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Exploring African American Girlhood Perceptions and Experiences of Self Esteem

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EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLHOOD PERCEPTIONS AND
EXPERIENCES OF SELF ESTEEM

by

Monica Wade

Bachelor of Arts
Claflin University, 2009

Master of Arts
Webster University, 2012

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Accepted by:

Jonathan Ohrt, Major Professor

Dodie Limberg, Committee Member

Moody Crews, Committee Member

Eliza Braden, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Joe and Patricia Wade and my siblings Christina, Ashley, Amber and Joey. It is because of your love, patience, understanding and encouragement I strive to reach my dreams. I love you more than all the stars in the sky.

To my nephews Solomon, Samuel and Joshua and my niece Patrice thank you for your love and encouragement. I love you so much.

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ABSTRACT

Furthering the cultural competence of counselors around emotional wellness for minority groups, this research explored the intersectionality of race and gender through counter storytelling of experiences of Black girlhood that are often not told. To fill the existing gap in literature describing perceptions of emotional wellness, I explored African American adolescent girls perceptions and experiences of self esteem for girls who participated in an empowerment organization called Dream Girls. This qualitative study used a phenomenological analysis to gain understanding of the influences that impact the way these adolescents understand themselves.

Keywords: African American, Black, Girls, Adolescent, Self Esteem

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this study, I explored the perspectives and experiences of African American adolescent girls and the impact a community organization, Dream Girls, may have on their view of self esteem. Developmental psychologists would suggest that the adolescent stage of development is the stage essential for mastery of learning and establishing identity (Erikson, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Kagan, 1982). Self esteem is a demonstration of how one identifies themselves. Self esteem, which is considered emotional wellness, is the belief that some individuals hold regarding self which is expressed through attitudes and behaviors (Olsen et al., 2008). Bohart et al. (1997) refer to self esteem as an experiential dimension consisting of one's feelings, thoughts and behaviors that create psychological awareness. This awareness starts with the imaginary, which aids in the creation of identity. Girls are exposed to beauty standards during childhood through books, television and movies (Parks, 2012). Walt Disney's oldest princesses *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* are among the most well-known princesses (Coyne et al., 2016; Parks, 2012). The characters who often are plastered all over pampers, baby wipes and children's clothing continue to invade their developmental growth of girls (Parks, 2012). These princesses are all skinny, White females with straight hair. During early childhood, Disney's princesses depict beauty and identity through images of gender-stereotypical behavior, prosocial behavior, and body image (Coyne et al., 2016). Body image and self esteem worsen during adolescence which is a result of the social

cognitive, and physical changes they endure (Agam-Bitton et al., 2018). If cartoon standards of beauty are not invasive enough, then television, social media, magazines, movies, social influencers and celebrities will model the expectations of beauty (Duke, 2000).

Beauty standards can become internalized (Speno & Aubrey, 2018). Adolescent girls are impressionable, especially during puberty as they desire to fit within common beauty standards (Tsukayama, 2019). If girls do not match this standard, they feel rejected, which lowers self esteem (Arslan, 2009; Baker et al., 2010). Self esteem levels could predict various health outcomes, one indicator is that people with lower self esteem have an elevated cortisol response to stress (Stinson et al., 2008). Low self esteem increases the chances of severe health problems over time such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and even suicide (Quatman & Watson, 2001; Robins et al., 2002; Stinson et al., 2008). Researchers predicted poor health outcomes in female cardiovascular patients are strongly influenced by self esteem (Forthofer et al., 2001; Smolak & Striegel-Moore, 2001). The pressure of self-worth turned into a movement of feminism, which encouraged women and girls the space to explore healthy self esteem without the considerations of the cultural disparities such as race (Duke, 2000).

Unfortunately, feminism alone cannot address the overarching concerns Black girls have within the educational system (Ladner, 1987; Scott-Jones, 1986).

In the United States, there exists a totem pole of importance for ethnic groups (Jessiman, 2011). At the top of the pole sits White people starting with White men followed by White women. The closer the pole gets to the bottom the darker the hue of the population becomes as Black people are the base in the United States and similarly in

other countries (Jessiman, 2011). Historically, the word ‘men’ automatically refers to White men, the word ‘Black’ often refers to Black men, and the word ‘women’ refers almost always to White women (Nunn, 2018). Most often, White feminists overlook and ignore the Black girls’ experiences, especially in schools (Ladner, 1987; Scott-Jones, 1986). Black women are familiar with being the base, the bottom, and the oppressed; they hold the label of double minority. The intersectionality of race and gender is often overlooked and underestimated (Crenshaw, 1994). According to Black Feminist ideology, “We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from Black men, or as a present part of the larger group ‘women’ in the culture” (King, 1988, p. 42). Black girls are more likely to experience racist remarks from peers (Scott-Jones, 1987) while facing exclusion and marginalization in the educational system (Evans et al., 2010). According to research studies, adolescent African American/Black women’s bodies are seen as spectacles while simultaneously being over policed, controlled and heckled (Collins, 2005; Roberts, 1997). The conversation regarding Black girls’ bodies continues even in educational spaces; in comparison to White peers, Black girls face stricter dress codes and presumptuous sexual innuendos (Evans-Winters, 2005). In the K-12 school system, these strict guidelines are considered ‘zero-tolerance policies’ (Kim et al., 2010), also known as the school to prison pipeline or classroom to courtroom (González, 2012).

Nelson Mandela says, “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.” Children are not treated fairly in academic space; the color of their skin determines their innocence (Bell, 2004; Crawford, 2011; Epstein et al., 2017). Adulthood starts as young as kindergarten and shows that adults need to learn more about the emotional traumas that affect Black girls when they are required to

grow up earlier than their White peers (Burton, 2007; Nebbitt & Lombe, 2010; Schmitz & Tyler, 2016; Speno & Aubrey, 2018). Goff et al. (2014) states if human childhood affords strong protections against harsh, adult-like treatment, then in contexts where children are dehumanized, those children can be treated with adult severity. Epstein et al. (2014) define adultification as adults' generalized perception of Black adolescents as more adult-like than their White peers. Adultification is echoed in society and evident in the educational system. According to Losen and Skiba (2010), the educational system has a "zero tolerance" for Black girls when it comes to behavior issues. In K-12 under-resourced public schools, the pipeline can be seen with the increases of suspensions, expulsions, arrests and policing of children of color (Kim et al., 2010). Scholars recognize the preparation these children are currently receiving is preparing them for a career of incarceration (Bell, 2004; Crawford, 2011; González 2012; Kim et al., 2010). Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality (2014) surveyed educators and administrators on their view in comparison to White girls to Black girls. The data showed participants believe that Black girls, as early as kindergarten, need less nurturing, less protection, less support and less comfort due to them being considered more independent (Epstein et al., 2014).

This paper sheds light on the perspectives Black girls have around self esteem while providing space for them to share their experiences related to this topic. These girls shared the resources that have been influential to their self esteem within the educational system and while participating in Dream Girls community organization. Interviews explored the lived experiences and perspectives of Black girls in understanding the impact that a community intervention could have on their development.

Statement of the Problem

The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards mandate counselors to be trained in cultural diversity and counselors must demonstrate their ability of cultural competence through interventions and treatments (CACREP 2016, Standard 2.6). The problem is that Black girlhood is often overlooked and ignored in the society which includes the educational system (Collins, 2000; McArthur, 2018). Counter storytelling is a method of telling the stories of minority groups whose experiences are not often shared (Bell, 1994; Solorzano et al., 2002). The perspectives that highlight the impact on the experiences of Black girlhood are not often told. The educational system dehumanizes Black girlhood experiences thus leaving them vulnerable to encounter stereotypes, racism and adultification as early as kindergarten (González, 2012; Scott-Jones, 1987). Adultification bias, hypersexualization and disproportionate suspensions are critical concerns for Black/African American adolescent girls (Epstein et al., 2014). Illustration shown through historical patterns expressed through the media continues in educational practices. The social and educational experiences of adolescent African American girls typically focus on poverty, crime, violence and inadequate education (Day-Vines et al., 2003). According to Agam-Bitton et al., (2018), body image and self esteem worsen during adolescence, which is a result of the social, cognitive, and physical changes they endure.

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) standards recognize that establishing credibility, rapport and working alliance with some students may be facilitated by developing relationships that extend beyond the school (i.e. attending community events and joining community enhancement organizations) (ASCA 2016,

Standard A.3-B). The girls in this investigation participated in Dream Girls' empowerment organization program. School counselors are essential advocates for adolescence (Freudenberg et al., 2007). Adolescents need support that extends outside of school hours (Freire et al., 2018). This awareness implies that counselor involvement during this development stage should extend to other programs after school hours (Gibbs et al., 1998; Golan et al., 2018). There is a gap in the literature of the voices of Black girls articulating their lived experiences of Black girlhood who participate in empowerment organizations and the influences that lead to the critical analysis of their self esteem. This study sought to fill in the gap in current literature by focusing qualitatively on the perceptions and experiences of Black girls' self esteem while seeking to understand the impact a community organization could have on their development. It is important for educators and counselors to hear the voices of this population. The findings of this study may potentially benefit counselors, educators, administrators and community leaders that work with this population.

Significance of the Study

"If we aren't intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the cracks." - Kimberle Crenshaw. The purpose of the study was to explore, understand and uplift Black girlhood. This study explored their perspective on self esteem. Several factors impact self esteem: body satisfaction (Agam-Bitton et al., 2018; Baker & Bornstein, 2010), socioeconomic status (Veselska et al., 2009), social support (Arslan, 2009), academic achievement (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008), race (Twenge & Crocker, 2002), and gender (Kim, 2006) just to name a few. This study provided Black girls with an opportunity to emasculate myths and illustrations that defeminize and

challenge their social, emotional and physical development (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2013). This phenomenological research focused on middle school Black girls ages ten to fourteen who have attended and participated in a community based empowerment program called Dream Girls. There are no previous studies that examine, from the counseling perspective, Black girls' experience of self esteem through the organization called Dream Girls. There is a gap in counseling literature around qualitative studies understanding the experiences of Black girls' self esteem and the intersectionality of race and gender (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Kim, 1994). I wanted to explore the common experiences shared by these participants and to generate interest in redefining self esteem as a healthy state of emotional wellbeing. This study is significant because it sought to record the stories not often told by allowing participants the opportunity to share the influences on their self esteem. The voices of these participants shared the impact they experienced while participating in the community empowerment program, Dream Girls, while articulating the evidence-based interventions used to engage with their self esteem. The impact of the interventions and curriculum may be used to replicate this process to help liberate other Black and Brown adolescent girls. Specifically, this study sought to fill in the gap in current literature of Black girlhood self-exploration in both school and clinical counseling spaces by focusing qualitatively on the influences on their self esteem. The contribution of this study sought to improve counselors' cultural competency when treating African American adolescent girls' emotional wellness. This study allowed Black girls an opportunity to share their own perspectives of self esteem. Through interviewing, these girls were provided with an opportunity to define their own self-worth and their experiences navigating the influential factors on their self esteem in their daily

interactions. The findings of this study may potentially benefit counselors, educators, administrators, and community organizations that work with this population.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides the platform used to consider the challenges that race permeates through American culture throughout history. Civil rights lawyers, after being faced with affirmative action and legal restriction of discrimination, organized together to challenge and critique the legal doctrine of the legal system (Anders & Devita, 2019). Critical Race Theory (CRT) was created in the 1970s by an African American civil rights lawyer who was the first Black faculty member at Harvard Law School located in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Bell, 1994; Delgado & Harris, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). CRT, created during the Civil Rights Movement, emerged to combat the racial injustices happening in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). The civil rights era needed new approaches as the movement leaders were murdered, and protest marches became less impactful (Bell, 1976; Delgado, 1989). CRT honours counter-narratives to illustrate the multidimensionality of oppression faced by people of colour, recognizing five primary tenets, presented by several scholars (Delgado, 1989; Joseph et al., 2016). CRT addresses the myth of colorblindness, identified when individuals downplay the racial differences and racial identities (Neville et al., 2016). CRT provides a lens that explores the historical and structural imbalances regarding race.

CRT provides a theoretical lens that gives an opportunity for deep exploration of Black girlhood and the impact of emotional wellbeing. One CRT philosopher Derrick Bell (1992) says, “Education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy foreshadows reform” (p. 150). Race has a historical process in the

school system in this country. The Brown vs Board of Education opened an opportunity for intersection of Black and White children to learn together (Bell, 2004). This Supreme Court decision still has not changed many cities in this country. CRT scholars are still working to increase educational equality for all stages of learning (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Bonvilla-Silva (2015) addresses the myth of colorblindness; rather intentional or unintentional, it dismisses the impact racial identity has on daily interactions for people of color. Individuals will suffer from racelessness that denies them of their racial identity and reality (Neville et al., 2016). Crenshaw (1995) argued that if color-blind policies and procedures continue to exist then only one 'proper role' of law can exist within the society which eliminates equal opportunities for Black people (Anders & Devita, 2019). The tenet of this theory that I focused on was counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is a method that aims to dispel the myth held by the majority (Matsuda, 1991). Counter storytelling highlights minority stories that are not often told due to Whiteness as permanent stories being prioritized (Bell, 1994; Crenshaw 1995). This study shed light on the stories, experiences and perspectives of Black female adolescents and their interpretation of self esteem while growing up in a society that ignores their voices.

Critical Race Feminism (CRF), similarly to CRT, asserts that racism is a structural development of American society (Berry & Candis, 2013). CRF places women of color at the center of the conversation/discussion. CRF emerged from the intersectionality of race and feminism while also being able to recognize the complexities in other groups (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is defined as the intersect of feminist and antiracist practices (Crenshaw, 1994). CRF understands that one's race/ethnic

appearance does not dictate a singular story about who they are (Berry & Candis, 2013). Wing (2003) states the CRF seeks to give voice to minority women whose experiences are not considered a part of the traditional feminism movement and generally overlooked. Wing and Merchan (1993) define two types of spirit injury (individual and group). Spirit injury is the slow death of the psyche, of the soul, due a devastating assault on the individual or group which leads to loss of self esteem (Wing, 1997; Wing & Merchan, 1993). Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminist Thought claim that Black female adolescents are subjected to the lineage of oppression of Black women in the U.S. (Joseph et al., 2016). Emotional wellness intervention programs within the minority communities enable minorities the ability to develop coping strategies and techniques (Gibbs et al., 1998; Golan et al., 2018). Counselors must consider the impacts racial history and culture have on African American adolescents (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Counter storytelling is a key component to CRT and CRF; it shares the ideas and realities of the group. Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism seek to affirm while confirming the experiences of people of color (Berry & Candis, 2013).

Operational Definition of Terms

The key terms that were used throughout this study are African American/Black, Dream Girls, adultification, emotional wellbeing, self esteem, Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism. African American and Black were used interchangeably and defined as individuals born in the United States of American who are of African descent. Participants for this study self-identified as girl.

Adolescence

Adolescence refers to a developmental period of transition between childhood and adulthood (Erikson, 1994). Adolescence is a rapid transitional stage for physical, social and psychological changes (Davison & McCabe, 2006).

Adultification

Adultification, as defined by Georgetown Center of Poverty and Inequality, is when minors are held to the responsibilities, expectations and standards of expected adult behaviors and emotions (Nunn, 2010).

African American

African American refers to individuals of African descent that are citizens of the United States (Gordon, 2004; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas, 2006).

Black

Black was used interchangeably with African American, which refers to individuals of African descent (Gordon, 2004; Thomas 2006). Some people of African descent refer to themselves as the term Black (Sellers et al., 1998).

Dream Girls

Dream Girls is a part of the Youth Empowerment Services also known as Y.E.S. programs located in Charleston, South Carolina. Y.E.S. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit service. This program offers small-group mentoring, educational events/activities such as college campus tours, conferences and workshops. Dream Girls targets underserved minority girls who live within the Tri-County area, which is Charleston, Berkeley and Dorchester counties. The organization wants to empower girls by providing them with strategies and resources to assist in empowering their emotional, physical, spiritual and social well-

being. The purpose of Dream Girls is that girls will be empowered to pursue a healthy and productive life by leaving the poverty area of their upbringing. Dream Girl's goal is to aid in the dropout rate, teen pregnancies, abuse, and sex trafficking. This organization services girls from elementary to high school grade levels. Participants find out about this organization from community centers or organizations, churches, family centers, school counselor's offices, Department of Social Services (DSS) office, or media (news, radio, social media site). The brochure of this organization is included in the Appendix.

Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is defined as a high sense of self esteem and positive mood (Schutte et al., 2002). While self esteem, according to Cohen (1959), is defined as a person's ability to understand the influence their emotions have on their behavior, both of these emotional behaviors are individually measured based on the participants' thoughts and feelings around them.

Self esteem

Self esteem is defined as positive perceptions of self with emotional and behavioral awareness (Sifers & Shea, 2013). Self esteem is a conscious ego that establishes the values and views of self which are vital for well-being (Gallo, 2003; James-Cue, 2011).

Research Question

In the educational system, Black girls are treated with disregard at the entrance of school in kindergarten (Gonzalez, 2018). Adolescent girls report higher levels of anxiety and depression (Schleider et al., 2018). Their voices are ignored before they have a chance to develop an identity of self (Gilligan, 1982; Kagan, 1982). Adolescence is a foundational stage of development because it helps establish healthy adults (Erikson,

1959, 1994). School staff consider these girls to be troublemakers and disrespectful; therefore, school staff have zero tolerance as these students express themselves (Kim et al., 2010). Black families seek refuses and social support within their own communities (Smith, 1985). Community organization over time has the power to change policies in the United States (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015). The purpose of this study was to address the disparities in mental health for African American girls by amplifying their voices and experience of self-worth. The research question for this study was, what are the experiences and perceptions of ‘self esteem’ among African American adolescent girls who engage in Dream Girls girl empowerment organization?

Research Design

The research design for this study is qualitative study, I used a descriptive phenomenological research approach. Participants shared their experiences in a descriptive way through semi-structured interviews (Oteiza, 2010). Creswell (2008) states that phenomenological research focuses not on the life of individuals but the understanding of their lived experiences surrounding the phenomenon. The participants made sense or meaning of the factors that have impacted their self esteem both in the school and in the community (Baynes, 2010). Descriptive phenomenology must analyze the data in order to achieve rigor (Englander, 2012) which is essential to understanding the strategy and purpose of the study (Giorgi, 2009).

Research Method

Population and Sampling Procedures

For this study, participant selection was purposive (Glesne, 2016) while using a criterion-based sampling method (Creswell, 1998, 2013). African American adolescent

girls who have attended a Dream Girls event are the target population. The criteria for this sample included (a) African American, (b) adolescent, (c) self identify as girl, (d) middle school, (e) attending a Dream Girl event or conference. The participants for this study were prescreened prior to participating to make sure they met the description. For a qualitative study, there is no correct number for participants; however, the sample size should remain small (Smith & Osborn, 2007). According to Starks et al. (2007), phenomenological studies range from 1 to 10 participants depending on the range of depth the researcher is in search of obtaining during the study.

Data Collection Procedures

The lead researcher conducted virtual interviews. The interviews were semi-structured. The data was recorded both audio and video. The interviews were forty-five to sixty minutes long. The participants had an opportunity to share their experiences in their responses (DiCicco- Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Data was collected by interviews. I also kept a journal of the process, so I can be aware of my own biases. Data analysis stages began by the lead researcher bracketing their experience, summarizing core ideas, constructing categories from the cross-analysis, auditing results, checking the stability of the results and charting the findings (Heppner et al., 2015; Moustaka, 1994). The data analysis process consisted of using in-vivo codes to compare the themes and subthemes of the participants (Pinto-Foltz et al., 2010). This coding was done among the research team. All the audio data was professionally transcribed by Rev.com. The researcher followed up with the interviewee as a group for member-checking.

As an ethical consideration in the data collection process, I contacted the University of South Carolina IRB approval submission prior to starting the study.

Included in the document, I indicated that the participants were recruited through empowerment organizations. Adolescents who were interested and eligible would be given a parental consent form, which is mandatory for participation. An incentive for participants was a \$10 Visa gift card. The gift card was my way to thank the participants for their time.

Data Analysis

The researcher triangulated the data limit biases as much as possible. I used my research team to assist in this process. Each interview was individually conducted. I interviewed each participant for one hour (Nunn, 2018). I asked each participant eight questions. They had an opportunity to recall their experience and share their thoughts and/concerns.

The research team debriefed after reviewing the transcripts and offered feedback. We used descriptive data analysis to determine themes/subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to highlight themes and key findings that came up during the interviews. The data analysis process consisted of selecting codes through comparison of interviewee's statements and focus groups themes (Pinto-Foltz et al., 2010). This coding was done among the research team. I clustered those themes with my research team and looked for the significance. Data analysis stages began by identifying domains, summarizing core ideas, constructing categories from the cross-analysis, auditing results, checking the stability of the results and charting the findings (Heppner et al, 2015). The research team explored the findings and refined the meaning by member checking to make sure that I have the correct interpretation. Hays and Singh (2012) shared the best way to collect these themes is by using a sounding board. Sounding boards collect the key topics or

phrases selected from the research team. All of those themes that relate were added to the sounding board and reviewed by the team to synthesize the data. All the data was stored on a password protected device. The names of the participants were changed, and no descriptive words were used to identify the participants. At the completion of this study, all the video data was destroyed to protect the participants. I analyzed the data by using Rev.com to transcribe the interview audio recording.

Ethical Considerations

Li (2008) states that researchers should have “full consideration of the sensitivity of the topic, vulnerability of the research population, and plasticity of the field membership role” (p. 101). It is the researchers’ responsibility to warn the participants that the study could be triggering in that it might bring up experiences that were not pleasant yet challenging to experience. As a researcher working with adolescents, it is important to consider their vulnerability. IRB will not approve it if they believe participants will be harmed. There is recurring social unrest in western society around topics of race, especially for people of color, and being aware of those changes is the researchers’ responsibility (Li, 2008).

Potential Limitations of the Study

The limitation to this study consisted of the data presented according to the interviewee’s perception. Self-reporting means the participants could data over or under analyze their experiences. In a phenomenology study, the limitation will be validity and reliability (Heppner, 2015). The girls’ interpretation of their experience cannot be measured because it is different for each participant. The study took place in South Carolina, and another limitation could be the representative outside to the southeast

region may have a different experience of depression and self-image. Another uncontrollable limitation is the racial unrest that is happening in the United States currently after the passing of George Floyd and the international protest. I cannot account for how racism and injustice affect the perspectives of the participants' experience.

Researcher biases were considered for potential limitation to this study. Semi structured interviews could limit potential responses of participants (Harris et al., 2018). Research team members influence data collection by their own false consensus (Hays & Singh, 2012). Researcher bias refers to the experiences, moral choices, and cognitive and emotional level the researcher has to influence the research (Li, 2008).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the foundational content of this study was presented. The nature of this qualitative study and use of phenomenology study were outlined while establishing the operational definitions that were recognized throughout the remainder of this study. This chapter also analyzed what the literature failed to answer, which led to the need for this research study. Having established the need for the study, Chapter 3 details the research methodology by which the research question was answered.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In preparation for this study, I reviewed literature that acknowledged the disparities in the investigation of this rationale. I sought to investigate the perspectives and experiences of African American adolescent girls regarding self esteem. Before diving deep into the literature review key terms, I sought out literature around adolescents' identity, societal norms, social media influences, and literature on minority adolescents. Adolescents form their identity within the context of family, friends, schools, culture and history (Souiden & M'saad, 2011). Adolescent ages range from eleven to nineteen years old (Ziomek-Daigle, 2016). This stage of development is foundational for the social behaviors that will continue through adulthood (Ziomek-Daigle, 2015). There are three stages of adolescence. According to Barrett (1996), early adolescent age is eleven to fourteen years old. I looked at the early adolescent population. Oftentimes, adolescents are encouraged to adopt the roles that they are expected to hold throughout adulthood (Buckley & Carter, 2005). Cultural and historical contexts are particularly relevant as economic, political, and social factors have consequences for adolescent educational, social and emotional development (Ginwright, 2010). Socialization is an important part of the developmental process (Buckley, 2001).

Socialization is one's way of connecting to one another, which creates the norms of the society (Buckley, 2001). Societal norms, such as social identity, influence

individuals' feelings and behaviors towards themselves (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Societal norms are determined by the community in which the individuals live. Western society has worldwide influence. In this study, the societal norms that are considered are the norms within the United States of America. Society constantly bombarded African American adolescents with messages that they are not as good, smart, or beautiful as their White counterparts (Morris, 2007), which affect racial identity. Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, affect adolescent psychological well-being (Gross et al., 2002). These sites give adolescents an opportunity to engage with their peers as well as engage with people all over the world. Social media is designed to create a social space. These social outlets can affect self esteem. The more time spent on social media the more likely teenagers have mental health issues like depression, low self esteem and anxiety (Escalante, 2019). The desire many students have is community and a sense of acceptance among a people that they can relate to (Chiessi et al., 2010). In this chapter, literature was shared on the impact of community in adolescents.

Minority teenagers face several challenges due to societal expectations (Gonzalez, 2012; Gonzalez, 2018). For example, children of African descent in European cultures endure more negative generalization regarding race than teenagers from other races (Wallace et al., 2011). Racial identity is a person's commitment to his or her racial group based on the shared common theme of the historical experiences that bring them together (Helms, 1990). The historical experience for African Americans in the United States reveals that they are descendants of slavery. Research on adolescent African American girls typically focuses on poverty, crime, violence and inadequate education (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Researchers tend to study the European counterparts thoughts and feelings

about beauty standards through social outlets such as magazines (Duke, 2000). The image the media portrays of beauty is harmful to females who do not meet those standards of beauty (Mikie, 1999). African American girls, like many adolescents, do not meet the “beauty standards.” As Ginwright states, the culture and history negatively associated with minor adolescents will affect their emotional development. African American girls might not be aware that they are depressed because of the stigma that the Black community has regarding counseling (Crawford, 2011). During adolescence, clinical depressive symptoms rise drastically (Chaplin et al., 2006).

This chapter consists of the literature I reviewed in preparation to address the self esteem of Black girls and the impact of community programs. Due to the limited research on experiences and perspectives on self esteem for Black girls who participate in empowerment organizations, I reviewed literature related to self esteem and self-worth for adolescent girls. I also reviewed literature on Black girlhood to understand the challenges and interventions conducted for this population. I also reviewed literature on community programming for adolescents. This literature review is separated into five sections: self esteem, critical race theory, critical race feminism, Black girlhood, and community programs. This literature review explains the need and relevance of the study.

Self esteem

Self esteem is a conscious ego that establishes the values and views of self which are vital for well-being (Gallo, 2003; James-Cue, 2011). This sense of well-being impacts one’s perceptions of emotional and behavioral awareness (Sifers & Shea, 2013).

Literature on adolescent self esteem and self-worth often is merged with disorders such as depression, anxiety, and body image which lead to eating disorders (Chard et al., 2020;

Ching et al., 2021; Dobrescu, 2013; Drosdzol-Cop et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Justin et al., 2016; Richardson & Paxton, 2010). Self esteem is often measured in psychological tests with pretest and post-testing such as Rosenberg Self esteem Scale, Body Image and Body Change Inventory scale, or Resilience Scale (Fuller-Tyszkiewicz et al., 2012; Leaper et al., 2013; Tomy et al., 2016; Wagnild & Young, 1993). Self esteem is a multilayered disciplinary concept which impacts social psychology and developmental psychology (Dobrescu, 2013; Lubans et al., 2011). An individual reaches the level of determining self esteem by assessing the topic three ways: the way an individual sees themselves, how others see them and the way individuals wish others viewed them (Dobrescu, 2013). The understanding of the emotional state of well-being is the person's ability to understand the influences on their emotions that affect their behavior (Cohen, 1959; Schutte et al., 2002). Self esteem is a conscious ego that establishes the values and beliefs around self and well-being (James-Cue, 2011). A program that took a closer look at this concept is called "In Favour of Myself" where the researchers aimed to study the effectiveness of a school-based wellness program (Agam-Bitton et al., 2018). It is a nine-week school based prevention program for 90 minutes once a week. The intervention aims to enhance self esteem, body image, and media literacy for adolescents. The researchers divided adolescents into three intervention groups: girls only, mixed gender, and a waiting list control group. This intervention starts with a baseline assessment then includes a post-intervention assessment. This longitudinal study followed the participants with a three month follow up to see how the clients progressed. The researchers found no significant changes in respect to self esteem but found small positive changes in the mixed gender group regarding protective factors against social and cultural pressures

(Agam-Bitton et al., 2018). The researchers in this study discovered that there can be impactful changes in self esteem when participants are allowed to create a community that gives them opportunities to discuss pressures. This program was a community program that collaborated with the school system; however, there are school based mentoring programs as well.

Another literature piece gave an example of an impactful school based program used to another minority group. The researcher in this article assessed the effectiveness of school based mentoring for Latino youth (Karcher, 2008). The intended audience is counselors and educational psychologists. This quantitative study utilized randomized control trials to test the effectiveness of the mentoring intervention. Participants were assigned to either a treatment or comparison group in which they either received routine supportive services in the school or routine supportive services in addition to a school based mentor. Before and after the interventions took place, the researchers measured self esteem using the Self Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ) (DuBois et al., 1996). Using hierarchical linear modeling, the researcher found school based mentoring to have a positive effect on self-reported self esteem for high school girls, in addition to greater connectedness to culturally different peers and support from friends. Some limitations of the study include the outcome assessor not being blinded to the intervention and the quality of mentoring being provided was not measured or accounted for (Karcher, 2008). Karcher stated, “Mentored high school girls reported greater connectedness to culturally different peers, self esteem, and support from friends” (2008, p. 107). Overall, the study was of sound quality with appropriate design and data collection techniques. The critical response is the inclusion of a diverse mentorship. The researcher made sure that mentors

represented the same diversity shown with youth participants. Critical response in this article speaks to the fact that representation matters, especially when working with minority youth. It helps students to see themselves differently.

The effects of low self esteem is the reason to aid in positive self esteem research. In another literature, the authors explore the effect low self esteem has on the body. Drosdzol et al. (2017) states that low self esteem is connected to body dysmorphia illnesses such as eating disorders. This is not just something that happens in adolescence but may continue through adulthood. Body dissatisfaction starts with self esteem (Richardson et al., 2010). Eating disorders impact body weight appearance, which lead participants to depression and anxiety (Ching et al., 2021). The dimension most impacted is the relationship between ethnic identity and self esteem. Then self esteem impacts the risk of eating disorder behaviors (Rhea & Thatcher, 2013). Negative psychological variables like anxiety, depression and stress impact the girls' life satisfaction which has an influence on self esteem (Freire & Ferreira (2020). This literature is important to understand the general conversation of self esteem and the conversation around it for adolescent girls. The impact can vary according to the individual's race.

Critical Race Theory

Beginning in the early 1970s among African American civil rights lawyers, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was created (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). The goal of Critical Race Theory is to address the relationships between race and power by shedding light on the historical racism that influences American societal norms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda et al., 1993). Crenshaw writes about this influence in the article, Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in

antidiscrimination law (1988). In this article, Crenshaw shares the thought of critics regarding the singular power of racism as a hegemonic force in American culture and society. Crenshaw talks about civil rights reform in law which influences education. The purpose of this article is to educate critical race educators and the community about the language and behaviors of critics around CRT. The intended audience is lawyers and educators. Crenshaw states, “the primary objective of antidiscrimination law, according to this vision, is to prevent future wrongdoing rather than to redress present manifestations of past injustice. “Wrongdoing, moreover, is seen primarily as isolated actions against individuals rather than as a societal policy against an entire group” (1988, p. 1342). This article shed light on civil rights and the importance of knowing the history of this country. In the educational system, lessons about civil rights are not taught. This article explores the formal equality that transformed for Black people in America. Crenshaw shared how racism is experienced in different ways. She writes, “the social, economic, and even residential distance between the various classes may complicate efforts to unite behind issues as a racial group” (1988, p. 1384). The unity that is fostered by civil rights will help future generations of Black Americans not feel like they are “second-class citizens.” The racial norms and stereotypes are led to recast the cultural inferiority in our society and school today. “Blacks were challenging their exclusion from political society, the only claims that were likely to achieve recognition were those that reflected American society’s institutional logic: legal rights ideology” (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1368). The discussion, according to Crenshaw, says, “the innocence of White weighs more heavily than do the past wrongs committed upon Blacks and the benefits that Whites derived from those wrongs” (1988, p. 1342). In conclusion, Crenshaw believes

that citizens should occupy space in political and economic policy in order to see change. This article is important to include because policy affects the educational system. In contrast, this article states that equality and equity exist in this country. Even though this article was written years ago, it is still an issue that we currently face. This study fails to address the research question because it focuses on adults not adolescents. Also, it is not looking for people to verbalize their perspectives and experiences.

Critical Race Feminism

Adrien Wing desired to give voice to minority women's experiences and explore the contribution on Critical Race Theory, critical legal studies, and feminism (Wing, 2003). Critical Race Feminism (CRF) examines the different experiences of women of color in comparison to men of color and White women along with addressing the ways in which American society have ignored their experiences leaving women of color voiceless and invisible (Joseph et al., 2016; Wing, 2003). Crenshaw (1991) suggests that women of color have multiple identities due to the intersectionality of race and gender; both must be analyzed to understand the complexities of discrimination and oppression. In the article Black female adolescents and racism in schools: Experience in a colorblind society (Joseph et al., 2016), this study examines the impacts and outcomes of a program that is designed to aid minority students (Black and Latinx) who are in high poverty areas about careers. The program was called Pathway2Teaching. The researchers only completed data to analyze the first two years. The researchers wanted to know how Black adolescent girls define racism, their experience with racism during school, and their perspectives on educational reform. Critical Race Feminism was one of the theoretical frameworks used in this qualitative study. These students completed both surveys and interviews. The

participants enrolled attended urban high schools, lived in high poverty areas and identified as a people of color. During the first year, thirty-three participants attended the program. The second year had seventy participants. Through surveys and interviews data was collected. The researchers found themes and patterns during the coding process. The findings show that Black adolescent girls are aware of the Black women's oppression because they experience it in school (Joseph et al., 2016). The girls defined racism as prejudice, stereotypes, low expectations from teachers and differential treatment. The participants discussed the interactions, behaviors and attitudes of White teachers/administrators. The researchers suggested that it is important that Black girls experience more Black female teachers through their educational journey. Representation not only aids in the girls feeling like they belong, but it also provides cultural awareness. This article addresses CRF, but it does not address the impact race has on self esteem.

Black Girlhood

In the literature, the intersection of race and gender can be viewed under the topic of Black Girlhood. African American and Black are used to represent people of African descent (Gordon, 2004; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas, 2006). An article that explores and discusses Black girlhood self esteem is *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girl's childhood* by Epstein et al. (2017). This study, published in *Georgetown Law on Poverty and Inequality*, reports a comparison between Black girls and their White counterparts. This report accesses the foundational needs of development, which are nurture, protection, support, and comfort. Surveys were given to all the participants, and Black girls scored sufficiently less in all of those areas. This study also shows that adult educators had conversation about adult topics such as sex with young adolescent Black

girls because the belief of maturity at young ages, and the girls are perceived to be more independent. The researchers explored the educational system's interactions with this population. The results include that Black girls received harsher punishment by educators and school resource officers (SRO) (Epstein et al., 2017). This study echoes the descriptive term adultification. Girls have to grow up faster because they are viewed and treated as adults. The harsher treatment starts off in schools, but it is the same behaviors demonstrated in the juvenile justice systems and jails. This phrase is known as the school to prison pipelining. Black children have harsher penalties. The researchers in this study want adults to recognize their own biases and take action toward repairing the disruption of inequality in the educational system towards Black girls. This research did not include the voices or perspectives of the adolescent girls.

Another article that is explored is called Black girls and school discipline: The complexities of being overrepresented and understudied by Annamma et al. (2019). The purpose of the article was to examine disciplinary outcomes among Black girls. The article states, "this article seeks justice by expanding urban education research to include and center Black girls, a marginalized population that is often left out of conversations around inequities in school discipline and urban education" (Annamma et al., 2019, p. 1368). The article focused on three main areas: office referrals, patterns of identity markers and used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to measure the actions that move girls into this disciplinary pipeline. This study explored "the ways urban schools perpetuate intersectional violence against Black girls through discipline disparities in Denver Public Schools (DPS)" (Annamma et al., 2019, p. 212). This article looked at the size of the city where these schools are located, the diversity of the students attending the

school and the technology as well as financial resources available such as federal programs. This study took place in October 2014.

The intended audience is school administrators, staff and educators. This article educated the readers by identifying the experience of Black girls. These researchers want educators to recognize historical and cultural differences in communication, equity, social justice, and power. The study includes data on the comparison of White girls, Black girls and other girls of color. “Blackness is viewed as the problem instead of racism, and specifically, anti-Blackness” (Annamma et al., 2019, p. 217). The researchers used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Feminism (FemCrit) to expose how laws, policies and practices, especially educational practices, have interfered in Black girlhood in the United States. Historically, the color of someone’s skin determined superiority and inferiority. “Black girls are often considered to have a bad attitude or are too mouthy or loud, like the Black woman Sapphire archetypes, these voices of these Black girls are unwelcome in schools, considered unladylike” (Annamma et al., 2019, p. 231). FemCrit recognizes that women of various racial cultures have unique differences in behaviors, mannerisms, and communication styles. “White femininity is often defined by passiveness, quietness and helplessness in the face of men, Black girls are immediately positioned as less feminine” (Annamma et al., 2019, p. 231). This form of gender oppression hinders academic progression. Black girls being channeled outside of the educational system communicate that education is an exclusive right of the most privileged, which echoes the narrative of Whiteness as superiority.

The study showed that White girls were referred to the office for drug possession at a more significant rate than other girls of color, while Black girls were more likely to

be referred due to disobedience or defiance. A teacher or administrator determines this complaint. Black girls are more likely to be charged for assault when getting into a school fight. These girls are typically charged with third-degree assault, which is defined as “knowingly or recklessly causing bodily injury to another person or with criminal negligence he or she causes bodily injury to another person by a deadly weapon” according to Denver's law. The findings of the research showed that Black girls are most likely to be disciplined based on the judgment of the school personnel’s experience. As an implication of this study, all teachers were trained on understanding the historical and contemporary racism, power dynamics, and equity. “It would benefit all who work in schools to see Black girls as powerful and assertive women who can solve their own problems with savvy and ingenuity” (Annamma et al., 2019). The limitation of this research is that it can only be generalizable for urban schools with this particular demographic. There needs to be further research on this population to identify patterns within larger schools and districts. The critical response to this article is that it is helpful to see Critical Race Theory in mixed method research. It was unfortunate that the article shared an explanation from South Carolina at Spring High School when the police officer threw the Black girl on the floor. This article shares the need for educators to be trained on cultural representation. While this article addresses the intersectionality of race and gender, researchers did not interview the participants. This study does not address the research question relating to the perspective of the girls’ self esteem and emotional wellbeing.

Community Program

The American Counseling Association (ACA) has a division for multicultural counseling, which includes the minority groups such as American Indians, Asian Americans and Blacks/African American (Lee, 1999). The literature advocacy for African American females is necessary conversation (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001; Jones, & Sam, 2018; Lewis & Bradley, 1999; Patrick et al., 2020; Smith & Wemeling, 2005; Williams et al., 1999). The perspective of school counselors in the article called Black girls matter: Counseling Black females through a servant leadership framework (Harris et al., 2018). The school counselor participants in this study discussed the importance of community involvement and how it promotes healthy and open environments as Black female students noticed educators taking an interest in their communities. Another finding states that school counselors should implement processes that will promote culturally responsive advocacy for Black female students due to negative stereotypes (Evans-Winters, 2005; Harris et al., 2018). The relevant outcome from this article that is crucial for counseling is the importance of understanding the needs of Black students, then exploring those needs by desiring to understand their experiences (Grimes et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2018). Students/clients tend to be less resistant to counseling when the counselor is from the same ethnical group (Gamboa et al., 1976). An example in the literature of community counseling is the organization called Big Brother, Big Sister.

Some researchers focus on quantitative measures such as surveys and assessment to measure self esteem. One study assessed the effectiveness of a group program called “Building Positive Relationships” in conjunction with mentoring in a Big Brother Big

Sisters program (Westhues et al., 2001). The group program, in addition to the one on one mentoring, aimed to enhance relationship skills of adolescent females. Researchers recognized that participants look within their community to aid their needs. The constructs the researchers looked at were self esteem, empathy, positive peer and family relationships, problem solving skills, and self-advocacy skills. The researchers used a quasi-experimental design with a wait list control group. After data collection, independent t-tests were run to assess for significant differences between the intervention and wait list control group. Significant changes were found on the self esteem measure at follow up, in addition to skill based changes such as assertiveness. This study used psychometrically sound measures to test their constructs with appropriate data collection techniques. The limitations of the study include the need to account for more confounding variables that could be involved. Additionally, the sample could have been more representative of the population, so there is potential for bias in the results.

Chapter Summary

The content of Chapter 2 presented a critical review of current professional literature to present this research question. In light of the research findings, self esteem has not focused on the Black girlhood for girls who attend empowerment programs. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology that sought to address the established deficiency for understanding the lived experience of the sample for the study around topics of self esteem.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In this chapter, I provided the qualitative design used to conduct this study. This study used phenomenological designs to explore Black girls' perspectives on self esteem. Phenomenology allows the researcher to hear the unique individual perspective of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Both of these approaches allowed the reader, as well as educators and counselors, an opportunity to understand this culture's knowledge, beliefs and behaviors. I presented the research design, the process used to collect the data, and the procedures used to analyze the data. I also discussed the technique used for the population and sampling.

Research Design

Qualitative

Qualitative researchers have five main goals; understand the way participants make meaning, understand the influence of behavior, identify and explore the influence, understand the process and finally develop an explanation (Maxwell, 2013). Roulston (2010) states that qualitative research is finding the quality in the work. Qualitative work is about framing the research in a structured and systematic way while giving power to the participants' voices (Tracy, 2010). The uniqueness of this qualitative research is that it gives voices to the lived experiences of the participants (Glesne, 2016). The investigation of the experience of wellness (Schutte et al., 2002), culture (Constantine & Sue, 2006) and race (Collins, 2000) can be measured through the experiences of human

behavior. This study used qualitative designs such as interviewing, video and audio-tape interactions (Roulston, 2010). I desired to understand the perspective and lived experiences of participants' influences and experiences relating to self esteem and, therefore, chose the phenomenology design for this study.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is referred to as the conscious knowledge of one's perceived awareness and experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology will help their cognitive behavioral interpretation of self esteem and emotional wellbeing (Patton, 2002). It is important to learn about the interventions and curriculum in hopes to replicate this process to help liberate oppressive ideologies. I considered talking with adolescent Black girls to get their understanding of "self esteem" and allow them to define it. Whittemore et al. (2001) stated the descriptive phenomenon allows participants the opportunity to offer vivid details and relate to others through the experience. The empowerment organization and interventions have given the girls an opportunity to relate to their peers. In this study, the researchers synthesized the descriptive details stated by each participant, which is why this design is best for this study.

Creswell (1998) has five main guidelines for phenomenological researchers: perspectives, research questions with lived experiences, criterion-based sampling, data analysis and structuring the lived experiences. In this design, the researcher's goal was to understand the underlying philosophy of the participants. The questions that were asked create the frame for the researchers to access the feelings, knowledge and assumptions of the individuals (Wertz, 2005). These five main strategies provided the researcher with a blueprint of data collection. First, it is important to construct a meaningful interview.

Wertz (2005) stated that data collection via interviews should consist of questions that could be used globally but that the researcher can equally construct meaning and make an interpretation of. The questions that I asked the participants were based on their understanding of self esteem and their interpretation of empowerment. Heppner (2015) describes this design by saying, “the research questions for a phenomenological study are developed to provide a mechanism by which to understand the everyday lived experiences of individuals and to explore what those experiences mean to the individuals” (p. 389). This is what I hoped to achieve: an understanding of the individual experiences relating to self esteem and their emotional wellbeing.

Second, criterion-based sampling means that the participants must have experienced the phenomenon and be able to articulate their experience (Creswell, 1998). In this study, the participants must have attended an empowerment conference or intervention within the past two years. They must be willing to articulate their experience relating to their interpretation of self esteem and emotional wellbeing. The participants can share how the empowerment organization has been beneficial to helping them identify self esteem. They could also share that there was a “session” or intervention that thought was most effectively aided in their understanding.

Phenomenological data analysis, also known as intentional analysis, is the reflection through the experiential processes of the situation and the knowledge associated with that experience (Glesne, 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Data analysis had to have a clear meaning, so the research and participants know and understand which areas of the experience are the focus. Since the data collected focuses on the relationship between the experience and the psychological

process, the researcher decided the best way to conduct the qualitative paradigm (Wertz, 2005). This is when the researcher started the bracketing process of their attitude around this phenomenon (Glesne, 2016). Then with the research team, the lead researcher assessed for sensitive language and behaviors during the interview (even during the reading of the transcription).

Lastly, the lived experience represents the structure of the phenomenon. Heppner (2015) states, “the researcher is expected to examine a phenomenon from all possible angles in order to understand the essence of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 391) As the researcher, I have my optional definitions that were stated in Chapter 1, which aided in making sure that all angles were covered. It was important for the research team to cover the Dream Girl program. This program aids in the drop out rate, teen pregnancies, abuse, and sex trafficking. This organization services girls from elementary to high school grade levels.

Research Method

Population

The population is comprised of African American/Black adolescent female middle school students who attended any Dream Girls’ organization event. Black will be used interchangeably with African American, which is referring to individuals of African descent (Gordon, 2004; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas, 2006). This organization’s goal is to empower and encourage minority girls by providing mentoring, educational activities, and college tours. The organization focuses on low income communities and group homes in the Tri-county area, which include the following counties: Berkeley, Dorchester, and Charleston. The ultimate goal is to provide various activities to aid in

empowering girls' pursuit of physical, mental and emotional health. Low self esteem is associated with poor physical health outcomes in women (Forthofer et al., 2001). Dream Girls provides resources for girls in elementary, middle and high school. No research has been done on this girls' empowerment nonprofit organization. Minority groups rely on community resources as a beacon of hope (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015). I chose to study this population because adultification hinders the development process of minority girls, impartially Black girls, in the educational system (Nebbitt & Lombe, 2010). Erikson (1959, 1994) states the development of adolescents as a strong foundation for adulthood beliefs and behaviors. I chose this population due to my desire to better understand and learn about the impact minority girls endure relating to their self esteem and identify where the counseling community needs to fill in the gaps.

Sampling Procedures

I will use purposive, criterion-based sampling to obtain the participants for this study (Glesne, 2016; Smith et al., 2012). This sampling technique ensured that the participants share in knowledge and that the participants were all selected based on the same characteristics (Bernard, 2002). Purposive, criterion-based selection requires individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Each student will meet the criterion based sampling model which will require each participant to complete the demographic survey and interview if they met the qualifiers (Glesne, 2016). Demographic questions are as follows:

1. What is your race?
2. What is your gender?
3. How old are you?

4. What grade are you in?
5. Which county do you live in?
6. What is the name of your school?
7. Have you attended a Dream Girls Conference?

After all participants were pre-screened to determine eligibility (Brown, 2018), then I emailed the participant to schedule an interview time (Lauzen & Dozier, 2002).

Participants were selected if they were willing and able to meet and share their perspectives.

Sample Size

The target sample population for this study consisted of five to ten African American adolescent female students who are enrolled in middle school and who attended a Dream Girls event. Smith and Osborn (2007) states that the sample size should be small because the researcher can ‘tackle the experience of pain in a useful way so the participant can address their experience of impact with the phenomena’ which is self esteem. Phenomenological studies range from one to ten participants depending on the range of depth the researcher is in search of obtaining during the study (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

Data Collection Procedures

Once approved by the University of South Carolina’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I started the recruitment process. The data for this study was collected through individual semi-structured interviews then concluded with a focus group with all the participants from the individual interviews. Applicants' responses were recorded both by

audio and video recordings. Data collection was obtained after the IRB approval, and the rationale for collecting this data is discussed in the following sections.

Recruitment

Elder et al. (2008) recommends a multilevel strategy to recruit adolescent girls. Three key strategies stated were communication, logistics and incentives. Since the girls are minors, I enlisted a few advocates to assist such as parents, teachers, and Dream Girls organizers. Research has shown that recruitment efforts of minors are more beneficial when the parental figures are included, since parental consent is required (Elder et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2011). I shared the flyer about the research study with the director of Dream Girls, Rossalyn Fields, and with their email mailing list. Using a contact list of numbers provided, I called to see if participants were interested. I also used the snowballing strategy by recommending that eligible participants share the flyer with other potential eligible candidates (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). Participants were compensated for their time by receiving a monetary incentive of ten dollars. The participants decided the method in which they wished to receive this incentive: gift card, cash, or the money sent to them via Cash App, Venmo or PayPal.

Once a potential candidate was identified, they received a follow up email with participant's details. The e-mail consisted of the Demographic Survey as a way of pre-screening participants and getting their general information. All candidates received the Informed Consent Form (see appendix). Once the Informed Consent Form was signed by guardians then participants, I scheduled interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and held on the Zoom video platform. The interviews were recorded both audio and video. All the data was stored on password protected devices. The interview was forty-five to sixty minutes long. The participants had an opportunity to share their experiences in their responses (DiCicco- Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Data was collected by interviews, and the audio was professionally transcribed by Rev.com. I also kept a journal of the process, so I can be aware of my personal biases. Data analysis stages began by identifying domains, summarizing core ideas, constructing categories from the cross-analysis, auditing results, checking the stability of the results and charting the findings (Heppner et al., 2015). The data analysis process consisted of selecting themes and in-vivo codes through comparison of interviewee's themes and subthemes (Pinto-Foltz et al., 2010). This coding was conducted among the research team (Saldana, 2016). The research team used in vivo coding (Saldana, 2016) to identify the themes within the data (Boyatzis, 1998, Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher followed up with the interviewee as a group for member-checking (Englander, 2012).

Data Analysis

The data analysis started with the researchers recording their experience, which is also known as bracketing (Moustaka, 1994). Bracketing is when the researcher accesses their thoughts and feelings on the topic. I recorded my experience with the phenomenon, my thoughts, and concerns. Qualitative Analysis approaches the data in the following ways: code the data; sift through the codes to identify patterns; isolate the patterns in search of commonalities and differences; note reflections; refine themes; and compare the

propositions to form concepts or theories (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher triangulated the data limit biases as much as possible. The data was collected via audio recording and video recording for the individual and focus group interviews. I used Rev.com to translate the audio recording. To assist the research team with in-vivo coding, I used NVivo. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software system. This platform helped the research team members collaborate and view the transcript while on one platform.

Each interview was individually conducted after the participant completed the demographic survey to include that the participants met the interview criteria. I interviewed each participant for forty-five minutes to one hour (Nunn, 2018). They had an opportunity to recall their experiences and share their perspectives. The research team debriefed after reviewing the transcripts and offered feedback. We used descriptive coding to highlight themes and key findings that came up during the interviews. The second stage of analysis is horizontalization (Creswell, 2008), I used my research team to assist in this process. The analytical process consisted of selecting statements and quotes of participants' codes then comparing interviewee's statements and focus groups to transcribe them into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Pinto-Foltz et al., 2010). This coding was completed among the research team. The team met after coding the transcripts.

The next step was to organize those statements then clusters those statements into meaningful groups also known as the cluster of meaning (Creswell, 2008; Moustaka, 1994). This stage included data analysis. Analyzing the data provides the flexibility and vocabulary to the participants' experiences by engaging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I clustered those themes with my research team and looked for the significance. Imaginative variation stated the influences on the participants' experiences (Maustaka,

1994). The developed and organized statements were clustered. The participants identified the things that have influenced their experience and perspective of self esteem (Creswell, 2008; Nunn, 2018). This step gave the researchers a chance to understand the thought process of the participants while having an imaginative interpretation. Once all the themes were collected, the lead researchers put them aside to discuss with participants during the second interview. It is important to see if the participants agree with the themes as a form of member-checking (Creswell, 2008).

Then the researcher analyzed the process by exploring the meaning and the depth of the participants' experiences. Data analysis stages began by identifying domains, summarizing core ideas, constructing categories from the cross-analysis, auditing results, checking the stability of the results and charting the findings (Heppner et al., 2015). The researchers wanted to know the meaning of the experience by refining the findings during this process. The research team explored the findings and refined the meaning by member checking to make sure that I had the correct interpretation. Moustaka (1994) shares that the next step is imaginative variation, which is the researchers describing the influences on the participants experienced with the phenomenon. The researchers desired to understand what lead/affected the experience. Lastly, textual-structural description is developing a thick description that presents the phenomenon to the participants collectively (Creswell, 2008). The researcher focused on the common experiences among the participants. This took place during the focus group. Hays and Singh (2012) shared the best way to collect these themes is by using a sounding board. Sounding boards collect the key topics or phrases selected from the research team. All relevant themes were added to the sounding board and reviewed by the team to synthesize the data. All

the data was stored on a password protected device. The names of the participants were changed, and no descriptive words were used to identify the participants. At the completion of this study, all the video data was destroyed to protect the participants.

Trustworthiness

Phenomenological methodology requires thick and rich descriptions during data collection (Moustakas, 1994). Merriam (2002) talks about the importance of the researcher being aware of their beliefs and experiences. I recorded my personal assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and experiences relating to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). I used bracketing, along with my positionality statement, to maintain awareness of my own thoughts, behaviors, thoughts and beliefs relating to this topic. Lincoln and Guba (1985) speak about the credibility of establishing accurate data by member-checking with your participants. In this study, the data was directly from the participants' interpretation of self esteem. As a lead researcher, it is important to track my thoughts and experiences. Record researchers' reaction to the interviews, coding process, and emerging themes in the data (Glesne, 2016). The research team met to discuss themes and subthemes while in vivo coding the interviews. The research team members also debriefed when audio was transcribed to discuss coding and feedback (Maxwell, 2013). I clustered sub-themes and themes based on the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Kornbluh (2015) says that member checking helps to ensure the accurate representation of the participants' perspectives and experiences. The second interview with the focus group gave the researchers an opportunity to check with the interviewee to see what themes they felt were important and if they wanted to add any additional information. Focus group participants got an opportunity to review themes that accrued during the coding.

Participants shared anything they felt was left out that should have been included (Kornbluh, 2015). The richness of the description occurs because phenomenological data analysis seeks to understand the significance in the statements that develop clusters of the meanings (Creswell, 2008; Moustakas, 1994).

Positionality

I am an African American female who holds a master's degree in Mental Health Counseling and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Counseling Education and Supervision. I am a native of South Carolina who grew up in a two parent household. I am a second-generation college graduate and first generation doctoral candidate. During adolescence, I attended various community empowerment organizations and events. Those events were not quarterly or annually but sporadic. I was forced to attend by my parents, which I've been told in the past was the case for some of the participants who've attended girl empowerment events.

My interest in this population grew out of my passion for working with children. I volunteered while in high school and throughout college working with adolescents. In my profession in student services, I have worked closely with all grade levels K-12, and my interest in this topic grew as I volunteered to work as a mentor for several nonprofit organizations. I noticed that minority girls were experiencing strict expectations which lead them to other issues. In my master's program, I saw clients at the counseling center of a college campus for a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the southeast. My clients were dealing with depression and anxiety, among other stressors. Most of the clients' trauma started during adolescence. I was involved in a girl empowerment organization. I served as a board member for this organization who served

middle school and high school girls. Majority of the participants were African American and Hispanic. The workshops that were offered during conferences and events for these girls consisted of topics such as anxiety, bullying, self-worth, depression, and self-identity.

I have collaborated with girl empowerment programs in South Carolina and North Carolina because they serve first generation students mostly in low economic communities. I am both an insider and outsider researcher for this population. I am an insider because I once was an adolescent, and I am an African American female from this same area. I am an outsider to this experience because I did not grow up in a similar environment. For example, there were not any social media platforms when I was in middle school. So, I did not have to endure cyberbullies or social media influences from people across the world. Also, some of the participants for this program are from single parent households while others live in a group home. I am an outsider to that experience because I grew up in a two-parent home in the suburbs. Jorgensen (1989) states that researchers' approach should move from outsiders to insiders once the observation, interviews and conversation are completed.

Ethical Considerations

As an ethical consideration in the data collection process, I contacted the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval submission prior to starting the study. I indicated in the document that the participants will be recruited through empowerment organizations. Adolescents who were interested and eligible would be given a parental consent form which is mandatory for participation. Li (2008) states that researchers should give "full consideration of the sensitivity of the topic,

vulnerability of the research population, and plasticity of the field membership role” (p.111). It is the researchers’ responsibility to warn the participants that the study could be triggering in that it might bring up experiences that were not pleasant and challenging to experience. As a researcher working with adolescents, it is important to consider their vulnerability and responsibility (Li, 2008). IRB will not approve it if they believe participants will be harmed. The American Counseling Association (2014) states the code of ethics, which also enforces the do no harm expectation for counselors.

Another ethical consideration are threats to confidentiality (Stiles, & Petril, 2011). Participants shared pseudonyms also known as ‘fake names’ to protect their identity. These pseudonyms were used during the focus group as well as the transcription. After the interviews, the content was shared for transcribing then shared with anyone outside of the research team (Creswell, 2008). All of the data collected for this study was stored on a password protected computer. Participants were notified of their right to discontinue at any point during this study.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the design of the study, which is phenomenology. I stated why I chose this design for this population and this study. I reviewed the data collection and analysis. I shared the research question and the questions that participants were asked during the interview. I reviewed the procedures of the methods that measured ethical protection of the participants. Also, this chapter stated the criteria of participants. I reviewed the researcher and participant relationship throughout this study. Chapter 4 sheds light on the research findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative dissertation was to gain a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences for middle school Black adolescent girls around the topic of self esteem. Specifically, I sought to understand Black girls' experiences of self esteem for Dream Girls' participants by conducting phenomenological individual interviews and a focus group. Understanding how girls experience the phenomenon can provide insight into the impact of self esteem and widen the understanding of clinicians. Chapter 1 explores the disparities in minority youth mental health and the importance of this endeavor to the counseling field. I sought to broaden the professional knowledge of minority girls' experiences as it relates to self-esteem with implications for professional development as well as student outcomes. An extensive review of the literature in Chapter 2 provides a foundation for the direction of this study by articulating the need to expand the knowledge around understanding the role of minority adolescent girls' development of identity within the confinement of school experience and community organization involvement from the perspective of Black girls. This understanding considers cultural and historical context, educational structures, community programs, and the specificity of development of self-exploration regarding self-worth. I used phenomenological methodology to both describe and interpret

participants' experiences. To ensure the depth and rich experiences of participants' accounts, semi-structured interviews and a focus group were utilized. The examination of participants' lived experiences revealed significant insights into how participants made sense of self-esteem. Specifically, the findings highlighted the influence of school experiences, community connection, race and cultural influence in the participants' lives.

Research Question

The primary research question addressed in this study was:

What are the experiences and perceptions of 'self-esteem' among African American adolescent girls who attend girl empowerment organizations?

I utilized reflection and probing to add layers of depth and richness to the interviews and the focus group allowing participants the opportunity to explore their experiences and thoughts as it relates to their understanding of self-esteem. My goal was not to prove or disprove any theory; I took an inductive approach to data collection (Glesne, 2016). This discussion provided participants with the opportunity to share rich descriptions of their experiences.

Data Collection

I collected data for this study by using interviews and a focus group that honored participants' understanding of self-esteem within the context of their cultural, educational and social experiences. A total of five interviews and one focus group was conducted. Participants' guardians were able to schedule their interviews through e-mail or telephone communication. Figure 4.1 shows the recruitment flyer. All semi-structured interviews

were conducted virtually through a software platform known as Zoom Video Communications, Inc. I originally planned to meet the participants virtually due to the continual health uncertainties regarding the global pandemic. The interviews were conducted during the end of the school year and during the summer break. Since the participants are minors, they needed flexible interviewing scheduling that would accommodate both participants and guardians' schedules. After conducting each individual participant interview, I inquired about the participant's interest and availability for the focus group. All participants agreed to attend the focus group. Two participants were present along with both research team members. The research team members did not interact with any of the participants. They were present to observe with cameras off and muted audio. After a brief welcome and check-in, participants were invited to review core themes and subthemes. Participants were asked for feedback and their interpretation of the presented data. This process of triangulating the data centers on the participants' voices, providing them the opportunity to member check while establishing the credibility of the data.

Similar to group counseling, the focus group members shared their independent thoughts regarding the themes then they joined in after hearing the opinions of the other group member on the subject matter. The participants seemed to find comfort in communicating with prior and having similar experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the format outlined in Chapter 3. According to Moustakas (1994), a seven-step analytic process was used as the framework for this

analysis. Prior to the start of data collection, the research team and I wanted to purposefully set aside our personal beliefs and preconceived thoughts to explain this phenomenon. To achieve this goal, each member of the research team wrote their own positionality statement related to the topic of this study. During the research team meeting, positionality, biases and assumptions were discussed. Research team members courageously shared their experiences, thoughts and interpretation of terms that made the most impacts in their own lives. One member of the research team was born in Cameroon and raised by paternal grandparents in a village with first-hand experience of community involvement influencing self-awareness. The absence of self-acceptance in adult female figures, another member of the research team, noted a complicated relationship with narratives of spoken acceptance and behaviors that are contradictory. The collective biases and assumptions were noted. For example, a few assumptions/biases were realistic role models, beauty standards challenges, racial pandemics, school staff might not know how to help, etc. By bracketing these experiences, the objective was the researchers would approach the process with an open mind.

The next phrase of the process enveloped horizontalization of the data. Each interview audio recording was transcribed using Rev.com. Each participant's transcript was analyzed using in-vivo coding (Glesne, 2016). The research team members selected significant statements and quotes for each transcript independently prior to the group meeting (Creswell, 2008). Statements or phrases that contained necessary information to help understand the experience were highlighted and labeled (Moustaka, 1994). The research team met each week following an interview. During the meeting transcripts, we discussed thoroughly line by line (Maxwell, 2013). From the group discussion emerged

patterns and discrepancies, and notable points were recorded. Oftentimes, team member coding was congruent.

During step three in the analytical process, clusters and thematic labeling were assigned. These clusters of significant statements were refined to show the core themes and subthemes of the investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team explored the influences on the participants' experience. The next step in the analytical process involved the development of the context of influence and exploring the structural description to focus on the common experience among participants. In this step, I abstracted recurring themes that were significant moments to the participants by using conceptualization analysis (Smith et al., 2012). I explored the descriptive statements to determine the relationship each theme has with the phenomenon. The data validation was enhanced by using NVivo (version 12). While using NVivo, I further investigated patterns, frequently used words, phrases and statements that might have been otherwise overlooked. The collected core themes and subthemes were presented to participants via focus group for the purpose of member checking. Through participants' comments and reactions, they agreed that the presented themes captured their experience. Participants' feedback did not result in any changes to the data. The focus group was not transcribed or coded by the research team. Instead, at the end of the focus group meeting, the research team members discussed participants' responses, behaviors and reactions towards the prompts.

Throughout the entire analytical process, the research team met via Zoom. Each team member immersed themselves in the transcripts and audio recordings before we met as a team. Our group meeting would last from one to two and a half hours as we debriefed,

shared and discussed the data. This does not include the independent immersion of the principal investigator which consisted of listening to audio recordings, coding transcripts, Nvivo coding, developing conceptual maps, writing structural descriptions, scheduling research team member and taking notes during debrief conversations. Each step allowed me the opportunity to learn more about each case, which adds to the richness of the investigation process. For a visual illustration, conceptual maps were also constructed around each theme, which can be found in Figure 4.2.

Participants

A total of 9 inquiries were received in response to the request for participation. Every participants' guardian responded to the recruitment flyer shared via email. All potential participants were sent the recruitment packet, which consisted of the demographic survey, consent form for guardians and consent form for participants. The guardians emailed the completed forms with signatures. Of the nine candidates, five were deemed eligible to participate. All participants met all of the criteria. Only one participant missed the scheduled interview. This participant did not respond to follow up communications. Therefore, there were five total participants in this investigation.

All of the participants live and attend middle schools in South Carolina. Three of the participants were in seventh grade, and two of the participants were in eighth grade, their last year of middle school. All of the participants identified as African American/ Black. All five participants also identified as female. Three participants were 13 years old. Two participants were 14 years old. They have all attended a Dream Girls conference or event. See Table 4.1.

Findings

In the following section, I use direct quotes from participants that support the core themes and subthemes that answered the research question which focused on *the experiences and perceptions of 'self-esteem' among African American adolescent girls who attend girl empowerment organizations*. Four core themes emerged from the data and described how participants made sense of their experiences with self-esteem: (1) uncertainty; (2) self-awareness; (3) resources; (4) race and culture. Within these four core themes emerged eight subthemes from the data. Each core theme had two subthemes. A visual illustration of the grouping of themes and subthemes can be found in Table 4.2. The names used are pseudonyms selected by the participants to assure their confidentiality.

Core Theme 1: Uncertainty

Analysis of collected data revealed emergent themes that were clustered to form the first core theme, Uncertainty. Participants have never participated in a research study which lead to uncertainty and a desire to say the 'right' things. This core theme lead to two subthemes: expectation and self-exploration.

Subtheme 1A: Expectation of Others: repetition of commonly used phrases.

Participants struggled to find the 'right' or 'correct' descriptive words for themselves. Each participant perceived their experience of themselves first as the 'self' that has been articulated by those around them. During this description, participants often spoke in third person with stating phrases such as 'you have to'.

Jay: *“Well, you have to have confidence in yourself and you should love yourself. And also, self-esteem, you should always focus on yourself; you should always focus on yourself”.*

Leigh: *“Because to have self-esteem, you have to have a lot of confidence and you have to have a lot of strength and you need to be at peace with yourself.”*

You notice that participants have not taken ownership as they account these expectations. They used phrases like “you should” as though they are rehearsing someone else’s expectations.

Subtheme 1B: Self exploration: searching within while questioning themselves vs description of their self esteem.

All participants shared statements exploring their thoughts about ‘self’ as they searched for the words to articulate and identify themselves as well as their feelings towards themselves.

Jay explained, *“Well, what makes me, me? And what do I think about myself? Am I a good person and all of that, then you really don't have to worry about anybody else.”*

Leigh stated, *“I think that self-esteem is basically what you think of yourself and how you perceive yourself.”*

Boutique elaborated on her thoughts by sharing, *“does self-esteem mean how you feel about yourself? I would say, I know challenging, caring and reliable.”*

Participants were asked to pick three words to describe their self-esteem and elaborate on the word selection. All of the participants took time to process this inquiry prior to answering the question. A few of the participants asked for help with word selection, but they were encouraged to share the words that best resonate with them. A few participants' descriptions would be contradicted later on in the interview in the self-awareness section.

Boutique continued, *" I would say, I know challenging would probably be one. Caring and reliable. For challenging, I would say I picked that because some stuff in life, you have to choose two options or more than one option that you have to face and it may be hard. Caring I would say, because I'm always nice to people. No matter what if I have something that somebody don't, I'll always help them out. And for reliable, if somebody tell me something you could trust me. And if they tell me to do something, I'll do it and get it done."*

Jada said, *"spontaneous, unexpected, and unbalanced. My self-esteem, it's like 50/50. Sometimes it's there, sometimes it's not, and so I felt like those words describe it good enough."*

Zy shared her description of her self-esteem as *"bold, big and high. I would use bold because I think I'm very bold. I pick big because I am very confident when it comes to talking to people and I'll pick high because I always bring (lift) myself and others up."*

Core Theme 2: Organizational Resources

Bell (1992) outlined that educational framework leads to enlightenment. The second core theme addressed the two main places where participants spend most of their

time which is in school and within their communities. From the data emerged these influences; participants shared their experiences of support or the need for support while expressing the impacts of these organizational resources. The community subthemes focus on the influences of the Dream Girl organization.

Subtheme 2A: School: supportive staff vs lack of support

Participants reported that they felt supported in some spaces and the lack of support in other spaces. Participants noted that teachers, administration and counselors influence their sense of wellbeing in those spaces. In spaces of support, participants shared their ‘go to’ personnel.

Boutique explained, *“It is one of my teachers, Mr. Butler. I'm very close to him. I always talk to him and share a lot of stuff. Certain stuff we learn about I be shocked about it, so I share it with him so I can learn more about it.”*

Jay said, *“I talked to my math teacher and she always listens and she gives you advice on what you should do and stuff.”* Then referring to her school counselor, she stated, *“She does the same thing too, she will listen, she'll always give you advice. She'll help you out and stuff.”*

Leigh shared, *“When I speak to my teachers and counselors, they usually tell me stuff like don't go there and pay attention to that. When you go into a test, they say don't psych yourself out and to have confidence and stuff like that.”*

Participants noted some resentment regarding the support they feel they did not receive and the impact it has on their feelings. They shared their lack of support they feel in school as well.

Leigh shared, *'when I was transitioning, because I went to virtual the first one and a half years in middle school, then I went back my last year. It was really hard for me to adjust, going back to school on campus'.*

When referring to her counseling office, Jada noted *"they don't care or do anything? They'll just be like, "Oh, okay, well we'll keep you separated from them," but that didn't really do anything."*

Zy admitted in her reflection *"There aren't any workshops, but in the library, there's a section of books about self-esteem. When I get A's and B's, they call me to the counselor's office and I get an award. Sometimes they do it in the middle of the year. Most of the time they do it in the middle of the year, not in the beginning or the end, but sometimes they do it in the beginning of the year."*

Leigh stated, *"When people are depressed or stressed, or need a break and need to talk to someone about it, just create a safe environment for that."*

Subtheme 2B: Community organization and the feeling experience during attendance.

Community organization aimed to enhance positive relationships with self and others through advocacy (Westhues et al., 2001). Convergent across all participants were shared experiences of self-care shared in the space of the Dream Girls conference and

events. Community advocacy combine creative arts with information. Participants recalled their experiences.

Boutique recalled, *“When I attend, they would have little dances then after the dance, we would talk about life and why should believe in yourself and what goals you should achieve when you get older and how you should achieve them.”*

Jada said, *“It was nice to see a lot of girls out there. I think I did make a few friends.”*

Jay shared, *“Getting to be around people that you enjoy being around. Well, I feel more confident with my family and with my friends, because they're the people that really know me and I could be myself around them.”*

Leigh expressed, *“I started going and it really helped a lot with a really bunch of different things, like confidence and self-awareness and a bunch of that stuff. I remember it was this lady speaking about self-empowerment and how you had to be content with yourself. And I really understood that.”*

Zy recalled, *“I like the fashion show part. And then I liked when they were talking about self-esteem and confidence. It made me more confident about my self-esteem, because of how they taught me more about self-esteem and it made me more interested in it.”*

All participants were asked if their thoughts of self-esteem would differ in comparison to someone who had not attended an empowerment event. Many of the participants recalled their experience prior to attending the event and their current thoughts of themselves.

Boutiqueue stated, *“it shows me how to love myself as a female and that I won’t depend on a man to help me and I could be very independent and beautiful.*

Because some girls don’t know their worth and some girls can hang around other females that don’t really be their true self. They would just hang around to be a part, to fit in, but they won’t really be their self but once they have self-esteem, they’ll really be their self and know who they are and be happy for who they are.”

Referring to her peers Jay said, *“they might not understand themselves like I do understand myself or they might not know how to love themselves.”*

Zy shared, *“I think it can be different. Some people’s self-esteem who probably didn’t go is more negative than positive. If you go, it can get more positive.”*

Jada reflected, *“I feel like I would have a higher understanding and a better self-esteem than the person who hasn’t gone to the Dream Girls.”*

Participants articulated that the most influential impact of Dream Girls organization was the discussion of self esteem which allow them to familiarize themselves with the language while observing the behavior of what confidence looked like through mentors, speakers, and volunteers. During the annual conferences hosted by this organization, participants shared that creative arts such a dance, music, art and fashion were used to model what confidence could physically look like when someone pursues their passion. The girls connected finding their passion/purpose as a key compound to a healthy self esteem.

Core Theme 3: Self Awareness

Participants reached the level of determined self-esteem by assessing the way an individual sees themselves, how others see them and the way individuals wish others viewed them (Dobrescu, 2013). Two subthemes supported the core theme, ideal self (what participants wish to have) and the reality of self (the way individuals see themselves).

Subtheme 3A: Ideal: stating what should be felt.

The ability to understand the influences and emotional state of well-being is reflected in their behavior (Cohen, 1959; Schutte et al., 2002). Collectively, participants were able to describe what they should feel about themselves. Participants stated things they “should do.”

Jay stated, *“You should encourage yourself.”*

Leigh shared, *“You should always love yourself.”*

Jada commented, *“You know, you should like love yourself.”*

Zy remarked, *“You should always be you and not try to be someone else that you're not.”*

Participants have heard these phrases so often they have not taken ownership and refer to their ideal self as though they are speaking to someone else. These are things that the participants feel they know or they feel should have or they feel about themselves because they are being told to feel that way.

Subtheme 3B: Reality: identifying thoughts of self vs self-worth influenced by performance.

Identity development has been linked to daily interactions, societal norms and experiences (Gross et al., 2022). All participants indicated established feelings about themselves. Participants shared they often attach their self esteem to a person, place or a thing.

Leigh commented, *“Self-esteem is you loving yourself and not really paying attention to what people say about you, and just living your life and enjoying it.”* She continued by stating, *“Well, my expectation is that I always think about myself and how I feel about myself. And try to be confident, and kind and nice towards others.”*

Jay said, *“You basically have to think about yourself first. You can't really think about what others think of you.”*

Jada stated, *“I'll be really confident in myself and then some other days, I'll just not feel really confident and have a lot of negative thoughts.”*

The strong connectedness to peers while feeling supported in educational spaces was evident in the analysis of participants (Karcher, 2008). Participants offered accounts that demonstrated patterns of self-worth being tied to school performance. Participants describe how they feel when they received good grades, and they connect their academic achievement as an influence on their self esteem.

Leigh expressed, *“When you make good grades, well at least for me, when you make good grades, it boosted my confidence and my self-esteem a lot and it just really made me more happy.”*

Zy stated, *“I think it impacts my self-esteem for the better, because I feel like getting good grades is a good way to lift my self-esteem.”*

Boutiquee shared, *“It [school] made me feel happy, but at the same time, certain stuff were just hard to complete, but I was able to get it done.”*

Core Theme 4: Race and Culture

The final core theme emerged as participants expressed their experience with the impacts of race on their self-esteem. The intersectional nuances race is expressed as stereotypes, prejudice or low expectation (Joseph et al., 2016). Within this core theme, there are two subthemes: race and culture. Race and culture are thick descriptions that must be broken into subthemes for participants to share more of those influences. To support each sub-theme are direct quotes from the participants.

Subtheme 4A: Race: I don’t know why race is a big deal vs I feel left out because no one else looks like me in this space.

Analysis of the data revealed that participants encountered multidimensionality of oppression faced by people of color (Delgado, 1989; Joseph et al., 2016). Participants shared descriptions of their lived experiences with race as they offered their perceptions of racial encounters. Participants shared the negative influences race has on their self-esteem. Collectively, these participants articulated the expectation of acceptance

regarding racial injustices while internalizing their discomfort to meet society's expectations of tolerance.

Jay said, *“Since I’m Black and stuff, I always question why is it so.. Why is it so bad to be Black, not only being Black but being something other than White? Why is it so bad? And why do they stereotype? Why do they stereotype us and other cultures and races?”*

Boutique shared, *“It doesn't matter the skin color of how you look, it just can show you how different people can have different talents and do different things that you probably can't do. It helped me open up to new things like languages, and just a lot of creative things.”*

Leigh expressed, *“Well, I feel like as a Black girl, I have to have a lot more confidence going into the world than other races or other girls of my age. And I have to have a lot of strength. Well some people perceive Black girls a certain way and to not be perceived that way you have to have self-esteem and be at peace with yourself and know who you are rather than what others people see you as.”*

Subtheme 4B: Culture: Cultural labels are not favorable for people who look like me.

The images of beauty portrayed are harmful to females who do not meet those standards of beauty (Mikie, 1999). During these conversations about race, race often intersects with culture normal expectations. Participants recalled the ways those cultural

norms impacted the way they felt. Participants share their disdain with cultural stereotypes and the way culture influences their self esteem.

Zy explained, "Some people could say good things and compliment my skin color, and then other people could say like bad things about it. It makes me feel happy when they say good things, but when they say bad things, it doesn't make me feel sad. It just makes me feel like... Like angry."

Jada shared, "It doesn't really impact me that much, but it kind of does because society now, it's little beauty standards or whatever. They're like, "Oh, you need to be thin. You need to have blue eyes, blonde hair and stuff like that." And when I see that I'm like, "Oh, well, why can't I be the beauty standard too?" And it makes me feel like I'm not pretty enough or good enough to be a beauty standard or be liked by others."

Jay expressed, "Well, one time when I was at volleyball tryouts in the beginning of the year, I felt discriminated against because I was the only Black girl there and all the rest were White girls. And none of them talked to me, so I felt left out."

This study was done to better understand, through the lens of African American middle school girls, the phenomenon of self-esteem. Participants shared their personal accounts, through vivid descriptions, that answered the proposed research question of this study (what are the experiences and perceptions of 'self-esteem' among African American adolescent girls who attend girl empowerment organizations?). Participants perceptions of self-esteem collaborated with interactions with teachers/counselors/family/community and their thoughts about themselves. Many

participants view themselves as confident yet expressed difficulty to keep that outlook. Although convergence was evident in the findings relating to community organization participation, participants were able to recognize the difference the organization has made for them in comparison to their peers.

What we knew prior to this study is there is growing literature on adultification and discrimination of Black girls in both educational spaces and community space. We knew that self esteem is foundationally established in early stages of development. We also knew prior to this investigation that low self esteem causes severe emotional, physical and psychological harm. What we know now after this study is that this community empowerment organization, Dream Girls, provided the space for Black girls to gain emotional intelligences to articulate the ways in which they process their emotional and behavioral awareness. This investigation fills the gap that community agencies normalize Black girlhood experiences by providing spaces for self exploration.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the data collected from five interviews and a focus group were analyzed using phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994). Emerging from participants' accounts of self-esteem were four core themes that highlighted their experiences and perspectives. In Chapter Five, I summarized and interpreted the finding results of this study. The implications for counselors and community leaders were discussed along with recommendations for future studies to conclude the chapter.

Table 4.1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Age	Grade	County	Dream Girls Attendee
Leigh	AA	Female	14	8 th	Lexington	Yes
Boutique	AA	Female	13	7 th	Georgetown	Yes
Jay	AA	Female	13	7 th	Georgetown	Yes
Zy	AA	Female	13	7 th	Lexington	Yes
Jada	AA	Female	14	8 th	Charleston	Yes

Table 4.2 Core Themes and Supporting Quotes

Core/Sub Themes	Supporting Statements
Core Theme 1: Uncertainty	
Sub-theme 1A: Expectation of others	<i>You have to have a lot of confidence and you have to have a lot of strength and you need to be at peace with yourself.</i>
Sub-theme 1B: Self-exploration	<i>Well, what makes me, me? And what do I think about myself? Am I a good person and all of that, then you really don't have to worry about anybody else.</i>
Core Theme 2: Organizational Resources	
Sub-theme 2A: School	<i>When I speak to my teachers and counselors, they usually tell me stuff like don't go there and pay attention to that. When you go into a test, they say don't psych yourself out and to have confidence and stuff like that.</i>
Sub-theme 2B: Community	<i>I like when they were talking about self-esteem and confidence. It made me more confident about my self-esteem, because of how they taught me more about self-esteem and it made me more interested in it.</i>
Core Theme 3: Self Awareness	
Sub-theme 3A: Ideal	<i>Try not to become someone that you're not.</i>
Sub-theme 3B: Reality	<i>I'll be really confident in myself and then some other days, I'll just not feel really confident and have a lot of negative thoughts.</i>
Core Theme 4: Race and Culture	
Sub-theme 4A: Race	<i>I always question, why is it so bad to be Black, not only being Black but being something other than White? Why is it so bad? And why do they stereotype? Why do they stereotype us and other cultures and races?</i>

Sub-theme 4B: Culture

I'm not pretty enough or good enough to be a beauty standard.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Research Participant Needed

Who?

**African American
Adolescent Middle School
Girls**

What?

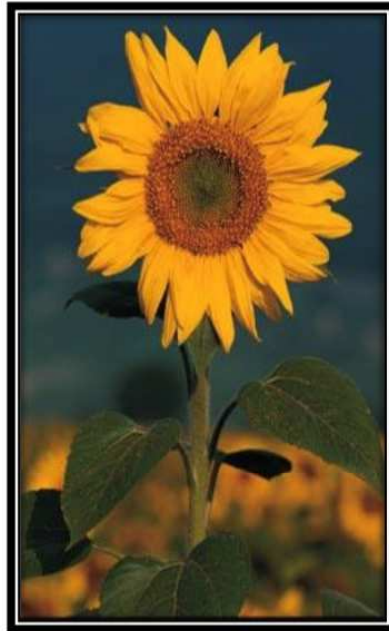
**Participate in an interview
and focus group**

Why?

**Inform clinical knowledge
of the experience of self-
esteem for black girls**

Gift

Earn \$10 for your time



Research Participant Opportunity

African American middle school girls are needed to participate in this research study, which seeks to address experience and perceptions around self-esteem.

If eligible to participate, you will be required to participate in one individual interview and a focus group where you will talk about your experience as African American girls.

*To learn more contact Monica at
843.330.9919 or
mfwade@email.sc.edu*

Monica Wade

Doctoral Candidate

Doctoral Candidate | University of South Carolina | 843.330.9919 | mfwade@email.sc.edu

Figure 4.1 Recruitment Flyer

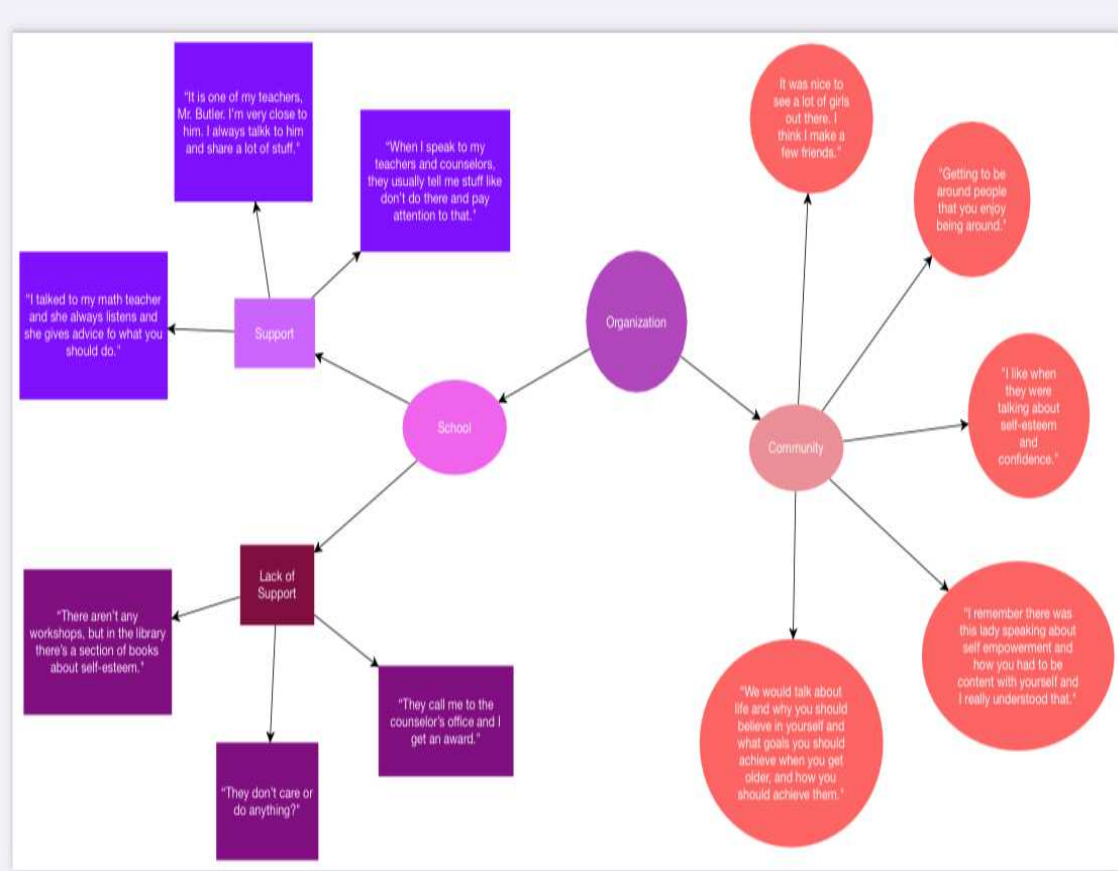


Figure 4.2 Conceptual Map of Them

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate experiences and perceptions of 'self-esteem' among African American adolescent girls who attend girl empowerment organizations. Learning and understanding cultural differences enhance cultural competencies while shedding light on the disparities in counseling for minority adolescents. Despite the growing literature discussing issues of Black adolescents, there still remains limited research related to influences on Black girls that exclusively focus on the perspectives and experiences with self-esteem for girls who have attended empowerment organizations. Rich descriptions for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. The findings of this study offer a glimpse into the lived experiences of middle school girls in South Carolina who attend a local girl's empowerment organization.

The research question addressed for this study was, *What are the experiences and perceptions of 'self-esteem' among African American adolescent girls who attend a girl empowerment organization?* I analyzed data from five individual interviews and a focus group. The common themes across participants were collected, and based on similarities emerged core themes and subthemes.

Chapter 5 is broken down into six sections. The first section will provide a summary of the findings. This section will be followed by the theoretical considerations which highlight some of the discussion addressed in Chapter 2. The third section will discuss implications for counselors. The next section will share future research suggestions. The fifth section will contain the study limitations and considerations. The final section will conclude this study.

Summary of Findings

My purpose in conducting this phenomenological study was to explore the way African American girls made sense of their experiences of self-esteem. Analysis of Black girlhood experiences provided insight into participants' encounters with the phenomenon. The exploration of educational spaces and empowerment events had implications on how they perceived self esteem. Participants explored their thoughts around their lived experiences by answering questions. These findings will be shared according to the core themes outlined in Chapter 4.

Uncertainty

None of the participants have ever participated in a research study. There was an uncertainty that participants shared in the beginning of the interviewing process. Participants shared how they were nervous and oftentimes questioned their responses to some questions. The participants' uncertainty is a common part of adolescence developmental stages as outlined by Erick Erikson (Knight, 2017). All participants articulated a distinguished contract between other expectations of them and the self-exploration. Participants easily stated common phrases often articulated by others such

as ‘you have to have’ or ‘you should have’. Participants shared the expectations that came from their supportive group. The consensus of the participants of supporters, also described as their ‘community’, consisted of family, friends, church members and neighbors. Participants acknowledged that they receive guidance from this collective group on the acceptable ways of thinking and feeling while feeling the commitment of continual love and support. Furthermore, participants believed that they had to follow a behavior of self esteem that they have been told but unsure of the application of the process to achieve such esteem.

According to collective descriptions, participants share the expectation of “strength” as a main characteristic of self wellness. Participants noted that they are not aware of the character traits that would be determining factors of balanced wellness. Beyond being told the expected feeling, participants described being disengaged from the vocabulary needed to express their involvement in themselves. However, participants acknowledged the challenges they were feeling to define their self esteem. Many of the participants believed that self-esteem is a term that should be defined based on what it means to the individual and not a general definition. Leigh shares how self esteem is different for everyone according to what they believe about themselves and how they feel about the personal experiences. She believes that anything could change a person’s perspective of themselves, and self wellness varies from day to day. Other participants echo this same notion of self wellness being open to individual interpretation. Jay said, “People might not fully understand or they might not get it.” By ensuring spaces for conversations about self worth, participants felt it helped them explore their feelings and thoughts regarding their own self esteem journey.

The findings revealed within the core and subthemes added to existing literature on the generational trauma on wellbeing. Prior to this investigation, the literature focused on the influence of environmental struggles on self-esteem. The vivid details provided by participants help to uncover the root of generational impact and the stories of ‘self’ passed down that become the identities of girls. The literature also shares the expectations of others' impact on Black girlhood experiences (Annamma et al., 2019).

Organizational Resources

The second core theme emerged from the data as participants discussed the two resources that influence their experience with self-esteem; school and community empowerment organization. Participants in middle school have spent their whole middle school experience in virtual and in person spaces due to the Covid pandemic lockdowns. Similar to their school transitions to virtual spaces, the community empowerment organization that they have participated in have also been in virtual meetings as well as selective in person meetings.

Minority of the participants share that they have a supportive school administrator, teacher or school counselor that they communicate with when they need positive affirmations and encouraging self-talk recommendation during school hours. Participants indicated the need to have someone to speak with when they are stressed about assignments, friendships, bullying or social issues happening in the world. Collectively, participants shared how it felt to have a person to speak with when they feel stressed. Leigh shared the ways her teachers and school counselor check in on her to make sure that she does not ‘psych herself out’ before a test or exam. Many participants

indicated that their teachers, outside of academics, take time to speak with them about personal concerns and provide them with advice/recommendations. Through those detailed conversations, participants described their beliefs that those conversations aid in them having a healthy self awareness while leaving them with feelings of security. Although there is no formal procedure, it seems that many participants are utilizing teachers as an informal counselor while at school.

All participants noted that their school counseling offices do not offer workshops or events about self esteem. Many of the participants shared that they go to the counseling office when they are picking up an award such as A or B honor roll certificates. According to participants, the counseling offices focus on academic achievement and virtual learning accessibilities. All of the participants entered middle school during the COVID pandemic, and they have shared how they have felt disconnected with the virtual and in person transitions. Some participants shared some of the challenges with virtual learning and in person learning transitions that left them feeling disconnected. All of the participants shared workshop or session ideas that they would love to see the counseling office at their schools offer. All of the participants articulated that they would love to see small group sessions on self esteem and self worth. Majority of the participants shared the counselor's office focused on the 'important' issues like substance abuse with alcohol and drugs. Jay said she hoped the counseling office would open group sessions that focused on 'morals'. Collectively, participants came up with a list of topics they hoped would be offered with the school counseling office: self-esteem, depression, anxiety, races/diversity and bullying.

Participants described the need for more resources and support around self-esteem from school counselors. Zy vividly recalled only having conversations with her counselor about academics only. She shared that there is a section of books in the library about self-esteem that she discovered independently. Leigh shared that her school counselor office passed out activity sheets on self-esteem if students wanted to work on those. Some participants shared they are being bullied at school. When they have a conversation with their school counselor, the conversation consists of staying away from the person that is doing the bullying. Jada said they separate us, but that does not change anything. Jada continued with a recommendation that school counselors offer workshops on “how students feel about their self esteem and how bullying affects them and help come up with solutions.”

The conversation about resources is expanded as participants shared their thoughts about attending and participating in the girl empowerment organization called Dream Girls. All participants expressed their appreciation for the empowerment organization events. Some of the participants shared the sessions during the event they felt was impactful to their self esteem. Zy excitedly revealed that the session on fashion provided her the space to explore her desire to learn about self expression. Participants revealed that one of the most beneficial aspects of attending these events was the opportunity to be with girls who are like them. Many of the participants could not remember the name of the speakers of the sessions or their favorite session they attended. However, all of the participants shared their favorite takeaway, moment or the feeling they had about their self worth during the event and how they felt after the event was over. Participants shared they made new friends, and they enjoyed people sharing with

them various ways they can increase their self esteem. Participants vividly described having fun while the empowerment group incorporated music, dance and fashion to teach self awareness and self confidence. Majority of participants stated that their church is about their community. The empowerment organization conference and event were held at different churches prior to going completely virtual. Participants shared that they feel most supported when they are with family, friends and church members. Many of the participants shared their thoughts regarding their moral spirituality. Jay expressed that she wished school counselors would have conversations with students about having morals. A few other participants agreed as they shared their desires to learn more about other diverse groups that are represented at the schools.

The findings revealed within the core theme and subthemes, due to public schools being required to go to virtual learning due to the global pandemic, participants needed more resources from the school counselors' office. Prior to this investigation and global circumstance, school counselors were expected to offer sessions according to the needs of the student population. The vivid details provided by the participants show the need and the desire to participate in nonacademic conversations with the counseling office. The subtheme of community agrees with current literature that articulates the importance of community involvement in minorities communities and how it aids in the promotion of health and wellbeing (Harris et al., 2018).

Self-Awareness

Participants expressed that they have a better sense of self awareness now that they have attended events or conferences where conversations about self worth, self

confidence and self esteem have been discussed to enhance their awareness. Through their accounts of their lived experiences, participants identified several factors that made their growth of self esteem meaningful.

Participants perceived that collaborative relationships with friends and family would help them successfully identify their ideal self esteem. All of the participants articulated the same phrases that they all collectively have adopted ideally to define their identity of self worth. Participants shared that they must be resilient while ignoring any feeling of weakness or self doubt. Majority of the participants shared that they should encourage themselves, love themselves and they should always be themselves. Majority of the participants shared the belief that individuals must remain positive consistently in order to have a 'good' self esteem. While discussing the discomfort of the perceived perception people have on Black girls, Leigh shared her belief and mandate on herself to keep herself encouraged and love herself. Jada dived in by recalling that loving herself is needed. Participants shared evidence of an embedded cultural value of strength in their experiences with self esteem.

Majority of the participants realized that they have a tumultuous relationship with their self esteem. Participants vividly describe situations where they have moments of both joy and sadness about themselves. Boutique says that her self esteem is challenging as she described trying to choose which thought and feeling are acceptable when she faces hard decisions. Jada joins these conversations when she states that her self esteem is 50/50. She shared that sometimes she is confident while other times she does not feel as confident as she would like to. Participants acknowledge that they are confident; however, they do not feel confident in every situation. From their perspective, self esteem

is a knowing of self that is often challenged, but the love of yourself will be their consistent foundation.

The findings revealed within this core theme and subthemes were collectively determined by the participants. Participants add a new consideration of literature that explores the struggle with the ideal belief of their self esteem and the reality of what they feel about themselves. The consciousness of well-being does impact their emotional awareness (Sifers & Shea, 2013).

Race and Culture

All of the participants shared their interactions with race and the impact it has on their outlook. Participants recalled their lived experiences of racial awareness and the influences of cultural expectations impacting the way others treated them which reflected in the ways they view themselves.

Participants described race as a significant factor of their self-esteem and perceptions of themselves. For a minority of participants, the articulation of expectation of Black girlhood has been shared both verbally through aggressive communication or nonverbally through passive communication both in educational spaces as well as in their daily lives. Participants experienced several racial injustices over news broadcasts and social media within the past several months. Jay was candid about her thoughts of race, as she expressed her disdain for stereotype and racial supremacy. Jay vividly recalled instances where being the only Black girl left her feeling discriminated against by educators and her peers when she endured the challenges of trying out for a school sport team. Jay was candid about the disrespect and isolation she felt from potential teammates.

Leigh recounted times where she experienced racial stereotypes and the struggle not to be perceived negatively as often associated with people of color. When these situations occur, Leigh realized that she needed to quickly move forward and focus her attention on being positive and resilient. There seems to be no space or place for participants to express their discomfort relating to race or racism encounters. Minority of participants shared that race should not matter, and they question its relevance in their lives.

Throughout participants' accounts, their feedback related to race is often intertwined with culture influences. Although not all participants directly discuss their personal encounters with racism, several identified cultural expectations and misunderstanding that they have experienced. Zy identified feelings of anger as she confronted conversations regarding her skin complexion. She distinctly recalled conversations with some individuals commenting on her skin color with compliments of positivity in a few instances; however, majority of the time she receives comments of negativity. Zy shared her feeling as an emotional roaster coater relating to her color while striving to understand the cultural need to point out the difference among one another. Participants shared feelings of sadness and wrestled with expressing their feelings. Jada asserts her frustrations with cultural beauty standards that do not include her. She revealed her illustration of culturally accepted beauty standards of thin White girls with blonde hair and blue eyes. All of the participants collectively acknowledged that cultural ideals of beauty do not include girls that look like them. Many participants believe that others perceive them as problematic in comparison to their White peers. Consistent throughout the findings related to this sub-theme, many participants remarked that these cultural limitations show up in the school and during conversations with peers. Many

participants remarked that peers could benefit from culturally sensitive groups, and conversation from their counselor's office could assist in diversity awareness. Many participants indicated their desire for 'safe spaces' at school to discuss these difficult conversations about race and cultural biases while having the support of school administrators, teachers and staff.

For participants, regardless of their desire, it was impossible to divorce their perspectives regarding this phenomenon from who they are as Black girls. Nearly all participants described ways in which they either knowingly or unknowingly conveyed their feelings or thoughts around their race when sharing their personal experiences and thoughts about their self-esteem.

The findings from this current investigation extend existing literature. Many of the characteristics described by participants are documented in literature (Annamma et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017; Gordon, 2004; Mikie, 1999; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas, 2006). However, these findings add weight to the literature with participants unapologetically endorsing their disdain for enduring race targeted labels and being discriminated against in educational spaces. These findings help unmask the role that race, racism and cultural expectation play in the way participants see their self esteem.

Implications

The results of this study stress the importance of developing a broader understanding of emotional wellbeing while considering the influence of culture and community outreach on reimagining the involvement of the phenomenon. Specifically, understanding African American middle school girls who have been exposed to

conversations of self-esteem and how they make sense of their experiences with emotional wellbeing has been underreported in counseling literature. The generalization of wellness oftentimes does not include the counseling needs and emotional support for minority girls. To demonstrate cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness, counselors must acknowledge the implications that race and societal stereotypes hold towards the experiences of Black girlhood. This study takes a step toward filling the gap that demonstrates the specific experiences of emotional wellness for African American girls. The findings of this phenomenological study offered new insights and had implications for counselors and counselor educators.

Implications for Counselors

School counselors have daily access to this population. As advocates, collaborators and consultants, school counselors have the qualification to implement programs that address the emotional development of students (ASCA Ethical Standards, 2022). The participants in this study shared that they felt like their counseling office does not care about them, and the office does not provide a ‘safe space’. School counselors for these participants should consider being aware of the implications their daily interactions have on Black girls self esteem. Although school counselors are trained to advocate for students from all backgrounds, racial identities and economic status working with minority students require an integrative approach. School counselors are positioned to support students; however, they should have in depth cultural diversity training that discusses topics of race, racism and discriminator behaviors. The training would aid these counselors in cultural competence for counseling Black girls. Counselors should commit to becoming knowledgeable and refine their skills by first addressing their own beliefs,

behaviors and biases regarding Black girls. While understanding the institutional barriers within the educational system, school counselors should work to address the dynamics that impact the student's perspective of themselves.

Counselors should collaborate with community organizational leadership to develop activities, workshops, group sessions and trainings that will educate on emotional wellness for African American girls. Collaboratively, sessions that encourage diversity, self-compassion, and reassurance could model confidence while introducing a growth mindset wellness. Through this partnership and training, school counselors should commit to refining their skills as they become experts in spaces relating to self esteem with minority groups. CRT sheds light on the biases and discrimination that Black girls encounter, and school counselors should partner with school administration to recognize practices within the school that are hidden/discriminatory on this group. Then counselors can assist with the implementation of policies that could have a larger impact on the community.

School counselors should prepare to provide culturally relevant care while collaborating with the school counseling staff which consists of a social worker, psychologist and mental health counselor. Collectively, school counselors should be prepared to address emotional wellness and ethnic/racial related care. To support the self esteem for students, school counselors should consider utilizing school-based mentorship programs. They should consider using the models, peer mentoring guides, and preparing for a mentoring relationship outlined from the national mentoring resource center website. This national mentorship program is offered through the office of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention (OJJDP) which encourages positive peer connection

and healthy mental health. The aim of self esteem and emotional wellness work is to increase opportunities for girls to improve the quality of mental health and self awareness. School counselors should infuse mentorship programs in each grade level. Students could be mentored by another student in a higher-grade level while also mentoring. An example of this system, seventh graders could be mentored by eighth graders while also mentoring sixth graders. This may be beneficial not only to the students but to the school counselors.

Clinicians can assist these clients by using a feeling wheel to educate while also expanding the client's emotional vocabulary. It is important for clinicians to validate the client's experiences about self-esteem and the practical ways of implementing self-care. It is important to reassure the client. While establishing a working relationship, the clinician can demonstrate healthy boundaries and encourage clients to establish their own boundaries as a part of healthy self-care. The holistic approach to wellness within minority communities involves family and spirituality. Counselors should not make the mistake of believing that spirituality is not important to this group. A holistic approach involves the mind, body, spirit and soul. Counselors should ask the client what their spiritual beliefs and practices are to avoid making any assumptions. These clients are honest about their beliefs, and it has been passed down from their parents, guardians and community. Clinicians can incorporate skills of mindfulness and meditation. Clinicians should consider determining factors of positive mental health for African Americans while incorporating coping strategies for historical traumas. Counselors should also encourage clients to get physical screens which contribute to the health of their body.

In order to fully address this service gap and offer equitable opportunities for this population, counselors must remain committed to professional and personal development. In the absence of focused graduate training and pedagogy, counselors should seek professional development opportunities. Whether the counselors used those professional development training to meet peers or obtain a mentor in the field, consistent conversations and participation in wellness for diverse groups will ultimately improve the service for this population.

Implications for Counselor Education

The findings from this study support CACREP standards requiring counselors and counselors in training to diversify the training that includes both cultural and social diversity. Counselor educators have the responsibility to develop and teach curricula that instill the knowledge necessary for counselors in training to be able to work with diverse populations. Collaborating with community organization, such as Dream Girls, educators could gain insight to training, courses and outlines that are being used to positively influence self esteem. This concept will give counselors in training the opportunity to practice community connection while learning the impact community involvement has on the minority communities. Counselors should encourage culturally specific training for African American girls. Counselor educators should implement role-play exercises or mock sessions using scenarios from the news that give counselors in training an opportunity to familiarize themselves with topics of race while providing them with the tools needed to explore the experiences of people of color. These exercises will not only expose them to cultural competency but will also increase the counselors' cultural sensitivity. Through counselor educators' demonstrations, counselors in training will be

encouraged to have conversations with their clients about race, racial differences and racial injustices. By incorporating this, counselors in training will be confronted with their own overt and covert prejudices that oppress and resist these girls.

Future Research

The findings from this study affirm the importance of validating the emotional wellbeing and self esteem of the Black girlhood experiences. The girls who participated in this study provided rich descriptions of their thoughts and perspectives of their experiences that shape their self esteem. Participants articulated their accounts with peers, school staff, and community leaders; however, what remains unknown is the contributions and role their mothers and fathers play in their self-esteem. The significance of the relationship with parental figures formulate their identity which should be investigated to determine the impacts on their perception of their identity. Through this investigation, the need to explore this phenomenon over the duration of the entire middle school grade levels was discovered. Using a longitudinal study with mixed method design, future studies should research how girls define themselves through each middle school grade level while including the Rosenberg self-esteem scale.

Additional studies should investigate the experiences of emotional wellness for minorities across different cultures with a more diverse population. Participants of this study were all participants of Dream Girl empowerment organization, and they were all from the same regional area. There may be differences in the perceptions of self esteem for Black girls from other states or countries. Other minority cultures may also have a different sense of self esteem and wellness that differ according to their cultural identity.

Future studies should also investigate the methods of emotional wellness incorporated in community based organizations. Future studies should explore practices, activities, and exercises used to establish a sense of wellness. These investigations should focus on the ways the organization may equip counselors with a better understanding of best practices to use when working with this population.

Limitations and Considerations

The acknowledgment of limitation to any study is a vital component. In this session, it is my desire to share my recruitment strategies, data collection methods, research goals, and details surrounding this study while also addressing the known limitations. This information will provide the readers with an opportunity to consider the relevance of the findings of this study.

In this study, participants were recruited using the snowball sampling model. This technique allows participants an opportunity to recommend a potential candidate for participation. This recruitment strategy resulted in all of the participants being from South Carolina, and majority of the participants were a part of another organization who brought girls to attend the Dream Girls conference. This recruitment strategy impacted the participant selection while also limiting access to participation from other regions in South Carolina and other states.

Due to the continual restrictions for in-person events due to the Covid-19 pandemic, participation for this study met in a virtual meeting space. Despite the creative corporation on technology, I wonder how the interviews would have deferred if I met with participants face to face and how that might have impacted the findings of the study.

The focus group provided such rich description and information used to triangulate the data; however, only two out of the five participants actually showed up to participate. Despite all participants having the opportunity to engage in member checking and four participants confirming that they will attend, there is no way to determine how the findings of this study would have changed if all participants attended the focus group. The two no-show participants who rsvp'd for the focus group never shared their reasons for not attending the group. All of the research team members were able to attend the focus group; however, the research team was not involved in the coding of this last interview. The research team members had a discussion after the conclusion of the group. There's no way to determine if the team written codes for the focus group would have impacted the findings of this study.

As a woman of color, a researcher and counselor in training, my worldview is through the lens that reflects my experience and my culture. To establish trustworthiness, I engaged in various strategies that demonstrated credibility and dependability through writing positionality statements, reflective journaling, bracketing the data, member checking and utilizing the research team. I recognize that my personal and professional experience working with girl empowerment organizations could have potentially led to unconscious bias in my interpretation and understanding of the findings for this study. Although it was my goal to engage with the data as a researcher by recording my assumptions, attitudes and beliefs (Creswell, 2008), there is no way to determine with certainty the impact my prior experiences had on the findings of this study.

Lastly, the context around this study must be taken into consideration. Throughout this investigation, several historical phenomena transpired: (1) the outbreak

of coronavirus also known as Covid-19 which resulted in global lockdown, (2) murders of unarmed people of color which resulted in global protest of racial injustices, and (3) school districts through the United States discuss critical race theory in K-12 educational spaces. The covid lockdown started when many of the participants entered middle school. They spent the majority of their middle school experiences learning remotely from home. Participants shared their frustrations about having to adjust to the transitions of in-person learning after doing hybrid educational models for over a year.

While having conversations about race and racial disparities, participants would express anger, sadness, annoyance and frustration. The interviews took place after the murder of George Floyd. George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered in the street at the hands of police officers, and it was recorded by a teenage Black girl. There were marches and protests all over the world. The police officers were convicted of murder. During these conversations, race and policy were in the news regarding critical race theory, and books about race were being banned from libraries in several states. When participants spoke about race, they were angry and confused about why race is still such an issue. It was impossible for participants to ignore their fears and anxiety about historical books about segregation being removed from their school libraries. I am not sure the influence the world and culture of recent events plays on this study.

Regardless of the limitations and considerations, this study was worth investigating this underrepresented population, and I hope that the findings of this study extend the conversation of self esteem and wellness for Black middle school girls.

Conclusion

This study explored the experience and perspective of self esteem through the lens of African American girls who have participated in a community based girl empowerment organization. There were important insights gained about the emotional wellbeing of Black girls, the Black girlhood experiences, and how they understand themselves. It is my hope that this research study will shed insight for both school counselors and clinicians on the perception of emotional wellbeing held by Black girls while they work with these populations.

As a researcher and counselor in training who has served African American girls both in school settings and through empowerment organizations, I am pleased with the increased awareness provided by this study. My understanding of the challenges and perspectives of these girls has been expanded while bringing awareness to the necessary work that is still needed for this population. Moving forward I intend to continue research in this area, and I hope this work will also challenge others to engage in advocacy and understanding of the Black girlhood experience.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your self esteem.
Possible prompt: Can you share more about that? Elaborate

2. What impacts your self esteem?

3. What support have you received?
Possible prompt: Can you tell me more about that?

4. What lessons have you learned about self esteem?

5. What resource would help your self esteem?
Possible prompt: Can you tell me more about that?

6. Can you tell me about your experience with Dream Girls?
Possible prompt: What resources have helped?

7. How do you increase your self esteem?
Possible prompt: What resources do you use?

8. Is there anything else I should know about your experience or perspective of self esteem?

9. Is there anything you would like to add or correct that we have already discussed?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

I am Monica Wade. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my PhD program in Counselor Education and Supervision, and I would like you to participate.

I am studying Black/African American adolescent girls' perceptions and experiences of self esteem after engaging in a girl empowerment program. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a pre-screening questionnaire to determine your eligibility then a demographic survey about your age, gender, race, grade level, school name, county and if you attended a Dream Girls conference.

As a part of your participation, you will be asked to meet for an interview. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about your perceptions of self esteem, your experiences in Black girlhood, and your experience with the empowerment conference. Each interview will take place virtually (i.e. Zoom) at a mutually agreed upon time. The interview(s) should last between 30 minutes to 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio/video recorded, so I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The recordings will only be reviewed by members of the research team and will be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. At the start of the interview, you will be asked to select a pseudonym (also known as a 'fake name') to identify yourself. The information from this study will be kept in a secure location. The results of this study may be published or presented at a professional conference; however, your identity will not be revealed.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have about the study. You may contact me at 843.330.9919 or mfwade@email.sc.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Jonathan Ohrt, at 803.777.5427 or ohrt@mailbox.sc.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number listed above.

Please note that a copy of this form will be e-mailed to you. By signing this form, you agree that you understand what the study is about and you are willing to participate.

Print Name of Participant & Date

Signature of Minor Participant

Print Name of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Parent/Guardian

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. What is your race?
 - African American/Black
 - American Indian
 - Asian
 - Caucasian / White
 - Hispanic/ Latino
 - Native American
 - Another race not stated above:

2. What is your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Transgendered

3. How old are you?
 - 10
 - 11
 - 12
 - 13
 - 14

4. What grade are you in?
 - 6th
 - 7th
 - 8th

5. Which county do you live in?
 - Berkeley
 - Charleston
 - Dorchester
 - Other:

6. What is the name of your school?

7. Have you attended a Dream Girls Conference?
- Yes
 - No