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Navigating White Dominated Spaces: Black Women and Their Trials Towards Upward Mobility in White Collar Occupations

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Navigating White Dominated Spaces: Black Women and their Trials Towards Upward Mobility
in White Collar Occupations

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By

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This study uses place-sensitive sociology to analyze how black women experience oppression in places of achievement, specifically white-collar occupations. I look to highlight the unique challenges faced by black women due to the pervasiveness and inescapability of racial and gender discrimination. I ask, do Black women continue to experience discrimination in high-level occupations? If they do, how do these experiences inform their treatment, approach to their work, and their perceptions of the self? I explore these questions through interviews with nine black women professionals and analyze their experiences with oppression in the workplace, as well as their strategies in navigating these predominantly white spaces. Given the underrepresentation of black women in white-collar occupations, I found that participants consistently faced microaggressions and underestimation by higher-ups, coworkers, subordinates, and clients. Consequently, black women in my study felt compelled to proactively manage the white gaze and discrimination, sometimes resorting to silence as a means of self-preservation against harmful stereotyping. I argue that the utilization of organizational hierarchies enables the white gaze to determine what bodies are deemed legitimate, and otherwise reinforce controlling images that portray the subjugation of black women as natural, normal, and inevitable. My study follows black women through their navigation of white-collar occupations, from silent strategies to cutthroat self-advocacy. Through my research, it is evident that through whatever strategies black women utilize, the stickiness of racism allows for the perpetuation of gendered racism even in the most privileged of spaces.

Keywords:

Controlling images, Multiple Jeopardy, Organizational Hierarchy, White-Collar occupations, Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)

INTRODUCTION

Black women have historically experienced the brunt of gendered racial discrimination and anti-Blackness. The categorization of people and deeming respect with a basis on class rankings has created a society in which people are always looking to one-up one another and look down on those who do not succeed. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2018) "argues that the United States is characterized by 'racialized social systems' wherein covert, subtle processes that maintain racial inequality are legitimized by 'colorblind ideology'"(Omi and Winant 2014, Wingfield and Chavez 2020, p33). These subtle processes refer to instances like the usage of stereotypes. Similar to stereotypes, "controlling images," as coined by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, are used to improperly represent a group of individuals with a basis in racist and or sexist notions; for example, the Mammy or Angry Black Woman (2000). These foul images play a role in justifying the oppression of black women and operate on the multiple marginalized intersections of their identities. Previous literature helps us understand how black women are susceptible to inequalities in their value of life, but how do these stereotypes and structures of discrimination impact women who have supposedly "made it," and engage in white social norms and spaces?

Sociologists have found that Black women in all class levels are victims of *controlling images* (Collins 2000; Wingfield and Chavez 2020), the objective is "not to reflect or represent a reality [their respectable accomplishments and education] but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations." These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life (Collins 2000, p69). First emerging in slavery, controlling

images are key in maintaining intersecting oppressions. They allow the stickiness of racism to infiltrate even the most privileged of spaces, and perpetuate racism in both covert and overt forms to conform to their respective environments.

Scholars and literature have heavily paid attention to the livelihoods of low-income black women, focusing on how gendered racism impacts the most indigent of the population (Desmond 2016). With research on experiencing this disadvantage from the middle and lower class being plentiful, I look to more recent studies around Black women in white-collar workspaces and question how women who have beaten the odds of inequality are treated in places of achievement. I look specifically at black women working in white-collar occupations, which often means participating in predominantly white institutions, and where organizational hierarchies and racial stratification have a huge impact on the black woman's experience in the workplace (Wingfield, Chavez 2020). White-collar occupations can be understood as roles that require professional training or educational credentials, including doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Occupations are an important social metric in dictating the success of an individual (Wingfield, Chavez 2020). In a society where Black women are controlled by the image of the "Welfare Queen" and the expectations of laziness, "making it out" represents their success with upward mobility. The black woman is not only disadvantaged to succeed but also stereotyped as someone who does not succeed in an economic and social category due to their own failings and laziness (Collins 2000).

Just as Deborah King states through the concept of multiple jeopardy, black women experience a multifaceted version of oppression that attacks all aspects of their identity. Being so, inequality may look different across the board for black women, some may feel more impacted by gender norms while others organizational inequalities. This may be evident not only across

different workplace environments but across different professions within these environments as well. Similarly to this malleable and invasive aspect of oppression, inequality may look different across workplace environments. As Wingfield and Chavez explain,

> At the organizational level, policies, regulations, and norms may be written to be race-neutral but ultimately have a disparate impact on black workers - what we call 'organizational discrimination'. Bonilla Silva (2018) argues that these processes reflect the demise of the old 'Jim Crow style' *mechanisms of racial inequality and the subsequent rise of colorblind ideologies that legitimize subtler, more covert practices that maintain racial disparities*" (Wingfield and Chavez 34).

Highlighting the usage of pervasive forms of oppression within the workplace, whether they are hidden within microaggressions or a blatant disregard for the professional status of black women within the structures of white-collar occupations, this research sheds light on the perpetuation of racism across time and place.

Thus, my research question asks: how does pursuing upward mobility via their positions in white-dominated spaces impact black women's experience in the workplace and their perception of the self? I aim to show the inescapability of racism as a black woman and point to the practices that allow its perpetuation, even when they prove themselves on paper. How does racism persist once we remove educational and class differences?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Racial Discrimination: From the Media to the Board Room

Discriminatory experiences in the workplace are a rich area of study, as racial and gender inequalities rear their head in many forms. Stereotyping and organizational factors result in the fostering of continued oppression of marginalized identities in the workplace along racial and gendered lines. For black men, this can look like discriminatory promotional and hiring practices, ongoing racial harassment, and discriminatory firing (Mong and Roscigno 2009). These actions can be reproduced on the basis of race, status, and the particular workplace in question (Mong and Roscigno 2009). Research shows that white women can also experience gender discrimination in the workplacesuch as a discriminatory promotional and hiring practices, regulation on the types of jobs they are deemed fit for, wage disparity in comparison to their male counterparts, and sexual harassment (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Stainback, Ratliff, Roscigno 2011). Both groups are subjugated on the basis of underrepresentation or sex composition, where women and black people make up fewer numbers of the workplace population. This is where organizational structures hold the most influence and ability to perpetuate race and gender inequalities. However, in both cases, both groups benefit from the privileges of their intersecting identities, where black men benefit from male privilege and white women benefit from white privilege.

Though black women face the same struggles as white womenand black men, their intersectional experience has unique implications on how they experience and navigate the workplace (Hall, Everett, Hamilton-Mason 2011; Rosette 2018). For example, research shows that Black women are part of two distinct social categories, but not two independent experiences at work, their interpretations of the workplace are captured by the interlocking characteristics of

both race and gender (Rosette 2018). Along with the discriminatory practices that black men and white women experience, black women hold significantly less managerial positions, face general harassment, questioning on their decision making, and judgements on their hair and clothing choices (Pogrebna 2024; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). This experience is dictated by the ubiquitous system of surveillance of the white gaze which renders black women as guests or strangers in white spaces, consequently, forcing them to be aware of the ways their actions, words, and appearances may be perceived (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020; Hall, Everett, Hamilton-Mason 2011).

In addition to these specific forms of discrimination, sociologists have theorized about the ideologies and structures that lead to this differential treatment. As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues, **controlling images** are stereotypical narratives imposed on black individuals to shape their societal perceptions as well as social and workplace interactions (Collins 2000). These images emerge and evolve from slavery as a way to persistently affect African Americans' upward mobility. They do not reflect reality, rather they operate as a disguise that is designed to make inequalities appear natural, normal, and inevitable (Collins 2000), consequently eliciting **imposter syndrome** within the marginalized population. One of these controlling images, the modern Mammy, a take on the enslaved caretakers of white families in the times of slavery and segregation, is just one example that represents the modernized version of how racism has adapted to persist throughout the lives of black women. This study emphasizes the component of **multiple jeopardy** and **intersectionality** in the workplace of white-collar occupations, and how gendered racism exposes black women to specific discriminatory acts based on these narratives, such as organizational hierarchies and racial stratification (Wingfield 2007, Height 2008, Collins 2022).

In addition to the literature on discrimination and controlling images, previous work has suggested that the perception of racial inequalities differs by level of class, and impacts black women according to their activities within specific **spaces**, such as the workplace. This study is constructed using place-sensitive sociology, where place can be understood as a key player in the lives of individuals rather than a backdrop. It actively influences the daily lives and interactions of black women, becoming a medium for experiencing social class and positioning in the world (Dinzey Flores 2017). Work has been done around the increased feelings of discrimination upon close proximity or placement to inequality (Dinzey Flores 2017). My study highlights a group that is experiencing this phenomenon in their own way, they have 'infiltrated' predominantly white positions of power and are working within its structure. Due to the practices of these environments, they find themselves subjected to organizational hierarchies(Wingfield, Chavez 2020).

Stereotypes and Gendered Racism: The Case of Black Women

Previous research has shown that racialized experiences in white-collar spaces are primarily orchestrated by the expectation of conformity, living within the narratives set by stereotypes (Wingfield 2007, Collins 2000, Wingfield and Chavez 2020). Conformity can be understood as abiding with whiteness being the default expectation for the workplace and discrediting or oppressing those who do not align with this default, either by appearance or by action. This is the lens through which black bodies are deemed illegitimate. These studies on gendered racism in professional settings have discovered the role stereotypes play in workplace interactions for black women (Rosette 2018). For example, there is a presumption made from the controlling image of the 'Mammy', in the past, this label was used for a black woman who is the caretaker of the white man's family, often sacrificing her own personal life to fulfill their wants

and needs (Collins 2000). The 'Modern Mammy's image in white-collar occupations is that black women are easily controlled, and loyal, and take part in upholding white-dominated institutions with similar sacrifices (Wingfield 2007, Collins 2000). This makes black women susceptible to improper and inappropriate conversations, requests, and expectations in the workplace (Wingfield 2007), such as doing work below their expertise or receiving comments on their hairstyle changes.

The 'Jezebel', and the 'Welfare Queen' are controlling images that work to other black women as hypersexual and lazy, deserving of poor lifestyles, and undesirable members of the community(Collins 2000); further exploiting them to participate in the acts of the Mammy to appeal to white society, especially in workplace environments. Due to these stereotypes, Black women are not only expected to perform in the willing manner of the Mammy but to accept disrespectful treatment in order to avoid causing trouble (Wingfield 2007). The 'Welfare Queen' is codependent on government aid, and viewed as a materialistic freeloader, but how are black women who have earned materialistic lifestyles viewed in the eyes of society? The 'Jezebel' prays on the idea that Black women have uncontrollable sexual desires in order to label her as deviant. Black women learn to compensate for their stereotypes by being proactive and acting against them. The ramifications of not conforming to this behavior bring in the image of the 'Angry Black Woman', she is representative of a black woman who resists the role of the Modern Mammy, or does not accept mistreatment from colleagues, higher-ups, or subordinates (Wingfield 2007, Collins 2000). The refusal to abide by one stereotype, consequently labels black women with another, either submit or be ridiculed for their autonomy (Meghji 2018). For example, rejecting the sexual advances of a coworker would be considered rejecting a stereotype (Jezebel).

Some women purposely portray themselves to be more intimidating in order to be taken more seriously in their roles (Wingfield 2007). However, this portrayal, which can also be viewed as an act of self-preservation or having 'tough skin', is also perceived as not conforming and creates consequences in the same way the 'Angry Black Woman' does (Wingfield and Chavez 2020). In this sense, controlling images can be viewed as a way to not only control the portrayal of black women, but an attempt to control their actions as well. Research shows that the fear of being labeled as an Angry Black Woman, or Modern Mammy consequently has black women refraining from speaking up for themselves or inversely allowing themselves to be exploited (Atkins and Callel 2023).

Making it Out: Being Black in Places of Achievement

Not only are black women working against modern stereotypes, but the organizational structures of the predominantly white institutions they participate in. Despite being in high-status occupations, the persistence of racism works to infiltrate the lives of black women even when she has attained a respectable class position. Other studies on the racialized experiences in white-collar occupations, such as black doctors, nurses, and technicians show that the higher on the professional ladder you climb, the more you encounter covert forms of racism within the structure of institutions (Wingfield and Chavez 2020). Each level within organizational hierarchies are exposed to different forms of racism, or rather, racism takes on different forms in order to reach black women in different positions of life (Wingfield and Chavez 2020, Meghji 2018). This is an experience that can be acknowledged through the term Multiple Jeopardy.

Multiple jeopardy is a key term coined by Deborah King, to emphasize how black women are impacted by racism, sexism, and classism but each by distinct and individual means. This term allows for an understanding of how each separate inequality is able to affect these

women, showcasing how certain aspects of oppression are more prevalent for some women than others and giving a better lens toward understanding the role of controlling images in these institutions. This is important for analyzing each workplace's environment and how their practices create the specific dynamics of clients, coworkers, and higher-ups. Rather than solely experiencing blatant racist remarks or interactions, black doctors often experience negative impacts on their upward mobility within their professions. One example is the testimony of black women on the unwillingness of their white colleagues to sponsor, mentor, or serve as role models in their line of work, specifically white men (Wingfield and Chavez 2020). The lack of representation of black women in these fields only further submits them to structural racism of this sort. Controlling images plays a major contributing role in the expectations of black women as well as their treatment in the workplace.

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METHODS
Recruitment and Participants

     In order to examine Black women's experiences with racial and gender discrimination in the workplace I embarked on a qualitative study aimed at analyzing how black women navigate being perceived in the workplace and ultimately its impact on self-perception.

     For my research, I have recruited nine participants who self-identify as black women and are working in a white-collar occupation. These occupations are those who perform professional services that require some aspect of education or training. I chose this group to capture the experiences of women who are well into their careers, as well as those with fresher memories of their career-focused education and their hiring process. This group was able to provide insight into the gendered racism that black women experienced while making their strides toward upward mobility and class attainment. In order to recruit participants, I utilized my Bard-provided email address to reach out to organizations that could point me toward individuals who may have an interest in participating in my project. Beyond this, I spoke with women across many platforms such as engineers, doctors, lawyers, and political figures; I reached out via LinkedIn, as well as through associations like NSBE (National Association of Black Engineers), The Association of Black Women Physicians, etc. Ultimately, the majority of participants I spoke with were from connections through family and friends in the workforce who were willing to share their experiences as well as connect me with others. In addition to purposive sampling methods, I also used snowball sampling, which consisted of previous participants suggesting their own acquaintances as possible future participants to identify additional interviews. This strategy is particularly useful for locating underrepresented participants in certain fields

(Wingfield and Chavez 2020) and ultimately gave me the most success when searching for partakers.

Originally, I intended to speak with upwards of 15-20 participants for my study. Unfortunately, my ability to find and connect with black women in these positions proved to be incredibly challenging, and once connected I often had difficulty with their availability and getting responses to set up interviews. After reading existing literature and attempting to reach similar populations, I recognized that my challenges in recruiting participants for this study are part of a broader pattern that reflects the low percentage of black women working white-collar jobs in the first place as well as their taxing professional roles (Wingfield and Chavez 2020). As you see in Table 1, all participants completed their Bachelor's degree with six out of the nine completing a Master's or Doctorate. They were in a range of professional fields, including social work, psychiatry, non-profit administration, engineering, and education.

Table 1:

Pseudonym	Profession	Education	Years in Occupation	Number of Job Changes
Isabella	Executive and Founder of (Organization)	Bachelor of Arts in Justice and Law, Master of Education	8 years	1
Rachel DO	Child Psychiatrist	Doctorate in Osteopathic Medicine, Double Board Certified	5 years	2
Tamara	Social Worker	Bachelor in Foster Care, Master in Social Work	15 years	3
Reese MD	Orthopedic Surgeon	Bachelor of Science: Biology, Doctor of Medicine, Currently in Residency	1 year	0
Kaisha	Non-Profit Health Administrator	Bachelors in Psych, Master in Health Administration	14 years	3
Jaden	Director of Strategic Partnerships and Sponsorships	Bachelor in Anthropology and Latin American Studies	4 years	2
Edibeth	Assistant Principal (retiring at the end of this academic school year)	Bachelor in Elementary Education, Master in Educational Leadership and Administration	30 years in Education, 13 in administration	2

Erica	Optical Engineer	Bachelor in Science and Optical Engineering, Master in Engineering (in progress)	3 years	0
Danielle	Administrative School Psychologist, Assistant Principal, Student Support Manager	Bachelor in Master in Psychology and Education	10 years	1

Interview Methodology

I conducted confidential semi-structured interviews with nine people that ranged from 30 minutes to an hour each, depending on the longevity of each participant's responses. Questions had a central focus on the general lived experiences of the participants within their workplace and their trajectory into their fields. Other questions focus specifically on soliciting answers to their racialized and gendered experiences in the workplace. If I were to conduct this study again I would ensure that I ask the participants what the expectations of their role are, followed by their account of a typical work day for themselves. I would do so to get a better understanding of the duties they attend to outside of their role expectations. With permission from the participants, I made audio recordings of each interview that took place in an agreed-upon setting, over Zoom. When conducting Zoom interviews I ensured that I was alone and in a private setting, and asked that participants use their own discretion in choosing their location. All interview notes, recordings and other materials were saved on a password-protected computer. For the sake of privacy and risk factors, each person's name and any other identifiable details are concealed in my research and assigned pseudonyms in their place. To ensure a mutual understanding, I also provided any necessary academic definitions pertaining to topics in my study prior to the interview and otherwise notified each participant of their right to any clarifications.

Data Analysis

When coding interviews I created a table that incorporated qualitative codes, the general characteristics of each conversation, separated by the pseudonyms of each individual, and further organized by occupation. Across this table, I looked for common themes and started to filter patterns within my research. From this, I was able to deduce the saliency of my project and analyze the major themes coming up in interviews using a color-coded system and mind map (attached in the appendix).

The intended audience of this study is organizations aiming towards more equitable work environments and to inform black and white workers alike on cultural sensitivity within the workplace.

FINDINGS + ANALYSIS

The ambiance of the workplace is manufactured by the type of work they produce, but also by the type of people that are within its setting. The type of work that an institution practices modifies the environment, and with that the kinds of oppression that black women face on a day-to-day basis. Sociologist Dinzey-Flores writes about the need to center discussions of inequality around spatial productions and representation of an unequal society because, through this lens, space becomes a medium for how people experience social class and positioning in the world (Dinzey-Flores 242). For example, a doctor who works in a public hospital will experience different forms of inequality that play on different jeopardies of their identity than a psychiatrist who works in a private practice. Although both women work in patient care throughout their day, here we see a difference in the exposure of who these women are interacting with; one is at the mercy of emergent public needs while the other has clients who actively seek out her professional opinion. In both positions, the default expectation of all workers within white-collar occupations is whiteness, whether that be by skin color or by conforming to white enactments. As Rableo et al explain in their study of Black women in the workplace,

> The presumption of whiteness dictates whose bodies register as 'legitimate members of an organization or profession, especially high-status roles (Carton & Rosette, 2011, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). Presumed whiteness is associated with two key practices: whiteness as default and depersonalization (Rableo 2008).

These expectations create an environment that permits and perpetuates racism, sexism, and ageism due to whiteness declaring who in society counts as "legitimate", which can be displayed in an array of different ways. In this section, I will analyze and compare the specific experiences of each participant as demonstrated by their workplace environments. By analyzing

the setting, population, and type of work that the participant is disclosed to, we will have a better understanding of the significance of the individual's environment on black women in the workplace and how it impacts how she is perceived and perceives herself.

As black women, an important factor of these participants' experiences in their environment has to do with the multifaceted aspects of their identities. When considering how intersectional identities, controlling images, and double consciousness influence how these women are able to navigate the workplace, it is imperative to understand the multiple jeopardies that coincide with how they are perceived and perceive themselves.

One of One: The Challenges of Underrepresentation in the Workplace

Within my study, underrepresentation was evidently a major factor in how black women experience and navigate the workplace. Underrepresentation works as a catalyst for the isolating and oppressive experiences black women endure and are a direct result of working within a predominantly white institution. Dinzey-Flores' (2020) work around space and inequality showcases that the number of interactions and contact people have with others who look unlike them enhances their perceptions of the distinct differences between groups, and therefore, emphasizes their perceptions of disparities. *'Against a Sharp White Background': How Black Women Experience the White Gaze at Work,* is another study that focuses on the white gaze as making up an environment with an ambiance causing black women to constantly be aware of their positionality. Claudia Rankine's art piece, "I feel the most colored when thrown against a sharp white background" (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020), is illustrative of the consciousness that the black women participants in my study discussed around the way the white gaze perceives them, such as white supervisors, clients, coworkers, and the predominantly white institution itself.

The lack of representation can be viewed within the majority of my participant's work environments, where they describe themselves as one of the few black people working within their white-collar occupations. When working these jobs, there was not one participant who had more than 5 black people working above, below, or alongside them in the workplace. Five out of nine participants noted having zero black men or women working in the same position level as them or higher, and out of those who did have other black people in the workplace, it was noted that they were all working lower-ranking jobs. Among these numbers, there are even fewer black men than black women within these white-collar occupations. Research from Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009), studies white employers and their preference for black women over men because their gender makes them more easily controlled. This ideology comes from the controlling image of the Mammy, where the black woman is expected to serve white people and organizations without complaint (Collins 2020). The insufficiency of diversity within these institutions alone is enough to exacerbate inequality for these black women (Dinzey-Flores 2020; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020), but my study works to look beyond those immediate inequalities and pinpoint the distinct oppressive practices of the white gaze, the organizations themselves, and its impact on black women's experiences and responses to inequality.

In my study, there are distinct differences in the way black women are treated, respected, and considered for opportunities within the workplace. The ramifications and even causations of these inequalities are visible in the absence of black women in top-level positions. Consequently, my study reveals how they have a significant impact on black women's access to mentorship, social networking, upward mobility, as well as workplace acceptance and respect. A dire example from my research can be found in my participant Reese, who is an orthopedic surgeon. Orthopedics is one of the most white male-dominated professions in the medical field and this

lack of representation of other groups is evident within the very tools they use for work. As

Reese explained,

> Women in orthopedic surgery… the stereotype is like ortho bros, so you think about the guy that benches 500lbs and squats 250lbs. We have to do lots of procedures that take a lot of strength, and so I think there is this negative connotation that if you are a woman you might not be able to do this job, which in reality this is not the case. I have colleagues that are 5 foot 2 and 120lbs and they do the job just fine. Now the mechanics may be different, we might not do it the same way, we might not be able to hold our instruments the same way, but that doesn't mean that it can't be done, it's just a different way of doing things. So that's also where having female faculty is really important because they can kinda help you navigate those spaces of like 'Hey, I can't really do this procedure this way because my body physically won't allow it' or 'Hey I can't hold this instrument a certain way because my hands aren't big enough'. Instruments are made for male hands so how do I hold this instrument to be able to do my job properly? So those are all things we kinda have to deal with, and can be perceived negatively by our male colleagues (Reese, Orthopedic Surgeon).

The experience of women in this field goes to show how important it is to have representation of

all genders in the workplace, not only when it comes to having access to this kind of guidance to

navigate inequalities, but in producing working materials that are not only suitable for men. With

the structural, organizational, and individual disadvantages black workers encounter, there is no

confusion as to how they are underrepresented in many professional jobs and have few black

workers to whom they can turn (Wingfield, Chavez 2020). Reese's recount of her experience and

her specificity on being perceived by male colleagues aligns with research from Rosette and

Shelby (2018), where they discuss the connecting experiences of race and gender within the

workplace in order to better understand how different subgroups of women experience

subordinate status at work. Many of my participants perceived most of the mistreatment and

alienation in the workplace as related primarily to their race, but through this literature, it is made

evident that the two are not separable in that sense; as race and gender are both immediately

detectable and chronically salient (Rosette, Shelby 2018). With this in mind, it can be understood

that black women are constantly receptive to a gendered form of racism, which are two distinct social categories but not independent experiences (Rosette, Shelby 2018).

One practice that allows for these oppressions to appear naturally is the usage of organizational hierarchies that are based on gendered racism rather than employment level (Megjhi 2019). Otherwise known as racial stratification, which alludes to the hierarchical organization of people based on race (Megjhi 2019; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020; Collins 2020). Through white organizations and white people utilizing these methods, they create a default of whiteness being the sole recipient of workplace success and legitimacy all while giving themselves the power to deem what bodies are legitimate for prestigious work (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). Not only is this social norm of whiteness as the default evident within white institutions but in black institutions as well. These methods influence the double consciousness of black elites to conform their practices and businesses to the white gaze. This can be understood as respectability politics, a term used to show the assimilation tactics of black elites to achieve upward mobility and gain respect from the majority. This assimilation can only be done via the usage of double consciousness and perceiving themselves through the lens of the white gaze (Du Bois 1903). I look to uncover the causes and consequences of organizational hierarchies within predominantly white institutions through the experiences of black women and their responses to unjust treatment (Wingfield, Chavez 2020).

One of my participants provided a unique perspective on racial stratification in the sense that she does not conform herself to the white gaze by any means. Edibeth, who works as an assistant principal of one of the largest freshman academies in the Midwest, says she is the only black person working in administration and with 173 employees she is one of four black people in the entire building, two being women and one man, all working below her in paraprofessional

jobs. Despite this racial makeup of her workplace, she manages to 'pay no mind' to the prejudices she experiences from supervisors and parents. Through my research and her testimony, I find this to be a direct relation to her originally being from the Bahamas.

> I am from a culture and a space where everybody is like this (black). Doctors are like this. Lawyers are like this. It's not a surprise to see a black person in a position of hierarchy for me. So I just operate as if this is just the way it's supposed to be. You know what I mean? I don't allow how I could react to mistreatment be a thing in my life(Edibeth, Assistant Principal).

Out of nine participants, she is the only one who did not mention, either directly or indirectly, experiencing imposter syndrome in the workplace. Research from *Against a Sharp White Background* equates with this finding as it talks about how a black woman realized "they do 'not always feel colored', especially during her childhood in a mostly black town" Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). The importance of representation is so evident here, as Edibeth showcases the type of confidence that comes with having people come before you due to her upbringing in the Bahamas. On the other hand, Erica, who is an optical engineer, had a very contrasting experience when entering her field. Coming from a university that was predominantly white, she experienced alienation to an extreme extent, in which her peers made it clear that they did not want to work with her and she had no one who looked like her within her field to look up to.

> I literally thought I was the only black woman out there in the world who does optical engineering, because when I tell you I've searched high and low like I went to conferences… even in undergrad I went to the registrar's office to find if anybody could possibly have graduated before me because, after all, the institution has been there since 1850. Nobody? You mean to tell me I'm really like the first? So I gave up(Erica, Optical Engineer).

Erica is a perfect example of how the lack of representation of blackness in white-collar occupations is a disservice to not only the upward mobility of black people but also their

motivations to attain those positions and education at all. Instances like these are carried with individuals throughout their lives, and in my research, the stickiness of these experiences is the culprit of imposter syndrome; whereas the white gaze regulates black people's routines and perceptions of themselves (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). Imposter syndrome serves as a product of underrepresentation as it causes black people to feel isolated in their work and feel as though they do not belong. This will prove to be a prominent experience for black women in the workplace in future sections.

Blatant Racism: Like a Slap in the Face

Throughout my interviews I found that the most common experience of discrimination and inequality is in the form of covert practice, where white supervisors, coworkers, and subordinates have the privilege of hiding behind statements that make you think "was that racist?", such as microaggressions or practices that happen behind the scenes like promotions and salaries. These covert statements and practices are reminiscent of the theory of colorblind racism, as explained by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla Silva, wherein others perpetuate racist microaggressions without having to mention race directly (Bonilla Silva 2006). However, I found that there are still environments that expose black women to blatantly racist and sexist remarks from individuals who can be described as clientele or patients, and these acts are often not denounced by supervisors (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

Kaisha is a licensed psychologist who works in health administration and is one of many participants who has held multiple jobs within her field. She and her assistant are the only two black people, men or women in the entire institution. Throughout one of her experiences administering care and resources at a senior center in the South, she was constantly faced with forms of racism, sexism, and ageism. Kaisha dealt with some of the most blatant forms of

oppression expressed by participants due to the environment of this workplace and the lack of support she received from higher-ups. Although it was her role in this leadership position to right the procedural wrongs of this institution, Kaisha says that her position as a black woman made this a difficult task. She remarked, "It was very silly of me to think that I could come in and enforce rules because we know what goes down in the South"(Kaisha, Psychologist). What is most important to note here is her perceptions of inequality and the ways in which racism hindered ability to manage difficult work situations (UN-Habitat 2008). Research tells us that an individual's perceptions of inequality are informed by their relative status within the social hierarchy, as there are political consequences and impacts on her well-being at work (Kuegel and Smith 1981; Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch 2001; Graham and Felton 2006; World Bank 2006; UN Habitat 2008; Dinzey Flores 2017). Kaisha's comment about the role she holds in contrast with the power she actually has due to others' stereotypical thinking shows a certain awareness of her environment and the practices that go on around her.

Although Kaisha is working within a white-collar and otherwise 'privileged' space, she finds herself aware of and perceiving the mistreatment of herself and her assistant, which is actually exacerbated by the environment itself. Through this experience, it is evident that class and higher education are no defense against subjugation and Kaisha feels this indifference directly. "I looked younger than I was, and with that plus the color of my skin, no one wanted to hear me or listen. They never supported the decisions I made. If it came out of my mouth it wasn't going to go over well"(Kaisha, Psychologist). She explains how working for and with rich white people comes with a lot of microaggressions, and they did not even always have the awareness that they are doing it. This lack of awareness is permeated through the lack of

representation in higher positions as well as through systemic racism which by definition is meant to make oppression look natural, normal, and inevitable (Collins 2020).

Another participant, Tamara, is a social worker who experiences very similar forms of oppression from coworkers and lower-income white people working in foster care. An example of this lack of awareness that white individuals often have can be found in the interactions she would have during home visits. During her interview, she shared that some family members would go out of their way to showcase their ability to interact with black people and use Tamara as a way to confirm these interactions. For instance, she recalled that these family members would often talk about "things they did when they were younger" which I was not given a specific example of, saying "They just feel obligated to tell me all these things, they get to confessing all their sins to make themselves feel better" such as "You know times were different back then" and "A black man helped me change my tire once" (Tamara, Social worker). Tamara shares that these statements made her feel as if she is the spokesperson for all black people and that she was being used for them to declare they are not racist through her. She describes these conversations as "confessions" which is intriguing because it implies not only their guilt but the consciousness of it. Her words are reminiscent of scholarship that points to how white individuals use "diversity language" to position themselves as more righteous despite putting in little effort to address real policies and practices (Luhr 2023)

Surprisingly, Tamara is the only participant to mention this sort of behavior and this is something I expected to see more of within my study. My thinking around this subject is that these clients felt comfortable sharing this sort of information as people who were in the safety of their own homes as opposed to the other participants who treat patients and meet clients at their

place of work; again using this idea around environment-informing behavior, and on both sides of oppression (Dinzey-Flores 2017).

There are also instances within the workplace where Tamara was directly targeted by coworkers. When asked how many other black people were in her workplace she responded,

> Me, at every job I have ever worked at… I notice it every day, from the time I wake up and prepare for the day I know that I'm gonna have to deal with the whites. It's a fine line I have to toe every morning to mentally prepare for work

This recognition and social isolation sets up the kinds of workplace environments she has been subject to in the past and currently. Just after she had received recognition for her hard work in a meeting, a group of coworkers and subordinates were sending emails back and forth that they had accidentally sent to the printer. An example of the writing that she shared with me said, "Congratulations to Tamara for getting it. But who gives a fuck". Her reaction to this was to bring the papers directly to HR, and when asked why she thought they had written this about her she said "Because I am black, and they are evil" (Tamara, Social worker). This gives a background for the isolation that she experienced in her workplace and a peek at how she is undervalued amongst peers. In Lacy's (2007) study on black elites, she writes about how black professionals speak to the racist interactions they had with subordinates and recounts how being black in predominantly white settings means fewer opportunities for advancement, being taken less seriously, and, as seen within these emails and home visits, frequent disrespect from coworkers, supervisors, and clients.

On top of the workplace environment being unwelcoming in this way, Tamara also experienced overt racial interactions through her home visits. She describes going into homes of people waving MAGA (Make America Great Again) flags and having to prepare herself for the kinds of conversations that come next. She talks about the state of some of the homes she visits

and recalls being yelled at and told that she did not understand world culture, "You don't understand" and "You just don't know how to be a redneck" in response to her trying to assess the home. Evidently, in these instances, these clients are placing assumptions about Tamara, her ability to relate to and understand their lives based on race, and her ability to perform the duties associated with her job. Within these interactions, these clients are utilizing controlling images as a way of assessing her skills and capabilities (Meghji 2019) to paint Tamara as incapable and intellectually inferior while working a job she is logistically qualified for. In this instance, her class status and certifications have no bearing on the treatment she receives. It is evident through both Kaisha and Tamara that whether you are of equal or higher status than clients, patients, or coworkers, the stickiness of racism will follow.

When experiencing these racist interactions, Black women in this study found few opportunities to address them. Kaisha, for example, states that no matter how delicately she would go about voicing her concerns to either patients or her bosses, it was never received well, and often received comments about her being aggressive in these conversations. A time she was given this label was when she was asked "ridiculous questions" regarding her appearance or ability to do her work, such as "Can I do my hair like that?" or "Do you know what you're doing?", whereas she said, "How can you not expect a ridiculous answer"? Black women are often perceived as hostile when displaying the same ambiguously aggressive behavior as white people (Duncan 1976; Collins 2000; Meghji 2019; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020), which in this case is ridiculous questions resulting in ridiculous responses. The controlling image of the "Angry Black Woman " is very prevalent here and is a common theme amongst many other participants who act with any assertion. Collins (2004) discussed this in depth when she explained,

the controlling image of the 'educated Black bitch' as one of black women with 'money, power, and good jobs [who] control their own bodies and sexuality'(145). The Black Bitch label is often assigned to Black women who fail to embody the extreme loyalty of the modern Mammy or who cannot uphold the image of the Black lady"(209). [The Black Bitch is also known as The Angry Black Woman]

Here, the expectation was for her to embody the image of The Mammy and serve without complaint; when she rejects this stereotype in any form she is immediately met with another, in this case, she has been labeled the Angry Black Woman (Collins 2020) simply because she was trying to do her job. For example, Kaisha describes a one-sided altercation with an older white man who stuck a finger in her face saying "No, I'm not listening to you, you don't know what you're talking about". The oppressive behavior she dealt with in this space got to a point where she had to enforce code of conduct rules in order to have people who acted in this way leave the center, and this is a direct relation to her supervisors not listening to her concerns and their inability to relate to the black experience. Instances like these lead this participant to stress how unsupported she felt while working this role, not only does this stem from patients but supervisors as well. A further analysis of this will be highlighted in the strategies and responses section of this paper.

Educated & Illegitimate: Credentials & Questioning

Through my study, I have been able to pinpoint the why behind black women's motivations for upward mobility. In high-achieving jobs that require training and certifications, I see a common thread of wanting to challenge the norms of whiteness in these occupations. This means that black women are working to be seen and raise the expectations of their abilities as well as their accomplishments, both individually and for the collective. Predominantly White Institutions reinforce the need to embody whiteness not only by appointing it as the default of success but also by presuming the incompetence of black individuals (Gutierrez y Muhz, Flores

Niemann, Gonzales, & Harris 2012). This works to undermine the previous work black women have overcome to get where they are today and create difficulty in moving forward, whether that be in their climb of the corporate ladder or in the way they are perceived by those around them and themselves. Although black women have worthy credentials for their roles within white-collar occupations, clients, coworkers, and supervisors can be found committing blatantly racist practices that question and undervalue black women in the workplace(Meghji 2019; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). In my research, this practice puts black women in positions where their aptitude and expertise are put into question and debased.

Multiple of my participants had experiences where they faced a parallel attitude of shock and underestimation towards their abilities as well as accomplishments. Reese, an orthopedic surgeon, for example, describes the preconceived notions that people have about what a doctor should look like. Wanting to challenge this image is one of the many reasons she chose this career path. "This field needs me", she says in her interview. In a profession where only 0.6% of that population are black women, Reese emphasizes the importance of her role of representation and more specifically the difficulties that come with that positionality. "I'll walk into a room and the patient assumes I am there to pick up their tray or bedpan rather than be their doctor, or they'll ask when the male doctor is going to be here". Her appearance, through gender and the color of her skin, immediately denotes her as someone incapable of being a doctor as she does not align with the default expectation of those working within this field (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020), but as someone meant to assist them. This is another example of how whiteness has the power to dictate what bodies count as legitimate and competent (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020), even within spaces where black women have previously had to prove themselves to be in the room. As Reese further explained,

I've had to overcome things. One time specifically that I can think of was when a patient didn't feel comfortable with me being their doctor, you know, and I'm like the primary person taking care of them. They were kinda being really aggressive about it, and things like this are not very few and far between"(Reese, Orthopedic Surgeon).

For Reese, knowing how underrepresented black women are in her field is both a motivator and an obstacle for daily interactions and expectations. Importantly, she shared that the experience of being seen as incompetent or unwanted at work (through patients who do not want to have her as their physician) was a frequent one. This goes to show how degrees and higher education do very little when it comes to changing this perspective of racism around the capabilities of black women. This is because whiteness often deploys representations of black people that are only applicable to racist ideologies rather than reality (Megjhi 2019).

Similarly, Rachel, a child psychiatrist, talks about her experience working in a fully white-dominated environment where she has the last say, "or at least [she] *should* have the last say". She talks about her role as something that did not sit right with her coworkers, specifically those below her, and without the proper education or certifications to do her job. Referring back to Lacy's(2007) study on black elites, where she notes that subordinates frequently undermined and lacked respect for black professionals in predominantly white settings. Again, this emphasizes that Black workers are taken less seriously, have fewer opportunities for advancement, and endure frequent disrespect from coworkers, clients, and supervisors (Chavez, Wingfield 2020). This is standard practice for white organizations. Sociologist Victor Ray (2019), for example, maps out the internal organizational hierarchies within these institutions and their hand in reproducing racial stratification as a means to create social norms(Ray 2019; Wingfield, Chavez 2020). These norms make racism in the form of credentialing, social interactions, and job sorting, which allow for black women to be positioned at the bottom of organizational hierarchies while making it appear natural, normal, and inevitable (Ray 2019;

Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020; Collins 2020; Wingfield, Chavez 2020). Rachel shared her

own experience with this when she said,

> I was the only black woman, and I was the doctor. For some of the women that I
> worked with that was hard for them to accept. Never the patients, I don't usually have
> trouble with patients, they come to me looking for what I have to say. But at work,
> when there's someone under me that doesn't feel like, they don't feel as though I
> should… It's either one of two things, they feel like they could do my job but they are
> not at that level, they've never gone through medical school, they've never gone
> through residency or a fellowship, or took the tests to be board certified, so you know
> that's that. But also sometimes they see something in you that they wish they could do
> or skills they wish they had, and they envy you for that and therefore they treat you
> differently."(Rachel, Child Psychiatrist).

Unlike Reese, Rachel describes the primary experience of racism as coming from colleagues

who hold a lower position in her organization than she does. Through my study I have been able

to note that this behavior around stratification can be a tool used by more than just bosses and

supervisors, but by subordinates and clients alike. An interesting aspect of this specific space is

that she did not have this same issue with patients because they knew who she was and wanted to

see her, it was her peers and subordinates who lacked hospitality and respect towards her. This is

where we see a contrast in work experiences. Whereas Rachel's patients chose and trusted her,

Tamara, a social worker, experienced racial hostility during her visits to certain homes, where

she dealt with clientele who may not trust her professional opinion. Meanwhile, Rachel often had

nurses and therapists undermine her credentials and ability to treat patients. In one instance

where it came up in conversation that Rachel is double board certified, she recalled that a

therapist she had been working with for quite some time expressed shock and surprise. Rachel

recalled her saying "Really?!" with utter shock. She describes this interaction as frustrating as

this is someone who she has worked with before and knows she is a good doctor. This goes to

show how even upon higher education and certification, black women are presumed incompetent (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020; Collins 2020).

This pattern of proving themselves on paper, and still being met with ignorance and underestimation is also evident within Edibeth, an Assistant Principal at a school. Parallel to Reese's and Rachel's experience with assuming patients, Edibeth has similar experiences with students' parents. She notes that before getting to look past the color of their skin, her black body is immediately deemed illegitimate for this type of administrative work (Meghji 2019; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

> I'll watch as parents walk into my secretary's office first, assuming the white lady is the principal rather than the black woman next door… Whatever the situation, I have had parents disregard who I am because, to them, what I have to say doesn't qualify past what my face looks like. That's why I hyperfocus on my why, which is the kids."(Edibeth, Assistant Principal).

This experience is another example of racialized assumptions in action. Anderson (2015) argues that black people are often victims of the 'deficit of credibility', which is a default assumption that they are lower class, and they have to strenuously convince people otherwise. This is a representation of how black women must work twice as hard to get in the room, and continue to work twice as hard to prove their right to be there.

For Edibeth, the questioning of her credentials is also appointed to her physical work, in this case, a program she has created to help 9th-grade students stay or get on track for graduation. On paper, the program has had impeccable turnout rates for students, and despite her pleading and attempts to convince higher-ups it has not been implemented for grades 10 through 12. "It goes nowhere except where I am"(Edibeth, Assistant Principal). Being in a predominantly white male space, she acknowledges that "if this program had been introduced by one of them, with the success rate that [she's] had, it would have been implemented years ago, and at first

ask". This statement goes to show an awareness of her positionality, not only around the treatment she receives but also the privileges that others have due to the role of whiteness as deeming legitimacy. It is also a reminder of the kinds of institutional blocks that prevent Black people from putting forth ideas, developing organizational interventions, and potentially being rewarded for their creativity and innovation (Ray, 2019).

In addition to this, Edibeth also faced negative consequences for her confidence,

> I'm strong in character too, sometimes people don't appreciate that strength and use it to put me in my place. Thinking that if we contain her, then I don't know if it empowers them or tries to debase me… I think that would be true. I shared with the superintendent what this work was doing for the students and I shared what his goal was for them, and still, that was 2 or 3 years ago. In the space that I've been in I think they admire what I am capable of doing with any race of people but… I don't even know how to put it, because I can't be them or in their head, because to me it's just so stupid. If this is our goal why don't we help these kids? You can just use the process so that the kids can be successful and my name doesn't need to be anywhere near it"(Edibeth, Assistant Principal).

Although Edibeth is someone who displays the least amount of self-doubt and overall holds a great amount of respect in her workplace, she is still faced with ignorant perceptions and expectations. We can refer back to research from Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009), where studies have shown that black women are expected to be more easily controlled and overlooked due to the intersectionality of their race and gender, and this is evident in her treatment from superintendents and principals. Nonetheless, a constant motivation for her despite these setbacks is being reminded that the work she does is for the betterment of the youth and their futures. This is something that is shared across six of nine participants and will be analyzed further in the Strategies and Responses section. Another participant who has a similar experience of "containment" is Danielle, an Administrative School

Psychologist. She also describes her bosses as punishing her for changing roles within the school, where they do not ask her for any input on her replacement. To this she says,

> I feel like the way they are handling the change just feels like a punishment because I've decided to step down. And I always question, I'm like "If this was a white woman is this what you would do?", or like "Is this how you would treat them, would you make them feel bad about the fact that they are deciding to step out of this box that you put them in and use some of their other skills to do something different?" I have been thinking a lot about that just because of how this transition has been going. (Danielle, Administrative School Psychologist).

Danielle provides another interesting look at how white organizations attempt to contain black women and how they are constantly made aware of their limitations and expectations of work.

Strategies and Responses

This section will showcase what strategies black women utilize to not only navigate these spaces but their raw responses and emotions to their oppressive environments as well. Their emotional responses are important as they are less observable than their strategies, this is because they have had to learn how to regulate them the most (Meghji 2018). Therefore black women are often found choosing between self-advocacy or silence. Similar to silence, black women in my study have learned redirection and preventative feats as prominent skills when faced with prejudiced comments, as a way to evade awkwardness and negative interpretations of their responses. They do so to avoid certain controlling images (Collins 2020), hostility from coworkers or community members (Dubois 1903), and organizational repercussions (Ray 2019). Specifically, I found that they were highly aware of the Angry Black Woman(ABW) stereotype how this stereotyping affects how they are perceived in the workplace, and the costs it carries for their well-being and careers (Collins 2020; Meghji 2018; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

This cost was evident in Kaisha who was appointed as an "Angry Black Woman" after responding to as she said, "ridiculous questions" with "ridiculous answers," a form of self-advocacy. In avoiding this controlling image, black women are often subject to being labeled as the Mammy, or Strong Black Woman who either works for the white organization without complaint or feels no strain and can handle it all; either way, the strategy, in this case, is silence(Collins 2020; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

Through my study, I have recognized that their emotional responses to racism are often the driver of their strategies. For these reasons, I chose to talk about strategies and responses in unison because of the difficulty in separating the inward responses of racism from their outward responses, or strategies. For example, when a black woman is faced with racism and has this inner moment of "Am I crazy, or was that prejudiced?" It has been a common strategy for her to rely on their cohorts of other black elites, though there are few of them (Chavez, Wingfield 2020). In this section I will analyze the oppressive experiences of black women in terms of their perceptions and feelings, followed by how the white gaze and double consciousness cause them to regulate these responses into a behavior deemed more appropriate and legitimate for their black bodies in white collar spaces.

Silence VS. Self-advocacy

When it comes to self-advocacy, black women in this study often choose to remain silent and practice redirecting or preventative skills. Through my study and other literature, I have concluded that this act is to avoid being perceived as inappropriate when responding to racism (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). Knowing the impact of racism and gender discrimination, Black women are remiss in the face of disparities. They can be found taking preventative measures to evade being positioned according to controlling images and other stereotypical

representations of blackness (Meghji 2018; Wingfield, Chavez 2020; Collins 2020; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). This strategy can be understood as an act of self-preservation. The wear and tear of this avoidance can have a toll emotionally, but by having access to cohorts within their immediate space, or outside peers that they can reach out to and relate with, they are able to upkeep their filtered behaviors in the workplace. These cohorts provide spaces where the white gaze is absent and the regulation of emotions can be ceased, as well as supply support and advice for workplace interactions.

The list of preventative strategies is plentiful, as black women are constantly having to align themselves with what the white gaze deems as legitimate for the workplace (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). This comes to life for black women in many forms, from being mindful of appearances, changing their voice, or regulating their emotions and responses to gendered racism; through these practices, they are constantly being silenced in the workplace. As mentioned in the Methodology section, I chose to focus on experiences outside of microaggressions and appearance due to the abundance of literature surrounding these topics already (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). However, my participants have confirmed that the first strategy used is often in the modification of appearances, such as their hairstyles, nails, and clothing choices.

Beyond this, in my study, the silence of participants is broken in a few ways. I found that they either 1) have found a cohort to unload and relate to their experience, 2) they have had enough and chosen to be assertive, or 3) they remove themselves from the environment inflicting harm. Due to the multifaceted aspects of multiple jeopardy, these women can experience one or all of these strategies.

When asked about certain strategies she uses in the workplace, Danielle describes her attempts to avoid being perceived as incompetent or an angry black woman.

> I would say as an administrator, we get people who second-guess and question your decisions a lot, which makes you feel like all the work we did was for nothing. You are always thinking about every email you send and how you craft it, what words you use, and always having to have other people check, and triple-check, before you send out the email to make sure you're not offending anybody, and that it's not coming from a hostile place. Especially when it comes to check-ins and giving feedback, I always double-check to make sure I have concrete examples because I'm always worried somebody's going to be like, 'Oh she just doesn't like me and it has nothing to do with my job performance'(Danielle, Administrative School Psychologist).

Through Danielle, the concept of taking preventative measures and being proactive about how black women are perceived is very evident, as well as her reliance on her black peers. There is a recognition of what consequences could come if she does not triple-check the way she is addressing people. When her role is to point out flaws in the work of her peers, this is an essential process as black women's assertiveness is often interpreted to be aggressive (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020; Collins 2020), or hostile as Danielle describes.

This was also evident through Kaisha and her attempts to improve the senior center she was leading, specifically in her interaction with the older man who stuck a finger in her face saying he was not going to listen to her. This act is also to avoid the previously mentioned interactions of having their work and credentials questioned. The hope is to not only evade being questioned or labeled but in doing so avoid the need to respond to oppressive interactions and avoid being perceived in those moments as well. This is also evident in Rachel, who felt like she could not question sexist comments without sounding like the Angry Black Woman, and uses silence as a strategy in workplace interactions. When asked about how she employs strategies to deal with being a black woman in the workplace, and whether she finds them to be helpful or not, she says that they are not good in terms of self-advocacy.

> They're probably not even good strategies, no one teaches you how to do it. In general, I feel like I've had to make myself small, had to not be a problem, had to know some things I can argue, some things I can't, some things I can be a stickler for, some things I can't. Just choosing your battles I'd say. Choosing your battles, keeping quiet, holding my tongue. Because you know I can't just be like 'B***, the f***?', you can't do that. There's times I've literally been like I wanna flip this table over… deep breathing, taking a moment, or taking a break. Or even telling them you'll circle back to them, because sometimes people ask you some outright crazy things, and you don't have to give an answer right away. Just because someone wants one doesn't mean you are able to give them one. Just taking time to reflect and even talk to your peers who understand you first. (Rachel, Child Psychiatrist).

Rachel has a high self-awareness of what kind of reaction is deemed acceptable for her black body. She recognizes the stakes of speaking up, and practices silence as well as reliance on peers. Before being asked this question, she had given a perfect example that puts this strategy into action. She provides a memory of her interactions with a white male therapist, a subordinate, who often questions her ability to make decisions for patients and their treatments. Although her status in the organizational hierarchy is above him, her position as a Black woman puts her in a situation where she is unable to question certain comments and behaviors (Wingfield, Chavez 2020). She says,

> A white man, questioning my decisions. You're a therapist, you did not go to medical school. There were several times when I felt like he would talk about the size of patients, and I'm not a small girl, so first I'm like why are you doing that? It's really unnecessary, I feel like you shouldn't talk about someone's size if they are using it in a psychiatric facility like I'm not worried about their health, I'm there for their mental. If they're not demonstrating that they can be unsafe with their size, there is no other reason to talk about the size of that patient. So why are you doing that number one, and are you saying something to me on the sly? Like what is this? I can't be sure because I can't be like 'Hold on what do you mean by that', because if I question everything I'm an Angry Black Woman (Rachel, Child Psychiatrist).

She goes on to talk about how these interactions cause her to question everything, whether she is seeing things for their truth and if so whether she is acting accordingly or not. This is a clear

representation of how the white gaze works with double consciousness to make black women internalize oppressive ideologies, as well as fear the product of not being proactive in their strategies. More specifically, these practices take a toll on how black women navigate the workplace in terms of monitoring how they look, emote, talk, fit in, and lead (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). Rabelo(2020) states that understanding how black women work to embody the legitimacy of whiteness reveals how power is built and maintained in racialized organizations.

My participant Erica is a great example of how Black women learned to cope with racism by developing specific strategies, as her experience in university caused her to be quiet for the majority of her first year working in the field, before eventually learning to speak up for herself (Erica, Optical Engineer). Black women operate in ways that desire to circumvent gendered and racist instances like being questioned or falsely perceived, however, in moments like this, women like Rachel find themselves still having to endure awkward interactions where they must redirect rather than allow their innate response to the surface. The continued need to deal with these matters of questioning and subjugation, despite their efforts to be proactive, elicits doubt in the minds of black women on whether they belong in the workplace.

I have been able to conclude that feelings of incompetence and being undervalued in the workplace create a fear of being dispensable to their bosses and organizations. As a result, many of my participants shared that they had a second income in the chance that their bosses would act on their ill perceptions of them. Two participants described them as "side hustles". This is another proactive strategy in response to the racism they encountered at work. Four out of nine participants mentioned having a source of income outside of their primary positions, and a fifth mentioned a project that would eventually have monetary value. Interestingly, the four participants who rely solely on their primary occupation have been working within their

respective fields for the shortest amount of time, two being in their first one to two years of the job. This could suggest that after prolonged exposure to white-collar workspaces, Black women seek additional incomes as a strategy in response to racism. This discovery is why I wanted to speak with women in all different places of their careers and gain the ability to analyze how time wears on the black woman's experience.

Breaking the Silence: For Your "Why"

The most frequently used strategy I found amongst participants is reminding and motivating themselves with their "why". The why is what breaks their silence and is their motivation for being in their field in the first place. Through my study, I have witnessed that black women in higher positions often put themselves as a defense for black people, especially youth. This strategy is put into use in all of my participant's occupations where their role takes the form of a caretaker in some way shape or form, whether that be in healthcare or school administration. Seven of nine participants work in a role that either tends to the mental or physical health and well-being of patients and or clients, five of them working specifically with children. In these occupations, my participants act as a defense for patients, clients, and students of color. They mentioned this act in multiple ways, whether that be defending students to get lesser punishments in school, better placement in foster care, or just being a comforting face for black patients. This also manifests in representation in terms of giving students role models or people to relate and turn to, as well as working to change the narrative of what bodies are considered legitimate for their type of work. This behavior aligns with the characteristics of the controlling image, Mammy and or Matriarch (Collins 2020). The Mammy has a visible role as these women go above and beyond to ensure the safety and security of their black patients and clients. The Matriarch is evident in the sense that the black woman is on her own in advocating for this population of people of color(POC), especially to the extent they go to.

My participant Danielle works in administration as a school psychologist at a charter school. When asked why she originally got into this work, she said it was because after going to a predominantly white high school, she had witnessed a lot of her friends of color struggle with mental illness. "Back then it was just kind of taboo to say like, you were feeling anxious or depressed, and I just wanted to go back and help kids like that. Being a presence for the kids during the school day, supporting and showing up for them" (Danielle, Administrative School Psychologist). In this space, she has the ability to help youth of color directly, while also serving as a role model. The school she works at has a 98% black and Latino population, while the staff in comparison is made up of about 75 members, 10 of those being black people and she holds the highest position of the 10. When asked how often she notices this, she laughs and says

> Oh, all the time. Like we have our own little group chat, (laughter) 'we're like 'can you believe this'(laughter). It's pretty often, especially when you see like, in the hallway, who the kids gravitate to, and who they want to communicate with. Not to say that the kids don't have relationships with the white teachers that work here, but you can see who they tend to gravitate to on a pretty regular basis (Danielle, Administrative School Psychologist).

Her experience is a great representation of not only relying on a black cohort to expel their honest perceptions of inequality but especially as an example of being motivated by your "why." These are both common practices in black communities, with research showing how black people try to support and provide mentoring for one another amid hostile environments (Hunn 2014). Knowing that these kids look up to their teachers of color as people they can turn to and relate with, is a great sample of how and why black women motivate themselves to advocate for students, clients, and patients, in the face of workplace oppression. For example, when asked if she feels supported in her role, Danielle says that she does not always feel supported by her principal but that she is still committed to advocating for her students,

> It happens pretty regularly, but I know I always have like this group of people of color that I can go to for support. I think I would say that the biggest times that I don't feel support is… well I am a pretty big advocate for when a student gets in trouble, not suspending them for like millions of days, and so I find myself always advocating for students of color not to be suspended for a long period. I'm a firm believer in them still getting an education and getting to graduate, and the more days they are out of school, the more instruction they are missing. I would say, most of the time I do not feel supported when I advocate for a student to not be suspended for a lot of days(Danielle, Administrative School Psychologist).

Through Danielle, it is conclusive that she embodies her role as a model for black students to receive advice, and be a representation of black excellence, but also a defense that speaks up for black students. This can be recognized as a strategy of advocacy, although it is not utilized for the self. When asked if she feels she belongs in the workplace, she says,

> I definitely do think that I belong here, and I think a lot of that reassurance comes from the students, versus the adults here. Just like students who will randomly say 'Oh what would I do if you weren't here" or "It's so important to have a black female role model that you can look up to", but I don't always feel that way coming from the adults. Not that I need it, it would be nice occasionally, but it just continues to reaffirm that I'm not here for the adults, I'm here for the kids" (Danielle, Administrative School Psychologist).

In areas that lack representation of this kind, it is evident why organized hierarchies create limitations for black upward mobility and equality (Ray 2019; Wingfield, Chavez 2020), which is why these women work to provide this representation in the face of adversity. She also has an awareness that her coworkers and bosses will not give her recognition for her role and that she cannot let this distract her from her "why".

Another participant, Tamara is met with similar pushback when advocating for black youth in foster care, and this is one of the reasons she continues to put up with the previously noted racism she experiences in the workplace. She believes that if she was not there to advocate for their equality, no one would.

> I am always being told I am over the top, 'you think everything is racist'. **** that is racist! When they are placing black kids in predominantly white places, with white foster parents, in schools where they're the only black kid. You mean we can't find another place in (city of occupation) for these kids? And they say 'Well they had a bed so that's where we put them, she'll be fine'. No! These are people's lives, little kids, foster kids, you're putting them out there and they have all this racist stuff happening to them. One minute they're living in the North (urban area, city of occupation) with their momma, and now all of a sudden they're living on farms (Tamara, Licensed Social Worker).

This example goes to show how imperative representation is when it comes to the advocacy of black equality and reinforces the reasons my participants have for wanting to challenge what bodies are legitimate in the workplace (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). I found this motivation to advocate for black youth and people in general to be interesting as black women often lack this incentive for themselves until later on in their careers. In my study, participants often lean toward the strategy of silence in order to not be cast as a problem (Dubois 1903). From my understanding, it is their knowledge of how the white gaze perceives their clients, patients, and students as well as their own bodies that leads to this behavior. Experiencing racism in these multiple forms is both a motivator for black women in higher positions to stand up for their race and a deterrent when standing up for themselves out of fear of further subjugation within the organizational hierarchies of white-collar occupations (Meghji 2018; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020; Wingfield, Chavez 2020). This is also a product of avoiding being labeled as the Angry Black Woman for standing up for themselves, although similar perceptions can be made of them advocating for others (Collins 2020; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

Before concluding this section it is again necessary to point out that this behavior is in alignment with the black woman's expectation to act as a Mammy(Collins 2020). They embody this role by taking on the form of a caretaker within their professions and exposing themselves to the costs of carrying on controlling images(Collins 2020). These images are the Mammy, which

they embody by advocating for black youth and people, the Matriarch as the head of caretaking

for the black community, and the Angry Black Woman, again for advocation (Collins 2020).

Taking the Blows: Black Women on Developing Tough Skin

Over time, as my participants became more confident in their positions and with their

positionality, they became more assertive in the workplace. Four out of nine participants used the

word "assertive" when describing how they stood up against inequality in the workplace. For

some this was a direct relation to reminding themselves of their "why" and their credentials to do

this work, or they were fed up with the treatment they were receiving. Unlearning is the biggest

step in becoming assertive for these women, it can be understood as discarding previous habits or

ways of thinking. For my participants, unlearning is about putting aside what the white gaze

perceives them as and remembering their license to be where they are. This process takes time as

the white gaze is a ubiquitous system of surveillance, permissions, and exclusions (Rabelo,

Robotham, Mcluney 2020). This turning point looks different for each participant due to each

individual being marginalized in distinct ways (King 1988), when faced with ignorance some

choose to speak up, remove themselves from the environment, or seek action from Human

Resources (HR). An example of this was shown through Tamara, as I explained earlier, who

brought the emails she had found directly to HR for them to handle.

In my study, education can serve as a solace when black women are faced with ignorant

comments and questioning of their capabilities and legitimacy in the workplace. Four out of nine

participants voiced that the questioning they experienced led them to question themselves and

their right to be in the room. Still, they found assurance in remembering their credentials and

education. As we have seen in the "Breaking the Silence for Your Why" section, this confidence

from their training provides the groundwork for sticking up for their patients, clients, and

students; eventually, this will push them to do the same for themselves. This is the path that leads to rejecting the servant Mammy image.

Education proves to be a factor for Erica, the optical engineer who was heavily impacted by her oppressive University experience and carried those negative connotations with her. She describes how this experience made her believe she did not belong when entering the workplace and she had to do a lot of unlearning. Many of my participants have this issue when coming from school, specifically primarily-white institutions, but also from the initial and continued ignorant interactions within their white-collar occupations. They have to unlearn to perceive themselves the way society and the white gaze do to be more successful in their roles. Black women have filtered their actions and opinions in the workplace to not be perceived in a negative manner or alignment with certain controlling images such as the Angry Black Woman, and this keeps them from speaking up or challenging other ways of thinking (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). Success in this sense is not whether or not they are fulfilling their duties, but rather how much autonomy they demonstrate in doing so.

When asked if Erica felt like she belonged in her role she said not at first, but she grew more comfortable as time went on. Her experience is important because, as an Optical Engineer, she does not work with clients or patients in the same way the other participants do, so her journey looks different. Because of the independent nature of her work, the work environment is the least problematic in terms of facing everyday inequalities when compared to participants who interact with a multitude of people a day, coworkers, and clients alike. Erica's journey of becoming more comfortable in the workplace after leaving the University environment goes to show how proximity to disparity has an imperative impact on the feelings and internalization of oppression and explains why leaving is an option that many participants take in future sections of

this paper (Dinzey-Flores 2017). This is why workplace inequality and constant submersion into

racial discrimination have such an overwhelming impact on the state of black women in

white-collar occupations(Dinzey-Flores 2017). Erica, when asked whether or not feeling like she

belonged affected her ability to do her job said,

> I was dealing with a lot from University, I think now I feel like I belong, and I did find a cohort of people that I would say I'm comfortable with. Now that I got more comfortable with my peers and the people I work with, I find that I'm better at my job now. I think before I was very quiet and didn't talk too much, I wasn't as vocal. You could just tell I was very nervous and like anxious, or just always worried and nervous, and for not much reason at all. I was just on the more uncomfortable side when I first started working. It took me a while to break out of that shell that I got in [University], even my coworkers noticed me start to say more... At first, it was a lot harder because I do have something to add but I was just so afraid of speaking up. But now if I have something insightful and valuable to say I will say it. It's like now that I have been doing the job for so long I just have that confidence now, in my experience and in my education. I know that I'm the best person for the job (Erica, Optical Engineer).

Erica's experience, though different, is representative of the shift that some black women have

during their time working. There is a moment of realization where they recognize they are not

better off being silenced. Erica is a great example of the silence that is brought out from fear of

alienation, finding strength in having a cohort, and eventually getting tough skin to speak up. She

also talks about her methods of being more assertive which include a "going to get it myself"

mindset, where she refuses to wait for higher-ups to teach her something or solve a problem,

rather she goes to get it herself; showing a pattern of black women working twice as hard for

success (Meghji 2018). This finding is particularly intriguing because a pattern of breaking

silence emerges among all participants, except Edibeth. She displayed confidence in her position

from the very beginning, likely due to her exposure to the normalization of black role models in

high places from her time growing up in the Bahamas. This goes to show the impact of making

racism and controlling images appear natural, normal, and inevitable (Collins 2020), as we can see what the product of the reverse is.

Reese provides a great story for how this tough skin can be put into action for participants who do find themselves working with others more frequently, and therefore experiencing different forms of face-to-face oppression (King 1988). Her methods closely resemble those of two other participants from my study working client-based jobs outside of healthcare, they describe their strategy as calling out racism and making her coworkers feel uncomfortable when they are being problematic or ignorant. She said,

> It makes me feel lots of different ways, I would say the easy emotion is annoyance or anger just because, you know, I didn't work this hard and get to this position to be like treated less than or like that I didn't deserve to be here, so those are the easy emotions. Unfortunately, the profession that I'm in I can't really afford to give in to these emotions at least not in the moment, in the interaction with like a patient or a staff member, so it's really important to have people you can talk to and colleagues that can be your advocates. I would say that now, at least when I can, I'll try to advocate for myself and you know I don't wanna say I back down from those situations, you know sometimes I'll ask people "Oh well why don't you think I'm the doctor?" or "Why do you think that?", and like call them out on their ridiculousness I guess. So I advocate for myself when I can, but sometimes you just kinda have to take it and move on(Reese, Orthopedic Surgeon).

Reese's initial response is annoyance and anger, which she not only recognizes as not being appropriate to display in her workplace, but that she cannot afford to, given prevailing controlling images of the "Angry Black Woman" (Collins 2000). This shows awareness of the specific limitations she has in her positionality, whether that be as a doctor or as a black woman is unclear. We also see her ability to rely on her previous work to get where she is to hold a foundation of knowing she has a right to be in the room. Working in positions such as this requires years of higher education and training, and having made it to this place of achievement and still being met with doubts shows the persistence of racism. Through Reese and Erica, it is

apparent that having confidence in your credentials and therefore the self, supplies the assurance

to speak up in the workplace in a professional manner as well as in self-advocacy. It is also

evident yet again that having a cohort is incredibly valuable to the black woman's navigation of

white-collar occupations.

Despite this confidence and defiance of the Mammy, there are Black Women in my study

who show resilience and are now labeled with a new controlling image of either the Strong Black

Woman or the Educated Black Bitch (similar to the Angry Black Woman), or both. These are

assigned to black women who fail to embody the extreme loyalty of the modern Mammy

(Wingfield 2007). These new controlling images expect black women to be invincible with a

limitless capacity for work, which is a malleable form of the expectations for the Mammy. This

goes to show how sticky racism can be, and how it can infiltrate all aspects of life due to its

shape-shifting privileges. Rachel is a prominent example of this experience, as she found the

courage to speak up for herself and was met with distaste. After explaining her methods of

resilience and setting boundaries I asked her how often she notices being the only black woman

in her workplace and she said,

> There are so many things. People asking me if I want to quit when I was like this is a
> large load of patients. The other attending[white man] was like "You should talk to her
> about a patient cap", and I did that… "Well, do you wanna quit?", who said that? Who
> said that? Who said that I wanna quit? Not me! I'm talking to you about what Dr.
> Lawrence told me to talk to you about, and you ask me if I wanna quit. Alright. Why
> would I wanna quit, I made it this far. Those are the things you gotta deal with, and
> they are microaggressions. They're little small cuts, papercuts, and they hurt (Rachel,
> Child Psychiatrist).

Rachel provides an interesting example as she was given advice from a white male colleague,

and to no surprise, this advice was not transferable to a black woman in this space. Rabelo's

(2020) research on how black women experience the white gaze at work showcases how black

women have to be mindful of how their skin and gender affect others' perceptions of their behavior and appearance. She was met with a response that Dr. Lawrence would unlikely receive, highlighting the disparity in how black women must proactively consider their actions to navigate the expectations and perceptions of the white gaze. When making a reasonable request to keep a feasible workload, it is made evident through this interaction that Rachel is a victim of the Strong Black Woman image, whereas she is expected to hold a limitless capacity for working and handling clients. Instances like these, where black women find themselves being undervalued and without support are what eventually lead Rachel and six other of the nine participants to leave their jobs in search of a better work environment and conditions.

Leaving and Remote Work

Seven of the nine participants who have experienced prolonged inequality in their workplace have attested to leaving their organizations due to being exasperated with their treatment. Those who have chosen to leave, find themselves either looking for a more diverse environment to work for or an environment that they are in control of. This act can look different for each individual, but the underlying purpose of leaving stays the same (King 1988). Each participant who left their position at a predominantly white institution testifies to being less exposed to workplace racism and discrimination. The two participants who have held the same position within the same organization are the youngest of my participants and have both been in their fields for the least amount of time, one being at the end of their first year and the other in their third. Prolonged exposure to inequality in my study has proven to toughen the skin of black women enough to not only self-advocate but to remove themselves entirely from the environment inflicting harm. Having spent considerable resources to face the white gaze, when leaving, black women carry their experiences from working in a predominantly white institution

to lead them to an environment more suitable for their multiple identities (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

Three of the seven participants who left their predominantly white institutions are now working for themselves, turning their second income, or "side hustle", into their primary occupation. For example, my participant Isabella, was working for a company dedicated to helping black girls but was made up of predominantly white staff, where she found herself constantly having to stick up for these girls and what they deserve. This is another example of the importance of representation, and advocating for your "why". She had already had her own organization dedicated to a similar mission, but eventually took a full dive into making this her primary occupation. Isabella had very little to say about workplace oppression or microaggressions in this new space. This is not just because of her position of power as Executive and Founder, because as we have seen throughout this study, being in hierarchical positions has no deterrence toward workplace inequality. This is because her company is entirely made up of black men and women, an intentional act of recruitment on her part. Her company has three black women and one black man out of a four-person board. When asked about how her previous experiences impact her approach to the workplace she says,

> It's made me think a lot about the importance of us like creating, working for ourselves, or working for people who are like us, for other black and brown people. Obviously like, all of these workplaces and settings come with their own pros and cons, but it's also made me think about the kind of leader I want to be and the kinds of spaces I want to create. Not only for the girls that I serve but for my team. I think that goes back to leading with humanity, and knowing that some of the things I run into as a leader with my employees, like if they were to do that in a workplace led by white women their response might not be as like understanding or as willing to pour into their professional development (Isabella, Executive and Founder of [Organization]).

Isabella is an important illustration of how intentional black women have to be when choosing and creating their work environments. Similar to other participants, Isabella's efforts to create an

environment made up of black women and men are a product of her experience in a predominantly white institution. This highlights their practices, which impose unequal treatment amongst its employees based on race and gender through implementing organizational hierarchies (Wingfield, Chavez 2020).

Although my participants are making it to these places of achievement where they should feel accomplished and valued, they have instead attested to feeling overlooked and overworked. While scholars have distinguished that inequality is exacerbated by segregation, some evidence points to segregation having some protective factors for the marginalized (Dinzey-Flores 2017). Edibeth is a very similar example of this, as she is retiring at the end of this year. After working 30 years in education and administration, she is leaving to patent and fully pursue her program for graduation readiness at the state level, rather than continue to be overlooked by her superintendent and principal. Similarly, Rachel has since quit her inpatient psychiatry role, entering what she calls a transitional period, focusing on running her private practice full-time in the future.

> I kinda burnt myself out working, and just not enjoying the environments that I was working in, because of microaggressions, toxic environments, you know. I'm just taking a break and finding out what works best for me in this season. I need… I'm feeling at this point I'm wanting to do more Telemedicine so I can be home, be more of a mom, and be more present for my kids (Rachel, Child Psychiatrist).

After feeling undervalued and overworked for such a long time, Rachel decides to be her own boss, she says "I don't want to work for anybody else now". Her occupation provides this option of environment control as her primary issues were from coworkers and subordinates. This is because as she mentioned previously, her patients knew who she was and sought out her expertise. She is a great example of leaving the harmful work environment, as well as finding comfort in creating her own environment. Telemed through private practice is a great option for

Rachel as she will have direct contact with patients while getting to work from home. What is truly beneficial about this method of working is being without the added stress of navigating not only the practices of a predominantly white workspace but also the added exposure to microaggressions from coworkers. Remote work is proven to be a solace for black women working white-collar occupations as it shields them from a lot of the recurring workplace interactions that subject them to microaggressions and inequality, but not all (Masunaga 2023; Williams, Andrews, and Boginsky 2022)

Throughout my study, I had three participants who work in-person jobs indicate that remote work would possibly solve most of the issues they have in the workplace. They explained that had very little trouble with the work itself, rather it was the people and organization they worked with that made them feel imposter syndrome. Outside of these three participants, one of the nine is currently working in a remote role and for their second year. After the experience she had working in the senior center and public hospital, Kaisha decided to move to a remote position that better suited and supported her. The hospital provided a peek at what more diverse environments look like, and this is what she preferred. Her new company has a devotion to diversity which shows in its racial makeup, this provides an added layer of comfortability on top of the remote factors, which is something she was intentionally looking for. She provides a great model of how remote work allows for the shaping of their own environment and the benefits that come from it. I asked how she would describe a typical workday and she said,

> This is my first full-time remote position, my workday… I'm very lucky that I can shape my workday to how I would like it to be. My employer gives lots of room for autonomy. Basically, as long as you're doing your job and everyone's needs are met, you're meeting your benchmark, it's all good… having this remote job and a company that cares about your real life and work-life balance.

She explains the day-to-day comforts and flexibility that come with remote work, and as a single mother of two these circumstances are a great fit for her lifestyle. This is something that my participant Rachel is looking for in her switch to telemedicine as well. After the first job, Kaisha had where she faced microaggressions and was underestimated constantly, her response when asked if she felt like she belonged in this workplace was a big shift in white-collar work experience.

> I prefer the remote workplace because no one is constantly trying to judge your actions, or your mannerisms, or your intentions, or my face. There is none of that crap daily, when you're working remotely you can just be in your environment, when you have to get on the camera you can turn on and put on face, and then go about your business. This remote workplace environment is my preferred space, where you don't have to… you know a lot of black women have to deal with microaggressions, and black people period, because men get it too. But this role and my previous role at the hospital… the more diversified of a place that you're in, you don't really run into those or just the black people, people of color that are around you in the workplace (Kaisha, Health Administration).

Kaisha perfectly describes what it is like to work free from the white gaze, and without having to be proactive about how they are perceived in the workplace. This access to more diverse and private spaces provides comfort that prevents her from having to deal with the day to day microaggressions associated with working in a white environment (Masunaga 2023; Williams, Andrews, and Boginsky 2022). However, she recognizes there are moments, where even in a diverse environment she has to "put on face" which she mentions earlier in our interview as an embodiment of the white gaze's approval. This shows a pattern that I witnessed in many participants who intentionally move on to more diverse environments, but bring the things they learned in predominantly white institutions with them. This is a product of rationalized subjugation, where the need to embody whiteness is made to look normal and inevitable (Meghji 2018; Collins 2020).

Black Spaces: The Infiltration of the White Gaze

This needed adaptability to the white gaze also impacts how black-centered white-collar occupations are run, and how black higher-ups enforce their practices. When leaving, black women in my study bring many lessons from working in predominantly white institutions and carry them throughout their careers. Keeping their tough skin and self-advocacy, they have looked to be more intentional about what environments they want to work in, but are still influenced by past experiences with the white gaze.

Through her experience, Kaisha learned what to look for and what to avoid when choosing a work environment and was intentional about accepting a diverse remote position. However, a few of my participants alluded to the fact that black environments and role models have their own pockets of oppression as well due to their oppressive experiences in past positions. Rachel describes an example of this finding in action, where she discusses interactions between herself and another black attending.

> I did have one black attending, but sometimes black women are okay with you as long as you're under them, and then when you pass them or whatever it's a problem. And I don't like all of that, that's not how I operate. I want you to be successful and do better than me, especially if you're a black girl. I want you to have a better experience, and I'll tell you what I wish I would have done. But that's not always the case, unfortunately, sometimes it's people that look like you. "Well you need to listen to me and do exactly what I tell you to do so that you can be successful", and it's like hold on now you're treating me differently because I didn't do exactly what you told me to do? (Rachel, Child Psychiatrist).

This account of her interaction is incredibly interesting as it showcases the relationship between two psychiatrists who work separately, Rachel being in the first ten years of her career and a woman during her 20-something year on the job. From my outside perspective, Rachel feels that this attending (or physician supervisor) is treating her in a way that she does not appreciate, because she does not realize the why behind her actions. This attending, having been in the profession for a prolonged period of time, and having extended exposure to workplace

inequality, attempts to demonstrate to Rachel what is acceptable for her black body in this space, by telling her exactly how she accomplished it herself. This message seems to be lost in what a future participant would describe as cutthroat behavior, as for black women it takes being cutthroat and tough-skinned to achieve upward mobility in white-collar occupations. So while Rachel demonstrates that if it were her, she would be more than willing to help younger black women on their journey, she fails to see how the attending is attempting the same efforts, but due to her methods of relaying this information, the message is lost. Through this encounter, it is apparent that black people hold onto their experiences with inequality, and the activation of double consciousness forces them to inflict the white gaze on their own behaviors as well as others, such as Rachel. This makes for an environment duplicated by the white gaze, which will be evident in further examples.

Jaden who works as the director of strategic partnerships and sponsorships at a predominately black organization, talks about the things she has witnessed from employees who come from predominantly white work spaces.

> Maybe this is controversial, but I have really experienced what happens to those people after they have been through that machine of a white-dominant workforce, where they are constantly being seen a certain way and have to work ten times harder and whatever because that's who I ended up working with. I will say that the biggest thing, is that they all want to become entrepreneurs, with all these negative experiences they all want to have jobs on the side, there's like a resilience and not wanting to depend on a singular work environment. I had never thought of it because I have had generally good experiences, but meeting these women who are older than me and have been in the workforce for a long time have second incomes just in case (Jaden, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Sponsorships).

Here it is evident that, for some Black individuals, even when they have gotten out of their predominantly white workplaces they continue similar strategies as though they were still in them. There is a nagging feeling that they need to be proactive just in case. This goes to show

just how sticky racism is to follow black people into their own environments and continue to be

influenced by the white gaze. This impacts further than the individual and their actions, but into

the environment and what expectations are made of the white gaze onto a diverse group of

bosses and workers. As Jaden described,

> And in my experience, the second thing is that it causes a lot of them, specifically
> black women, to become really cutthroat, like hardcore cutthroat. I would say that my
> experiences with black women have been definitively worse than my experiences with
> white women in the workplace. And it's not because they're black, it's because of
> what they've experienced. In their own experiences in the workplace, how they've
> been treated, and the sort of climbing that they had to do. I think it's an unknown thing
> that they do it to others, I don't think it's ever intentional, it's just trauma quite frankly.
> You don't just shake it because you start working with black people after you've been
> around that (PWI) for twenty-plus years. The corporate world just teaches you really
> bad habits that you have to unlearn. And for a lot of those black women, they were
> high earners, which is important. They were not at the bottom of the food chain, they
> were making decisions, and they came out being hardcore. And I learned a lot about
> that because there's a benefit to being hardcore… as a black woman you are going to
> be tried (Jaden, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Sponsorships).

Jaden provides a perfect example of the consequences of being a black woman working in

white-collar occupations, surrounded by white people. This learned experience shows patterns of

not only being proactive but learning to stick up for yourself in a way that is cutthroat and

intense because it is the only way to earn respect and upward mobility. Being cutthroat or getting

tough skin, coincides with the stereotypical attributes of the Angry Black Woman, the Matriarch,

and the Strong Black Woman, which aids in the black woman's ability to stand up for themselves

but black women can never readily stop traversing controlling images when it comes to the white

gaze (Collins 2020). These habits are not easily forgotten and influence the ways they maneuver

black spaces as they are observed to bring the white gaze with them through their double

consciousness. This shows the intensity of how the white gaze is able to permeate the black mind

and experience by simply making whiteness and white embodiment the norm even upon exiting these predominantly white institutions(Meghji 2018; Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Black women have alternate experiences in the workplace as opposed to their black male, white female, and male counterparts. This is a result of the usage of controlling images and organizational hierarchies that work to subjugate black women who have earned their way into places of achievement (Wingfield, Chavez 2020). This practice is most harmful as it makes inequality look natural, normal, and inevitable, and it is a product of the actions, behaviors, and characteristics that black women bring to the workplace. This is made possible by deeming whiteness as the default or norm, and the baseline for what is acceptable in white-collar occupations(Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). As the white gaze itself dictates legitimacy, any attempt made by black women to embody what the white gaze deems legitimate, whether that be through education or silence, will still be considered unacceptable due to their positionality. In reality, my findings confirm previous research which shows that black women are susceptible to a controlling image no matter what their actions are, and each of these images deems them illegitimate (Meghji 2018; Collins 2020). These controlling images follow them through every avenue they take to navigate the workplace and they are further subjugated by the ideology of racial stratification(Collins 2020).

Through my study, it was made evident that there is a pattern of self-preservation that black women have to implement for their survival in their occupational environments. The lack of representation of their identities creates an ambiance that lacks support for the black population, both workers and clients alike. This predominantly white makeup of higher-ups, coworkers, and subordinates alienates the black woman in her role and subjects her to heightened levels of exposure to inequality (Dinzey-Flores 2017). In doing so, she is made aware of how her actions and words may be perceived by those around her and therefore she makes proactive incentives to filter her behavior and speech, oftentimes resulting in silence. This silence comes in

the form of contributing less in professional settings, as well as having to ignore or redirect acts of oppression toward themselves. Their silence, or regulation of emotions, is a proactive measure against the judgments of the white gaze because as we have seen, black women are frequently met with attacks on their capabilities and credentials (Rabelo, Robotham, Mcluney 2020). Imposter syndrome begins to set in at this point and further silences the black woman to avoid certain negative images and perceptions, such as the Angry Black Woman(Collins 2020). This, however, is at the cost of acting in alignment with the controlling image of the modern Mammy in which she is abiding silently by the demands of the white gaze(Collins 2020).

In my study, those who practice this strategy often break their silence when it comes to advocating for black patients, clients, and students. I found this to be because this act of advocacy was their reasoning for choosing the professions they did, otherwise understood as their "why" for their work. Over time, through prolonged exposure to ignorance –manifested uniquely in each individual due to their diverse experiences and positionalities (King 1988) – black women's skin toughens, and they learn to become more assertive. This assertiveness looks like speaking out against ignorant comments, but the black woman does not abandon the awareness of how their acts and words can be perceived, it only gives them the incentive to speak up for themselves more often. Double consciousness provides this awareness of how their self-advocacy can label them as the Angry Black Woman or the Strong Black Woman(Du Bois; Collins 2020). In this case, she subjects herself to new forms of oppression such as being overworked. Having tough skin looks different for each participant, it can look like self-advocacy in face-to-face interactions, or she can fully remove herself from the environment altogether. Both are strategies that my participants use to create better environments and standards for themselves in the workplace.

This need to be proactive, along with the usage of the white gaze to understand how they may be perceived, forces black women into a state of constant double consciousness and awareness of their positionality, curating "cutthroat" individuals who carry their past inflictions with them to new spaces. Black women's inability to stop readily traversing the white gaze is what allows for black environments to take on similar practices and expectations as predominantly white institutions. Further showing the inescapability and stickiness of inequality even in spaces of achievement such as white-collar occupations. However, this inability to shake off past inflictions can look differently by the individual. When bringing these experiences into the next space, black women also look to build environments that are intentionally incompatible with white dominated spaces, just as Isabella worked to create an environment that was more understanding and forgiving than her previous employers. These differing outcomes go to show how distinct and unique each individual's experiences are (King 1988).

Thus, from here we learn about the harm being caused to Black women in the workplace, how they cope with these experiences, and the ways in which these experiences shape their future actions. Through my study, I have found that to mitigate these feelings of inequality, organizations must realize that underrepresentation is a major factor in black women lacking support and feelings of belonging in the workplace. For them to have this realization, efforts toward cultural awareness and differences are imperative, for which I suggest providing black women with a resource for reporting grievances and recommendations. With this knowledge of black women's experiences in the workplace, it is clear that providing much-needed breaks from this environment, such as granting more days off or remote and flexible work options is a viable solution as a step towards ameliorating their encounters with racism. From my study, I can conclude that their recommendations would also bring consciousness to the need for increasing

diversity in upper management as well as their needed reliance on black cohorts to navigate white-collar occupations. That being said, there should be a more contingent effort in hiring diverse groups of people at all levels.
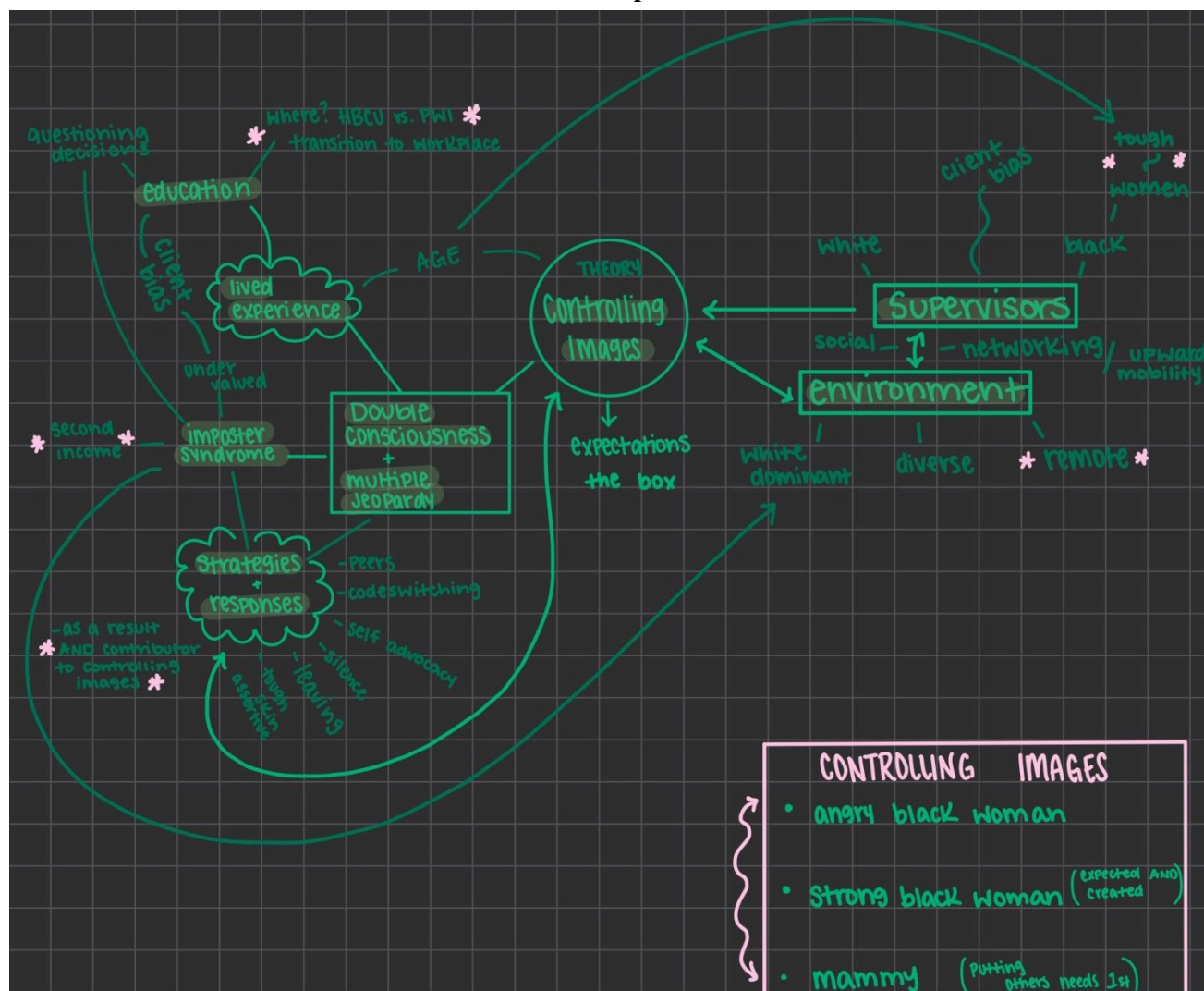
Appendix
Interview Questions

Introductions. Name, age, school, major, occupation, area

1. What made you decide to pursue your career? (build an idea of the trajectory of their career)

2. What does a typical day in your workplace look like?

3. How many other people in your (work/school) setting are black? Women?
   a. How often and when do you notice this?

4. Do you feel supported in your role as an employee? Why or why not? Can you tell me about a time when you didn't feel supported?

5. In your perspective, do you think your bosses and coworkers see you as competent, why or why not?

6. Do you feel like you belong in the workplace? Can you tell me about specific events or moments where you felt like you did/or didn't belong? (who is doing the displacing?)
   a. How do you think that this affected your ability to do your job?

7. Have you ever felt like you were treated differently than your coworkers? If so, can you describe an instance when this happened?

8. Have you ever experienced racism/ sexism at work? If you feel comfortable, could you share more about this experience?
   a. How did experiencing this make you feel? How did it impact your work?

9. Do you employ any strategies to deal with being a Black woman in a white-dominated space? What are these strategies? Do you find them helpful?

10. In general, what do you think are your coworkers' responses to you utilizing these strategies?

11. How have these experiences impacted your career goals and or approaches to the workplace?

12. What policies and practices could your employer implement to make for a better work environment?

Mind Map

Mind map diagram with the following visible text:

- questioning decisions
- where? HBCU vs. PWI ✽
- transition to workplace
- education
- client bias
- tough ✽ women ✽
- client bias
- white
- black
- AGE
- lived experience
- THEORY Controlling Images
- Supervisors
- under valued
- social — networking / upward mobility
- Second income
- imposter syndrome
- Double Consciousness + Multiple Jeopardy
- Environment
- expectations the box
- white dominant
- diverse
- ✽ remote ✽
- Strategies + responses
- peers
- codeswitching
- self advocacy
- as a result AND contributor to controlling images ✽
- silence
- leaving
- assertive/aggression

CONTROLLING IMAGES
- angry black woman
- strong black woman (expected AND created)
- mammy (putting others needs 1st)

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