"Oh you Graduated?" "No, I Decided I was Finished."

Dropping out of High School and the Implications over the Life Course

by

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ABSTRACT

The Civil Rights Project estimates that Black girls are among the least likely to graduate from high school. More specifically, only about half, or 56%, of freshman Black girls graduate with their class four years later. Beyond the statistics little is known about Black girls who drop out, why they leave school and what happens to them once they are gone. This study is a grounded theory analysis of the stories eight adult Black women told about dropping out of high school with a particular focus on how dropping out affected their lives as workers, mothers and returners to education. There is one conclusion about dropping out and another about Black female identity.

First, the women in my study were adolescents during the 1980s, experienced life at the intersection of Blackness, womaness, and poverty and lived in the harsh conditions of a Black American hyperghetto. Using a synthesis between intersectionality and hyperghettoization I found that the women were so determined to improve their economic and personal conditions that they took on occupations that seemed to promise freedom, wealth and safety. Because they were so focused on their new lives, their school attendance suffered as a consequence. In the second conclusion I argued that Black women draw their insights about Black female identity from two competing sources. The two sources are their lived experience and popular controlling images of Black female identity.

DEDICATION

For my mother:

the architect of my education.

Who taught me to crochet, to travel alone and to make soy-milk French toast,

Who still owns a box of crayons and her grandmother's lace handkerchief,

Who taught me the Lord's Prayer and reminded me to remember the women of the Bible,

Who believes every season in my life no matter how temporary or uncomfortable can be beautiful.

She also believes that if you don't have enough money to pay the light bill you should buy a pair of shoes.

Who talks to the angels

Who could (if she were that kind of lady) stitch an endless quilt from the scraps of her broken hearts and handwritten funeral pamphlets, and wrap herself invisible forever.

Instead, she swept them into God's palm and went to fly a kite.

For Juanita's Carla and Char's Nikki I dedicate this modest product of her *focused* vision.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the Bible the Book of Esther holds two remarkable distinctions. First, a woman, Queen Esther, is the central figure of the story. Using her wit and courage, she convinces the king to spare the Jews (only a few close aides know that she is Jewish) from a genocidal plot. Second, at no point in the book is there any mention of God. Lately, I think of Esther often. I admire her for being bold in the face of challenges. Beyond Esther's virtue, I find the "absence of God" inspiring. There have been times in my journey through this process that I looked for God and could not find Him. My search seemed most fruitless when the rejection letters from jobs and publications were streaming in, my writing was blocked and my motivation to persevere slowed to nothing. Nonetheless, here I am - finished and none the worse for the wear.

The notion that I have been without God at any moment in this research process is just as absurd as the suggestion that Esther accomplished her feat without God. God is all around and supremely attentive. But sometimes the facts of this life build up so high that while He can always see you, you may not be able to see Him. True to His promise, it is in those moments that God deploys a hero to lift you up. That's what He did when he sent Queen Esther to save the Jews and that's what He did for me. My heroes are:

The women, Edith, Jessie, Myra, Pauline, Ethel, Eliza, Nikki and Zephyr. Thank you for sharing your stories with me. Because you chose to open your hearts to this experience I have a chance to flourish. It is my sincerest hope that together

we provided our readers with a better understanding of the lives of so many Black women in America.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Early in his career, rapper Tupac Shakur wrote a song that while commercially less popular than the urban anthems of his later albums, is a hauntingly keen reflection of the experiences of women in the Black American hyperghetto. Tupac tells the story of a young girl named Brenda who, through a fated course of events is murdered at the age of 12. Brenda grows up ignored by her parents. When a male cousin shows her some attention they begin an affair. When Brenda gets pregnant he leaves her and she eventually gives birth to a baby boy on the floor of a bathroom. The song is a long narrative without a chorus and concludes:

> No money no babysitter, she couldn't get a job. She tries to sell crack but ends up getting' robbed. So oh what's next? There ain't nothing left to sell. So she sees sex as a way of leaving hell. It's paying the rent so she really can't complain. *Prostitute found slain.* And Brenda's her name (Shakur, 1993).

I prefaced my study with this quotation because it reflects my findings in two ways. First, Tupac demonstrates, through his narrative, that the Black American ghetto is a socioeconomic labyrinth for its residents. The women in this study argued that, just like Brenda, they were desperate to create positive change in their lives. However the extreme joblessness and social isolation of the ghetto created an environment where each turn led them back into poverty and desperation. Second, Tupac never mentions school in his song about the 12 year-old girl. Though I can't be sure that he edited schooling out of the story

purposefully, his apparent omission does mirror the stories the women told me about their lives. This began as a study about schooling, dropping out and experiences over the life course. However, I learned in the field that for Black women who experienced their lives in the harsh realities of the Black American hyperghetto, schooling had little influence on their decisions to drop out.

When and where I enter

Three years ago I was well into my graduate program in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies but, I could not settle on a dissertation topic. I was sure my research would be a qualitative inquiry on the lives Black women and girls in urban communities and schools, but I hadn't decided on my research problem or the methodological approach or strategies of analysis. Meanwhile I had taken a part-time job as an instructor for a General Educational Development (GED) class on the south side of Big City[1]. My students were mostly Mexican and Black women who had dropped out of school years before they enrolled in my class (my first graduate was a 72 year old). Always five minutes late, the women would careen into my tiny classroom, babies and books in tow, simultaneously desperate for peace and quiet and a soapbox. "My daughter is finally coming home from jail tomorrow," one would begin, "I have so much to do!" Another joins in, "Ms. Erica I just don't get these fractions! How can the bigger numbers really be smaller and the smaller numbers really be bigger?!" As the class went on the students would truncate our mundane discussions about the early presidents and the anatomy of the animal cell, with their stories of

[1] All proper names of people, locations and schools have been changed.

experience. As they told of their own lives they also narrated the controversial and often hidden evolution of Big City. The women told stories about the all-Black shantytowns on the south side, the urban cotton fields, the influx of crack cocaine and schools with revolving doors.

The literature is full of explanations for why people do not complete high school and why Black Americans leave school at disproportionately high rates. Ironically little of what the students told me in class receives fair attention in the literature. It was the stories they told about feeling forced to make difficult, often self-destructive life decisions that lured me closer to the questions that shaped this study. Moreover I was intrigued by the value that the diploma still held for students that had not been in a classroom for decades. Despite their years in the workforce, their success as parents and in relationships, the diploma was for innumerable reasons, far from irrelevant. For example, many students confessed that they felt they were setting poor examples for their adolescent children working toward their own high school graduations. Others worked under constant fear of termination. If their companies began layoffs or if my students earned minor infractions those without diplomas could be fired immediately and without ceremony. One of my students testified to this reality. She had driven a local bus for the city for 27 years. After a minor citation she was fired with no regard for her 27 consecutive years of service and an otherwise perfect record. She enrolled in the GED class because she could not find another job without her diploma. Other students explained that not having a diploma left them vulnerable to poverty, which, in turn, can lead them to choose illicit occupations to provide for

their own well-being and the well-being of their children. Though I had rarely considered my high school diploma since my graduation in 2000, for those without a diploma, realizing its importance can be a daily nuisance at best and a paralyzing stigma at worst.

The more I listened to my students, I began to formulate questions about schooling and dropping out that I had not considered during my coursework: *Does everyone who left school without a diploma still talk about it*? *Why do so many of their stories about schooling also include stories about motherhood, relationships and poverty?* Most importantly: *Why haven't I read a study that includes the ways in which women like these women interpret schooling?*

Only a few months into this part-time job I decided to craft a dissertation project that analyzed the drop out phenomenon from the perspectives of adult Black women who had been living, mothering and working without diplomas for decades. In order to capture for my readers what I experienced in the GED class, I would ask the women to tell stories about school. Lastly, I would venture in the field aware of but not looking for the existing theoretical explanations of Black student achievement. Rather I would discover new conclusions using grounded theory methods.

Problem

In 2004 the national graduate rate was 68% (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). More specifically, a third of the students that start high school as ninth graders are unaccounted for on gradation day four years later. With the intense scrutiny that No Child Left Behind (2001) has placed on school quality

and teacher accountability, the low graduation rate has become a public concern. Educators fear that that the education system is not serving students properly. Public officials complain about the strain dropouts -- who are more likely to be unemployed, imprisoned and dependent on social programs -- place on their local and state economies. Policymakers worry that the next generation of Americans will be ill equipped to compete globally (Meier & Wood, 2004). My primary concern, however, is that scholars have not provided the above-mentioned parties with research that can lead to deeper, culturally relevant understanding of why students, particularly Black women, dropped out of school. Current research on dropouts either focuses too closely on the statistics or searches for one single explanation for why students drop out and, in particular, why minorities do so at disproportionately high rates. Not surprisingly, policymakers have yet to implement effective retention policy.

This study critically investigates the extent to which dropping out as a moment in a Black women's life shapes her experiences over the life course. At the onset I was certain that important insights into the low graduation rate and other public concerns lay hidden and silent in the stories that adult Black women who dropped out have tell about their schooling and lives since dropping out. I began with the following research questions: Why do Black women drop out of high school? How has dropping out of high school affected (if at all) the professional and personal lives of Black women over the life course?

Organization of the Dissertation

The paper is organized into five remaining chapters: 2) Conceptual and literature review, 3) Methods, 4) Analysis of dropping out, 5) Analysis of Black female identity and 6) Conclusions, limitations and implications. The conceptual and literature review broadly defines the empirical and theoretical landscape in which I situate this research. First, I provide important information about dropping out and why it is a public concern. Of particular significance is the work of Gary Orfield (2004) and other scholars at the Civil Rights Project. Using the Cumulative Promotion Index (p.9), they found that the graduation rate is much lower than researchers previously anticipated. Next I outline conceptual traditions that help critical qualitative researchers make sense of academic phenomena. The work of critical scholars, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and John U. Ogbu (1981) are featured including the ways in which contemporary scholars have applied and tested the relevance of their concepts in the field. In addition I stress the importance of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept from Black feminist thought (which was also popularized by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw) that argues that Black women live at the intersection of multiple oppressions including but not limited to race, class and gender (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

Unlike a conceptual framework I do not impose any of these concepts as a frame around the data collection. Instead I use this review to sensitize me to the most relevant theoretical concepts used to elucidate the phenomena of dropping out, academic achievement and Black female experiences in schools and society. The theoretical conclusions featured in chapters 4 and 5 were constructed directly

from the data using grounded theory techniques. As is the standard in grounded theory, I consulted the data and identified new concepts to frame the conclusions during the analytical phase known as theoretical sampling (commonly referred to as the second literature review). These concepts are featured throughout chapters 4 and 5.

In chapter 3 I address the methods in three sections. In the first section I offer a brief summary of the entire study and introduce its key components: adult Black women as participants, the use of stories as data and grounded theory analysis. In the second section I guide the reader through the major and minor components of the study including their significance to qualitative research in general, and how I implemented them in the field and during analysis. In the third section I offer a glimpse of the challenges I faced during the study and the adjustments I made to reconcile those challenges. For example during solicitation I learned that people who dropped out of high school are not only difficult to find but are reluctant to participate in research studies during which they have to share intimate details about schooling. I also gained valuable insights about developing and maintaining rapport when conducting qualitative interviews with Black women.

As I mentioned earlier, grounded theory is an inductive research process. The primary goal is to discover a new theory about a phenomenon directly from the data. Contemporary grounded theorists also use the method, however to verify existing theories or extend the promises of existing theories. This dissertation contains two insightful conclusions about dropping out and Black female identity.

It is important to note that chapters 4 and 5 do not simply report the results of the study. I organized the chapters so that the reader might understand the process through which I analyzed the data, supported the arguments with theoretical sampling and referenced the text from the women's transcripts as I developed the conclusions. In other words, each chapter contains findings, a new conceptual review and excerpts from each of the interviews. My goal was for the reader to follow the same analytical process I used to develop the arguments.

Chapter 4 contains conclusions regarding dropping out. I argue that dropping out is not always about an aversion to teachers or coursework. In the case of the women in this study dropping out was a consequence of an occupational shift. For example, Nikki liked school and wished she had graduated. But Nikki also lived on the south side of Big City, a Black American hyperghetto. According to Nikki, her life was heavily impacted by aspects of the hyperghetto such as the prevalence of drugs, poverty and violence. Determined to improve her quality of life Nikki took advantage of an occupation that seemed to promise freedom and personal wealth. She ran away from home and became a prostitute.

My conclusion about dropping out deliberately draws attention away from conversations about the relationship between dropping out and aspects of schooling such as curricula, teachers, peers, extracurricular activities, etc. This study is also a departure from the useful critiques of the role schools play in recreating social injustices. Instead I chose to focus on the role the Black American hyperghetto plays in shaping the decision-making processes of its

adolescent inhabitants. What I found is that the women did not necessarily want to leave school but did desire freedom from their living conditions. So they sought out change via fulltime, and sometimes, self-destructive occupational changes. Regular school attendance was simply a casualty of their refusal to acquiesce to the status quo. Admittedly my argument is complicated by the reality that the women chose occupations that were either self-destructive or illicit. As I analyzed the data I wondered: If these women were so determined to improve their lives why did they choose self-destructive occupations? During theoretical sampling I learned that the women most likely chose jobs that were self-destructive and illicit because the hyperghetto is devoid of options for positive change.

Chapter 5 contains conclusions directly related to how the women conceptualized Black female identity in general and Black mothers specifically. For context I start with a review of how popular culture has defined Black mothers over time. Using four tropes of Black female identity as guideposts, I chronicle how the dominant group and African American men have used controlling images such including Mammy, the Matriarch, the Welfare Queen and the Superstrong Black mother to impose racist, classist and sexist constraints on Black women. Then I present two separate but related findings. First, Black women often blame their mothers for their poor academic performance and eventual departure from school. According to the women their mothers damaged their educational careers by*: a) frequently moving, b) failing to enforce disciplinary standards, c) failing provide them with a distinct childhood.*

Second Black women narrate Black motherhood in two competing ways. When talking about their own experiences as parents, they were careful to contextualize the choices they made within the harsh realities of ghetto life. When narrating their mothers' decisions however, the women provided little to no context. In the final analysis I argued that the variations in their stories indicated stark differences in their conceptualizations of Black mothers. They saw themselves as parents negotiating the myriad challenges of the ghetto. In contrast, the women measured their mothers against the superstrong Black mother stereotype. When their mothers did not live up to the expectations of the superstrong Black mother the women criticized them as being uncaring or incompetent.

Chapter 6 concludes the study with a discussion of the major conclusions from chapters 4 and 5 and a list of implications for policy and future research. Important considerations

Ethics in Black feminist research. When conducting research with human subjects researchers must remain diligent in regard to the rights and safety of the participants. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board in October 2008 and renewed in October 2009. Additionally, before I enrolled women into the study I explained the study, secured informed consent and had each woman choose a pseudonym from a set list of names (see Appendix A for Human Subjects approval, list of names and sample consent form).

Beyond considerations mandated by the Office of Human Subjects Research, I also had to consider the data collection and analysis within a Black

feminist standpoint. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) advises that when conducting Black feminist research scholars must incorporate an ethic of caring. This means that researchers must engage certain cultural norms of Black women during the sharing of knowledge: empathy, emotion and expressiveness. This is particularly important for any study during which participants divulge sensitive, or controversial details about their lives -- scholars must take care to support and protect the women even when those details were shared within the boundaries of informed consent. I kept this principle in mind when I drafted this product. I had to ask myself: *What kind of story do I want to tell about the Black women who shared their lives with me?* My goal was to present the findings without using their experiences to create a salacious dramatization of Black American women. I decided the best way to report the results was to only include deeply private or tragic stories and details if they would assist the reader in understanding the conclusions.

Terms. Throughout the dissertation I use terms that have many, sometimes conflicting connotations. To clarify: I acknowledge that the terms dropout (in reference to individuals) and dropped out (in reference to the act of leaving school) conjure up stereotypical notions about intelligence and competence that suggest two things: a) students who left school without diplomas knowingly "give up" on school and b) that they were the sole actors in that event. I have no suitable alternative to the term dropout so I do use it, but only sparingly, most often when citing other studies that included the term. When describing the actions I use the phrase *dropped out* interchangeably with others such as: *left*

school without a diploma and *did not complete high school*. I hope that by using these phrases interchangeably and presenting these women's stories with their complexities and contradictions, I demonstrate how we need to move beyond the stereotypes associated with people who are living and working without high school diplomas.

I use the terms *African American*, *Black* and *Black American* interchangeably. In addition, the use of stories as the primary data source was an important aspect of the Black feminist standpoint of this work. Therefore my use of stories is not bound to any one methodological stance such as Narrative Research, or Life History Research. Throughout I terms and phrases to designate the act of storytelling interchangeably, including but not limited to: *told me her story* and *narrated her experiences.* Also, I do not use the term *ghetto* in the casual sense, referencing the culture of Black people in urban environments or as a generic term for poor, urban neighborhoods. Rather, it is the sociological term indicating the end result of a process known as ghettoization (Waquant, 2008; Collins, 2001; Wilson 1980,1987). Finally, all the names of the people, schools, organizations and locations featured in this study are pseudonyms.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE AND CONCEPTS

As more employers require diplomas for minimum-wage positions and with school accountability under the national microscope through legislation like No Child Left Behind (2001), families, schools, policymakers and private citizens have all positioned increasing the graduation rate as a key public policy issue. Consequently scholars have responded with countless studies that attempt to provide answers to the questions: How many students drop out? Who are they? Why?

Measuring the Drop out Rate

There is no single drop out rate to which all educators and policymakers refer. This is because not all researchers agree on how to define a dropout or the most accurate way to collect and analyze school attendance data (Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2007; Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for instance, currently defines a dropout as any adult over the age of 18, who is not currently enrolled in school and who does not have a diploma or equivalent. The percentage of adults without diplomas is the Status Completion Rate (Laird, Keinzl, DeBell & Chapman, 2007). According to the NCES, in 2001 5.0% of the adult population was living without a high school diploma (p.20). The NCES also uses a Freshman Four-year rate to describe how many students graduate with their class four years after beginning high school. In their study of the 2001, on-time graduates the National Center of Education Statistics did not yet have data for this rate (NCES, 2004, p.38). Gary Orfield (2004) and his colleagues at the Civil Rights Project did

calculate the four-year rate for the on-time graduates in the class of 2001 and found that the national graduation rate was only 68% (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). Although the National Center for Education Statistics has relied on the Status Completion Rate for decades, Orfield argues the freshman four-year rate is the best point from which to view the graduation rate crisis. Instead of attempting to count how many adults do not have diplomas we should simply subtract the number of students who graduate from number of students that began with them as freshman. The difference represents the school's ability (or lack thereof) to retain students, regardless of why some left.[2] In any case, most studies suggest that at least 25% of all students graduate behind their class, drop out, obtain diploma equivalents or are otherwise unaccounted for on graduation day.

Individual states also maintain their own definitions of a dropout and report their graduation rates based on their own criteria. For instance, in the state where I conducted this study there are ten criteria for considering a student a dropout including failing the state graduation exam, imprisonment and unexcused absence for ten or more days. In 2004, the state Department of Education announced that the state Status Completion Rate was 93.1% (Damas, 2005). This number is impressive considering that "since 2002, [the state's] education ranking has been steadily decreasing to the point the state has remained 50th in education since 2006" (Ast, 2010). This discrepancy in the information about this state suggests that the process used to calculate the completion rate is flawed.

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[2] The numbers provided by institutions like the NCES and the Civil Rights Project account for students who have official withdrawals on record.

Unfortunately flaws in the calculations and unethical reporting procedures are not uncommon. Though there is no concrete evidence suggesting this state's statistics are fraudulent, other states have been exposed for sending padded graduation rates to the National Center for Education Statistics. In 2008 *The New York Times* reported that some states have been maintaining two sets of graduation rates. The first set is accurate and the other, grossly overestimated, is sent to Washington. "As a result, researchers say, federal figures obscure a dropout epidemic so severe that only about 70% of the one million American students who start ninth grade each year graduate four years later" (Dillon, 2008). The author argued further that some schools feel pressured to fabricate their graduation data under the strain of NCLB requirements.

Which students drop out in the greatest numbers?

Even with lingering debates on the most accurate way to measure the drop out crisis, nearly all studies report that racial, linguistic and socioeconomic minorities have the highest drop out rates. Orfield et al (2004) reported, for example that Black, Latino and Native boys had the lowest graduation rates, each averaging less than 50% nationally. In the same report Orfield and colleagues demanded that policymakers pay more attention to these populations. "Education policymakers need to use research and proven interventions more proactively to address the unacceptably high rates of school failure experienced by Black, Native and Latino males" (p.16). The dire circumstances of minority boys notwithstanding, the low graduation rates of all minority students are just as sobering. Black girls in particular only fare six percentage points higher than

their male counterparts, with a graduation rate of 56%. Consequently the lack of a high school diploma places Black women in even greater economic danger than men across all racial groups. Even though boys have higher drop out rates, female dropouts have lower employment rates and are more likely to depend on state and federally funded social programs, like welfare (Women's Law Center, 2007). As scholars committed to addressing and reducing the drop out rate, we cannot forget that many social challenges are multiplied for the girls who will also face lifelong gender inequities.

Why do (Black) students drop out?

The literature on Black students who drop out is a subsection within the larger field of research on the achievement differences between students of various genders, races, and ethnicities. Though space restricts the inclusion of all key findings from the literature on Black children in American schools, this brief review focuses on three perspectives of school failure that I feel are the most relevant to my study. They include: 1) the deficit perspective, 2) the school engagement perspective and, 3) the critical qualitative perspectives.

Deficit perspective. Valencia (1997) provides a detailed analysis of how scholars have, over the course of the last 100 years, used arguments about the genetic inferiority of Blacks to promote a deficit view of Black children's academic potential. For example, in 1958, Shuey used an analysis of IQ tests to argue that there were genetic differences between the intelligences of Blacks and whites. Likewise, Henry Garett (1973), a staunch anti-miscegenationist was so convinced of the intellectual inferiority of Blacks that he published pamphlets

warning against the dangers of school integration. In Garrett's view, mixing white students with Black students would depress the academic outcomes of all students. Arthur R. Jensen (1974) also argued that Blacks not only perform consistently lower than whites on IQ tests, but that the inheritability of the IQ was consistent among the races. In other words, whites passed on their high IQs to their children and Blacks passed their comparatively lower IQs to their children (Valencia, 1997).

While subsequent researchers have noted that these scholars' arguments were based on racist myths and supported by faulty science (Suzuki & Aronson, 2005; Gould, 1981), I highlight these studies here to demonstrate their lingering influence on contemporary arguments. For example, the culture of poverty perspective follows a similar logic when explaining why certain students have disproportionately low graduation rates. Daniel Moynihan (1965) was the first scholar reference the culture of poverty in a study of Black Americans. He claimed that because of centuries of slavery and decades of marginalization, Black Americans culturally and morally depraved. In Moynihan's model Blacks did not value education, did not have strong work ethics and did not acknowledge men as natural heads of households. This argument had far-reaching implications on the public opinion of Black women and on public policy of the 1980s and 1990s. I detail these implications in chapter 5.

Today the culture of poverty perspective still informs research, educational policy and teacher training. For instance, Ruby Payne (2005), a popular consultant for professional development in urban school districts, teachers

educators that in order to understand urban students, teachers must understand poverty as an intergenerational, cultural phenomenon that includes physical abuse from parents and criminal behavior.

Of course, there is no shortage of scholars who critique Payne for educating teachers based on classist assumptions about poverty and the ways in which socioeconomically disadvantaged families view education and parenthood. For instance, Gorsksi (2007) argued that Payne's assertions failed to consider how schools systemically disadvantage students from poor and working class backgrounds (for more critiques of Payne see, Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008; also read Rank, 2004 and Tozer, 2000 for critical arguments about poverty and education).

The school engagement perspective. Another major development in the literature was the school engagement perspective. Unlike the biological deficit arguments and the culture of poverty arguments, studies of school engagement do not always pinpoint race or ethnicity as a determinant of school failure. Many scholars did, however, identify student-centered characteristics as contributing factors to poor achievement. The school engagement perspective framed schools as communities within which students must assimilate to reach their full academic potential. Students who actively and continually engaged in school culture and felt a sense of belonging with teachers and peers, were more likely to succeed and eventually graduate (some examples include: Finn & Pannozzo, 1993 and Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001). In his 1989 review of the literature on school engagement, Finn argued that two related models of student engagement were

useful explanations for why some students drop out and others do not: 1) the frustration self-esteem model; and 2) the participation-identification model. In the frustration self-esteem model, those students with a history of failure in earlier grades were more likely to sabotage their academic potential in later grades. Students' disengagement often took the form of disrupting class and disrespecting authority figures. In the participation-identification model students who chose not to identify with school culture and activities were more likely to withdraw from school; which could lead to dropping out (see McNeal, 1995 for similar findings).

The engagement perspectives are useful because they suggest that school culture is just as important to school success as academics. But most scholars working in this paradigm implicated the attitudes, deportment and values of students and parents as major contributing factors to academic failure (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; see also Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & Magnia, 2004 and Yan, 1999 for arguments about parental involvement).[3] According to this logic, if Black students drop out more than whites it is because they reject school culture and disrupt class at higher rates. Such conclusions beg questions like: Are schools democratic, neutral institutions that offer all students the same academic opportunities to succeed? And If Black students fail at higher rates is it because Black people, as a group, are less interested in education?

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[3] Not all scholars of school engagement found that students were to solely responsible for their success and/or failure. Wiggan (2008) for instance found that engaging pedagogy and scholarship incentives were just as important to student success as extra-curricular involvement.

The critical qualitative perspective. The next set of studies in this review are what I describe as the critical qualitative approaches to dropping out. The findings of the following scholars suggest Black students' academic outcomes are only partially attributable to the academic effort of students and their families. Rather, many of the following scholars found that a shared history of discrimination and experiences in schools where dominant culture based on white middle class knowledge and values were the cultural norm makes it difficult, although not impossible for Black students to succeed in these settings. It is important to note that many of the scholars writing from this perspective apply and extend the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (1973, 1977) or John U. Ogbu (1978, 1992). Accordingly this section also reviews the various applications of Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus and Ogbu's cultural-ecological model. I also consider how, if at all, either perspective informs the research design for this study.

Cultural capital and habitus. When French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) examined French schools he advanced a theory to explain why children of the upper class outperformed those of the lower class. He found that children of the dominant class are not necessarily smarter or more committed to their educations. Rather, children from the dominant class are more likely to succeed because schools more readily acknowledge their cultures – rules, customs, rituals, dress, language – than the cultures of the lower class. This is not to suggest that students from the lower classes do not have culture. Only, the cultures of students from the lower classes are devalued in institutions like schools (Lareau, 1987;

DiMaggio, 1982). Weninger and Lareau (2003) explain, "In societies characterized by a highly differentiated social structure and a system of formal education…these advantages stem largely from the institutionalization of standards of assessment which are favorable to students from a particular class" (p.1).

Habitus, as Bourdieu (1977) described it, is a largely unconscious, yet ubiquitous endowment from one's parents that over time, works to reproduce a child's social class position. In sum this set of dispositions can be described as a person's general attitude toward their social, economic and academic potential. Without considering that they may have been conditioned to believe so, children grow up confident that their success or failure is a direct result of their own efforts. In simpler terms, working class children grow up expecting working class jobs just as wealthy children grow up expecting to remain wealthy (Dumais, 2002). According to Bourdieu, this process is unconscious and although many families remain poor or working class for generations, people rarely question the roles societies play in reproducing socioeconomic stratification. MacLeod (1987) clarifies, "Through the concepts of cultural capital and *habitus*, Bourdieu seeks to explain how social inequality is perpetuated and why this process of social reproduction is so readily accepted by exploiter and exploited alike" (p. 15).

Early examples of similar findings include Bowles and Gintis (1976) (which was revisited in 2001) and Paul Willis (1977). Bowles and Gintis argued that, "Schools prepare children for adult work rules, by socializing them to function well, and without complaint in the hierarchical structure of the modern

world" (2001, p. 1). They also concluded that genetically inherited intelligence was only partly responsible for a person's economic success. It was more likely that inherited economic privilege contributed to a child's success. During his ethnographic study of working class students in London, Willis (1977) observed working class boys disrupt class and disrespect teachers all as a rejection of the traditional roles placed on students. The boys or "lads" informed Willis that they opposed schooling for two reasons: First, they were aware that their futures were limited to jobs earning working class wages. Second the boys believed that working class jobs, and especially manual labor positions affirmed their masculinity. It would be a perversion of gender norms to pursue jobs unlike those of their fathers and uncles.

One clear limitation in the use of Bourdieu for understanding inequities in schooling is that his conclusions are deterministic with little consideration of individual agency, and the possible influence of gender and/or race on a student's experiences. In Bourdieu's framework, students continue to believe that schooling levels the playing field for economic competition even though it does not. But, Willis' study suggested that social structures and individual agency worked together to construct the lads' realities. On one hand the lads were not fooled by the achievement ideology of the school. As a result they chose to fail rather than conform to their teachers' expectations. On the other hand, they chose working class jobs based on gender ideology. Decades later Jay MacLeod (1987) made significant arguments about the viability of Bourdieu's framework in his comparative ethnography of Black and white working class boys, *Ain't no makin'*

it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood. MacLeod's findings will be discussed in greater detail later.

Likewise, when Jean Anyon (1981) studied five schools with students from socioeconomic backgrounds that ranged from executive elite to working class, she found evidence of social reproduction similar to Bourdieu (1977) and Bowles and Gintis (1976). But she also observed student resistance to such practices much like Willis did (1976). As she studied the five schools, Anyon found that students were given curricula and discipline that seemed to prepare them to take jobs similar to the ones their parents had. Yet in the middle class and working class schools, Anyon also found instances of student resistance to their schooling and their vulnerability, "to alternative ideas…that support fundamental social change" (p.33).

Cultural capital is essentially a class-based concept, but it is nonetheless particularly useful when examining the academic success of Black American students. The most general finding of this body of work is that disparate educational outcomes have far more complex origins than can be explained by examining class alone – they also include issues of race and, though addressed to a much lesser extent, gender. For example, MacLeod (1987) employed Bourdieu's theories in a study of working class Black and white boys in an inner-city high school. In his study he found that race was a key factor in the experiences of the working class boys. The white boys, the Hallway Hangers, did not buy into the achievement ideology of the school. As members of the workforce since their mid teens, the Hallway Hangers understood that schooling

was unlikely to alter their futures in working class positions. But when it came to the Black boys or Brothers, MacLeod noticed that despite their parents' working class status the Brothers internalized the school's achievement ideology. Despite coming from poor families they believed that if they worked hard they would surpass the socioeconomic status of their parents. MacLeod argued that differences in attitudes toward the achievement ideology could be attributed to differences related to race.

> The Hallway Hangers reject the achievement ideology because most of them are white. Whereas Blacks have racial discrimination to which they can point as a cause of their family's poverty, for the Hallway Hangers to accept the achievement ideology is to admit that their parents are lazy or stupid or both. Thus the achievement ideology not only runs counter to the experiences of the Hallway Hangers, but is also a more serious assault on their self esteem (p.128).

Horvat and Antonio (1999) chose to focus on white and Black girls in an elite prep-school school to analyze the affects the organizational *habitus* had on the educations of the Black girls – most of whom did not come from elite families like their white classmates. They reported that the school contained its own *habitus* evident in décor, teacher practices, traditions and parental involvement that "represented symbolic violence" against the cultural norms of the Black girls (p. 320). Horvat and Antonio found that while the that the school provided the girls with greater opportunities for social mobility than the public schools they

would have attended, as minorities in the school the girls also, "…[paid] a social price for their valuable educational capital" (p.320). In other words the girls enjoyed the opportunities that going to the school guaranteed (particularly entrance to more prestigious universities) but they had to suffer years of alienation in return.

Similarly, Lareau and Horvat (1999) argued that in the case of middle class African Americans in a predominantly white school race has primacy over class in determining one's experiences in school. They also found that as it relates to cultural capital, students are not guaranteed privilege simply by inheriting dominant cultural capital. Rather they still must leverage their cultural capital expertly in order to take full advantage of their privilege (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Finally, Tyson (2003) observed that in even when Black students attend schools with Black teachers, the teachers positioned the cultural capital of whites as normal. Though the teachers reported caring deeply about their students and the racism they might face, they felt the best way to resist racism was to adopt white cultural practices and to avoid adherence to the negative stereotypes of Blackness.

The selected examples demonstrate that scholars interested in the ways in which Black students experience schooling have been able to apply and extend the concept of cultural capital to examine race as well as gender.

Cultural-ecological model. John U. Ogbu (1978, 1992, 1998, 2004) is best remembered, cited and critiqued for his insistence that Black students often

choose to fail for fear that academic achievement diminishes their cultural authenticity in the eyes of their peers. Those Black students that do achieve must bear the burden of *acting white*. Not unlike Bourdieu, Ogbu saw a clear connection between unequal educational outcomes and institutionalized practices that maintain patterns of social stratification. The key components of his theory that distinguish the cultural-ecological model from cultural capital include the distinction Ogbu draws between voluntary and involuntary minorities, and the concepts of oppositional identity and the burden of acting white (Ogbu, 2004).

Ogbu (1992) framed his analysis of Black student underachievement on a redefinition of what it means to be a minority. He argued that "autonomous" minorities are those cultural groups that are phenotypically white but have cultural or religious differences that make them a minority in numbers only (e.g. the Amish). Immigrant or voluntary minorities are groups of people that came to the United States seeking fortune, political and/or religious freedom, etc. Italian or Irish immigrants fit this second category. Black and Native Americans are involuntary or castelike minorities. Unlike the first two groups Blacks came to this country against their will via the slave trade. Even when the Constitution outlawed slavery, Blacks codes, lynchings, anti-miscegenation laws, *de jure* segregation and workforce discrimination emphasized their second-class status to whites. As a result of a history of racist discrimination, violence and political disenfranchisement, Blacks have developed cultures that evolved in opposition to their oppressors. Ogbu explains:

> Involuntary minorities such as Black Americans, developed oppositional identity because for many generations they realized and believed that White treatment was both collective and enduring. There were (and still are) not treated like White Americans regardless of their individual differences... They could not (and still cannot) easily escape from their birth-ascribed membership in a subordinate and disparaged group (1992, p.9).

According to Ogbu, the oppositional identity of Black Americans explains why Black students perform poorly in schools. Castelike minorities have primary differences from the dominant group (like appearance, language, customs, etc) that prevent full assimilation. Blacks also developed secondary differences "to cope with their subordination" (p.8). These differences render institutions and roles that are controlled by the dominant group not only as unattainable, but also undesirable or inappropriate for Blacks. Schools and the achievement ideology therein represent white mainstream norms. According to Ogbu, Black students knowingly fail as an act of resistance to the oppressor.

While this view is interesting, the idea that Black students choose to fail as an act of resistance to white racism is not completely accurate. Historians have argued that early Africans in America and Black Americans have always valued education and used education as a tool of empowerment even before the American Civil War (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Anderson, 1988). Oppositional identity also implicitly suggests that all white students value education and want to succeed academically. But in a comparative study of immigrant students and

American-born students, Suarez-Orozco (2001) found that the white students offered more negative comments about school and teachers than their immigrant classmates. Clearly Ogbu's research has limitations including but limited to an essentialist view of Black students and white students. Although Black students share a history of racist oppression, they do not all respond to that history in the same way (Collins, 2000; Carter, 2005). Consider McCleod's Brothers. They sensed the challenges that they faced in school, but they persevered claiming that if they continued to work hard they could graduate and go to college.

Even with this key historical limitation scholars still attempt to assess how much of Ogbu's theory applies in the field. Their findings suggest that despite some limitations, concepts like acting white should not be wholly dismissed. Akom's (2003) study of the achievement ideology of the Nation of Islam is an interesting example. As mentioned above, both Anyon and Willis noted that if outsiders (e.g. parents, mentors, community members, etc) had acknowledged the students' resistance to academic achievement as acute awareness of social inequities, then the students' resistance could have been transferred into fundamental social change. In Akom's study, he found that the Nation of Islam (NOI) served as that catalyst for Black girls in an urban high school. The organizational habitus of the Nation is premised on an oppositional disposition to White domination. Using this stance, local leaders in the NOI empowered the students to succeed in spite of this dominance. In other words they taught them to succeed while maintaining an oppositional disposition toward their teachers and school.

> [T]he NOI (Nation of Islam) associates being black with positive educational outcomes. Thus, by changing a community's interpretation of both itself and its history and redefining morality and acceptable social behavior, the NOI has been able systematically to create an organizational habitus that encourages achievement for its members, resulting in the transformation of the burden of acting white into the honor of being black (p.313).

As he discussed his results, Akom acknowledged Ogbu's approach was at least partially applicable; the students resisted because they did not want to feel as if they were assimilating. However, Akom moved beyond Ogbu when he revealed how NOI leaders in a local community helped the girls translate their urge to resist into the desire to succeed. O'Connor (1997) found similar results in her earlier study of Black girl's dispositions toward academic and economic success. She reported finding instances where students used their awareness of social inequities to either drive towards success or justify their antipathy.

Other studies demonstrate how scholars have grappled with cultural-ecology theory in their attempts to understand Black student achievement. Hemmings (1996) observed that academically successful Black students learned to perform the role of the good student for teachers and to switch to the so-called authentic, working class adolescent when around peers. "In performing these images of self, many of the students acted in ways that tarnished their model student images" (p.23). Importantly, her conclusions do not disprove the existence of oppositional culture. Rather they only suggest that some students

code-switch between different identities (academically compliant and academically ambivalent) depending upon either identity's usefulness in a given environment (see also Horvat & Lewis, 2003 for similar findings). Finally, in their analysis of nationally representative survey data, Ainsworth-Downey and Darnell (1998) found evidence that Black students "maintain more pro-school values and are more likely to esteem their high achieving peers than are whites" (p.551).

Despite the limitations of Ogbu and Bourdieu scholars continue to apply their frameworks in the field. My experiences as a GED teacher suggest that Ogbu's and Bourdieu's theories work best when considered together. Most of my students were working class or poor, and nearly half of all the students were Black. My understanding of class-based concepts and race-based concepts will ensure that I am prepared to analyze issues, should they come up, related to either. When it comes to gender and how race, class and gender interlock to create unique experiences for Black women, however both Ogbu and Bourdieu fall short.

Black feminist thought. In any study of Black women, gender is not only an important concept, but it is just as important as race or class. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) challenges researchers to remember that Black women in America exist at two or more intersections of social identity. First they are Black and encounter the full range of oppressions that come with being a part of the othered race. Secondly, they are female which forces them to traverse the terrain of being the othered sex. Finally, many Black women share a history of

marginalization in the workforce. Therefore it would be inappropriate to engage a discussion of the experiences of Black women and Black female students using unidimensional frameworks - that would force Black women into prioritizing one domain of their identity while ignoring the others. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1999) is an ideal concept within Black feminist thought. Intersectionality urges scholars to consider multiple identity domains (class, race, sex etc) and, if necessary their attendant oppressions (classism, racism and sexism), equally and simultaneously. In doing so scholars have the opportunity to understand how race, class and gender position Black women in social institutions, like schooling, apart from those of Black men or white women or the wealthy.

Unfortunately, intersectionality is not used to understand Black student achievement as frequently as cultural capital or cultural ecology. Even studies that focus on Black girls (e.g. Akom, 2003 and Horvat & Antonio, 1999) often rely on unidimensional conceptualizations of the students' identities to frame their analyses. In this study I wanted to be prepared to analyze any experience the participants indicated as relevant to the study. If, for instance, they suggest that experiences related to motherhood, relationships, and sexuality are relevant, I will be ill-prepared to analyze those experiences without understanding gender. Even with an understanding of gender, however I will be limited in that analysis if I don't understand how gender intersects with other aspects of a participant's identity such as race and class.

This review of theoretical perspectives of Black student achievement will inform this study, but it is not necessary to designate the above concepts as the

frame for the data collection or analysis. I instead used this conceptual review as a strategy to establish sensitizing concepts. Unlike a strict conceptual framework, sensitizing concepts do not limit the scope of inquiry or analysis. Rather they serve as, "points of departure from which [I can] study the data" (Charmaz, p.159, 2003). The scholars above demonstrated how racial and class discrimination, intersectionality, cultural capital, social reproduction, gender discrimination, ethnic authenticity, and immigration are important to understanding unequal outcomes for minority students. Instead of using these concepts as a bulls eye in the field that I must seek out and hit, they serve as a compass that performs the limited but essential task of providing a starting point for my inquiry (Glenn, 2006).

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Want to hear God laugh? Make a plan.

In the introduction I indicated that my conversations with my GED students inspired me to think more deeply about dropping out and how I might research this phenomenon. The unique components of this study – adult Black women as participants, the use of stories as data and grounded theory analysis – were the best assurances that this study might yield previously unheard accounts about schooling and lead to fresh implications for future research and policy development.

In this chapter I describe the research methods. It begins with a review of the qualitative research design. Then I explain my techniques and experiences in the field. Next I reveal important landmarks in the data collection and analysis and end with a discussion about the myriad challenges I faced in the field which range from developing rapport to making difficult decisions about what kind of story I would tell in the final product.

Throughout the entire chapter I temper the review of key moments in the data collection and analysis with my own stories of experience. Composed from my field notes, memos, field reflections, my interview data and personal journals these stories contextualize the research experience among my positionalities as a young, Black woman, a novice to the field and the author of this work. More specifically my reflections should help the reader to not only understand how the data were collected and analyzed, but also my strengths and weaknesses as a

scholar and the unforeseen ethical considerations of qualitative fieldwork.

Research Design

If researchers are interested in the experiences of African Americans they must first understand that positivist epistemologies that distinguish reason from emotion, distance the participant from the data, and employ unemotional or impersonal field practices are inadequate and often marginalize minority populations (Collins, 2001). Rather researchers should embrace and incorporate the unique ways in which African Americans share knowledge. Culturally sensitive approaches include qualitative methods that reflect the knowledge sharing practices of Black Americans (Tillman, 2002).

As it relates to projects that analyze the experiences Black women specifically, Collins (2001) argued for a Black feminist epistemology. She said that a Black feminist epistemology includes key tenets that create a space for the knowledge sharing to flourish. First, *lived experience is a criterion of meaning*. This means experiences are valid evidence of one's expertise on a matter. The second tenet is: *dialogue can be used to assess knowledge claims*. Because dialogue is valued in African and African American cultures, researchers can be sure that dialogue with Black women is a valid venue in which they can assess their knowledge about a given issue. Additionally Black feminist researchers must engage two ethics during data collection, analysis and reporting. The ethic of caring is based on principles of engagement that promote rapport and knowledge validation. Researchers should embrace and promote emotion, expressiveness

and empathy during knowledge sharing. The ethic of accountability incorporates the assumption that "people are accountable for their knowledge claims" (p.265).

Each component of this research design was deliberately chosen to engage the Black feminist epistemology described by Collins. The use of stories incorporated dialogue and lived experiences; the in-depth interviews and artifact analysis both integrated the ethics of caring and accountability. I also applied the ethic of caring when I was drafting this work and deciding which details the women shared would be published. Finally, the use of grounded theory ensured that I would go beyond using the women's dialogue and experiences as data. Their experiences and dialogue were also the basis for theory. Below is a brief summary of the major components of the conclusions. Following the summary are detailed explanations of each component.

Study summary. The fieldwork began in spring 2009 and ended in summer 2010. During that year approximately 50 women called and inquired about the study. Of that 50, 16 participants enrolled. Per the eligibility requirements all of the women self-identified as Black (African American), they were all over the age of 24, each one attended high school in the Big City metropolitan area, and did not have a diploma or high school equivalent. I advertised the study via flyers posted in local communities and electronic networking (posting on listservs, emailing colleagues in the community, postings on social networking sites, cold calls to local adult education programs, etc). The participants expressed their interest by calling the number I listed on the flyer. After determining that they were eligible, I met each participant either at her

home or a public location. After they reviewed and submitted informed consent we set a time, location and date for their two in-depth interviews. Eight of the women who enrolled in the study appeared for their first interview. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes and I began each interview with the grand tour statement: *Tell me about high school/the last grade you finished.* At the end of the first interview I compensated the participants with a small monetary gift. Lastly, I asked to the women to bring personal artifacts from school to their second interview. Of the eight participants, three followed up for the second interview. Only one had access to personal artifacts from school.

During and immediately following each interview I wrote field notes documenting important moments in the meetings or listing questions I wanted to revisit. In separate documents I also recorded personal reflections about the fieldwork.

In order to apply grounded theory techniques appropriately I had each interview transcribed word for word. In some cases I transcribed the interviews, other times I hired a professional transcription service. Using the transcripts, field notes, field reflections, and notes from the artifacts I began analyzing the data using grounded theory techniques. Below I explain the importance of each component of the fieldwork and analysis. See *Figure 1* for a visual representation of the steps I followed during the fieldwork and analysis.

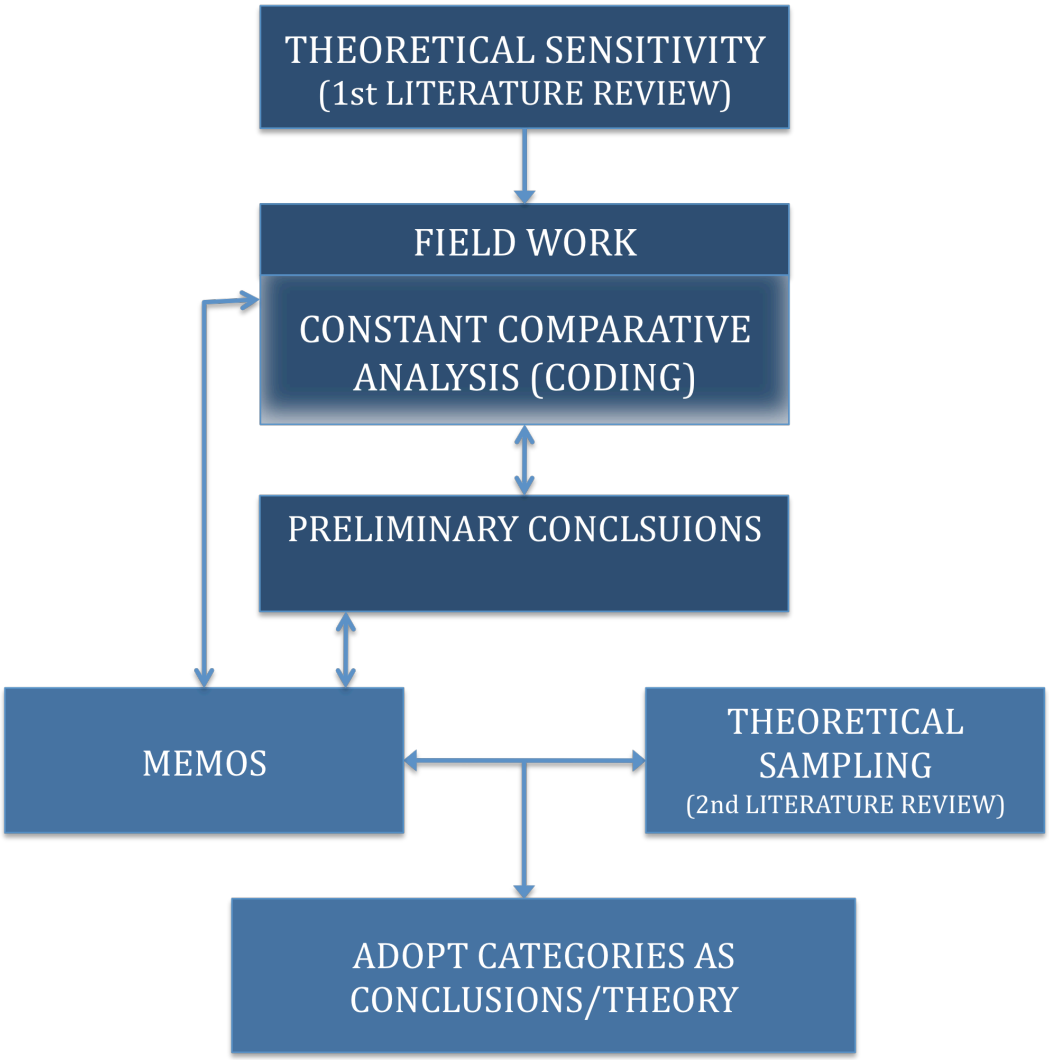

Figure 1. Fieldwork and analysis

Grounded theory. Grounded theory analysis is a relatively young qualitative methodology introduced in 1967 by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead of deducing whether or not data verified a given theory, as was the tradition in other methods, Glaser and Strauss argued that social phenomena are best understood inductively. That is, the theory about the research problem is discovered through a systematic coding

process (Charmaz, 2006; Clark & McCann, 2003; Egan, 2002; Rennie, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Though against the use of a theoretical framework, Glaser and Strauss agreed that researchers should review the existing theories about the phenomenon in question to develop substantial theoretical sensitivity before entering the field. At the onset of this study for example, I reviewed the various theories about Black student achievement, why students drop out and the nature of urban schools. Consequently, I developed a set of sensitizing concepts that served as a point of departure for the study. The concepts did not dictate what I was looking for in the field but they did indicate what kinds of questions I should ask and what kinds of participants I should look for (Charmaz, 2006; Glenn, 2006; Charmaz, 2003).

Glaser and Strauss also contended that the systematic coding process of grounded theory include three key components. They were: constant comparative analysis, memoing and theoretical sampling (Rennie, 1998). Constant comparative analysis is a coding strategy that begins immediately and continues throughout data collection and across cases. This strategy refines and directs later data collection and analysis. For example, after my first interview with Edith I coded her transcript for compelling or common words, lines or themes. Once I interviewed the second participant, Jessie, I applied the same coding techniques and then I compared the two cases and added or refined codes as necessary. The process of coding within and across cases helps to refine future data collection and keeps the researcher focused on theories that exist in the data and not premature interpretation based on her preconceived notions.

Memoing in grounded theory is a device that researchers use to monitor their own coding techniques and to better understand the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically the memo serves as a checkpoint for the analysis. As she writes memos the researcher is not only recalling a recent case but she is also critically reviewing her codes. Is she coding based on the data and the constant comparison? Are her own biases entering the coding process? The memo also provides the researcher a space to begin developing categories from the data. As she reviews the memo she will likely notice how thin the initial category is. The memo can then direct her to her next step. This could mean refining the codes or moving ahead to theoretical sampling. Finally, during memoing, "…sensitizing concepts, long left silent, may [begin to] murmur" (Charmaz, 2006, p.76).

Throughout analysis I wrote several memos about my emerging categories. Some of the memos were streams of consciousness about initial categories and others helped me to articulate my hunches for next steps in the collection process. There were also memos that recorded my reflections about the participants' behaviors in the interview and how acts like telling jokes, bringing friends or family to the interview, stopping the tape or refusing to talk about certain experiences could provide insight into their stories. I will discuss memoing in greater detail later in the chapter.

Theoretical sampling begins as the researcher notices categories – usually after a memo - indicating that she needs to collect more data about the tentative categories. "The purpose of theoretical sampling is to obtain data that help you

explicate your categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p.100). Importantly theoretical sampling is not increasing or diversifying the sample of participants or cases. Rather theoretical sampling is a directed collection of data that helps to flesh out or refine an emerging category. Some might say that theoretical sampling is the second literature review that grounded theorists conduct during analysis. In this study, for example the women all indicated that drugs, particularly crack cocaine, posed a significant influence on their lives and were critical factors in their life decisions. Once I coded for crack cocaine over and over again I wrote short memos listing questions about how, if at all, this commonality could contribute to the construction of a theory about Black women and dropping out of high school. I then took those questions to the literature on the gendered and raced implications of the height of the crack cocaine epidemic. Later in this chapter I detail the how I used each analytical level: coding, memoing, category development, theoretical sampling and theory development.

By 1987, Glaser and Strauss' partnership suffered from epistemological differences and the two ended their professional collaboration. In general, Glaser (1998) remained loyal to the three above-mentioned components of grounded theory and insisted that grounded methods should only lead to discovery of theory not verification of theory. Strauss (Strauss & Corbin,1990) on the other hand, has kept the three main components while advocating for the use of grounded theory not just for discovery of new theories but also for verification of existing theories. He also argues for the addition of updated techniques for collecting and coding data (Rennie, 1998). This study does not advocate for one branch of grounded

theory. The structure of the fieldwork was based primarily on Kathy Charmaz's (2006) book, *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* Although Charmaz prefers Strauss and Corbin's (1990) views on grounded theory, she presented the method without an overwhelming bias to either tradition.

Stories. Researchers use stories for three reasons. First as Clandinin and Connelly (1990) explain, "…humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p.2). In other words humans, as members of societies construct and reconstruct their shared and personal realities as a series of stories including the appropriate roles and plots. Second, stories allowed the participants to include any and all of the factors that influence their adolescent decisions. Russell Rumberger (2004) noted that dropping out of school is a process mitigated by "…an array of proximal and distal factors related to both the individual student and to the family, school, and community settings in which the student lives" (p. 243). This means students do not drop out in response to a singular experience and the decision to leave school is not a unilateral one. Keeping this in mind, stories, unlike surveys or strict interview schedules, provided participants with the greatest latitude to determine and share their lives holistically.

Third, storytelling is a mainstay of the African American oral tradition. As involuntary immigrants and marginalized people African Americans have had to rely on many techniques including oral traditions to transmit cultural knowledge, language and history despite their relegation to the margins of the

academic records (Collins, 2000; Vaz,1997; Mitchell, 1974). Asking the women to tell me stories validates the oral tradition and brings their knowledge and wisdom from the margins to the center of the drop out debate.

Indeed the women in this study told stories about school, about their mothers, life on the street, their children and everything they considered important enough for me to hear and write down, possibly to be read by others. But our meetings did not always reflect the notion that Black women are comfortable telling stories. Perhaps I relied far too much on my experiences listening to my mother and grandmothers retelling our family history but I was surprised when my participants did not immediately fall into the role of sage griot[4] or other-mother during our meetings. I present a detailed discussion of the unexpected outcomes of my meetings with the women later in the chapter.

In-depth interviews. In order to gather the women's stories I planned two unstructured, in-depth interviews. Unstructured, in-depth interviews are defined by open-ended questions, conversational exchanges, lengthy responses by the participants and the variations of the interview content from case to case (Siedman, 1991). Given the nature of in-depth interviews, particularly the way they foster environments where the respondent directs the conversations and allow for narrative complexity (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.55), they certainly facilitated the storytelling. Siedman (1991) explains further:

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[4] In West African cultures the "griot" is an elder poet-historian who maintains and shares the history of the local people via poems, songs and other oral traditions. www.griotcircle.org

> The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions nor to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is normally used…at the root of the in-depth interview [however] is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (p.3).

Artifact analysis. The final component of the research design was artifact analysis. Artifacts including photos, report cards, and homework assignments are useful for two reasons. First school photos in particular provide a great deal of insight about school culture. In his analysis of before and after photos from Indian boarding schools, for example, Margolis (2004) found that the composition of the photos including but not limited to the styling of the set, the students' clothing and the posing were evidence of how the schools exerted control over the students and forced them to assimilate to American cultural and political norms. Second, in a qualitative study that relies heavily on participants' memories for data, artifacts serve a dual purpose. On one hand any item that the subjects identify as illustrative of their experiences aids the researcher in interpreting the interview data. On the other hand, subjects can use these items to refine their stories, jog their memories and maintain authority over the direction and flow of the interview (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Importantly, the only artifacts I considered were those the subjects chose and brought to the interviews. If I sought out artifacts meant to represent their schooling experiences alone I would have de-centered the women as the experts and narrators of their own experiences. Also, the subjects' descriptions of the

items included otherwise hidden details about the item and its relevance to the stories in particular. For example, in his article arguing for greater inclusion of artifacts (e.g. images) in education research, Fischman (2001) discussed how a college student explained his second grade photo. Although books and other classroom resources (e.g. a globe) are featured in the background of the picture, the student told Fischman that, "…during [the student's] whole second year he did not read any books" (p. 30). The composition of the photograph as compared to the student's story demonstrated exactly why artifacts should be included, but also why they are most useful when provided and explicated by the participant. Without participant expertise, a researcher limits her/his opportunity for deeper analysis of the data.

Unfortunately, Pauline was the only participant who was able to provide any items from her schooling. Unlike the other women, her parents never moved and her father held on to the majority of the children's school photos. None of the other women had access to any childhood belongings. Details about how I considered Pauline's school photo in the analysis of her case are featured later in the chapter.

Fieldwork

Soliciting. The solicitation phase of this dissertation occurred during what seemed like a yearlong walking tour of Big City. Initially, I had not planned to spend my precious Saturdays, walking the streets of Big City. The original plan was to solicit participants for the study by emailing and calling colleagues in the community. Certainly they would pass the study information along to their

students, clients and friends who would immediately call me to enroll. Given this plan, my Saturdays would be spent interviewing subjects and analyzing data. Realizing early (although not fully understanding why) that this strategy was flawed, I took to the streets. Between spring 2009 and summer 2010 I spent weekends and evenings walking into dozens of churches, bars, barbershops, nail salons, community centers and WIC offices to post a flyer or two advertising my research study on Black women who had dropped out of high school. Initially I questioned the ethics about walking into someone's place of business to solicit my study. Should I buy something? Get my hair done? Was it fair to ask something of them without offering them my patronage? To satisfy these qualms I bought dozens of catfish plates, tasted new peach cobbler recipes, offered fellow writers impromptu advice about getting into college and connected people to free GED classes across town.

After I began to solicit subjects on foot I eventually realized why finding participants via networking was hard and why doing so in person would be equally difficult. Oftentimes I would place flyers down on a counter and linger in the area to see if people noticed it, read it and picked it up. Almost always Black women would read the flyer, carefully fold it and place it in their handbags. Yet I received less than fifty calls about the study the entire year I solicited participants. After talking with the women who did enroll I learned that people who drop out of high school are burdened with a stinging label not unlike "ex-con." The connotation includes judgment of their perceived low intelligence as well as the insistence that those who dropped out willingly chose failure. And, just like "ex-

con," no matter what different directions one's life may take the label seems to always be true.

This is why a flyer that advertises a study for Black women who dropped out of high school may attract lots of interest but will yield few calls. Pauline, a woman for whom school was a daily torture, demonstrated this revelation more so than any other woman in the cohort. At the start of our first interview Pauline cried and did not stop crying until I turned off the recorder. She told her story with such overwhelming sorrow that I left both of our meetings burdened and deeply regretful that I had compelled her to relive her pain. Nonetheless that experience solved the mystery of low enrollment. Her behavior illustrated for me the pain many people feel when they think about dropping out of school. Realizing the courage it must have taken Pauline to tell personal stories that conjure feelings of shame, guilt and inadequacy, I understood why many women were hesitant to participate. As a result, my restlessness for participants subsided and I simply waited for the brave ones to ring my phone.

Participants. The flyers and emails for this study indicated that participants must be Black or African American women over the age of 24, living in Big City and currently without a high school diploma or general educational development diploma (GED). During my year in the field 16 women attempted to enroll in the study. Eight of those women were eliminated either because they did not have viable contact information, failed to appear for their first interviews or rescinded their enrollment before the first interview. The remaining eight women enrolled and participated in at least one interview each. They were (in order of

enrollment): Edith, her daughter Jessie, Myra, Myra's aunt Pauline, Eliza, Ethel, Nikki and Zephyr. All eight women currently live in Big City, a large metropolis in the southwestern United States and they are all concentrated either in the central or southern communities of the city. Their ages ranged from 24-72.

Edith was the first woman to enroll in the study. She was a 72 year-old grandmother who serves in her church and is known in the community for her soul food dinners and homemade pastries. At our interview she was dressed causally in a red t-shirt and blue jeans. She had clear skin, a bright smile and long, naturally curly hair pulled back into a modest ponytail. Edith spoke with ease and punctuated her story with southern proverbs and matter of fact declarations. Such as, "I was railroaded out of my city job because of my age, race and sex." Or, "My mother always told me to never take no wooden nickels!"

Edith explained that she left school because she wanted to marry her boyfriend, move out of her mother's house and take care of her own family. As I left the first interview I felt that Edith had set the tone for the remainder of the study. Her story was unique, she told it openly and she had agreed to a second session. Although she warned me that she did not have access to personal artifacts from school, I judged our first meeting a complete success.

In addition to Edith's candor, she helped me to find the next participant. When I asked her if she would be willing to pass along the study flyer to friends and family she assured me she would have her daughter Jessie call me right away. Jessie was a thin, almost frail woman in her early forties. She lived only a few blocks from the community center where I met Edith and suggested I meet her at

home for the first interview. Jessie was Edith's oldest daughter, born in a town west of Big City but she grew up and attended high school in Big City. When we met I immediately took note of how thin and soft-spoken she was. I also noticed her body language. When she sat down on her couch she wrapped her arms around herself and slowly rocked back and forth as if she was either cold or extremely uncomfortable. Moreover she spoke so rapidly that I didn't bother to take field notes. Nonetheless she was just as candid about her experiences in high school and since dropping out as her mother. Unlike her mother however, Jessie left school after joining her boyfriend's narcotics operation.

I met another participant at the community center where I met Edith. Myra was a 26 year-old mother of two children. She was a pretty, youthful woman and brought her youngest daughter, Olive Claire to our interview. Myra told me that she believed her mother's negligent parenting style led to her disengagement from school. Unlike Edith and Jessie she was less willing to elaborate on certain parts of her story. For instance, she mentioned that her childhood dream was to become a flight attendant. When I asked why she felt she could not still pursue that dream she looked down at her hands and confessed in a low voice that there were "…certain things on [her] record" that rendered her ineligible. Considering that her daughter was present and that she was visibly uncomfortable with experiences that led to her developing a "record" I decided not to pursue questions about criminal convictions. Although I wanted to meet with Myra again (I hoped she would reflect on our first meeting and decide to add details and

clarifications to her stories), she never did respond to my requests to schedule the second interview. But Myra did introduce me to her aunt Pauline.

Pauline's interviews were especially difficult. When we met I noticed that she had brought Myra with her and insisted Myra sit in on the meeting. I was hesitant to agree because I knew this would weaken her anonymity, but she assured me that the only way she would speak to me was if Myra was there to support her. As we talked about her struggles in all academic subjects, her family's insistence that she was incapable of learning and her departure from high school in the tenth grade she cried incessantly. In addition to her need for a friend in the interview and her emotional response to telling her story, Pauline stands out also the only participant who left school for academic reasons. She explained that despite advancing to high school she never learned to read and write beyond small words. Embarrassed about her illiteracy she eventually left school for good.

The next participant to enroll was Eliza, another former adult education student in the community center of which Myra and Edith were members. Eliza's style was similar to Edith's. She directed the content, used folk humor and spoke matter-of-factly about her burden as the "black sheep" of the family. Eliza told me she left school early because she started a family and moved in with her boyfriend to the college town east of Big City.

The next participant, Ethel, called me one day explaining that her daughter found the flyer at church and urged her to tell her story. At that time Ethel was living with her brother's family on the Westside of Big City. When I met her there she offered me a plate from the full Sunday dinner she had made earlier. As

we spoke Ethel was very pleasant and spoke with incredible detail. She remembered what she wore the first day of ninth grade, the names of all of her teachers and the praise she received on class projects. In fact she was the only participant who remembered the day she dropped out of school, the day she dropped back in and the day she dropped out for good.

I met Nikki in the summer of 2010. Like Edith and Pauline she completed two interviews. However, I only analyzed data from our second interview because Nikki requested that I erase our first conversation so she could tell a different story of her life. In our second interview Nikki described the day she met a pimp while she waited at a bus stop. A week later she ran away from home with the pimp and traveled the United States with him for nearly ten years.

The last woman to enroll in the study was Zephyr. At 24 years old she was the youngest of the group. We met at a community center in the central neighborhoods of Big City where she was studying for her GED. Zephyr was soft-spoken and more guarded over her story than any other participant. I noticed that Zephyr would use generalizations about her experiences with men, her stepfather and alcohol and drugs. It seemed that she wanted to tell her story but was afraid of mentioning certain experiences to a stranger. Her transcript was difficult to analyze for content because it was full of cryptic narratives and vague references, but it was clear that she dropped in and out of three alternative high schools before leaving for good.

Coding. According to Charmaz (2006) there are four distinct kinds of coding in grounded theory research: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding

and theoretical coding. The first two are essential components of the method while the latter two are useful options. In this study I conducted initial and focused coding. Both of these levels include constant comparative analysis.

All of the coding was done manually, on hard copies of the transcripts. The different coding phases are represented with three different cues on the transcripts. The initial codes correspond to the highlighted text. The focused coding was represented with underlines and boxes. Tentative theoretical categories were represented on color-coded sticky notes. Because grounded theory analysis is a reflexive, non-linear method I also made innumerable notes in the margins, drew lines to indicate possible theoretical connections and wrote questions reminding me to consider a different direction, refine my interview skills or to research an idea during memoing and theoretical sampling.

The initial coding occurred in three layers. First I coded the transcripts word-by-word searching for unique or compelling phrases or terminology. Word-by-word coding quickly evolved to line-by-line coding during which I took note of repetitions, strong declarations or interesting ideas or summaries from the participants. Finally I coded story-by-story. Of course an entire interview can be viewed as a singular story, but close review of the data reveals that each conversation was a collection of stories that corresponded to different stages in the women's lives. Some women even narrated the same event from different perspectives. Overall the initial coding phase set the tone for the analysis and helped me to refine my interview questions and strategies as more women enrolled in the study.

Word-by-word coding was a time consuming process because it required me to break down each transcript into a disjointed collection of data. This step was important however, because it applied structure to the analysis and limited the chances I might miss key bits of data as the analysis moved from words to lines to stories. As I went through each transcript I did not interpret what each woman said. Rather the goal was to attach actions to the data. For example when a woman told the story the day she learned she was pregnant, it was important that I coded the transcript using neutral verb phrases like: *got pregnant* or *had a baby* instead of interpretative nouns like *teenage pregnancy,* etc. This strategy kept the codes "close to the data" and limited the introduction of preconceived theoretical frames (Charmaz, 2006, p.47-48). This was a challenge, but when I was finished, this step provided an expansive foundation for me as I moved to focused coding. The word-by-word coding provided me with hundreds of individual codes (which made constant comparison easy) and created space for new ideas to emerge. *Figure 1* is a section of text and some of my codes from Edith's first interview. We were speaking about her work ethic.

City paid for school Attended college City paid for school Learns by doing Promoted to manager Follows examples Pays attention Goes unnoticed? Mothering Single parenting	No, 'cause I worked my way up, and then when I got to be the supervisor they paid for a year for me to go to college to get that learning for the supervisor position. They also paid a year for me to go to college for the experience for the laundry manager. Like I was saying, you know, I'm easy to catch on and learn. I learn, pick up by looking at other people before, I mean standing up under others, where a lot of other people like often aren't paying no attention to see I'm there. Whether they believe it or not, I'm paying attention to what you're doing so I can catch on so I can do it. I'm always looking for a way to better myself so I can, you know, help better my kids, 'cause I raised my six kids by myself.
Figure 2. Word-by-word coding on Edith, interview I.	

Notice how I often relied on the verbs that Edith used to attach actions to her text. Notice also how the majority of the codes were of the content -- details about her story rather than how she told it or what those details mean for her experiences as a dropout. Of course these aspects of the interview are important but they were not the priority during the word-by-word phase of initial coding. When I returned to the text during focused coding I began to question the data and set aside some codes for review as theoretical categories. The overall result of the word-by-word coding was my introduction to the content or facts of the women's

stories aside from their personal judgments about those facts. When I saw terms such as "pregnancy," "mother," "boyfriend," "black sheep," "loner," "sports," "good grades," and "escape" I did not yet know how they fit into the stories but I did know that these terms, based on their inclusion and repetition were important.

Over time I realized that my word-by-word coding grew naturally into line-by-line coding. There was no defined moment at when I moved from coding words to lines, but I found that when I returned to the transcript I noticed the participants' emotions and judgments about the content of their stories.

Look again at the same excerpt from Edith's first interview. At first I only coded what specific words that appeared to have some meaning. When I returned to the text and read more generally, however I realized other words and phrases provided insight into her story about work and revealed her judgments about the story and should be coded accordingly.

City paid for school Attended college City paid for school Learns by doing Promoted to manager *Reiterated from earlier conversation* Follows examples *Distinguishing from others* Pays attention *Referring to skeptics* Mothering Single parenting	No, 'cause I worked my way up, and then when I got to be the supervisor they paid for a year for me to go to college to get that learning for the supervisor position. They also paid a year for me to go to college for the experience for the laundry manager. Like I was saying, you know, I'm easy to catch on and learn. I learn, pick up by looking at other people before, I mean standing up under others, where a lot of other people like often aren't paying no attention to see I'm there. Whether they believe it or not, I'm paying attention to what you're doing so I can catch on so I can do it. I'm always looking for a way to better myself so I can, you know, help better my kids, 'cause I raised my six kids by myself.
Figure 3. Word-by-word coding on Edith, interview I.	

The line-by-line codes (in italics) highlight areas that I discovered had meaning in the same lines of text I analyzed before. For example during word-by-word coding I took note of Edith's ability to learn by example but did not notice that her phrasing, "where a lot of other people often aren't paying no attention…" indicated that she was distinguishing herself from others in her position, until the line-by-line phase. When I continued to analyze Edith's transcripts I noticed that she consistently defined herself apart from others. Taken together similar lines of text indicated her belief that she worked harder, paid

closer attention – and perhaps that was why she went to college and earned promotions despite not finishing high school.

I also analyzed each transcript by individual stories. During our sessions the women told stories from childhood, about special or memorable events and about family and friends. During the initial coding I coded the stories based on several questions, including but not limited to: Did the participant offer particular stories as responses to questions or on their own? Did she tell the same stories more than once? What was the content of each story? How long was each individual story? I also asked questions based on my performance as an interviewer: Did I allow her to tell a story without interrupting? Am I using grand tour questions? Did I ask effective follow up questions?

As more women enrolled in the study I compared the notes from stories across cases. Overall, I realized that the women had a great deal in common. For example, although I never solicited them, most all of them told stories about strained relationships with their mothers. I also noticed that while some women were candid and told their stories with great detail, others shared stories with glaring omissions. The codes from the initial coding phases, including notes about stories, left me with a clear understanding of the content of each transcript, the ways in which the women were unique and what experiences and feelings they shared.

The artifact. As mentioned earlier I planned to analyze personal artifacts in addition to the stories the women provided. Only one woman, Pauline was able to provide an artifact. Six of the other women explained that over the years they

had lost most if not all of their childhood belongings. Nikki, explained that her personal items were in storage and she could not access them in time to find an artifact and bring it to our next interview.

At our second meeting, Pauline brought in a school photo. It was a wallet-sized, black and white portrait of her from (she estimated) the first grade. In it she is smiling, her hair is curled, and she is wearing a dress. There was nothing in the background of the photo and there was no date or writing of any kind on the picture. Just as Fischman (2001) advised I invited Pauline to explain the context of the picture – namely the smile. I was particularly curious about her smile because in her first interview she explained that she hated school and was a perpetually sad child. So I pointed out to her: *You look happy right here.* She responded, "[T]hey had made me smile. This is 'bout as good as my smile gets. But picture day wasn't no fun day for me cuz everybody would tease you." This led us into a conversation about teasing and bullying that reinforced the themes from our earlier interview. So I decided to address another component of the photo: the dress.

For a brief time she abandoned her tears and dejected tone for one that was at once journalistic and nostalgic. She explained that her hair was freshly combed and that she was wearing a "new" dress. I asked her how she remembered that and she explained that her mother placed a high priority on the appearance of Pauline and her 15 brothers and sisters. "Ha, my mother - that's one thing she did she took care of us. She dressed us good. Combed our hair everyday. That was one of my school dresses." As we talked about her mother I

noticed that Pauline seemed proud to have a mother that nurtured her large family. Her responses also suggested that she felt privileged compared to other kids who did not have nice school dresses or their hair combed everyday.

The artifact not only helped Pauline to remember specific details about her schooling but it also introduced a new theme into her interview. Instead of repeating the stories from her first interview her narrative took an unexpected turn. Indeed Pauline talked about her parents in our first interview but with the photo as a prompt she began a story about her family that led to another story about her mother's battle with mental illness. Her battle was an unexpected one that, according to Pauline, had a severe affect on the welfare of the children and the upkeep of the home. Without that tiny photo, I doubt Pauline would have considered sharing that story with me.

Memoing. I engaged in focused coding and memoing simultaneously. Once I had a substantial collection of initial codes I returned to the transcripts and began to group the codes based on their theoretical similarity. I also grouped my questions about the data based on their theoretical similarities. At this stage I also used field notes and field reflections to begin interpreting the codes. My field notes contained observations about locations, meeting times, the women's attire and their attitudes during our meetings. All of these points helped me to draft theoretical categories. The process of organizing the codes, field notes and questions into viable theoretical categories occurred in a series of memos.

Charmaz (2006) explains that, "Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions

for you to pursue" (p.72). Traditionally, memos are lengthy (500 to 700 words), unstructured documents that eventually constitute the earliest draft of the published document. As she memos the researcher is refining her ideas, establishing categories and identifying holes in the data. The researcher also uses the memo to identify areas of her analysis that require fleshing out. Moving forward the researcher will read her memos and realize that she can use some of her sensitizing concepts to frame her conclusions or that she needs to begin reviewing a new concept – or both. Given my modest sample size and the fact that many women did not meet for their second interview, I wrote traditional and shorter, quick memos. Some were done electronically and others done on hard copy.

Once I began focused coding I set aside theoretical notions for the memos. Some of the notions included but were not limited to: selling crack as illegal not immoral; rejection of Black mother stereotypes; dropping out is logical in the ghetto; skipping school is an act of agency. When I went began memoing I began with notions about my primary concern: Why do Black women drop out of high school? Below [Figure 4] is an excerpt from a lengthy memo regarding the women's reasons for leaving school. I began the memo with the idea that "dropping out is insignificant." I ended with some preliminary theoretical arguments.

Dropping out for these women seems insignificant. Or not necessarily more significant than other moments in their lives. Dropping out seems more like a moment or shedding of a burden or distraction from more attractive options.

Have not fully articulated it because I am stuck on the idiom: It wasn't that big a deal. They tell the stories of the day that decided to leave school with no fanfare or drama. In fact, for many leaving school was not a decision that led to other consequences it was a side effect from two or more parts of their lives colliding:

Relationships and School Responsibilities collide – school attendance was the casualty.
Work and School Responsibilities
Motherhood and School Responsibilities
Traveling/Adventure and School responsibilities

A casualty of life.

This is not to say that leaving school is not a consequential occurrence, but just that the decision to leave and the specifics around the moment or day it happened are much less dramatic and substantive than research would lead us to believe. For the women in this study one teacher would not have made them into Rhodes Scholars. Sure they are all intelligent and creative and passionate, but the conditions of life at the intersections of race class and gender are largely affected by racism, classism and sexism.

Dropping out seems insignificant because schooling did not hold the secret to success and achievement like American meritocratic rhetoric would have us believe. However, this argument is not without scholarly precedence or guidance. John U. Ogbu, made the controversial argument that Black children are aware (whether consciously or not) of the capital required to succeed in schools.
Arguments

- Dropping is not necessarily a unique, identifiable, dramatic event in someone's schooling experience. Nor it is necessarily a significant day in a person's life. Because of this finding the "reason" why people drop out is not the best strategy to employ when researching the issue
- Just as dropping seemed insignificant, staying in school might have been as well. Simply staying in school and obtaining a high school diploma may not have changed the life courses of all those who did drop out. Often the restraints characteristic of poverty, racism and sexism are overly deterministic – *the most accessible options for escape/success are deemed criminal by larger society. Such as running away, selling of controlled substances for income, etc*
- Express agency through marriage, motherhood, running away, illegal employment like selling drugs and prostitution

Figure 4. Memo September 7, 2010

Notice that the final thoughts on this memo were rudimentary theoretical categories. They included hunches about concepts such as: agency, the insignificance of school, and the overdeterminism of racism, sexism and poverty. At this point I was sure that I could develop conclusions about schooling from the perspectives of Black women who grew up in the harsh and limiting conditions of the Black American ghetto. However, my categories contained concepts that were not covered in my original literature review such as ghettoization, mothers and motherhood, agency and resistance. Moreover, it was obvious that my potential categories were missing a thorough understanding of the history of race relations and urbanization on the south side of Big City, such as the influx of crack cocaine, segregation, gang activity and federal public assistance programs. Without compensating for the missing concepts, my categories would remain incomplete and I could not move the analysis toward a viable conclusion. The missing concepts and remaining questions led me to theoretical sampling.

Theoretical sampling. "The purpose of theoretical sampling is to obtain data to help you explicate your categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p.100). More specifically, it is a return to the literature or other data sources. After I completed the theoretical sampling the concepts I had explicated in all of the memos became the building blocks of the conclusions of this study. I mentioned earlier in the chapter that Strauss and Corbin (1990) argued that grounded theory methods could be used to discover new theories or to verify or add to existing theories. Charmaz (2006) explains:

> As a field develops… the areas narrow in which scholars can claim originality. In many disciplines, the days have long past when an author could make a breakthrough by constructing a new field. Grounded theorists can contribute to a specialty field and simultaneously extend general theoretical interpretations that cut across fields. If you can't claim new turf, you may be able to mine an overlooked area (p.153).

There are two major conclusions from this study. The first is about dropping out. In brief I determined that dropping out is often an unintended consequence of an occupational shift. The women in this study chose occupations that promised freedom from the poverty, joblessness and isolation of the Black American ghetto. In the second conclusion I argued that Black women draw their insights about Black female identity two competing sources. The two sources are their lived experience - which produces conceptualizations of Black women that align with Black feminist thought - and popular controlling images of Black female identity.

Lessons from the field

Annette Lareau (1989) contends that a realistic description of how research is conducted is important because it gives, "…qualitative researchers a formal avenue for reporting how they proceeded with data collection and analysis" (p.197). More specifically she feels that methodological appendices help to undo the myth that a well-written study is a well-executed one. Instead, appendices advise the readers (novices especially) on what the researcher did

correctly in the field, the unexpected outcomes of working with people and the missteps. Taking a note from Lareau, I have included in this section the lessons I learned in the field.

In general, the mechanics of qualitative research suit me. As a Black feminist scholar I was eager to investigate dropping out – a common problem in many quantitative studies – using qualitative methods. I was certain that the major components of my research design 1) the perspectives of Black women, 2) using their stories as data and 3) analyzing the data using grounded theory techniques would provide me the best opportunity to learn something new and useful about schooling and the schooling experiences of Black women. Once in the field I was always excited to meet a new participant and found each of their stories (even the mundane bits) compelling. During the analysis I took pride in the slow process of growth from organizing the data, coding, and the development of my conclusions. As it relates to all other logistical concerns (following up with participants in a timely manner, driving near and far to meet the women, remaining flexible, protecting their anonymity and so on), I was more or less successful. In contrast, I faced many challenges as I learned to work with the participants with whom I shared this research process. Below is a summary of those challenges and the lessons I learned about data collection and analysis.

Population, solicitation and sensitizing concepts. Earlier I mentioned that enrolling women into the study was difficult because for many people leaving high school without a diploma was a function of one or more negative experiences or circumstances. Therefore, telling that story invariably means

divulging sensitive, controversial and, at times, embarrassing details about one's family, friends and life choices. But enrolling subjects for this kind of study is also difficult because adult Black women, who grew up in Big City, and dropped out of high school are a population in the sense that they share an experience, but not in the sense that they share a location, an occupation or an activity where a researcher might meet them. Although I did frequent many General Educational Development (GED) classes and introduced my study to many students, only one or two of the students in each class would be Black women and, although many set up times to meet, none of them followed up for an interview.

Determined to improve my skills for solicitation I relied on the literature and sensitizing concepts for guidance. The literature suggests a link between the lack of a high school diploma and poverty, dependence on social programs and imprisonment. Keeping this in mind I expanded my scope for solicitation to include food banks, community centers, DES offices, and programs for former inmates seeking to reinstate their rights or assistance with employment. I met more people and increased my enrollment as a result.

Black women cry, too. I now understand that I carried with me a stereotype about Black women's orality. I assumed that my participants would be eager to tell their stories and would do so with authority and poise. My assumption was based in part on iconic figures (real and fictionalized) in the Black oral tradition (e.g. Sojounor Truth, Jane Pittman, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, Ntozake Shange, etc) and scholarly descriptions of the importance of orality in research with Black women. For example, Hambrick (1997) provides an awe-inspiring

account of her experiences interviewing Black women inventors.

> Here we were, Black women, lives intertwined, needing to weave our webs adroitly, bringing truth, enlightenment, and healing to ourselves and future generations. We were Black women — mentoring, truth telling, sharing, healing, creating Black magic. I wanted to experience their stories as they experience them. I knew that I would always be an outsider; after all I wasn't an inventor. But I was black and I was a woman and I did care. The women responded with depth and courage—I had gained their trust—as they told their stories. Sometimes I asked questions; most of the time they talked (p.70).

Despite the importance of the Black oral tradition and the potential for interviews to produce "Black magic," as was the case in Hambrick's experience, it is unrealistic to think that all Black women will respond this way when sharing their stories. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) stresses that a Black feminist standpoint does not exclude the diversity of Black women. "Despite the common challenges confronting African-American women as a group, individual Black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion" (p.27). Had I explored this phenomenon in greater detail in my review of sensitizing concepts, I might have dropped my preconceived notions about Black women and thought more critically about how to more effectively facilitate interviews with Black women about difficult experiences.

Instead our meetings seemed sterile and impersonal. The women all

appeared uncomfortable and I felt like they spoke to me in the same way they would speak to an employer or customer service professional. Jessie for example sat rigidly upright and rocked back and forth as she spoke. Moreover, some of the participants, including Myra, Pauline, Nikki and Zephyr were hesitant to share intimate details from their lives. Zephyr for example used pronouns and other vague phrases when she narrated certain events in a clear attempt to censor herself. Nikki even recanted her first interview explaining that she should have never told me those things about her life. She said that when we met for our second interview she would tell me another story, the right story. Moreover, when the women cried I did not validate their emotion nor did I ask them which details in their stories had led to the tears. I simply waited and listened for them to continue their stories. Importantly Seidman (1991) explains that this technique is valid in traditional qualitative research. But when qualitative research is done from a Black feminist standpoint the researcher is supposed empathize with participants and nurture participants through difficult moments in the discussion (Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Gibson &Abrams, 2003; Collins, 1991).

Although my missteps during the interviews were significant there was another potential barrier to beyond my control. In qualitative inquiry scholars are taught that participants are more likely to engage and trust the interviewer if she shares aspects of the participants' identities (Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Gibson & Abrams, 2003). I shared the race and gender of the participants, but most of my participants were poor and working class, whereas I was a graduate student. Considering the reality that the term graduate student carries

with it a connotation of middle class privilege, my efforts to appear socioeconomically ambiguous (I dressed down, left my laptop and cell phone in the car and wore minimal jewelry) likely did very little to diminish our class-based differences.

Likewise because the study was about Black women who dropped out it was impossible to ignore our differences in educational attainment. Given the fact that the women did not have diplomas and I was seeking an advanced degree, I knew that I was not only an outsider to their experience. Perhaps, I represented, as a graduate student, the benefits (whether real or imagined) of educational perseverance.

CHAPTER 4: DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL AND INTO THE GHETTO

This chapter contains my conclusion about dropping out. As it stands the conclusion is a complex argument about why Black girls drop out of high school. In the interest of clarity, I explain the conclusion in two subsections. Before the subsections there is a selective review of the contributions of critical qualitative scholars who study the drop out crisis. Next I present a short chronology of Big City with a narrow focus on the development of the south side of the city and its race relations. Then I detail two concepts: intersectionality and ghettoization and their importance to understanding why Black women drop out of high school.

In the second section of the chapter I explain the conclusion in two subsections. First I introduce the conclusion as a "simple finding" based on a familiar premise. It states that Black women don't necessarily drop out for academic reasons. Rather, while they are still students they often take on other occupations that leave them little or no time to continue going to school. This simple truth is not a unique finding. In fact, it verifies the work of Fine (1991), Dei (2004), Rumberger (1983, 2004) and others who found that dropping out is a process that is mitigated by many economic, social, personal and institutional factors – including systemic racism and sexism. Later I explicate my simple finding using two conceptual tools: intersectionality and hyperghettoization. Doing so extends the contributions of the above drop out scholars and results in a fresh, refined understanding of how Black women are uniquely situated in the hyperghetto and the drop out crisis. When fully explicated the conclusion reads this way: Black women living in the hyperghetto do not want to drop out of

school. However the violence, drug abuse and poverty within the hyperghetto drive them to seek alternatives to their status quo. Desperate for immediate relief they take on seemingly promising occupations, which leave school attendance impossible. This shift toward other "work" creates an unsettling paradox. First because the hyperghetto is devoid of any substantive alternatives the only occupations the women can find are illegitimate and eventually entrench them deeper into the strongholds of the hyperghetto. Second, lack of a diploma all but guarantees that subsequent attempts to enter the legitimate workforce will be very difficult.

Engagement and critical qualitative theories of dropping out

As mentioned in the conceptual review many prominent scholars of the drop out crisis present useful and insightful analyses of the low graduation rate, its causes and what can be done to alleviate it. At the onset of the study I highlighted two perspectives as most relevant and used them to sensitize me to major issues before entering the field: the school engagement perspective and the critical qualitative perspective. In brief, school engagement scholars framed schools as communities to which students must assimilate to reach their full academic potential. Those students (and parents) who actively and continually engaged in school culture and felt a sense of belonging with teachers and peers were more likely to succeed and eventually graduate (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & Magnia, 2004; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001; Yan, 1999 Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Finn & Pannozzo, 1993).

The work of critical qualitative scholars marked a shift in the literature because these researchers began to interview stakeholders in education (e.g., students, former students, teachers, parents) and also held institutions accountable for the retention or lack thereof of minority students. For example, in her study of an inner-city high school with mostly Black and Latino students attending Michelle Fine (1991) challenged the contentions of the engagement scholars who she claimed, "…camouflaged the very policies and practices that force most low-income and urban adolescents to leave their high school prior to graduation, and to leave in ways that appear to be *their choice*" (p.21). Fine conducted an ethnographic investigation of the school interviewing teachers, students, parents and administrators. She also collected archival data from the school and the district offices. Finally, Fine observed the school culture. In the end she found that the school and district deliberately funneled so-called low-skill students into the same schools. The schools were so overcrowded that their resources were depleted. With few resources they were unable to serve the students properly. When students did show signs of disengagement the overworked teachers and staff were reluctant to intervene. Given what she observed, Fine referred to those students that did eventually leave, not as dropouts, but as *pushouts* (see also, Fine & Zane, 1991).

George Sefa Dei (1997, 1996) documented that African and Caribbean adolescents in Canada had similar experiences to the students Fine studied in New York City. Many of Dei's respondents claimed feeling that the curricula and cultural practices of their schools marginalized the experiences and voices of

Black/African-Canadian students. The Eurocentric focus of the schools also made the students apprehensive about voicing their concerns. As their feelings of alienation mounted the students begin to disengage from classes and activities. Eventually many Black/African-Canadian students drop out (Dei, 1997, 1996).

As I reviewed the data from my interviews and field notes I learned that while both of these perspectives are useful, they do not address directly many of the compelling issues that appeared in the stories of individual women and in the transcripts of multiple respondents. As I share the data here and in other sections you may see phenomena that could be explained by the school engagement perspective and the insights of the critical qualitative researchers. I chose not to focus on these findings directly for two reasons: First, during the initial and secondary analyses these issues did not rise to thematic prominence. Second, the theoretical categories featured in conclusion are not yet prominent in the literature about Black female students. As such, they are given space here. Before I continue to the conclusion I will contextualize the social and economic conditions of Big City during the decades when most of my participants were adolescents.

Funky, funky ghetto

The economic and social disparities of the 1980s and 1990s are essential to understanding my findings about Black women who dropped out and the relevance of ghettoization and intersectionality. The women's stories extended beyond the schoolhouse and beyond their adolescence. Therefore without at least a modest understanding of the social climate during the years they recalled in the interviews, there would be no way to contextualize their schooling, their

experiences in the community or their decisions over the life course.

Finally, there is an intense focus on the influx of crack cocaine because, as you will see, the era of crack use in the United States was unlike any moment in history. In less than a decade crack cocaine provided the DNA for an epidemic defined by poverty, gang violence, police brutality, racist judicial practices, HIV, rape and prostitution that still exists today. A study about Black inner-city women during these decades would be incomplete without a discussion of crack, its scope and lasting effects.

Big City, big problems

Edith: Well, I would give family gatherings every weekend, everybody get together and come over and play cards and dominoes and we'd cook, eat and drink, whatever, and had a lot of people over there. And then a fight – you know, you going to defend your house, and then I [made] a head start at the door to keep from letting the bullets, you know, fly and hit one of my kids.
EN: But no one else got shot but you.
Edith: Just me, and my house got shot at, but just me…It's *(laughs)* Big City.

Today Big City, and its surrounding suburbs, is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States (TSBA, 2008). In 2010, the population of Big City was about 1.5 million and the median household income was approximately $41,000 (US Census Bureau, 2010). The major industry of the state in which Big City is located is manufacturing, which includes technology and military equipment. Black people make up nearly 4.5 percent of the population and participate in all industries. Since 1980 the Black population in Big City has increased by 141% and in 2005 the state reported that the Black student high school completion rate was about 86%. As is the case nationally,

Blacks in Big City still lag behind Whites in homeownership, median income and business ownership. As you will see however the economic and social conditions for Black residents in Big City today have improved considerably since the 1980s and 1990s. Below is a brief review of the social and economic conditions for Black Americans in the 1980s and 1990s. Later I introduce intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and hyperghettoization (Wacquant, 2008; Wilson 1996, 1987) and pay special attention to Big City's history of: a) income disparities, b) school inequity, and d) crack cocaine.

Income disparities. South Big City, home to most Black residents of the city, is a relatively small subsection of Big City. Although it does not have formal designations it is generally considered to be a ten square-mile district that is "…is bounded on the north by the [Pepper] River and on the south by mountains…and is within walking distance to the central downtown section of [Big City]" (Harris, 1983, p.111). South Big City was and is severely segregated. The majority of the residents are Mexican and Black. In 2000 40% of the families in South Big City lived below the poverty line (Rex, 2000). In 2010 52% of the families lived below the poverty line (PRC, 2010).

"Unlike cities of the industrial heartland, with distinct patterns of white flight to suburbs as central cities deteriorated, Big City's segregation has been in place for the last century" (Bolin, Grineski & Collins, 2005). Bolin et al. (2005) outlined how Jim Crow laws relegated Blacks, Mexicans and Mexican Americans to communities south of Big City's Southern Pacific Railroad and south of the Pepper River before the turn of the twentieth century. Although many industries

settled in that southern region providing jobs and inviting development, most industries refused to hire Blacks (Harris, 1983). Moreover once the Pepper River flooded in 1891 whites fled north, attracting modern amenities such as plumbing, sewage, a trolley system and roads north of the railroad and river for decades. By World War II, South Big City had deteriorated into a shantytown with, "no heating, plumbing, electricity, sewer systems or paved roads" (Talton, 2005, p.4). To compound the neglect, the Black and Mexican communities in the south also experienced environmental abuse. For example when it rained, untreated sewage from the white communities ran directly into the unprotected Black and Mexican communities (Bolin et al, 2005). Meanwhile whites were unwilling to consider how Big City had neglected its Black and Mexican residents (Harris, 1983). Up until the 1960s media and policy makers referred to the south side as the "shame of Big City" (Bolin et al, 2005, p.162; see also Wheeler-Cronin, 2009). Harris (1983) reiterates, "[t]hat broad expanse was for a long time devoid of adequate social services agencies, health facilities and public transportation; it had neither department stores nor industries necessary for jobs, and as a tax-base" (p.111).

Just as with other major cities, the 1950s represented a time of industrial and economic growth. Unlike other major cities that were home to relatively stable and safe African American enclaves, however, the Black residents in south Big City were not able to take advantage of the thousands of working class jobs of the industrial boom. Well into the 1960s old and new industries in Big City refused to hire Blacks (Harris, 1983). Instead much of Big City's post-War economic growth occured at the expense of the Black and Mexican neighborhoods. For

example by the 1960s industrial zones, two major highways and the development of the state's largest airport resulted not in the mass employment of Blacks but in drastic rezoning and isolation of communities in South Big City (Talton, 2005).

Overtime the south side of Big City remained neglected by the state and local governments despite the widespread industrial and economic growth of the state, the expansion of the state's largest university and the desegregation of schools. Unfortunately aside from a few useful articles detailing Big City (most of which were used above) there is little information about Big City's race relations especially during the years when most of the participants were adolescents – 1980s and 1990s. The best way to understand Big City's political economy during the 1980s and 1990s is to reference the participants' stories and national reports on economic racial disparities. Fryer et al (2005) provide a useful general description of the economic status of Blacks in cities like Big City during this period:

> The fraction of Black children in foster care more than doubled, fetal death rates and weapons arrests of Blacks rose more than 25 percent, and Black low birth weight babies increased five percent. Among Whites, there is little evidence of parallel adverse shocks. The poor performance of Blacks relative to Whites represents a break from decades of convergence between Blacks and Whites on many of these measures (Fryer, Heaton, Levitt & Murphy, 2005 p.2).

As it relates specifically to income, in 1985, the national median income for white families was about $29,000 whereas black families' median income was about $16,700 nationally. The median income for families with a black female householder was about $8,000 as compared to about $16,000 for white women in 1985 (Welniak, 1988, p.1). In 1985 the unemployment rate for Blacks was about 13% but, for whites it was about 6% (Current Population Survey, 1981-1991).

Big City today. One remarkable comfort of living in Big City and the surrounding areas is that the streets follow a grid system. Hapless drivers like myself rely on the grid to find new locations with ease and to avoid highways during rush hour. In most cases one can stay on a major street without significant rerouting or interruption for 80 or 90 miles. During my year in the field I was frustrated to learn that it is impossible to drive from the downtown area directly into the poorest areas of South Big City. Moreover it is impossible to drive from the poorest areas of South Big City directly into the bustling suburbs to its south. There are bridges over the Pepper River so that is no longer a barrier between the downtown and the south side. But there is an industrial district, including factories, abandoned warehouses and the airport, that serves as a five-mile long barrier, running east to west between the impoverished communities of South Big City and the downtown neighborhoods to its north. Although it would normally take only a few minutes to ride a bus downtown the industrial district disrupts the grid system. Meanwhile the major highway that travels south through the city routes drivers completely around the south side.

These realities about the design of the Big City metropolitan area may seem

like mundane inconveniences, but they are a perfect example of how the residents of South Big City are still isolated from the resources like quality schools, higher education, and jobs of the suburbs and the downtown.

Schools. As Big City's population expanded in the first decades of the twentieth century, Black students were taught in "colored buildings" on the campus of Big City Union High School. By 1926 Colored High School (later renamed Carver High School) opened to serve Black students. Historians and reporters referred to Colored High School as separate and unequal. As was the case in other major cities in the US, Black activists sued the legislature and the judge eventually ruled in their favor in 1953. As a result The Colored High School closed in 1954. But, also like most other cities in the US, after the elimination of state sanctioned or *de jure* segregation communities responded with policies that ensured *de facto* segregation. While some Black students were finally able to attend all white schools most students remained in the few underfunded, overcrowded South Big City schools in their local neighborhoods.

In his history of Blacks in Big City and the state, Harris (1983) explained that in 1962 local Black leaders testified to the US Civil Rights Commission the lingering racial inequities of Big City Schools. Harris summarizes their complaints.

> No Negro teachers are hired in the 11 elementary school districts north of [Big City]; all are in the two school districts in [South Big city]. In the [Big City] Union High School vocational department, approximately 60% of Black students are enrolled in culinary or

> automotive classes, few in electrical or electronics. Lack of adequate vocational counseling was blamed for this discrepancy (p.95).

Black students in white schools also struggled with harassment and differential treatment. Although city officials were slow to respond to the discrimination that Black students in South Big City faced, local organizations, including Black Greek-lettered organizations, the Salvation Army, local YW/MCA branches and national organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) supported students in the community. Harris (1983) explains that the "roots for the [Big City] revival stemmed from ghetto sections in 1968" (p.115). These organizations funded summer recreational programs, arts and crafts programs and even campaigned to the school boards on behalf of the Black students in South Big City. In 1982 for example, the Big City Union High School Board of Directors had voted to close three high schools with a majority Black population, Big City Union High, East High and North High. Eventually the local NAACP sued the board and forced the reopening of North High.

Crack cocaine. Jessie, Nikki, Ethel and Zephyr all mentioned drug use and addiction, especially as it relates to crack cocaine, in their stories. According to the National Institutes of Health, Black women are six times more likely to be addicted to crack cocaine than white women and four times more likely than Hispanic (Latina) women (SAMHSA, 2002). One of the reasons that crack was increasingly devastating to the Black communities across the nation between 1984 and 1989 was because,

> [A]large fraction of users were young women. Prostitution was common among female crack addicts, potentially accelerating the spread of AIDS and the unwanted birth of low birth weight "crack babies[5]." Crack addicted mothers and fathers are unlikely to provide nurturing home environments for their children (and often ended up incarcerated), leading to the relinquishment of parental rights (SAMHSA p.9).

Importantly the prevalence of crack led to an increase in gender-based crimes like rape (Fryer et al, 2005; Falck, Wang, Carlson & Siegal, 2001), which suggests that prostitution may not have been the only reason why Black women had unplanned births, why many Black Americans contracted the AIDS virus, and why a higher number of Black children were either born chemically harmed by crack or reared in foster care.

Ghettoization

There is a rich literature on the African American ghetto, how it developed and the impact ghettoized communities have on society as a whole (Sugrue, 2003). The term *ghetto* predates African Americans' experiences in the US and was most often used in reference to Jewish and other ethnic enclaves in Europe. Characterized by poverty and isolation, the term ghetto means, most generally, a poor, urban area that is home to a minority population within or adjacent to a major metropolis. As David Ward (1982) explains, in the US context

[5] The term "crack baby" is a relic of the discourse of pathology that hegemonically obscured the ghettoization of Black Americans. It is only used here as part of a direct quote.

connotations for the term ghetto have evolved in the decades since the height of European immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. When Europeans settled in ethnic enclaves of US major cities "…the ghetto [was] a symbol of the social isolation of [European] immigrants who were unlikely to assimilate to American society" (Ward, 1982, p.260). After the US placed restrictions on European immigration those populations began to assimilate to the dominant culture. Through the "…rapid adoption of language and content of American popular culture and the progressive increase in intermarriage each succeeding generation of immigrant descendents… " contributed more to the growth of the increasingly hybrid but, dominantly Anglo-American host society (p.260).

During the years following World War II Black Americans also migrated north also settling in enclaves in major northern cities (Price-Spratlen, 2008). Driven by many factors including structural inequalities in the south and the elimination of many jobs in the cotton industry, Blacks saw northern cities as opportunities for social autonomy and middle class stability (Price-Spratlen, 2008; Sugrue, 2003; Hirsch, 1983). Unlike the European immigrants, Black Americans did not eventually assimilate into the dominant culture. Despite their cultural similarities to whites, namely their Protestant religious traditions and English as a first language, the ghettos that Blacks inhabited in the late 1940s persisted and still persist today. Eventually, most major cities of the northeast and Midwest including Chicago, New York, Newark, St. Louis and Detroit all contained Black ghettos (Groh, 1972).

As mentioned scholars have been interested in Black American ghettos for

decades. Some of the earliest works were published in the1960s and chronicled the formation of the ghetto including claims that while African Americans chose to migrate to the same areas, forming enclaves, those enclaves were ghettoized largely by acts of racism such as school segregation, discriminatory residential zoning policies and intimidation. This forced Blacks to remain in socially isolated areas while simultaneously empowering whites to retreat to the suburbs (Key works include: Trotter, 1985; Philpott, 1978; Kusmer, 1976; Katzman, 1973; Osofsky, 1968; Spear, 1967). Despite the fact that Blacks were culturally more similar to American whites than European immigrants, full assimilation was never an option. This may be because while Black Americans could assimilate culturally the differences in phenotype could never be hidden. In other words, European immigrants could "become white" whereas Blacks could not. Sugrue (2008) adds a footnote about the earliest scholars of the ghetto. In addition to their keen descriptions of the ghettos the earliest scholars of the Black ghetto were also "…deeply pessimistic about the persistence of racial segregation and the enduring costs and consequences of the concentration and marginalization of growing urban black populations in the North" (p.283). Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. concurred in his insistence that ghettos were the result of institutional racism rather than a cultural pathology. In 1967 he wrote, "The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them, but they do not make them, any more than a prisoner makes a prison" (World View Magazine, 1972).

The 1980s saw a resurgence of studies of the Black ghetto, most notably

William Julius Wilson's 1987 classic work *The Truly Disadvantaged*. His book is a departure from the works of earlier scholars in two ways. First he decentralizes the previously popular notion that ghettos were formed based on racist ideology and racist practices. He argues instead that, at least in regard to the modern ghettos of the 1980s, significant differences in the cultures of the communities indicated that ghettos were perpetuated more by the changing economic milieu than structural racism. For example, Wilson does acknowledge that racist attitudes compelled Blacks to develop racially homogenous enclaves, but he also helps the reader to understand that the early ghettos were not necessarily places of extreme poverty. In actuality, many Blacks maintained working class and middle class jobs and most families were headed by two parents. In the 1970s however, the Northeast and the Midwest "…experienced massive industrial restructuring and loss of blue collar jobs" (Wilson, 1991, p.644). Wilson explains that economic restructuring led to the extreme joblessness, white flight, Black middle class flight and social isolation characteristic of the Black ghettos of the 1980s.

Second, Wilson expands his argument by explaining how these economic changes affected the cultures of those living in the Black American ghetto. He argues that without access to jobs and middle class neighbors the urban poor developed apathy towards the labor force, increased dependence on social programs and turned to illicit or deviant industries for survival. Additionally, because girls do not have access to the cultural influence of middle class neighbors who abstain from sex, and because welfare programs like Assistance to Families with Dependent Children are readily available, they more willing to have

children out of wedlock (Wilson, 1991, 1987).

Wilson's framework is useful because he clearly delineates how shifts in American economics in the 1970s resulted in widespread joblessness and social isolation in the ghettos of the 1980s. He also helps the reader to understand how the urban poor's "…marginal economic position is uniquely reinforced by the neighborhood or social milieu" (1991, p.653). This point is particularly important to my analysis of the women's stories and will be revisited later. In general Wilson's framework falls short in two ways. First, Wilson decentralizes race and racism as primary factors in the persistence of the Black American ghetto. Although his economic argument has some validity, by deemphasizing race and the influence of structural racism, Wilson's framework gave way to cultural explanations for certain aspects of the ghetto such as drug abuse and single-parenthood. Second, Wilson neglects to analyze how gender and institutionalized sexism work together with economic shifts and racism to marginalize women differently than men.

Sociologist and student of William Julius Wilson, Loic Wacquant (2008) is a contemporary scholar of the Black American ghetto. In his 2008 work *Urban Outcasts* Wacquant draws from the contributions of the earlier scholars and Wilson to develop a refined perspective of the ghetto. The basis of his argument is in step with Wilson's contention: Black residents of urban centers were casualties of a process of economic and social abandonment by the state that was defined by mass destruction of manual jobs, the exodus of middle-class families to the suburbs and rapid deterioration of schools (p.97). He extends the work of

Wilson specifically however, by reintroducing race into the framework and by arguing, in stark contrast to Wilson, that although the term ghetto has been applied to many groups, Black Americans' experiences with ghettoization are unique. He termed this process "hyperghettoization" to illustrate the process by which Black ghettos were formed and to distinguish these communities from the ghettos inhabited by European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. Here is his brilliant summary:

> It is less well known that blacks are the only category to have experienced ghettoization in American society. So-called ethnic whites initially lived in heterogeneous ethnic clusters which, though they may have been slums, were temporary and, for the most part, voluntary weigh-stations on the road to integration into composite white society. They were not …ghettos in any sense other than an impressionistic one (2008, p. 52).

Wacquant's perspective of the ghetto is more relevant to this study than Wilson's because similar to the earlier scholars, Wacquant acknowledged how structural racism has played a consistent role in the formation of the hyperghetto. Using Chicago as the exemplar, he provides evidence of the sharp decline in jobs but he also combines that with evidence of federally sanctioned housing segregation and the creation of housing projects in isolated areas of the city. Additionally unlike Wilson, Wacquant attributes the overwhelming dependence on social programs and the increase in illegitimate industries to the extreme poverty of the community. He explains:

> Most ghetto residents…have little choice but to 'moonlight' on jobs, to 'hustle' for money through a diversity of schemes, or to engage in illegal commerce of various kinds (including the most dangerous and potentially lucrative to them, drug retail sales), in order to 'make that dollar' day to day. The frenetic growth of the informal and criminal economy observed at the heart of large cities in the United States over the last two decades of the century is directly explained by the combined closing of access to unskilled jobs, the organizational desertification of the urban core, and the failings of welfare coverage (p.62).

Both of these strengths of Wacquant's model provide a framework for understanding not only the challenges the women faced but also why they made choices that reinforced, as Wilson (1991) would put it, their social milieu. Additionally Wacquant's focus on structural oppression and not so-called cultural pathologies provides an alternative to the culture of poverty models that argue that Black Americans perpetuate their own poverty through rituals and traditions that reject education, family and legitimate employment. This is important because the culture of poverty ideology is not only popular, but powerful. During the 1980s and 1990s public officials rejected arguments that structural racism and economic disinvestment ghettoized Black Americans. Instead they claimed that the urban poor willingly maintained a culture of poverty and the availability of welfare funds only reinforced this culture. As a result voters eventually reformed welfare and the media swelled with stereotypical images of residents of the Black

American ghetto. Scholars and public figures used fictitious tropes like *welfare queens* and nihilistic thugs to as tools to advance the argument that urban Blacks were equally interested in self-destruction and the rejection of the socio-political gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

My only qualms with Wacquant regard his conflation of gender into race. While he did discuss how women differ from men as it relates to class structure and dependence on welfare, his otherwise brilliant discussion is limited by the fact that he did not adequately explore how men and women experience various aspects the ghetto differently. Had he used an intersectionality paradigm throughout his analysis he would have been able to better how violence, sex, rape, drug use, prostitution and parenthood are gendered pheonomena. Below is a brief review of the strengths of intersectionality and how I applied it to the design of the study and analysis of the data. I hope that the discussion of the conclusions that follows clearly demonstrates how a synthesis of hyperghettoization and intersectionality provided me the best framework to understand the women and the stories they told me.

Intersectionality

Critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw (1999, 1991) popularized the term intersectionality to indicate an awareness of the unique positionalities of women of color and the attendant structural oppressions they face. Black women live at the intersection of multiple identities including but not limited to racism, classism and sexism. The metaphor of an intersection is meant to conjure an image of a person existing where all structural oppressions meet (Collins, 2000).

Therefore critical paradigms that only analyze race or that only analyze gender or that only analyze socioeconomic status are insufficient for studies on Black women who experience multiple structural oppressions equally and simultaneously (Hull, Bell-Scott & Smith, 1982; Crenshaw, 1999, 1991; Collins, 2000). On the other hand, intersectionality transforms studies in many ways. First, intersectionality rejects either/or identity frameworks that force scholars to think of people as, either Black or white, man or woman. Implicit in these unidimensional models is the assumption that Black women choose their identities depending on the circumstances. Yet in practice it is unlikely that Black women wonder, "Which identity should I choose, Black or woman? Intersectionality validates their consideration of all identities equally and simultaneously. Black women are at once Black and woman and, in many cases, working class. In addition intersectionality allows scholars to not only examine systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, etc), but also how the systems interlock and create nuances in privilege and penalty (Collins, 2000). Moreover intersectionality illuminates diversity within groups previously regarded as homogenous. For example, without intersectionality, the crack cocaine epidemic might be viewed as affecting Black people uniformly. However, after the application of intersectionality scholars can clearly see how the influx of crack cocaine had specific implications for women. For example crack cocaine led to the increased incarceration of Black men, which also contributed to an increase in female-headed households. Meanwhile addiction led to increased joblessness and poverty for men and women. But in response to their poverty, more women

engaged in prostitution for survival. Prostitution leads to increased cases of rape against women. Rape in turn exacerbated the rates at which women contracted the virus that causes AIDS. This is an overly simplistic example but it demonstrates why a race-only perspective on crack cocaine obscures how men and women experienced the epidemic differently.

Importantly, although Crenshaw popularized the term intersectionality "[m]any Black feminist intellectuals have long thought about the world in this way because this is the way we experience the world" (Collins, 1990, p.221). Intersectionality has been the primary distinguishing factor between Black feminist thought and the traditional feminist movements for decades. Sojourner Truth, for instance proclaimed the need for intersectional thinking for Black women in her 1851 speech at a women's convention in Ohio. As she critiqued traditional feminist arguments, which at the time were decrying acts of chivalry as thinly veiled acts of patriarchy, designed to marginalize women from voting and participation in the workforce, Truth testified to the differences between Black women and white women. Namely they were not subjects of chivalry and as slaves and freed persons, had always worked outside of their homes. Summarized in her brilliant rhetorical question" Ain't I a woman?" she urges white feminists to recognize that while gender equity is important, campaigns for equity must acknowledge that for women of color gender is complicated by race. Since then Black feminist scholars (McClean, 1996; Lorde, 1984; Davis, 1981), novelists (Walker, 1982; Hurston, 1937), playwrights (Shange, 1975) and poets (Clifton, 1991; Giovanni, 1968) have all included notions of intersectionality in their

arguments and depictions of Black women's experiences, even if the term wasn't used until the late 1980s. This common awareness among scholars and artists indicates, as Collins suggests, that intersectionality is deeply rooted in Black women's experiences working, mothering and going to school while Black and female.

As it relates to the literature on Black girls in schools many scholars use critical theoretical frameworks (e.g. critical race theory, cultural capital, cultural ecology) and take antiracist standpoints, but intersectionality has yet to have a real home among the critical qualitative studies of Black female student achievement. This study not only applies an intersectionality framework to the research design but also in the analysis. Together with hyperghettoization, I interpreted the stories about schooling and life that the women told me in a way that demarginalizes Black women and highlights the political economy of poor, urban neighborhoods. The following analysis begins with the simple conclusion: Black women don't want to drop out of high school. But out of determination to survive in the hyperghetto they take on occupations. These occupations render school attendance impossible. Using the stories of the women, with special attention to Edith and Jessie's stories, I illustrate how schooling was rarely a major concern during the time when the women disengaged from school. Rather it was personal wealth, safety and freedom that dictated their decisions. In the last section I explicate the conclusion by exploring the occupations the women chose to take on and argue, using hyperghettoization and intersectionality, why they chose occupations such as prostitution, drug dealing and single motherhood. I close the

chapter with a short discussion and a preview of the implications that are detailed in chapter 6.

Dropping out as a consequence of an occupational shift

First, it is essential for all those interested in the dropout crisis to understand that dropping out is not always about school and it is not always a deliberate act based on a singular, academic problem (Rumberger, 2004). Instead I found that for these women, dropping out was a consequence of a non-curricular lifestyle shift. I developed this conclusion from the prevalence of two themes. First, six of the eight women cited pregnancy as their official reason for leaving school but, as I analyzed the data I came to the conclusion that the women used pregnancy symbolically. Instead, I argue that pregnancy is a readily available and comparatively socially acceptable placeholder that the women used as shorthand for a more detailed process of shifting their occupations from "student" to other occupations that are often stigmatized as deviant. Second, the participants provided details when they talked about school including their teachers' names, outfits they wore on the first days of school and boys on whom they had crushes, but many of them could not pinpoint the day they dropped out of school or the days leading up to their last day on campus. In contrast, the women did provide rich stories about what they were doing outside of school when they dropped out. The presence of these two themes across several cases in the study suggests that the women did not necessarily turn away from schooling as much as they turned toward other occupations.

Take, for example, Edith. Edith is a 72 year-old grandmother who cooks and sells pastries and barbecue dinners to family and friends at her church. I met her when she was a student in a computer literacy class at a local community center. During our interview, I learned that she came from a family of farmers and cotton choppers. In fact, her family moved to the state to take advantage of the large cotton industry in the 1950s. She became pregnant and married and moved out of her mother's house at 15 years old. Edith reported enjoying school as an elementary school student. She played the violin in the orchestra and, more than anything else she loved sports. She also liked school because she knew that, if she was a good student and maintained good behavior she would not have to join her family in the cotton fields. Here she explains her feelings about academics:

Edith: I hated social studies.

EN: What did you like? What subjects?

Edith: Well, I liked my math, I liked spelling, and I liked my penmanship. And I loved my sports.

EN: You had to take a penmanship class?

Edith: Handwriting, yes.

EN: And you did well in those? You did well in math?

Edith: Pretty good

Clearly Edith was not a student who went to school begrudgingly. As a matter of fact, Edith expressed a balanced view of school; she liked some subjects and disliked others. She enjoyed extracurricular activities and excelled in some classes. It is important to note, here that Edith shared her stories with remarkable

detail. She remembered the names of her teachers and even earmarked important experiences in her life with exact dates. It was not difficult to identify her feelings about experiences and to compare those experiences with others. Because she seemed to like school, I was curious what she would describe as her reason for leaving school. We talked about dropping out several times over the course of two interviews. Here is the first recorded instance: "I went to school in Sunset[6], you know, from the grade school on up into junior high and about the first or second year in high school. I was pregnant, so I just, like I said, I just quit and didn't went back."

Like five other women in the study Edith cited pregnancy as her reason for dropping out of high school. Granted, this is a major life change, but (and this is true of other women in the study) pregnancy was not the major lifestyle shift in Edith's life that eliminated school as an option. Instead, dropping out was a consequence of her desire for change. To be sure, Edith told other stories and made other statements that instigated follow-up questions about the nature of her decision. Only a few minutes before this statement, for example she said:

> *Edith*: Grandmother, everybody…they started me to cooking when I was five years old, for a full-course meal every day. And like I told you…wouldn't believe me probably, but what I'm saying is the honest to God truth, because you in the country, you live in the country and you own your own land, you gots to harvest it, and then you know that if you big enough to walk or if you big enough to pick up a spoon then you got chores. That's the way the old folks did it back in them days, and stuff. And it was that way clear on up until, you know, I just couldn't take it anymore. I wanted to get out

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[6] Sunset is a small farming town west of Big City.

Here you see that Edith identifies for me (perhaps because of my obvious youth and my location in the urban center of a major US city) the stark differences between her current life in Big City and her childhood in Sunset. Notice how she used the phrase "…you wouldn't believe me probably, but what I'm saying is the honest to God truth…," to stress that she was not exaggerating. In her conclusion she revealed how her responsibilities to her family continued for years, and left her exasperated to the point of, "…want[ing] to get out." This suggests that she was struggling with the burden of her responsibilities to her family before she became pregnant. I followed this line of analysis and looked for more codes about her childhood, working in the home, and feeling disgruntled about her responsibilities. Here is a useful excerpt:

> *EN:* You['re] the oldest?
>
> *Edith:* I'm the oldest. I was – I never had a childhood life; I had to take care of my sisters, take care of the home, prepare the meals, make sure all the laundry and everything was done. That was an everyday thing, so I had to get up and get them ready and get them off to school, just like if they were my own kids.
>
> Then I married at a young age; I married at 15 because of the way things were at home. I just had got tired, 'cause I never had no, I guess you could say no time for me or no time for myself, so I started my family off real early. My mom signed for me to get married

Obviously Edith's decision to leaving school was complicated. Only on two occasions did she mention leaving school due to pregnancy. But on several occasions she told stories about feeling overworked at home and how she thought that motherhood and marriage would bring her freedom. As a researcher I had the

option of reporting that Edith left school because she was pregnant. But, Edith's stories made visible the complexity of her experiences and the processes that eliminated formal schooling as a viable option for her. With her pregnancy as the turning point, Edith's lifestyle shifted from being a child under her mother's control to being an adult, a wife and mother who was in control of her own life. Close analysis of her words reveals her desire to move out of her family's house predated her pregnancy. When she said, "I just had got tired, 'cause I never had no, I guess you could say no time for me or no time for myself, so I started my family off real early" one might even wonder if she planned to get pregnant for the purpose of moving out.

Edith's oldest daughter Jessie also participated in the study. Jessie's stories support the argument that dropping out is the result of a lifestyle shift but, for Jessie this entailed a shift being from a non-working adolescent, with very little access to her own money, to a full-time worker in a large crack cocaine operation. Jessie was born in Sunset, but she grew up in Big City with her mother and four sisters. She attended High Hill High School until she dropped out in the eleventh grade. Jessie currently lives alone in a modest house in Big City not far from Edith, and she and Edith talk often. Unlike her mother, Jessie never mentioned an affinity for her high school experience. I intentionally pressed her for details about her classes, teachers, and grades and she responded to most of those questions with ambivalence.

EN: Do you remember any teachers or any coaches –

Jessie: Mm-mm.

EN: that kind of made you want to -?

Jessie: Mm-mm.

EN: Any subjects in school where you thought maybe I'm good at this? You've got to be good at math.

Jessie: No. I was just average. I was _____.

EN: If you sell drugs on the street, you gotta be good at math.

Jessie: You know I can count money when it comes down to drugs.

EN: That's what everyone says, "I can count money."

Jessie: Yeah. I can count money really, really good.

EN: *[Laughter]*

Jessie: No. I wasn't all that smart. Like I said, I got by. I mean I didn't fail any of my classes. I got by.

Like the others, Jessie became pregnant in high school. But it wasn't until she became preoccupied with personal wealth that she stopped attending class.

Jessie: [My boyfriend] always had stuff. He had a car. He was selling drugs – joints and shrooms back then. I started selling joints and stuff at school. On my birthday, I messed around with him and wound up getting pregnant the first time.

My boyfriend used to come pick me up. I call him and he'll come pick me up or whatever. After I got pregnant I wasn't into school. Then my mom worked all the time.

Then my dad, he didn't know where we was at or whatever. So, as long as I made it home and cleaned up or whatever – what I had to do before my mom got off. We'd meet the mailman there and tear up them papers for me not going to school. I guess they called her and wanted to set up a meeting. She was like, "What meeting" for me not going to school? I said, "I'm moving out. I'm pregnant. I'm gone."

Here again, we see a story about dropping out that mentioned pregnancy but included other issues that raise questions about any significant connection

between pregnancy and dropping out. In our discussion about her last days on campus Jessie did say "After I got pregnant I wasn't into school." Close inspection of the passages reveals, however Jessie's pregnancy did not prompt any direct movement away from schooling. Instead it appears that Jessie had a desire for personal wealth, was presented with an opportunity to make money via her romantic relationship and seized that opportunity. Furthermore the comparison of Edith's accounts of the years when Jessie was in high school reveal that Edith was a single mother of five children, received very little child support from her ex-husband and worked two jobs to make ends meet.

Notice how Jessie and Edith's stories about the temptations that lured them away from school differ – Edith wanted freedom from her overbearing family and Jessie wanted financial security. But, their decision-making processes, starting with having a desire for change, seeing an opportunity for change and seizing it were almost identical. Because the stories of many women in this study followed this pattern, I identified the process of occupational shift as a primary component of my argument.

This distinction between choosing to drop out and making an occupational shift that forces one to drop out can be awkward for several reasons. I can speculate that some scholars, particularly those committed to exposing systemic practices that "push out" minority students, may see my limited discussion of in-school activities not sufficiently attentive to the processes within schools that contribute to dropping out. Additionally, my intense focus on the occupational shift might seem less than helpful to dropout prevention campaigns. Some might

suggest that drop out studies should focus on programs designed to reclaim the thousands of Black girls who are at risk of dropping out today – regardless of why they left. In the section that follows I demonstrate why the argument about the occupational shift is a key component of the grander drop out debate. Using evidence from more of the women's stories and by incorporating intersectionality and hyperghettoization I argue that the occupational shift captured for me an important moment in the women's otherwise murky disengagement from schooling. Additionally, the occupational shift brings to light the influence interlocking oppressions within the hyperghetto have on the Black girls' ability to focus on schooling. It is because they were Black, female and living in the harsh realities of the hypherghetto that they felt the need to take on other occupations. Moreover, it was because they were Black, female and living in the hyperghetto that they most often took on occupations that entrenched them deeper into poverty and social isolation.

Decision-making in the hyperghetto

Moving forward from the simple finding (dropping out is the consequence of an occupational shift) I wondered why so women began with a desire to improve their lives but ultimately engaged in self-destructive activities like prostitution or drug dealing. Why didn't they focus more on schooling so that they could qualify for full-time positions after graduation? And if they were determined to work, why did they choose such self-destructive occupations? These questions directed me to develop a deeper understanding of the hyperghetto and how it traps well-meaning residents into cycles of poverty and joblessness. I

found that although the women desired positive change in their lives certain realities of the hyperghetto make positive change impossible. To be precise, there were four realities of the hyperghetto that account for the women's decisions and reveal how those decisions entrenched them deeper into poverty and joblessness.

First, there is no significant workforce in the hyperghetto. As Wacquant (2008) explains when Blacks began their migration to the north in the 1940s and 1950s they comprised a "reservoir of unskilled labour" (p.97) from which large industries drew hundreds of thousands of workers. During the 1960s and 1970s however, the major manufacturers left urban areas for cheaper labor abroad and in the American west. This mass exodus of working class jobs stripped ghetto communities of their primary sources of income. Without legitimate jobs students who are seeking alternatives to their poverty or freedom from their homes are more likely to settle for occupations that are risky and illegitimate.

Second, schools in the hyperghetto are saturated with the realities of the community. Underfunding, poor teachers, drugs and overcrowding render high schools ineffective at providing sanctuary for students. Moreover, because students keenly understand that without local businesses and industries to sustain a working class workforce the high school diploma will not guarantee them access to fulltime employment, they are more likely to consider illegitimate opportunities for financial gain, freedom and safety.

Third, women don't necessarily seek out self-destructive occupations like prostitution and drug dealing. Rather, they are often lured into the operations by men who bamboozle them into believing these occupations are their best options

for survival. Fourth, not all of the occupations (e.g. motherhood) are inherently self-destructive. But when motherhood interlocks with other factors like adolescence, poverty and drug addiction they place young Black women and their children at risk of becoming dependent on welfare programs and remaining in the hyperghetto.

The details I listed above and earlier in the chapter adequately explain the first reality: extreme joblessness of hyperghettos like Big City. Below I use excerpts from the women's stories to show how the remaining three realities of the hyperghetto led the women in this study to take on risky, and sometimes, illegitimate occupations. I find that Nikki and Zephyr's stories are most useful to this discussion because they expertly distill the decision making process of adolescents who have a desire to create change but due to oppressive conditions have very few options to positively transform their lives.

Today Nikki is a recovering addict and alcoholic who wears a gold Cocaine Anonymous chip as a pendant on her necklace. She lives with her uncle and serves as his nighttime caregiver in a small home in the central region of Big City. She is a highly skilled caregiver but has a hard time keeping a job because most employers want her to get her GED. She is studying at a local community college and hopes to have her diploma in the few months. When we began our discussion, Nikki made it clear that she did not drop out of school because of pregnancy. Nikki explained that the morning she decided to run away from home, she had gone to the north side of Big City to answer an open call for models at a nationally recognizable agency for teens.

> *Nikki:* After about our third session, the photographer was kinda like, you know, touching me in places he wasn't supposed to be. And then he wanted me to take off my clothes so he could take shots elsewhere. Anyway, I ended up leaving. And when I left, I didn't go to find my sister. I went straight to the bus stop. And I was sitting on the bus stop crying and then a pimp pulled up. Took me home and that's how it all started.

This passage demonstrates two things. First Nikki was working to improve her quality of life. Nikki explained throughout our meetings that her family lived in poverty and for three years after her mother's divorce lived in housing projects. She had eight sisters and as a result her single mother was forced to work three jobs to provide for the family of ten. She told me that they only reason she went to the photo shoot was because she knew she could earn her own money modeling. Second, the form and content of Nikki's narrative expertly guide the reader toward the point at which her vulnerability converged with the predatory scheme of the pimp. Obviously she did not seek out an opportunity to have sex for money nor did she approach the pimp. He saw her crying and lured her into what he portrayed as a lucrative business opportunity that would improve her circumstances.[7]

By any measure, life as a prostitute under the control of a pimp is not a better life. In fact, she would be trading her life of poverty for another in which she would be, for all intents and purposes, a sex slave. But, as the rest of Nikki's

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[7] The tactics that pimps use to solicit prostitutes are well documented. Myer (1991) and Amber (2009) both detail how pimps seek out vulnerable adolescents (mainly girls) who are either distraught or runaways. Once the girls engage in prostitution the pimps maintain control over them with violence and/or drugs. Moreover according to Norton-Hawk (2004) pimp-controlled prostitutes are more likely to be single, non-white, without a high school diploma and from homes with severe dysfunctions (p.191).

story clearly demonstrates, the pimp made her an offer she could not refuse. He explained that she had a series of choices: She could continue to cry on the bus stop or get a ride home. She could eat later or let her future pimp buy her lunch. She could wear her own clothes or he could buy her a new wardrobe. She could continue to feel traumatized by the actions of the photographer or let the pimp console her. Given her poverty and her vulnerability it is easier to understand how a well-meaning girl "decided" to live as sexual chattel for the next ten years.

Zephyr was the last participant to contact me about enrolling in the study. At 24 years old she was the youngest of the cohort and the most soft-spoken. She told her story with the greatest reservation. It was clear that she did not want to become emotional and used pronouns instead of proper names, avoided rich description and offered short answers as mechanisms to maintain her composure. From a researcher's standpoint I regretted knowing that I would not get the richest data possible from her interview. Nonetheless, I was careful to honor her restraint.

Just like Edith and Jessie, Zephyr wanted to get good grades. Unfortunately her desire for academic achievement conflicted with her desire for solitude and safety. Her stepfather was addicted to crack cocaine and spent the evenings brutally abusing Zephyr, her sister and their mother. "I was so afraid of my stepfather," she explained, "that I slept under my bed." She said that she was nine years old the first time she skipped school. When I asked her where she would go she said she always went back home. She wanted time alone to think about her future and make plans for escape. But she never did escape. On one

occasion the police were called to her home on suspicion of domestic violence. As a child she assumed the police would rescue her. Apparently due to lack of probable cause the police could not do anything to help her and left Zephyr and her sister in the home with her mother's attacker. Over time she became resigned to the fact that she might never escape her mother's negligence and stepfather's violence. As a teenager she decided that the best option for freedom would be to have a baby. "It would be a fresh start," she said. Later when Zephyr met her first boyfriend she told him that she hoped to get pregnant. He obliged her.

It seems unlikely that an adolescent girl would view pregnancy as an opportunity for positive change. But Zephyr's logic is not uncommon. In his 1990 book *Children Wanting Children,* Leon Dash found in his study of teenage parents in Washington, DC, that adolescents don't necessarily have babies "because of aimlessness or ignorance" (p.18). Rather there are associations between life in the ghetto (e.g poverty, poor education, parental neglect etc) and a desire to start a family. Some of the teenage parents he spoke to argued that they viewed having a baby as a rite of passage to adulthood. Another girl explained that girls see having a baby as an opportunity to become the good mother the girls never had (p.17). Andrea Parrot (1997) found similar results in her work with adolescents in New York. She claimed that some girls deliberately have children because they see motherhood as their only achievable life goal (Lang, 1997).

These insights into teenage pregnancy suggest that girls like Zephyr became pregnant because of perceived benefits. Indeed motherhood, as an occupation is not inherently self-destructive. As Gloria Joseph (1991) explained

"there is a wide variance among the population of teenage mothers. Some have help from extended family and access to counseling and care" (p.100). Others like Zephyr, do not have support at home, financial security, nor do they have access to prenatal and mental healthcare. Without a diploma Zephyr could not find a job once her first baby was born. She attempted to return to school but continued to have poor attendance because she could not afford consistent childcare for her son. Moreover she could not leave her son with her mother because she did not want her son exposed to her stepfather's violence.

Just like Zephyr, Eliza and Edith both provided similar accounts of wanting to leave home and seeing motherhood as a positive shift in their lives. In all three cases, it is obvious that the women did not willingly take on a self-destructive lifestyle. Rather, their status as mothers interlocked with other aspects of their lives and had unintended negative outcomes.

The stories above clearly illustrate the challenges the women faced in their personal lives. But their stories also beg the questions: Given your personal challenges why would you drop out of school? Was school a refuge, a safe place where you had caring teachers and engaging activities? Wacquant (2008) argues that schools in the hyperghetto are not only underfunded, lacking in qualified teaching and support staff and overcrowded, but also that the dangers of the hyperghetto including gang violence and illicit drug use, infiltrate the schools and affect the students (see also Fine, 1991 & Dei, 2004 for ethnographic details about schools in poor urban areas). The women's stories support his finding. Zephyr, for instance recalled that once teachers realized she was chronically truant they

did not seek to reengage her with retention programs or additional support. Instead she was reported to authorities who offered her family the option of completing community service or paying a fine. Zephyr's mother made her complete the service.

Before Nikki ran away she went to Big City Union High School. It was there that she was introduced to drugs. They were readily available. Here she describes the environment.

> *Nikki*: …because I was just a curious kid. I was just curious to all the things
>
> *EN*: Why do you think it was so easy in your school, being that young, to get a hold of all that stuff?
>
> *Nikki*: It wasn't so much in the schools. It was what was on the outside of the schools. Big City Union sits right in the middle of downtown Big City.
>
> *EN:* So you guys could get a hold of whatever you wanted?
>
> *Nikki:* It was right off of Reagan Avenue, what they used to call "The Stroll." So yeah, it was simple. If you went in that direction, it was simple. You could walk right out the door and someone would say, "I got some weed for sale." Most of the students - I put it to you like this: Once you get on that side you know who to say, "I got some weed for sale" to. You could spot a curious kid more than you could spot someone who is at that school for school.

Unfortunately what Nikki and Zephyr describe above, overworked or inattentive teachers and illegal substances in schools, is unremarkable in the literature on poor, urban schools. In his book *Savage Inequalities* Jonathon Kozol (1991) brilliantly illustrates how schools in the cities like East St. Louis and Newark seem to work on behalf of the oppressive conditions of the hyperghetto rather than train students to remain resilient, graduate and go on to jobs or college. If

there are no jobs: if schools in the hyperghetto are just as perilous as the streets and do not offer students comprehensive skills for success; if pimps and drug dealers actively seek out vulnerable girls to drive their operations; and, if certain neutral occupations become risky once they interlock with other risk factors of a Black girls life; then the answer to the question Why do they take on self-destructive occupations? becomes clearer. The answer: Given their challenges how could they not?

[Today], I can't get a job at Church's Chicken. Whether it is because most jobs require the diploma or because the women struggle in math or reading, the primary reason all of the women in this study currently struggle with joblessness and poverty is not because of drugs, abusive relationships or a poor work ethic. Without the diploma as an assurance of the women's competence and intelligence, employers are free to assume the women are under-qualified even for unskilled positions. Jessie, for example overcame a 15-year drug addiction, ended a long-term relationship with a drug dealer and survived four years in prison, but has been refused a promotion at the food bank where she works because she does not have a diploma. Edith is a well-known cook in her community and sells dinner plates and pastries every weekend to friends and family. Yet, she was the first laid-off from her job at a fast food restaurant because she did not have a diploma. Likewise, despite having experience, Nikki cannot get a job as a caregiver because most assisted living facilities now list a diploma or equivalent among the minimum requirements. The irony of leaving school early to work and now not being able to work because they left school early was not lost on the

women. Myra put it perfectly.

> *EN*: You say that you used to think [the diploma] didn't matter. Do you think it matters now?
>
> Myra: I know it does because, like now I can't find a job, you know? Any kind of job. I can't get a job at Circle K. I can't get a job at Church's Chicken. [Or] anywhere where I have applied.

In the final analysis, I learned that despite their best efforts, the women currently face the same reality that they faced the moment they sought out alternatives to their status quo. The fact that dropouts cannot find jobs is not surprising but, in light in their personal struggles to negotiate their way out of poverty only to find themselves poor and having to go back to school, it is a sobering reminder of the way the hyperghetto tends to cancel out its residents attempts to resist the status quo.

Conclusion

In the beginning I explained that the finding from this study was complex and that the best way to present it was in two parts. In the first part I advanced the "simple conclusion" that stands as the core of my argument: Black girls don't want to drop out of school. I concede here, as I did in the introduction, that this is a familiar finding. Scholars have thoroughly conveyed this notion as it relates to Black students in general, if not as it relates to Black girls in the hyperghetto in particular. Nonetheless without this simple truth, I would not have identified a starting point from which I could drive the analysis forward, ending at the fully explicated argument. Black women living in the hyperghetto don't want to drop out of school. However the violence, drug abuse and poverty within the hyperghetto drive them to seek alternatives to their status quo. Desperate for

immediate relief they take on seemingly promising occupations, which leave school attendance impossible. This shift toward other "work" creates an unsettling paradox. First because the hyperghetto is devoid of any substantive alternatives the only occupations the women can find are illegitimate and eventually entrench them deeper into the strongholds of the hyperghetto. Second, lack of a diploma all but guarantees that eventual attempts to enter the legitimate workforce will be very difficult.

It was not my intention to present a depressing story about Black women that suggests that they are helpless against the realities of living in impoverished communities. That is certainly not the case for all African American women nor is it necessarily the case for the women in this study. But because the extreme challenges associated with life in the hyperghetto severely affected these women's abilities to focus on schooling, the hyperghetto also dictated the direction of this analysis. There are other concepts, including but not limited to resistance, resilience and agency that should be considered in future work on Black women who dropped out of high school. Implications for further research are detailed in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5: MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, MATRIARCHS AND WELFARE QUEENS

Motherhood is a complex domain of Black female identity. Since arriving on North American soil Black women's ability to reproduce and rear children successfully has been a contentious site, influenced by multiple, interlocking oppressions. On the other hand, Black women have used their roles as mothers and caregivers to subvert those multiple oppressions. In this chapter I discuss how the Black adult women in this study narrated Black female identity in general, and Black motherhood specifically. In the two sections that follow I present two separate but related findings. First, Black women often blame their mothers for their poor academic performance and eventual departure from school. According to the women their mothers did not support their educational careers by*: a) frequently moving, b) failing to enforce disciplinary standards, c) failing provide them with a distinct childhood.*

Second Black women narrate Black motherhood in two competing ways. When talking about their own experiences as parents, they were careful to contextualize the choices they made within the harsh realities of ghetto life. When narrating their mothers' decisions however, the women provided little to no context. In the final analysis I argued that the stark differences in their stories indicated stark differences in their conceptualizations of Black mothers. They saw themselves as parents negotiating the myriad challenges of the ghetto. In contrast, the women measured their mothers against the superstrong Black mother stereotype. When their mothers did not live up to the expectations of the

superstrong Black mother the women criticized them as being uncaring or incompetent.

Before continuing to the two findings on Black mothers it is important to review, in brief, popular and scholarly conceptualizations of Black female identity. Using four tropes of Black female identity as guideposts, I will chronicle how the dominant group has conceptualized the Black mother over time and then discuss how Black feminist frameworks have spoken back to those conceptualizations.

Black mothers in American popular culture

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that "intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence." Controlling images like the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen and the superstrong Black mother are not just entertaining caricatures of Black womanhood. Rather they are ideological devices that, in their mythical representation of Black women, contribute the continued oppression of Black women[8]. Below is a selective review of controlling images of Black mothers including evidence of their influence on scholarship, popular culture and policy. This review is important to the findings of this chapter because while many of the ways in which the women characterized black mothers align with Black feminist thought, some of their stories align with the controlling images featured here.

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[8] Controlling images are caricatures found in media that are based on stereotypical notions about a race of people or gender group (e.g. savage Indian, hypersexual Black man, 1950s housewife etc).

Mammy. Mammy is the most beloved of all stereotypes of Black identity in the US. Since slavery producers and artists have consistently reprised her image to fill a role in movies or to sell popular products (Collins 2005; Johnson 2003; Douglas 1999; West 1984). Although Mammy is a fictionalized relic, created from racist myths, her identity does have roots in slavery and the roles that captured Africans were forced to fill (Lester & Goggin, 2005). Moreover her iconic status in American popular culture suggests that she has become a trusted figure by which we understand Black women and Black mothers (Bogle, 2001; DelGaudia, 1983). Indeed mammy can be seen movies such as *Imitation of Life (1934, 1959)* and *Gone with the Wind (1939)*; in children's cartoons like *Tom and Jerry*; in advertisements as *Aunt Jemima* selling pancakes; and in television shows like Nell Carter's character in the popular 1980s sitcom *Gimme a Break.* In each of these examples mammy is fat and dressed in rags or inexpensive clothing. She is black (dark-skinned) and happy to work in the homes of whites without pay. Unlike other tropes of Black female identity, which are characterized as threats to white dominance, she is a loyal, trustworthy nurturer for the white family. Typically mammy is portrayed as the housekeeper for the home, caring for the entire family but paying special attention to the children. As their wet nurse and then nanny, she raises them as her own, even though she is their servant. As for her own family, mammy is never portrayed as caring for her own children even though her ability to nurse white infants indicates that she has had her own children.

Although mammy lives with her white owners, is given license to speak her mind and is trusted with the children, as a controlling image she also educates viewers and consumers about Black female identity and the benefits of oppression. Pilgrim (2000) explains:

> During slavery, the mammy caricature was posited as proof that blacks -- in this case, black women -- were contented, even happy, as slaves. Her wide grin, hearty laugher, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery (Pilgrim, 2000).

More specifically the portrayal of a slave who is happy and "free" to move about the house without her captors fearing that she might attempt to escape, undermines the notion slavery is an inhuman, brutal institution. Mammy's message is Blacks are happy when they disregard their own families and communities, and abandon their ambitions for personal wealth and freedom and to submit their lives to the will of whites. Additionally, the invisibility of mammy's biological children suggests that Black motherhood in support of whites is appropriate, whereas Black motherhood and by extension, sexuality in support of her biological family is something to be feared and hidden (West, 1984).

Although mammy is a fictionalized icon she is a spokesperson for white domination over Black families and Black sexuality. Before abolition and during Jim Crow, for example, formal and informal policies prohibited slaves from owning land, empowered whites to monitor their actions constantly, restricted

their marriage rights, and otherwise forced slaves and freed Black persons to live their lives in full scrutiny of and service whites.

Matriarch. The matriarch is an archetype of Black motherhood that rose to popularity in the1960s and still persists today. What is most interesting about the matriarch is that she is an updated version of the mammy. She is domineering, maternal, sassy and willful. The matriarch's commitment to her own home, makes her seem like mammy's antithesis. As a loyal servant in white homes, mammy is a good mother; as the mother to her own children, the matriarch is a bad mother. Most often adapted to the screen as the loud, domineering Black woman, the matriarch also subverts dominant gender roles. She works outside of the home and makes more money than her male counterpart. Keep in mind, the mammy was never portrayed as loyal or submissive to a husband – which is the ideological gender norm in US society – but because she subverted gender roles for her white family this was seen as appropriate. In contrast, the matriarch, a Black woman who subverts gender roles for her children is seen as emasculating and disrespectful of American core values (Baker, 2005; Collins, 2000).

Since the 1960s the matriarch's influence on America's perceptions of Black female identity has been profound. One of the most well-known example of her place in the American consciousness is found in Daniel Moynihan's 1965 report to President Johnson called *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action.* Drawing from the work of Oscar Lewis (1960), who argued that poor people develop and transmit a culture that supports poverty, Moynihan (1965) claimed

Black Americans in the ghetto were victims of their own culture of poverty. In his report in support of President Johnson's War on Poverty Moynihan summed up his thesis.

> There is no one Negro community. There is no one Negro problem. There is no one solution. Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.
>
> It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people. Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is a resurgence doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored (Chapter II).

Moynihan noted that generations of slavery and overtly racist laws restricted the social, economic and political movements of Black Americans– especially those who migrated away from the south to urban areas in northern states. He saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 as the turning point in race relations in America. Yet Moynihan also argues that due to generations of alienation, Black Americans simply did not value practices that supposedly lead to full participation in American society. Instead Black people valued and normalized a culture that

supported and recreated their own poverty – a culture of poverty. Of the cultural norms Moynihan observed about the Black family, he pays special attention to the so-called matrifocality of the Black family. He claimed the reversal of male and female roles is a "…fundamental fact of Negro American family life" (Chapter, 2). Using educational statistics and (often misleading) quotes from other scholars about Black female achievement in the workforce, Moynihan concluded that part of the reason Black families are caught in a tangle of pathology is because the Black woman fails at her role as the submissive, nurturing wife. Instead Black women overachieve academically and financially, which harms the self esteem of the Black man and compels the woman to look upon him with disgust. Her disgust for her husband/boyfriend evolves into disgust for all Black men so eventually she begins to favor her daughters over her sons. Of the ways in which Moynihan argued that Black people perpetuated their own moral depravity and poverty, matriarchy was the most salient. Although Moynihan ignored modern structural racism and sexism some scholars concurred with parts of his thesis. William Julius Wilson (1987) echoed Moynihan's critique of Black mothers in his work on the Black American ghetto. Wilson contended that Black women in the 1980s did not value marriage the way their mothers and grandmothers did. This shift in the cultural norm, he insisted led to an increase in sexual activity, a higher birthrate and more households led by single mothers.

Since the 1960s popular media the matriarch has joined the cast of Black controlling images with the unique roles as both a cause and a symptom of Black urban life. The most popular contemporary matriarch is Madea played by male

filmmaker Tyler Perry. The matriarch is also featured in movies such as *Deliver us From Eva* (2003), *Why did I get married?* (2007), and *Baby Boy* (2001), in the popular television series *Girlfriends* (2000).

Welfare queen. If the matriarch was a commentary on white bitterness toward Black women turning away from the menial jobs of the South and work as domestics in white homes, in favor of caring for their own children and careers, the welfare queen was and continues to be evidence of the dominant group's willingness to blame Black people for their own ghettoization and to punish them accordingly. By the 1970s Black people were not just seen as intruders on the white urban centers of the north, they represented an attack on American core values. Ghettoization, a process mitigated by the Great Migration of Blacks from the south to the north in the 1950s and the exodus of the middle class and industries away from urban cities in the 1960s, plunged Black American enclaves into poverty and social isolation (Wacquant, 2008; Wilson, 1987; Groh, 1972). In addition the horrific assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Medgar Evers and the race riots that followed, all suggested that the 1970s would be a time when the promises of the Civil Rights Era would likely go unfulfilled. This was especially true for Black Americans living in the ghettos of the north and Midwest. As I detailed in chapter 4 the Black American ghettos developed in the 1950s as ethnic enclaves containing the full range of socioeconomic classes seen in mainstream society. But by the 1970s they became locales of extreme poverty, un(der)employment, high drop out rates and social isolation (Wacquant, 2008; Wilson, 1987; Groh, 1972). Rather than consider the

crisis of the Black American ghetto against the backdrop of racist and classist policies that led to their formation, politicians reprised arguments that Blacks were oversexed, lazy criminals. This ideology, conveniently contained in controlling images such as the nihilistic thug and the welfare queen/crack mother, frightened whites into voting for leaders who would implement policies to control the wild, lazy and nihilistic residents of the Black ghetto.

The welfare queen "…constitutes a class-specific, controlling image developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law" (Collins, 2004, p.78). She lives in the ghetto, has many children, is unmarried and does not work. Unlike the dominant ideology that associates a woman having children with appropriate gender identification, the welfare queen's children represent her poor family values, her laziness and nonexistent work ethic (Gillory, 2005; Collins, 2004).

Because the welfare queen is depicted as a Black woman it is clear that motherhood, in the poor and working-class context, is racialized. The message is: Black women have children out of wedlock because they do not value marriage and are sexually promiscuous. Moreover, poor Black mothers do not work because they are lazy. And poor, Black mothers take advantage of welfare because they would rather defraud the government than carry their own weight in the workforce. In some cases the welfare queen was also depicted as addicted to crack cocaine and, because she was perpetually pregnant, she knowingly exposed her children to crack cocaine. The welfare queen was a powerful trope of Black mothers because all of the problems of the ghetto seemed to be linked to her

including: overcrowding, childhood poverty, HIV, and the prevalence of crack cocaine.

During the late 1970s and 1980s public officials realized that if they could convince voters that poor Black mothers were a threat to the American economy, the voters would readily elect an administration that planned "…cuts in government spending on social programs that fed children, housed working families, assisted cities in maintaining roads, bridges, and basic infrastructure and supported other basic public services" (Collins, 2000, p.80). Indeed, two-term President Ronald Reagan often conjured this controlling image on the presidential campaign trail.

> She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names" ('Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign. *The New York Times*, February 15, 1976).

Although Reagan is credited with the most prominent reference to welfare queens, other high-ranking public officials adopted the rhetoric in their own public indictments of the values of Blacks. For example, in his 1992 speech regarding the Los Angeles Riots, Vice President Dan Quayle (1992) ignored debates about police brutality and the racist motivations behind the acquittal of the police shown beating Rodney King, and instead used that opportunity to argue that poor Blacks were morally depraved. Indeed he only devoted a small portion of his speech to a

condemnation of the rioters. The majority of his remarks assailed the Black underclass and their presumed pathologies – pathologies that not only led to their poverty but also to violence, extended dependence on welfare programs and widespread unemployment.

> The intergenerational poverty that troubles us so much today is predominantly a poverty of values. Our inner cities are filled with children having children; with people who have not been able to take advantage of educational opportunities; with people who are dependent on drugs or the narcotic of welfare. To be sure, many people in the ghettos - struggle very hard against these tides - and sometimes win. But too many feel they have no hope and nothing to lose. This poverty is, again, fundamentally a poverty of values (Quayle, 1992).

The trend of blaming Black Americans for their poverty, including defining poor Black women as welfare queens, had wide ranging implications. In 1996 for example welfare programs were finally reformed under the Clinton Administration. Collins (2004) also describes how birth control products like the Norplant Rod and the Depo Provera injection were "…heavily marketed to women who seemingly could not control their fertility and needed medical intervention to avoid motherhood" (p.133). In addition movies and television shows used the welfare queen as a fearsome example of the pathologies of Black mothers. Popular movies like *Boyz in the Hood* (1991)*, Losing Isaiah* (1995) and *Juice* (1992) and *Lean on Me* (1989) all featured examples of the welfare queen.

Superstrong Black mother. An important distinction between the superstrong Black mother and the others listed here is that she is an in-group stereotype. Purported primarily by Black men, the superstrong Black mother seems to speak back to the matriarch and welfare queen stereotypes by arguing that Black women in working-class urban areas are not lazy or bad mothers (Collins, 2000, 2004). Rather, because Black women in the ghetto must raise their children while negotiating poverty, single-parenthood and racism, they should be revered as strong. Although this archetype appears to be a powerful counternarrative to the notion of the welfare queen, her characterization is nonetheless steeped in sexist assumptions about the appropriate roles for Black women. Collins (2000) explains that "glorifying the strong Black mother represents Black men's attempts to replace negative White male stereotypes with Black male ones" (p.175).

Just like the matriarch the superstrong Black mother pervades popular culture and is featured in many films and shows about urban Black family life - many of which are produced and supported by Black people. Movies such as *Soul Food* (1997)*, This Christmas* (2007) and nearly every film in the Tyler Perry franchise include a superstrong Black mother as the central figure, as did the popular 1970s television series *Good Times* (1974) and *What's Happening!!* (1976). Langston Hughes' (1922) poem *Mother to Son* also features a mother that is resilient and works tirelessly so that her son might have a better life. Additionally popular songs like *Keep ya Head Up* (1993) and *Dear Mama* (1995)

by Tupac Shakur, *I'll Always Love my Mama (*1973) by The Intruders, and *A Song for Mama* (1997) by Boyz II Men all invoke similar themes in the lyrics.

In most cases the superstrong Black mother is depicted as chaste, pious and nurturing. In *Soul Food,* for example the mother is a widow who was married to a gambler who, on several occasions spent the entire family's earnings on poker games. The children revered their mother for "not tripping" and going out to get a second job to support the family. This idea of "not tripping" speaks to the notion that authentic Black mothers work tirelessly and without complaint. Because her work ethic will shape the success of her children, any signs of weakness undermine her character as a mother. Until her death the mother's entire life revolved around cooking for her children and inspiring them to greatness with proverbs about perseverance and the importance of family.

In addition the superstrong Black mother is not seen as poor because she lacks a work ethic. Rather she is deliberately modest, investing all of her resources and time to the educations and careers of her (male) children. In *Dear Mama* Tupac raps to his mother "I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man. You always were committed, a poor single mother on welfare tell me how you did it." Notice how in Tupac's depiction the superstrong Black mother is faced with the same challenges as the welfare queen but he leads us to interpret her, not as lazy but as committed. The suggestion is that she should be revered because overcame otherwise insurmountable odds.

As for being a single mother, the superstrong Black mother is single for two reasons: First she has been victimized by men in her past (including the

father of her children) and is therefore not willing to risk being hurt again. In *Soul Food* and *Good Times* the mothers did not remarry after their husbands died. Second she does not want to share her time and affection for her (male) children with another man. The film *This Christmas* took an updated perspective on this theme. In the movie the mother maintained a secret relationship so that her oldest son would not find out. When her son discovered her relationship, he was so disappointed in her that he threatened to leave home and never return. Also, consider a few verses from Tupac's ghetto anthem for Black mothers in the ghetto, *Keep Ya Head Up*

> And when he tells you you ain't nuttin don't believe him. And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him…
>
> And I realize momma really paid the price. She nearly gave her life, to raise me right. And all I had to give her was my pipe dream of how I'd rock the mic and make it to the bright screen…
>
> Cause I think we can make it, in fact, I'm sure. And if you fall, stand tall and come back for more. Cause ain't nuttin worse than when your son wants to know why his daddy don't love him no mo'. You can't complain you was dealt this hell of a hand without a man, feelin helpless. Because there's too many things for you to deal with. Dying inside, but outside you're looking fearless…

In the song Tupac admires Black mothers as being fearless victims of ghettoization. Implicit in his message is also the notion that Black women are

defined not only in opposition to the men who "diss them" but also in opposition to their male children. The message is that she subverts the oppression of the ghetto by sacrificing herself for the "pipe dreams" of her sons. The gender binary in Tupac's song is one of many dilemmas in this stereotype. Critical analysis of the superstrong Black mothers in media reveals that, similar to the Matriarch, the Black mother had to become superstrong because she could not trust Black men to support her financially or emotionally. The sons of these women witness their resilience in the face of abandonment and heartbreak and interpret it as maternal sacrifice. Moreover they place these Black mothers on pedestals as examples of authentic Black mothers - the opposite so-called welfare queens. Collins (2000) explains that the opposition between Black mothers and men extends beyond gender norms. As African Americans embrace this seemingly positive controlling image, it becomes clear how the sexist notions about the Black mother interlock with racist notions about Black men.

> Far too many Black men praise their own mothers [yet] feel less accountable to the mothers of their daughters and sons. They allow their wives and girlfriends to support the growing numbers of African American children in poverty. Despite the alarming deterioration of economic and social supports for US Black mothers, large numbers of young men hold fast to myths of Black male hypersexuality and encourage their unmarried teenage girlfriends to give birth to children whose futures are at risk. Even when they are aware of the poverty and struggles these women

> face, many Black men cannot get beyond powerful controlling images of matriarchs and superstrong Black mothers (p.174).

As a controlling image the superstrong Black mother stereotype poses another dilemma for Black women. Increasingly scholars in psychology are finding that in Black women's attempts to live up to the superstrong ideal they at risk for depression or other health risks. However, because the superstrong ideal precludes open displays of weakness, hurt or vulnerability Black women are less likely to acknowledge these feelings or seek medical attention (Johnson, 2008; Prather, 2008; Wyatt, 2008). Angela Neale-Barnett (2003) argues that because of the pressure to be super strong Black women developed insufficient strategies for dealing with anxiety. "Rather than being seen as less than she is supposed to be, a Strong Black Woman refuses to admit she is stressed and keeps her feelings and emotions bottled up inside while she helps everyone else. This strategy makes [her] an excellent candidate for the development of anxiety" (p.21).

This brief review of the controlling images of Black motherhood is important because it demonstrates how these images support racist and sexist ideologies. Additionally this review clearly outlines how controlling images help to shape the expectations that Black people have of the women in their families and communities. Often Black Americans embrace the matriarch and the superstrong Black mother as having positive qualities, qualities that subvert the oppressive conditions of urban life. But, as I attempted to demonstrate here, these images actually work in support of sexist and racist structures that oppress Black women and by extension Black Americans.

In the next section I discuss two separate but related findings. First I argue that some Black women blame their mothers for the women's poor academic performance and eventual departure from school. This is a significant finding for two reasons. On one hand their stories support the literature that suggests there are positive correlations between a student's academic performance and their mother and fathers' parenting styles. On the other hand this finding also highlighted what appeared to be a double standard in the ways the women chose to categorize Black motherhood. In the second section I use the women's stories to illustrate this double standard.

…the same drama. When things went wrong we blamed mama

The literature on the relationship between parental rearing practices and child academic success is broad and supported by many disciplines, including but not limited to sociology, educational leadership and psychology. In general scholars argue that successful students of all races, genders and socioeconomic levels, are more likely to have parents that are involved in school culture, had a history of educational success and are consistent disciplinarians, yet are not too controlling (Attaway & Bry, 2004; Park & Bauer, 2002; Falbo, Lein & Amador, 2001; Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg & Ritter, 1997; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts & Fraleigh, 1987; Hess & Holloway, 1984). Likewise, students who perform poorly in school are more likely to have parents that did/could not provide the same support for their education. The women in this study did not have parents who were highly educated. Most of their fathers were not present and their mothers worked outside the home – often at more than one

job – in order to pay the rent and purchase food. Accordingly, the mothers were not active in school activities. As for discipline and family management, Edith, Eliza, Ethel, Zephyr and Myra spent a great deal of time not only critiquing their mothers' choices but also describing how those choices made it difficult for them to remain in school until graduation.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter the majority of the women in the study did not leave school because of a poor performance or an aversion to school culture. Instead they chose lifestyles that did not articulate with fulltime school attendance. According to Edith, Eliza, Ethel, Zephyr and Myra, their mothers' parenting practices may have facilitated these life choices. Below are the three areas the women referenced as likely contributors to their inability/unwillingness to prioritize schooling.

High mobility. Early into our first discussion I asked Ethel, as I did all the participants, if she played any school sports. Her response: "Oh yeah, I was supposed to go to the 1988 Olympics as a track star." During the three years Ethel lived with her grandfather, he realized that she was a gifted athlete and enrolled her in a league for children all over the southwest states. Here is an excerpt of her talking about her talents.

> *Ethel*: Yes, I ran track all through middle school. I ran here and then I got involved with the [local] community college because I did the trials for the Hershey track meet that put me on the next level to compete with the girls in college.
>
> *EN*: You were competing with college students when you were a child?

Ethel: Yep, the long jump 880 and I did the 880 relay and the 440 relay. It was the fastest relay. I was always the anchor. (whispers) "The fastest!"

EN: Were you?

Ethel: Yes! I loved being the fastest. That was always fun.

Despite her obvious potential and desire to win, that was the last time Ethel competed. For the next two years she moved from city to city, living in Big City with her father, and later her aunt, then she lived with her mother in California and then moved back in with her father in Big City. By age 15 she was pregnant and living on the street. The end of her aspirations for the Olympics is a heartbreaking example of how frequently moving or "high mobility" affected Ethel's academic achievement. She was careful to clarify that this pattern, constantly moving from home to home and from caregiver to caregiver, began when her mother abandoned her when she was seven years old and affected her through her adolescence. Close analysis of her story suggests that Ethel believed that had she remained with her mother she would have remained stable and been educationally successful.

Ethel: [My mother and father] hadn't been together. And um, my mom had found my stepfather and he was a really, really great guy and stuff and she wanted to reestablish herself in California so she moved me down there [to my father's house] one day and said "Wait right here your dad will be back after work." And that was it. I didn't see her again until I was fourteen. I went to ninth grade…

She left me when I was seven years old. She left me there with him. In [his] garage.

Unaware of her mother's plans, Ethel's father had started a new life with a new family and was unwilling to include her. From that point, Ethel moved

frequently between family members for the next seven years. At fourteen Ethel went back to live with her mother in California. Here again Ethel's story indicated that although she and her mother had a contentious relationship, her mother was the only relative who was able, albeit reluctantly, to provide her with economic stability, a stable living situation and a high quality education.

EN: …she let you come back when you were 14?

Ethel: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if she wanted it or not. I know at one point my stepdad Joe told me she didn't.

EN: So even when you were there it's almost like she just tolerated you. Well, what was school like there?

Ethel: Oh my goodness that was awesome. That was the most school I've ever been successful in.

Sunset Community School. Um, yeah there was only 10 kids in our whole graduating class and there was kindergarten too and it was in a big, big church.

It was the best I'd ever done in English and History. And it was the first I was on the honor roll. I've never done so well in school ever.

EN: Why do you think that is?

Ethel: It was the class size and it was the teachers. I was concentrating. Literally. Letting you ask the questions that you need to ask. And not being like, I should know and how come I don't know. Not making me feel dumb to where I didn't want to ask. So I felt comfortable enough that I (said) "Hey I don't know what's going on and I need help." I felt like I could get help. And I did. I got guidance. I got help. I remember those teachers. Mr. Stone and Mr. Allen. I will never forget 'em. I'd never done good in English ever. I got an A I couldn't believe it. In History I got an A. I got a B in math.

While Ethel enjoyed school because of the smaller class sizes and the focused support from the teachers, close analysis of the transcript including how

she chose to organize her stories, and the detailed accounts of her experiences with her mother, indicate that she believed it was her mother who had the power to provide her with a secure environment and a quality school. Moreover outside of the care of her mother, she attended inner city schools in Big City. Many of the schools she named remain in ghettoized areas and have histories of segregation, underfunding, high drop out rates and high incidences of drugs and teen pregnancy. Indeed once her mother sent her back to Big City, Ethel failed in her classes, became pregnant and dropped out. It is safe to say that if her mother had allowed her to stay in California she would have had fewer barriers to her academic success. Although Ethel maintained affection for her mother, Ethel's realization that her mother could have supported her education yet chose not to, fueled Ethel's disappointment of her mother's performance as a parent. Toward the end of our interview Ethel cried as she recounted the day she gave birth to her baby next door to a known crack house. The final sentence in her transcript reads, "I just remember feeling like I really wanted my mom."

Myra also complained that her mother's frequent moves contributed to Myra's inability to prioritize schooling. Early into our discussion she put it plainly. "From elementary to middle school I went to, probably, a total of 14 schools. We moved around a lot. My mom was unstable. Always moving. And so, that kinda led up to me not finishing school."

In a later point during our discussion Myra detailed how her mother's tendency to move her family around affected her social and academic engagement.

Myra: I was shy a lot because it was always starting over, starting over. So I never really opened up to, you know, anybody. I never really had any friends. With me moving around so much I was never really able to grasp math and like even now today I can't do math. Like I don't even know times tables and things. So when I got to the 7th grade I was gonna be retained so, at that point, you know I thought, "I'm not repeating the 7th grade, I'm too old I need to be graduating. Going to the 8th grade and graduating." So I pretty much dropped out. I just stopped going. And it started off with me ditching, ditching, ditching. It started off with me ditching math classes. And then I just stopped going to school altogether

Lack of discipline. In addition to high mobility Myra complained that her mother chose not to discipline any of her children. Instead, when her mother learned of her truancy, poor grades or about her premarital sexual activity Myra went unpunished. Myra believes that if her mother had been a more conservative disciplinarian she might have learned to focus more on her studies and less on extracurricular distractions. Here is her description of her mother's attitude toward discipline.

Myra: [A]s we got older, [she] just let us do what we wanted to do. And that's why I always chose to stay with her instead of with my dad. Because on my dad's side, you know, they were more strict. And I couldn't do what I wanted to do.

Here Myra described how her mother responded when she learned of her truancy.

Myra: [T]hen she caught me one time. And I just made an excuse. She didn't too much like look into it. [S]o after that I seen it was easy I wouldn't get in trouble so I just started staying home.

In chapter four I noted how Zephyr's mother responded to her news of her truancy. Notice the similarities between her story and Myra's.

EN: [W]hat did your mom say [about you skipping school]? When did she even start to find out?

Zep: She been knowing it.

EN: And did she make you go to school? Did she talk to the teacher? Did she punish you? What did she say?

Zep: Nothing just say "got to do your community service." And that's it. She would tell me to go to school but after while she just didn't care. I know she thought it wasn't that serious.

Lack of a childhood. Eliza and Edith both complained that their mothers looked to them to take care of the home and their siblings. Edith characterized it as having, "No childhood life," while Eliza said, "I was like the mother of the family." According to both women, their increased responsibilities left them vulnerable for mistreatment from their mothers and alienated from the childhood activities that their siblings and friends enjoyed. As the alternate caregivers of their families, Edith and Eliza had to ensure that the house was cleaned, their siblings were bathed and dressed, and the meals were served while their mothers were away or at work. Edith explained:

Edith: I'm the oldest. I was – I never had a childhood life; I had to take care of my sisters, take care of the home, prepare the meals, make sure all the laundry and everything was done. That was an everyday thing, so I had to get up and get them ready and get them off to school, just like if they were my own kids.

During our second interview, Edith explained that in her early years in high school she was an enthusiastic and gifted violinist. To ensure her success a teacher sponsored her private violin lessons. Unfortunately, she spent her afterschool hours cleaning, cooking and looking after the younger children while her mother was out. She only found time to practice once everyone was put to bed. Edith eventually quit the orchestra because her mother would not consent for her to travel to performances with the school orchestra.

Eliza explained that in order to win her mother's affection she went out of her way to help out around the house.

> *Eliza:* So my mom had to hold down the fort with three kids by herself. But I used to do everything I could do like chores around the house and stuff like that to please mom and make sure everything was done and stuff like that when she got off from bein' at work all day long.

Despite their willingness to help their mothers care for the home and the children, both Edith and Eliza were subject to harsh punishments if their mothers were displeased.

> *Eliza:* [My siblings] never do nothin' and it was always me doin' everything. My brother used to protect me from my mom 'cause I don't know what it was about my mom; she used to just beat on me ever since I was a kid.

Here is what Edith said when I asked her if her siblings helped her keep the house clean.

> *Edith:* No, they was up, running in and out. You know, like the kids, when you clean the house up and they know what supposed to be time my mom to get out of work, they'll go in there and mess up something just so I can get a whooping.

> *EN:* *(Laughs)* So you had bad little sisters.

> *Edith:* I had bad – three bad sisters. The fourth one, next to me, she wasn't, because me and her was the black sheep of the family. Me and her [were] the ones that got in trouble all the time because of the other three. So that's why when I left home my sister did too.

Notice how at the end of this story Edith draws a connection between her differential treatment and her desire to leave home. Also keep in mind that her desire to leave home and start a family facilitated her eventual departure from high school. Eliza's story is almost identical.

> *Eliza*: Once I got pregnant and had my daughter I was 17 years old and I was almost 18 years old and I moved out of my mom's house. I

> think that was to me – Erica – I escaped to go. That was the reason why I think I had that baby is to leave.

The results of this analysis support the existing literature on the relationship between parental practices and student performance. This finding is important because it introduces adult Black women's voices into the research on school engagement. Beyond notions about school engagement, this finding also introduces questions about Black female identity. I have shown that in most cases (Pauline and Nikki are important exceptions) the women spoke very critically about their mothers, at times criticizing them harshly for their performance as parents. Interestingly, when you compare the stories the women told about themselves in chapter 4, with the stories they told about their mothers here, there are similarities. Both sets of women experienced teenaged motherhood, both sets struggled with poverty, single-parenthood and low-wage employment. The similarities in the life experiences of the women and their mothers led me to question the ways in which the women criticized their mothers. If you recall Edith, Eliza, Ethel, Myra and Zephyr all mentioned how difficult it was to remain in school and to take on legitimate jobs while struggling with the harsh realities of ghetto life. This compelled me to interpret their choices not necessarily as bad choices but as functions of life in the hyperghetto. Why then, I wondered, did they not provide the same context when they talked about their mothers? Were they unable to see the parallels between the challenges they faced and the challenges their mothers faced? Given the small sample size, my conclusion is preliminary, pending further investigation. But it appears that the women, not unlike Black men, held their mothers to the superstrong Black mother stereotype.

Using excerpts from their stories and examples from the literature I will demonstrate why this is a likely conclusion.

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair

I first noticed this duality when I listened to Jessie talk about the reasons she began selling crack – an occupational shift that eventually rendered school attendance impossible. Jessie explained that her mother, Edith was poor, worked all of the time and did not provide Jessie with a car to drive or nice clothes. Eventually Jessie turned to selling drugs for extra money. Clearly Jessie made a self-destructive decision but she offered context that compelled me to consider the circumstances that led her to an ilicit occupation. As with Edith, without any context, Jessie's story left me to see her as an autonomous individual who made her choices without outside influence.

What Jessie did not realize was that Edith and I talked at length about those years when Jessie was in high school. According to Edith, she was poor because she had decided to leave her husband. He was violent and did not support the family. Once they were divorced he refused to pay child support. Edith did not have a diploma and had no work experience, so she took two low-wage positions to provide for her five children. Just like Jessie, Edith provided the context I needed to understand the choices she made within the context of the challenges she faced as a single-mother, a victim of domestic violence and a low-wage worker. Edith was also like Jessie, in that Edith's stories about her own mother (Jessie's grandmother) were devoid of the context I may have needed to fully understand Edith's mother's choices. When Edith described life with her

mother she did not include details about her mother's experiences in relationships, with poverty or in the workforce. Rather, Edith simply explained that her mother was overbearing and dependent on Edith to care for the home while her mother was away. This lifestyle compelled Edith to marry young, leave home and drop out of school.

In five of the eight cases featured in this study, the women were critical of their mothers and in each of the cases there was this duality: when the women narrated their selves they contextualized their choices and experiences within the influence of multiple oppressions. When the women talked about their mothers they did not. Below are excerpts from Myra's stories that demonstrate this double standard.

> *Myra*: It would have to say it is - it started off being her fault. You know at that time I felt that she did put her boyfriends first...
> But my dad always said, you know, cuz he blamed my mom too. He said it was her fault. He wanted to keep me. But she wouldn't let him keep me…she would say all she wanted was the child support
> That's what I used to tell my mom: that it was her fault that we turned out how we did. With my brothers, them being in jail. She let them do that they wanted to do. You know? They used to run around, steal. I mean, I stole too, but I stopped…
> It was I guess I told my mama, you had all these kids and you didn't want these kids. You know? It was just her fault. She didn't never try to change nothing. Like with me, ditching, when you knew I wasn't going to school you didn't make me go. You know, I'm like you didn't take me to school. You let my kids' dad, come over just about stay with us. You let him spend the night you know. You wasn't you know, Mom being strict. That's what I told her. I said you know...you didn't want them. I said "[B]ecause you don't care"

Clearly Myra felt that her mother's decisions, including having multiple children and multiple boyfriends, had negative consequences for Myra and her

brothers. It is also clear from Myra's insistence that her mother did not care, that she did not interpret her mother's decisions within the context of her mother's relationships or socioeconomic status. Rather Myra saw her mother's choices as products of her mother's values. Interestingly, Myra confessed that she and her mother had very similar experiences as students and mothers.

EN: Have you done things differently from what your mother did?

Myra: I didn't want to be - but yeah I started off on the same track as her.

EN: How?

Myra: Becoming a teen mom. Umm being on welfare a little bit. She was on welfare for a while. Just her attitude. My mom, she's like, I wanna say mean. But she wasn't mean towards us she was just mean towards others. She don't have no friends. She, she's just...she's just a mean, mean person. Pretty much, like don't really care about other people. And then I seen myself doing that. Like after I had my first kid and then I had another one. She was like "You gonna have five kids just like me." She had five kids and I said, "No I'm not." So then after my son, my second son, I got the Norplant put in and that was supposed to last five years but I had left it in my arm. I never went back to my doctor to have them remove it. So I think that helped so I didn't get pregnant until I did get it taken out and I got pregnant with her. Which was the same thing; eleven years between [Olive Claire] and my last son just like my mom with me and my brother. Eleven years apart. So after I seen that, I got my tubes tied. I don't want no more kids that I have to struggle with. And not having a high school diploma...

This passage is essential to the seeing the duality in her story. Myra made it clear that she and her mother had similar experiences with relationships, unplanned pregnancies, academic achievement and social programs like welfare. Yet Myra did not contextualize her mother's story they way she did her own. As I mentioned in chapter 4, Myra made it clear that her experiences with poverty, her challenges with math, living in a single-parent home and strained relationship

with her parents all contributed to the challenges she now faces as an adult in the workforce and a mother. She illustrated just how difficult it has been for her to provide for her children without a diploma.

> *EN:* You said you used to think a GED didn't matter? Do you think it matters now?
>
> *Myra*: I know it does because, like now I can't find a job, you know? Any kind of job. I can't get a job at Circle K. I can't get a job at Church's Chicken. Anywhere I have applied.

Compared to Myra, Zephyr talked less about her mother and, of course, had different stories to tell. But she adopted the same judgmental tone that Myra used. Recall Zephyr's story about the time her mother found out she was skipping school. "She would tell me to go to school but after while she just didn't care. I know she thought it wasn't that serious." Below is a similar excerpt.

> *Zep*: I know there are parents that struggle. I'm a single parent myself. But I make sure my kids are not wearing the same cloths they wore two or three years ago or they're decent. And we weren't decent kids. Like she didn't care. She basically neglected us most of the time.

Just like Myra, Zephyr detailed her disappointments with her mother's performance without any social context. She even admits that she understands that single parents like her mother "struggle." But instead of analyzing why her mother may have struggled and how that may have affected her mother's ability to care for the family, Zephyr assumed her mother "didn't care." At another point in her narrative about her mother, Zephyr also mentions that her mother's boyfriend was addicted to drugs, was abusive and took all of her mother's money to support his habit. Nonetheless, Zephyr did not indicate, explicitly or implicitly, that these circumstances may have affected her mother's performance as a parent.

Now compare the stories Zephyr told about her mother, to the stories she told about herself. To summarize the excerpts I listed in chapter 4, Zephyr indicated that her childhood experiences, drugs and alcohol, and negative influences from friends led her to make poor decisions for herself and her children. For example, she explained that she dropped out of two different high schools because the environment was not conducive to learning. She said her classmates were, "…just bad influences [who were into] just drugs and hanging out." She consistently said that trouble "found" or "followed her" to each school she attended. Though she was hesitant to elaborate, she did confirm that during her teenage years she abused alcohol and drugs. She also explained that the responsibilities of her pregnancy led her to drop out a third time. Unlike her talks about her mother – who she claimed simply didn't care, Zephyr was careful to contextualize her poverty, drug use, lack of a diploma and successes in school and at home within the conditions of the urban ghetto. During her childhood, community and home conditions affected her ability to prioritize school. Later as a young mother, classmates in her schools pressured her to turn to drugs and alcohol.

Given her story and they way she included the challenges in her community, peer groups, home and schools, Zephyr clearly understood that her decisions and experiences were influenced by the local political economy. Even as an adult she was constantly reminded of how circumstances of the hyperghetto can affect her parenting style. For example Zephyr mentioned that her oldest son was doing poorly in school and because she feels she did not receive an adequate education

she feels unable to help him academically. At time of our interview she was worried that his grades would continue to drop and that he might eventually disengage like she did. In the unfortunate event that her son did disengage from schooling, those who know Zephyr and understand her story are unlikely to interpret his failure as a product of her poor parenting. Rather they would consider his failure as mitigated by many personal and social factors.

Finally, Zephyr also demonstrated through her story, her awareness of the power of intervention. In our interview she credited her successes (e.g. job security, purchasing her own car, taking classes for her GED) to the support she received from guidance counselors and social workers. Here she offered her opinion of what might have happened if she received intervention earlier in life.

> *Zep*: I always felt that if I had - well I am a single mom and I do have a lot of children but - I found that if I had gotten just a little but of support like, "Hey you really, really need to do this you really need to focus a bit more. You can go farther than right here in your neighborhood and to try to look outside the box then." And I didn't have that. Got off track really easily.

Just as with Myra, Jessie and Edith, I saw a clear double standard in the ways Zephyr chose to characterize her mother's performance as a parent. According to Zephyr her mother also lived in the hyperghetto was in an abusive relationship. Why did Zephyr not consider the possibility that the same realities that continually knocked her off track could have affected her mother in the same way? Why did she not consider how an intervention might have changed her mother's life and thus positively affected her mother's ability to care for the family?

Conclusion

My curiosity about the double standard in the women's stories is not meant to undermine the women's feelings or an attempt to exonerate their mothers of the claims the women lodged against them. Rather in the interest of understanding how Black women conceptualize Black female identity, it is important to investigate why this duality exists and why it existed in more than half of the cases in this study. Furthermore, three aspects of the women's stories made the women's treatment of their mothers seem out of place. First the women talked at length about their mothers. Second the women were all very aware of intersecting oppressions and how they influence Black women. Third, in most cases the women reported facing the same challenges their mothers faced. Beyond the context of the women's stories, I was also surprised to find this double standard because, although bigoted and essentialist notions about Black women permeate scholarship and popular culture, often taking the form of controlling images, so do complex and empowering representations of Black mothers. Why did the women choose to define their mothers in such negative terms?

Given these considerations the question of why the women used a double standard to understand mothering in the hyperghetto is warranted. Before I detail my conclusion about the pervasiveness of the superstrong Black mother stereotype, I concede that there are other potential explanations for this double standard. First given the modest sample size it is possible that if I had interviewed more women this trend would not have appeared in such a large

percentage of the cases. Also given the relatively short time I spent with the women in the field it is possible that they did not have the time to elaborate on their mothers' experiences. Likewise, the women may have felt they did not know enough about their mothers' lives to detail how the political economy of the hyperghetto affected their mother's experiences. Each of these considerations are valid and point to the importance of further study of adult Black women's conceptualizations of Black motherhood.

Nonetheless, at this time, the pervasiveness of controlling images, especially the superstrong Black mother stereotype, represents an important first step in understanding the duality in the women's stories. I suspect that the women were disappointed that their mothers did not embody the superstrong Black mother stereotype for three reasons. First African Americans (men and women) embrace the superstrong Black mother as a powerful counternarrative to the welfare queen. Second all of the mothers mentioned in this study fit the profile of the superstrong Black mother. The mothers were Black single-mothers, all living and working in poor urban areas. Third during their interviews the women constantly focused on their mothers' inability to provide for the family despite the challenges of the ghetto. Meanwhile, the superstrong Black mother is defined by her supernatural resilience to the setbacks she faces in the hyperghetto. Tupac perfectly illustrates the superstrong Black mother's appropriate response to setbacks when he advises, "If you fall, stand tall and come back for more." The subtle message in this quotation is that all Black mothers will face hardships but strong mothers regain their footing, ready to shoulder the next hardship. The fact

that the women talked about their mothers' failures without any context about the challenges of the hyperghetto suggests that the women expected their mothers to resist the temptations of the ghetto regardless of how difficult it may have been to do so. Given this fact, it is easy to understand why they were disappointed when their mothers succumbed to drugs, alcohol and abusive relationships with men and poverty.

Additionally, the women asserted, either implicitly or explicitly, that their mothers did not care. In contrast, the superstrong Black mother not only cares about her children she devotes all of her time and resources to the educational and professional success of her children. Finally, Eliza, Ethel, Myra and Zephyr all complained that their mothers were distracted from their parenting duties by marriages or boyfriends. Their actions were contrary to the superstrong Black mother who would never prioritize a romantic relationship and risk neglecting her children.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

We ain't meant to survive cuz it's a set up. But even though you're fed up, you got to keep your head up. – T. Shakur

Eight weeks before I was scheduled to defend this dissertation I was in a coffee shop writing when my phone rang. I did not recognize the number on the screen but I recognized the voice on the other end. "Hello Ms. Erica? This is Florence, from GED," she began. "I just called to tell you that I passed my GED today!" It had been at least 18 months since I had seen Florence and two years since we were in class together. Many people do not know that when a person takes the General Educational Development test the scores are available within a few hours. After months of studying and eight hours sitting for the exam testers can call a number that night to learn their scores. Given that Florence called me around 6:30 pm it was pretty likely that she had learned she passed only minutes before she called me. In that moment I thought about the few people I planned to call the day I successfully defend my dissertation and realized how lucky I was that she decided to share her accomplishment with me. We chatted for a few moments more about our time together and her plans for nursing school. Then we hung up and I returned to writing.

My call with Florence was perfectly timed. I was happy to hear about her accomplishment and saw the call as a good omen for the completion of my own work. More importantly, however the call reminded me of the importance of the story, the importance of the diploma and Florence's desire for change, despite her age, her socioeconomic status and her environment.

This chapter concludes the study. Below I summarize the major findings including the theoretical categories that contributed to those findings. Next I discuss the significance of the work. Lastly I list the implications this research has for future studies and policy implementation.

Summary of findings

Most scholars contend that dropping out is a symptom of a problem in the school or the student. Either the students dislike school, they falter under the pressure to perform or they feel isolated from their peers. Other scholars see schools as sites of political and social tension, marginalizing students who do not fit the social norms of white, middle class, native English-speaking, protestant, typically-abled boys. While my findings do not necessarily adjudicate these claims, the women in this study did tell a different story. Their stories produced findings that forced me to place questions about schooling within the wider context of the local community – specifically, the hyperghetto (Crowder, 2003). Doing so helps us to analyze and reinterpret dropping out of school as a reaction to the entire community not just teachers, classes or peer relationships.

I began this research study with the following questions: 1) Why do Black women drop out of high school, and 2) How did dropping out of high school affect them (if at all) over the life course? The primary conclusion featured in chapter 4 of this study is that dropping out of school is not always about school. Using grounded theory methods I found that Black women, specifically those who live in the hyperghetto, drop out of high school not necessarily because they have aversions to schooling and teachers, or because they lack the academic

proficiency to perform. Rather they leave as a consequence of taking on occupations that either take them away from their local school or leave them with little time to attend. Importantly, the occupations that the women choose reinforce the challenges associated with living in the hyperghetto.

The second set of the conclusions is featured in chapter 5. In addition to what I learned about schooling and why the women dropped out, I found that the women provided conflicting characterizations of Black motherhood. When they narrated their own lives they were careful to contextualize their mothering experiences within the limitations of the hyperghetto. They called into consideration – as I did in chapter 4 - difficult childhoods, exposure to drugs and violence and marginalization from the workforce when clarifying the complex process of caring for their families. When they narrated their mothers' performance as mothers however, the women abandoned this standpoint and used language that suggested they felt that their mothers were neglectful and disinterested in raising healthy happy children. In the final analysis it seemed that the women unconsciously held their mothers to the fictitious yet pervasive superstrong Black mother stereotype.

Significance of the study. The findings of this study are not unfamiliar. Since the 1960s scholars have argued that the (hyper)ghetto has damaging affects on all aspects of Black American life, including and especially high school graduation (Wacquant; 2008; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Wilson 1987;1996). By the 1980s critical qualitative researchers began arguing that Black American students drop out at disproportionately high rates because systemic inequities

limit their access to resources that promote academic achievement (Fine, 1990). This study stands out because it synthesizes and extends the potential of both traditions to analyze the schooling experiences of Black women in three ways.

First, hyperghettoization is an increasingly viable conceptual tool in research about the Black American experience. More and more scholars who investigate Black students and academic achievement have found it particularly salient (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov & Sealand, 1993). Crowder and South (2003) say it this way:

> [W]e find that over the past quarter-century the impact of neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage on school discontinuation has remained consistently strong for white adolescents and has actually increased substantially among black adolescents. A possible explanation for the increasing salience of neighborhood socioeconomic distress for black adolescents school persistence is that, over time, disadvantaged black neighborhoods have themselves become more isolated—both socially and spatially—from middle-class neighborhoods and the role models, sources of support, and social capital that the latter provide (p.693).

Unfortunately scholars have yet to focus squarely on Black women and by extension, incorporated intersectionality into this emerging tradition in any significant way. This is dangerous because, as I mentioned in chapter 2 and as demonstrated in chapters 4 and 5, Black women who drop out face unique and

sometimes harsher challenges than their male and white counterparts. This study compliments the excellent work of Crowder and South (2003) and their contemporaries by highlighting issues in the hyperghetto that are typically obscured by studies that subsume gender into race. These issues include but are not limited to (single)motherhood and rape.

Second, this study is significant because I focused on adults. Unlike recent dropouts and adolescents, adults are better able to provide insight about dropping out and how that event affected their lives as mothers, workers and returners to education. To date the literature is full of two kinds of studies on dropping out. The first are those that feature the experiences and voices of at risk-students and adolescents who recently left school. The second includes reports detailing the association between dropping out and undesirable outcomes such as imprisonment, dependence on social programs, poorer health, and other outcomes. Few provide real world testimonies about how dropping out affected people's lives because very few collected data from adults who left school without diplomas (see, Lutrell, 1997 for an outstanding comparison of Black and white female returners to education).

I deliberately chose to interview adult women because they could not only speak to the relationships between dropping out and life experiences, but I hoped they could also provide a processual understanding of how dropping out leads to their adult circumstances. Jessie's case, for example, I knew she dropped out and I knew she sold crack cocaine but would her story support arguments that the two were related? If it did, exactly how did her dropping out lead to imprisonment?

The answer, as you saw in chapter 4, demonstrates how my focus on adults is a compliment to the literature. These experiences were related, but it was her poverty and the appeal of making middle class wages selling crack that lured her away from school. Without stories that contextualize statistical snapshots of the dropout crisis scholars may never fully understand how embedded the drop out crisis is in the political economy of a community.

Third, stories illustrate the drop out crisis in the same way personal narratives illustrate inequities that are often hidden in systemic practices and dismissed by marginalizing ideologies (e.g. colorblindness, meritocracy, etc). One of the tenets of critical race theory is the use of stories to highlight how racism still victimizes non-whites (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race scholars also use "counterstories" – narratives that speak back to stereotypes about certain groups of people (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Solorzano, Delgado & Bernal, 2001; Bell, 1992). In other cases critical race scholars use fictional, "composite" stories that while not true are grounded in the real life experiences of people who were victimized by racism (Hairston, 2010; Delgado, Bernal &Villalpando, 2002).

Although this is not a critical race theory dissertation, the stories featured here carried with them the same power. When I listened to the women talk about their lives I not only understood dropping out and ghettoization as very real parts of the human condition but, I also began to understand how a national phenomenon like dropping out affects individuals. The women also demonstrated through their stories how dropping out affects women versus men. Finally after

spending so much time talking with the participants it was difficult not to reflect on my privileges and the ways in which our schooling and life experiences as Black women may be connected. Consequently, part of my analysis of these data included considerations of my responsibilities as a scholar and how I might use my research to promote social justice for Black women.

Implications

As mentioned in the introduction the low graduation rate is at the forefront of the public agenda. This section of this chapter is a discussion of the implications for research and policy.

Research implications. The key components of this research design – use of adult Black women; use of stories as data; use of grounded theory methods – produced invaluable insight into the drop out phenomenon specifically as it relates to hyperghettoization. Nevertheless it essential that scholars replicate this research design with other populations including but not limited to teachers, parents and even policymakers.

In addition, there were some concepts that while compelling were not featured in the final analysis. During theoretical sampling for example I observed that resistance might be an interesting starting point for further inquiry into the decision making processes of Black girls at risk for dropping out. Currently the literature on school achievement has an extensive volume on student resistance. Very generally resistance as a concept refers to acts outside the normative behaviors and culture of a school. These acts can range from disrupting class to refusing to submit assignments to complete disengagement from schooling.

This analysis did not incorporate resistance. The primary conclusion did acknowledge that the women disengaged in school but that act was interpreted as a move toward an occupation not a move away from schooling. Nonetheless further analysis might reveal a relationship between the occupational shift and resistance.

A study of Black women as student resisters is also essential because studies that feature Black women and, by extension, intersectionality, are emergent but rare (see scholars who lead the charge on investigating minority student resistance: Carter, 2005; Bettie, 2004; Ogbu, 2004; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; O'Connor, 1997).

Policy Implications. In order to address dropping out effectively policymakers must first understand that the hyperghetto does not foster faith in schools. Wacquant (2008) illustrates how the same ills that imbue the private lives of residents of the hyperghetto affect students as well.

> Schools are no exception to this pattern. Designed and outfitted in the manner of military fortresses, with bricked-up windows and reinforced metal doors. They commonly deploy metal detectors to try and limit the number of guns and other hand-weapons circulating on school grounds (p.56).

The women in study would extend Wacquant's description to include life on campus as well. According to Zephyr and Ethel, school was no safe haven. In between classes Zephyr was subjected to violence and both she and Ethel testified to the prevalence of drugs in their high schools. Therefore any step toward drop

out prevention in the ghetto must begin with interdisciplinary committees that merge the expertise of its individuals toward revitalization of the entire local community. This includes, but is not limited to, supporting small local businesses, especially those that hire high school graduates. Though few in number there are such programs in existence. The Metropolitan Center for Urban Education's "Broader, Bolder Approach to education policy" is a perfect example. The four pillars - educational reform, social services, community engagement and economic development - speak to the Metro Center's commitment to working with a diverse group of professionals, and their shared belief that school reform takes place inside and outside of the classroom. Currently the Metro Center is implementing the "Bolder, Broader Approach" in a "village" of inner-city schools in Newark, New Jersey.

State and local legislatures should also reinvest in after school programs, particularly those in the arts and music. Such programs offer students a constructive yet creative respite from the increasingly standardized curricula of public schools. They also provide a safe haven for students whose parents may work during the evening hours.

Lastly educational administrators should adopt drop out prevention programs that acknowledge the existence of systemic racism, sexism and classism and the ways in which these oppressions reinforce poverty, not just for Black girls but for all minority students. Instead of increasingly popular programs that train teachers on the so-called culture of poverty, schools should empower teachers to work with their students in developing critical pedagogies designed to challenge

students who may be considering other occupations to resist the status quo while they are still in school.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the small sample size. As I detailed in previous chapters African Americans only comprise about 5% of Big City's population. Additionally unlike other groups that are bound by an occupation, a place of worship or a recreational facility, adults who dropped out of school are difficult to locate. Finally those who meet the eligibility requirements must first overcome the stigma of the label "drop out" before they consider enrolling in a study such as this one. While I understand the need to protect one's privacy I also acknowledge that if the sample was increased to 15 participants I may have been able to draw additional conclusions from the data and provide stronger support for my conclusions.

Likewise, Pauline's story is mentioned in the methods chapter but is not featured in the analysis, chapters 4 and 5. This is because her story was anomalous to the stories of the other women. Unlike the other women Pauline dropped out of school because she hated school, did poorly in all subjects and had a long-term knee injury that limited her mobility. Moreover she had a much more positive review of her own mother, unlike the other women who were critical of their mothers' parenting choices. As I analyzed the data it was clear that very little of what Pauline said would have a place in the conclusions. Nonetheless my interviews with Pauline provided many insights into in-depth interviewing and the use of stories as data, all of which are featured in chapter 3.

Toward a theory of Black female student disengagement

In a perfect scenario the grounded theory researcher develops a theory about the phenomenon and provides her readers with a previously unseen view of the problem and the population. Luckily Charmaz (2006) assures readers that while the development of a new theory is possible and desirable, "…if you offer a fresh or deeper understanding of the studied phenomena, you make an original contribution" (p.153). This study certainly meets the fresh criterion – very few studies of dropping out focus squarely on Black adult women, use stories, and analyze data using grounded theory. Given my synthesis of hyperghettoization and intersectionality, I also provide a deeper understanding of dropping out and how the decision to leave school is influenced not only by the multiple oppressions Black female students face, but also the realities of the hyperghetto.

The remaining concept of this analysis is the occupational shift. Drawing on Black feminism, antiracist models and hyperghettoization the occupational shift is a gendered, raced and classed concept that compels us to redefine what it means to drop out of school. In the case of the Black working class women in this study they did not drop out, they made an occupational shift. The emphasis is not on their turn *away* from school. The emphasis is on their turn *towards* another occupation.

The occupational shift denotes the beginnings of a viable mid-level theory of Black female student disengagement because, unlike existing theories of Black student disengagement, it assumes intersectionality. Furthermore the occupational shift implies that the student is looking for work – but it does not

limit the notion of work to legitimate employment. Rather, as was the case for many women in this study, work could include paid labor, unpaid labor, gendered work or even illegal occupations.

Ogbu provided a similar contribution to the field in his notion of acting white. Just like the occupational shift, acting white presupposes certain realities about the Black student experience, such as oppositional identity and Black people's shared history of discrimination in American institutions, like schooling. Drawing from these realities Ogbu interpreted the disproportionately high rate of Black student failure as a function of culture, not necessarily academics.

Of course, not all scholars of Black student achievement agree with Ogbu's assessment. Nonetheless scholars have embraced the concept as one that deserves application in the field. The occupational shift has the potential to advance the emergent field of study on Black female students but requires application in that field. This study was an important first step but the modest sample size is a significant limitation to the development of a mid-level theory. Thus the viability of the occupational shift is still uncertain. Hopefully scholars will assist in the refinement of this theory by testing its viability in their own research on Black girls who drop out of high school.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS

EXPEDITED REVIEW APPROVAL

ASU Arizona State University
RESEARCH AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To:	Jeanne Powers ED
From:	Mark Roosa, Chair Soc Beh IRB
Date:	10/22/2008
Committee Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Approval Date:	10/22/2008
Review Type:	Expedited F7
IRB Protocol #:	0810003318
Study Title:	Black Women Who Dropped Out
Expiration Date:	10/21/2009

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.

EXPEDITED REVIEW RENEWAL

ASU ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
RESEARCH AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To:	Jeanne Powers ED
From:	Mark Roosa, Chair Soc Beh IRB
Date:	11/09/2009
Committee Action:	**Renewal**
Renewal Date:	11/09/2009
Review Type:	Expedited F7
IRB Protocol #:	0810003318
Study Title:	Black Women Who Dropped Out
Expiration Date:	11/08/2010

The above-referenced protocol was given renewed approval following Expedited Review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval of ongoing research before the expiration noted above. Please allow sufficient time for reapproval. Research activity of any sort may not continue beyond the expiration date without committee approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol on the expiration date. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study termination.

This approval by the Soc Beh IRB does not replace or supersede any departmental or oversight committee review that may be required by institutional policy.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

INFORMED CONSENT

Erica Nicole Griffin, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Mary Lou Fulton College of Education, Arizona State University
Black Women who Dropped Out
October 20, 2009
Sample Information letter for potential participants

October 20, 2009

Dear _____:

I am an ASU student working with Dr. Jeanne Powers in the College of Education at Arizona State University. I am interested in the experiences of women who live and work without a high school diploma. Ms. Green, the director of this center and I have decided the Central Community Center would be a great place for me to find women to interview for this study.

Anyone invited to join in this study will be asked to participate in three conversational interviews during which you share stories about your education and your life in general. Each interview will take place here at the community center and last approximately 60-90 minutes. You don't have to answer any questions and if you choose to join the study you can stop participating at any time. If you agree, I will also spend time with you observing you at the center, other places you consider to be important for me to learn more about you. With your permission I would like to observe you at least once each week, for 1-2 hours, over four weeks.

Your part in this study is voluntary. At the conclusion of each interview you will receive a $10 gift card. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. For example, your activities at this community center will not be jeopardized. You will keep all benefits you have received thus far. You should also know that there are no risks involved in this study.

I will never reveal your real name when I discuss the results or write up the study. I will also change details about your life that may reveal your identity. Those include: your high school, your job, which community center you attend, your family and friends' names, and the city you live in. In all my notes and in the final write-up, I will use a pseudonym (fake name) when talking about you. I will however, keep a private master list linking your pseudonym to your real name and information. After one year of publishing and presenting the results I will destroy that master list.

I would like to audiotape this interview. But the interview will not be recorded without your permission. If you give permission for this interview to be taped, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped. Please indicate whether you give permission for the interview to be taped. I will keep the taped interviews in my business office and keep them locked at all times. Once I am done transcribing and analyzing the interview topes, (approximately one year) I will permanently delete all recordings.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact my advisor Dr. Jeanne Powers. Her phone number is 480.965.0841. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at (480) 965-6788.

Your participation will be considered your consent

Thank you!
Erica Nicole Griffin

ASU IRB
Approved
Sign Mark Rogers
Date 11/9/09 – 11/8/10

APPENDIX B

LIST OF PSEUDONYMS FOR PARTICIPANTS

LIST OF NAMES

Osceola
Marguerite
Winona
Ethel
Bertha
Zephyr
Edna
Jessie
Frederica
Myra
Olive Claire
Jimme
Pauline
Vashti
Naomi
Mamie
Eliza
Florence
Edna
Wertie
Madree
Edith
Nikki