. This promote their sense of social,

political and cultural cohesion and teaches others about their social realities (para. 1).

This research utilized critical race feminist theory and counter-stories to describe the microaggressions experienced by myself and other members of the sorority. Counter-stories were essential in this research because they challenged the statistical information found in the literature regarding African American single mother college students, and it also gave a better understanding of the impact that social inhibitions have on this group of students.

This chapter begins with the master narrative. The master narrative describes what the majority, (White, Male, Middle Class, &Heterosexual) would consider to be normative or universal. The master narrative presented in this chapter describes the way in which the dominant group portrayed the single parent college student, specifically African American single parent college students. The master narrative painted the picture of the African American single parent college student as one who is unprepared academically, is a victim of stereotype threat, financially restricted and scholastically uncommitted. The counter-stories dove deeper into the core of the single parent college student experience. They uncover the social isolation, the lack of understanding from faculty and staff members, and the extensive pressure to succeed despite all odds.

This chapter will conclude with a discussion of how the master narrative and counter-narrative impacted me as the researcher and the participant. I hope to encourage my readers, especially those who have shared experiences, to reflect on the fear of stereotypes and how those micro-aggressions have impacted their social interactions on campus. Additionally, I hope this research opens a dialogue about the importance of

advocating for single parent college students as a protected group of interest on college campuses.

### **Master-Narrative**

There is a significant amount of literature that supports the concept that a college education is the road to financial freedom and stability, not only for the individual, but for their families (Miller, Gault & Thorman, 2011). Individuals who have earned a college degree generate more income over their lifetimes than someone who has no post-secondary exposure (NCES, 2010). Higher levels of education accompany increased earning potential. This earning potential often transfers from generation to generation (Attewell and Lavin, 2007). College degree obtainment is essential to the stability of the family, especially families led by single mothers.

Single parent college student enrollment is increasing. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), college enrollment of single parents has nearly doubled, from 7 percent to 13 percent, in the past 20 years. However, the increased enrollment doesn't always produce degree completion. This figure is even more dismal for African American single parent college students. In addition to barriers caused by welfare reform, others exist such as juggling school and work schedules, obtaining and maintaining health care, child care issues, and financial independence inhibit the persistence of single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Shaw, 2004). The feminization of poverty coupled with low degree completion rates amongst African American single mothers has maintained the endless cycle of families who suffer from financial deficiencies.

## **The Counter-story**

As a part of my doctoral dissertation research for the University of Missouri-St. Louis, I interviewed three members of the sorority. The participants and I are the primary data source for this counter-story. To protect their anonymity, I have replaced their names with pseudonyms as well as the name of the sorority. All the participants were contacted through social media. The first three to respond to the request were selected for the study. I decided not to conduct a focus group because I wanted all the participants to be able to retract their memories of the micro aggressions without the influence of the other participants. All the participants were active members of the sorority during the time that I reported experiencing the micro aggressions. The counter-story is written in a way that the other participants triangulate my auto-ethnographic narrative. An analysis of the interviews produced themes or sets of truth that were then inserted into the counter-story as validation to the phenomenon.

### **Multiple Identities and Consciousness**

I always looked forward to hearing from Nikki, but the sound of her voice sparked immediate concern. She stated, “We are calling for an emergency meeting and I need you to be on campus tomorrow at 5:00 p.m.”. I asked if everything was okay and she just replied, “Some of the members are really concerned about the leadership and feel that we have done everything possible to remediate some of the issues.’ ‘Tomorrow we are asking for the members to vote for the expulsion of our president.” I remember feeling baffled by the thought of this because she was not only the president of the organization, but she was also the founder. This was her baby; her project and we were

removing her from it. However, this incident was of no surprise to me. There were numerous encounters reported regarding the president's welfare queen behavior. There were written and unwritten rules regarding behavioral conduct and a zero- tolerance policy was in place. Our hands were tied. The sorority was barely over a year old and many of the members were of the first inducted class. We had more hands- on involvement with the leadership and the direction that the sorority was to take. We wanted this experience to be one that was uplifting and supportive in nature. We also really wanted to create a molding technique in which new sisters would be taken under a Big Sister's wing and would be guided into adopting a lifestyle that was ideal for membership representation. Admittedly, this representation, at times, seemed unattainable for even the most disciplined sister.

In the beginning, the rules of being a member were very lenient, but towards the end it became harsh. Once we promoted it more, we didn't make it as easy for the newbies (Personal Communication, May 10, 2015).

Although, the intentions were positive, this branding took what should have been a sister circle experience for the members into a contact zone of its own. Our goal was to defy every negative descriptive of a single parent. We were all aware of the stereotypes associated with being a single mother and our objective was to portray an image that was the exact opposite of that. We were determined not to be seen as a group of baby mamas or welfare queens. Social psychologists define this normality as narrative scripts.

According to Gilliam (1999):

Social psychologists developed the notion of scripts to refer to a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a

participant or as an observer. The utility of scripts lies in their ability to distill information, thus aiding in quicker comprehension. Scripts setup predictable roles and actions that, in turn, offer clear indicators of what is most likely to follow from them. (p.1)

According to Gilliam (1999), the script associated with the welfare recipients consisted of two components: they were often women and disproportionately African American. We desired to challenge the common knowledge that society had assigned to single mothers, especially African American single mothers.

People tend to look at mothers that are going to school and women that have multiple children with a stereo type and a negative light. But I honestly feel like if you look at the women of our sorority, you will see that that is not the stereotype. I think from us you can gain positive statistics vs negative statistics. (Personal Communication, May 9, 2015)

Initially, what we wanted was not only academic support, but we wanted a place where we could combine our home life with university life. We wanted a place where we could bring our kids on campus. We wanted to brainstorm with other single parent college students about ways to deal with the challenges of higher education. We wanted to see other women like us make it to graduation and follow her plan of action. You looked up under somebody, then you had somebody looking up under you. You no longer called them by their name, you said that's my sister (Personal Communication, May 10, 2015).

They offered teamwork. A couple of times the sisters came through and watched my son in the arcade rom while I attended class and I did too when someone had



class. That was my experience, it was good (Personal Communication, May 10, 2015).

We were not only looking to graduate so that we could obtain financial wealth, but we were also looking to acquire a higher social and cultural capital. According to Yosso (2005), “People of Color lack the social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (p.70). We often spoke of the negativity that society placed on single mothers and our objective was to eliminate or at least balance out that negative social and cultural capital by obtaining a higher education degree. According to Gilliam (1999), the welfare queen was typically lazy, promiscuous, had poor parenting skills and lived a life that was unproductive and unhealthy. We adopted bylaws that banned any member from exhibiting any behavior that perpetuated the unfavorable social script. Though it appeared that many of us easily met the criteria mentioned in the bylaws, it was our fifteen minutes of fame that would put our self-actualization to test.

News of our sorority gained national attention within three to four months of formation. Our sorority was contacted by multiple media outlets including Star Jones and People magazine. As excited as we were about the exposure, the pressure of portraying the ideal image became overwhelming. We began to seriously question what the “ideal image” really was.

Shorter-Gooden (2004), defined this phenomenon as shifting; the concept that people of minority often live a double life and feel required to shift between living a life that is acceptable to the white community then, shift to living a life in which they are accustomed to once they are around other African Americans.

Although shifting can be a healthy and normal process of switching between one's social roles such as career and parenting, minorities shift for social acceptance and survival; the greater the discriminatory indicators, the greater the need to shift. This is especially true for African American women who are victims of not only racism but sexism and often classism. According to Johnson, Gamst, Meyers, Arellano-Morales, and Shorter-Gooden (2016), "Racial attitudes, both positive and negative, include beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes, and their various manifestations in social practice" (p.18). Individuals with higher discriminatory indicators often experience greater negative racial attitudes which results in increased shifting to reduce social rejection. The prevalence of negative racial attitudes toward African American women stems from three main societal scripts; Mammy, Sapphire, and the Jezebel. According to Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008), The Mammy is an asexual caregiver, the Sapphire is loud, aggressive and emasculated, while the Jezebel is very seductive and promiscuous. Although these negative images have been counteracted with the prevalence of the Strong Black Woman, defined by Shooter and Goodwin (2016) as a woman who is strong, self-sufficient and aggressive; this image only further perpetuates that Black women are angry, unfeminine, and less desirable. African American women need to constantly balance not only their need to shift but the degree of shifting between their roles so that they become acculturated enough for acceptance into the dominant culture but not so much that they isolate themselves from their own race or social group. In the end, our decision narrowed down to what we were versus what we wanted people to believe that we were. We only had one member who was married, so we chose her to do the interviews. Naturally, our

founder did many of the interviews as well. However, this would eventually cause extreme turmoil within the group.

Rumors began to circulate regarding our president's lifestyle. Some of her choices mimicked too closely to that of a welfare queen. The other sisters were concerned with the way the organization was being represented publicly. Social credibility was everything at this point. We had what seemed like the world looking at us and we needed to make sure that our representation was air tight. Many of the sisters relied on the university, not only for the gain of financial wealth, but, social and cultural capital as well and couldn't afford to have their reputation tarnished. So, we replaced our president with one who was married; her children had only one father; the most articulate; the most wholesome of us to be the face of our organization. We felt as if her shifting would be minimal. Although we were accepting of who we were as African American single mothers, we had to employ major damage control by putting up a front that our group was full of members with attributes like our new president just for social acceptance.

The desire for social acceptance was very common for us. I often would have my kids play for little league teams in more affluent neighborhoods. Not only were we the only African American family on the soccer team, but I was the only single parent. The moms would huddle together and talk about their lives and their struggles and I would listen thinking to myself how our struggles were nothing alike. They really had no idea what struggle really was. They often complained about which contractor to hire or which private school to send their toddlers too; while I was struggling to figure out how I was going to pay my mortgage or who was going to watch the boys while I attended class the next day. After the first encounter with the soccer moms, I started wearing my old

wedding rings to the games. Surprisingly, I felt more comfortable talking to other moms when I wore my rings. I was able to converse with them without the feeling that my family was inferior to theirs. Even after soccer season ended, I continued to wear my rings while out in public with my children just to avoid the stigmatism.

We all experience different degrees of shifting; however, we all shifted for the same reasons, acceptance. The expulsion of our president exhibited how our greatest strength was also our greatest weakness. We were victims of internalized oppression. According to Thomas, Speight & Witherspoon, “The internalization of oppression can lead individuals to adopt personas that match the stereotypes, based on their feelings of public and private regard” (p.120, 2004). We were so overwhelmed with the possibility that we would be identified negatively despite all our efforts to defeat the odds.

Me as a Black woman, it is very important for me to create a positive statistic and not be a negative statistic. It is very important for me to educate my daughter to be in the same frame of mind, be a positive statistic not a negative one (Interview transcript, 2015).

Defeating the odds was how we dealt with the oppression. Being the opposite of the stereotype was how we coped with the stigmatism. Any deviation from this coping strategy from any member of the circle could result in scolding or abandonment. The risk was just too great.

### **The Intersections of Race and Gender**

All seemed to be well under our new leadership. The sorority was a united front. The expectations were set in stone and we were all conforming. We began to expand our university and community outreach. We had healthy living parties and educational

playdates. Several members were preparing for graduation. We were even in the process of forming a graduate chapter. During an advisement meeting we were made aware that our former president had reached out to the Office of Student Affairs and made a formal complaint about her expulsion. We were expecting some backlash from her and had consulted with the Director of Student Affairs regarding the proper procedure for replacing a member of the executive team. However, what we didn't expect was that now our funding would be cut because we didn't have enough members in our organization to be recognized by the university. We overcame that hurdle by increasing our fundraising efforts. We also continued to recruit and accept new members. Our organization continued to thrive, and our bonds gained in strength.

The advantages of being in the organization were obviously the friendships that you made. Being a part of a sorority, a small group where everybody had the same background. If it wasn't for that organization, I probably wouldn't have the close knit friendships that I have now. We are all still friends. Our kids are still friends. I have gotten additional friendships from those friendships. Secondary friendships as a result of those (Personal Communication, March 9, 2015).

You will have the ability to look back on this situation with your daughters or your cousins or your nieces and say at some point, I was a part of a sorority or I was a part of an organization that empowered other women. Maybe that will spark something in their minds to say, hey I can do this too and maybe even make it better (Personal Communication, March 10, 2015).

Unfortunately, our former president continued to make daily phone calls to the Office of Student Affairs complaining about being removed from the sorority. We

consulted with the Director of Student Affairs many times about how to best handle the situation. We had followed their directives and were unclear on what the next step should have been. It was this final statement stated by the Director that would be the last straw, “I really feel that you guys should contact an attorney because I really don’t want to get involved with a bunch of angry women in what appears to be cat-fighting” (Personal Communication, May 2008). After she made that statement, I remember feeling like I had been punched in the stomach. I couldn’t even find the words to respond to her. I just thanked her for her time and walked out of the office. I immediately called the other members and told them what she had said. Their response was identical to mine; devastation.

I think that if there is an idea, I think there should be a very wise choice in advisors from the school. If they are going to allow an organization like this to be on campus, then there needs to be an administrator that really buys into what an organization like this entails; empowering women (Personal Communication, May 9, 2015)

The advisor did try to help, but you know dealing with women, everything just came to a halt (Personal Communication, May 10, 2015).

It wasn’t her request for outside consultation that hurt us, it was because after all our hard work; after we had defeated all odds; after we consulted with the department and professionally followed their directives; after all the positive publicity we brought to the university; amongst other things, we were simply reduced to angry black women. According to Ashley (2014), “The angry Black woman mythology presumes all Black women to be irate, irrational, hostile and negative despite the circumstances”

(p.28). At no point did any of the remaining members present an attitude that was angry or hostile during our advisement meetings. At the meetings, we were very professional, articulate, prepared and firm. Walley-Jean (2009) described this phenomenon as such:

Yet, the inherent risk of perpetuating this stereotype, even unintentionally, is illustrated in a feature printed in *Newsweek* written prior to Senator Barack Obama becoming the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party in which the author suggests that, as Senator Obama's campaign becomes more widespread, the public may shift from interpreting Michelle Obama's outspoken and assertive behavior as a reflection of strength and intelligence to viewing her as emasculating, acerbic, and domineering. (p. 69)

Just when we thought we had eliminated any possible reason for them to dismiss us, they managed to find one. No matter how hard we tried to eliminate our disadvantages, how flawless our shifting was, we would never be able to escape the narrative script society had written about us. It didn't really matter what our demeanor was, we were Black women and therefore hostile. I stated before that I didn't have the words to say during the meeting, but in fact I did have the words and they were all hostile. My temperament would have been justified considering how easily our concerns had been dismissed. Unfortunately, I knew that if I had reacted negatively, it would have only confirmed what she thought of me anyways; angry black woman. Walley-Jean stated,

Thus, I argue that the angry black woman stereotype arises from this foundation of negative images and the position of subordination of African American women that seeks to restrain their expression of anger by negatively labeling it (p.71).

Labeling us angry Black women was a way of silencing us, by controlling our demand for justice and acknowledgement and we had succumbed to it. Smith (2016), defines this as racial battle fatigue. “Racial Battle Fatigue is caused by the constant redirection of energy needed for emergency situations, mainly for psychosocial reasons, to deal with race related stress.’ ‘This also compromises resilient coping resources when used for responding to mundane forms of racism” (Smith, 2016, p. 2). The threat of the stereotype was internalized. It was over. I couldn’t help but wonder what was all of this for? It didn’t really matter how accomplished we were or what we did for the community. It didn’t matter if we were good mothers or excellent providers. When it was all said and done, we were Black women and therefore dismissible.

I wish the school would have pushed a little more, if they cared. I believe the sorority would still be in effect today (Personal Communication, May 10, 2015).

Any time you hear Black Single Mother, even single mother without preference to Black, there is always going to be a stereotype to that. It doesn’t matter if I’m a single mother sitting at a bus stop, a single mother sitting in an office or a single mother being involved in a sorority, I think the title holds a stigma to it anyway and I think that which stigma equals stereotypes. So regardless if you and I are single mothers, we are educated women. You are working on a doctorate and I have a bachelor’s degree and will be working on an MBA at some point. I think



because we don't wear hats that say MBA and doctorate, we walk around with our children and no man attached to us, people automatically give us a stereotype. It doesn't matter what we have done or what we have accomplished. There is always going to be some stereotype attached to single moms regardless of if it's true or not. I think that it does lead to having to be better than the next person, right? Especially if Black single women or Black women in general without being a single mother, we always have to be better than the next person (Personal Communication, May 11, 2015)

### **Our experiences are different from White women and Black men**

It was 3 o'clock in the morning and I had all my bills spread out on the kitchen table. I had calculated and recalculated exactly how much money I would need every month to pay my bills and expenses. I had also calculated what my potential financial aid package would be for the next two semesters; unfortunately, there was a \$4,000 deficit. I had no idea where this money was going to come from, but I said to myself, "I don't care, I'm going for it!" I only needed to complete two more semesters in order to finish my bachelor's degree and I had put it off for a year so that I could work a dead-end job. I was willing to risk everything so that I could finish school. I knew that it would be difficult, but the result was worth the struggle. I walked into my job the next day and gave them my two weeks' notice. For the next six months, I went to school full time and worked odd jobs such as delivering phone books or working on an ice cream truck just to make sure that the bills were paid. During my last semester, I was accepted into graduate school. As excited as I was, I knew that I couldn't continue to support my family off odd end jobs, so I made an appointment with my financial aid office for support. Although

we were able to come up with a financial aid package that would allow for me to pay for my expenses, the money wasn't coming in fast enough. The semester had already started, and I had planned to get caught up with my mortgage, pay my daycare expenses amongst other things. After several weeks of waiting, I spoke with a financial aid counselor and explained that my utilities were in jeopardy of being disconnected and I desperately needed my funds to be released. I was told that my utilities and daycare expenses were not an educational expense and that I didn't qualify for an emergency release. Later that afternoon, during my graduate seminar class, I discussed my situation with the entire class. One of my fellow classmates, who worked in the financial aid office, informed me of the protocol for an emergency fund release. She was able to give me the step by step procedure for obtaining an emergency release of financial aid as well as issues that she felt single mothers experience when requesting additional financial aid. She also stated that the Director of her department didn't want students to know about this resource out of fear of abuse. The next morning, I went back to the financial aid office and followed the instructions that my fellow graduate student gave me and was granted my funds immediately. As elated as I was that my lights were no longer in jeopardy of being disconnected, I was still very angry about why this service wasn't offered to me the first time. Why were my needs seen as too extreme or uncustomary to the financial aid counselor? Why was it so hard for him to understand that formula and diapers was an expense for me? Single mothers are the bread winners of their homes with often little to no financial support from family. The needs of a single mother are significant, and although higher education institutions are more open to enrolling this population of students, they also need to be prepared to accommodate their needs.

During my graduate studies, I was fortunate enough to have classes with higher education professionals who were able to give me insight on the political climate of not only my institution, but others all around the city. This information granted me access to who my allies were and how to maneuver through conflicts with minimum resistance. Several months later, during a monthly sorority meeting, I overheard a fellow member complain of the exact issue that I experienced with the financial aid office. It was the start of a new semester and she needed her financial aid released so that she could get caught up with her utilities and she was met with resistance from the department. I quickly informed her of my similar encounter and gave her the steps for an emergency release. Before, I knew it, several other members had joined the conversation regarding the perception that our needs were too extreme and unwarranted.

The cost of higher education is increasing at an alarming rate. Families are feeling the burn of peaking tuition rates, high health insurance premiums, and sky rocketing room and board fees. The cost of higher education obtainment is even more burdening for a single parent college student because they are more likely to be living in poverty. According to Lee (2018)

Single mothers often spend over half of their income on housing expenses and a third on child care, leaving them with less money for educational expenses.

Without financial aid, single mother students have little or no means to contribute financially to their educational expenses. One third graduated with a college degree, while one sixth had not completed high school. (para. 35)

According to United States Census (2016), Women in female-headed households with no spouse experienced higher rates of poverty (35.6 percent) than women in

married-couple families (6.6 percent) and men in male-headed households. Not only are women in general not earning as much as men, but White women are earning more money than Black women. According to Lee (2018),

If a single mother is able to work, her earning power still lags significantly compared with men's, about 79¢ to a \$1 for the same job — leaving a wage gap of 21¢ on the dollar. The wage disparities are even greater for women of color — African-American women earn only 64¢, while Hispanic and Latinas fare worse, being paid just 56¢ on the dollar".(para.11)

In other words, not only is there a disparity between the wages of women and men in general, but White women are earning more money than their Black counterparts. In addition to having a higher earned income, White women are more likely to receive financial support from family and receive child support from their child's father (Livingston, 2018). Those differences make the story of poverty even more dismal for African American single mothers. When providing for your family is a challenge, being able to include the cost of an education is almost unattainable.

The financial aid needs of an African American single mother are very different from that of an African American single father and a White single mother. Because they are less likely to receive child support or sufficient income to sustain their family than white women, their financial needs will be greater than that of a White single mother. Financial aid departments need to be trained on the difference between the financial needs of these distinct groups. Single parent college students must walk on the fine line of earning enough to support their families, while not earning too much that it results in a disqualification of the maximum federal financial aid package. In addition, they needed

to work enough to maintain their homes, but not so much that it interferes with their education. Having sufficient financial aid would significantly reduce the amount of time that single parents have to spend working which would increase their persistence and graduation rates.

### **Conclusion**

Telling this story was actually very difficult for me. Sometimes victims don't realize that they are victims. Black women constantly deal with so many layers of oppression that the pain of it has become bearable. We have become immune to it especially if we have managed to infiltrate categories that are dominated by the majority such as higher economic class or education. I found it interesting that although the participants and I didn't admit that we were a victim of oppression initially, the stories that we told uncovered many microaggressions. Even when we come together and mirror the lifestyle of the dominant culture, we will always be reduced because of the color of our skin.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

I will open this chapter by discussing the literature on single parent college students, specifically African American single mothers. Next, I will discuss the affects that race and intersectionality placed on the sustainability of the organization; as well as the oppressive nature of the university's administration and how my investigation adds to the existing theory on the persistence of African American single mother college students. I will then analyze how the information uncovered in this research can benefit current and prospective students, as well as higher education administrators.

Today, women are the majority on the college campuses (National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey data, 2009). The increase in the enrollment of women has also led to an increased enrollment of single parent college students. According to the Department of Education (2009), 12 percent of undergraduate students are single parents, of that 12 percent, 31.3% are African American. This particular population also concurrently represents students with low income. "In 2008, women made up 57 percent of the 16.8 million undergraduate students in the United States, 71 percent of the 3.9 million undergraduate student parents, 78 percent of the 1.9 million single student parents, and 81 percent of the 1.5 million low-income single student parents" (Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011). Being able to obtain a higher education degree would not only assist with stabilizing the single parent home but would also be a gate opener for social and cultural capital. Unfortunately, the obstacles that many of these students face are overbearing. The challenges of welfare reform, low income, lack of flexible childcare, amongst other barriers have made it difficult for African American single mothers to successfully navigate through the higher education system. By providing "sister circle"

type organizations, much like our sorority, the student will be able to feel more connected to the university. The feeling of connection in a university setting increases persistence and graduation rates, leadership skills, as well as cultural and social wealth. However, according to this study, due to multiple internal and external intersectional micro-aggressions, such an organization would require a significant amount of nurturing and support to be sustainable.

I conducted this auto ethnography to expand the very limited research on organizations that support African American single parent college students. My research focused on three counter narratives:

1. Our experiences are different from White women and Black men.
2. Multiple Identities and Consciousnesses.
3. The Intersections of Race and Gender.

One very distinct concept that was uncovered during this research was motivation. What motivates African American single mothers to pursue higher education? Despite all the barriers presented before African American single mothers, they continue to enroll into higher education institutions because of familial motivations that are directly related to capital. It often goes far beyond the human capital theory that indicates that the more education one has, the more income they will receive. African American women are using higher education as a vehicle to move them up the economic, social, and cultural ladders. They are using education as a way to gain access into institutions, communities, and positions that are predominately dominated by White people. African American women are essentially using education to camouflage themselves in order to adopt the

power of White privilege; specifically, the rights to enjoyment and the rights of reputation. This camouflage is a foundation that is made up of education, economic stability, social class, and cultural knowledge. When African American women apply this camouflage to their lives, it makes it difficult for people of the dominant race to identify the negative social scripts that are often associated with them. It gives them the privilege to a better quality of life, increased power, and stability. Utilizing education as a camouflage also grants African American women with rights of reputation because they are more than likely to be viewed favorably if they identify themselves as a scholar over identifying themselves as a single mother. As I mentioned during my opening story, I chose to identify myself as a scholar first in order to gain credibility and to buffer or hide the negative stereotypes people would see in me if I first identified myself as a single mother only. Critical race feminists refer to this phenomenon as having multiple identities or consciousnesses. The scholar is the identity that African American single mothers are acquiring in order to infiltrate into the areas that are dominated by White America. The application of this camouflage is how African American single mothers are coping with the layers of oppression placed upon them by making it more difficult for individuals to devalue them without exposing their own racial propaganda.

Every participant told a story regarding a negative experience that they had with our first president. Some reported what the literature would describe as “the angry black woman” while others would describe incidents similar to that of a welfare queen; none of which were tolerable to the other members of the sorority. All of the participants spoke of the importance of not only the financial implications of higher education, but of the substantial potential for social and cultural capital that could be obtained as a result of



organization. The thought of allowing one member the opportunity to taint the flawless reputation that we wished to acquire was not a risk in which we were willing to take. According to Schmader and Lickel (2016), “Individuals tend to view their social groups as part of their self-concept” (p. 266). Schmader and Lickel (2016), also go on to say that the more a person identifies themselves with a group, the more sensitive that person will be regarding the negative actions of another member. This phenomenon is known as vicarious shame. Schmader and Lickel (2016), state, “Specifically, we assert that, like personal shame, vicarious shame is likely to be evoked by appraisals of the threat to one’s personal and group identity that are caused by a group member’s actions, and that vicarious shame is linked to a motivation to distance oneself from the event and the perpetrator” (p.267, as cited in Johns, Schmader, & Lickel, in press). Vicarious shame caused us to outcast a member who, although was imperative to the founding of the organization, chose not to conform to the necessary standards that were set in place for our sorority to gain access to the social and cultural capital that we all desired. I do feel that our former president was given the opportunity to remediate her actions; unfortunately, she wasn’t transitioning at a pace that was acceptable or effective enough for us. We had to distance ourselves from her misrepresentation in order to repair the group’s reputation.

All of the participants agreed that little was done by the institution to sustain the sorority. Some of the participants reported a need for more tailored advisement, while others suggested that more should have been done to promote the organization due to the public attention and large nontraditional presence on campus. My particular experience involved multiple interactions with student affairs administrators that ultimately led to a

micro aggression that reduced our members to angry Black women. Sustaining a special interest group will require a substantial amount of buy-in from administrators, faculty and staff. In addition to having institutional buy-in, there should also be enough trained support staff to deal with the emotional and financial support that these groups demand. Having individuals that are trained in diversity, conflict resolution and counseling is key to the success of special interest groups. According to Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) (Zúñiga & Nagda, 1992)

In communities that are not perceived as supportive, conflict is likely viewed as a threat to be avoided. Hence, it is essential that institutions provide ways for members of the campus community to successfully understand and resolve conflict. Then conflict can become a stimulus for creativity and community-building. Dialogue groups can provide both a structure and process for addressing the intergroup dynamics of multiculturalism within the learning environment. Activities for the learning process include the opportunity to break down barriers, challenge the ignorance inside and outside oneself, create new insights, forge new connections and identities, and finally, build coalitions to work toward a common goal. (p.295)

### **Implications**

The participants in this study were able to add to the existing literature by offering hindsight on not only the importance of having an organization for African American single parent students, but also the need for higher education administrators to offer support in the forms of marketing, diversity training, counseling and conflict resolution. This literature is essential due to the increasing enrollment of African

American single parent college students on college campuses. This is a group of students that suffers from the consequences of multiple intersections of racism, sexism, and classism. They not only have to deal with external indicators of oppression but internal as well. Providing support for this growing population is essential for student connectivity, student development, and persistence. Support staff who are diversity trained could offer workshops to special interest groups to help them cope with the stereotype threat, vicarious shame and racial battle fatigue.

Even if the shoe fits, African American must rise above the negative stereotypes that society has narrated for them, especially if it interferes with their personal growth and well-being. It may be best to be a hero of your own culture. Don't be a victim of the stereotype. Rewrite the narrative so that your critics will have no choice but to expose their own racial biases.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The results of this study have generated numerous opportunities for research on African American single parent college students. The potential effects of higher education on the feminization of poverty and welfare reform would be my first suggestion. More should be done to assist single parents, especially African American single mothers, with access to higher education at the four-year and graduate level. In addition to access to higher education, welfare reform should be extended to assist students who are pursuing higher levels of education. The higher the level of educational attainment achieved, the higher income potential they will have and the lower possibility that they will rely on any welfare programs long term. I believe that a pilot study should be conducted on the effects of extended welfare access to recipients who are pursuing

higher levels of education. Another interesting topic would be the affects that sister circle type organizations have on the persistence on African American single parent college students. Having such an organization would assist with connecting the students to the campus, provide peer, staff and faculty support, and provide and safe house for these students to cope with micro aggressions.

### **Limitations**

This auto ethnographic study of a specialty sorority for single mothers had several limitations. The first limitation was that this research was limited to only African American women. Single parent college students of other races and ethnicities as well as men were excluded from this study. However, this study focused solely on single parent college students who have experienced maximum racial intersections. The sample size for this research only consisted of four participants. Such a small sample size is not enough to generalize the findings to all African American single mother college students. However, qualitative research doesn't necessarily require such a result.

The data collected for the study also produced inherited limitations. Much of the data came from participants memories. According to Walford (2004) "If people wish to write fiction, they have every right to do so, but no every right to call it research" (p.411). Some would also argue that the use of auto-ethnography is highly subjective, and that valid research demonstrates an objective truth. According to Mendez (2013) Thus, the richness of auto ethnography is in those realities that emerge from the interaction between the self and its own experiences that reflect the cultural and social

context in which those events took place. It is through this representation that understanding of a particular phenomenon is accomplished. (p.283)

Researchers maintain that everyone's reality is subjective; it is their own account of how they experience a phenomenon. It is the collection of those experiences that creates an objective truth.

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