“WHAT DON’T KILL ME MAKES ME STRONGER”: BLACK WOMEN’S NARRATIVES CONCERNING THEIR LOW SUICIDE RATES

A Dissertation

by

KAMESHA SONDRANEK SPATES

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2009

Major Subject: Sociology

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Chair of Committee,	Edward Murguia
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ABSTRACT

"What Don't Kill Me Makes Me Stronger": Black Women's Narratives Concerning Their Low Suicide Rates. (August 2009)

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The black-white suicide paradox explored in the current study explores black women's notions of suicide. In its most basic form, a fundamental question of this project is why have black women's suicide rates remained consistently low? This project seeks to explore specific internal and external adaptations that black women have come to rely on for long term survival. A great deal of attention will be given to black women's perspectives of suicide inside and outside of the black community.

This qualitative study by way of narratives provides insight into the entities that black women perceive to contribute to their virtually non-existent suicide rates. This approach is particularly appropriate for this study because black women's accounts on suicide will provide rich detailed data typically unseen in current suicide literature. In my work, I assume that black women's multifaceted oppressive conditions have compelled them to use subtle forms of resistance, i.e. coping mechanisms that act as protective barriers against suicide. This study also re-examines notions of social integration and religious beliefs in lessening chances of suicide among black women.

Research findings were presented by way of four themes that emerged from the dominant narratives of twenty-two in-depth interviews. Respondents perceived family and communal obligations, faith based beliefs, a sense of long suffering, and declaration of strength to be the primary grounds for black women's low rates of suicide. Recurring themes were consistent despite the women's income or education levels. The study concludes that black women employ and perceive these strategies to be significant in coping or resisting trivial and significant stressors of life. Additionally, black women's perception of suicide as a weakness played a significant role in the way they defined themselves as well as the act. For literature on suicide, I engaged the works of Durkheim, Prudomme, Hendin, and Lester among others as a theoretical framework for this study.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this manuscript to those that fought and died so that I could have the opportunities presented to me today. Additionally, the participants of this study shared very intimate areas of their lives and I dedicate this project to you. Thank you for allowing the world to catch a glimpse into the daily lives of black women. This is for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For those who really know me and my story, they know very much what this accomplishment means to me and my immediate family. On the road to becoming Dr. Spates, I have faced some extraordinary circumstances, but I could not have done so without the assistance of certain people. I strongly believe that God places certain people in our lives for a reason and the people whom I would like to acknowledge have in one way or another fed into my physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual being during my scholarly pruning process. First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Edward Murguia, for believing in me, encouraging me, and for providing me with some of the cultural capital that I desperately lacked when I first entered the doors of the Ph.D. program. The rest of my committee, Katheryn Henderson, Alex McIntosh, and Holly Foster, has been a very supportive committee, and I thank them for helping me develop as a scholar.

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forgotten, and I hope that I have made you proud in becoming the first Ph.D. in the family.

To my husband, for your unyielding support and believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself, thank you. Thank you for allowing me to spread myself so thin over the last few years. Although unfair to you, you always saw the bigger picture. Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Had it not been for Him and for His placing the appropriate people in my life, I would not be where I am today. I pray that He will continue to direct my life, so that I can live out His purpose for me. Thank you Jesus, for keeping me and for your unconditional love.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"*Successful Black Woman*": *What is it like to be a black person in white America today? One step from suicide! What I'm saying is—the psychological warfare games that we have to play every day just to survive. We have to be one way in our communities and one way in the workplace or in the business sector. We can never be ourselves all around. I think that may be a given for all people, but for us particularly; it's really a mental health problem. It's a wonder we haven't all gone out and killed somebody or killed ourselves (Feagin and Sikes 1995: 1).*

It was a chilly Texas afternoon approaching the end of the fall 2006 semester that I sat down to have a conversation with one of my colleagues. We discussed politics, specifics about the doctoral program, and suicide. I do not recall exactly how the conversation moved to such an unrelated topic, but I do remember my colleague informing me of some interesting statistics. He took out a piece of paper and wrote down the following four numbers: 19.6, 9.6, 5.0, and 1.9 per 100,000.

He then informed me that what he had written was the most recent suicide rates for blacks and whites, males and females in the United States. Not knowing which rates belong to whom, I frankly stated that I was not sure which numbers represent which group, but that I was sure that black women's suicide rates were the lowest of the four. He assured me that my assumption was correct. Why, though, wouldn't black women's suicide rates outnumber the rates for whites when year after year I have seen my mothers, sisters, aunts, and female cousins endure multiple stressors throughout the course of their lives?

This dissertation follows the style of *American Journal of Sociology*.

The literature on race clearly illustrates the unique oppressive conditions of black women in America (Aeauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Collins 2000; Collins 2004; Farrington 2003; Feagin and St.Jean 1998; Gray-White 1999; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Krieger and Bassett 1993; Lerner 1973; Shorter-Gooden 2004; Staples 1973). Thus, it was the identification of this paradox that served as the direct cause for the emergence of this project.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Suicide Paradox

The suicide paradox has been defined as the exception to unfavorable racial health disparities (Rockett et al. 2006). What is even more striking about this phenomenon is the fact that blacks appear to be just as suicide prone if not more so than whites given the risk factors for suicide. Minorities, particularly blacks, are suffering economic, educational, and health challenges on a larger scale than whites (Rockett et al. 2006) So shouldn't blacks be as likely as whites to commit suicide?

Risk Factors

In order to properly assess the issue of suicide, it is essential to identify those in danger and to understand how conditions might perpetuate an individual's likelihood to commit suicide. A risk factor is defined as a characteristic that might increase the probability of injury or disease. Established risk factors in the suicide literature include: a history of mental disorders, particularly depression; history of alcohol and substance abuse; barriers to accessing mental health treatment; easy access to lethal methods; unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health and substance

abuse disorders or suicidal thoughts; and physical illness. Importantly, these are attributes more likely among blacks than among whites in the United States (Center for Disease Control 2008). One of the most common risk factors found to increase an individual's chances of participating in suicidal behavior is depression. Poverty is one of the most reliable predictors of depression thereby placing women at a disproportionate risk for the disorder. To no surprise, statistics reveal that women suffer from depression more than men (Belle and Doucet 2003). What is even more striking is that black women have the highest rates of poverty in the US (Brewer 1988). Nevertheless, the rates of suicide attempts and of suicide itself are higher among white women than among black women.

Challenges in Studying African Americans and Suicide

Because suicide is considered to be a problem that primarily affects white males, suicide completion and its consequences are rarely explored within the context of minority populations. In fact, statistics have shown us that 90% of all suicidal deaths do occur among whites males (Crosby and Molock 2006). Some speculate that because suicide is not typically considered to be an occurrence that affects blacks, studies investigating the phenomenon are underrepresented (Griffin-Fennell and Williams 2006). Therefore, researchers' inexperience in exploring suicide among the black population poses initial complications.

Barriers to studying suicide trends among blacks tend to come from a multitude of sources. Lester (1998) discovered that even the American Association of Suicidology a presumed "safe place", initially resisted exploring the phenomenon. The Association

argued that sessions at meetings of the Association exploring "minority suicide" generated fairly poor attendance (Lester 1998). Lester also goes on to questions the validity of black suicide statistics. He states,

> It has not been uncommon to use nonwhite suicide rates in research on black suicide since the United States government did not calculate black suicide rates prior to 1979. Are stats reliable-many use non whites instead of blacks….In order to make definite conclusions about black suicide rates we must use *black* suicide statistics. (P. 49-50).

Suicide Attempts

To further illustrate the difficulty of working with statistics of the suicide of blacks, it is important briefly to discuss suicide attempts among blacks and whites. Historically both black and white male suicide rates have outnumbered those of black and white women; however, official governmental statistics do reveal that females are more likely to attempt suicide than men. With reference to women, recent data suggest that black women's suicide attempts are significantly lower than those of white women (Office of Statistics and Programming and Prevention May 2007).

The statistics on suicide then indicate that regardless of the black-white differential in risk factors for suicide, the rates of suicide attempts and of suicide itself are lower for black males and females than for white males and females. Despite the fact that both black men and women have higher rates of poverty, infant mortality, and various health conditions (i.e., blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, mental illness, etc); suicide is the one occurrence in which blacks, particularly black women, have the lowest rates. In part because of this, the study of suicide in the African American community has been ignored. Because traditional risk factors predict a higher rate of suicide than is

the case, and because the study of suicide among African Americans has been neglected, this makes it an important study and, therefore, the topic of this dissertation.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to address a gap in the literature by examining black women's perspectives of suicide with the hope of gaining insight into factors related to this suicide paradox. Because of the nature of this study, this project will serve to link the literatures of suicide, race, and gender.

Research Questions

The current research project is guided by the following questions:

1. What types of stressors are faced by African American women relative to the suicide paradox?
2. What insight can African American women provide on the suicide paradox by way of their perceptions of black female and white male rate disparities?
3. What strategies are employed by African American women, either consciously or unconsciously, to elude suicide?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The primary way that this project will explore black women's low suicide rates is through interviewing black women. This approach is particularly appropriate for this study because black women's accounts on suicide will provide richly detailed data unusual in the current literature on suicide. Although there are some studies of suicide among black women, but that there still remains a need to study this phenomenon

through interviews of black women themselves (Fernquist 2004; Hendin 1969; Kaslow et al. 2006; Neeleman, Wessely and Lewis 1998; Nisbet 1996; Stephens 1995).

West (1999) declares that the voices of black women are rarely heard, and when they are, their statements frequently are taken out of context. They are considered too emotional and lacking objectivity (West 1999). Therefore, I am adamant about allowing Black women's voices to speak for themselves concerning the notion of suicide. This project will allow black women's voices to illuminate the suicide literature which to-date has been significantly lacking their voice.

BASE LINE CONSIDERATIONS

Three base line considerations derived from the literature were made before data collection began. The first was that black women's religious beliefs are significant in their perceptions of low suicide rates. Studies going back to Durkheim (1897/2006) have shown this to be a common factor among populations with low suicide rates. Similar results also emerged in five preliminary unstructured interviews conducted with black women.

The second literature based assumption is centered on notions social networks. Secondly, According to the literature from Durkheim (1897/2006) and others, social integration also appears to be fairly established in the field. Therefore, I expect that black women will deem social networks as essential to the low roles of suicide among black women. This assumption however was in direct opposition to some existing studies that have examined the social networks of black women. With pathological portrayals of the black family dominating a significant part of the race literature in the

United States, prominent race theorists have argued that many of the black family's social ties and networks have been weakening (Demos 1990; Moynihan 1965; Rainwater and Yancey 1967). If this were true, one would expect increasing suicide rates among black women. Since this is not the case we are faced with an apparent contradiction.

The third and final base line consideration is with reference to the multifaceted stressors experienced by contemporary black women. Black women in the US reside in a unique social position in the United States. As a result, I theorize that the grueling conditions that have overwhelmed contemporary US African American women have ultimately resulted in the development of various coping strategies that enable them to survive even when faced with the most difficult challenges (Brewer 1988; Collins 1996; Feagin and St.Jean 1998; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Lerner 1973; Lewis 1977; Townsend-Gikes 2001).

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter I will begin by analyzing the most recent US suicide statistics for blacks and whites, and for males and females. Chapter I also will review relevant literature on suicide while discussing the complexities of examining suicide within the context of African Americans. The second chapter will concentrate specifically on historical and contemporary challenges faced by black women. Chapter III will describe the research design and methodology used. Chapter IV, V, VI, and VII will present the themes that emerged from the study. The final chapter, chapter VIII, will provide a comprehensive conclusion to the study and will delineate implications for future research.

CHAPTER II

SUICIDE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will analyze US suicide statistics for blacks and whites, males and females. Following the presentation of suicide rates, I will then present a review of the suicide literature and will provide illustrations of how traditional suicide literature has neglected adequately to consider African Americans in its studies. The chapter concludes with brief discussions of the difficulties associated with examining suicide among African Americans while simultaneously calling for additional research from an epistemological standpoint concerning the study of African American women and suicide

THE PREVALENCE OF SUICIDE

Suicide Statistics

Every 16.2 minutes, a person dies from suicide in the United States. Suicide is ranked as the 11th leading cause of death in the US (with death caused by homicide ranking 15th) and is the 3rd leading cause of death among youth ages 15-24 (McIntosh 2004). For this reason, the US Surgeon General has declared suicide a national problem calling for immediate action. Because suicide affects individuals from all backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, the World Health Organization has also urged other countries to join the United States in the fight for suicide prevention (Davidson, Potter and Ross 1999).

Table 1 is a presentation of age adjusted suicide statistics in 2004.

TABLE 1. 2004 Death Rates for Suicide by Race and Sex, Deaths per 100,000 Resident Populations (Center for Disease Control April 2007).

Race	Sex	Age Adjusted Rate	Crude Rate
White	Male	19.6	19.6
	Female	5.0	5.1
Black	Male	9.6	9.0
	Female	1.8	1.8

Note the extremely low rate of suicide for black females relative to the other groups. To understand how suicide occurrences among whites and blacks, males and females fit into a historical context refer to the1980 Suicide Rates by Race and Sex on page 178 and the 1950 Suicide Rates by Race and Sex on page 179 in Appendix A.

Research also reveals that females are more likely to attempt suicide than men. Thus, for every one male suicide attempt there are three female suicide attempts. Despite this, men are four times more likely to die from suicide than females. As a result, even though women attempt suicide more often than men, men are more likely to die from suicide attempts (Center for Disease Control April 2007). Examining attempts by race and gender, Alston and Anderson (1995) revealed that nonfatal suicide statistics are not documented nearly to the extent of that fatal suicide attempts are documented,

particularly in the case of African Americans (Alston and Anderson 1995). Along the same lines, Nisbet (1996) alludes to a similar point by claiming that nonfatal suicide behavior among African American women might be more frequent than attempts by their white counterparts (Nisbet 1996). Despite these claims, however, recent statistics collected by the Office of Statistics and Program Prevention show that the rate of attempted suicide for white females is significantly higher than that for black females (Office of Statistics and Programming and Prevention May 2007).

Demographics of Suicide

Region. After controlling for race, gender, and age, suicide rates vary significantly by region (McKeown, Cuffe and Schulz 2006). Figure 1, describes suicide rates in 2003 by region.

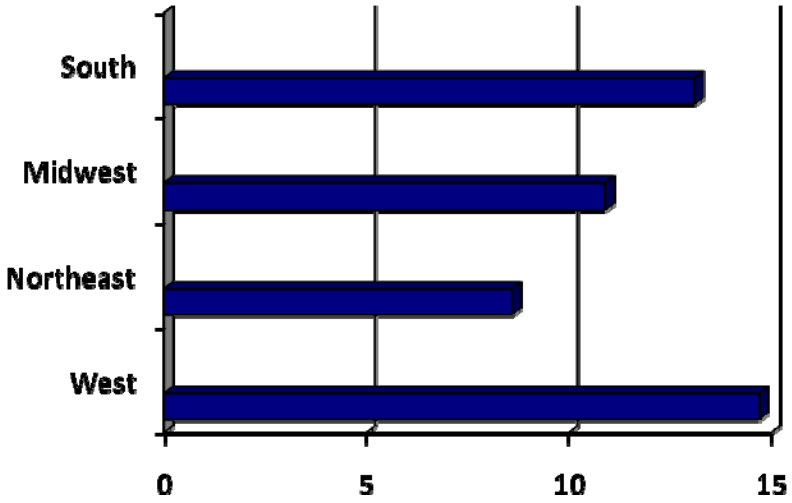

FIGURE 1. 2003 Suicide Rates by Region in the US Suicide Rates by Age Group, 1970-2002: An Examination of Recent Trends. *American Journal of Public Health* 96.

As illustrated above the northeastern region of the United States has the lowest suicide rates of 8.6 per 100,000. In the Midwestern region, of the country, suicides occur at a rate of approximately 10.9 per 100,000 people. The southern region of the country has the second highest rate of suicide, that of 13.1 for every 100,000. Finally, And lastly, the western region of the country has the highest occurrence of suicide with a rate of 14.7 per 100,000. Cities with the lowest suicide rates nationwide, as one might assume from the regional statistics, are in the Northeastern region of the country with Washington D.C. for example having the lowest overall rate of 6.05 per 100,000. The city with the highest rate in the nation is Las Vegas, Nevada, with an overall rate of 23.93 per 100,000 (Pearson 2007).

Age. When examining rates by age, some groups have exhibited a faster rise in suicide rates than others. For example, suicide rates among black males ages 15-24 have nearly doubled since 1986. Nonetheless, the age group with the highest suicide rates continues to be older white males (Pearson 2007). In a study conducted analyzing census bureau suicide data collected for the years 1994-2002, black women had the narrowest age distribution concerning the prevalence of suicide, ranging between early 20's and mid 40's. Additionally, this study also showed that virtually no suicides occurred outside this window for black women. Lastly, this same study notes that the mean age for suicide victims among whites was 46.2 and the mean age for blacks was 36.8. These findings indicate that not only do blacks commit suicide less often than whites, but they also tend to commit suicide much earlier in life (Garlow, Purselle and Heninger 2005)

Education. When considering white males and females, larger suicide rates tend to be located among those with less than 12 years of education. For blacks, African Americans ages 25-54, with lower levels of education, were more likely to commit suicide. However, older blacks differed from older whites in that lower educational attainment seemed to have no effect on their risk for suicide (Fernquist 2001).

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Several scholars had made theoretical contributions to the study of suicide. Classical Theorist Emile Durkheim declared that social integration and social regulation were two variables that could be used to predict suicide. In terms of social integration, Durkheim states that suicide is most likely to occur when a society or group is characterized with either high or low levels of integration. He refers to high levels of social integration as a direct cause of altruistic suicide; and he refers to low levels of social integration could result in egoistic suicide.

Social regulation is also an important variable in suicide prediction. Durkheim defines social regulation as the extent to which society controls an individual's attitudes, desires, and emotions. Similar to social integration, both high and low levels of social regulation increase the likelihood of suicidal behavior. Durkheim referred to instances with low levels of social integration as anomie, and instances of high levels regulation as fatalistic. In summary, societies that maintained moderate levels of social regulation and social integration were likely to have fewer suicides among its members (Durkheim 1897/2006)

Durkheim's analysis of suicide goes on to examine other factors related to suicide. His analysis discusses social factors such as income, cosmic factors such as seasonal variances in weather, marital status, and religion. Especially important in Durkheim's analysis is the factor of religion. He argues that religion encourages integration, that is, the formation of a collective life and collective community. Therefore, religion appears to have a preventive effect on suicide. He illustrates this point by exploring two prominent religious dominations in US society, Protestant and Catholic. Durkheim argues that despite the fact that most denominations discourage suicide, the Protestantism tends toward less collectivism than Catholicism (Durkheim 1897/2006).

The final two aspects to be discussed in Durkheim's theory are the associations between relationships and location. Durkheim finds marriage to be a protective factor against suicide for both males and females; however this especially appears to be the case among middle aged and older males. Secondly, Durkheim discovers that suicide tends to be more of an urban phenomenon than a rural occurrence. However, Durkheim fails to include the factor of race in his study (with the exception of his analysis of fatalistic suicide among the African slave population). Importantly in the context of this study, although he briefly mentions gender specific risks for suicidal behavior within the context of married or single life, he does not provide insight on risk factors associated with women of color.

Durkheim's theories continue to serve as a base for contemporary suicide studies. For example, while maintaining Durkheim's basic premises that collective life of groups

serve as social relations helping to bind individuals into society, Bearman (1991) argues that Durkheim neglects to mention that in abnormal contexts, integration and regulation are not one and the same. In other words, one may be integrated into a group, yet due to inconsistencies within the group, still remain unrestrained. Likewise an individual may be subject to constraint, yet not integrated. As a result, Durkheim's thesis concerning integration and regulation is only likely to occur within an ideal form of societal integration and regulation (Bearman 1991).

Although Bearman does criticize Durkheim's theory, Bearman as well fails to acknowledge the importance of providing a more in-depth examination of suicide by race and gender. In an attempt to establish a more inclusive approach to the study of suicide, Girard (1993) seeks to provide readers with a more diverse and accurate examination of risk factors associated with the contemporary suicide phenomenon. He begins by criticizing Durkheim's theory of social integration by arguing that it neglects to consider the significance of age and gender. He goes on to say that the suicide phenomenon becomes more complicated when you attempt to introduce other variables into the study of this occurrence, such as ascribed and achieved characteristics. Generally speaking, Girard believes that achievement statuses tend to increase the likelihood of suicidal behavior. With this said, Girard argues that since men's roles in US societies tend to be centered more on the achieved statuses (such as education, income, etc) their suicide rates will tend to be higher. Likewise, he claims that suicide rates among young women exceed those of young men because women's roles in the US

are centered on familial roles. Therefore, young women tend to feel pressure to marry and to start a family by a certain age (Girard 1993).

Girard, then, provides us with a more comprehensive analysis as to what places one at risk for suicide than earlier studies such as those by Durkheim and Bearman. He considers both structural (social identifications' such as age and gender) and cultural (achieved status) dynamics as a playing a role of increasing one's risk for suicidal behavior. Nevertheless, Girard, too, fails to point out the role of race in his study

A theory focused on the association between suicide and modernization was developed by Charles Prudhomme (1938). Prudhomme argues that suicide tends not to affect African Americans to the extent of whites because of existing social differences between the two groups. Educationally and economically, blacks lag behind whites, so in extreme times of need, such as the Great Depression, they had far less to lose. Lastly, he goes on to say that African Americans appear to utilize interpersonal ties, placing more of an emphasize on social ties and religion relative to whites.

Similar to Bearman and Girard, Hendin (1969) criticizes Durkheim's theory for being too simplistic. He argues that if social disruption is one of the primary causes for suicide as Durkheim suggests, then rates among of the black population should be higher than whites. In illustration, he states,

> By the time one reaches a formulation as general as 'disruption in social relations,' one has a formulation vague enough to cover many situations but so general as to be meaningless. Even so, the formulation is contradicted by the Negro experience, for if disruption in social relations were the central factor in suicide, the black population of all ages would have a suicide rate ten times that of the white population (P. 134)

Hendin goes on to argue that the wide-spread rejection of African Americans through discrimination and racism evokes feelings of rejection and anger. However, Hedin claims that unlike whites, instead of becoming suicidal, African Americans may instead turn their rage outward, thus more likely becoming homicidal. Therefore he concludes that suicidal behavior and homicidal behavior are inversely associated (Hendin 1978).

An additional point worth mentioning comes to light in Hendin's case studies of suicidal black women (Hendin 1969). Close examination of his approximate six patients discovers an apparent pattern that existed among black women. It appears that the majority of black women who made suicide attempts typically did so after experiencing some sort of relationship problem with the opposite sex or issues with maternal abandonment. To illustrate, he states:

> After the birth of her child Agnes went back to her job as a file clerk, while her sister cared for her daughter. Agnes is often impatient with the child and sometimes fears she will grab her and choke her. ..Yet when things are going well with her husband, she enjoys her daughter. Agnes mentions times when all three of them play and romp on the floor. Without her husband she feels she will be of no use to her daughter since she will spend her days crying for him. (P. 26)

Although Hendin's theory has been criticized for generalizing his findings of suicidal individuals to those of non-suicidal individuals, his theory does provide insight into the implications of cultural stress that African Americans disproportionately share and its relation to suicidal behavior. Additionally all of the women struggled with issues of parental abandonment and significant mistrust of the opposite sex. To now, then, theories that focus on suicide rate differences have not been able to provide a definitive answer as to causality, particularly when concerning people of color. To no surprise,

Jedlicka (1977) argues that there are no existing theories present to explain racial differences in suicide rates (Jedlicka, Shin and Lee 1977).

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Suicide statistics have been referred to by many as one of the few exceptions to typical racial health disparity scenarios. In other words, morbidity and mortality rates for almost every other negative occurrence, either physical or mental are typically much higher for non-whites than whites. However, suicide is one of the few exceptions to the rule. In fact, statistics have shown that 90% of all suicidal deaths occur among white males. Because suicide is considered to be a problem that primarily affects white males, suicide completion and its consequences are rarely explored within the context of minority populations. (Crosby and Molock 2006). Consequently, we need to take a closer look at characteristics that experts believe may place a person at risk for suicide.

Risk Factors

A risk factor is defined as a variable positively related to suicide. A comprehensive list of risk factors for suicide includes: previous suicide attempt(s); a history of mental disorders, particularly depression; a history of alcohol and substance abuse; a family history of suicide or suicide attempts; a family history of child maltreatment; feelings of hopelessness; impulsive or aggressive tendencies; barriers to accessing mental health treatment; losses (relational, social, work-related, or financial); physical illness; easy access to lethal methods by which to commit suicide; unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health and substance abuse disorders or suicidal thoughts; certain cultural and religious beliefs—for instance,

the belief that suicide is a noble resolution of a personal dilemma; local epidemics of suicide; isolation and feelings of being cut off from other people (Center for Disease Control 2008).

Based on the above risk factors, people of color would appear to be disproportionately affected by several of these factors. Specifically, African Americans are at greater risk than whites concerning having greater barriers to accessing mental health treatment, having higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse, having easier access to lethal methods, and having a greater stigma associated with seeking mental health treatment .

Ambiguity of Race Associated Risk Factors

Minorities, particularly blacks, are suffering economic, educational, health, and cultural challenges relative to what would seem to cause suicide on a greater scale than whites (Griffin-Fennell and Williams 2006). Why, then, are the rates for suicide among African Americans consistently low relative to whites? With the exception of the risk factors of previous suicide attempts, a family history of suicide, and local epidemics of suicide, African Americans logically appear to be less at risk for suicidal behavior.

Risk factors such as having: a history of mental disorders, particularly depression; a history of alcohol and substance abuse; barriers to accessing mental health treatment; and an unwillingness to seek help because of the stigma attached to mental health disorders such as having suicidal thoughts are is especially prevalent in the African American community. Harris and Molock's (2000) study revealed that the leading cause of suicide among African Americans tended to be untreated depression

(Harris and Davis-Molock 2000). Additionally, Garlow et al. (2005) finds that African Americans have a greater disparity in mental health care treatment and availability compared to whites. Therefore, if suicide is an outcome of an untreated psychiatric illness it should follow that African Americans should be at greater risk to commit suicide, yet this is not the case.

In Walker and colleagues (2006) study exploring lay beliefs held among African Americans, she hypothesized that existing stigma's concerning mental health treatment have traditionally made it difficult to treat troubled African Americans (Walker, Lester and Joe 2006). It appears that on the aggregate level, African American communities are overwhelmed with unemployment, drugs, and social isolation (Anderson 1990; Flagg 1993; Stack 1974) all of which seem to increase the likelihood of suicidal behavior. To make matters worse, as mentioned, racial/health rates (cancer, cardio- vascular disease, stroke, diabetes, etc.) among Blacks are significantly higher than those of whites (Keppel, Pearcy and Wagener 2002), except where suicide is concerned.

So how can we explain differences in suicide rates between blacks and whites? It appears that blacks frequently are exposed to characteristics that place them at risk for suicidal behavior; however, as we have pointed out, black suicide rates have remained consistently lower than suicide rates for whites. Nonetheless, but their completion rates have remained consistently lower. So then, what role do protective factors play in suicide? Some scholars argue that suicide occurrences among African Americans have remained low due to protective factors shielding them from suicide (Fernquist 2004;

Marion and Range 2001; Neeleman, Wessely and Lewis 1998; Walker, Lester and Joe 2006). We now turn to an examination of protective factors as they relate to suicide.

Protective Factors

Researchers claim that risk factors are a useful tool in predicting suicidal behavior; however, identifying protective factors have also have played a large role in suicide prevention initiatives. Protective factors are defined as characteristics that potentially buffer people from the commission of risk suicide. The list of protective factors relative to suicide are as follows: effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders; easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help seeking; family and community support; support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships; skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and nonviolent handling of disputes; cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation instincts (McIntosh 2006).

It is important to consider protective factors when assessing available resources for those at risk for suicide. Consequently, the U S Surgeon General's call to action has incorporated many of the above protective factors into national prevention programs. By focusing on a particular group that appears to have established strategies in averting suicide (i.e. black women), we hope to gain insight into how these strategies might be effective in lowering rates of suicide for other groups.

Protective Factors among Black Women

Scholars have acknowledged the low rates of suicide among black women. One notion is that low rates can be attributed to protective factors that operate in the lives of

many black women. A review of the findings provides an interesting basis for this study. Here, we review the literature on protective factors specific to African American women.

Support Systems. In a study on protective factors of African American females, Nisbet (1996) found that marriage tends to serve as a protective factor against suicide attempts for both men and women, regardless of race. However, marriage appears to provide the most protection for white women, followed secondly by white males, and then by black males. Thus, marriage provides the least amount of protection to black women. The study also revealed that on average, black women were less likely to marry, more likely to have dependent children, to live in larger households, and to earn less income than both white men and white women. Nevertheless, black women still attempt suicide at rates comparable to white females, and complete suicide at much lower rates than the rest of the population.

It has been suggested that social support systems among black women is an important protective factor for African American women; however, researchers have as yet not fully understood the dynamics of how these support systems operate. For example, Nisbet (1996) concludes:

> The findings of this study point toward an underlying system of support—a system comprised of and regulated by elements such as household size and friendship and familial ties...the underlying social system of Black females needs to be researched further to fully understand how familial and kinship ties safeguard against completed suicide. (P. 338)

Nisbet's finding deserves more attention. He too, confirms that social networks are significant in decreasing the likelihood of suicide among Black women. Nonetheless he is uncertain as to how this phenomenon plays out.

Single Motherhood. Fernquist (2004) argues that single-motherhood does appear to protect black women from suicide. He reasons that this could be related to social ties and networks utilized among single parents. He also concludes that the greater the disparities between whites and blacks educational attainment, the lower the suicide rates of African Americans will be. He believes that this phenomenon can be attributed to one of the following two variables: the lower the education, the more likely the individual is to be a single mother (Fernquist 2004).

Acceptability. In an attempt to explore lay beliefs held among African Americans that could serve as a buffer among suicide, Walker et al. (2006) reported several interesting findings. They determined that Blacks were more likely to believe that their lives and general well-being were attributed to God, whereas whites were more likely to believe that an individual or the state or government was responsible for their life and well being. Contrary to what they hypothesized, however, African Americans and whites did not differ in their reports of stigma associated with suicide. The authors' did not expect this finding because previous research has argued that suicide is more highly stigmatized in the African American community than it is among whites.

Applying a cognitive dissonance model, Neelman et al. (1998) examine the notion of suicide acceptability among African Americans and whites. The cognitive dissonance model argues that church membership, religious belief, and suicide are

incompatible with one another. Although emotional, social, and educational roles have an impact, the greater impact of cognitive dissonance having the effect of lowering the amount of suicide among African Americans. Findings revealed that this was primarily due to high levels of orthodox beliefs and personal devotion among African Americans. Thus, these combined variables appear to have an inverse effect on suicide acceptability.

Religiosity/Church Attendance. Neelman et al. (1998) also find church attendance contributes to ethnic differences in suicide acceptability. Along the same lines, Fernquist (2004) discovered a positive association among suicide rates and religion among black females in the 25-54 and 55-64 age categories (Fernquist 2004). Marion and Range (2001) also found religiosity to be associated with better psychological health as well as a decrease in suicidal ideation among African Americans (Marion and Range 2001).

THE SUICIDE PARADOX

Attempting to Narrow the Gap

Realizing the gap with the literature, authors' Castle et al. (2004) identify risk factors common to blacks and whites, namely, death ideation, and suicidal ideation (Castle et al. 2004). Along the same lines, Kung, Liu, and Juon (1998) used a combination of variables to examine suicide risk factor differences between whites and blacks. Using the four variables, educational/occupational status, alcohol consumption, use of mental health services, and living arrangements, they found that while all four of these risk factors were significant for whites, only the use of mental health facilities was significant for blacks (Kung, Liu and Juon 1998).

The Difficulty of Examining Suicide among African Americans

Lester discovered that even the American Association of Suicidology initially resisted exploring the phenomenon of suicide among African Americans. The Association argued that conference sessions exploring "minority suicide" generated fairly poor attendance (Lester 1998). Additionally, Lester also questions the validity of statistics on suicide for African Americans. For example, Lester states:

> It has not been uncommon to use nonwhite suicide rates in research on black suicide since the United States government did not calculate black suicide rates prior to 1979. Are stats reliable-many use non whites instead of blacks….Thus in order to make definite conclusions about black suicide rates we must use *black* suicide statistics" (Lester 1998: 49-50).

This matter takes us into the next challenge in the literature, the epistemological dilemma of black's suicide. One can only imagine that if our knowledge of suicide occurrences is distorted by race it most certainly is for women of color. Nonetheless, in order for researchers' to get over the initial awkwardness that unfamiliarity of the subject brings, it is important for studies to expose any difficulty that researchers might encounter up front on their new journey.

CHAPTER III

BLACK WOMEN: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II provides a discussion of the social scientific literature concerning the African American family. The chapter reveals that much of the literature on the African American family is done from a perspective of the African American family as being dysfunctional. Some studies even conclude that the black family's social ties are weakening to a major extent. Additionally the chapter will provide discussions of the daily challenges and strengths of contemporary black women. As black women's historical experiences may very well play a role in their perceptions of low suicide rates.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Many Africans were brought to the US and to the Caribbean involuntarily. This account begins when approximately twenty African Americans were forced ashore at the Jamestown colony by white settlers. Over the next two-hundred years, thousands of people in Africa were stolen from their home lands, torn away from their families and subjected to extreme hardship (Feagin 2006).

Contrary to what many Americans believe, the African migration occurred on several different levels. Some Africans reached the North American shores as free men and others came as indentured servants who fulfilled their duties and went on to live out their years as a freemen (Mindel, Habenstein and Jr 1998). At one point in time both the Irish and Africans co-existed as indentured servants. The two groups lived and worked in a communal area, and some even ran away together to form partnerships against their

superiors. Ultimately, growing discontent by Irish and African workers forced white landowners to make a decision. Upper-class white male landowners decided to restructure society on the basis of class and race. These actions resulted in a drastic decline in the number of Irish indentured servants. Blacks, on the other hand, more easily could be denied their rights based on the color of their skin and could thus be more easily controlled (Takaki 1993).

The Reconstruction, during the early 1960's to the mid 1870's, was an attempt by the United States government to address the return of the southern states to the Union following the abolishment of slavery (Gerstle 2001; United States Congress 1867). The Reconstruction also provided former slaves with equal protection under the law, along with the right to vote and the right to receive an education.

During the period of slavery and during Reconstruction and its aftermath, the foundation for many of America's basic racial attitudes were established. Feagin (2001) argues that racial attitudes consisted of a complex array of anti-black practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and white racist ideologies and attitudes to maintain and rationalize white privilege. Feagin asserts that this phenomenon later set the foundation for what he refers to as "systemic racism".

Although conditions for African Americans were beginning to improve, these improvements were short lived. In 1867 Jim Crow laws were ratified. From 1867 until about 1965 and as late as the 1970's in certain places, Jim Crow laws enforced "separate

but equal" doctrine. Although this set of guidelines was originally created with Blacks in mind, other groups of color were at times held to these strict guidelines (Feagin 2001).

Consequently, what we have here is a group of individuals that have "technically" been "free" from legal restriction and lawfully protected for 38 years at most. As one might imagine these occurrences continue to pose several challenges in the contemporary lives the Black family. This historical base provides us with a historically adequate version of Blacks in the US let's examine the impact that these historical changes have had on the contemporary Black family. Additionally, how are these occurrences being portrayed in the literature?

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY

Contemporary literature reveals that blacks consistently suffer a destitute future. For instance, minorities, particularly blacks, are suffering economical, educational, health, and even cultural dilemmas on a much more massive scale than whites (Griffin-Fennell and Williams 2006). More specifically, Aguirre and Turner (2001) argues that the legacy of slavery still plagues African Americans today, characterized by disproportionate amounts of inner city and housing projects, single parent homes, high unemployment rates, unequal education, and crime-ridden streets (Griffin-Fennell and Williams 2006).

Prominent race literature tends to examine the African American family from a pathological perspective as is the case with a large part of the social scientific literature of the African American family. Although, there definitely are issues that trouble African American communities, social factors and structural matters are often

overlooked. A primary example of this can be found in the work of one of sociology's most well-known race experts, Patrick Moynihan

The Moynihan Report attempts to address several of these issues. In his report "*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*" (1965), the current circumstances of the African American family rest in the legacy of slavery. He goes on to say that occurrences such as growing urbanization, education and employment discrimination, increasing welfare dependency, an increase in the births of illegitimate children, and strong traditions of matriarchy (Moynihan, 1965) are a direct result from slavery. In addition, Moynihan claims that despite the fact that there is an emerging black middle class, he believes that conditions of the lower-class black families will continue to worsen. Moynihan maintains that institutional discrimination towards the African American family leads to what Moynihan refers to as a "family breakdown"(Moynihan 1965). Institutional discrimination towards the African American family leads to what Moynihan refers to as a "family breakdown". He believes that the results of a family breakdown will ultimately lead to a "social meltdown". To further illustrate this point he states,

> There is no one Negro community. There is no one Negro problem, There is no one solution. Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure….It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will has the Negro people. Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is resurgence is doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored. (P. 30)

This report was met with ambiguity. Although, some readily accepted portions of Moynihan's claims, several rejected the allegations of the "deteriorating Negro family". A significant portion of the Negro community as well as some in the academic social

science circle disputed these claims by arguing that Moynihan's analysis seemed to ignore the strengths of the African American community by depicting them as pathological and unstable (Rainwater and Yancey 1967).

Also stemming from the controversial work of Moynihan Eugene Genovese (1999) provides a historical overview of the myth of the absent African American Family. Genovese, reassessed the slave family has having more power than originally portrayed. He provides examples in which slave masters used these strong familial ties as a form of social control. In fact, it has been documented that one of the most effective forms of discipline employed were threats to sell child or spouse. The resilentancy of the black family also resulted in delayed or terminated sales of a slaves family members. The analysis concludes by arguing that the slave master's were very aware of the significance of these bonds and the slaves themselves were aware that whites were aware of them as well. Thus, Genovese argues that even though myths of the absent family during slavery are widespread nothing could be farther from the truth. With thought, these same conclusions could be expanded to contemporary views of the black family. Since most claims of the weakening black family are deemed to be a direct result of slavery, this illustrates not only have strong familial bonds existed during this era, yet superseded the institution itself (Genovese 1999).

Other scholars take an entirely different approach by arguing that contemporary conditions of the Black family are structural. Contrary to Moynihan's point, Staples's argues that the decline of the black nuclear family rests in the structural conditions. He goes on to say that despite the fact Blacks have made inconceivable gains in education,

these gains have resulted in small economic benefits for the majority of blacks (Staples 1987).

Similarly, Elijah Anderson (1999) also insists that structural changes remain the primary setback in the black community. In his manuscript "*Code of the Street"* he argues that urban areas have experienced structural changes ranging from deindustrialization, poverty, institutional discrimination, and even social isolation. As a result, these conditions have created what Anderson refers to as an "institutionalized oppositional culture", and thus the "code of the street" is one of the most obvious public manifestations of this social alienation (Anderson 1999)

It is not surprising that the African American family continues to face extreme hardships. Considering the fact that the dominant group controls the stereotypes portrayed in the media, which in turn perpetuates myths and stereotypes, society is able to justifiably condemn the African American family before they are given a fair chance (Gutman 1975). For example, according to (Greenblatt and Willie 1978):

> Here the assumption is clear that any divergence from the family structure that predominates among members of the majority race is inherently inferior and a danger to minorities and to society as a whole. (P. 691)

It is often these stereotypes that lead to various forms of discrimination and prejudice in virtually every existing social sphere. It is also important to keep in mind that frequently these hardships occur on both societal and individual levels. Consequently, even though a great deal of African Americans experience discriminatory acts individually, these dilemmas ultimately present countless setbacks for the entire African American family.

CHALLENGES OF BLACK WOMEN

Presenting discussions on the historical and contemporary challenges that black women face, in the US is critical. Since the primary purpose of this study is to explore black women's perceptions of their virtually non-existent suicide rates despite the disproportionate amounts of stressors experienced in their daily lives, it is critical to have an accurate depiction of the conditions that black women encounter on a day to day basis. Thus, by merging the suicide literature with that of the race literature we may begin to gain insight into how closely suicide risk factors are associated with daily lives of US black women.

Standards of Beauty

For centuries black women have been struggled with negative notions of womanhood. An unfortunate matter of being a woman of African descent in the United States is that western standards of beauty have always been exclusionary toward her. Beauty standards were set centuries ago, and they included porcelain skin, long silky hair, and "regular features". Therefore darkened skin, kinky hair, and shapely women were virtually absent from the mass media (Farrington 2003). Standards of beauty in America are fairly simple. The standards are as such, not black, not overweight, not too overbearing, dainty, and a "nice" grade of hair. What does this mean for the black woman? It means that based on Western standards of beauty it means she is not beautiful. How has it come to be that almost all physical characteristics associated with African American women have come to be synonymous with unattractive. Gray-White

(1999) claims that this is the case because the notion of black womanhood and White womanhood are interdependent of one another (Gray-White 1999).

Growing technological influences of Television, Radio, Magazines, and of course the internet has resulted in virtually limitless distributions of ideal beauty standards worldwide. Just as the notions of whiteness and blackness are opposite, it is important to remember that within binary thinking it is impractical to consider the blue-eyed, blond, slender white woman beautiful without the construction of the other (Collins 2000). Collins states,

> White women and Black women as collectivities represent two opposing poles, with Latinas, Asian-American women, and Native American women jockeying positions in between. Judging white women, by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their white skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege them in a system that elevates whiteness over blackness. In contrast, African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty –standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and most painfully, one another. (P. 89-90)

In addition to physical characteristics, culture has also played a significant role in constructing the ideal appearance for black women. The idea that "black is beautiful" is a primary demonstration of this. Prior to the civil rights era darker skinned African Americans were practically ignored in advertising or placed in inferior positions to fairer skinned blacks. Often times, even in black magazines (such as *Ebony Magazine, Essence Magazine, etc,)* darker skinned women were advertised as maids or other roles that perpetuated negative stereotypes.

Body Image. In Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2003) examination of weight and body image, she provides a historical account of oppressive images that have plagued the black woman for years (sapphire, jezebel, and mammy). And although contemporary

claims of the mammy are few and far between the new myth of the "black superwoman" has emerged. Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues that presumptions of strength and deviance are pushing women to develop eating problems, especially forms of compulsive overeating that they are often unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge. Subsequently, black women's issues with weight continue to fuel the stereotype of the strong black woman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003).

As far as issues of weight are concerned black women understand they are viewed as deviant outside of their communities. Yet, despite the fact that cultural variations in the black community tell us that black women prefer thickness rather than thinness, their desire for thickness has more to do with just attractive preferences of black men. In fact, the author argues that the existence of economic and social powerlessness among black women translates into their weight. Thus, Black Women's weight ultimately symbolizes limited power over their lives, particularly among lower income black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003).

Along the same lines author Doris Witt (1999) examines the notion of the black female appetite. In her quest to determine why black women are largely absent from the eating disorder literature she instead discovers that are they are present in certain roles. Witt discovers an overwhelming presence in the literature depicting black women as mammy's and cooks, the matriarch, and the internalization of white beauty standard (Witt 1999).

Similar to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2003) Witt also finds many black women eat to suppress their emotions. Therefore the notion of "Fat is a black woman's Issue" takes on

a metaphorical significance. In further illustration this point she states, "The widespread conflation of African American female bodies and fat is, then, surely a function of the psychic needs of the dominant white society". (P. 189)

Colorism. In order to be considered truly beautiful in American, weight is on part of the equation, but skin color also plays a major role. As a result, not only has the notion of black women's body shape been constructed as deviant, but so too has their skin color. Although, one might assume that colorism occurs primarily from whites towards blacks, author Mark Hill (2002) discovers that this is not the case. In his study of skin color preferences among blacks, he discovered that Eurocentric standards continue to serve as an accurate indicator of attractiveness. His results revealed that Men held the strongest biases toward feminine beauty. And, contrary to what he presumed perceivers belonging to the baby boom era 60's and 70's (or the black power era) held similar perceptions as those that came from different cohorts. In other words, despite the era that the perceivers grew up in they showed significant preference for fairer skinned black women (Hill 2002).

Thus, far we have established that Eurocentric beauty standards continue to pose a problem for black women in this day in age. Weight, body images, and skin color of black women (and black men to a certain degree) continue to position them into subordinate categories. Let's explore how the media works to propagate this matter on a mass level.

Media

Contemporary misrepresentations of black women in the media are overwhelming. In fact, 97% of the black women in the Jones and Shorter-Gooden study say that they acknowledge negative stereotypes in the media and 80% claim that they have personally been affected by these racism and sexist assumptions (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). Collin's (2004) asserts that ever evolving controlling images of black women evade the media, nonetheless, despite the fact that there as has been a surge in black professional women, contemporary images fail to reveal this change. Collins, goes on to say that modern day mammies have become Black Bitches (angry, loud, and aggressive) polarized on the other end of the spectrum by other images of bad mothers (Collins 2004).

Deck (2000) demonstrates that food and ethnicity has used as an apparatus of discrimination towards people of color. She illustrates this point by exposing prominent images of black women in American culture: such as novels, films, ads, and TV shows, dating back 100 years. Many of the images in the advertisements are said to portray black women in a masculine image. The rationale behind these acts during this era, were to make the white homemaker feel safe while her husband is away. In other words, as long as mammy was around then she could act as the man of the house thereby protecting the white women (Deck 2000).

The notion of Jezebel was also a negative image of black women heavily circulated in the media. Jezebel was framed as a sexed crazed black woman. Gray-White argues that the image of the Jezebel maintained among white men resulted in

centuries of sexual abuse and rape. Thus, it was not uncommon for black woman at times to have to deal with both, abuse from white men and a jealous white mistress. Images of Sapphire emerged after slavery ended. Sapphire was frame as a domineering female who consumes men and while taking control of them. The image of Sapphire is fairly close with idea's of the Matriarch of the black family (Gray-White 1999).

Feagin and St. Jean (1998) argue that black women are misrepresented in both public and private discourse. Authors' argue that African Americans are stigmatized by dominant culture created to maintain the goals and objectives of white men and women. As a result, an unfortunate consequence of these occurrences is that black women face stigmatization physically, morally, and spiritually. They continue this point by arguing that these stereotypes tell far more about the white men than about African American women. In illustration of this point, author's state that, "One key aspect of racial oppression is the 'misrecognition' of the full humanity and experiences of African Americans and other people of color by white Americans" (P.11). Therefore we again see how images of the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire effect black women (Feagin and St.Jean 1998).

Similar to Feagin and St. Jean's claims that stereotypes of black women increase their likelihood of being stigmatized in society, Neville and Hamer (2001) argues that the ideologies themselves are used as ways to oppress the group. She extends this point by arguing that these ideologies can interact with black women's' sexual id as well. Misrepresentations of black women's sexuality has had daunting consequences on the

mistreatment of black women and these same ideologies are connected to the various structures that shape our society (Neville and Hamer 2001).

In the book *Racist America,* Feagin (2001) reveals that media images are far more that just stereotypes. In fact, studies have shown that stereotypes and racial prejudice is connected to much larger social and cultural aftermath. More importantly, stereotypes are more than just ideas. They often also perpetuate visual images such as Visions usually show blacks as lazy, criminal, or immoral (Feagin 2001).

Double Oppression

The results of double oppression are practically inconceivable. In no way shape or form, am I attempting to downplay the discrimination and oppression experienced by white women, black men, or any other member of the minority group. However, black women in the United States have suffered from gender and racial oppression for some time. Black women are often depicted negatively and viewed as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, and welfare recipients. Feagin (2000) suggests that the use of negative imagery is generally used as a way of expressing anti black ideas. An example, of the overwhelming effects that these images have on society is illustrated by a CBS News/New York Times poll. According to a CBS News/New York Times poll, it was found that the majority of those questioned both black and white, thought that most black people were poor and that most welfare recipients were black women. Yet, statistics tell us that only 27% of blacks are poor (Feagin 2001).

Both white women and black women continue to be victims of gender oppression in the 21st century. However, black women are often criticized for not fitting into

traditional sex roles despite the fact that they experience dual racism: gender and race. Black women body parts have been exaggerated and they are often looked at as hypersexual beings, which can further insinuate acts of sexual violence and disrespect towards black women.

Author Traci West (1999) declares that the voices of black women are rarely heard and when they are, their opinions are frequently taken out of context. They are considered too emotional or not objective enough. And, when it comes to the issue of racism black women are likely to feel powerless. They claim that encounters with racism are thought of as a black man's problem. West, interviewed black women in an attempt to grasp how they perceive their position to be in this country (West 1999). On the subject of racism, one of the respondents states,

> Being a black woman is difficult in the United States, to say the least….There's the dictum I would say, in the black community, that that men come first, that black comes first, that black men are the ones that are oppressed, and the rest of us need to support them in surviving racism. Like, we don't have to survive racism, and we are somehow privileged in this country that we get all the good jobs; we get to go to college and we have it just fine here. And the poor black men are the ones that we need to somehow reach out to and help, and I don't know, sacrifice our lives for. That has always just struck me as being ridiculous. Anytime at all when racism is discussed in this country, it discussed in terms of black males. Everyone else is a kind of fodder for their tribulations. That's what I think it means to be a black woman. It's just like this kind of loss of a sense of self. You are just kind of cast away. (P. 42)

The severity of the oppression that black women have encountered has forced them to have to reinvent themselves. Facing multiple forms of discrimination at once is a daily struggle of the contemporary black woman. Unlike their counterparts (black men and white women) Femaleness and Blackness are interlocking identities, thus, it is impossible for a black woman to escape their twofold character. In an interview given

by Aimee Sands (2001) with Dr. Evelyn Hammonds, Dr. Hammonds presents us with an exceptional example of this point (Sands 2001). She testifies concerning her femaleness and blackness that,

> They are not separate. Because they are not separate in me. I am always black and female. I can't say 'well, that was just a sexist remark' without wondering would he have made the same sexist remark to a white woman. So does that make it a racist, sexist remark? You know, I don't know. And it takes a lot of energy to be constantly trying to figure out which one it is. (P. 248)

Overtime black women have discovered that they must play several different roles in order to survive. Multiple role playing is exhausting, extremely stressful, and has physical and psychological consequences on the individual. Authors' Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) argue that the existing oppressive conditions in US society cause black women to "shift" in order to adjust for differences in race, gender, and class. Overtime shifting has devastating effects on her sense of self. This often includes instances of verbally silencing herself and suffering from depression. The authors provide a description of this phenomenon on page 7 that states,

> Shifting is what she does when she speaks one way in the office, another way to her girlfriends, and still another way to her elderly relatives. It is what be going on when she enters the beauty parlor with dreadlocks and leaves with straightened hair, or when she tries on five outfits every morning looking for the best camouflage for ample derriere. (P. 7)

Thus, there appears to be a disconnect between what one is and what one pretends to be (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Contrary to what one might think success does not immunize black women from discrimination (Feagin and Sikes 1995). In fact, Feagin and Sikes interviewed one very successful black (woman) entrepreneur, whom describes her experiences as a black

woman as "psychological warfare". Thus, what you begin to see here is that racism and oppression have "real" consequences. We are finding that long-term periods of exposure to racism can have debilitating psychological effects on people of color and even more so for women of color

Racism and Mental Health

As indicated earlier several black women experience unique stressors due to racism and sexism in the United States. But, again there is a lack of empirical and theoretical based knowledge concerning this phenomenon. The vast majority of the clinical research that has been done tends to study black women from a pathological perspective. The negative mental health effects caused by issues such as substance abuse, dysfunctional family circumstances, single parenthood issues etc, are typically the topic areas of study. However, a black women dealing with their oppressive realities along with the mental health consequences deserves much more attention (Jones 2004).

As addressed earlier, femaleness and blackness have been constructed as the "other" in today's day and age. Additionally, we have also established that oppression, be it race or gender, can cause stress and prolonged stress has psychological consequences. Additionally, black women deal or cope with stress in different ways compared to their counter parts. Therefore, it is probably no surprise that stress tends to affect black women to a greater degree than white women. Dr. Angela Barrett (2006) claims that white women are more likely to seek support from others such as friends, children, etc, whereas black women have the inclination to immerse themselves in the situation in an attempt to mend the situation. What was also striking about Dr. Barrett's

findings is that the majority of the black women in her study where either unaware that they were stressed or they were just not willing to admit it. As a result, in order for Dr. Barrett to come to the conclusion that the women were stressed she had to rely on the blood pressure results and heart rates of the women (Moorer 2006).

Black women are almost 50% more likely to die from cancer than white women, they represent the fastest growing group to be imprisoned (Neville and Hamer 2001; Waquant 2001), and as if matters couldn't get any worse, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) argue that many black women cope with depression by overachievement, overeating, or obsessing about their physical appearance. The authors' argue that compulsive eating may be a culturally acceptable way to "speak the unspeakable" (P. 118). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2003) puts forth an interesting point as she states:

> Could it be that black women's bodies become the playing field for such contradiction between personal needs and cultural norms, between the desire for control and the persistence of oppression, between the voicing of pain and the denial of its existence? (P. 118)

Bhugra and Oyedeji (2001) declare that there is a direct correlation between racism, racial life events, and mental ill health. They define racial life events as anything ranging from individual or group migration, to individual or group violence or racial motivated crime. The article also suggests that ethnic minorities are less likely to report racial incidence of crime often due feelings of shame, inadequacy, hopelessness or mistrust. The authors' also revealed that psychologists often ignored the impact of the racial encounter and concentrated more so making sure the victim got back on their feet financially (such as writing letters of recommendation for housing etc.) .

In addition, to racial life events Bhugra and Oyedeji (2001) that often times minorities groups experience stress due to their minority status in society. On an institutional level occurrences such as stereotyping, rejection, prejudice, and devaluing the culture; and on an individual level stereotyping, rejection, prejudice, devaluation of culture, threats, and attacks can influence the individuals perception of life events, therefore, lead to additional stress (Bhugra and Ayonrinde 2001a).

Additionally, critical race scholar Derrick Bell (1987) claims that 48% of all black households with children under the age of 18 were headed by black women (Bell 1987). This plays a major role in why both black women and their children are disproportionately affected by poverty (Brewer 1988). To make matters worse, there is also an increasing resistance among black women to "marry down"(Staples 1987). Therefore, with the shortage of black men becoming a growing concern Staples concludes that structural conditions in the black community should be taken seriously and must be immediately addressed.

STRENGTHS OF THE BLACK WOMAN

Despite the fact that prominent race theorist argue that many of the black family's social ties and networks are weakening or all in all disappearing (Genovese 1999; Moynihan 1965), contemporary literature on black women tells a different story. It appears that social networks continue to be one of the primary strengths of the black woman. In author Carol Stack's examination of African Americans coping strategies to poverty, she found social networks to be one of the most common methods employed to cope with poverty-stricken conditions. She discovers that the networks are dispersed

over several households and they often consist of blood-kin, friends, and fictive kin (Stack 1974). In addition to coping, Gray White (1999) also determines that social networks have often also served as a safe haven which allowed the women to exist in a place in which they could redefine their definitions of black womanhood as well as their notions of what a woman should be (Gray-White 1999).

Resistance

Another strength exposed in the literature on black is their ability to resist. Foster (1973) claims that black women have recognized their oppressive conditions, and as a result that have begun using literary and other methods as a way of developing a new philosophy (Foster 1973). Along the same lines, Brown and Anderson (1978) argue that there are typically two ways in which black women employ resistances strategies in society: active and passive. Active resistance can be seen through the notions of hostility and success. She offers the instance involving Harriet Tubman leading the Underground Railroad as an example of active resistance. An example of passive resistance would be an immediate follow-up behavior to the process of conscious identification during slavery. For instance she argues that during slavery once a black woman could identify the Massa's behavior and thus, react in a way to lessen the impact of difficulties in their relationship (Brown and Anderson 1978). Therefore it appears that oppressive conditions actually created a sense of frustration among black women. Consequently, black women later gained a sense of resiliency and general sense of common interest with other black women (Lewis 1977).

Redefining Oneself

It is not uncommon for black women to find themselves unable to relate to experiences of white men and women, but at times they may also find difficulty in relating to black men. Behaviors of black women are often misinterpreted by black men as intimidating or hotheaded. Relationship expert Michael Dyson (2006) interviewed black men on the subject of whether or not they believed black women have too much attitude, and a few of the participants responded as follows:

> It would be really nice if black women could just lighten up a bit. Sometimes their tone and the extra drama they can bring can be off-putting and a little intimidating. Whenever I'm around a woman like that, I'm worried that I'll be her next victim—Daryl B., 42, systems analyst
>
> All women give men attitude. If she was in a bad relationship, she'll have her guard up with the next guy she meets. She'll anticipate problems and be ready to argue. On the other hand, if she's dealing with a soft guy, she won't respect him and will give him trouble just for that reason—Sam J., 26, recording artist
>
> Saying that all black women have attitudes is a generalization, but it is quite obvious that they don't take any bull in any aspect of their lives. I think that keeps many of them single because a good brother may feel as if he doesn't have a chance.—Rashid J., 31, music publishing executive. (P. 172)

On the contrary, Dyson (2006) claims that black women's "attitudes" are a survival trait that has developed over the years. Dyson goes on to say without this trait black women might not have endured the decades of abuse placed on them by society; and, the African American family would not have progressed nearly as much as it has. These findings demonstrate that if those closest to black women (black men) can misinterpret their behaviors, there is no doubt that white men and women's interpretations would be even further off base (Dyson 2006)

Intellectuals. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000) there have been several attempts to silence the voices of black women in America. However, Collins argues that the construction of intellectuals is another area in which black women can change the traditional meaning of the sense. Whites accomplished this phenomenon by constructing the meaning of intellectuals as one which excludes black women. However, she argues that the dominant definition of Intellectual must first be deconstructed. Once this has occurred we can redefine a meaning which includes Black women. Regardless of class, education, or approach each and every black woman has a valuable story to tell (Collins 2000).

"Safe Space". One way in which Collins claims that black women have been able to survive such harsh circumstances is by redefining themselves by the notion of the "safe space"(Collins 2000; Gray-White 1999). Collins defines "safe spaces" as social spaces in which black women can speak freely. Within in this space black women are allowed to be themselves and participate in safe discourse that has been essential to their means of survival. "Safe spaces" also provide a realm in which black women are empowered through self defining and resisting dominant negative ideologies (Collins 2000).

Motherhood as a Symbol of Power. Historically the notion of black motherhood in mainstream society has been one of mere humiliation. Black mothers are often envisioned through stereotypical lens of whites resulting in negatively fabricated images. Images such as the "welfare queen", one who practices promiscuity, an overweight

matriarch, or even a mammy or mule, invade Americans minds and there authenticities are rarely questioned.

On the other hand, motherhood among black women has become a symbol of power and a particularly empowering experience. Through various forms of safe spaces (friend and family interaction, formal organizations, etc,), black mothers have come to reconstruct the meaning of black motherhood. Therefore, within the black community it is believed that the child serves as a catalyst for self definition, self-valuation, and individual empowerment. In fact, black women view motherhood as a way to "uplift the race" and it is also looked at as a form of activism. Collins defines motherhood as such:

> Motherhood—whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother—can be invoked as a symbol of power by African American women engaged in Black women's community work. Certainly much of Black women's status within women-centered kin networks stem from their important contributions as bloodmothers and othermothers. Moreover, much of US Black women's status in African American communities stems from their activist mothering as community othermothers. Some of the most highly respected black women in working-class Black neighborhoods are those who demonstrate an ethic of community service (Collins 2000: 192).

Along the same lines, it is not uncommon for black women to raise their children in unbearable conditions. Some mothers have very little education, money, and resources to feed and clothe their children. Yet, despite the circumstances, black women's children offer a sense of hope. Not to mention the fact that motherhood itself, is an empowering experience. An anonymous woman interviewed by Collins claims that her pregnancy is the only time in her life that she feels alive, therefore the fetus serves as a sign that she is alive. Black mothers cultivate love for the child's mind, body, and soul in a way that appears to be on another level to their counterparts. In turn, black children

look up to and affirm their mother's in a world that constantly devalues and degrades them. Therefore, black children are just as important to their mother's existence, as the mother's are to their children.

Activism. One of the most fascinating aspects of Collins analysis concerning black women and resistance is her attempt to reconstruct the definition of activism. Often times one would define activism as participating in a protest or sit-in. However, Collins argues that black women play the role of activist on almost every level. In fact, she even goes on to say that everyday black women participate in some form of black activism. Thus, if interested in studying resistance should pay close attention to collective daily actions of black women rather than ideologies.

Collins defines the first level of activism as fighting for group survival, and she defines the second as fighting for institutional transformation. An example of the first would be would be dressing down. For instance, some black women who worked as domestic workers recall times in which they purposely dressed as if they were "poor" to convince their employers to give them raises and other incentives. The second level of activism in which black women frequently partake is on the institutional level. An example that Collins gives of this was of a black woman who was excluded from a training session based on the color of her skin. When she took her complaints to the union she was labeled as a troublemaker since she refused to ignore the incident. Thus, these daily actions have come to be seen as forms of activism, and therefore essential to the survival of blacks nationwide.

As we can see here black women face several challenges in today's day and age. This essay discusses contemporary challenges of the black woman. Although this essay only covered a few, the challenges mentioned were standards of beauty, media, double oppression, and health at present. Nonetheless they also appear to be equipped with several strengths. The strengths covered were social networks, resistance strategies, and, the ability to redefine several characteristics of black womanhood that have historically been negatively defined.

Dealing with the Dilemmas

Turing our attention back to dilemmas of black women, society's attempts to doubly oppress them has required them to develop various ways to cope with racism and sexism in the United States. It is not safe to assume that black women cope with other stressors the same way they cope with racism and sexism. In fact, according to Shorter-Gooden (2004) the coping mechanisms that black women utilize when dealing with sexism and racism generally fall under two categories: ongoing internal resources and ongoing external resources. Combined, these resources tend to serve as a buffer for everyday encounters with racism, sexism, and potentially suicide.

Ongoing internal resources fall into three categories (1) resting on faith (2) standing on shoulders (3) valuing oneself. Resting on faith is related to religion and black women depending on a higher power for their strength to make it day by day. Standing on shoulders speaks to the connection between current African Americans and their ancestors. It is a strong belief that due to the fact that previous generations African Americans sacrificed their lives for freedom and justice, therefore, acknowledging the

legacy of such heroic events provides African American women with a sense of empowerment. Lastly, valuing oneself is the third internal resource that black women draw upon to cope with racism and sexism. The study found that it is important to love yourself regardless of what others in society think of you. The notion that no one is better than you helps black women fight many of the negative images that they encounter on both an institutional level and individual level.

The previous resources utilized are all internal resources, such as belief systems, world views etc, however, the final resource that the participants employ were referred to as "external resources". The ongoing external resource is what the author refers to as leaning on shoulders. Shorter-Gooden (2004) claims that as a strategy for coping black women rely on their family and friends a great deal. It is important for black women to surround themselves with others' going through similar dilemmas. This is not to say this is an action taken for coping with other stressors, but it is definitely a coping mechanism for dealing with racism and sexism (Shorter-Gooden 2004)

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the claims of weakening social networks, contemporary literature reveals an entirely different perspective. If claims of disappearing social ties were accurate surely black women would be affected by this. However, the literature reveals that even with the multiple forms of oppression that black women experience in this country, social networks continue to be one of their most utilized strategies. Be it familial ties or "fictive kin" social networks appear to be just as valuable as they were during the era of slavery.

In summary, this chapter provides an overview of the literature concerning black women. This chapter served a dual purpose. The first function of this chapter is to provide the reader with an illustration of the historical and contemporary challenges of US black families and women. The second purpose of this chapter is to examine the theories concerning black women highlighting their strengths resultant of their experiences with oppressive conditions.

Although the information presented is not exhaustive, the challenges discussed in this chapter include standards of beauty, the notion of multiple forms of oppression, along with mental, physical, and social issues health issues that are disproportionately prevalent among the women. This chapter ends with an atypical discussion of the strengths that black women possess though rarely discussed within the literature. Although, this section of the discussion is not exhaustive, a few of the strengths mentioned were black women and notions of resistance development, ways in which black women have begin redefining themselves, and finally the strength and power of social networks.

Thus, the oppressive conditions of this society have forced black women to develop various methods that act as coping mechanisms in avoiding suicide. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate how these experiences affect black women's perspectives as it pertains to their low suicide rates. Let's now review the research design and methodology used to explore black women's narratives on the matter.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study was to examine the suicide paradox that exists among black women. Taking into full account the modern day challenges faced by many US black women today, why, then, do suicide rates remain lower than their white counterparts? To provide an even deeper analysis of why suicide rates are almost nonexistent among the black female population, my dissertation also explored coping strategies employed in the everyday lives of black women. Thus, not only did this study seek to uncover reasons for the suicide paradox, but it also sought to explore black women's perceptions of the paradox with the intention of ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Suicide literature has repeatedly revealed that studies of suicide on the African American community deserve more attention, particularly studies concerning African American women (Rockett et al. 2006). Few researchers have attempted to look into the low rates of suicide among African American women (Fernquist 2004; Hendin 1969; Nisbet 1996; Walker, Lester and Joe 2006) and even fewer have made an effort to talk to the women directly. This chapter describes the methods and procedures that were used to collect and analyze data for this study. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What types of stressors are faced by African American women relative to the suicide paradox?

2. What insight can African American women provide on the suicide paradox by way of their perceptions of black female and white male rate disparities?
3. What strategies are employed by African American women, either consciously or unconsciously, to elude suicide?

AN UNETHICAL APPROACH TO RESEARCHING AFRICAN AMERICANS

Historically, both common knowledge and scientific evidence have been used to rationalize mistreatment of certain racial groups in the United States. Although the concept of race is continually evolving, at one point in time, the notion of race had daunting legal consequences. The unfortunate part of the matter is that society's understanding of race stemmed from the contradictory results of common knowledge and scientific evidence. This contradictory knowledge was used to deny women and people of color citizenship and basic human rights, granting only white men authoritative power over society. As a result, common knowledge came to be known as "the white males common sense," and when members of society didn't rely on scientific evidence to shape assumptions, they relied on their common knowledge (Lopez 1996).

Science provides numerous examples to draw upon. Many examples justify their claims of inferiority toward women and people of color. For example, scientific evidence provided by both craniometry and eugenics was heavily relied upon to maintain the existence of gender and racial hierarchies. During the early 1900s, it was believed that craniometry contributed valid, reliable scientific evidence. Craniometry declared that cranial size and brain weight were directly correlated to intelligence.

Therefore, it was assumed that smaller individual brain sizes denoted less intelligence. This study implied that women and African Americans were intellectually underdeveloped (Haraway 1997).

During the same era, eugenics was also a very popular scientific explanation. Eugenics involves the study of the physical and mental qualities of human beings through genetics. Instead of using brain size, eugenics made a similar attempt to label people of color as inferior based on genetics. Intelligence, health implications, and scientific claims have all at one point or another been linked to eugenics, and some still are (Duster 2003). For instance, IQ tests are still administered to children nationwide, despite the fact that the tests have been proven to be culturally biased.

Following craniometry and eugenics, from the 1940s through 1975, scientists began using ABO blood maker frequencies as an object or source of knowledge. ABO markers identify an individual's blood type by revealing if you have blood types A, B, AB, or O. The ABO blood maker frequencies have been known to assert blood differences between the racial and ethnic groups. This information was used for all sorts of purposes, ranging from social sciences to medical sciences. Because ABO blood maker frequencies implied that individual races have common blood types, this information was used to justify reasons for discouraging miscegenation. Although the use of blood maker frequencies is no longer an appropriate measure, it does indicate one of the earlier forms of illustrating the blood−race relationship. According to Haraway (1997), blood was used as an inclusive determining factor. Following the abolishment of

these fallacious results, the paradigm shifted, attempting to bring into play a more genetic standpoint using DNA as an object of knowledge (Haraway 1997)

For the period of 1975-1990, biological kinship categories shifted from blood frequency tests to genetic mapping and DNA analysis. A person's DNA attaches an individual to a gene. This gene is said to provide a map to our true heritage. Unfortunately, these results might perpetuate racist beliefs. For instance, if it is supposed that all Native Americans have a gene that predisposes them to alcoholism, society would tend to believe that all Native Americans will become alcoholics (Haraway 1997).

Lingering Effects

Consequently, these scientific practices and studies have had a tremendous impact on the way society views race. It appears that Western scientists are desperately in search of scientific explanations that will sustain the age-old belief of inherited racial differences. Despite several failed attempts to establish substantial evidence, science and genetics are positioned in a unique yet somewhat strained relationship.

The lack of understanding of people of color has also extended into the mental health field. Elise Smith (1981) reveals several instances in which mental healthcare professionals were more likely to misdiagnose black women (Smith 1981). Furthermore, mental health practitioners are also more likely to diagnose black women more severely than white women. Smith illustrates this point, saying:

> Therapists may either consciously or unconsciously screen black women out of treatment to avoid a sense of their own therapeutic failure. The counseling treatment for black females tends to be short-term. Black females terminate counseling earlier than do white females, and therapist difficulties regarding race

> and sex are believed to interact negatively to cause early termination of minority female clients. (P. 137)

In summary, I argue that historical carelessness of scientists and scholars has created a complicated environment. Researchers must regain the trust of the African American community. Therefore, recreating "common knowledge" and "taken for granted" knowledge of this community is crucial. Investigators should seek to construct an accurate depiction of the African American way of life. These efforts are all the more important when exploring topics where African Americans' perspectives have rarely been sought. From the very beginning, a fundamental goal for this study was to determine which major characteristics would be necessary to emphasize in a well-conceived and well-executed qualitative study of this group.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Extended Case Methods

My methodological course of action was guided by Burawoy's extended case method. Burawoy's (1998) work focuses on making use of existing theory in hopes of understanding one's data. Additionally, this method pays particular attention to the importance of the frameworks of respondents as well as the macro determinants of everyday life. As Burawoy states:

> The *extended case method* applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the 'micro' to the 'macro,' and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory. (P. 5)

Rather than neglecting or downplaying the importance of social structure, extended case theory operates on the basis of seeking to unveil how the "social situation" is ultimately shaped by wider structures (Burawoy 1991).

Extended case method encourages the bringing of micro data together with macro theory. Chapter II, the review of suicide literature revealed that the many prominent theories are relevant to black women's narratives regarding suicide. Although, Burawoy's approach is most appropriate for this study, I expand on this theoretical framework. This study adequately links previous theory to my findings; however, I take things a step further by presenting new findings that emerged during the study.

I believed that this approach would be particularly appropriate for this study because black women's accounts on suicide would provide rich, detailed data without disregarding previous suicide literature or contemporary structural conditions of black women. The extended case method encourages engagement rather than disengagement in seeking knowledge. For example, by applying fundamental principles of reflexive science and ethnography, the approach also persuades dialogue between us and the people we study. As a result, the insider status of the researcher appears to correspond nicely with this methodological framework.

Insider Approach

The primary way that this project explored black women's low rates of suicide was by conducting approximately 22 face-to-face/telephone interviews. This approach proved to be particularly appropriate for this study as the interviewees' accounts on

suicide provided rich, detailed data typically unseen in current suicide literature. I was able to utilize my insider status of being a black woman to gain access to areas of the group rarely accessed by other groups. Although my experiences gaining entrance into the population of interest was an ideal one, I realize that not all researchers with insider status have similar results.

An example can be found in Hurston's (1935) collections of folklore in her hometown of Eatonville Florida, a primarily African American town. Her personal life experiences posed challenges, particularly when interpreting the materials. Despite the fact that Hurston grew up with her participants and was very much aware of the folklore culture, she had to learn to insert herself into the environment that she was studying. She discusses her reservations and feelings of awkwardness about fitting in. Hurston, operated on the premise that her status of growing up in Eatonville did not automatically qualify or provide access among subjects, especially without prior preparation (Hurston 1935).

On the other hand, Baca Zinn argues that possessing insider-status in fieldwork has been found to be advantageous for researchers. field research conducted by scholars of color tends to have both empirical and methodological advantages (Baca-Zinn 2001). The researchers are less likely to encounter initial mistrust, and their insider status allows them to ask questions that others may not.

> …Because they come to the task with different backgrounds they are likely to see different problems and pose different questions. The intellectual and practical concerns may overlap, yet their analyses and recommendations will almost necessarily differ insofar as these are tempered by differences in the individual sense of urgency and conception of the possible. (P. 159)

Baca Zinn argues that even though minority researchers face just as many dilemmas as white researchers attempting to execute a project in a minority community, their status may initially allow for easier entry to the population. This description mirrors my fieldwork experiences and I recognize that my race and gender assisted me in building rapport with the women.

RESEARCH DESIGN

My decision to carry out a well-executed study among African American women resulted in the following components: (1) encouraged subjectivity among the subjects, either in the form of narratives or other similar methods; (2) attempted to minimize restrictions on the subjects (of course, the project had a focus but allowed the subjects to provide as much knowledge from their perspective as possible; (3) reconstructed the frame previously used in exploring topics among African Americans; and (4) included ample time spent among the African American women being studied. The following section describes in more detail how these specific actions were performed.

Qualitative Methodology

Trochim (2001) suggests that qualitative research is considered to be any study that relies primarily or exclusively on qualitative measurements. Qualitative measurements serve as an appropriate measurement for any data to be presented in a non-numerical format. Although almost all qualitative data can be coded quantitatively, a few examples of qualitative data results consist of short-answer written responses to survey questions, interviews, field research, and video and audio data recording. Qualitative measures are particularly beneficial if primary research objectives include

doing one or more of the following: (1) developing or creating a new theory; (2) understanding a deep issue; and/or (3) trading generalizability for detail (Trochim 2001). Because the notion of suicide among African American women has rarely been explored, this study was looking to gain a deep understanding of the issue.

Encourage Subjectivity

Because researchers tend to favor objectivity, scientists have also failed to recognize the value of subjectivity. The notion of subjectivity is often portrayed as biased, oversimplified, intuitive and unempirical. Studies that are validated using subjective knowledge, such as narratives, usually receive profound criticism and lack of recognition, no matter the quality of the study. The data is not thought of as being generalizable but is considered more so to be an individual's story. Alternatively, critical race theory suggests that attempting objectivity is impractical. Objectivity requires one to remain calm, open minded, and rationale, yet calmness is a form of emotion. For that reason, critical race theory asserts that remaining emotional and objective at the same time is nearly impossible (West et al. 1995). Freire (1968) argues that to deny the importance of subjectivity is to ultimately transform the work into a simple and naive place (Freire 1968).

When studying the African American population, researchers must allow for and even encourage subjectivity. Exploratory studies that allow the subject to shape the study rather than the study shaping the subject are essential to the study of African Americans. This is particularly important because many of the studies conducted prior to the last few decades were from the perspective of whites. Therefore, it is now time to

give voice to this group. Collins (2000) argues that we must allow blacks the opportunity to redefine themselves. Although she is particularly referring to black women, I argue that persuading African Americans to be subjective rather than silenced gives voice to the group. This is essential to developing an accurate depiction of the group.

Based on this premise, I continually encouraged my participants to tell me how they truly felt. I assured them that they would not be penalized or ostracized for their perspectives on the research topics. I encouraged them to make this study about something much bigger than themselves. I frequently stated things such as: "this is your opportunity to tell the world what you think is important"; "your opinions are critical to helping us understand how black women perceive 'this issue'"; and "no matter how big or small you think it may be other researchers in the field can truly benefit from these rarely exposed examples."

Reconstructing the Frame

Providing a voice to the historically silenced is an attempt to reconstruct the frame. Feagin (2006) argues that the frame often includes negative stereotypes toward people of color. Frames are embedded in the brain, and they can cause horrible consequences (Feagin 2006). Research of African Americans is typically studied and written from a pathological standpoint. As a result, providing the group with an appropriate platform is essential to allow the group a "voice" in the process.

Narrative Approach/In-Depth Interviewing

Incorporating perspectives of more minorities and women in the field instead of white men is what science needs to keep it strong (Harding 1993). One of the most clearly stated arguments written in favor of including perspectives of people of color is written by researcher Richard Delgado. According to Richard Delgado (1989), narratives can be just as effective as any other form of scientific data collection. Advantages to using narratives to address research questions are that narratives allow others to "understand" things from the storyteller's point of view. Oftentimes, stories tend to evoke mental pictures. How many times have we read an interesting romance or mystery novel in which we were able to see ourselves as the characters? We could smell the environment, taste the food, or feel our emotions changing during the climax of the book; if given the chance, narratives can stir up similar responses.

Delgado goes on to say that problems arise when narratives from members of the "in group" (whites) are pitted against narratives from members of the "out group" (minorities). Even if both sides tell their stories, the narrative of the "in group" is taken as the norm, whereas narratives produced by minorities are despised. Nonetheless, many fail to realize that several of today's most respected contemporary theories are nothing more than dominant narratives (Delgado 1989).

It would appear that multiple perspectives would be ideal regarding race discourse and analysis. However, according to critical race theorist Patricia Williams, author of *The Alchemy of Race and Rights,* dominant narratives no longer seem sensible once you include the perspective of the minority. Nonetheless, Williams declares that

eliminating black voices from discussions ultimately perpetuates the impact of existing dominant narratives (Williams 1991).

Spending Time

It can be costly to spend significant amounts of time with study subjects; nonetheless, it is essential. Because African Americans have historically experienced misfortune at the hand of many scientists and researchers, extended time is often necessary to gain trust and understanding of the community. Spending time with the group allows the researcher to gain insight into what Collins (2000) refers to as "taken for granted knowledge." Black feminist thought has achieved a more accurate depiction of black women's circumstances in America by using this taken for granted knowledge. The taken for granted knowledge encourages black women to create new self-definitions and value their subjectivity (Collins 2000). Of course, this insight can be applied to researching the group as a whole.

Stack's (1974) and Anderson's (1990) studies illustrate the reward of immersing oneself into the African American community for research purposes. Stack reached a point in her study in which prominent women in the African American community would often vouch for her among other members, clarifying that it was safe to trust her. Of course, this also helped her to gain access into segments of the community that she, as a white woman, might not have been welcomed to alone (Stack 1974). Anderson (1990) also reached a point in his study in which he was able to acknowledge and interpret nonverbal gestures of the men in his study. His study found that blacks (particularly men) use several nonverbal gestures, such as looks, gazes, swaggers, and

body language, to claim their turf. Despite the fact that Anderson is an African American male, he speaks of the existing disconnect between blacks and whites and the even greater difference among blacks and the whites that are not "streetwise." He declares that these types of encounters can set the ground for whites and un-streetwise blacks to easily misinterpret blacks' behaviors (Anderson 1990).

SAMPLING AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

In determining why black women's suicide rates are significantly lower than whites, I allowed black women to speak for themselves. This approach was particularly appropriate for this study because these black women's accounts on suicide provided rich, detailed data typically unseen in current suicide literature. Over the course of two months, I conducted 22 face-to-face/ telephone interviews with black women ages 18 and over. In addition to the minimal age requirement of 18, the women were also required to have no history of serious mental illness or previous suicide attempts.

Recruitment

My initial research participants were recruited through contacts that I had established in the northern Illinois area, the local (Bryan-College Station, Texas) community, and the Houston area; all remaining study participants were recruited through email advertisements and word-of-mouth snowballing techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Although the sample is nonrandom, I made every possible effort to include a demographically representative sample of the larger population of African American women. Even though I gained the trust of the participants early on in the

study, I continued to adhere closely to the human subject guidelines and protocols of the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Within days of receiving IRB approval, I immediately began seeking participants to take part in the study. I first made use of established contacts among African American women in the Texas and Illinois area. After acquiring participation from all interested established contacts, I circulated advertisements via email to gain additional study participants.

Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, they were directed to visit a password protected website that I created. The site consisted of all required IRB documents (Appendix C), along with a set of demographic questions. Once the online portion of the study was completed, I contacted the women to arrange a time to complete the interview.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The data collection process lasted for approximately two and a half months, resulting in the completion of 22 in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews began mid December of 2008 and continued on until I determined that I had collected a demographically representative (education, age, income) sample of black women. The data collection phase of the online demographic questionnaire ran concurrent to the in-depth interviews. Upon completion of the online survey, submitted responses were immediately directed to a database. I personally analyzed all data collected in the study.

Initial Contacts

The study eligibility guidelines of 18 or older and no history of suicidal behavior or serious mental illness were included in the recruitment letter. The letter also instructed all participants to contact me using the provided email address. Once the potential participant contacted me, I further screened the candidate for study eligibility.

If I deemed the woman eligible to participate in the study, I then emailed the interviewee instructions for accessing the password protected online IRB documents (informed consent form and participant referral form) and demographic survey questions. I opted to load the IRB forms online to make them easily accessible for those that resided outside of the Bryan/College Station area. After reviewing the consent form and the participant referral form, I then contacted each woman via telephone or email to answer any questions and arrange a time and date for the face-to-face or telephone interview to take place. I also provided the participants with a copy of the informed consent form via email or in person in the event that they needed to review the information or contact me.

The decision as to whether the interview would be conducted via telephone or face to face was mutually determined by me and the interviewee; determining factors were based on schedule availability and geographical location of the interviewee. The interview consisted of a series of questions that were created to examine the current research questions mentioned earlier in this chapter. If the participant opted for the telephone interview, I called the interviewee approximately five minutes prior to the arranged time. This preliminary call served a dual purpose: The first was to discuss any

existing reservations or answer any questions that the woman may have had. The second was to inform the woman of her rights of anonymity and to notify her of my limits as a researcher.

I took measures to guarantee the anonymity of the participants by the use of pseudonyms. During the preliminary phone call, the respondent was assigned a name that she was then referred to during the recorded phone call. I discussed the importance of adhering to these guidelines and strongly discouraged the participants from divulging their actual name during the recorded phone call. As long as there were no additional questions, I disconnected the preliminary call. Then a minute or two later, using a telephone dictation service, I re-called the individual to begin the telephone interview.

Face-to-face interviews were carried out similarly to telephone interviews. At the scheduled time, the interviewee and I arrived at the disclosed location (appropriate for IRB guidelines). For example, interview locations ranged from my campus office, to the participant's office, to a reserved room at a Bryan-College Station public library. Because the informed consent and participant referral forms were completed prior to the meeting, I took the first five minutes to familiarize the participant with the order of the interview and to discuss any questions that might have arisen. Shortly after assigning the participant her personal pseudonym, the interview began.

Introducing the Participants

Existing suicide literature clearly points to significant variations in US suicide rates within racial groups. The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with a more in-depth look of the study's participants in hopes of discovering uniformity or lack

of concerning perceptions of the suicide paradox. Thus, one way to explore these consistencies among the participants is by examining participants' profiles. In other words, who are these women? In determining this, we take a closer look at their education levels, marital status, income levels, and age groups. The following provides applicable demographic information for study participants:

Alisha. Alisha is a single woman between the ages of 55-68. The participant was born and raised in the panhandle of Texas and still resides in the state of Texas. She has children, has a high school diploma and is currently employed full time. Alisha categorizes her current job specific duties as administrative. She considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Alisha's annual income level falls within a range of $30,000-$49,999 per year.

Alison. Alison is a single woman between the ages of 26-33. The participant was born and raised in North Carolina but currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has no children, is employed in a professional position and is a full-time graduate student. Alison considers herself to be a Christian but is not a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Alison's annual income level falls within a range of $15,000-$29,999.

Ava. Ava is a married woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born in the Washington, D.C., area but currently resides in the state of Texas. She has children, is employed in a professional position, and is a full-time graduate student. Ava considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Ava's annual income is over $100,000 per year.

Bridgett. Bridgett is a single woman between the ages of 26-33. The participant was born in Ohio but currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has no children, is employed in a professional position and is a full-time graduate student. Bridgett considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Alison's annual income level falls within a range of $15,000-$29,999.

Ceva. Ceva is a single woman between the ages of 18-25. The participant was born and raised in the state of Texas and continues to reside there. She is currently taking college classes and has no children. Ceva considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of $15,000-$29,999.

Cheryl. Cheryl is a single woman between the ages of 43-54. The participant was born and raised in California but currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has no children, is employed in a professional position and is a full-time graduate student. Cheryl considers herself to be a Christian but is not a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Cheryl's annual income level falls within a range of $15,000-$29,999.

Delilah. Delilah is a widowed woman between the ages of 55-68. The participant was born and raised in Arkansas but currently resides in the state of Louisiana. She has children, has a high school diploma and is employed in a position that includes managerial roles. She considers herself to be a Christian but is not a

regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income falls within a range of $30,000-$49,999.

Donna. Donna is a married woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She has children, and she holds a full-time position with administrative duties and an additional part-time position in retail. Donna completed high school and went on to gain vocational training. Donna considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Donna's annual income level falls within a range of $30,000-$49,999.

Hilldreth. Hilldreth is a single woman between the ages of 26-32. The participant was born and raised in Louisiana but currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has no children, is employed in a professional position and is a full-time graduate student. Hilldreth considers herself to be a Christian but is not a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Hilldreth's annual income level falls within a range of $30,000-$49,999.

Janet. Janet is a divorced woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She has no children and is currently employed in a professional position. Janet considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. She holds an advanced degree and earns an annual income over $100,000.

Jennifer. Jennifer is a single woman between the ages of 18-25. The participant was born and raised in the Louisiana but currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has no children, is employed part time and is a full-time graduate student.

Jennifer considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of up to $14,999.

Justine. Justine is a single woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born and raised in Louisiana and relocated to Texas following Hurricane Katrina. She has children and is employed full time in retail sales. Justine considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of up to $14,999.

Karen. Karen is a married woman between the ages of 43-54. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has children, has a high school diploma and has completed some college coursework. She did not disclose details on her occupation. Karen considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of $50,000-$69,999.

Katherine. Katherine is a divorced woman between the ages of 43-54. The participant was born and raised in Wisconsin but currently resides in Illinois. She has children, has a high school diploma and is employed full time in the childcare industry. Katherine considers herself to be a Christian and a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of up to $30,000-$49,999.

Kelly. Kelly is a divorced woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She has children, and her highest level of education is a high school diploma and is currently employed fulltime as a cosmetologist. Kelly considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active

member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of $15,000-$29,999.

Kyndall. Kyndall is a married woman between the ages of 43-54. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She has children and holds a full-time position with clerical duties. Kyndall considers herself to be a Christian but is not a regular, active member of a church or religious group. She has a bachelor's degree and earns an annual income over $100,000.

Regina. Regina is a married woman between the ages of 43-54. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Louisiana. She has children and is employed full time in a clerical/administrative position. Regina considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of $50,000-$69,999.

Sandy. Sandy is a single woman between the ages of 26-33. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Illinois. She has children and is currently unemployed. Her highest level of education is a high school diploma, but she has taken some college coursework. Sandy does not believe in a higher power, nor is she an active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of up to $14,999.

Shantay. Shantay is a single woman between the ages of 18-25. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She does not have any children, and her highest level of completed education is a high school diploma. She has completed some college and is approximately two semesters away from completing her

bachelor's degree. Shantay is employed part time, but she did not disclose specifics about the position. She does not believe in a higher power, nor is she an active member of a church or religious group. Her annual income level falls within a range of up to $14,999.

Tanya. Tanya is a single woman between the ages of 18-25. The participant was born and raised in Louisiana but currently resides in the state of Texas. She currently has no children, is employed part time and is a full-time graduate student. Tanya considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Tanya's annual income level falls within a range of $15,000-$29,999.

Tasha. Tasha is a married woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She has children, is employed in a professional position part time and is a full-time graduate student. Tasha considers herself to be a Christian and is a regular, active member of a church or religious group. Tasha's annual income level falls within a range of $30,000-$49,999.

Tina. Tina is a single woman between the ages of 34-42. The participant was born, raised, and currently resides in the state of Texas. She has children and holds a full-time position with management/administrative duties. Tina considers herself to be a Christian but is not a regular, active member of a church or religious group. She has a bachelor's degree and earns an annual income between $50,000-$69,999.

STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

Data was collected from a total of 22 interviews. All respondents were of the female sex, and 21 of the 22 respondents self-identified themselves as belonging to the

African American racial group. The additional respondent categorized herself as "other" due to her Creole/African background. The age ranges of the participants were from 18-68 years of age. A total of 14 of the participants had children, leaving nine that did not. In terms of education, all study participants held at least a high school diploma. Specifically, six of the women held a high school diploma or GED, one completed technical school, five had some college, two held bachelor's degrees, and nine were in pursuit of a graduate level degree or had already completed one.

Current relationship status of the study participants indicated that a little over half of the women were single (13, to be exact). Additionally, seven of the participants were married, two were divorced, and one was widowed. Three of the participants reported a household income over $100,000; one reported a household income between $70,000-$99,999; three reported a household income of $50,000-$69,999; six reported a household income between $30,000-$49,999; another six reported earnings somewhere between $15,000-$29,999; and four reported earnings up to $14,999.

Religion was also a fairly common attribute among the women. For example, 20 of the women classified themselves as Christian, while 15 of those women reported being active in a local church or religious group. Regarding residential location, all but four of the women reported currently residing in the state of Texas, with two dwelling in Illinois and the other two residing in Louisiana.

Tape-Recorded Interviews

A one-time 60-90 minute tape-recorded interview was conducted. For face-to-face interviews, the interview was held in a location that guaranteed private discussion

and comfort for both parties. Participants were reminded that all responses would remain anonymous but that if there was anything that generated feelings of discomfort, the participant should feel free to disregard the question(s). In terms of telephone interviews, since I did not have total control over the interviewee's environment, I could only encourage the participant to find a quiet environment that would allow the privacy and comfort to discuss the sensitive subject matter that the study required. After completing the interview, the individual was allowed to comment on the topics discussed in the study off the record. It was during these times that the women often communicated their personal feelings toward the study.

INSTRUMENTATION

One of the most significant instruments developed for conducting this study was the interview guide. Since studies of suicide infrequently employ narratives, serious care was taken in composing the interview questions. As a black woman myself, I as the researcher made it a priority to include questions that would expose some of the taken-for-granted knowledge often ignored in the literature (Baca-Zinn 2001; Collins 2000; Delgado 1989). In doing so, five preliminary, unstructured interviews were conducted with random black women on the subject of suicide. The intent was not to gather the women's perspectives on the suicide phenomenon, as was the case with the 22 study participants, but instead to find out the types of questions that black women would expect to be asked in the event that they were ever interviewed on such a topic. This process aided in the development of a more comprehensive array of questions that were

later included in the interview guide and provided an opportunity to test the questions already included for clarity.

The instrumentation used in the study was an interview guide (Please see Appendix B). The interview guide was used to facilitate all 22 tape-recorded, in-depth interviews. The interview guide consisted of four primary sections: Growing Up, Suicide Perspectives, Stress, and Coping. Each section contained questions representative of its individual topic area. For instance, the Suicide Perspectives section generally consisted of questions related to the individual's perspectives on suicide. Although the questions were structured for organizational purposes, the interview was not constrained to these particular questions. In the event that a participant brought up other information that was relevant to the study, she was encouraged to share the information. In other words, the questions served as a guide rather than a restraint.

Suicide Protocol

Initial communications with study participants included screening participants for study eligibility. In the event that the woman was 18 years of age or older, had no history of suicide attempts, and had no history of serious mental illness, she was allowed to proceed to the next step of the process. All 22 of the study participants met the eligibility criteria. However, in the event that it was discovered during the interview that the participant was suicidal, certain measures had to be in place. In anticipation of this issue, a three-step protocol that could be put into action if needed was created (Please refer to Appendix C for a copy of the actual protocol).

The three steps within the suicide protocol were (1) discover, (2) inform, and (3) refer. In step one; the primary objective would be to listen carefully to what the participant was saying without incurring judgment so as to make the appropriate decision to get the woman the help she needed. In the second step in the suicide protocol, the participant would be informed of at least two or three national suicide prevention resources. National suicide resources were opted for as a result of the geographical diversity of study participants. The final step of the suicide protocol would be to refer the women to three separate means of contacting help. Examples included an email address for an organization that specializes in dealing with these types of issues, a website with alphabetical state and county suicide prevention resources, and, finally, the actual phone number to a national suicide helpline directory. In the event that a study participant interviewed over the phone exhibited suicidal behavior, the interview would have been brought to a halt and the participant would have received these resources via email. As for face-to-face participants, similar measures would have been taken; however, a paper copy of suicide protocol information would have been provided. Although appropriate measures were taken, no such incidences occurred throughout the data collection process.

LIMITATIONS

Detail vs. Generalization

Although the sample is nonrandom, every possible effort was made to include a demographically representative sample of the larger population of African American women. In doing so, women with a variety of education levels, income levels, marital

statuses, and geographical locations were sought. Since this study addresses a fairly new area of research, rich, detailed data was opted for, rather than data that could be generalized across the group. Additionally, this study did not seek to explain the accuracy of the rates but rather sought to discuss perceptions of suicide among the women.

Uneasiness with Audio Recording

Over the course of my data collection, there were three separate factors that posed as limitations for the present study. The first issue regarded participants' apprehensiveness with being audio recorded. In certain cases, there was a noticeable difference in the subject's paralinguistic communication and body gestures. One way I tried to address these concerns was by allowing the interviewee equal input in choosing a comfortable, private location for the interview to take place. Additionally, although the average interview length was approximately 60 minutes, I set aside a time slot of approximately two hours per interview. Knowing that we would be discussing sensitive subject matter and that some of the women were already apprehensive about their voice being recorded, I wanted to allow extra time in the event that the interviewee needed extra time to impart her perspective.

Sensitive Subject Matter Triggers Unpleasant Emotions

An added limitation that arose during these in-depth interviews was unpleasant emotions that surfaced during our dialogue. Often, these emotions were brought on as a result of discussing personal encounters with suicide or talking about individual bouts with prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory acts. For example, some of the participants

had contemplated suicide at earlier times in their lives; others encountered life-changing episodes of discrimination. In these instances, they were assured that if they ever reached a point in which they were feeling uncomfortable or needed to take a break from the questioning, they would be well within their rights to do so. In one case, it did become necessary to allow time for the participant to gain her composure. The interview resumed approximately 2-3 minutes later, at the participant's request. Prior to restarting the interview, I gained permission from the interviewee to turn on the tape recorder and again informed her that she could end her involvement at any time without consequences; nonetheless, she did not choose to do so in the course of the interview process, so the interview was completed.

In conclusion, the following chapters consist of the main data findings. In its rarity, I present black women's perspectives of the suicide paradox while providing insight into established behaviors used as an alternative to self-inflicted physical injury. I also analyze narratives collected by means of in-depth interviews from research participants. Research findings for this study have been categorized using themes that emerge from black women's accounts on the phenomenon of suicide.

The collections of narratives were examined by means of extended case methods that focus on making use of existing theory in hopes of understanding one's data (Burawoy 1998). Existing theory led me to formulate the literature-based assumption that two strategies would emerge from black women's narratives as a means of averting suicide: faith-based or religious beliefs, and social integration. The women's experiences are presented in a narrative format and organized specifically by themes and subthemes

that emerged during the study. Chapter findings are presented in three categories: (1) insight into daily stressors of black women's lives as they pertain to the suicide paradox; (2) insight into black women's perceptions regarding their own suicide rates, in addition to what they believe contributes to their low rates; and (3) insight into black women's perceptions of white male suicide rates.

CHAPTER V

NOT ALL PEACHES AND CREAM: CONTEMPORARY PRESSURES OF BLACK WOMEN

"We have social obligations to our immediate family, our community, our churches, the work as well so it's not…we have to balance the household as well as our social obligations which usually doesn't leave much time for us to really, um, take care of ourselves so it's kind of like the combination of those outside obligations would not…really taking care of our own self that kind of leads us to not under- not really understanding how to help ourselves when that…when those times come." (Jennifer)

Contemporary literature reveals that blacks consistently suffer a destitute future. For instance, minorities, particularly blacks, suffer economical, educational, health, and even cultural dilemmas on a much more massive scale than whites (Griffin-Fennell and Williams 2006). More specifically, Aguirre and Turner (2001) argue that the legacy of slavery still plagues African Americans today, characterized by disproportionate amounts of inner city and housing projects, single-parent homes, high unemployment rates, unequal education, and crime-ridden streets (Aguirre and Turner 2001). Thus, the multifaceted oppression that black women experience in this country presents them with a distinct set of dilemmas. This unique position allows black women to offer a one-of-a-kind perspective unfamiliar to any other group, including black men, white women, and all other non-black women (Thomas 2004).

Absence of the African American adult male often results in female-headed households. Thus, in order to survive, African American women must exhibit traits typically displayed by their male partner. Being sole income providers for the

household, being decision makers in the family, and single-handedly raising children are often referred to as matriarchal traits. With high crime rates, high unemployment rates, and high prison rates affecting African American males, it becomes even more important to the survival of black families for African American women to possess these traits (Kendel 1971).

Even though these characteristics are deemed unattractive by most men in society, they are vital for the survival of the African American family, especially for those belonging to the lower class. Unfortunately, due to these state of affairs, African American women are often placed in a position of economic distress (Allen 1981). Black women are frequently compelled to live a life of welfare dependency. Unfortunately, due to recent changes in welfare policies, such as time limits placed on welfare recipients, black women can look toward a future filled with turmoil. According to Darity and Myers (1984), this is a significant cause of concern because female-headed households are more likely to be in poverty, less likely to have a head in the labor force, and more likely to experience economic hardship than are male-headed households (Darity and Myers 1984).

The struggle and concerns of black women have been vital to the construction of black feminist thought. Black feminism is centered around an African American critique on a Euro-centric approach to knowledge. For example, according to Collins (1989),

> Like other subordinate groups, African-American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of Black women's oppression but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge. (P. 20)

Black women's acts of resistance dispute two prominent approaches to studying the consciousness of oppressed groups. The first approach claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression. The second approach suggests that the oppressed are less human than their rulers and, therefore, are less capable of articulating their own standpoint. An underlying assumption of the two approaches is that the subordinate group's perspective is inferior to that of the dominant group and that the subordinate group lacks the enthusiasm to pursue any kind of political activism. Thus, black feminist thought encourages African American women to articulate their own standpoint and to value their own subjective knowledge (Collins 1989).

INTIMATE STRESSORS OF THE BLACK WOMAN

Contemporary Examples of Prejudice and Discrimination

As Collins suggests (1989), substantive knowledge of black women is critical to understanding the lives of the contemporary black woman. During these discussions, insight into the daily stressors of these women's lives emerged. When asked, "What are the existing stressors that you currently face in your life and where do the majorities come from?" Hilldreth shared:

> I believe that one of the major things is still inequality, and that's regarding whether it's jobs or opportunities or whatnot, and I think another thing is we don't have the resources that we need many times in order to accomplish the things that we want to accomplish, that they're not made readily available to us, as they are to white females and I would probably say a third would just be [pause] black women, I think, are still looked down upon and what I mean by that is, for example, if there were four doctors, a white male, a black male, a white female and a black female, it will probably be, people will go to the white male doctor first then the black male, then the white female, then the black female because they think that we're inadequate…

Hilldreth's example of inequality as a source of stress is a very important one. She later shared that society's unrealistic expectations of black women only intensify the stress in black women's lives. What's also intriguing about Hilldreth's point is that she told a story that totally undermines the discourse of a democratic meritocracy. The story of the four doctors and the likelihood of the white doctors being chosen over the black doctors despite similarities in merit and education is worthy of note. Hilldreth is pursuing a graduate-level degree in nursing with the hopes of one day becoming a nurse practitioner, so her concerns are very much justified. However, Hilldreth later revealed that she will continue to do her best to not let the stereotypes of black women get her down.

This is not the first time that the ideologies of US democracy have been questioned. French sociologist Alexis De Tocqueville also disputed these claims. Tocqueville's journey through the United States coupled with his "outsider" (French visitor) perspective allowed him to develop his conclusions without partiality. In lack of any vested interest and free of restraint, Tocqueville was able to make full use of his sociological imagination. During Tocqueville's voyage he noticed several striking characteristics that were contradictory to US claims of the "American Democracy."

Tocqueville found that the American governments as well as many of our most prominent principles were established on a political/religion or moral split. Instead of a true democracy, Tocqueville illustrates the existence of the "tyranny of the majority," which tends to be a common trait of most democratic governments. With this in mind,

interests of the minority tend to get overshadowed by the interests of the majority; nonetheless, in a truly democratic society the majority rules (Tocqueville 1990).

Prejudice attitudes and discriminatory acts in the workplace were referenced several times throughout the interviews. What also became apparent throughout these discussions were the considerable amounts of stress that these incidents were causing the women. Ceva, an 18 to 25-year-old student in Texas, shared her experiences with prejudice attitudes. She commented that one of her biggest stressors is racist attitudes on the job:

> I guess being in the workplace and being considered ugly. And just because you walk in, you're black, you're not considered…you're a step lower and then your woman, now you're two steps lower and always having to fight to say, "I'm this person. I know what I'm doing….You work extra hard. You go the extra mile and you spend a little bit more time at the office. You become friendly, say that your friendly face, you're not loud, you're not ghetto, you're not taffy. You just do everything possible to make yourself blend and be accepted as just the person and not the black woman.

Ceva's encounters with trying to downplay her societal-deemed "unattractive attributes" in an attempt to "fit in" have been a constant struggle in her life. Jones and Shorter-Gooden illustrate similar findings in their analysis of black women in the workplace. Similar to Ceva's accounts, black women's attempts at speaking quietly, working overtime, and going above and beyond to appear as a team player ultimately cause excess amounts of stress (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003).

Delilah revealed that discrimination in the workplace has also been a source of stress for her over the last few years. She reminisced on an event that occurred in her place of employment that involved labor wage discrimination. Delilah said:

> You're hired to do a particular job, and then you do that; but then that's not enough. And when I say that's not enough, you may have a white counterpart who would not be as qualified to do what you do, but would be earning…you doing her job and somebody else's. I mean and your own. But then when it comes to pay, she would get the bonus or go…they would go to bat for her. But it's like, okay, she doesn't need it. Either she's not doing enough. So yeah, I have had that, and how I did it I just continued to do what I was going to do, and I fought it but you know and then in the end it paid off. But it took years, and I didn't leave because I liked what I was doing and what have you. And I have great benefits. So now it's a lot better. But I went through a period there where it wasn't, and I could easily have walked out the door but…

As Delilah mentioned, this issue went on for years before it was resolved, but in doing so the situation took a toll on her health and energy levels. She saw the incident as wrong but regarded this as just something that black women typically deal with. With limited education and the need for healthcare benefits, Delilah sustained her composure until the rough times passed.

Shantay, an 18 to 25-year-old African American student at a predominately white institution in Texas, conveyed an example that she claims made her experiences in the dorm extremely stressful and unpleasant. According to Shantay, there was only one other African American male student living in the dorm. The two of them often found themselves targets of racist jokes. Shantay commented:

> I've lived now on campus for two years and I lived in a dorm of course with quite a few different ethnicities of people, like my roommate was Chinese, the girl across the hall from me was Asian and have some Hispanics upstairs, so it was like a lot of cultures. And yet, and when I moved in I was like the only African American person in the dorm in that hall, and so when I was trying to hang out with all of the people in the dorm because they would have barbecues and stuff, they have this guy who they referred to as, they called him Token, and he was Token and I didn't realize, I thought this was just his own nickname, but then when I realized that he was called Token because he was their Token Black guy, and then when I came around, I kind of messed up his nickname a little bit because he was no longer the only Black person in the dorm. And so when someone was explaining that to me, I was just like wow, so next they'll try to

> think of a nickname for me. Now of course, maybe in freshman, I'm just thinking I'm being included, their nickname for me ended up being … Shout out, and it's because they felt that Black people, whenever they got on the radio, they're always getting shout outs, and so I was like shout out because they couldn't say Shantay, so … yeah, you know I got Shout out and he was Token and we hung out with him and then a lot of the things like, when we would hang out, and because we perceived ourselves as all being cool and then myself as being the new person, I really wouldn't go and start any arguments with anybody, a lot of jokes would be cracked. And so he would be like I'm just Black because of this and then you know, you're White because of that, and like they would throw these racism jokes back and forth and I was thinking, okay that's fine because that's the relationship that he has with them, but then when he left and they started cracking the jokes with me and I was like hey … you don't know me like that, I'm not comfortable with that, and so I had to deal with like a lot of racism jokes from the people within my dorm.

We see in Shantay's example that she had to deal with the stressors evoked by white students as a direct result of her race. What's even more striking about this scenario is the fact that Shantay experienced similar bouts of discrimination throughout the campus environment. Although Shantay did not report any of the incidents to campus administrators, she admitted that these conditions caused considerable amounts of stress and venting to friends and family was the only strategy that she employed to alleviate her stress.

All study participants revealed experiencing some form of prejudice or discrimination within their lifetime, and 18 out of the 22 women claimed that prejudice and discrimination continue to act as forms of stress in their daily lives. Narratives revealed that these incidents were not isolated to just the workplace or school. These incidents occurred at parks, shopping malls, and in their neighborhoods and several other locations. It was obvious that the women were very aware of the fact that these occurrences were inevitable, regardless of their levels of education or income.

Unrealistic Expectations

Not all incidents of race-related stress were a result of tangible examples with prejudice or discrimination. Because these issues weren't visible, the women reported having all the more difficulty in addressing them. Several of the women reported feeling the pressures of societal expectations that resulted from being a black woman. Alison spoke of the additional stress that she undergoes just living day to day:

> There are a lot of things that tie into those like being the only black female in wherever you work or whatever class you're taking or something like that. Or the expectations that society in general has on a black female as a wife or a mother.

We see here that Alison's awareness of what others expect from her is a concern. When probed a bit further regarding coping with the situation, she said, "It creates extra stress…because you have to do more than what is necessary or required."

Ava, a married woman between the age of 34-42, said that unrealistic expectations are one the top three stressors that black women deal with in this day and age. With that said, Ava's response to an incident appears to be one that would likely perpetuate the stress. She revealed:

> …discrimination is self-imposed and what I mean by that is for years we've always told you've got to be the best, you've got to be better than everyone else and I think the reward for someone in society is marginal and so you're never going to be rewarded for the same amount of effort you're putting in and you convince that we have to be three times as good, and so you're always disappointed.

The disappointment that Ava spoke of appears to hinder her attempts to handle the situation, which is evident when we look at Ava's approach to handling the situation. From her standpoint, black women should do their best to live up to these expectations.

Specifically she stated, "I think we should be strong and to be able to do it all… and so I'm right there trying to do it all." Similarly, Karen argued that just being an African American woman in the United States constitutes a certain amount of stress:

> Being black in itself is stressful…Uh because even though it's 2008, um, you're still not viewed to my understanding of what I've seen. You're still not viewed as equal a lot of times to, um, your counterparts like white women and stuff. I mean, even though we've got like a black president, you still a lot times are not looked on as still equal.

Karen's point clearly illustrates that the existence of racism today is just as taxing as the expectations of not being considered equal because of one's race and gender. Additionally, because she has not found an effectual way to change the situation, she admitted that she deals with it the best way she can. Case in point, Karen said, "Well, I just try to express it to anyone that will listen but if you see there's no changes then just try to find the next best job or something for you."

Family

Studies regarding the African American family have been a topic of interest for some time. Be it examining the effects of the southern apartheid, long-term oppression, or the soaring incarceration rates among African American males, the study of the African American family has been deemed highly significant among researchers. Having survived 200 years of slavery, 30 years of post-civil war oppression, and another century of systematic discrimination in practically every social sphere possible (e.g., housing, education, employment, etc.), this group undeniably continues to suffer from various hardships (Aguirre and Turner 2001). Be that as it may, prominent US race literature tends to examine the African American family primarily from a pathological

perspective. Thus, a significant amount of existing social science literature either misrepresents or inaccurately characterizes the reality of the African American family.

Staples argues that widespread inaccuracies are troubling (Staples 1999). While he does acknowledge that the African American family has adapted several times to the various forces in society, he also argues that the unique historical experiences of the black family deserve recognition. Thus, speaking of the poverty and racial oppression that continue to plague the black community, Staples concludes with a call of acknowledgement. He challenges researchers to always acknowledge the social position of this group and, in doing so, to be sure that studies that seek to portray the African American experience are being placed into the appropriate historical context.

One finding worth pointing out is the repeated mention of black women's familial experiences as a form of stress in their narratives. Although the majority of the women rely heavily on their families for support of one kind or another, over half of the women reported family as a significant stressor in their life. It was commonly said that familial ties are often two-fold, in that they function as the women's biggest stress relievers but are also their biggest stressor. There were several reasons for this familial stress. In direct response to the question about the stressors that she currently faces in her life, Donna shared a story that revealed the stress placed on her by her family to be a "good mother":

> Um, I got married when I was 20. My husband kept going to college. I quit going to college because I felt like, okay, now that we're married, I need to, you know, get in my role as being a mother and being a wife. And by going to school, I couldn't do that because we would never see each other and my son was…our son was actually being raised by my mother and my mother became mom and I became you or he would call me by my name. And so once I did that, my

> mother's family was like, 'Oh, she's wasted her life and she's running behind that no-good man. You know, he ain't got no job, he's going to school.' And that's kind of stressful for your family to say something like that and then…I mean nowadays, I have more than their children have, you know. When me and my husband were in our 30s, we built a home and you know, we have cars, you know, we take care of our family and our children work in church and they're ushers, they sing in the choir, they praise dance. And you know it kind of…it kind of makes you go back to those people and say, 'Look, you said I would never amount to nothing and you probably shouldn't have said that because only God knows my destiny and not you.' But in society, that's just the way black women are looked at. You know, once you…even black women will tell other black women, once you have a child, your life is over. There is no such thing!

Even though Donna admitted that her relationship with her family was strained because of her family's attempts to impose their expectations of what a "black mother" should do, she did admit that their relationship is critical to dealing with difficult situations. Donna also confirmed that attending family events and interacting with family was stressful, but she never got to a point where the amount of stress would end the relationships. The complexity of issues like Donna's is that there is an existing sort of interdependence. Therefore, outside of her husband, she still admitted that her mother would be her primary source in her time of need. For example, Donna stated:

> We'd probably contact my mother because she always says and she says it from this day and I tell my daughter the same thing. You know, if I have it, you have it and I hope you feel as if you have it, I have it. And she's been like that since we were little. She would give you her last. And she's actually, she's raised me and my brothers and sisters up like that. We would give each other our last.

Jennifer also communicated the multifaceted compromise that goes along with being a part of a close-knit family. After being probed to elaborate on why her family was a source of stress, she commented:

> Um, well with society being the oldest sister it's like I'm the second mom, house manager, babysitter, chauffer, oh-uh um tutor, mentor, basically whatever,

> whatever role that somebody's probably specializing in and getting paid for, I'm doing it for free [Laughter] for my family and I don't…you know and I think because that's always kind of been my role as the older sister. Um when I was younger, and you know it was…it was kind of expected of me now that I've gone to, um, to the PhD level and I'm like the first in my family to do that like I'm not sure if they really understand like what it takes to…to be at this level and then, you know, to understand what that affects, how that affects my own you know personal schedule and time and then, you know, what I can really do to still help the family. But it's kind of like even in my own mind, it's like I still feel like that big sister that has to you know be there to help with the homework and take them to basketball practice. So even I myself kind of struggle with, you know, prioritizing my work to my family obligations.

In Jennifer's example, there was absolutely no question of whether or not she loves her family, but the dilemma comes about when Jennifer is unable to follow through on these expectations. She later reported that she realizes that she could easily turn to her family to do the same. So the implied sense of obligation proves important to both Jennifer and her family. In fact, Jennifer confidently expressed her gratefulness as she said:

> My mom would have no problem taking me back home but in Houston, I have no…I mean I have so many relatives and like family friends in Houston that you know I'm blessed that…that will never be… I will never get, you know, have to come a time where I wouldn't have a place to stay or food to eat.

Katherine, a divorced Illinois resident between the age of 43-54, spoke highly of her supportive family. When Katherine spoke of her family, she emitted a glow. It was obvious that her family is the most important thing in her life. Throughout the interview, she found opportunities to convey her family's precedence in her life. Nonetheless, when asked about her biggest stressors, the first thing that she mentioned was "my mother and my kids." Katherine's adult children and elderly mother were often the origins of her stress.

For example, when asked, “What are you most passionate about?” she quickly responded, “My family, I’m very passionate with people.” When asked, “What makes you happy or what are you most happy about?” Katherine responded, “Being around my family.” When asked, “What makes you sad or what are you most sad about?” she boldly expressed, “When something is wrong with part of my family or I’m not feeling well.” Lastly, in response to the question, “What makes you angry or what are you most angry about?” Katherine replied, “Maybe if one of my daughters get into it or something like that. Or something is going wrong with a family member of mine or something like that.”

Katherine exhibited obvious ambiguity between what relieves stress and what evokes stress. She felt as though no matter the situation, her family was fundamental to solving the problem. Thus, her commitment to her family was an uncompromising requisite in her life, yet nonetheless still stressful.

Finding a Good Man

In comparison to other men in society, African American men bear a substantial burden. These men are trying to be men in a society that rejects the cultural norms of the group, resulting in inevitable societal disappointment. For that reason, African American men are left with a psychological void that places them outside the reach of essential human connections. These feelings of inadequacy affect the African American family, the community, and friendships. With this in mind, African American males are more vulnerable to disadvantageous conditions in almost every aspect imaginable. African American men statistically outnumber their white counterparts in just about

every respect, including poverty, crime, imprisonment rates, higher unemployment rates, higher substance abuse rates, and higher morbidity rates (Sampson 1987).

A variety of reasons contribute to high unemployment rates of African American males. Accordingly, the African American male–job relationship is a fragile one. Furthermore, the African American men who are employed must often accept low-paying jobs. This repetitively affects the man's self-esteem, often generating feelings of fear and incompetence. These feelings of incompetence cause African American men to shun away from jobs where they are depended upon to meet certain expectations and acknowledge the liability for their responsibilities. Because of this, black men are often considered lazy, yet the truth is African American men place the same social value on their employment status that society does. This is illustrated in Eliot Liebow's (1967) *Tally's Corner*; for 18 months in 1962-63, Liebow performed a study of Negro street corner men. Liebow lived among a group of seemingly hopeless black men in a traumatized neighborhood in the inner city of Washington, D.C. The results of Liebow's study were eye opening to the American people. This "thick," rich narrative description of the study portrayed African American men in a totally different light. Liebow's experiences gave America the opportunity to "take a walk in the shoes" of the everyday African American male. During the study, Liebow discovered that the street corner men objectively evaluated job considerations. The African American men revealed during the study that they were often misrepresented. Rather than being portrayed as unwilling to work, they instead conveyed that the man who is willing to work is unlikely to earn enough to support family (Liebow 1967).

With increasing pressures from society to "keep up," these circumstances can breed an appalling outcome for the African American male. Unemployment rates and crime rates have been shown to have a positive correlation, which can lead to various other tribulations for the African American adult male. Let's use the example of an African American adult male recently released from prison. How many employers are willing to hire an African American adult male directly out of prison? The reality is probably not many; therefore, various outcomes can occur that can lead to a life characterized by crime, violence, and high unemployment rates. According to Robert Sampson (1987):

> Further, blacks are disproportionately represented as offenders: they account for approximately 61% of robbery arrests and 55% of homicide arrests, while representing only 11% of the overall population. The extremely high level of blacks offending and black victimization has led Wilson to conclude that 'perhaps the most dramatic indicator of the extent to which social pathology has afflicted urban blacks is crime, especially violent crime.' … The theoretical attention that has been focused on these issues has tended to neglect the role of embedded structural factors such as male joblessness. (P. 349)

A recurring concern among sociologists about criminal law stems from racial disparities regarding the imprisonment of African American men. Due to various occurrences such as racial profiling and unfair court trails, African American adult men are much more likely to be imprisoned for crimes than white men who commit similar offenses. In illustration, 72% of black males indicate that they have been stopped on various occasions for reasons that they believe to be none other than their skin color (Aguirre and Turner 2001). Likewise, 33% of young black men in their 20s are under supervision of the criminal justice system. Additionally, African American men get more jail time for possession or sale of crack than for cocaine, which is more prevalent

among middle class (Aguirre and Turner 2001). Unfortunately, even in states where the populations of whites numerically exceed the number of blacks, blacks are still more likely than whites to be imprisoned (Bridges and Crutchfield 1988).

Current conditions of the black male are thoroughly understood by the black woman. And for those with aspirations of marrying a black man and mothering his children, the mere mention of the subject evokes anxiety. In response to the question of the top three stressors that she is currently dealing with in life, Bridgett, a single 26 to 33-year-old graduate student stated:

> I am kind of stressed about, I'm just kind of…I'm not really pessimistic but I'm like, man, you know I just hope that she lives to where I live or whatever to see me you know have children or get married or graduate from college. So like that's kind of a stress because like, man, I want to get done with this stuff because I feel like you know she might want grandchildren or she might want to see me walk down the aisle and so like you know, so the fact that life isn't promised is a stressor for me.

Bridgett's desire to find and marry a black man illustrates a universal concern for black women. Significant disparities in the male-to-female ratio make finding a quality mate a realistic concern. This can be seen in Janet's response to the same question about stress in her life. Janet, a divorced woman between the age of 34-42, established an interesting point. She stated:

> I think one big one that comes to mind is uhm that I hear a lot about is this stress which I think stresses a lot of them out is finding a mate…and uhm, dealing with their black male mate, if they have one.

Hence, Janet was not just referring to the stress of finding a mate, but she was also referring to the stress of dealing with the issues that arise as a result of keeping a black man. Regina and others expressed concerns of contracting HIV, being physically abused,

or ending up as single mothers. Additionally, Kyndall, a married woman between the ages of 43-54, asserted, "I think the black man puts a lot of stress on us too." She went on to say:

> The black man believes that as a black woman, our job is to cook, clean, have the kids, take care of the kids and help him bring home the bacon. Well actually, they don't really…most of them, I'll take it back. Most of them don't want us to help bring home the bacon but if they make $7 an hour, they want us to be okay with that.

Kyndall's point is another illustration of the continuity of the stress that black women are facing in their relationships. These women reported stressors associated with acquiring a black man and the independent stressors associated with sustaining the relationship.

Black women make up the group least likely to intermarry among other racial groups and the largest group of never married individuals in the United States. Rates reveal that 43% of US black women have never married; despite that, they have the highest level of divorce rates of any other racial group or gender (Lee and Edmonston 2005). Consequently, these rates are affecting the daily lives of black women in ways unimaginable. Not only does this phenomenon result in psychological stress, but it also results in material lack. Single-parent homes are more likely to live in poverty than two-parent homes, and black women are more likely to live in poverty than any other group (Brewer 1988). Thus, this lack also emerged as a significant stressor in black women's lives.

Material Lack

Black women are disproportionately affected by poverty (Brewer 1988). Therefore, an issue that continued to emerge in the women's narratives regarding stressors in their daily lives was the topic of "lack." Financial and material deficiencies were constant concerns for several of the women. Cheryl communicated that finances are currently one of the most significant stressors in her life. Although she does the best she can, Cheryl refuses to let these apprehensions discourage her. She illustrated this point by stating:

> I'm living on loans. I'm almost 50 years old. I'm in debt up to my ears and I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to pay all these people off before I die so that's my second stressor. Money, there's never enough money.

Katherine, reported that her financial situation is depressingly affecting her level of life satisfaction. In response to the question, "In general, are you satisfied with your life?" she said:

> Not right now I'm not. Probably because I'm going through some financial issues right now...It's to definitely find some other type of work right now, and just do whatever I can for my grandkids to become successful. To become financially stable so that, you know, I can definitely help them out. So far, no I haven't achieved it the way that I would like to, but I've been pretty successful in the past. It's just that I might haven't done the things I didn't do when I should've did with the money at the time.

Rough economic times have wreaked havoc in Donna's home as well. As a result, Donna has taken on the role of the primary bread winner for her family. She revealed:

> My husband got hurt in a wreck a couple of weeks…a couple of months ago so he isn't working and I work two jobs…a stressful thing is probably not knowing day to day what is going to happen in the society of our economics. But I try not to worry about that because in all actuality, I'm not promised tomorrow. So I try too much not to gloat on that.

Although Cheryl, Katherine, and Donna referenced monetary examples as a source of economic distress, lack in general consumed the lives of some respondents. For instance, Shantay divulged that monetary issues combined with car troubles are current stressors in her life:

> My financial situation, because I found out about myself that I'm really not good at balancing my budget; and then I would say… like material things, and I have to just go ahead and classify it as material things because my car gives me a lot of grief and then I keep it up with my apartment intact because I tend to get messy when I have too much school stuff going on. So I would just classify the third as material things.

Shantay is a full-time college student with an annual income of less than $14,999 per year, so she admitted that her budgeting issues are more about her lack of income rather than her lack of ability to manage her money.

Repeatedly, we see here that incidents of prejudice and discrimination, familial obligations, and lack of some kind serve as primary stressors in the lives of the African American women. In fact, it was fairly commonly disclosed that several of the women suffer through multiple stressors. So then the question becomes, "What effects are these stressors having in the lives of black women?"

INSIGHT INTO THE MOMENT OF CRISIS

Moments of crisis are careful examinations of circumstances and events that lead up to thoughts of suicide at the individual level. A significant finding in the study was that nine out of the 22 interviewees contemplated suicide at one point in their lives. With black women's suicide attempts being significantly lower than all other groups, combined with the fact that their suicide completion rates are virtually nonexistent, this

was an unexpected finding. As a result, this study provides insight into a very intimate part of black women's lives.

During moments of crisis we examine the process in which suicide is a considered option, but for whatever reason the individual does not go through with the act. These processes are particularly complex due to the compound stressors in black women's lives. One might assume that the unremitting stressors of black women discussed in the previous section would only exacerbate moments of crisis. Nonetheless, the study concludes that, these moments rarely result in the outcome of suicide. Thus, stressors may cause a moment of crisis, but they are not themselves moments of crisis.

Subsequent chapters will provide detailed illustrations of black women's rationales for evading the act, however, what follows are black women's classification of these thoughts. Accounts revealed that moments of crisis are generally perceived to play out in one of two ways. The first is casual thoughts and the second deliberation of the final moment. Let's first examine participant's assessments of these thoughts.

Casual Thoughts

Since suicide is unlikely to occur among African American women in the first place, these discussions are fairly unexplored areas. The narratives presented here provide the reader with a snapshot of the period of suicide ideation and will follow with a brief rationale of why the individual did not follow through with the act. Much more in-depth details of the rationale for not committing the act are provided in subsequent chapters.

During discussions of the relentless stress of the contemporary black woman, it was discovered that suicide ideations were no stranger. Some of the discussions of suicidal thoughts were presented during the interviews in a nonchalant way, while others were presented with much more emotion. In reply to the question "Have you ever considered suicide?" Janet revealed a fairly relaxed approach to suicide ideation. She stated, "Probably thought about it but uh it's not a option for me. I don't know if it was really an option or that I really, say, thought about doing it." Janet, a divorced woman between the age of 34-42, was casual in her conversation. She expressed her thoughts of suicide in a way that suggested that everyone thinks about it from time to time. Although Janet acknowledged that the act of suicide was something that came to mind, she ultimately accredited her religion as a personal reason for not following through.

Tanya, a single woman between the age of 18-25, also expressed her experiences with contemplating suicide in an informal way. When asked, "Have you ever considered suicide?" she stated:

> Not seriously…I mean, there are thoughts when you're definitely like, things might be better if I weren't existing, but never to the point where I thought about here's what I'm going to do, and this is how I'm going to do it now.

Furthermore, although Tanya's thoughts of suicide were no less genuine that any other individual, she too considered them to be a customary response to stressful situations. Tanya also attributed her faith-based beliefs in Christianity to be the primary factor for not ensuing these thoughts.

Tina, a single woman between the age of 34-42, also reported a time when she considered suicide. Tina plainly stated:

> Yeah. I think…I don't know. In my opinion, kind of everybody does in low stages or high ones just through life. It's like, I just want this to stop, how I wish I would die, you know. You can float up in the air and not really mean it.

Although Tina was going through a rough time in her life. She alleged that these thoughts were harmless:

> I mean, I can imagine but the thought of it and then actually doing something to make it happen was two different things for me. I mean, we quickly say, 'I want to die' because we want something to end, but to actually take the action, I never came close to doing that.

Tina said that her commitment to her family was her primary reason for not following through with the act. She later declared that nothing could happen that could push her to carry out the act. We see here from these narratives that contemplating suicide is not necessarily something that the women perceived as serious. As a matter of fact, some of the women considered occasional thoughts of suicide to be normal. Additionally, the women also provided preliminary information into the factors that assist in deterring the act.

Deliberating the Thoughts of my Final Moment

While some women's thoughts of committing suicide were unlikely to develop into action, there were some women who revealed that their thoughts of suicide were preliminary steps to the act itself. Different from those that spoke casual thoughts of suicide, these women revealed that they perceived their thoughts to be genuine. In other words, they claimed that these were not mere thoughts, and they did not perceive them as normal. For example, Delilah, a Louisiana resident between the age of 55-68, contemplated suicide after the sudden loss of her husband. When asked, "Have you ever considered suicide?" Delilah stated:

> Very slightly and when I say that, I lost my husband five years ago. I just…there was a moment that I knew I was in trouble when I just thought that life wasn't the same, wasn't as I had known it. But I got help, and I took anti-depressants for a while; I guess about three months. My doctors said probably I should have stayed on them longer or she recommended. But I think it got me through that point where I just felt lost.
>
> I continued to work and I date with friends and everything. I did share with one of my co-workers how I felt, and it was only person that I told that sometimes I just don't think I want to go on, but I knew that it wasn't an option. I had to. But that is the only time that you know I would say for just a little while that I thought of it, but I knew I couldn't do it.

In Delilah's case, not only did she seriously consider it, but she sought help after realizing that something was terribly wrong. Delilah came to a point where she felt as though she could no longer go on after the death of her lifetime partner. After probing a bit further to gain insight into what altered her suicidal thoughts, Delilah shared that it was due to religious beliefs. Specifically, Delilah lives by the religious principles instilled in her at a very young age, which taught her that suicide is just not an option.

Tasha, a married woman between the age of 34-42, also seriously considered ending her life. During a difficult time in her life, as a teenager, Tasha saw suicide as a way out of a dreadful situation. A combination of her rough upbringing as a child and the lack of control over the situation resulted in thoughts of wanting to end her life:

> As a child, there were times when I was like, gosh, I want to end some issues that I was facing. I grew up in a blended family that had a lot of problems. And so as a child you do not really see your options, you do not really have control and you do not have the emotional maturity to handle the situation, so you may think drastic things not really realizing what that would really mean, not really fully understanding.

Tasha claimed that she has matured a great deal since then and would no longer consider suicide as an option. She revealed that commitment to her family and friends in addition to her spiritual growth helped strengthen her during this complicated time.

Shantay, attempted to end her life during the summer of her eighth grade year. During this time, Shantay experienced very difficult conditions for a 14-year-old girl. Upon losing her mother, she decided that life wasn't worth living anymore:

> I was just feeling really bad at one point in time and in transition really from middle school to high school and that was around the time that my—well, my mom's actually deceased and she passed away after I graduated the 8th grade. And so when I was getting ready to go into high school, everyone was talking about they were doing things with their mom and their mom bought them all of this and everything. And I know Gran said my mother didn't raise me but she was there and then I guess just dealing with her death and being a new student in my high school and everything, it was just, I don't know. It was really intense, and my older sister, she's 10 years older than me so she was off like, she wasn't around at that time when I was starting school. I mean she bought me some clothes and sent them to me but nothing more than that. And so I guess at one point in time I was just feeling really down emotionally, and I started to consider that because—and there was nothing my grandparents could do so just … really difficult with that. Oh, and I think also at that time, because if I remember correctly, my grandfather passed away the year before my mom passed away. So I didn't even have that father figure in my life anymore so it was just me and my grandma when I was starting school.

Losing both her mother and her grandfather was devastating to Shantay. Similar to Tasha, who also contemplated suicide as a teen, Shantay claimed that she has matured a great deal since the incident. She revealed that it was the support of her family and social networks that helped her through this dark time.

In conclusion, from these interviews, we repeatedly see that these black women have faced multiple stressors in their lives. It is also clear that the types of stressors endured by these women are just as assorted as the places from which they come. These

stressors included issues that arose at work, with family, or even as a result of deficiencies in various aspects of their life. Although some women contemplated suicide, the vast majority of them did not.

Logically, the question becomes, "If black women's lives are significantly more challenging and they do at least entertain the thought of suicide, then how does the unique societal experiences of black women seem to impact the way they see themselves in relation to suicide?" Thus, the following two chapters will provide insight into black women's perception of low suicide rates despite their stressors or suicidal ideations.

CHAPTER VI

FAITH, FAMILY, AND THE SUICIDE PARADOX

"I think we look at people as crazy [Laughing] that commits suicide. And I think a lot of it has to do with religion because we consider this as God's temple. You know, and whether it's Baptist or Methodist, Catholic whichever, we were raised that this is God's temple and you don't destroy God's temple. I…I think we have a major issue with that." (Kyndall)

The current study examined narratives of black women to gain insight into black women's perceptions concerning the suicide paradox. As we have established thus far, the suicide paradox is defined as the exception to the unfavorable racial health disparities (Rockett et al. 2006). The collections of narratives were examined by means of extended case methods, which focus on making use of existing theory in hopes of understanding one's data (Burawoy 1998). Existing theory led to the formulation of two literature-based assumptions (Durkheim 1897/2006; Fernquist 2001; Nelson 2006; Nisbet 1996; Walker, Lester and Joe 2006). It was assumed that two of the strategies that would emerge from black women's narratives as a means of averting suicide would be faith-based or religious beliefs and social integration, and guided by the literature, this study found the black women participants to be no exception. The women's experiences are presented in a narrative format and organized specifically by themes and subthemes that emerged under the areas of faith and family.

NOTIONS OF FAITH

Faith-based or religious beliefs have been established both theoretically and empirically as a factor that decreases the likelihood of suicidal behavior (Durkheim

1897/2006; Neeleman et al. 1998; Walker et al. 2006). Durkheim claims that religion encourages social integration through the formation of collective life. Neeleman (1998) discovered that church attendance among African Americans attributes to lower levels of suicide acceptability. Case in point, in this study, six out of 22 women conveyed that notions of faith-based beliefs heavily shaped their views in handling troubling events. Through these narratives, the women exposed how faith-based beliefs permeate their lives on a daily basis.

When asked to share their general perspectives on why black women's suicide rates are significantly lower, several of the women attributed low rates of suicide among African American women specifically to their faith. Along these same lines, 20 of the women classified themselves as Christians, with as many as 15 belonging to some form of church or religious group. In examining the role of faith in the lives of these black women, they attributed religious upbringing, life's purpose, and fear of hell as critical to maintaining their sanity.

Religious Upbringing

The idea of a religious upbringing being used by African American women as an means to navigate themselves through stressful situations is not an entirely new concept (Shorter-Gooden 2004). Although Shorter-Gooden (2004) does not specifically attribute religious upbringing as a protective factor for suicide, she does discover that black women often rely on their beliefs in a higher power to make it through day to day. This can be seen in Karen's, Bridgett's, and Alisha's accounts on how they perceive religious

upbringing as a factor in minimizing the likelihood that black women will participate in suicidal behavior.

Karen, a 43 to 54-year-old who is married with children and is an active member of her local church group, claimed that the only way that she would consider suicide would be if *ALL* of her family members were killed simultaneously. Karen attributed this uncompromising perspective about suicide to her religious upbringing and personal beliefs about God. In illustration, she stated:

> It's because of my upbringing…God forgives us for everything but they don't forgive you for suicide so I never wanted to like venture going to hell, and still if you…I think if you commit suicide, you still leave problems not with yourself because you're gone but you leave problems with other people behind. So, that was never a thought for me...That's my primary reason and I pray.

Karen stated that she has never contemplated suicide and credits attending church and believing in God for this. Prior to the presented response, Karen revealed that her religious upbringing makes it difficult for her to see life from any other perspective. Karen also shared that her overall solution in life for dealing with difficult events is prayer.

Bridgett, a single woman with no children who is between the ages of 26-33, provided a similar example of how her religious upbringing has aided in the maintenance of her anti-suicide attitude. Similar to Karen's viewpoint, Bridgett also affirmed that religious upbringing plays a significant role in the low suicide rates of black women. Bridgett said:

> …Religious background might be a deterrent from committing suicide, and the other thing is I don't really know the statistics offhand but a lot of African American women are pretty more heavily in the church, even more so than black men. You know, every time I go to church, I see a majority of women and so if

> that's the case and if some of it is connected to their religious teachings, then that could be another reason why a black woman may not commit suicide as much because they may have more connection to some religious teachings that are saying that it's a sin.

Bridgett, who is also an active member of a church group, accredited religious upbringings to low rates, but she also referenced current religious teachings in this scenario. Based on Bridgett's account, religious upbringing and current connections to the church are fundamental in deterring black women from suicide.

Alisha, a single woman between the age of 55-68 who serves as the primary caregiver for a grandchild, claimed that it was her childhood teachings that instilled her with a sense of belonging to something greater than herself. Alisha revealed that suicide is not an option because she believes her life is not hers to take:

> I know that the Christ that I love loves me that much so He gave His life for me. Why should I decide to limit something that He's given me? I have received a gift and every morning when I wake up, I may not be as strong as I used to be 20 years ago…But our parents used to always say in their prayers that He gave me a reasonable portion of health and strength so that reasonable portion is enough to get me through the day….So ah it's as important to me and it was important to me when I raised my children that we understand that the life we live is not ours. It's, it's not mine by myself. I owe so many other people. And above all, I owe it all to Him.

Alisha spoke of principles that were instilled in her by her parents as a child. She then stated that she had done her best to instill similar beliefs into her own children. What's also intriguing about this point is Alisha's overall perspective about her life. Alisha was confident in her assertions that God would supply her needs as long as she gives back to God through others. She went on to say that she perceives thoughts of suicide as a ridiculous notion not even worthy of one's attention.

In summary, black women who attend church on a regular basis appear to be much less tolerant of suicidal ideations than those who do not. It appears that church attendance contributes to ethnic differences in suicide acceptability while encouraging social integration (Neeleman et al. 1998; Durkheim 1897).

A Sinful Act

The continued discussions of black women's low rates of suicide illuminated another manner in which notions of faith play out in the lives of black women: internal convictions that the act of suicide is a sinful act. Some women bluntly pointed out that the thought of spending an eternity in hell is enough to deter most black women from participating in suicidal behavior.

Tasha, found herself contemplating suicide during her teenage years. Tasha had a rough upbringing as a child, and it was her lack of control over her life that brought about thoughts of suicide. Tasha illustrated this point as she stated:

> …I knew enough that suicide was a sin and so the pain that I felt was like, 'Yeah, but suicide is a sin and it is against God' and so my idea of what I would face on the other side would be worse. Having the faith and the fact that it's not just looking at what this life has to offer, you know, that there is something better. And what God commands us to do is to fight this fight with His help…

It was Tasha's notion of suicide as an act of sin that discouraged her from following through with suicide. Tasha later went on to share that suicide is no longer an option for her as she has since matured mentally and spiritually since the incident.

Kyndall also shared how the thought of the lack of opportunity given between the time of the act and one's last breath prevented her from attempting suicide during a very rough time in her life. Kyndall's main concern was not having time to repent for the sin,

thereby qualifying her to spend eternity in hell. Kyndall was involved in an abusive relationship and dealing with the difficulties of single motherhood. Indicating how her thoughts of damnation played a major role in the situation, Kyndall stated:

> …Well, it's my faith because within Christianity and stuff, and especially within my church, you're taught that killing oneself, you can't -- that's condemning yourself to damnation, basically…There is no way to come back unless within that last breath, you can completely confess all your sins and everything else. There is no guarantee that it's not going to be quick enough or something. So I think it's the thought of possibly spending eternity in hell because I decided to kill myself. And I think that that's not worth it.

Hilldreth, also found herself contemplating suicide as a teenager. Based on her depictions of the event, she was in a very serious relationship. Although Hilldreth thought the relationship would last forever, things took a turn for the worst and the relationship suddenly ended. It was during this difficult time that Hilldreth found herself contemplating suicide. Therefore, similar to Kyndall's account, we see that Hilldreth's apprehensions about hell were enough to impede pursing the act further:

> …our faith in God. Because if we would not have the faith and we would not believe that things are going to get better, then we would not put ourselves as Gods and we know that there's a higher being and we wouldn't feel as though that things would get better and also, I would say, it's probably because many of us were taught that you commit suicide then you're going to go to hell so people think, 'Okay, well, I don't want to go to hell so I'm not going to kill myself,' and I know many people that I know in general believe that concept.

After sharing such an intimate event, Hilldreth went on to say that she would no longer consider suicide as an option because she has come to the conclusion that it doesn't solve anything. Although Hilldreth is not an active member of church or a religious group, she was clear to convey that her discontent with suicide was not out of fear of God's wrath, but rather her desire to remain obedient to God by following his "word."

Seeking God's Will for My Life

Notions of seeking God's purpose for their lives proved to be particularly significant in shaping the women's perspective regarding stressful events. So then how does one's desire to find their life's purpose affect suicide? In response to the question "Have you ever considered suicide?" Jennifer boldly stated:

> Oh, no…Um, I feel that every day that I have a chance to be on this earth has a purpose so um once I found the Lord, I really…it's the motivation that I have every day and also like the people who are very close to me in my life, um, remind me that you know all that we've been through is for a reason so that every day that I have on this earth is, you know, still speaking of that reason why I'm supposed to be here and trying to do the Lord's will.

Jennifer was yet another study participant that contemplated suicide at one time in her life. However, it was her notion of faith that gave her the inspiration to go on to find her purpose. Jennifer attributed her thoughts of suicide to a combination of school, personal issues, and not knowing who she was as a person. Her response to the whole incident was, "It took me finding the Lord…It saved my life." Jennifer revealed that she is an active member in the church and now considers doing God's work to be a priority in her life. Taking the focal point off of self and concentrating on fulfilling God's purpose for her life has prompted Jennifer to handle stress accordingly. Although she made it clear that suicide is no longer an option, she now perceives stress to be a necessity along her journey with Christ.

Tina and Regina attributed notions of low suicide rates among black women to their ability to see beyond their individual problems onto something greater than themselves. Their life perspectives require them to focus more on God's desires for their lives rather than their own wants. Both women's narratives revealed that seeking out

God's purpose for their lives resulted in less stress and, in doing so, lessened the likelihood that they would resort to suicidal behavior. Tina stated:

> I take it to God because I've had it. I have to be prayerful and try not to get into a depressed mode. "No, Tina don't go there." Because I was literally stripped of so many of my independent self and I believe that was one of the things that God was trying to tell me. You're too independent. Lean on people sometimes. Quit letting yourself stress, lean on me.

Even though Tina, a middle-aged single mother, expressed that she is not an active member of a church or religious group, she did confirm that she depends on God for her continued existence in her time of need. Regina, a married woman between the age of 43-54 who is an active member of her local church, referenced a time in which things seemed fairly grim. Her response to the situation was:

> Pray, pray, pray…I pray and praise. I love my praise and worship and I think when I put that on, you forget about the little whatever it is, the dilemma, and you give it to the Lord; and we try to figure things out and He's already really worked it out, and if you let go and let Him do it. There ain't no need to worry, we can't do it, we can't fix it. Sometimes we wonder how this is going to happen or how that is going to happen, but he does it all the time. All the time!

Regina went on to provide additional examples of how she trusts God to provide for her as she stated:

> Oh! I don't think I would even consider, but I just don't think I would consider because if I lost my home I know God would give me a new one, a vehicle…you know what I'm saying? I don't think I would even…I don't think…No. Even losing a loved one, because I know…and the Lord tells us that we should rejoice when someone is born and…I mean rejoice when they leave and be sad when they're born but we're just the opposite. So no, nothing comes to mind.

Regina's emotions filled the room, so much so that she apologized for losing her composure. It was apparent that she was very adamant about God's role in her life. In illustration of this point, she affirmed that "the people who commit suicide obviously

don't have God in their life." Based on her logic, she argued that Christians have no need to be stressed as they have the option to hand their problems directly over to God.

COMMITMENT TO FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY

Claims of weakening social networks in the black family are prevalent in the social science literature (Genovese 1999; Moynihan 1965). However, despite these claims, a closer look at the black family yields a different image. One way to truly investigate social networks among the black family is to explore the lives of black women. Unique social positions of contemporary black women have aided in their efforts to survive these conditions.

Black women employ social networks in a variety of ways. Historically, images of these women were created in opposition to their white counterparts. Because the images were oftentimes negative, the black women embarked on a journey to redefine themselves. Deborah Gray-White (1999) explores strategies that black women employed during slavery in an attempt to re-create their image. One of the most essential ways of doing so was through their use of social networks. Female slave networks proved essential to their survival. These networks allowed the women to exist in a place in which they could redefine their definitions of black womanhood as well as their notions of what a woman should be. The author declared that black women would not have survived very long were it not for the company of her female companions, and she believes this holds true for the contemporary black woman as well (Gray-White 1999).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) also discusses efforts of black women to define themselves through social networks. She argues that bouts with prejudice and discrimination are often handled in heroic ways. One way in which Collins claims that black women have been able to survive such harsh circumstances is through the formation of the "safe space." Collins defines "safe spaces" as social spaces in which black women can speak freely. Within this space, black women are allowed to be themselves and participate in safe discourse that has been essential to their means of survival. Safe spaces also provide a realm in which black women are empowered through self-defining and resisting dominant negative ideologies (Collins 2000).

Author Carol Stack (1974) also recognizes the importance of social networks within the lives of black women. She gives a considerable amount of attention to black women's use of social networks in response to poverty. She discovers that the poor adopt several tactics for survival, oftentimes by immersing themselves in domestic kin-networks that can offer both cultural and material support (Stack 1974).

So how do conceptions about commitment to family and community affect notions of suicide? A study conducted by Nisbet (1996) confirms that social support and social networks are thought to work as protective barriers for suicide for African American women to the extent of none other. Although this is a very interesting finding, Nisbet concludes that the underlying social system of black females needs to be researched further to fully understand how familial and kinship ties safeguard against completed suicide. According to the literature from Durkheim and others, social integration appears to reduce the probability of suicidal behavior (Durkheim 1897/2006;

Fernquist 2004; Nisbet 1996; Taylor-Gibbs 1997). Since the literature has also suggested that black women heavily make use of social networks as a means of managing troubling times, it was no surprise to find similar patterns in the women's narratives (Gray-White 1999; Stack 1974).

Previous research examined associations between social networks and mortality rates. Results revealed that marriage and or children in the home have preventative effects on negative health outcomes. Potential explanations may result in familial roles acting as an agent of social control regarding health behaviors which influence mortality (Umberson 1987). Therefore, the second theme that emerged during the discussions of black women's perceptions of the virtually nonexistent rates of suicide was commitment to family and community. Several of the women expressed concerns about leaving behind their families and friends or not being able to follow through on their commitments. Often times, the women revealed that the thought of disappointing friends and family was often too much for them to bear. During these discussions, the subthemes that emerged were devotion to others, the reciprocal effect, and community perspectives.

Devotion to Others

Comments regarding lack of time and devotion to others were interesting. It appears that feelings of devotion to others have left the women feeling as if suicide is a selfish act. Participants' stories were reminiscent of a contractual agreement in the sense that they believe they are fulfilling their responsibilities as a member of the group. Donna commented:

> Okay, mostly because black women have grown up from a background that we've come from little of nothing and we are family support. So a lot of black women wouldn't consider suicide unless they were off from their family and they couldn't get back to their family. But most of us, you know, once you have a family and you have people that support you and people that lean on you. You're not going to do anything to just leave them alone.

Donna, a married Texas resident, discussed how perceptions of connectedness among black women and their family's account for low suicide rates within the group. Donna's commitment to those around her is instrumental in her perceptions of suicide. Although she provided a work-related example, she also mentioned that familial commitments fall into this category as well. The mere thought of not being able to follow through on a commitment frightened Donna. She mentioned that, after all, she has a reputation to uphold.

Ava's recognition of the role that African American women have played in the family coincides nicely with what the suicide literature alludes to regarding social integration among black women. Although findings were not able to explain how these networks minimize the risk of suicide among black women, Ava's perspective provides us with insight as to how her commitment to family affects her perceptions of suicide. She stated:

> I think traditionally in the past African-American women have been the foundation of most families and I think it's that commitment that you know 'I have to be or I have to follow through with things'… and I think not just for white males but for men in general. I think that men do what needs to be done and women do what needs and should be done, and so our plate is always full. Because we just don't do, we go beyond.

She then went on to say:

> I just…I feel like I always am involved in something. I'm always responsible for something. I'm always doing something and yeah, I'm very committed to the

> things that I say I'm going to do…And so to take your life would mean that I would not be following through on a commitment that I made to someone else or a project or something like that. I'm not saying that, you know, I thought about it and that's the only thing that held me back. I'm saying I've always been engaged in something and yeah, I knew I would follow through. I've always had a plan for the future.

Ava's devotion to those around her is key in shaping her perceptions of suicide. In direct response to the question "Have you ever considered suicide?" Ava plainly stated, "No…I'm too busy."

Alisha's example is a powerful one. In her example, she discussed topics of single motherhood. After leaving an abusive spouse, Alisha took on the role as the primary caregiver for her children. She said:

> If you are a single mother and my children were…my children were my life, you see what I'm saying? My children were my life so I had to be the mother, the father, and all those things to my children. So in order for my children to survive, I had to survive. You better know it. You better know it. Those babies depended on me, break me down, beat me up, black my eye, bloody my nose, it don't make no difference.

Her testimony could be felt throughout the room. The sense of triumph radiated through her voice. Alisha's perspectives of suicide are uncompromising. She revealed that there is no scenario that would trigger suicidal thoughts. All in all, she perceived suicide to be the "coward way out." She went on to tell a story that illustrated how a close friend provided her with psychological motivation even upon dealing with a terminal illness:

> But I have limited- I have some control, limited control but the ultimate control comes to the one that controls our life. Why do I say that is because regardless of what I'm going through, He [GOD] knows exactly how much I cantake. So when He says it's enough, that's when I know it's enough. Some situations that happen in our life is not for you. And what do I mean by that? I had a girl friend that had breast cancer. She went through it, I mean she was my Sunday schoolteacher, she never missed a Sunday at Sunday school…Going through her breast cancer, she had had a breast removed. She never missed a Sunday school

> day, not a Sunday teaching her class. So I tell her all the time, her going through was not for her. She was just the instrument that God used in order to give me the strength.

Alisha later went on to say that her friend's incident of breast cancer helped her to manage stressful situations and that she looks forward to returning the favor someday. She ended the examples by saying, "How can you leave behind someone [speaking of the friend] like that, especially by killing yourself?"

The narratives illustrate that women's devotion to friends, family members, and other social networks provides them with social embeddings that often leave them with a sense of accountability and responsibility. Literature has shown that black women are more likely to be single mothers than any other racial group. Fernquist (2004) finds that single motherhood serves as a protective factor against suicide for black women (Fernquist 2004). This claim is attributed to the fact that single mothers likely make the most of social networks. Additionally, the women deem these networks critical to their day-to-day survival. Thus, black women perceive their unyielding devotion to others as contributing to the low rates of suicide.

The Reciprocal Effect

As the narratives have shown, one of the ways that black women benefit from uses of social networks is by integrating themselves with others through devotion. Based on the women's accounts, devotion to others appears to be centered more so around women's mental stance of their commitment to those around them; however, it initially becomes clear that these women are typically involved in mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore, an additional way that black women gain from the use of social

networks speaks more to the benefits that the women reaped from these social encounters than their obligations to the other party. The following narratives resulted from the direct question, "What protects black women from suicide?" In one way or another, the women responded that social networks were critical in this equation. Based on these responses, the need to explore this a bit more developed. As a result, the women were asked a follow-up question regarding how the involvement of friends and families buffer black women's risk for suicide. In response, Shantay commented:

> …I think, the reason why they're so low is there are a lot of black women that…most black women go to college and they have sorority sisters so they have other people to pretty much fall back on and help them…

As a teenager, Shantay considered suicide. She had a difficult time coping with the loss of her mother and grandfather. After reminiscing on the event, she claimed that it was feelings of complete loneliness that forced her into a depression. Although these suicidal ideations did not last long, she credits family and community support for her recovery. Shantay sought out the support of her sorority sisters and argues that their backing coupled with her own personal growth helped her deal with difficulties in her life.

Donna brought forth the issue of the stigma associated with black women seeking mental health treatment. Donna provided insight into how a good friend helped her get through difficult times:

> I would probably say that the support of ongoing medical and mental healthcare relationship should probably be removed. A lot of African American women are not openly that they would go to a psychiatrist if they were having any problems. We pretty much have the, I guess, you could say the girlfriend connection or as me and my sister say, our gloating box [chuckles] which is where if I'm having problems or I have had a bad day or I'm having something on my mind, I call my

> sister and I gloat like, look, this is what went wrong today and you know, da da da da and my husband didn't take out the trash and our children aren't doing what they're supposed to do and then she does the same for me and once we get off the phone, it's like it's gone, we've moved on…So you're not…you're not taking baggage with you day to day. You're pretty much finding that one person you can talk to that's just going to listen to you and say, 'Well, no, you shouldn't do that, you should do this and you should do that.' She never says that. She sits and she listens to me and she says, 'You know, I understand.' And then she says, 'Well, let me tell you about my today' and then pretty much after about an hour of conversation, we've forgotten about all the bad that happened that day and we kind of move on.

Donna's acknowledgement of stigmas associated with seeking mental health treatment is an important one (Satcher 1999). As we see here, black women depend on their social networks to maintain their sense of well-being. Conversation is one of Donna's methods of choice. Calling up a friend to "vent" proves therapeutic. Similar to Donna, Katherine pointed out that family is fundamental to avoiding occurrences like suicide. She revealed that family is her biggest stress reliever: "Close-knit families, you know, I'm just staying… like they go and try to get help before it gets to that point." What Katherine is verbalizing here is that family can provide black women with a sort of intervention regarding suicide.

Community Perspectives

Black feminist thought encourages African American women to articulate their own standpoint and to value their own subjective knowledge (Collins 1989). Black women are referred to as the cornerstone of the black family. So then what is the relationship between black women's perspectives of suicide versus those of the community? Thus, a discussion of suicide perceptions of the community with these women was justified.

The interviews revealed that community perspectives of suicide were an important factor for all participants. Although it was probable for the black community's opinions to differ on discussions of suicide, it seemed promising to solicit information from black women about study-related conversations that occur behind closed doors. Therefore, the participants were asked not only about their own personal beliefs on suicide, but also how the community perceived suicide as well. Overall, it was discovered that their beliefs mirrored those of the community. In almost every instance, the women perceived community perspectives to be similar if not identical to those of their own.

Based on the narratives, "the community" came to mean any individual of African ancestry that the participants had formal or informal contact with. Under this definition, the local mailman, the pastor of the church, or even the cashier at the local supermarket could be included. The women were allowed to define "their" community. Then, participants were asked, "What do you think the black community would say about suicide?" Based on the women's narratives, community perspectives on suicide generally fell into three categories: (1) suicide was considered stupid or crazy, (2) suicide was a totally unacceptable option, or (3) suicide was something they had never discussed. Thus, these narratives provide insight into what black women and men from various backgrounds may believe. Sandy, Katherine, Kyndall, and Ceva commented on community perceptions of suicide as almost cynical:

> Uhm, I think that you know as African Americans, I think that they would find it to be you know a serious thing. I mean, any human being that would be able to take them their own life, I mean that's some pretty serious you know stuff. But at the same time, I think well, uhm, like I was saying, being an African American

> woman and a majority of the African Americans that I know, uhm, we're all pretty much brought up just the same, all pretty much look at a lot of things in life as the same. And I think for the most part, we look at it as though it's just not, it's just not an option…I mean almost…we almost wouldn't have time to do it, being that we're single parents and uhm you know just trying to survive, you know, make better lives for our girls**…**as a whole they would also find it to be ah ridiculous because like I said it's just not…we just don't look at it as an option. (Sandy)
>
> That it's crazy, that it's nuts, that it's unbelievable, and it's just not an option… you definitely can't make it to heaven. That's one thing God won't forgive you for, is taking your own life…(Katherine)
>
> I think we look at people as crazy [Laughing] that commits suicide. And I think a lot of it has to do with religion because we consider this as God's temple. You know, and whether it's Baptist or Methodist, Catholic whichever, we were raised that this is God's temple and you don't destroy God's temple. I…I think we have a major issue with that. (Kyndall)
>
> I believe it's not an option. They think it's crazy, like for you to even think about suicide. I've had friends who have been suicidal but they've never gone through with it, and those were male counterparts. I've never knew a woman that's been suicidal. (Ceva)

What's most interesting about Sandy's, Katherine's, Kyndall's, and Ceva's comments is the interchangeable use of the words "they" and "we." Although the focal point of the question was the community, the narratives revealed that the women rarely separated their perspectives from those of the community. Their frequent use of the term we revealed the women's awareness of their connectedness to their social networks (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2008). In fact, several of the women outright responded that there was no difference between their individual perspectives and those of the community. The frequently quoted things such as, "Oh, they would agree with what I already said."

The women often confirmed that their continuous contact with other community members played a major role in forming their anti-perspectives toward suicide. As we

can see from Sandy's, Katherine's, Kyndall's, and Ceva's points, the notion of suicide in the black community is often perceived as plain stupid or crazy. In addition to suicide being seen as crazy or just not an option, a lack of empathy was also apparent. During the interviews, the women oftentimes communicated facial expressions that seemed to suggest that the topic was rarely discussed. Some took 30 seconds or so of deliberation to answer the questions, other times they stared blankly at the ceiling, and a few even asked to come back to the question later, once they'd had time to think about it. In illustration of this point, Alisha's comment shows that she is nearly flabbergasted by the matter:

> You know, that is one topic, believe it or not, I'm thinking about that since you asked that question, I don't know if very many of us even talk about suicide. African- in the circles that I travel with, with my….I only have three friends, okay? [Laughter] But even with those three friends or with my family, suicide is not, we just never talk about it because it's not an option. You…it's not very many African Americans you can talk to that you can hold a conversation with about suicide because it's not an option for African American female. Now, I don't know what the guys talk about but it's just not an option.

Alisha's point about suicide not being an option for blacks coincides nicely with the work of Walker et al. (2006). Walker and colleagues find that levels of suicide acceptability are significantly lower among blacks than whites. Jennifer's comments further illustrate this point. She stated:

> It's like it's not even something that we really discuss. I think it's almost taboo- I know it's understood but it's just something that I guess one that we don't see a lot, it's almost seen as something that, you know, people when mainly probably something that white people would do but it's definitely not seen as something that, you know, our community really has to deal with.

Jennifer's discussion of suicide as taboo in the black community is a fascinating point. Researchers must be aware that this could pose challenges when studying mental health-

related issues in the black community. Although suicide rates are low among black women, they are certainly on the rise among black men and teens (Center for Disease Control April 2007). With black women just as suicide prone if not more so than whites, the fact that Tanya says that she has never thought about community perspectives of suicide is remarkable. Even though Tanya's mother is a psychologist, she revealed that random conversations about suicide are nonexistent:

> I'm not really sure what my friends would say because I'm not really sure of anything or I've ever thought about anything. It's not something that we talk about… they're very against it. They're very open about how they're against it and this is something that, even if it gets to the point where you even start considering these ideas, that there are people that you can talk to, to seek help especially with my mom being a psychologist. She's very much so like, 'talk it out even if it's not talking to me because you think I'm too close to it. Please go talk to another counselor or a psychologist, somebody, to get these feelings out because no stress you can possibly have is worth taking your own life'…

Tanya later went on to say that she plans to start initiating these conversations, as she too was aware of the recent rise in suicide rates in the black community (with men and teens).

Tina revealed that in the past, she has been met with outright discontent at the mention of suicide. She realizes the importance of the discussion since she has contemplated suicide in the past. Tina admitted that she was baffled by the community's response to the phenomenon and hadn't realized the existing animosity associated with the subject:

> I can't say that…and what I consider friends, I count on one hand. I can't say that they would get a funny look on their face. They would have a heart for the topic as well as myself. They wouldn't be like, "Oh, that's crazy, don't talk about that to me blah-blah-blah." Some people they don't want to hear about stuff like that. Personally, I think that they would think of it like I do. It's a serious topic and if

> anyone needed to talk about this particular topic that they would and they would listen. I don't think that they would like and they might say 'eww…'

Similar to Tina's experiences, Cheryl spoke of a time in which the mere mention of a suicidal incident evoked a response from her that could easily be interpreted as harsh. Cheryl stated:

> The only time that I mentioned it, to be very frank, is that when someone with another friend or another family member has committed suicide then they talk about it. They mention it briefly and they mention and say, "By the way, did you know that…" —if somebody died in my family, a friend, a next-door neighbor's son committed suicide a few months ago and they'll say, "Did you know that Maumee's son killed himself? He hung himself when his girlfriend left him" or something. And I'll say, "That's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that." And you just move on. You make the comment, you let the person know what happened, you commiserate and you express sympathy and then you change the subject. And that's it.

Although not as surprised as Tina on the matter, Cheryl did find herself a little disappointed at lack of empathy.

According to Barnes (2006), author of the article "The Aftermath of Suicide Among African Americans," one of the primary difficulties associated with studying suicide among African Americans is the prevalence of denial. By means of semi-structured interviews, he examined the impact that suicide has on African American suicide survivors. Barnes discovered that many African Americans fail to believe that suicide is a significant issue in their community. With very little support from within, community denial complicates the healing process of African American suicide survivors. What we see occurring here appears to be a lack of empathy towards suicide within the African American community. The author urges other researchers to explore this or similar issues in an attempt to produce more expansive results (Barnes 2006).

It appears that black women's perspectives on suicide closely mirror those of the black community. Black women's commitments to family and community through the use of social networks appear to play an important role in shaping their perceptions on the phenomenon. It appears that both notions of faith and commitment to family and community are two factors that generate perceptions that discourage suicidal behavior.

CHAPTER VII

ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE: PERCEPTIONS OF STRENGTH AND SUFFERING AND ITS RELATION TO THE SUICIDE PARADOX

"Because that's where my strength comes from. My strength comes from my trials that are behind me that gives me strength to face those that are before me. So life teaches you those things. If you don't buckle under, if you don't buckle under and Jerry Butler I think it was Jerry Butler when I was a teenager come up with the "only the strong survive." Only the strong survive..." (Alisha)

Understanding black women's perceptions of why their suicide rates have remained consistently low is critical to understanding how black women fare in a world where they are just as suicide prone as white males. Underlying beliefs about the phenomenon provide insight into how thought processes can often materialize, thereby affecting the act or, in this case, failure to act. To expose black women's perceptions on the matter, participants were asked to discuss what they personally believe contributes to black women's low suicide rates. As a result, two additional themes emerged: (1) sense of long suffering, and (2) declaration of strength.

PERCEPTIONS OF STRENGTH

"Maybe, well,—I mean, Ms. Kamesha—I've been through a lot, so if I was going to commit suicide, I would have been dead a long time ago. And it's… just life itself make you want to commit suicide. So I guess like not having a job or the kids just stressing me out or they're not doing what needs to be done. So, you know…It's just what life takes us through and we have to be stronger." (Justine)

Sense of Long Suffering

The accounts of study participants displayed considerable perceptions of a "sense long suffering." Black women have historically overcome extreme hardships and

continue to do so. The literature has demonstrated that these dilemmas are prevalent in virtually every arena of their lives (Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities 2007; Collins 2004; Feagin and St.Jean 1998; Sands 2001; Sharpio 2004; Shorter-Gooden 2004; Staples 1973). What has also been established is that these same predicaments appear to be taking a toll on the physical and psychological health of these women (Adams and Simmons 1987; Bhugra and Ayonrinde 2001b; Moorer 2006; Nelson 2006; Satcher 1999). However, the narratives of black women in this study have illuminated an area heavily neglected. Although black women are suffering disproportionately from an assortment of social ills, it appears that their experiences gained from historical and present-day oppression are taking on the role of a safeguard in the occurrence of suicide ideation. A significant finding in this study was that every single participant measured the magnitude of their present day struggles within a historical context, thereby lessening the psychological impact of the crisis at hand. Thus, the subthemes that emerged under the notion of "a sense of long suffering" were the "bottom of the barrel" and "drawing from our pasts."

Bottom of the Barrel. In The Psychology of Black Women: Studying Women's Lives in Context, the author states, "No other group has been victimized by hegemonic domination and located within the hierarchical power structure as black women have in America society" (Thomas 2004, p. 286). Because of the severity of black women's oppression, they offer a one-of-a-kind perspective unfamiliar to any other group, including black men, white women, and all other non-black women (Thomas 2004). The complex lives of black women become even more apparent in their discussions

when defining themselves as "long suffering." Narratives revealed that black women are very much aware of their racialized gendered stance in US society (Shorter-Gooden 2004). Not only are they aware of their lower social position, but they consider themselves to be at the bottom (Mutua 1998-1999). In relation to low suicide rates among black women, Katherine bluntly declared that black women's social position on the hierarchy ultimately prepares them for whatever challenges life might bring. Katherine stated:

> …the black women that I know are definitely brought up that suicide is definitely not an option. We came from poverty and stuff like that anyway, so we came from the lowest, you can't go too much lower when you come from that. You know what I'm saying? I think that have a lot to do with it.

Tasha also compared black women to what appears to be relative reference to the hierarchical alignment of other racial groups or genders in the US. Similar to Katherine, rather than being discouraged about her stance, she instead commented that these experiences have made her stronger:

> Gosh…well, I guess from my own life, and the things that I have gone through as a child, it was difficult but I think that God used those experiences to strengthen me because I have been through a lot as a child growing up, and so I know that things are not that bad, like I have been down there and God willing I would never go down there again or even lower but I did build some strength from that and realizing that you know things are not that bad. And I kind of wonder if that might be a part of it and looking at like this scale, I see kind of a social and financial scale, I do not want to necessarily think that black women are on the bottom, but I think we have a lot of issues that we have to face, one by being a women and then by being black. We have a lot of things we have to struggle again…But I think the experience I have had strengthened me. You start out fighting in the sense, not necessarily physically fighting but you have to struggle just to survive…

Cheryl's discussion of suicide and the social position of black women brought forth an interesting concept:

> I think there's a greater pressure on white people, both white men and white women…there are lower expectations for black persons and I think that in a way, it's harmful because when people expect less of us, we don't perform it to a higher but at the same token, when you have lesser expectations, you have breathing room…I think that is grounds or that leaves room for them to possibly consider suicide more so than blacks, than African-Americans.

She maintained that lower societal expectations yield less pressure. Indirectly, Cheryl was also hinting to an existing hierarchy in the sense that society anticipates that whites will prosper but not so much for blacks. In this instance, whites are considered to be the measuring device in Cheryl's example, which fits directly into notions of the black/white paradigm (Feagin 2001).

Sociologist Joe Feagin (2000) claims that the exploitation of blacks was institutionalized and lasted for at least four centuries. Whites have dominated other non-European groups from a previously established and highly imbedded system of anti-black racism. The hierarchy consisted of whites on top and blacks on bottom, and that was the measuring stick. This setup has served as the basis for all minority experiences, even more so than a black/white paradigm (Feagin 2001).

Drawing from Our Pasts. Drawing from the past as a means of living out the present is referred to as collective memory (Nora 1989). Each account presented exemplifies how the participants' individual identities are influenced by collective memory. Nora argues that objects such as pictures, stories, and living and passed on relatives serve as a channel to chronicle past experiences to those of the present.

Drawing from the past played an essential role in the way that the participants perceived the notion of suicide. These powerful narratives were in direct response to the question, "Why are black women's suicide rates significantly lower than the rest?" For

example, Cheryl, who is between the age of 43-54, drew on an example that happened over three centuries ago. Her account of the middle passage and slavery was presented within the framework that if black women could survive these grueling circumstances, then she could classify them as "survivors":

> …I think the reason why it's because black women, in my opinion, are survivors. We have survived the middle passage. We have survived slavery. We have survived—what's the word with that? When I say slavery, the last 300 years...the master can come in and rape us and impregnate us and we've had to suck it up and I go back to that word and that just means you have to just tough it out and you have to…it's called tough luck. You just have to survive it so even if you have to endure daily rapes and you have to endure your children being taken from you and being sold to another plantation, you got to, what you lived for….our ancestors had to live for the children they did have so I think…I'm getting spiritual and then maybe this is crazy but I think that that spirit that lives on in us. I really think that essence lives within us and that is why we'll continue to endure because of our background and because of what we've gone through, coming from the mother country, coming from the Ivory Coast or West Africa or wherever we have, wherever we happen to come from.

Cheryl shared experiences of how racial and gendered oppression have contributed to the sense of strength that black women embody. They consider themselves to be survivors rather than incompetent, as deceitful media images suggest (Collins 2004; Deck 2000; Gray-White 1999). Cheryl provides insight into how black women perceived these hardships. There appears to be a segment of black women's lives that external circumstances cannot alter. Therefore, whether its rape, the loss of a family member, or whatever it may be, their sense of collective memory and sense of endurance has shaped their perceptions of themselves and what they can cope with. Ava, drew from the experiences that took place during the Civil Rights Movement:

> I think the whole Civil Rights Movement….I think that their ability to basically go through the you know the tortures, the beatings, the abductions, you know, the assaults by police, I think what it has done is you know we watch videos, we've

> seen the stories and we say, 'Well, if they can do that, then surely I can just tolerate this'….And I think it would one way or another be sensitized as to trauma, to unfairness and we feel it that we're almost expected to tolerate it.

Although Ava referenced a more recent event, she too used the historical oppression of African Americans as a gauge of her capability to handle adversities. Similarly, Hilldreth, who is between the age of 26-32 and is the youngest of the four, and Delilah, who is between the age of 55-68, both appeared to be very well aware of the historical stance of black women in the United States. Neither referenced a particular event, but instead the women were aware of the oppressive history that black women have faced. Hilldreth and Delilah both made use of similar terminology to express their points of black women's responses to long-term oppression. Hilldreth labeled this response "accustomed to getting the short end of the stick," and Delilah remarked that black women get to "a place where it (long-term exposure to controversies) hardens us." Both illustrate black women's perspectives to coping with life's difficulties. In their examples, they said:

> Because as black women, we have become accustomed to being oppressed. We were oppressed for a very, very long time so we know how to handle stress. We know how to handle things that come our way that may not be who we want or any kind of hurt and pain or if we lose our jobs or if someone hurts us in any way, we know how to handle that because we have been accustomed to getting the short end of the stick for so many years. (Hilldreth)

> I think it is because we as black women face controversies early in our lives and probably throughout our lives. And sometimes when something happened to another race, it is probably more devastating I think for them than it would be for us because we often face a controversy or controversies. We face a lot of things and so we're able…we learn to cope with things that perhaps bring us displeasure you know at an early age. So I think that we just…we are more able with that because we're accustomed to it. I guess you might say we get to a place that it hardens us, and we were just not…we're used to it; I guess that's what I would say. (Delilah)

As a result, these women recognized that historical and modern-day oppressive conditions have aided them in developing philosophies that guide the strategies that black women use to navigate through difficulty situations (Brown and Anderson 1978; Foster 1973). The experiences they drew from are ingrained in their consciousness, which makes a significant difference. The amount of time passed since these disastrous events appears irrelevant.

We can't miss what we never had. Women's discussions of their hardened pasts demonstrated an additional way in which notions of long suffering ward off thoughts of suicidal behavior. The reoccurring theme of "we can't miss what we never had" not only speaks to women's detection of historical struggles, but it also works by pressing the women to endure and cope with stressful events at hand. Several women mentioned that low suicide rates could be related to long-term exposure to lack. On the topic of lack of money, Karen stated:

> Well, to me black women have always had a level of stress to deal with that white women, black men or white men have to anticipate, and I think because of all the pressures and stuff that has been put on them to like a lot of them be single parents or to be head of household and stuff…A lot of them saw no option of leaving the family. Suicide means that you would leave these people behind and stuff. And I think it would just not an option to them to do that. We can deal like all of the stuff that's going on in the world, you know, with the bailouts and money problems and stuff. Well, if you never had a lot of money, those problems really don't affect you as much, you know, because you're not really going to lose anything because you never had it. What you don't have, you can't lose.

Using Karen's logic, if one were to fall from a ladder two feet from the ground, he or she would probably be much less likely to sustain injury than if a person were to fall 20 feet from the ground; in other words, the longer the fall, the more severe the psychological

and physical impact of the event will be. Connections between racial groups, existing social differences, and suicide rates are not an entirely new phenomenon (Prudhomme 1938). However, what Prudhomme neglects to discuss is the role of collective memory due to the centuries of discrimination that have plagued African Americans. The narratives of the women illustrate that they are very much aware of this and they appear to strategically apply identifiable tactics when necessary.

In Tina's example, her mention of black's innate sense of struggle again ties back to the idea of the sense of long suffering. Tina provided us with a relative breakdown of losing versus not possessing in the first place. Both Karen and Tina applied the word *never* in their examples, thereby again illustrating that they were not just referring to contemporary issues:

> We are the people, black. I am of black descent, African American descent. We come in with a struggle. I mean, we're pretty much born or the majority of us are born into this cycle and the struggle. So when we're faced with adversity, I think it's a part of our nature as well as our DNA, just a part of us to fight back a little longer, a little harder…we don't have it. You can't miss anything you've never had. The majority of us haven't had that kind of life. So, when we don't get it, it's not a big deal but to have had it and lost it, that's a whole different ballgame.

Finally, Tasha provided a magnificent example as to how viewing life in these terms serves as a benefit in avoiding suicidal behavior. Tasha stated:

> …Things have been worse in my life in the past and as far as me compared to other people. There are many people who have a lot more than I do as far as finances, good shape, whatever it is, not a big…there are people that are better off than I am and there are people that are worse off than I am and just realizing, okay, I may not have size 9 body but I do not have a size 22 either. I may not have a job…a high power job but I have a job that allows me to spend time with my family. So just being able to not just look at the negatives in life but being able to appreciate the blessings, so I guess in a way, all of those.

Tasha appeared to use experiences of family and friends as a lens for viewing her own hardships. When asked if there was a perspective that she always tried to keep in mind when dealing with troubling events, she responded, "This too shall pass." This type of mentality was common among the women. It was their way of giving sight to the "silver lining" often misunderstood by others. Thus, be it recognizing their social positions, drawing from their pasts, or not succumbing to lack, black women's narratives expose exactly how the sense of long suffering affects their perceptions of the suicide paradox.

DECLARATION OF STRENGTH

Pathological portrayals of black women in the literature pay particular attention to the negative mental health effects caused by issues such as substance abuse, dysfunctional family circumstances, and single-parenthood issues (Jones 2004). However, accounts of the participants illuminated an entirely different perspective on the matter. In response to the question of why black women's suicide rates remain consistently low, several attributed this phenomenon to black women's "declaration of strength." Declaration of strength was described by the women as the unprecedented strength possessed by black women and unmatched by others. The subthemes that emerged during these discussions were the "unyielding black woman" and the "flowerbed-of-ease" kind of woman.

The Unyielding Black Woman

In short, almost half of the women credited the unique strength of black women as a cause for low suicide rates. This was an entirely unique finding. Although connections between the sense of long suffering and declaration of strength can clearly

be seen, discussions of strength resulted in a significant amount of variance that is well-deserving of a discussion in its own right.

One of the advantages to conducting face-to-face interviews is that body language and other paralinguistic cues can aid in interpreting data (*Maekawa* 2004). According to Maekawa, one's mental attitude or intention is often conveyed during speech. This was very much the case when discussions of black women and strength emerged in the interviews. This topic evoked amplified voices, at times standing up, and even intense statements almost to the point of tears. These were by no means negative emotions, but instead they were prideful and affirmative. It also became apparent that black women hold other black women to these same expectations. For instance, Tina proclaimed:

> …We're just not single parents…we go in thinking, he might not be here forever, I got to do this. I've heard in several movies, 'black women don't do what they want to do, they do what they need to do'. So, I think we've been raised with that type of mentality. So, whether it comes from family, friends, life experience or whatever, we're just able to bounce back. I mean, African American women carry it compared to men…In our community, we don't have a screw driver, grab a butter knife, we improvise. So, we look at other avenues to handle things, to take care of things, to get the job done.

Tina was very adamant about this point. She was prideful about the black women's ability to bounce back. She associated black women's strength and their capacity to get creative in their efforts to simplify things to low incidents of suicide. Although Tina did contemplate suicide during a difficult time of her life, she later expressed that absolutely nothing could cause her to consider it now.

Justine, a Hurricane Katrina evacuee, also spoke confidently about black women's ability to persevere through difficult times. She commented:

> …Even though it gets tough, but we're not going to take our life. We'd take somebody else's life, but…Not our own. It just comes back to just having that strong perseverance…Just what we already know, what we already been through, you know, as a black woman—we know how to survive. We know how to make bread and butter, at the same time, run a household and deal with every other situation that's coming into play.

Similar to Tina's point, Justine also illustrated that black women are well equipped with what it takes to survive, and again, their ability to be innovative with the resources they have has confirmed this. In the same way, Alisha confidently boasted that black women are the *strong ones*:

> Number one [chuckles], we have been…it, it is a…let me see, what do I want to call that? It is a subject or a topic or a course, let's say a course, it is a course that black females are taught early in life, that regardless to who you may marry, the man, that you are always the stronger one. Black women are always the stronger ones…

This is a particularly remarkable statement considering the fact that Alisha survived an abusive relationship and now has full custody over her grandson. Following this statement, she went on to discuss her beliefs on suicide by pronouncing:

> It's a coward's way out….It's the coward's way out. When we ask, when I ask for more strength, when I ask even in my prayers, when I pray and ask for more strength, I'm asking for more trials, I'm asking for more tribulations, I'm asking that you take me and bend me down and beat me up, I'm…I'm asking for those things. And still through it all, I'm still…I'm still going to stand.

Alisha's notion of suicide as a cowardly act indirectly affirms participant's beliefs regarding an existing dichotomy of the strong versus the weak. Despite typical associations between oppressive conditions and mental health (Bhugra and Ayonrinde 2001b), suicide appears to be the exception.

Myths of the black superwoman are apparent throughout social science literature. Portrayals of black women as unshakable, overbearing, and masculine can have

misleading effects on the way black women perceive themselves. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) argue that black women are oftentimes flattered by their reputations of strength and offended at thoughts of being considered overbearing and masculine. Despite the labels' accuracy, it becomes difficult to argue the fact that black women are accountable for considerable responsibilities. Figure 2 provides a visual illustration of black women's perspectives of their low rates of suicide.

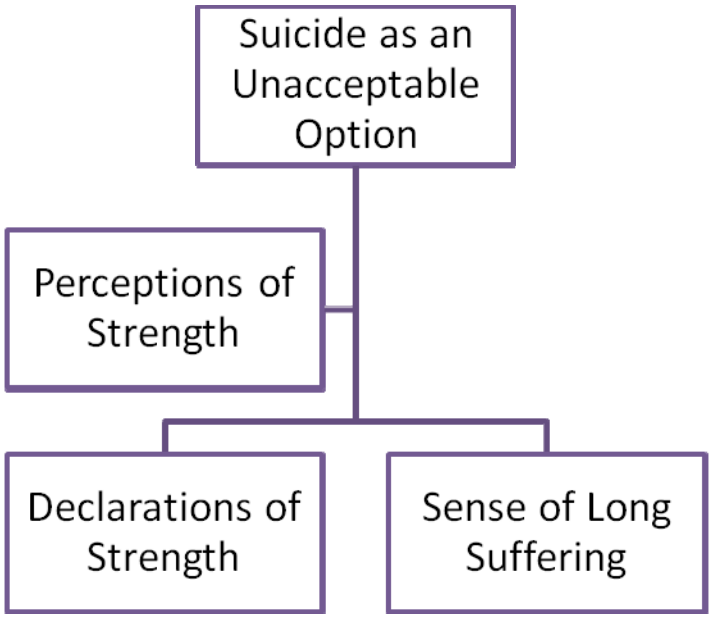

FIGURE 2. Visual Illustration of Themes Associated with Black Women's Low Suicide Rates.

What is proposed here is that black women's perceptions of strength are direct consequences of their perceived declarations of strength and their senses of long suffering. A combination of this paradigm results in black women identifying suicide as

an unacceptable option. Thus, the unique experiences of black women seem to impact the way they see themselves in relation to suicide. They have come to define themselves as resilient survivors with a sense of purpose, an identity that suicide defies. Throwing in the towel is not an option because as one participant put it, "Only the strong survive."

Flowerbed-of-Ease Kind of Woman

With this being said, there were instances in which the discussions of weakness expanded to black women. In response to the question, "What types of things would have to occur to bring you to the point where you would consider suicide?" Alisha stated:

> [Sighs] Gee, you know, I don't know if I can answer that because I don't know the answer to…the only thing that, that I guess comes to mind with that question is the fact that whomever it is having been through nothing, she's…she's must, she has to have a life that we called a flowerbed of ease, because if you have life and you had a flowerbed of ease then…then you probably could not ah go through the storm but if you've…all my life, I've gone through storms, so it's and it's how, kind of like the eagle you know when he goes through the storm, you know, when he…when he sees the storm coming, how he reacts to the storm. That's the way African American females act in storms. You know, it's not whether I can get over the storm or under the storm, sometime we have to go straight through it. And when we know we have to go through those things, what we do is we, we compose ourselves, get all our strength and pull ourselves together and I mean we go head on into the storm. Because we know we've already went through another one, we've already got have them behind us, so if I have this storm before me, I know I've already come over. There is nothing that can…that can come into my life that I can't deal with because I've already dealt with these other things all the way back here. So if a person or African American female is contemplating suicide, that means she's never been through a storm, she's never had to go through it.

Alisha's comment shows that perceptions of suicidal behavior as an association with weakness are not restricted to just the white male. In her example, she refers to a weak black woman as a "flowerbed-of-ease" kind of women. Her description of this type of

woman is a woman with little experience in dealing with life's hardships. Alisa later went on to associate traits of the flowerbed-of-ease kind of "black" woman with those of whiteness. Thus, both the weakness and whiteness are perceived to play a role in the higher likelihood of suicide probability.

Similar to Alisha point, Justine initially started out by commenting about perceived notions of black women's strength in relation to suicide. She declared that *if* a black woman were to partake in suicidal behavior, it would have to be due to some extenuating circumstances. However, after some deliberation, she concluded by declaring that there was nothing that came to mind that could make a black person commit suicide unless she was weak to begin with. Justine, a 34 to 42-year-old, single mother and grandmother, commented:

> If a black woman commits suicide, it has to be really something really traumatic to make them commit suicide, you know—getting put out of her house… Even that, you know… even that may not even make her commit suicide, but it… it's just have to…she would have to really be a weak individual, you know? Just don't have no kind of hope, no kind of willpower, no kind of… inside, she's not going to…she's not God-fearing or something like that. That's the only way I can feel black women committing suicide, and she just giving up on life because she has nothing else she can do and she's just like, "Well, the Lord is not going to help me," or, "I have no one to help me," or…Even if she may just have handouts then, she may just be so prideful, she don't even want them, you know? Because we as individual, we can do that, but I have…you know, it's very rare for us to just commit suicide. It just has to be something very traumatic…I think that the only way black people commit suicide is they're overdosing… They have to have some kind of drug or, again, they're in jail and then they don't want to be there.

Therefore, the act of suicide becomes less about black women's behaviors and more about the strength of the individual to rise above her circumstances. Thus, Justine's

equation of black women with strength implies that suicide is simply not an option, and even in the rare case that it does occur, it is likely accidental.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEAK

"Yeah, because we're stronger. We are the stronger of all, of all of the races, be it black or white or Hispanic, male or female genders, the African American female." (Alisha)

One winter afternoon I sat down to have a conversation with a friend. A few of the issues that we discussed were life, politics, and work. During our discussions of work, my friend, an African American man, told a story about a young coworker who he was concerned about. A white male between the ages 25 and 30 years old confided in my friend that he had been having suicidal thoughts. My friend, a concerned coworker, probed the young man for information. "Hey man, what's got you down?" My friend then told me that the man revealed that he had been having a rough weekend.

He was currently living in his parents' basement, and he was annoyed with the fact that his father would not give him any privacy. Whenever he wanted to have friends over, his father would always come down into the basement to monitor their behavior. My friend's coworker responded, "I just don't know how much more of this I can take. I bet my dad will miss me when I'm gone." Then, he boldly stated, "I should end it all right now!" As anyone would in this type of situation, my friend tried to offer words of wisdom and encouragement. Although they were only new acquaintances, he didn't want to see this individual harm himself. My uncle went back to work the next day, but this gentlemen was no longer on his shift. To this day my uncle is not sure what happened to him, and he even still wonders about him from time to time. My friend later

informed me that what was most interesting about this situation was that this white male was contemplating suicide over what he considered to be such an insignificant event. He stated, “White men don’t understand what it’s like to struggle, especially like blacks do. They’re weak.”

Black women’s narratives garnered similar perceptions. Their stories painted pictures of weak-willed men with very little capacity for struggle. What was even more intriguing about this finding was that black women defined themselves and their ability to handle stressful events in complete opposition to white males. Figure 3 shows a visual demonstration of black women’s perceptions regarding the dichotomy of strength and weakness in relation to suicide. As one can see, perceptions of suicide were centered on a dichotomy of strength. Statistically, black women and white men represent the two extremes when it comes to actual incidents of suicide. This can be seen with 2004 age-adjusted rates of 19.8 for white men and 1.8 for black women.

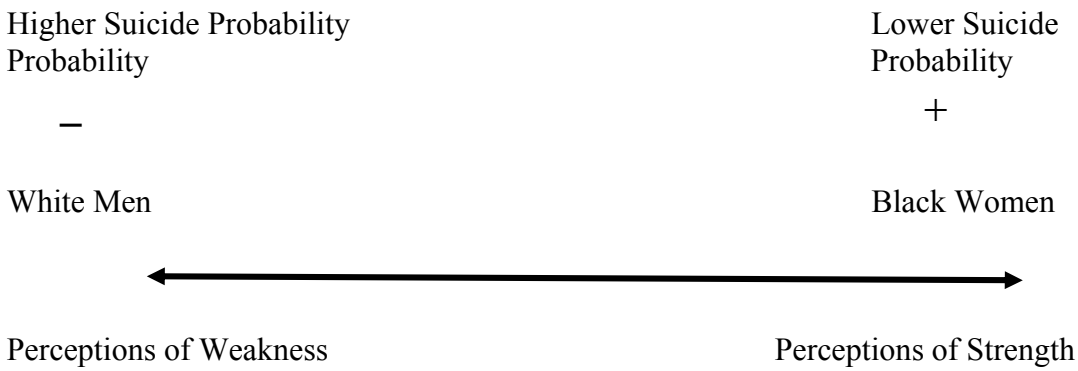

FIGURE 3. Black Women's Perceptions of Suicide Probability Among White Men and Black Women.

Figure 3 shows us that black women's narratives associated those with higher probabilities of suicide with perceived weakness. The women unmistakably attributed strength in a positive context and weakness in a negative one. With over 90% of all suicide deaths occurring among white males (Crosby and Molock 2006), it's no surprise that over 85% of the women envisioned white males in their presumptions of weakness.

The Weak White Man

Perceptions of weakness emerged during discussions of black−white rate disparities. In response to the question, "Why do you perceive white men's rates to be significantly higher than black women?" Bridgett, a single woman between the age of 26-33, shared a childhood memory of a white male committing suicide; she stated:

> I remember growing up probably, it was probably my aunt or someone saying it, we were watching some kind of movie and this white guy was standing, he was obviously a big-time executive or something of that nature, he was standing outside of his window, the stocks crashed and they show him jumping out. And I remember my aunt saying, see that's what white men do, you know. Like they…they're, they would commit suicide because they're not used to living a life that is less than what they expected or felt like they should have in their life and so they would commit suicide.

Although Bridgett was only a child at that time, she revealed that she never forgot that incident. Narratives of the women revealed that they closely attribute white male's historical lack of suffrage as a major role in their higher probabilities of suicide. Both Deliah's and Sandy's points articulated this point nicely:

> Geez…Well, I think if…by the same token, if they are accustomed to having their way or getting what they need, providing for their families, and they are looked at as I can do anything because there are…more opportunities are available in most cases. And when this…when they cannot provide, then they feel like a failure, and they feel like I…I can't do what it is that I need to do for my family. I think that's why they…they can't cope. (Delilah)

Delilah's remark about white males being accustomed to having their way is indicative of notions of white privilege circulated around in social science literature. Delilah said that this sense of privilege undermines white men's ability to cope with difficult situations. White privilege materialized during the periods of legal slavery and legal segregation. In the same course, the notions of privilege were embedded into America's most prominent institutions. Feagin (2001) argues that this unstable period in our history bred white racist ideologies and attitudes that were created to maintain and rationalize systems of white privilege.

> Well, I think in a lot of those instances uhm a lot of white men uhm just white families in general, they come from a pretty wealthy homes, they have pretty wealthy parents and stuff like that. And I think that when they don't uhm, basically live life or become as successful as their parents, I think that there's a lot of pressure on them and they tend to, to just kind of give up on life unfortunately, and you know, drugs, alcohol, things like that, I'm sure plays a big part as well. **(Sandy)**

Sandy's presumptions that white men come from affluent backgrounds also implied that she believes that white men are socially and economically privileged. She later mentioned that from her perspective, white men are just unable to cope, and suffrages give rise to strength.

Born into the Privilege of the Silver Spoon

Race-based discrimination, prejudice, and oppression are supposedly a thing of the past. Everyone has equal opportunity and access to the "American Dream." Therefore, despite America's brutal history, we have finally achieved a utopia, a "colorblind" society. Then why are notions of a colorblind society a part of everyday discourse? Many scholars claim that race isn't a thing of the past. They claim that the

myth of a colorblind society continues to complicate things. The issue of race seems to be as hypocritical as many other characteristics of US society. We are race neutral in terms of theory, but we are racialized in practice.

Before one can be said to have racial characteristics, we must first be able to identify those characteristics, thus we are "racing." Racing occurs from the top down, and it involves assigning and denying groups racial identity. Powell (1997) also claims that the role the government and the white majority have played in creating and maintaining racialized space (crime, welfare dependency, economic deprivation, joblessness, etc.) is also used as a tool to preserve white privilege (Powell 1997). Whites' attempts to preserve white space often yield unjust advantages. Bridgett imparted a contemporary example of how she perceives the psychological consequences of white privilege play out in the lives of whites in a tragic situation:

> Uhm, and even if I think about like the movie, think it was Oz even in the movie Titanic, think there were some people that had committed suicide and I remember we were just you know a couple of family members had kind of talked about that you know we're just like you know that's just because they're used to having in a sense white privilege so when you feel like you've lost that, kind of like they don't know what to do now because they're so used to living life here at this standard so if something happens to fall down below that standard is maybe a major shock.

Bridgett argued that the privileged lives of white men do very little to equip them with how to handle failure or lack. We see this again in Hilldreth's point; she expressed that white men's elevated social status affords them little tolerance for variation in their lives. Hilldreth believes that white men would rather be dead than poor, whereas blacks would rather be poor than dead, an interesting paradigm comparison.

> Because white men are so accustomed to being elevated to the point of being their own god that if…and they're so used of having that when they don't have, they don't know how to deal with it because they would rather be dead than be poor or they would rather be dead than be embarrassed in front of their peers so we just don't. We just handle it differently.

White privilege can have damaging effects on non-privilege holders. According to Powell's (2000) article "Whites will be Whites," whites assert their innocence and demonize others by engaging in discourse that deems the "other" as undeserving. He suggests that privilege on a structural level seeks to normalize or maintain the system (Powell 2000). Ceva provided a very thorough explanation of her perception on the privileged background of whites:

> Blacks are going to struggle; blacks are just to trying to climb on the economic and social statuses that whites have never been in. So, therefore, when things hit them or when things hit blacks, or when something such as a depression is…our recession is going on, we don't feel like, "Oh we're going to die." Or "Oh, our livelihood has gone away." We just feel that this is another tough time, we'll make it through.
>
> But for the white people, they don't live with that same knowledge or they don't live with that same awareness of second conscience like we do. So therefore when a recession happens or when a depression happens, they're feelings are hurt, they don't think they're not going to live the same life that they lived. They spend a lot of their life on credits. So when the credit goes down and therefore their livelihood is apparently has.

Ceva's discussion again ties back to black women's perception of strength and weakness related to suicide. Ceva revealed that she believes that blacks are used to the disappointment that comes along with not acquiring what they set out to achieve; however, she argued that whites spend their life on "credit," so the loss of this credit (that Ceva equates with privilege) threatens their livelihood.

Can't Take the Heat

"And for white men, a lot of them are…there are a lot stresses put on them to be the best at everything. They have to be the best. If they are not the best then there are issues. They can even take it as black whites. They are not supposed to be less than us. And I don't think they have the tools to take…to survive it." (Kyndall)

We have established the fact that black women's narratives assume that white men's weaknesses are associated with long-term exposure to unwarranted privilege; however, black women also perceived white men's weaknesses to be associated with the fact that they buckle under pressure. Existing similarities between the "privilege of the silver spoon" and "can't take the heat" provide an interesting contrast. When the women spoke of notions of white privilege, they were referring to the social environment from historical and modern-day examples, whereas in their discussions of not being able to take the heat, they referred to white men's reactions to the conditions. Nonetheless, perceptions of weakness were incorporated in both, with a presumed outcome of suicide as a result.

Justine, is no stranger to life's hardships. Justine revealed that her recent move to Texas following Hurricane Katrina has been a stress within itself. Besides the stress of leaving behind many of her established networks, she has found that Texas has a too many rules; to say the least, it is a racist environment. She found a job almost immediately upon arrival, but her and her children have struggled with bouts of prejudice and discrimination since the relocation. When asked to describe her position on suicide disparities of white men, she stated:

> White men, they…that's what they do. That's exactly, you know… that's…when you look at these numbers, they take their life and nothing don't have to be going on; they can have the best of everything and they'd still take their life. So

> we're…the question is why are they taking their life. Because if you look at the situation, when you're looking at the news and they're committing suicide, and you're looking at the news and they're telling you, oh, so and so had this and had that, what's going on in his life? You know, what's playing that big part? Why are they committing it, suicide? You know what I'm saying? Because they have both… the best of both worlds. They have the money and some of them have the education and you… just looking at them, they're taking pills or they're taking overdoses with needles or they're hanging themselves.

Justine has come to terms with the fact that her struggles as a black woman have prepared her to survive whatever society throws her way. Her perceptions of white males' inability to survive even the slightest amount of pressure were a mockery, to say the least. Tina, a 34 to 42-year-old single woman who has reached middle class status through her hard work and education, also implied that white men's inability to cope is related to their lack of longstanding struggle. Similar to Justine, Tina discussed these notions as if they are outlandish; she commented:

> Whereas, the Caucasian community for whatever reason, their upbringing and their lifestyle is less stressful than the African American community. So, when something hits them that is on the opposite end of the spectrum, they don't know that to do because that's not something that is consistent in their life. They [Whites] were taught about the finances and to save and to do these things in their community as well as other races other than the black community, but it's like when they lose that, it's just over…

Although Tina contemplated suicide at one time in her life, she argued that she would have never followed through on the thoughts. She finds the act itself absurd. Tasha, a married 34 to 42-year-old graduate student in Texas, also attributed white men's lack of experience with oppression as an underlying cause for their weakness. Tasha boldly asserted:

> I do not mean to be a prejudice but I think, perhaps, the white men, they kind of have, in general, have a lot of things that are working for them just by virtue of the fact that they are white and they are males, and so maybe they have more

> advantages, maybe have this outlook on life or maybe some people, and I hate to do generalization but that some people have had an easier road to hoe, as my grandmother would say, and so maybe when they get to a rocky part in the road, they do not know how to handle it, they do not know where to turn, so they perhaps haven't build that strength.

Tasha added that being white and male affords them opportunities that predispose them to an attitude of entitlement. Tasha was alluding to institutionalized practices that favor white men, and her point concurs with social science literature. For example, Feagin (2001) refers to Tasha's point as unjust enrichment. He defines unjust enrichment as circumstances that give rise to the obligation of restitution, that is, the receiving and retention of property, money, and benefits, which in justice and equity belong to one another. He argues that unjust enrichment dates back to before slavery and now is now embedded in every aspect of US society.

Kelly, a 34 to 42-year-old, divorced, single mother of four, deliberated on how difficult things have been for her, yet she still lacks understanding as to how white men can take their life. In sharing her views of white men's suicide rates, she too hypothesized that white men haven't been through enough:

> I believe black women deep down inside have a lot more faith and they really believe things are going to get better. They've been through things back in the past with slavery. So, they feel like if they could make it through that they've seen worse, and they can make it through anything. And as far as white men, I really don't know. I don't think that they've been through enough and they don't know how to take pressure. They don't know how to take any oppression because they've been given so much.

The perceptions that Justine, Tasha, Tina, and Kelly are suggesting regarding the suicidal behavior of white males is in complete contrast to perceptions of their own behavior. Narratives revealed that these women perceive themselves to be strong and

white men to be weak. They theorized that their upbringings and experiences with long-term suffrage play a critical role in historical and current-day suicide probability. In summary, Figure 4 provides a visual illustration of black women's perspectives of white males' suicide rates.

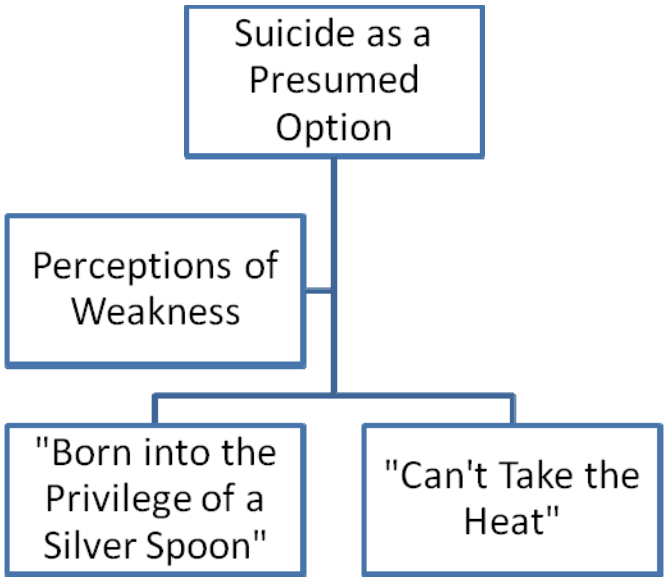

FIGURE 4. Visual Illustration of Themes Associated with Black Women's Perceptions of White Men's Rates of Suicide.

What is proposed here is that black women's perception of white males' weakness is a direct consequence of their perceived notions of white privilege coupled with an inability to cope with long-term exposure to stress. Again, we see here a combination of this paradigm that results in black women identifying suicide as the

presumed option for white males. Thus, black women seek to define themselves in opposition to their conceptions of the weak white man, thereby making suicide even less of an option, despite their circumstances. Some narratives did reveal that societal expectations of white men to be the best may add to the pressures of their daily lives; nonetheless, the women conveyed that these occurrences unrivaled those of the everyday black woman. As Kelly declared, "They don't know how to take any oppression because they've been given so much." This belief was confirmed by Kyndall, who stated, "I don't think they have the tools to take…to survive it."

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

With over 90% of suicide occurring among white males, it is this group that has been studied with reference to suicide. Relatively few researchers have studied other groups including African American women. The purpose of this study, then was to examine black women's perspectives of suicide. In doing so, my intent was to gain a better understanding of black women's narratives about the suicide paradox, to capture an intimate look into some of the stressors of black women's lives, and to begin to understand why, despite the stressors, the suicide rate of black women has been so low.

The majority of existing studies that examine suicide among black women do so by examining the relationships between variables. Often times this is done by utilizing existing data bases or survey-based research (Castle et al. 2004; Fernquist 2004; Garlow, Purselle and Heninger 2005; Neeleman, Wessely and Lewis 1998; Nisbet 1996; Walker, Lester and Joe 2006). This work provides insight into different aspects of the field, but primarily in the areas specific to risk or protective factors believed to affect the probability of black white suicide disparities. I chose to explore this area qualitatively, however, to see if additional knowledge of this phenomenon could be discovered using this approach.

A narrative based approach was the method of choice to gather black women's perceptions concerning of suicide. Advantages of narrative research are many (Delgado 1989). As a result, it is hoped that this study provides insight into areas in the lives of

black women that have been investigated only rarely, particularly in the context of suicide.

This research used the extended case method consisting of in-depth interviews guided by previous literature to collect the necessary data. Study participants were twenty two African American women. Initially the data was coded and analyzed using the research questions asked of the participants, and the chapters in this study are derived from the research questions posed to the respondents.

As stated in Chapter I, and at the most general level, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of stressors are faced by African American women relative to the suicide paradox.
2. What insight can African American women provide on the suicide paradox by way of their perceptions of black female and white male rate disparities?
3. What strategies are employed by African American women, either consciously or unconsciously, to elude suicide

These three research questions were addressed in Chapters V, VI, and VII and the remainder of the chapter will be organized according to the four analytical categories: Finally, this concluding chapter also will discuss recommendations for future research.

SUMMARIZING THE THEMES

Daily Stressors of Black Women

The first research statement sought to explore the different types of stressors that black women endure in their daily lives. The narratives indicated that black women perceive their lives to be significantly more stressful than their white counterparts. Specifically the study indicated that the participants clearly understood the intricate details of their stressors, while they had a difficult time finding solutions for handling the identified stressors. In other words, they were aware that they faced multiple stressors in their daily lives, yet they had no clearly defined solutions for effectively addressing the problem. The women often perceived these issues to be long term stressors with no immediate end in sight. Furthermore, they assumed that that they would endure these stressors for years to come.

The narratives also revealed that black women sense the existence of stressors in virtually all aspects of their lives. They deemed their stressors to be never-ending. They traced the origins of their stress to be within their own households as well originating from the larger society. Despite this, what was most intriguing was that the vast majority of the women assertively declared that they had the capability to withstand these challenging circumstances. By doing so they were fulfilling their responsibilities as black women.

A conclusion to be drawn here is that the black women's position concerning dealing with stressful events is one of self-defined resiliency (Brown and Anderson 1978; Collins 1996; Feagin and St.Jean 1998; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Stack

1974; West 1999). What is important here, then is not so much the stressors that black women endure, but rather their perceptions of the stress and how they define themselves relative to stressors. They have come to define themselves as resilient survivors with a sense of purpose which has the effect of insulating them from suicide. "Throwing in the towel" to them, is simply is not an option.

Insight into the Moment of Crisis

An additional discovery in this study was related to black women and suicidal ideations. Referred to in Chapter V as the moment of crisis, many of the black women interviewed did contemplate the act of suicide. This was a fairly unexpected finding. The researcher assumed that she might find a few women who had considered the act, but to find that almost one half of the participants had contemplated suicide was unexpected. Also, the women discussed in detail what deterred them from following through with the act.

Thoughts of suicide generally fell into two categories. Some thoughts occurred on a casual basis in which these participants perceived their thoughts to be fairly common given the circumstances. One woman in particular stated "everyone has suicidal thoughts at one time or another". These women appeared to have a clear understanding that their circumstances were fairly extreme, and assumed that challenges of this magnitude would most likely evoke suicidal thoughts in anyone under those conditions. Others considered their thoughts of suicide to be symbolic of an impending disaster. In one instance, a respondent struggled with her thoughts alone for as long as she could before sharing her thoughts with a co-worker who ultimately helped her to

seek help. What was concluded was that despite the stressors or underlying reasoning behind the thoughts, *all* black women (both suicidal and non-suicidal) perceived their lack of participation in suicide activity to be directly attributed to black women's efforts to survive despite challenging circumstances.

Black Women's Perceptions Regarding Existing Low Suicide Rates

The second research question of what insights African American women provide on the suicide paradox by way of their perceptions of suicide resulted in four themes. These themes played a significant role in why black women envision suicide as an unacceptable option. As mentioned, the factors were: (1) notions of religious or faith based beliefs; (2) use of family or/and social networks; (3) a sense of long suffering"; (4) "declarations of strength". These themes will be discussed in the order of the frequency of mentioned by the respondents.

Sense of long suffering. The first and most mentioned theme that black women perceive to play a major role in their low rates of suicide is a "sense of long suffering". Although some studies have credited cultural differences as a reason for the low rates of suicide among black women, they have not alluded to this theme. (Harris and Davis-Molock 2000; Kaslow et al. 2006; Kung, Liu and Juon 1998; Neeleman, Wessely and Lewis 1998; Stein, Levy and Glasberg 1974; Taylor-Gibbs 1997). Perceptions of a "sense of long suffering" in relation to the lack of suicide among black women has yet to be discussed in the current suicide literature.

Congruent with this theme, women perceived both historical and current struggles against racial and gendered oppression to be the primary factor in deterring

suicidal behavior among black women. Respondents were not only inspired by their own struggles but also, they found strength the stories of other African Americans. The narratives revealed that the women commonly used the trials and tribulations of others as a gauge for their own current situations. An example commonly proposed was slavery. For example, some would say, "if my ancestor's survived slavery, then I can certainly survive losing my job". There was a sense that giving up, which was often equated with suicide, was simply an unacceptable option for a black woman.

Declaration of strength. The second most mentioned theme that emerged from the narratives was the respondents' perceived notions of strength. This theme is not alluded to in the previous literature on reasons for the low suicide rate among black women. is also an additional finding not eluded to in any of the previous suicide literature. Building off their perceptions of African Americans having experience long-term suffering in the United States the women credited their survival to their strength and willingness to overcome any situation with which they are presented with. This philosophy of strength neutralizes thoughts of suicide The he women, then, defined the act of suicide as something a weak individual would do and they considered themselves as strong women.

Discussions of strength were far from arrogant or boastful, but rather, they were heroic. Narratives revealed that black women have come to the realization that surviving the struggles that they endure takes an almost superhuman effort. They took great pride in this. Therefore, the narratives revealed that the women placed a significant amount of emphasize on the person contemplating suicide the person rather than the act

of suicide itself. If a black woman attempted or committed suicide, then she too was defined as weak, and weak was not supposed to be the way that black women should be. Ultimately weakness opposed the way black women conceived themselves to be.

Notions of faith and family. As alluded to in the introductory chapter of the study, previous studies literature lead the researcher to believe that social networks and faith based/religious beliefs would be significant factors in decreasing the likelihood of suicidal behavior among black women. Indeed, both were relevant with social networks being mentioned slightly more frequently faith based beliefs. Social networks, which pertain to social integration, have been understood to be important since Durkheim's (1897-2006) pioneering work, and have been shown to be important in subsequent studies. (Alston and Anderson 1995; Durkheim 1897/2006; Fernquist 2004; Harris and Davis-Molock 2000; Kaslow et al. 2006; Taylor-Gibbs 1997).

Concerning studies directly on African Americans, St. Jean and Feagin (1998) speculated that the strength of the black family could play a role in the notably low suicide rates of black women. Additionally, Nisbet (1996) argued that the underlying social system of black females needed to be researched further to fully understand how familial and kinship ties safeguard against, the suicide of African American women.

How exactly, though, do black women's social networks lower the likelihood they will engage in suicidal behavior? Based on the narratives collected here, black women identify their connectedness with those within their networks to be indispensible.. There is a fundamental and unwavering sense of devotion by the women to their family and to their friends.. They frequently made statements such as, "I

couldn't kill myself because my family needs me" or "I have committed to helping them so leaving them is not an option". Therefore, a strong sense of connectedness to an obligation to the well-being of family and friends that becomes an essential factor in sustaining low rates of suicide among black women.

Equally important, black women's narratives also exposed the reciprocal effect of the role of others in suppressing suicide. What the women revealed was that the other members of their networks were equally devoted to them. Thus, they believe that others were no more likely to abandon them than they were to leave them. This made a significant difference because the women felt to be part of a mutually beneficial relationship.

Lastly, community perspectives emerged as important in black women's narratives regarding the role of social networks and suicide. It also became apparent that being a part of a community played a major role in their perspectives of suicide. Therefore, the group tended to disparage the act of suicide, then individuals within the group were likely to share these same views. Because notions of suicide are heavily frowned upon in the black community, narratives revealed that the women's thoughts closely mirrored what they perceived the community's opinions of suicide to be.

The fourth theme mentioned by the black women interviewed concerning suicide concerned faith based beliefs/religious beliefs. Previous suicide literature concluded that religion encourages social integration, thereby decreasing the likelihood of suicide (Durkheim 1897/2006; Neeleman, Wessely and Lewis 1998; Taylor-Gibbs 1997). The narratives here yield a similar finding. More specifically the women perceived the role

of religious beliefs to function in three ways relative to reducing rates of suicide among black women a few different ways in relegating suicide rates among black women. and these three ways can be described as religious upbringings, a sinful act, and seeking God's purpose for one's life. With reference to their religious upbringings, most of the women stated that many the religious principles that they lived by were instilled in them as young children. Therefore, many of the women saw these principles as essential to their very existence. Thus, it was no surprise that well over half of the women considered themselves to be active members of a church or religious group.

Concerning suicide as a sinful act, because suicide was defined as sinful by their religion, it was something to be avoided. Finally, the respondents tended to seek their life's purpose by invoking a higher power. In sum, then, initial thoughts of suicide were often discarded.

Black Women's Perceptions of the Suicide Rates in Relation to the High Rates of Suicide among White Males

This study's last finding to be discussed is with reference to black women's perceptions of white male's rates high rates of suicide in comparison to their own very low rates. Just as black women defined themselves as strong in relation to their position in society, they perceived white men to be weak. Using this dichotomy, black women characterized their long-term exposure to stressful conditions coupled with their notions of faith and family as motivations for their uncompromising strength. They attributed the lack of these same characteristics in white males as causal for their high rates of suicide. Participants cited white males inexperience with long term stress coupled with

their and unjustified privilege (i.e., white privilege) as related to their vulnerability to suicide. Similar to findings by Walker et. al. (2006), the women also perceived that white men were more likely believe that they had control over their own lives in comparison to blacks who overwhelmingly placed their faith in a higher power. They also claimed that the basis for this frame of mind could be traced back to historical and contemporary white privilege.

White men know nothing of elemental struggle, they believed, and this resulted in their caving in under high pressure.. The respondents, therefore, saw suicide as a not uncommon response to troubling times by white males, Additionally it was commonly stated that "white men don't even have to be going through anything to kill themselves" or "that's what white men do".

The primary conclusion that can be drawn here is that black women perceive struggle and strength to be associated with the black experience. In contrast, they perceive both lack of struggle and white privilege to breed weakness and suicidal tendencies. The narratives also revealed that black women perceive suicide as an act of whiteness and thereby of weakness. These perceptions were glaringly negative and black women used this as an opportunity to define and distance themselves away from the thought of suicide.

To conclude, the suicide paradox is an intriguing area of research. Although the women with whom I spoke had various levels of education and income and different life experiences, there was surprisingly homogeneity within their responses. This study has revealed that the black women's perceptions of themselves through both their historical

and contemporary struggles, their notions of faith and family, and their self-ascribed labels of strength serve as preventative mechanisms against their committing suicide. Along these same lines, black women have constructed their own meanings of suicide that connect suicide with weakness and to whiteness. that of weakness and thus whiteness. As a result, the act of suicide is intrinsically contrary to the individual definitions that they have developed of themselves. This finding could prove crucial in understanding the lack of suicide among the African American population more generally.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature by way of providing rich, detailed information into a relatively unstudied area.. As a result, I challenge researchers to continue on the path of providing more detailed data regarding black white suicide disparities. Qualitative approaches regarding this topic can be a way in which we truly can gain insight into the phenomenon.

I encourage researchers to further study a preliminary finding of this study concerning moments of crisis. These are points in time when black women had suicidal thoughts but decided against an attempt or the act itself. A substantial number of the women interviewed reported contemplating suicide but of the nine who did, only one attempt was reported. It would be interesting to study this phenomenon further with the hopes of gaining insight into these as yet unexplored occurrences.

Finally, this study as well as others have found that social networks appear to play a significant role in the of black women's perceptions of suicide. It would, then, be

particularly interesting to explore changes (if any) in suicide perceptions among African American women who have experienced disruptions in their social networks. Groups of interest, for example, would be incarcerated African American women as well as victims of Hurricane Katrina.

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APPENDIX A

TABLES

1980 Death Rates for Suicide by Race and Sex, Deaths per 100,000 resident populations (Center for Disease Control 2007)

Race	Sex	Age Adjusted Rates	Crude Rate
White	Male	20.9	19.9
	Female	6.1	5.9
Black	Male	11.4	10.3
	Female	2.4	2.2

1950 Death Rates for Suicide by Race and Sex, Deaths per 100,000 resident populations (Center for Disease Control 2007)

Race	Sex	Age Adjusted Rates	Crude Rate
White	Male	22.3	19.0
	Female	6.0	5.5
Black	Male	7.5	6.3
	Female	1.8	1.5

2007 Self-harm All Injury Causes Nonfatal Injuries and Rates per 100,000 United States (Center for Disease Control 2007)

Race	Sex	Number of Injuries	Population
White	Male	86,129	201,192,088
	Female	122,643	102,417,745
Black	Male	13,331	19,121,492
	Female	17, 464	20,097,466

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Background Information
   a. Where did you grow up?
   b. Who were the individuals that played a significant role in your upbringing?
   c. What individuals are you closest to in your life?
      i. Some of the ways those individuals dealt with stress
   d. Is there anything that you'd like to add about those that played a major role in your upbringing or the ways in which they dealt with stress?

II. Perspectives on suicide
   a. How would you define suicide?
   b. Have you ever considered suicide?
      i. If yes what brought you to that point?
      ii. If no, why not?
   c. What types of things would have to occur to bring you to the point that you'd consider suicide?
   d. Show statistics than ask from the perspective of a black woman, why do you believe this to be the case?
      i. In your opinion what are the top three reasons black women's suicide rates are so low?
   e. What do your friends and relatives say or think about suicide?
   f. What do you think the African America community would think about suicide?
   g. You talked about what would bring you to the point of suicide but, what do you believe places the everyday black woman at risk for suicide?
   h. Do you think there are difference s between what puts whites at risk and what puts blacks at risk for suicidal behavior?
   i. What do you believe are some of the things that prevent the majority of black women from partaking in suicidal behavior?
   j. Do you personally know a black woman that has either attempted or committed suicide?
   k. If yes, I will ask details on the suicide and how this affected the respondent

i. If no they don't know details, why do you believe behavior occurred?

l. Is there anything else related to suicide that you'd like to add that we haven't already talked about?

III. Stress

a. How do you define Stress?
   i. Is there a difference between being stressed and overwhelmed? If so what?
b. What brings you to the point of Saying "I am stressed out"?
c. What are the top three stressors that you currently face in your life and where does the majority of your stress come from?
   i. What are your top three stress relievers?
d. Where or from whom did you learn to handle stressful situations?
e. Can you please describe a typical day in your life?
   i. Is there anything about that description that acts as a source of stress in your life?_____
   ii. Is there anything else that stresses you out?
f. Individual Thoughts
   i. In general, are you satisfied with your life?
   ii. What are your individual goals?
   iii. How would you define "success in your life"? Have you been able to achieve this ideal?
   iv. What are you most passionate about?
   v. What are you most sad about?
   vi. What are you most angry about?
   vii. What makes you Happy?
   viii. What makes you Sad?
   ix. When it comes to stressful events in an individual's life, what do you think about the following statements:
      1. People allow certain stressful situations to happen
      2. Your life is only as stressful as you allow it be?
      3. You have control over your life
      4. What you are willing to "take" or "put up with" plays a major role in your stress level.
      5. If I am in a situation that makes me unhappy, I stick with it because I know it will get better.
g. Group Stressors

i. What are the top three stressors that a black woman must face in America
    1. How do you deal with these stressors
ii. We've discussed some of the places or people that have affected the way you view or handle stress so now the questions becomes has there been a historical event in America, particularly affecting African Americans that affects the way you view troubling or stressful events?
    1. If so, what?
iii. Do you believe that there are any additional stressors associated with being a black woman in America?
    1. What are the major difficulties that you believe that you face as a result of being a Black Woman?
        a. Examples
        b. How do you deal with these difficulties?
iv. At any time in your life have you ever had to deal with prejudice or discrimination?
    1. Examples?
    2. IF so has this been a source of stress for you?

IV. Coping

a. How do you define coping?
b. What is your biggest fear and how do you handle it?
c. How do you cope with personal issues (i.e, relationships, issues with family or friends, etc)?
d. How do you cope with financial issues (i.e, such as being short on cash, etc)
e. How do you cope with emotional issues (such as feelings of insecurity etc)
f. How do you cope with professional issues (such as issues that might occur at work, etc)
g. How do you cope with health or physical issues (illness etc)
h. How do you cope with social issues (such as discrimination, etc)
i. Do you have one or two life perspectives that you employ when dealing with troubling or stressful issues?
j. If you needed financial support who would you contact?
k. If you need emotional support who would you contact?

l. If you need physical support who would (such as a place to stay or food to eat) you contact?
    i. Who do you typically contact for assistance when needed?
m. How many days per week would you say that you provide (emotional, financial, or physical) support of some sort to family or friends?
    i. What is the most common form of support that you receive?
    ii. What is the most common form of support that you provide?
n. Whom are you closest to?
o. Has anyone or anything in your past currently affected the way cope with troubling or stressful events?
p. No matter how big or small what are some of the things you do for fun or relaxation?
q. Is there anyone that you talk to everyday?
r. What types of support do you offer and receive from others and how?

APPENDIX C

SUICIDE PROTOCAL

In the event that a particpant mentions or eludes to suicidal behavior or ideation the following actions will be taken on part of the researcher. Also please note that not all participants will reside in the brazos valley, therefore my objective was to find a national suicide prevention resource.

CONSENT FORM

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project to examine African American women's viewpoints on suicide. The current research project will explore the statistical disparities of suicide in the United States. Suicide has been typically an incident that primarily affects white males; whereas on the other end of the spectrum, suicide rates have remained consistently low among African American women. The purpose of this study is to explore why African American women's suicide rates have historically and currently remained so low. Additionally this study also looks to gain insight on alternative behaviors that African American women may partake in instead of suicidal behavior. Since I am interested in speaking with African American women from various backgrounds ages 18 and up, you were selected as a participant.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a short survey in addition to a one time subsequent 45-60 minute interview. The survey will consist of approximately 10 questions which will be administered in paper format. The interview will consist of a series of questions that were created to examine the current research topic mentioned above. Therefore, participants will be asked their opinions and feelings regarding personal topics, such as depression, coping strategies, as well as their general views on suicide. The interview will also conclude with questions to help the researcher identity demographic information of the study such current education level, age, income, etc. The entire time necessary to participate in this study will require a one-time meeting for approximately 60-90 minutes.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?
The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, I hope to provide insight into the lives of a low risk group to potentially employ the knowledge to groups that have historically been disproportionately affected by the suicide phenomenon.

Do I have to participate?
No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
This study is confidential and will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Kamesha Spates and Edward Murguia will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Kamesha Spates and Edward Murguia will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for 5-7 years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Kamesha Spates directly at 979-680-8685, or by email at kspates@tamu.edu or Dr. Edward Murguia at 979-845-3157 or by email at murguia@tamu.edu.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Signature
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

X_____

Participant Signature

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Race/Ethnicity
    A. African American
    B. Biracial
    C. Caribbean
    D. Other
2. Age
    A. 18-25
    B. 26-33
    C. 34-42
    D. 43-54
    E. 55-68
    F. 69-88

3. Do you have children?

4. Employment Status
    A. Employed
    B. Student
    C. Employed & Student
    D. Retired
    E. Unemployed

5. Education
    A. Some High School
    B. High School Grad
    C. Technical School
    D. Some College
    E. Bachelor's Degree
    F. Graduate Work or Graduate Degree

6. Marital Status

7. Current Household Income
    A. Up to $14,999
    B. $15,000 to $29,999
    C. $30,000-$49,999

D. $50,000-$69,999
E. $70,000 to $99,999
F. $100,000 or more

8. Religion
A. Christian
B. Muslim
C. Other
D. None

9. Are you an active member of a church or religious group?
A. Yes
B. No

10. Geographical Resident Location

VITA

Kamesha Sondranek Spates received her Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from Northern Illinois University in May 2002. She entered the sociology program at Texas A&M University in August 2002 and received her Master of Science degree in December 2004. Kamesha went on to complete her Ph.D in sociology from Texas A&M University in August of 2009. Her research interests include racial and ethnic relations, criminology, mental health and suicide, substance abuse, health disparities, and qualitative research. She plans to publish a book on these topics, focusing on social stressors of black women and relevant measures that impact their mental health conditions in relation to their suicide rates.

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