



Racial Identity Development on the Margins: The Narratives of Black Women College Students with Experiences in the Foster Care System

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Accepted: 19 September 2022 / Published online: 7 November 2022
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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore ways Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system construct meaning of their foster care experiences, and how these experiences have influenced their higher education experiences, and the current status of their racial identity development. Using semi-structured interviews, the participant's narratives are constructed to span across defining moments in their childhood to their current selves in higher education. Guided by Black feminist thought and intersectionality, the questions that this research study asks are (a) how does being a Black woman with experiences in the foster care system impact a student's experience in higher education? and (b) what kinds of knowledge do these Black women perceive as lessons, that they acquired during their time in the foster care system? In centering the experience of being in foster care, this research highlights intragroup differences among Black women college students to demonstrate the complexity of racial identity development that transcends the boundaries of traditional racial identity models of measurement. The findings of this research illustrate the complexity of racial identity development for Black women college student with experiences in the foster care system.

Keywords Black women · Foster youth · Racial identity development · Higher education · Qualitative research

Higher education is an important location for the development of racial identity among Black college students (Baber, 2012; Harper & Quaye 2007; Hurtado et al., 2015; Ritchey, 2014), whether the location is a predominately white institution (PWI), or a minority serving institution (MSI), such as a historically Black college or university (HBCU), college is a place where young adults learn how to positively contribute to society (Ritchey, 2014), and the experience allows students to explore themselves and shape their own beliefs (Chavous et al., 2018; Torres et al., 2009). Given the multi-dimensional nature of Blackness, Black students often arrive on campus having experienced different levels and forms of oppression (Baber, 2012). The field of higher education has consistently documented the prevalence of racism, it's many forms in colleges and universities, and its capacity to impact the success of Black college students (Allen, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Existing research on the relationship between the development of racial identity and higher education suggest that for Black students; racial identity is a critical part of psychosocial development and is associated with social adjustment, student engagement, mental health, and academic performance (Clayton, 2020; Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Hatter & Ottens, 1998; Miller-Cotto & Byrnes 2016). The development of racial identity is constantly evolving based on a myriad of societal factors; in fact, Wijeyesinghe & Jackson (2001) noted that studies on racial identity development are like taking a “snapshot of a moving picture” (pp.2; as cited in Baber, 2012).

This paper explores how Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system develop their racial identities while attending a PWI. While Black women college students share common experiences with both Black men and white women, Black women experience racial and gender-based oppression simultaneously (Patton, 2009). Research focused on Black women in higher education is a consistently growing interdisciplinary field, and current research has reported that while its common for Black women to be portrayed in higher education as resilient and high achieving, researchers have documented Black

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women at PWIs experiencing feeling like outsiders (Shahid et al., 2018), feelings of isolation (Kelly et al., 2019), and encountering prejudices that are rooted in stereotypes of Black women (Lewis et al., 2012). While research on Black women in the academy has uncovered that Black women share commonalities in their higher education experiences, this study takes a different approach to explore if these commonalities ring true for Black women who are situated at a very specific intersection within the Black women collective standpoint, experiencing the foster care system.

The purpose of this research is to explore ways Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system construct meaning of their foster care experiences, and how these experiences might influence their higher education experiences, and the current status of their racial identity development. The questions that this research study asks are (a) how does being a Black woman with experiences in the foster care system impact a student's experience in higher education? and (b) what kinds of knowledge do these Black women perceive as lessons, that they acquired during their experiences with the foster care system? This research is guided by the philosophical foundations of intersectionality in combination with Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought principles are used to conceptualize the participants' lived experiences to understand the construction of their racial identity through an intersectional lens. Ultimately, this paper centers Black women with social identities that are not commonly represented in the collective Black woman intellectual tradition, to demonstrate the richness of intragroup differences among the collective standpoint of Black women, and how these differences further situate them at various points of Black womanhood. Understanding the experience of Black women in higher education has better informed higher education institutions on ways to continue to support Black women (Patton, 2009). In centering experiences with foster care system, this research showcases the intragroup differences among Black women, and increases the visibility of Black women in foster youth research, making this work critical to the field of social work and higher education.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework for this study combines two theories that are created by and for the theorizing of Black women's lived experiences. Collins & Stockton (2018) explain that in addition to guiding the research study, the purpose of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research is to articulate how the study will process new knowledge, clarify epistemological dispositions, identify the logic behind methodological choices, and build theory as a result

of the research findings. Black feminism as a critical social theory aims to understand how Black women are marginalized through institutional structures and practices, social norms, and ideological elitism (Gist, 2016). Intersectionality is used in higher education research to analyze the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences in education (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality also provides scholars with a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality and gender disparities (Harris & Patton, 2019). Understanding racial identity development among Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system with theoretical tools that are created and maintained by the intellectual traditions of Black women, situates this research as an original work. Theory attempts to explain phenomena logically and meaningfully (Collins & Stockton, 2018), and by theorizing this work with the tools of Black women, these stories are being constructed in a theoretical design where the advancement of Black women has always been the priority. It is critical to this work that Black feminist thought, and intersectionality are intertwined to serve as a theoretical guide, not only to fulfill its purpose in the context of qualitative research, but more importantly to provide an opportunity for these Black women's lives to be theorized by the work of a long line of Black women.

Black Feminist Thought

"When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both fronts are inseparable"- Audre Lorde, I Am Your Sister (1985) pp. 74.

Black Feminist Thought is a longstanding intellectual tradition that functions as a critical social theory, grounded in its commitment to justice for both U.S. Black women and other oppressed groups (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought is versatile in nature and can function in many ways such as a consciousness and as an activist approach. As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought is a body of collective knowledge and set of institutional practices that aims to empower Black women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000). The historical evolution of Black feminist thought as an intellectual tradition has developed out of the need to improve Black women's conditions in the United States (Taylor, 1998). In her work titled *The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis* (1998), Ula Taylor characterized the evolution of Black Feminist tradition in a series of waves. The reoccurring theme that can be seen

through the evolution of Black feminism, is how the concept of liberation has been envisioned in the eyes of Black women, versus how liberation is envisioned in the eyes of Black women's racial and gendered counterparts, and why the counter visions of liberation have never been beneficial for the advancement of Black women. Through the waves of Black feminism, white women feminist groups rejected Black feminist rhetoric around liberation if it did not immediately serve their needs, and organizations that were run by Black men rejected issues around gender (Taylor, 1998). Through this resistance and calls for the advancement of Black women throughout history, critical features of Black Feminism emerged. The distinguishing features of Black feminist thought that this study is grounded in includes: the power of self-definition, the tension of linking experiences and ideas, and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims.

Intersectionality

While intersectionality has been recognized as an important form of critical inquiry (Collins, 2019; Harris & Patton, 2019; Nash, 2019), there has been debate regarding nearly every aspect of intersectionality and its ideas, from intersectionality's histories and origins to its relationship to identity (Collins, 2019; Harris & Patton, 2019; Nash, 2019). In her 1989 work titled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the term intersectionality to the academy. Her work demonstrated how "U.S. structures, such as the legal system, and discourses of resistance, such as feminism and anti-racism, often frame identities as isolated and mutually exclusive, leaving Black women and their multidimensional identities unaccounted for" (Harris & Patton, 2019, pp.1; Crenshaw 1989).

In its current form in the academy, intersectionality is at a crossroads (Collins, 2019). While intersectional ideas have been conceptualized in many ways from a concept to a heuristic device, a consensus of whether intersectionality is a developed critical social theory has yet to be reached (Nash, 2008, 2019; Harris & Patton, 2019; Collins, 2019). Critical social theories are particular bodies of knowledge that work to both explain and critique, existing social inequalities with intentions towards creating possibilities for change (Collins, 2019). In an effort to contribute towards reaching a consensus on the sharpness of its critical edge, intersectionality is used in this study as both a metaphor and a heuristic device. In the context of identity, intersectionality is a lens to understand how individual identities are shaped from one social context to another (Collins, 2019). Heuristics are

techniques that inform how people approach old and new puzzles, they are used for social problem solving, learning, and discovery (Collins, 2019). In a technical sense, heuristic devices provide a set of provisional lenses that can be used to interrogate social problems within an academic discipline (Collins, 2019). One of the objectives of this research is to illustrate to the field of higher education how Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system conceptualize their racial identities. Intersectionality is important to this research, because it encourages thinkers to consider the intragroup dynamics within the commonalities that Black women have, and further study the ways both the foster care system and higher education, influence identity development.

Both theories have their individual purpose in guiding this research. Black feminist thought and its core themes operate to recognize the connection between the past experiences of these women in the foster care system, how those past experiences have carried with them and further connects to their consciousness as Black women, and how all of these stories come together, to shape their everyday experiences in higher education. While Black feminism acknowledges that Black women do not all have the same experiences, nor do Black women agree on the significance of those varying experiences (Collins, 2000), intersectionality enables the reader to understand the richness of the intragroup differences among the participants in this study, and is better suited to serve as an analytical lens to examine the multidimensional layers that contribute to the formation of racial identity of a Black woman college student with experiences in the foster care system. Together, these frameworks allow their realities to be understood within theories that have been created for the advancement of Black women (Collins, 2000).

Review of Literature

In the following section I overview racial identity in higher education, racial identity for Black women in higher education, and identity development for foster youth in higher education. Highlighting key developments in each area, I illustrate gaps in each field to further demonstrate the urgent need for this study that connects all three of these research fields.

Racial Identity Development in Higher Education

Broadly, identity development is about the phenomenological experience of coming to understand oneself (Thomas et al., 2011). Historically, racial identity development has been

primarily theorized in the field of psychology (Cross, 1971, 1991; Helms, 1990;1994; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2011), and this foundational work has commonly expressed that the ways Black people define what their racial group membership means to them is an important step in their racial identity development (Scottham et al., 2008). Identity development scholars are increasingly highlighting the importance of racial identity processes in the college context as relevant to the academic and psychological adjustment of Black students (Lockett & Harrell, 2003; Chavous et al., 2018; Graham-Bailey et al., 2019). Early work on racial identity development has been theorized on a single axis framework solely focusing on race, and these models of racial/ethnic identity suggest that individuals move across linear stages of development from having naïve beliefs about their racial group status to developing racial consciousness and a sense of pride in history, heritage, and group membership (Cross, 1971, 1991; Helms, 1990;1994; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2011). While there is no consensus on the ways to research the development of racial identity in higher education, racial identity development is important to explore within a higher education context, because college is a time period characterized by change, instability, an exploration of possibilities in academic and social domains, and college is a time characterized by a continuing process of personal identity exploration (Harris, 2017; Chavous et al., 2018; Graham-Bailey et al., 2019).

Racial Identity Development for Black Women in Higher Education

Early studies of racial identity development for Black women, have primarily taken a quantitative approach and used traditional racial identity models (Parks et al., 1996; Settles, 2006; Daugherty, 2011). Dr. Christa J. Porter has done important work in understanding identity development among Black women in higher education. In their work titled *Articulation of Identity in Black Undergraduate Women: Influences, Interactions, and Intersections* (2017), Porter expanded on their model of identity development in Black undergraduate women (MIDBUW) (2013). The model is unique from other traditional models of identity development because it works to support the experiences of Black women college students through an intersectional lens (Porter, 2017). While research on Black women in higher education is constantly growing (Howard-vital, 1989; Patton, 2009; Kelly et al., 2019; Patton & Njoku, 2019), racial identity research that accounts for other impactful identities such as experiencing foster care, remains limited. This is troubling, because there is sufficient research that documents the foster youth college experience, and how it stands

alone from the college experience of people who did not experience the foster care system (Salazar, 2012; Smith et al., 2015; Lane 2020). Since college is an important site of location for racial identity development, this raises questions around what there is to be discovered about racial identity development among Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system. To understand the standpoints of racial identity, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1992) conceptualization of the process of racial identity development through the visualization of a spiral staircase is fitting. Tatum (1992) explains that: "As a person ascends a spiral staircase, she may stop and look down at a spot below. When they reach the next level, she may look down and see the same spot, but the vantage point has changed" (p.12). Identity development is complex, it's shaped by family dynamics, historical factors, life experiences, as well as social and political contexts; therefore, the development of racial identity in this study is not confined to moving across time and space in a linear fashion (Tatum, 1992).

Identity Development for Foster Youth in Higher Education

Existing literature on children in the foster care system has encouraged the support of identity development, expressing that positive identity development has the capacity to improve outcomes of foster youth (White et al., 2008). While the existing literature validates the importance of identity development among foster youth, little is to be found on identity development among foster youth that is conceptualized through a critical, racialized and intersectional lens. Existing studies on foster youth generally consist of basic demographic characteristics (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Batsche et al., 2014; Courtney et al., 2005, 2009, 2011). Existing large-scale studies of foster youth and their postsecondary education experiences have been conducted with minimal comparisons of their experiences directly related to race (Courtney et al., 2005, 2009, 2011).

There is existing research on Black college students with experiences in the foster care system. In their work titled *Persistence, Motivation, and Resilience: Older Youth Aging Out of Foster Care Attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)* Smith et al., (2015), examined the experiences of young adults who were in or had recently left foster care, and who were college students attending an HBCU. Ultimately this study found that while the participants enjoyed the HBCU experience, they collectively suggested progressive initiatives to accommodate youth who are in foster care that attend postsecondary institutions (Smith et al., 2015). While this research broadly illustrated the importance of a supportive college environment for

students with experiences in the foster care system, how experiences in the foster care system and higher education intersect and collectively impact the development of their racial identity remains in question.

Another example of foster youth research progressing in recent years is the work of Dr. Tiffany Yvette Lane and their work titled *Persistence: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of African American Foster Care Youths Who Aged Out and Made the Transition to College*. In this research, Lane (2020) documented college experiences of ten African Americans who aged out of foster care. The study explained that in the context of foster youth, protective factors are an essential concept of understanding how some at-risk individuals thrive and adapt, regardless of stressful situations (Lane, 2020). This study found that many of the participants described how race had significant meaning to them in the context of the college experience (Lane, 2020). The participants were well aware of the large number of African American children in foster care and were aware that many do not attend college (Lane, 2020). Further, the study found that their participants perceived African American foster care youths to be viewed in society in a negative way, and they wanted to contest stereotypes by persisting in college (Lane, 2020). Participants' coping skills, self-awareness, access to resources, and perception of how society views African Americans and foster care youths were protective factors (Lane, 2020). This study made significant developments and discoveries around how Black foster youth college students navigate higher education, but this research study did not have the stories of how the participants experienced the foster care system, why it was important to them to contest stereotypes, and how they see themselves.

To address the reach gaps of how experiences in the foster care system and higher education intersect and collectively impact the development of their racial identity, this research study takes a wider lens to understand the development of Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system. Mapping out their life experiences and connecting each story they tell about their life, brings the examination to understanding the participants current selves. Through this individual tracing, the complexity of identity among Black women with experiences with the foster care system is captured.

Study Methods

Conceptual Design

This study is overseen by a balance between critical and constructivist paradigms and employs various theoretical frameworks that center Black women. As a collective

conceptual framework, this guide seeks to reconfigure the complexities of Black woman marginality through an intersectional analysis where race, class, gender, and other social divisions are theorized as lived realities. Using multiple theoretical approaches in combination is important in theorizing this work to understand how identity is constructed in higher education. Constructivism is grounded in the notion that multiple realities exist, and this paradigm seeks to understand reality through dialogue (Abes, 2009, 2016). Critical theory houses the assumption that multiple social realities exist simultaneously, and critical theory allows participants to challenge their marginalized status (Abes, 2009, 2016). Utilizing a hybrid epistemological approach has the potential to benefit higher education research by revealing new possibilities for racial identity research to delve deeper into marginalized students' intragroup differences.

Interviews

The interviews in this study were designed in a semi-structured form, meaning the interviews were guided by an interview protocol with follow up questions inserted throughout the dialogue. The overall approach in the interviews was asking the participants to reconstruct the details of their development. The interviews spanned from fifty to seventy minutes. Questions from the interview protocol include, a request of the participants to describe their experience in the foster care system, when did they recognize going to college was something they wanted to pursue, how it felt when they first arrived at [site], what were some things about the college life they had to adjust to, and what are some things they have learned in life that has benefited them in college. The reconstructions that detailed their early life and stories around their initial interactions with the foster care system, are regarded as origin stories.

Participants and Research site

Three Black women attending a PWI in California participated in this exploratory study. According to the University's website, Black college students make up 5% of the undergraduate population and 6% of the graduate student population. To be eligible for participation in the study, participants had to be (1) 18 years of age or older, (2) identify as African American women, (3) had experiences in the foster care system, and (4) enrolled full time in college. Although there were eligibility requirements for participation, there was still a lot of flexibility within these requirements. Participants could be in either undergraduate or graduate school, the study was open to participants

from all majors and disciplines, and the way they exited the foster care system whether it was aging out, being placed with relatives, or adopted, was also flexible. With that, their education level, academic focus, and their experiences with the foster care system all varied. Recruitment methods consisted of electronic flyers being distributed to resource centers on campus as well as student communication platforms. Participant procedures included completion of a short qualifying questionnaire to establish eligibility, and a two-part semi-structured interview that consisted of both a sit-down and walking interview. Once prospective participants completed the online preliminary questionnaire, they were contacted based off their selected preference of email or text message to be notified of their eligibility. Of the five prospective participants, three were eligible for participation. Throughout this research study, I use pseudonyms in place of their names to protect their identities.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

In order to increase trustworthiness, member checking was used in constructing the findings. Member checking involves soliciting feedback on emerging findings from the participants (Merriam, 2009). Participants were sent their respective sections of the constructed excerpts, and they also had the opportunity to select their own pseudonym. Two out of the three participants completed the member checking process. Even with the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, this study is not without limitations. The first limitation is due to the exploratory nature of this study, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire population of former foster care youth who are in college. The second limitation of this study involves the one-dimensional design of the methodological design. Social work research that centers Black women should consider methods beyond in-depth interviews in order to explore meaning of experiences through collectivity. A myriad of methods may expose a different set of findings regarding dialogue around differences in experiences.

Positionality

As sole author of this piece and creator of the student-centered research study, I [INSERT NAME] come to this work as a Black transracial adoptee. While I do not have direct experience with the foster care system, I have commonalities with each of the participants in terms of their family structures, and their racialized experiences. Through my lived experiences as a Black woman transracial adoptee, I have embarked on my own unique journey to understanding

Black womanhood. It was Black feminists like Audre Lorde who gave me the tools to understand the how racial identity has evolved in my own life. In her work titled *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, Lorde (1984) expressed “To survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson - that we were never meant to survive”. Supporting the development of racial identity among Black women in America is a political act of love and is a tool for our collective survival. In doing this work I am committed to continually making Black women who have existed at different points of the intersections, visible. I am dedicated to naming, defining, and speaking for ourselves. I am committed to breaking the many silences that have yet to be discovered.

Data Analysis

The analytical strategy of this research started with transcribing the data through an online transcription service and following that process with reviewing the material by hand. Thematic analysis involves building themes that note relationships, similarities, and differences in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The thematic coding process took place in three stages: open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The open coding stage was an exploration of the raw data in which codes were created. From there, the data analysis went into the axial coding stage which involved categorizing and compartmentalizing codes in relation to each other. The coding component of the thematic data analysis process ended with a round of selective coding. During this final coding phase, the codes were refined to reflect a specific dimension of an intersectional experience to highlight, how participant’s experiences brought them to their current standpoint of their racial identity. Therefore, the themes that emerged from the three-stage coding process are origin stories, reflection on an aspect of their life in relation to how the participants see themselves, and racial identity development.

Findings

The three themes that emerged from the coding process are interconnected in a way that traces the participants lived experiences. The first theme in the findings is the origin stories of the participants. This section shares the specific stories that come together to illustrate the foster care experiences. The second theme presented in the findings is personal reflection, where the participants reflected on their past experiences in various ways. The findings then arrive to the final theme: racial identity development. In this section, we hear how the participants see their racial identity.

Origin Stories

In using a Black feminist approach to construct this study, the lived experiences of these women are the subject of inquiry. The findings of this study begin with presenting the participants origin stories. The stories of how these women came into living the life they currently live is important to begin with so that the listener can better understand how these women see themselves. People are naturally prone to composing and telling stories about the origins of their identities and these stories help make sense of and communicate who we have “become” over time (Zheng et al., 2021). While all three Black women have experiences with the foster care system, each woman in this study entered and exited the system in vastly different ways, and these experiences have shaped their identities differently.

The origin story of Serenity

Serenity was eighteen months old when she first entered the foster care system. She described her birth mother as developmentally delayed and not able to properly take care of her. Serenity’s grandfather was also in the household taking care of both her and her mother, but Serenity expressed hearing that her grandfather “wasn’t a good person”. In telling the early stories of her existence, Serenity described the reasons of the removal from her mother and grandfather as “neglect” and being diagnosed as a “failure to thrive”. After the initial removal, Serenity was placed with an older couple. Serenity remembered other children living at this home and remembering a little boy. This foster home was the only place Serenity had lived during her time in the foster care system, and she lived there from the age of eighteen months to three and a half years old. Serenity never went back to live with her mom. At the age of three years old, Serenity moved in with a different family, and she was officially adopted by them when she was four years old. Upon exiting the foster care system through adoption, Serenity shared that the finalization of the adoption took around six months. This was a new chapter for young Serenity, and in discussing the emotions around her adoption and never going back to live with her birth mother, Serenity shared that her family threw her an adoption party in celebration:

I had an adoption party. I do remember crying, because we like planned... like a dancing thing, and I was still nervous in front of people so like.... I ended up crying and running to my mom...So yeah it was pretty big deal...like meeting family little by little...it wasn't like everyone at once meeting me, it was just a few people at once...

Serenity identifies as a transracial adoptee, and there is a significant amount of literature that expresses the complexity of identity development among transracial adoptees (Ferrari et al., 2015). In understanding Serenity’s stories to come, it’s important to highlight the connection between meeting her new adopted family, and her emotions in response to the new environment.

The origin story of Ada

Ada was seven years old when she arrived in the United States from Africa. Upon her arrival, she was accompanied by her younger brother who was six years old. In the first few years of Ada and her brother living in the United States, they lived with their maternal aunt and uncle and their two children. Life inside their first home in the U.S. consisted of their aunt, who was pregnant at the time, and their uncle having “really volatile fights, and one time it got out of hand”. Ada recalled several details of that night that she found strange that she remembered, like eating grape nuts. The incident took place in the evening when her aunt and uncle were arguing in the kitchen:

My uncle took the stove guard and hit my aunt over the head. She fell to the floor and her head was bleeding. My brother who was around eleven years old at the time, called the police and the police came...and things happened. My uncle and aunt had two kids at that time, the fourth child was back home still in Nigeria. So...they separated her two kids, put them in different foster homes.

Along with the two other children, Ada and her brother were removed from her aunt and uncles’ home after this event. Reflecting on this event that had changed her home circumstances, Ada said she was grateful the foster care system put her brother in the same foster home. She further explained: “I don’t know what I would have done if they had separated us”.

This story was a defining moment in Ada’s early experiences in the United States. We went onto discuss the background stories of what led to Ada and her brother’s arrival to the United States. Ada explained that parents sent her and her brother to the United States for education purposes. Ada’s parents were living in Africa when she and her brother were placed in the foster care system. Ada explained that she maintains a healthy relationship with her parents. In telling me about her parents, Ada explained that her father is an OBGYN, and her mother is a defense attorney. She reflected on the moment her parents found out about Ada and her brother being removed from their relatives:

My Dad had traveled abroad to study medicine and wanted to give his kids opportunity of exposure. And so, I remember the first phone call we got from them in foster care. It was like bittersweet, because I was experiencing what I thought was like a normal American childhood. Because my culture is so different, and my uncle and aunt were so different from like, my friend's parents. I was like.... I want to know what it feels like to be an American kid. Not a Nigerian American kid, an American kid.

Throughout the interview Ada expressed that it was bittersweet to be in a foster home, because on one hand she longed for a United States experience and living in the foster home played a significant part of that idealization, but on the other hand she felt reluctance in telling her parents that. Ada went on to illustrate what her foster parents were like, and she revisited the thought of her parents, through exploring her feelings around telling her birth parents how they were enjoying themselves:

My foster mom was Black, and my foster dad was white. They had this beautiful relationship, and they were older. They were probably like, in their 60's or older. And they regularly.... they would foster. They used to like foster a lot of kids, I guess that's the right way to put it. And so, there was also another brother and sister that were in the foster home. I remember the first time I talked to my parents over the phone and they're like, 'Are you okay?', you know, I was like, 'do I want to tell them I'm great? Do I want to tell them this is fun?'

Six months into living with the older interracial couple, Ada's time in the foster care system ended. She recalls hanging up Christmas decorations on the house when the social worker came:

I don't remember my social worker that much, but I just remember them telling me and my brother that day 'Oh we think you're going to be able to go back to your uncle and aunt'. I was sad. I was really, really sad. Like... I don't want to go back to a dysfunctional home. I don't want to miss a first normal Christmas. I don't want to like go away from these new friends I met. I was like academically excelling, and my brother was as well, and I had gotten into so many different extracurricular activities that normally I wouldn't be like... kind of allowed to do before. So...it was kinda sad.

From Ada's perspective, the foster care placement was a better environment than living with her aunt and uncle. Listing out the positive parts of her time in the foster care placement such as her academic performance and trying new things she wouldn't have been able to do before, Ada felt strongly about her home environment changing once again. The placement lived up to her idealization of experiencing life in the U.S. and she was sad about those good moments ending. Ada and her brother ended up going back to the home they were originally removed from.

The origin story of Laila

Laila was a senior in college when we conducted this interview. The story of Laila is a story of understanding and growth. Laila's parents were always in her life, "but they struggled raising her". Laila had always been surrounded by her grandparents, and they were a fundamental part of her childhood. At the age of fourteen, Laila's grandparents they took guardianship of her, and she officially moved into their house:

My grandparents' house has always been here. So even when I was living with just my parents, it was sort of that home that I would also come back to if anything happened or, you know, if I just needed somewhere to stay.

As Laila was transitioning to living with her Grandparents, she transferred high schools. In describing this time in her life, Laila reflected on her long terms plans she had, expressing that she potentially wanted to go to college, and she was very interested in participating in social activism. She explained that her Grandparents served as a stable entity and they really helped. Laila went on to discuss her experience in transferring schools' multiple times starting in the sixth grade. In the schools she attended before the one she graduated from, she was 'getting bullied and there was a lot of social tension'. Through the school transfers, she ended up attending a charter school, where she had a really good time and met some of her closest friends that she still carries today.

Laila did a lot of self-reflection during our interview. Regarding her friendships, Laila talked about through her school transfers and how her friendships kind of broke away and came back together. She expressed how she sees this kind of shifting within her friendships as a beautiful bond:

We created each other, we created a family with each other, when all of our other families were kind of... doing their own thing, I really think that is what it

comes down to, is folks needing to take care of themselves and how do we take care of others when we can't take care of ourselves? How do we love and respect others when we're still figuring out what that means for us?

Laila recognized that her family played a part in how her friendships formed, but she expresses that these difficulties with her family, influenced her appreciation for her friendships. While acknowledging that her parents had struggled, she expressed love and understanding for them. From this moment, Laila connected this message of her friendships to how she conceptualizes her family:

That's something that I had to come to terms with my family, like, there are things that my family whether grandparents, my friends, me...that we're all still trying to figure out. when I came to terms with that I was like, 'Okay, I can't even be angry at my mom or whoever for not being this... this parent figure thing that we all imagine the typical mom or parent to be'.

The act of leading with understanding has influenced how Laila reconciles her relationship with her struggling parents. Laila spent time in the interview explaining the lessons she has learned through her experience with the foster care system, and how she carries these lessons with her today:

The importance of forgiveness and also setting boundaries...And working within! You know, really trying to understand who you are from within, because at the end of the day, that's what really is going to have the most impact and difference in your life and how you view the world and how we interact with others. And again, I think something that I always say is like, 'we don't really have control over some things that happen in our lives or how other people move and do things, but we do have control over how we react and over how we carry ourselves'. So, you know, um...I think family is so important, you know? ... and whatever that means for you, whether that's by blood or not, you know?... and finding community is family. Building community and friendship and bonds with people who...you know, share similar values and all of that... yeah, again, like I think.... I'm really really grateful to have my grandparents.

In a conversation of difficult times, Laila opened up to share with me that her father passed away a little over a year ago from when the interview was conducted. She reflected on how her father's passing was a very big shift, and how

losing her father changed her perspective of her relationship with parents and family in general:

I'm really really grateful to...have known my mom and my dad and like...had the experience and the time that I did with my dad, you know, it was hard for him to have passed. That was difficult because I knew like... I thought I had more time with him, you know.... I was like, 'Oh, this is a new beginning'.

Personal Reflection

Serenity reflecting on the present

Throughout the interview Serenity described herself as "really introverted", and she "enjoys spending time by herself". After spending time discussing her life as an adoptee, Serenity was asked how she feels about where she is now in terms of her development and being in college. I asked Serenity how she felt when she first arrived to [site], and she recalled being emotional:

I'm always nervous when like there's some big change, but it's like nervous and excited. I cried a lot that day. I don't know why. It was really weird, but that first week was really hard. I'm not really sure why.

Serenity explained that she expected college to be a little bit different. She thought about her younger self in that moment, sharing that when she was younger in middle school, she was already thinking "college was going to be so great". In the present, she explained that she has "struggled a little bit, and she didn't expect herself to struggle at all". Serenity explained that she has felt like she has been "mentally struggling" during her time in college and this difficulty had its beginning "in high school when she was diagnosed with social anxiety":

I was diagnosed with dysthymia, which is like a persistent mild depression basically. So that kinda had impacted me...a lot. Not a little, a lot. It's hard but like...I'm trying.

Throughout the interview Serenity described herself as a "perfectionist", and how she has "always been kind of hard on herself". She was asked what the university could do to support her in her endeavors, and she expressed that "a lot of times she just feels like she should be doing things by herself, and that's kinda how she is" ... she expressed that she "feels like she shouldn't ask for help" ...and she

“honestly doesn’t know” how the University could help. She did however, express that she knows how to ask for help when she feels like she needs it, and the program at the University that is focused on supporting former foster youth has been a positive experience when she has used it, and she described the program as “super supportive”:

They’re very resourceful. Sometimes, I think about like...sometimes I feel like I shouldn’t get the benefits...because like I don’t really need them. I mean it’s nice to have priority enrollment for housing, but I feel like other people are more...like need it more.

While Serenity believes she should be doing things by herself, she has warmed up to the idea of utilizing resources that are geared towards supporting her in college. Her thoughts do raise questions as to why she persists to think she doesn’t deserve access to these resources. In discussing her life in college, Serenity was asked what are some things that she has learned in her life, that has benefited her in college:

One big thing is that grades aren’t everything... because that was my life as long as I can remember. I always wanted good grades. I actually wanted to be valedictorian in high school. So, I kind of like I sacrificed a lot of stuff, a lot of social stuff to get good grades. And, like here... I’ve heard like...I heard that it’s good to learn and to know things, rather than to just like try to get the best grade. Because like in high school, I didn’t really like know things...I just tried to get the grade. And then I would just like forget what I’ve learned, and I want to actually know and understand what I’m learning. I think that’s the biggest thing.

College has been a place where Serenity is beginning to take lead on her intellectual growth, and she is doing this by self-evaluating what she wants to take away from her classes. While she expressed that she has seen herself as a perfectionist, and she has always been hard on herself, she acknowledges that she has been trying in navigating college. Ultimately, Serenity expressed feeling like she made the right decision to attend the university site, and “it was a really good decision she thinks she is supposed to be here”.

Ada reflecting on the past and present

In asking about any hardships Ada might have experienced in foster care, and difficult lessons that she learned during that time, she took a long pause and said, “This is gonna be a lot”. She continued:

It taught me that...I should just be careful...with men, like no matter how old or young. There was another pair of a brother and sister that were living in the home. I didn’t really see this coming, but there was a time where the brother like, tried to...like, be intimate with me, you know? And I’m 12 and he was like...I think at the time he was like, 17 or something. And so, I just remember being petrified, like, ‘I don’t want this to be a memory. I don’t want to leave this good place, feeling scarred by that’. And I was like, ‘how is this gonna change things?’ And so like, I kind of like fought him off. I remember like pushing, pushing him off of me, so that he wouldn’t try to do anything, but he tried. It was weird after that... He would be really mean for no reason, and I felt like I couldn’t say anything because I didn’t want to disrupt the family dynamic, you know...I felt like, I was kind of negotiating between keeping the peace and for things to keep being normal. I didn’t want to bring up another problem that would get me taken out of the home that I liked so much.

Ada experienced a tense moment in the foster care system, that she has carried with her in how she navigates relationships with men, but it’s important to recognize that she resisted that moment defining her overall experience in the foster home. Rather, she reframed this tense moment into a lesson:

I feel good in the grand scheme of things...grateful for how... grateful for the things that I’ve gone through in my life that take me to where I am, and that took me to where I am now. So, I feel good, and I feel especially good about that... like that terrible experience aside, I feel good about the overall experience. It taught me a lot. And I’m grateful that nothing happened in that moment. Like, because that could have really been probably devastating. It just taught me to be like really optimistic about stuff and not let one bad experience.... Color the whole experience for me, you know? Not to let one bad part of it cover the whole thing. I feel like that... that one taste of my Blackness in that...in that experience got me comfortable around more Black people, you know, feeling like we had something in common.

A consistent theme throughout Ada’s story is her act of reframing experiences for the sake of her livelihood. Ada longed for “normal” experience in the United States, that was different from her ethnic culture. While being removed from her relative’s home due to her guardians having violent fights was a new situation for her and her brother, Ada

saw this as a way to experience the U.S. way of life she had envisioned as a child and experiencing the foster care system gave that to her. Despite the tense moments in Ada's life, she reframed those times into broader self-teaching moments on relationships with men, and how to move forward in navigating life with optimism.

Laila reflecting forward

Laila's self-reflection has been in a forward movement. She told these stories of difficult times to further connect how these moments shaped her identity in higher education and the connection she feels among her college peers:

I learned a lot from all that stuff. I went to college, and I met other people who have actually been in the foster care system and have experienced stuff. I realized the different...you know, how my experience is so different than others and how we all share something. I don't know, it's really it's really beautiful though in that aspect.

Laila has been able to find community and feelings of connection among her fellow college students with experiences in the foster care system. Her experiences with her friendships before college influenced how she forms connections in college. Laila went onto tie her experiences together by reflecting on her upbringing, her schooling, and experience with the foster care system to make sense of how she views herself as an individual:

Now looking back, of course, like it takes a village to raise a child, it completely takes teachers and administrators and everyone kind of working together to do what's best for the student and do what's best for the child and the youth. And so, I definitely also was really grateful, of course, for my grandparents. And I do remember some particular teachers who really inspired me and like, things that they would say when I was a freshman.... that like always stuck with me and really influenced how I perceive myself and how I view the world....

The people in Laila's life that supported her when her parents could not, served as her foundation to continue to navigate the world. This expression of gratefulness illustrates the importance of support systems for young people experiencing the foster care system.

Racial Identity Development

Serenity's racial identity development

In discussing the Serenity's college experience and how that has intersected with her racial identity, Serenity reflects on her expectations of college and how her original thoughts have changed:

Interesting. I was actually excited to come to the school that had like more Black people than where I grew up there was not...that many Black people. Most of the time I was the only Black person on like a sports team or like in a classroom or something. Um... but I don't know it's different because like, I don't feel like I fit with my own race, which kind of sounds weird, but I grew up in a white family. And I grew up in a town that was mostly Hispanic and Caucasian...and so I'm comfortable with every other race except like, Black people, which is really weird, but like, it's my normal kind of.

The complexities of Serenity's identity development become more and more pronounced as her self-narrative moves from her origin story, discussing her college life expressing that she feels as if she doesn't deserve access to resources, and speaking on her racial identity and the discomfort she experiences around people of her same race. In understanding Serenity and her navigation with mental health and college adjustment, it's important to recognize that Serenity is someone who underwent a lot of environment adjustments at a very young age through experiencing the foster care system, and based on her findings, she grows into adjusting to her new environments. Serenity expressing that she is not fully comfortable around people of her own race merely illustrates the complexity of her experiences as a transracial adoptee (Ferrari et al., 2015; Fedosik, 2012) and her current standpoint sets her story apart from the other women in this study. This is Serenity.

Ada's racial identity development

During her time of switching homes, Ada had changed schools as well. Through these schooling experiences, Ada reflects on her first exposure to Black American culture:

And so, coming to [city] was like...it was like.... like a mixed/diverse kind of area. You know, Latinos, Black, whites.... And I was like 'this is new'. {laughter}. So that was the first time I felt...Black. You know? I was like getting immersed in culture and the music, and all

the... you know, dances and all this stuff and I was like, 'oh this is interesting, I like this' {laughter}.

In discussing Black culture with Ada, I continued to ask clarifying questions regarding the specific aspect of Black culture she was referring to. Ada discussed her African heritage throughout the interview, and she embraces her ethnicity proudly throughout the conversations that were had. Ada found a balance between keeping her ethnic pride strong and being open and excited to new United States cultural experiences. Her ability to reframe her intersecting experiences comes of use in being immersed in a new culture:

Yeah, like American Black! Yeah, not like, like African Black, which I didn't have any issues about my culture or like, I didn't not like my culture. I loved it. It's just, you know, it was a different kind of, like celebration, like a part of my identity, bringing in a different part. I don't know.... Seems like as a kid.... I'm just like, 'yes, this is fun. This is...I feel like... not alone'. Because I mean, how many [ethnicity] kids would we meet? barely any.

Oftentimes, school transfers can be difficult for children navigating the foster care system (Fries et al., 2014), but Ada's form of resistance, which includes reframing of situations she has faced in her lifetime, as well as learning to lead with optimism, has had a positive impact on how she experienced K-12, and on the development of her racial identity. Her identity development was influenced by others around her growing up, and this influence has carried with her, into her time in higher education. In discussing her campus life, she often spoke of her admiration of her colleagues and their sense of racial solidarity:

I have a colleague, who like every Black person we see here at [site]... she'll be like, 'I see you'. and I'm just...She's so outgoing and I want to be so much more like her. I don't want to look... look like I'm not friendly, but it's just like how I... like I'm just not like the most friendly person on the outside. And so, that is one thing that I, you know, admire about that colleague of mine, is that she wants other Black students here to know like, 'we're in this together'.

In a conversation about how she feels as a Black student at [site], Ada reflects on the progression of their identity development as someone who has navigated the foster care system and higher education:

I feel like the Black in me is just.... over the years, it's just been....it has stuck more... like 'okay, this is what it means to be Black'. Just being here I feel like, just the fact that I've gone through this, that and the other, and then finally landed here.... like I feel the most Black I've ever been... and so that colleague that I'm telling you about, yea.... I should be like, saying 'Hey!' to the fellow Black students. You know, cuz there ain't a whole lot of us {laughter}.

What Ada has experienced throughout her life is commonly viewed as difficult and troubling, but Ada's ability to reframe these events into lessons that go onto to protect her wellbeing, has served her favorably. Being removed from her relative's home and entering the foster care system served as a form of escape from the violence she was witnessing. It's important to note that Ada learned to reframe difficult situations from a young age, through her experiences in the foster care system, and that ability influenced her development as a Black woman. Ada has been able to define herself on her own terms and she aspires to spread feelings of collectivity and community among other Black college students, recognizing that there is not a lot of Black students where she is enrolled. Working hard to protect her spirit, and now feeling as Black as she has ever felt in college, this is Ada.

Laila's racial identity development

Laila's approach to how she sees her racial identity has commonalities with how she has connected with friends, and how she conceptualizes her experiences with the foster care system. We have seen Laila lead with love and understanding, and she gives herself the same amount of grace in understanding her racialized self. While discussing her racial identity, specifically how she feels about her Blackness, Laila offers up a deep illustration of her racial identity:

Yeah, um, you know, I feel... I love being Black, I love... I love like...reflecting on it, it's something that takes a lot of time. And I will say, like it definitely adjusts...depending on the people who I'm with, you know, in the sense that like... I know that I am... you know, very white passing and so like.... I completely understand when...sometimes there's a miscommunication or like misunderstanding. During times like those, I just don't take them personal, and I try to learn how to be as supportive and effective as possible. I'm talking about particularly when I'm with other Black folks obviously... if it's white folks then like, you know, then it's educate...educating them that being Black is not monolithic. And that, you know, it's sometimes.... it's even that with other Black folks and

other folks in general, like being people of color and being... just people in general.

After a brief pause, Laila connected this story to how she views her larger purpose in life:

And so when... I think like, I'm totally meant to be this... like, again the courage, and the spirit that I am, and look the way I do, I feel like...it's this opportunity to create change and do more.... What is it.... preventative work. You know utilize... understanding white privilege, understanding the systems that are at play, and understanding my role and position within it. And of course, again, this is something that takes so long to understand this is something that of course, you know, I'm not perfect in um...but, at least I'm always trying to be aware of that.

The salience of Laila's racial identity has influenced a personal practice of educating her peers about identity, that challenge their assumptions around her own racial identity. Laila discussed how her framing of her own white privilege while simultaneously being a Black woman, has been seen in the eyes of others.

Being you know...being so proud to be Black can be difficult for other people, you know what I mean? Like...no matter what you look like, you know, people... that's always the thing... Black power is always looked at as.... Um, oh, you know.... this hateful thing, this negative thing...., so.... you know, it's definitely a process though. I think that it's taken time, and again has been...I've dealt...I've been in a lot of different situations because of being white and then also, you know, being Black and how other people perceive that, you know?

Laila's political commitment to Blackness has been perceived in various ways by people she interacts with. By approaching these questions around her identity with the practice of education filled conversations, this approach serves as protection for the salience of Laila's racial identity, while simultaneously being a learning opportunity for those who question Laila's racial identity. Laila was later asked who in her life has empowered her as a Black woman. She revisits the thought of her father to further connect her growth to her present reality:

First and foremost, my dad always... he was the one that I learned and understood what the implications of race was. When I was in preschool, we were pulled over. The cop was like, 'is this really your dad?', and

like that right then taught me immediately that like... people perceive us differently...I didn't know really what it was, you know what I mean? Like, I guess I probably didn't really understand, like, what that really meant for his life and for just everything. But I definitely realized that there was something going on there and that, you know, that there was a difference between how we are perceived.

Witnessing her father being pulled over by the police and being questioned whether her father was in fact her father, taught Laila how her racial identity was seen by others, in comparison to her father. Laila then connects this childhood racialized experience with how she saw her racial identity in approaching higher education:

Even further, more than that, you know, when I came to [site], well, even before then... like, you know I had a teacher, who was my sociology teacher, and she was also sort of a college advisor. Or she was...and I remember talking to her being like.... about going to [campus organization] [site] weekend, 'oh, like, I don't really know if I am.... you know, people aren't gonna perceive me as Black enough'. I've always been very proud of it, but it's definitely something that other people have always.... you know, try to say some shit about... like, that's always going to be a thing, and I had to realize that. And so, she really helped believe in me and was like, 'No, you know who you are, and you know you need to go there. That's what you know, and that's who you are'. And she really helped me because she's from Trinidad. she was always there for me. Her and I were really close.

Laila had been nervous about attending an event at her new university, concerned that her racial identity wouldn't be accepted and embraced. Contrary to her worries, Laila's experience during the [campus organization] event at [site] marked the beginning of her community building at [site]:

When I got to [site] and [campus organization], I met some of my closest friends during that weekend. And you know, working for [site mentorship program] has been amazing getting to work with other Black youth, other Black college students, and helping us work together on what Blackness means for us. And what does it mean to be Black in the United States.... What is African versus African American... What does it mean to be trans in the Black community...What queer, you know...what are all of these different sections, these different ideas and concepts...that fall under and within and without...Blackness. And so...

it's been really really beautiful to be on this journey with those folks.

Laila has been able to find community during her time in higher education with people who have similar racial identities, and also people who have experienced the foster care system. Throughout her time sharing these stories, Laila consistently expressed how beautiful it has been to grow with her peers.

Laila's experiences in life have all connected to contribute to the salience of her racial identity. Through her parents struggling to raise her, she was removed and placed with her grandparents which served as a stable environment for her to explore her interests and engagement with activism. In transferring schools and finding a safe educational space for herself, she made friends who had similar family difficulties and she calls these friends' her family. Laila was nervous about going to college and how her racial identity would be perceived but she has multiple groups of friends that she shares various identities with, and she has been able to build community with these groups. Through her practice of leading her navigation throughout life with love and understanding, Laila has been able to protect her racial identity and address others in how they understand racial identity. Her experiences with her family have influenced the way she makes meaning of herself and how she forms bonds with others. This is Laila.

Discussion

This research study was set out to convey the complexities of racial identity development for Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system. The findings highlight a wide variety of commonalities and differences among these three Black women, and this display of intragroup dynamics structurally mirrors the continually growing body of subjugated knowledge that forms the collective Black women's standpoint in United States society. Through the stories within the findings, the meaning of their experiences is visible through understanding their lived experiences with the foster care system, and how their experiences intersect with their current standpoints of their racial identity development. Taken together, the stories of these three women raise questions around the power of understanding intragroup differences and considerations for social work research in understanding the development of racial identity for Black women.

Origin Stories

The origin stories of these women collectively reflect intragroup differences within experiences with the foster care system. Serenity was eighteen months old when she was removed from her mother's home, and she exited the system through transracial adoption at the age of four years old. She discussed her experiences as a transracial adoptee, often being the only Black person on a sports team or in a classroom. Serenity lives with mental health conditions, such as social anxiety, and being in college has been an adjustment for her, experiencing discomfort around people in the same racial group. Ada came to the United States from Africa when she was seven years old, to live with her aunt and uncle. For Ada, being in the foster care in comparison to what she was experiencing in her biological home, was a positive experience. Throughout her time in the foster care system Ada confronted any changes such as school transfers, as a new opportunity to have exposure to United States culture. Laila expressed that her parents struggled to raise her, but the home she transitioned to was not a new place for her. Living with her grandparents gave her the stability she needed as she was transferring schools during her childhood. Taken together, the origin stories of the Black women college students in this study reflect how experiences in the foster care system vary across individuals, they shape life lessons that contribute to how they see themselves, their aspirations, and these origin stories are inextricably linked to how they experience higher education.

Intragroup Differences of Racial Identity

Black women are multidimensional, possessing various social identities, which is why it is important to understand these societal issues at large that Black women commonly encounter, and how these issues are made up of a mixture of societal values, socialization experiences, and they create messages for Black women individually and further influence racial identity (Thomas et al., 2011). Serenity had a different level of proximity to whiteness than the two other participants in this study. The experience of being a transracial adoptee, and how that identity can shift in higher education is visible in Serenity's conceptualization of her Blackness. Serenity expressed that she presently did not feel as though she fits in with her own race, and how she considered that her normal. Serenity opened up about her struggles with her mental health in college and how that has been impacting her experience. Despite her struggles, her perfectionist persona persists in how she approaches her academics but learning from her past she expressed how it is important to her that she engages with the subject matter

in her classes for the knowledge, rather than for the sake of the grades.

Being in the foster care system for Ada in comparison to what she was experiencing in her biological was more positive. While she expressed enjoying her time in the foster home that she was placed in, she also reflected on moments of potential sexual assault in the foster home. Ada was not willing to let those moments define her overall experience because she understood the impact that moment could have on her identity. Instead, she reframed this tense moment and expressed how she felt like that moment was the first taste of her own Blackness and she reframed that moment as a lesson for herself to be cautious with men, and to lead with optimism and not let one bad experience, define the whole experience.

Laila had an interest in activism from a young age, and by often being confronted with issues of colorism among people regardless of their racial identity, Laila had found her calling. Laila expressed that while she had to learn that her racial identity was going to be challenged throughout her life, she feels as if she is meant to look the way she does. Throughout the interview she expressed her love for being Black, and despite people questioning the legitimacy of her racial identity, Laila uses those moments as opportunities to educate people about the multidimensionality of Blackness.

Through an intersectional lens, these women are at vastly different points of their racial identity development and Black feminist thought legitimizes these intragroup differences. All of these women have encountered problems commonly faced by Black women in America such as mental health, sexual assault, and colorism, however each of these women have resisted these issues and have reframed their encounters as power that has carried with them to higher education. These findings reflect how identity development evolves over time in higher education, and the power of academic student spaces shaping racial identities. Serenity was the newest to the university, and the development of her racial identity while in higher education was vastly different from Ada and Laila. It's important to consider what the participants did not say. Ada and Laila expressed how their friends and family influenced their racial identity, and Serenity passed on that question first and later said Serena Williams. Serenity is situated at a specific point of her racial identity, while Serenity's construct of her racial identity stands apart from the others, the use of dialogue through an intersectional lens brings the listener to the understanding of how she has arrived at this current point of her identity. Existing literature on racial identity development suggests that in order for Black women to be healthy, they have to recognize both the prevalence and reality of racism and sexism in their lives, and that identity development occurs in light of racism and sexism (Thomas et al., 2011;

Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). This position is not permanent, nor linear. How Serenity sees herself and her comfortability around her same race peers is likely to move as if she was ascending a spiral staircase (Tatum, 1992), as she continues to navigate higher education.

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Research

In contributing to the advancement of racial identity research in the field of social work, I offer theory-centered implications to consider. This research was grounded in several core themes of Black feminist thought: the power of self-definition, the tension of linking experiences and ideas, and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. The ways in which these themes were used in this study, could inform social work research and practice. The power of self-definition involves Black women crafting identities that empower them (Collins, 2000). To be a Black woman in America, involves a series of negotiations between being objectified as other by society, and separating our own self-definitions away from those controlling images (Collins, 2000). The process of racial identity development serves as a site of location for these negotiations, and it is important that social work research highlights this process within Black women with experiences in the foster care system, for their experiences often stand apart from the current research on foster youth. The second theme that this study was grounded in was the tension of linking experiences and ideas. As expressed earlier in highlighting intragroup dynamics of the Black women in this study, while Black women face similar societal challenges, this does not mean Black women all have the same experience, nor are they the same in how they make meaning of these experiences.

As seen in this study, the same could be said about Black women with experiences with the foster care system, and future research should keep diving deep into intragroup dynamics among Black women with foster care experiences. The final grounding theme in this study is the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. Collins (2009) asserts that new knowledge generated by Black women is rarely worked out in isolation, and are commonly developed through dialogues with other members of the community. In sharing a similar experience of developing my racial identity apart from my birth family, I was able to connect with the participants in this study on how the different ways they reflected on their past experiences, the lessons, and messages they generated from those moments, and how they carry those stories with them in higher education. In utilizing a qualitative methodology design to conduct this research, we were collectively able to assess the experiences

of these women through dialogical engagement. In future research the use of focus groups, and other methods that center the voices of the participants would allow space to generate knowledge creation and validation. Taken together, these recommendations highlight the power in theorizing the lives of Black women with frameworks that were created to improve the societal conditions of Black women.

Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to understand the ways Black women college students with experiences in the foster care system construct meaning of their experiences and how these experiences have carried with them and further influenced their racial identity development. The study illustrated that direct and indirect connections between past experiences with the foster care system exist and are present in their higher education experiences and their current standpoints of their racial identities. The intersectional characteristics of their lived experiences with the foster care system demonstrated how Black women with this identity can have commonalities in their experiences, yet so many differences exist in how they make meaning of their experiences, and the impact of these experiences on their racial identity. The participants commonly took lessons from their experiences in the foster care system and reframed them into lessons and messages that they have carried with them throughout their development as Black women in America, and these lessons have benefited them and their navigation of higher education. These crafted identities serve as tools of resistance in navigating their development and their college experiences. Through speaking their truths in this study, Serenity, Ada, and Laila have highlighted how dialogue plays a part in how we come to understand racial identity development for college students with experiences in the foster care system. Interdisciplinary scholars engaged in foster youth research should consider how these stories are situated beyond the current tools of measurement for racial identity development and continue to explore the intragroup differences of college students who have experiences in the foster care system; how these students engage with the societal issues they encounter, and how these experiences impact their racial identity. In advancing the study of racial identity development, studies to come should explore how racial identity experiences might differ for college students in different educational contexts such as community colleges or MSIs.

Funding The author of this manuscript did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript, and no funding was received for conducting this study.

Potential Conflicts of Interest The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Informed Consent Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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