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CAREER INFLUENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE COUNSELING PROFESSION

by

Tamara Lynn Ford

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Counseling Psychology

National Louis University  
September 2020

**National Louis University  
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## ABSTRACT

The current literature concerning African American women in the counseling profession is limited. Research is available regarding women in the profession; however, research on African American women is scarce. This study seeks to add to the body of literature by exploring the reasons African American women become counselors, thereby improving recruitment techniques to increase representation in the field and improve mental health care for the African American community. This qualitative research study used a phenomenological approach to explore, interpret, and describe the lived experiences of eight African American women who are Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors currently practicing in the counseling profession. The theoretical foundation Social Cognitive Career Theory was used to guide this study on the career influences of African American women for entering the counseling profession. Data collections were conducted using in-depth face-to-face virtual interviews with the participants and analyzed using the NVivo software. The results of the study indicated that in regards to the decision to join the counseling profession, African American women are influenced by the following: family dynamics, personal characteristics, work experiences, adult influences underrepresentation, and education. The findings in this study may not be generalized to men, other professional disciplines, or people in another ethnicity. Thus, the results of this study could be developed and implemented with a larger population using a questionnaire to determine the generalizability of the findings.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, who have created the foundation for my personal growth and willpower to never stop setting goals in life. The concept of family and their support has instilled the self-efficacy that drives my thirst to seek opportunities that will make me a better person and that can challenge my thoughts to be different, to excel, to strive for independence, to not let my skin color define who I am or what I can obtain. For this I will always be grateful for the gift of hope that I need to reach the unexpected.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Counseling is a profession that empowers diverse individuals by providing assistance and guidance in the resolution of social and psychological difficulties (Gladding, 2000). People who work as counselors offer a vital service to society; thus, it is important to investigate the influences of those who entered the profession. As of 2018, there are more than 139,000 mental health counselors practicing in the United States; however, only 19.8% of them are African American women (Census Bureau). In stark comparison, the percentage of African Americans in need of counseling services is increasing (Mental Health American, 2020); however, African Americans are less likely than other groups to seek mental health care, partly because they feel that they will not receive culturally competent treatment (Mental Health America, 2020). That being the case, there is a need to increase the number of African American women in the field of counseling. In order to do so, it is important to discover what motivates African American women to choose the counseling profession for their career.

African American women counselors are needed because of the unique advantages of being an advocate of their own cultural group, the use of self as an instrument, the ability to endorse the utilization of counseling services, and being a model for promoting health. African American women can be a safe resource for information concerning counseling services, and instill hope through modeling productive coping strategies. African American women are also needed to assist the client to normalize acculturative stress and symptoms related to intergenerational conflict. They are best able to fulfill these roles because they can relate to their clients' experiences.

Career development is a process that is founded on the principles of human rights and is a product of the development of a nation; thus, it has a major impact on the working lives of many

individuals (Zunker, 2016). There are many variables that affect a person's choice of profession, such as personal interests and abilities, self-efficacy, socioeconomic status, upbringing, and opportunity. For women, and particularly for African American women, there are added layers of complexity due to internal and external factors, including gender-role conditioning, employment inequities, and other barriers that restrict African American women's career choices. Having a better understanding of these factors would assist in recruiting and training new counselors, and improve the profession overall. While there is ample research regarding general influences on career choice, there is little data specifically about African American women. This study seeks to add to the body of knowledge in this area.

### **Background**

The construct of professional counseling derived from a predominately white, middle class context. Historically in the United States, counseling services were not readily available for the Black community, nor were African Americans likely to become licensed counselors. While that has changed and continues to improve, the counseling profession is still influenced by its roots in a privileged, mostly homogenous culture (Gerig, 2014; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). Given the increase in diversity of the U.S. population, there is a strong probability that professional counselors will encounter clients who are of a different race (Remley & Herlihy, 2010).

Therefore, cultural competence and representation in the counseling field is imperative.

There are three predominant reasons that African Americans are reluctant to seek counseling. The first is that access to health care is often limited for minority populations. Beyond that, there is a sense of stigma in receiving counseling, combined with the belief that many mental health issues may be related to one's character or choices (Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017; Mental Health America, 2020). A third reason is related to the underlying racism and

stereotyping that may be experienced when interacting with counselors who are unfamiliar with the unique experiences of African Americans.

Racial and ethnic disparities in access to and receipt of quality health care are urgent needs (Caldwell et al., 2016; Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017). The limitation of access to health care uniquely affects African Americans; specifically, there is a need for improved access to mental health services. Mental health disparities arise when the mental health needs of an ethnic group are not met. In addition, mental illness is more severe and persistent in African Americans due to the inadequate access and treatment (Breslau et al., 2005, as cited by Kawaii et al., 2017).

African Americans generally have poorer access to, and lower quality, health care, and experience several barriers in the attempt to access services. These barriers include the cost of care, lack of transportation, stigma, and service utilization. These barriers limit access to getting the most effective treatment. Chang & Downey (2012) reported that African Americans are disproportionately affected by mental illnesses, in part, because of the barriers that affect their mental health care access and utilization (p. 12).

Research has noted the cost of care for minorities is a prevention of accessing quality care due to African Americans having the lowest average annual household income when compared to other populations. It is important to note that “increased rates of prevalent chronic mental health conditions are correlated with socioeconomic status, and African Americans are overrepresented in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities” (Kawai-Bogue et al., 2017, p. 15). Since lower income groups have greater financial impediments to obtaining high quality health care (Caldwell, et al., 2016; Kawai-Bogue et al., 2017), it is imperative to improve the available care as much as possible.

Research suggests that transportation is a barrier for access to health care that is aligned with the cost of care (Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017). Transportation is a larger problem for African Americans due to the distance and the shortage of public transportation to access mental health treatment. The result is unaddressed mental issues. Kawaii-Bogue et al. (2017) suggested that financial incentives influence healthcare; in fact, international companies depend on health incentives for health prevention.

The stigma of mental illness is widely reported and is a significant barrier for seeking mental health care for African Americans. Within this context, perceived stigmas related to mental illness often prevent this population from seeking help in a professional manner or speaking to others about their symptoms (Caldwell et al., 2016; Chang & Downey; Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017). The sources of stigma are generated from peers, family, employers, and the community; therefore, strategies for health care that cater to the experiences of African Americans are effective with reducing the stigma associated with seeking mental health care. Positive resources, such as church and religious beliefs, are received by the African American communities as influential factors for encouragement to seek health care (Avent, 2013). Finally, religious affiliations may create links between the community and mental health care services to reduce stigma (Kawaii-Bogue et al. 2017, p. 14).

Another strategy for reducing the mental health stigma in African American communities is to hire African American clinicians. Research suggests that an increase in African American practitioners will “result in increased mental health care access for the African American community” (Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017). This was corroborated by a study revealing that, when compared with White providers, minority providers are more likely to realize more positive outcomes with minority patients (American Psychological Association, 2006). Likewise, there

are several other benefits of having a clinician who shares the clients' ethnic or cultural background, especially in the realm of mental health care. It is not assumed that the same racial or ethnic origin alone is the only component to a success therapeutic process. Therefore, there are gains in the provider-client match (Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017).

The underutilization of mental health services by African Americans is rooted in factors such as economic constraints, service access barriers, and cultural mistrust towards White therapists (Constantine, 2007). Also, many African Americans distrust mental health therapists generally, and those clients that access treatment may be viewed in the African American community as talking with strangers about their business. In addition, the majority of mental health practitioners in the United States are White, and issues of racial or cultural mistrust might lead some African Americans to have negative expectations and perceptions about White practitioners (Constantine, 2007, p. 1). Clients are less likely to discuss uncomfortable topics in cross-racial provider-client dyads (Sue, 2012). Therefore, the need for more African American counselors is evident.

African American clients present unique situations that some counselors may not be competent to address (Nadal et al. 2014). Many African American clients believe that counselors are unable to understand variables that affect them. Being able to recognize that complex and varied layers of oppression built the foundation for issues faced by African American is vital for the treatment process. Counselors should be able to identify cultural viewpoints that may have a negative impact on their ability to engage with the client in ways that are therapeutic and beneficial for positive outcomes (Nadal et al., 2014). For example, the inability to communicate effectively, the overtones of racial superiority, and the lack of the ability to be proactive may have the potential for negative results that could harm the client (Burt et al., 2016; Nadal, et al.,

2014). While some counselors are not competent, or ignore these factors, it creates a rift in the process because the clients cannot relate to the counselor and vice versa. However, African American counselors can provide a deeper level of insight for Black clients because they too have experienced similar struggles. They can assist the client to work through issues and build a better foundation for handling past and future problems.

African American clients struggle with seeking counseling services because of their need to be understood. The counseling experience can be different for all cultures, especially for African Americans, due to historical factors such as oppression, discrimination, and stereotypes. Traditionally, expressing emotions with others outside of the home is a foreign concept to many African Americans because people of other cultures are not able to relate to their experiences. Therefore, having a counselor that is culturally competent and that resembles them increases the chances of being open to sharing their story and being able to develop trust.

Burt et al. (2016) suggested that the process of counseling is perceived by African Americans as the relinquishment of his or her independence by talking to a stranger and then having to accept the advice of that stranger. This suggests that it would be easier to talk to someone that is within the same race. An African American counselor can assist the client with not feeling as if there is a need to break stereotypes, and having the feeling of not being judged, because what is understood doesn't have to be explained (Healthline, 2020). In fact, a study by the National Association of Black Social workers found that African Americans experience more effective treatment resulting from the pairing with a clinician of similar race and background (KALW, 2020). Thus, it follows that greater availability of African American counselors would alleviate the sense of discomfort, and make the counseling process more accessible to the Black community.

## **History of the Counseling Profession**

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the counseling profession has seen changes in the treatment of individuals, especially in prisons, asylums, and factories (Kloos et al., 2012). Attention was focused on remediation of all, regardless of circumstance. Concurrently, the education system became a catalyst for change, with a focus on self-actualization and cooperation as part of a humanist education. It became more common to have counselors in schools, for both mental health issues and social and career guidance. With a widening range of services, the counseling profession grew in response to societal needs and new opportunities.

The development of the counseling field identifies three key figures during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who had an influential role in the profession: Jesse Davis, Frank Parsons, and Clifford Beers (Zunker, 2016; Kloos et al., 2012). These leaders-initiated change across three professional movements: guidance counseling and education reform, mental health reform, and psychometrics; these created the foundation of the modern counseling profession (Zunker, 2016; Kloos et al., 2012). These three areas are historically significant for answering the questions of why African American women become counselors. These professional movements created an opportunity for women to establish themselves outside the typical role of domestic provider. It allowed women to have a voice and contribute to the workforce.

The development of public-school counseling and guidance was introduced by Jesse Davis, with an emphasis on creating character development as a means of decreasing behavioral problems (Zunker, 2016). He believed that when students received the proper guidance, the outcome would be positive. Further, the goals were to assist the student in understanding their character and being more socially responsible (Kloos et al., 2012). Davis's contributions to the profession increased the value of school counseling.

Frank Parsons was another key contributor to the development of counseling and was known as the father of guidance, as well as the founder of the Boston Vocational Bureau (Zunker, 2016). He believed that when individuals have a sense of self and an awareness of their abilities, they can make better career decisions (Kloos et al., 2012; Zunker, 2016). Parsons wrote *Choosing a Vocation* (1909); his principles have been implemented in various vocational programs to create a space for learning and assisting students to improve decision-making regarding their career choice (Zunker, 2016).

Clifford Beers is another influential contributor. He focused his attention on the mental health reform movement. After his own hospitalization experience, he wrote a book entitled *A Mind That Found Itself* (1908), exposing the conditions of mental health facilities (Zunker, 2016). His work drew national attention to the treatment of persons with mental illness, and became a success, eventually translated into several languages (Kloos et al., 2012; Zunker, 2016). Beers is known as a founder of mental health reform and a pioneer in advocating for improved treatment of mental illness. He also was the founder of the Connecticut Society for Mental Hygiene, the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, and the National Association for Mental Health Hygiene (Kloos et al., 2012; Zunker, 2016).

This history of modern counseling identifies White men as the founders of the profession. However, women have had historical influence as well. The first woman to break into this male-dominated world was Margaret Floy Washburn. She was known for working with women; she brought them into her laboratory to gain experience, and included them on many of her publications. She was a skilled researcher and prolific writer that published a groundbreaking book on animal cognition titled *The Animal Mind* in 1908 (APA, 2020). Since then, women have become contributors and leaders in the profession.

Mamie Phipps Clark was the first African American woman to obtain her doctorate degree in psychology from Columbia University, while her African American husband was the first to be president of the American Psychological Association, the first appointed to the New York Board of Regents, and the first tenured full professor at the City of College of New York (Martin, 1994). Her work with children exposed internalized racism and the negative effects of segregation of African American children (Butler, 2009).

Clark designed and conducted a series of experiments known as “The Doll Test” to review the psychological effects of segregation on African American children. The study used four dolls exactly alike except for their skin color, and tested the racial perceptions of children based on their responses to the dolls. The results indicated that the majority of African American children preferred the White dolls over the Black dolls because their perceptions were that the Black dolls were bad (Butler, 2009). Clark was also influential during the Civil Rights Movement, using her expertise as a witness in several schools’ desegregation cases (Martin, 1994). She and her husband were founders of a child development center in Harlem, New York, where they helped children with psychological needs and continued to engage in work centered about racial biases in education (Butler, 2009). Clark is one of the most important figures in the field.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century also produced Inez Beverly Prosser, another influential African American woman who contributed to the counseling profession. She focused on educational psychology as well as the effects of racism. Her work was known throughout the United States, and she was the first African American woman to receive her PhD in psychology. She was a key figure in the debate on how to best educate black students, and voiced her support for desegregated schools, promoting the benefits for students and staff, and explaining why

segregation was detrimental to all students. Dr. Prosser's legacy is a touchstone of progress for the counseling profession.

Currently, women in the profession continue to be influential. Another well-known African American counselor is Jennifer Eberhardt. Her research investigated the unconscious yet deeply ingrained ways individuals racially code and categorize people. Her focus was on the association between race and crime. The results of her research were used to bring attention to stereotypes in criminal justice system and in education (APA, 2020).

Another prominent African American woman is Linda Myers, who specializes in psychology and culture, moral and spiritual identity development, healing practices and psychotherapeutic processes, and intersections of race, gender, and class (AMH, 2020). She is internationally known for the development of a theory of Optimal Psychology. She has conducted trainings in countries such as England, South Africa, Ghana, and Jamaica. She uses the Oneness Model of human functioning, which "offers a trans-disciplinary focus that builds on insights from the wisdom tradition of African deep thought, and converges with modern physics and Eastern philosophies" (AMA, 2020). Dr. Myers has been awarded numerous honors and awards and named Distinguished Psychologist by the Association of Black Psychologist and many more (AMA, 2020).

These women and others paved the way for African American women to become leaders in the counseling field. Historically, the entry of African Americans into the world of work started as a subhuman act rather than as an act of equal rights for women. In addition, Black women were seen as the caretakers of the household and not as contributors to the professional workforce. This contextual background frames the need for new research regarding the reasons that African American women become counselors.

Literature documenting the career influences of African Americans is scarce. Further, there is very little research on African American women who are licensed in the counseling profession. It is unclear what motivates African American professional women to choose careers in the counseling profession. It is known that African American women are at a disadvantage in the American workforce; research suggests that several factors, such as low socioeconomic status (SES), racism, sexism, and the lack of equitable opportunities, can have a significant impact on African American women's career development (Booth & Myers, 2011). Even though African American women are frequently reported as having a strong work ethic grounded in a cultural history of work experiences, and employment expectations based on current and future economic needs (Byars, 2001), they perceive significant barriers to having a career (Booth & Myers, 2011). There is a clear need for more information regarding why African American women become counselors, including the barriers they face in pursuing a professional career.

### **Career Development**

An understanding of the historical perspective for career development will provide greater insight into the career counselor's role in the workforce (Zunker, 2016). According to Zunker (2016), there are historical stages of career development guidance in the U.S., beginning with the early placement services of the late 1800s. In the early 1900s, career and educational guidance became a component of public-school offerings for students; this resulted in a greater need for guidance counselors, which in turn affected colleges and universities as they sought to provide training for counselors. In the 1980s and beyond, the career counseling profession grew to include private practices and community services; in addition, the rapid increase of technological advances affected the availability and methods of career development. Currently, there is a greater incorporation of technology in career development, as well as a greater

emphasis on meeting the needs of diverse populations (Zunker 2016). This focus on serving a broader, more inclusive population is one of the reasons that further research is needed regarding what inspirations and challenges are experienced by minorities when it comes to career choice.

### **Career Counseling for Minorities**

The use of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides a framework to consider the situation of African American women in the counseling profession. SCCT is a career development model that focuses on personal variables and contextual factors that affect self-efficacy as well as career goals and outcomes. SCCT identifies career development as similar for all individuals, however, the influence of cultural factors often causes different outcomes for minorities. Therefore, understanding cultural factors leading to a career choice is important.

Socioeconomic status (SES) has an impact on career decision self-efficacy, the belief that an individual has in their ability to successfully complete tasks that are needed for career decision making. Hsieh and Huang (2014) suggested that SES may affect the development of self-efficacy beliefs through shaping one's learning experiences. Family SES is directly related to the opportunity for learning and achievement of individuals. For example, individuals from higher SES have more available resources, higher expectations, more occupational role models, higher educational opportunities, and more access to parental support, and such efficaciousness may help facilitate higher career self-efficacy beliefs (p. 30). In contrast, individuals from lower SES are exposed to poorer quality education, fewer role models, limited community resources, and less financial support, a situation which is likely to suppress the experience and development of career self-efficacy. (Hsieh & Huang, 2014).

Career development theories and approaches are limited in their applicability to diverse populations. Research on career development has neglected important determinants such as

racism, sexism, family background, and opportunity structure. In part, this is because “socioeconomic status and ethnicity/race are confounded, making it difficult to determine the pertinence of findings to specific populations” (Alfred, 2001, p. 111). Other factors that affect the career choice of diverse individuals include world view, identity, values, and context. However, it is worth attempting to identify factors that affect career choice for minorities and diverse populations in order to combat institutional racism, increase representation, and provide needed services for all communities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to discover the career influences that motivate African American women to choose a career in the counseling field. During the research process, data collection was centered on themes such as familial expectations, socioeconomic status, personal characteristics, the lack of mental health awareness, and internal and external barriers. This project uses a qualitative methodology to consider the lived experiences of a sampling of African American women who are licensed professional counselors; it provides valuable information on the reasons African Americans enter the profession. The study may be of assistance in recruiting African Americans to enter the field of counseling.

### **Problem Statement**

African American women are underrepresented in the field of counseling. It is not known why those who are currently counselors chose the profession for their career. By exploring the reasons African American women choose counseling as a profession, as well as the challenges they face, it is possible to improve representation and therefore increase effective services for the African American community.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study helped to bridge the literature gap regarding African American women's career influences relating to the counseling profession. Also, determining the reasons for entering the counseling profession is important because these motivations may influence career satisfaction and/or performance. The outcome of the study will provide pertinent information to seasoned African American women who may choose to enter the profession, as well as African American students who may want to pursue a career in counseling.

### **Research Question**

What motivating factors and challenges are experienced by African American women who become Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors?

### **Definition of Terms**

*African American.* An American of African, and especially Black African, descent. (“African American,” n.d.)

*Family of Origin.* The significant caretakers and siblings, whether blood or legally bonded, that are raised together or are the first social group of belonging (Pearson & Bieschke, 2001).

*Glass Ceiling.* An intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions (“Glass Ceiling,” n.d.).

*Minority.* A part of a population different from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment (“Minority,” n.d.). A group of people that are not treated fairly because of race (Booth & Myers, 2011).

*Socioeconomic Status (SES).* The social class of an individual that is a combination of education, income, and occupation (Hsieh and Huang, 2014).

*Personal Characteristics.* The factors that comprise one's personality (Gushue & Whitson, 2006).

*Career Counseling.* The inclusion of all counseling activities associated with career choice over a life span. All aspects of individual need, including family, work, personal concerns, and leisure, are recognized as integral parts of career decision making and planning (Zunker, 2016, p. 7).

*Career Development.* Individual development of needs and goals associated with stages of life and with tasks that affect career choice and subsequent fulfillment of purpose (Zunker, 2016, p. 7).

### **Assumptions of the Study**

The assumptions of this study were that it would be facilitated in an environment that demonstrated objectivity, and that this process would provide valid, fair, and reliable results. It was also assumed that the participants from the sample of African American professional women were comparable with other African American professional women in the study population. In addition, there is the assumption that the participants will respond truthfully. It is also assumed that there will continue to be a need for the counseling profession, specifically by African Americans, in the future.

Using a qualitative design emphasis, with the belief that reality is subjective, provided an understanding of the phenomenon through patterns and theories. It is assumed that the essences of the experience are through the perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2018). The scope and the results of the study were limited to the participants' views as recorded by the researcher. The results cannot be generalized to all African American professional women. This study consisted of eight African American women from different settings within the counseling

profession; it cannot be generalized to the entire population of African American professional women in the counseling profession. In addition, the participants in this study were all from North Carolina, and their responses cannot be generalized to all states. However, this study can be used as a guide for African American students who seek a career in counseling, or seasoned professionals wanting to explore other career opportunities such as counseling; it can also be helpful in expanding recruitment efforts in order to increase representation.

Finally, the researcher, an African American professional woman with experience in the counseling profession, put forth the effort to contain her biases during the process as well as while analyzing the data collected. Every effort was placed on collecting and representing the data in an ethical manner without bias. However, unconsciously, some biases could have surfaced in the study.

### **Summary**

The factors that influence a person to choose a particular career are multi-faceted and overlapping. While there are valid theoretical frameworks devoted to understanding career influences generally, there is limited empirical data on the influences of African American women in the counseling profession. Since African American women are underrepresented in career development literature, and, additionally, because of the low percentage of African American women in the counseling field, it is important to learn more about the phenomenon. Using a qualitative framework, this study explores the motivating factors for African American women who become counselors. The goal is to discover useful, beneficial information for increasing diversity and representation in the counseling profession, and thereby improving mental health care for the Black community.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The factors that influence the career decision-making process of those who enter the counseling profession have been explored in a wide spectrum of literature, with researchers considering family structure, personal characteristics, and the environmental structure as common influences (Whitson & Keller, 2004; Bounds, 2017). However, research related to different cultural groups is limited (Fouad et al., 2016; Paa & McWhirter, 2000; Schulenberg et al., 1984; Whiston & Keller, 2004). Because little is known about how people from minority groups choose a career field, a better understanding is needed. Beginning with an overview of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a foundation, this literature review examines the existing research on factors that influence people to choose a particular career, specifically for African American women who choose to become counselors. In addition, this review will discuss the development of counseling as a career.

A detailed strategy was created and reviewed using the following electronic database: EBSCOhost psychology, APA PsycARTICLES, APA PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Keywords entered included: “African American Women and Career Influence,” “Black Women and Career Influence,” “African American Career Development,” “African American and Counseling,” and “Domestic Role.” Due to the limited number of academic articles on career development of African American women in the counseling profession and their lived experiences, a wider search strategy was initiated using more general terms such as “women and work experiences,” “women’s workforce,” “African Americans work experience,” and “Black women” to identify studies to merge in this review. This was then reduced based on the year of publication, language, setting, relevance, and type of article. The researcher reviewed books, counseling publications, and the American Counseling Association database. All sources of the

articles are included in the reference list. The literature review was limited to articles in English, with a focus on works published between 2010-2020, and only peer-reviewed articles were selected.

Research on career influence is important because it is not adequately represented in the literature on factors that contribute to the career development of minority groups, including African American women (Waller, 2006; Lent et al., 2010). According to Coogan and Chen (2007), career development is complicated, and there are various restrictions on women's career choices and advancement opportunities; therefore, a better understanding of these internal and external influences gives insight into the social and cultural barriers that influence career development for women. These internal and external influences include gender-role orientation, employment inequities and family involvement (Coogan & Chen, 2007).

### **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

The theoretical approach chosen for this study is Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which provides a framework that understands the career development of ethnic minorities and women. The focus of SCCT is on variables and how they interact to shape an individual's avenues of career development. SCCT emphasizes the social and environmental contexts in which human agency and self-efficacy function. Contextual barriers are relevant because of the range of dynamic interactions between social, environmental, and personal contexts (Coogan & Chen, 2007, p. 197). The consideration of contextual and internal factors contributes to the social cognitive perspective. Scheuermann et al. (2000) indicated:

SCCT posits that personal inputs (e.g., personality) and background contextual factors (e.g., socioeconomic status) influence an individual's self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (i.e., expectations of positive or negative consequences)

through his or her career-relevant learning experiences. In turn, self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence the individual's vocational interests and other career outcomes such as career choice, both directly and through a sequential pathway. (p. 274)

SCCT provides a structure for understanding individuals' realizations about their capacity to execute different tasks, their realizations that their efforts will produce positive results, and that their proclivities will lead to career goals.

Lent et al. (1994, as cited by Dickinson et al. 2017) identified SCCT as a model of career development and choice that incorporates various contextual factors, including the environment. This environment is comprised of barriers and support that may have an impact on career development, goals, and the ability or inability to exhibit persistence (Dickinson et al., 2017 as cited by Scheuermann, 2014). An individual's self-efficacy and outcome expectations contribute to the interest, goals and behaviors as they relate to SCCT (p. 46). Dickinson et al. (2017) found that SCCT is applicable for various populations, including African Americans (as cited in Morris et al., 2009, p. 46). The SCCT model assists with identifying vocational and personal efficacy, outcome expectations, perceived barriers and support that could foster career exploration, career interest of the population served (Morris et al., 2009), and focus on the perceptions of the individuals (Smith, 2000). Lent et al. (2000) found that "individuals develop interests in specific careers for which they feel competent (i.e., efficacious) and for which they expect to achieve the outcomes they desire because of their efforts (i.e., positive outcome expectations)" (p. 135). Self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence interest and selecting a career choice, whereas goals, career choice, self-efficacy and expectations will influence an individual's choice actions (Turner et al., 2019).

SCCT has been utilized by a limited number of researchers to examine the career development of diverse populations, including African Americans, with results being supportive of SCCT-based propositions (Alliman-Brissett & Turner, 2010; Brown & Lent, 2017; Gainor & Lent, 1998; Lent et al., 2005, 2011; Lent, Sheu, et al., 2010; Waller, 2006). Dickinson et al. (2017), in their investigation of SCCT and African Americans, found the focus of development was on math- and science- related interests and choices, due to this population being underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and math occupations (Flores et al., 2010; Lent et al., 2003; Lent, Paixao, da Silva, & Leitao, 2010; Sheu et al., 2010; Schaub & Tokar, 2005). Therefore, SCCT is an important addition to the limited body of literature on African American women within the counseling field.

SCCT suggests that career self-efficacy, or one's confidence to successfully negotiate various career-related pursuits, stems from several sources. Johnson (2013) indicated that SCCT focused on several cognitive personal variables and interactions that may occur within the environment. Also, it recognizes Bandura's concept (1989, as cited by Brown & Lent, 2019) of "triadic reciprocity, in which personal attributes (internal cognitive and affective states), physical attributes (external environment factors), and overt behaviors or actions all function as mechanisms affecting each other in varying ways" (p. 86). Lent et al. (2000) also indicated that SCCT is berthed in Bandura's social cognitive theory, and "focuses on several cognitive-personal variables (self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and goals) and how these variables interact with other aspects of the person and his or her environment (gender, ethnicity, social support and barriers) to help shape the course of career development" (p. 36).

Albert and Luzzo (1999, as cited by Gushue & Whitson, 2006) found that another important aspect exists within the SCCT framework, in that it emphasizes three social cognitive

mechanisms: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting. In addition, Gore and Leuwerke (2000) suggested that an individual's action is focused on their judgements of what they can do, self-efficacy beliefs, and their beliefs about the outcome that may follow (outcome expectation). As it relates to career decisions, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations are needed for the kind of goal setting that contributes to career decisions. Therefore, self-efficacy has been found to have an influence on vocational interests (Johnson, 2013).

Along with self-efficacy, the learning process itself is an important factor. The process of learning generates from multiple sources, including the observations of social behaviors and skills taught during daily interactions. Bandura (1989, as cited by Turner et al., 2019) found that social learning theory focuses on the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura (1989, as cited by Brown & Lent, 2019) also found that learning and subsequent behavior change could occur vicariously through observation of others' behaviors. The theory suggests that most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling.

SCCT helps to explain how individuals' career interests develop, how they make career choices, and how they determine their level of performance. It emphasizes the importance of personal choice in the career decision-making process, and attempts to explain the ways both internal and external factors serve to enhance or constrain that choice (Brown & Lent, 2019; Lent et al., 1996; Ochs & Roessler, 2004; Turner et al., 2019). For example, individuals would more likely disengage their interest in a career choice if they believe that their environment is not supportive or if the barriers are too demanding for success. Then, it is likely that their choice will be made on the bases of job availability, self-efficacy beliefs, and outcome expectations (Kloos et al., 2012).

SCCT has broad usefulness for explaining influences on occupational interests and choices as captured with traditional measures, in both African American and female samples. These measures are both personal and contextual factors for understanding career development and the factors that comprise of a successful career. Also, the application of SCCT suggests that self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence the individual's vocational interests and other career outcomes such as career choice (Scheuermann et al., 2014); in addition, this construct posits that cultural factors exert an influence on career related outcomes through the major social cognitive variables. The approach of SCCT is wide and encompassing, allowing space for examination of specific cultural groups and changing trends.

Research is supportive of the tenets of SCCT (Bandura, 1986; Phillips & Imhoff, 1997; Turner et al., 2019). Brown & Lent (2019) highlighted the role of self-efficacy and outcome expectations in the formation of career-related interests and choice goals with the achievement of career-related outcomes. Lent et al. (2000) also indicated that an individual's interest, choices, and performance are affected both directly and indirectly by contextual factors throughout the development process (p. 76). Dickinson et al. (2017) further indicated that SCCT suggests that a person's input (e.g., gender) and background contextual factors (e.g., social class) contribute to self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations from their learning experiences (i.e., personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological states). These beliefs contribute to the development of academic and career-related interests in a type of trajectory that creates the development of choice goals and performance (p. 76). Therefore, SCCT provides a strong framework for examining the influences that affect career choice, the steps to participating in a chosen career, and the ways in which success is achieved in a particular career field.

## Family of Origin

SCCT focuses on several cognitive personal variables and on their interaction with the environment as well as within the family of origin. Fouad et al. (2016) provided an extensive review of the literature on a plethora of influences that affect the career decision-making process. Among these factors, family influence has been given increased attention, offering a better understanding of the influence that families have on career development.

Family influence can evolve in a variety of ways, including indirect and direct observation and involvement. Fouad et al. (2016) suggested that direct contact is face-to-face interactions within the same physical proximity, and indirect contact is no human contact. Tziner et al. (2012) reported on literature on the relationship between family variables and career development. The creation of social connections fulfills individual aspirations and offers meaning to one's life. Fouad et al. (2016) also indicated that earlier literature examined the relationship between family background and work value orientation, suggesting that family influence has a critical role in the development of work value. This study further suggested that people of color tend to be more influenced by family expectations and can relate more to extrinsic work values than intrinsic work values.

Another factor to explore is the family role in different cultural groups. Whiston and Keller (2004) found that assessing the role of the family across cultures is needed because various cultural groups have different career constructs. Wintre et al. (1988, as cited by Pena, 2000) suggested parental influence has a role in career choice but has declined in other aspects of adolescents' lives. Tang et al. (1999, as cited by Fouad et al., 2016) also investigated how broad family variables could influence a variety of long-term career outcomes. These long-term variables are the development of parental attachment and parental involvement. Downey and

Powell (1993, as cited by DiCaccavo 2002) found increased parental support was directly correlated with an increase in positive behavioral and emotional development, including low-income students' increased achievement with the presence of parental involvement.

A study by Pearson and Bieschke (2001) found that empirical research explored the link between family of origin experiences and career development. For example, Lustig and Xu (2018) indicated that rules and boundaries within the family dynamics were an influential factor on decision-making choices for family members during the early stages of one's career. Hotchkiss and Borrow (1984) stated that the social status of parents is another variable that provides an opportunity for formal training for career development (as cited in Pearson & Bieschke, 2001, p. 301). Other variables associated with these phenomena are occupational status, aspirations, and expectations that influence career choice (Lustig & Xu, 2018; MacKay & Miller, 1982; Marini & Greenberger, 1978; McLaughlin, Hunt, & Montgomery, 1976). Research conducted with psychotherapists, social workers, and doctors points to the early experiences of such individuals in shaping their experience in career choice (DiCaccavo, 2002, p. 463). In addition, family dynamics are derived of different structures which provide the opportunity for various support within the realm of the family context. Although there is a lack of extensive research on African American women, the existing research strongly confirms that family roles have an important influence in making career decisions.

The research suggests that family dynamics, presented in various forms, are contributing factors for influencing career choices. The term "family of origin" has been defined as "the significant caretaker that exerts cohesion in the dynamics of the relationship" (Blustein, 2011; Schultheiss, 2003). In investigations of family of origin, multiple studies have found that it is an important factor in career choice (Fouad et al., 2016; Lustig & Xu, 2018; Tziner et al, 2012;

While et al., 1969; Wintre et al., 1988). Lustig and Xu (2018) also found that family can provide an impact on career decision-making.

The career development process for women can become a challenge when parental guidance is focused on a certain career choice (Downing & D'Andrea, 1994; Li & Kerpelma, 2007; Ma & Yeh, 2005; Mau, 2001). For example, Mau (2001) indicated that Asian cultural career choice is seen as a family matter and reflects the family; therefore, children tend to only choose careers that their parents would approve. Holland, Whitney, Cole, and Richard (1969, as cited by Kniveton, 2004) also investigated the positive effects of parental support on career development. Themes emerged with significant evidence that fathers' influences were related to educational planning and expectations among Mexican American girls. Lustig and Xu (2018) found that higher levels of family cohesion were associated with lower levels of decision-making confusion, commitment anxiety, and external conflict, which affect the ability to make career choice decisions (p. 149). In addition, Blustein (2011) found that family of origin provides components for understanding the dynamics of vocational development, which is essential to develop a successful work life. The family of origin provides the needed skills for effective career decision-making as an individual moves from adolescence to adulthood (Shin & Kelly, 2013).

The family can positively influence career choice through cohesion and adaptability. Olson (2000) defined family cohesion as the emotional closeness of the family, the ability to share quality time together, and the process of making decisions. Further, Olsen defined adaptability as "the amount of change in the family's leadership, role relationship, and relationship rules," including who is viewed as the family leader, the acceptance of each role of the family members, and family rules (p. 151). Families that have strong cohesion are able to

maintain emotional stability and are inclusive with decision-making. In addition, families that are democratic and have emotional closeness provide children with stability to make choices and to accept the input of others (Lustig & Xu, 2017). Olson (2000) found that high levels of family cohesion would reduce the chances of making choices based on emotions, experiencing anxiety regarding the outcome, or having difficulty balancing input from others with one's own ideas. Family stability creates an opportunity to develop effective decision-making skills, which is an essential component of setting career goals.

The role of the family contributes to the child's career decisions. Young and Freisen (1992, as cited by Tziner et al., 2012) found that families consider their influence on career development as a direct reflection of themselves, as well as being a way to facilitate personal growth. Also, parents are influential in such ways as exhibiting intentional behaviors, actively engaging in and guiding the process, providing emotional support, providing an environment that is stimulating for the purpose of forming career interest, and providing detailed information about various career opportunities (Cinamon, 2001; Li & Kerpelman, 2007; Otto, 2000, as cited in Tziner et al., 2012, p. 100). Baumrind found that there are additional factors that contribute to the development of career influences, such as the styles of parental authority (Baumrind, 1971, as cited by Koumoundourou et al. 2011).

The three most basic parental styles are permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative. A permissive parental style is known as having little to no control over a child's behaviors. The authoritarian style sets limits with the child and is able to control behavior through punishment. Lastly, the authoritative style provides stability within the relationship because boundaries are clear. This parental style influences control, but also listens to the child and shows respect for their autonomy (Otto, 2000, as cited in Tziner et al. 2012, p. 101). Koumoundourou et al. (2011)

found that parental styles affect competence, assertiveness and maturity, as well as psychological well-being, all of which influence career decisions. However, children of authoritarian parents often exhibit poor self-confidence and self-esteem (Psychyl et al., 2002, as cited in Tziner et al., 2012, p. 100). The lack of these characteristics leads to the development of poor decision-making abilities. For example, authoritative parenting was revealed to contribute to the discouragement of the child's ability to achieve educational goals. The authoritarian style of parenting is a positive indicator for self-decision self-efficacy (Lease and Dahlbeck, 2009, as cited in Koumoundourou et al., 2011, p. 168). In addition, findings indicate that an authoritative parenting style can create secure attachments, building the connections that allow more shared activities related to exploring career development (Tziner et al., 2012). Parental attachment and parental support are variables that influence career outcomes and are persistent over time (Fouad et al., 2010; Ketterson & Blustein, 1997; Tziner et al., 2012).

Chope (2005) discovered that various aspects of parental behavior directly affect and influence the career choice of children. The aspects are identified as parental support, autonomy granting, and encouragement to engage in career interests and abilities and explore vocational options. The more parental support the child perceives, the more likely the child is to engage in exploring career options. The second aspect found that autonomy granting gives the child the opportunity to make decisions with the assistance and support from the family. The third aspect is encouraging the aspirations of the child, which supports examining career interests, exploring abilities, and reviewing relevant experiences (Schultheiss et al., 2001). These behaviors were reported by students as support for their motivation to engage in career activities (Phillips et al., 2002), while others revealed that their parents controlled and were involved in their career choice too often. These behaviors resulted in the lack of career involvement, and these children were

more passive in the process of effective engagement in career preparation (Schultheiss et al., 2001). Whether permissive or authoritarian, active or passive, parental involvement is a strong influence on career decisions. This involvement has the potential to increase and/or decrease, depending on the socioeconomic status of the family.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been measured in the literature in a variety of ways, such as the use of the Duncan's Socioeconomics Index, the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index of Social Status, and Differential Status Identity Scale. SES refers to the social class of an individual or group, and often can dictate a person's opportunities for learning and achievement (Hsieh & Huang, 2014). Kay et al. (2017) found that career development is related to socioeconomic status and beliefs about what constitutes success. They further indicated that youth with higher SES parents who attended quality vocational programs believed that success in society was not attained through external factors. However, SES did not have any correlations to the belief that personal abilities are a component of success.

The results suggest the external causes for career success may contribute to transmission and maintenance of SES over generations. In addition, most of the transmission is a direct relation of parental wealth and indirectly contributes to the education system and the labor market (p. 2169). The belief in one's effort and abilities leads to the encouragement of individuals to put forth efforts to engage in career goals. However, the belief that success is due to factors outside of one's control reinforces the individual to set lower goals that disengages them from attempting to reach their desired goal (Shane & Heckhausen; Shane et al., 2012). Therefore, when there is a lack of structure, the motivation to achieve goals decreases.

Resources are needed to assist with gaining the knowledge for developing good decision-making skills. Economic resources have been identified in the literature as positive for making career decisions. Blustein et al. (2002) found that students from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) see work as meaningful, but felt they were not likely to find employment related to their aspirations. In addition, they experienced family disruptions and encountered less support from family in regard to their career decisions (p. 152). Economic resources were vital to create an environment that was stable for making decisions related to career development.

The literature reveals that lower socioeconomic populations are underrepresented in vocational development, including those in the African American community. The assumption exists that there is an unbound labor market, that everyone has equal options related to career choice and opportunities, and that these opportunities can provide individuals with satisfying employment (Smith, 1983; Warnath, 1975, as cited by Hui-Hsien & Huang, 2014). This assumption was challenged, identifying reality recession, high unemployment, and discrimination, especially within the African American community (Warnath, 1975, as cited by Hui-Hsien & Huang, 2014). In addition, low socioeconomic communities have limited resources for career guidance.

The career theory view of career development is focused on initiating the individual's self-concept; however, there is limited data on addressing this process within the lower socioeconomic sector of the African American community (Super, 1990, as cited by Coogan & Chen, 2007). Smith (1983) as cited by Hui-Hsien & Huang (2014) explained that “[These individuals] know ahead of time that the jobs they seek, the jobs that are open to them, or the jobs that they qualify for in terms of their skills, will not allow them to implement their self-concept” (p. 189). It suggests that, for lower socioeconomic minority individuals, lower entry-

level employment is the path of least resistance (Osipow, 1975). Self-concept may be perceived as different for people with lower socioeconomic status, since they tend to separate work and personal self-concept to maintain their own sense of self-worth. Therefore, the sense of self-worth within the African American culture is created from various sources.

Those with lower socioeconomic status within the African American community thrive on interactions that play a role in human development. Bronfenbrenner (1979, as cited by Kloos et al., 2012) studied the ecological model of human development and found that the environmental structure consisted of smaller structures of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem is the development of interpersonal relationships that are developed by the individual that include environmental factors such as home, school and the neighborhood. For example, the mother figure plays an important role in the development of girls; maternal influence contributes to the development of career aspirations and expectations (Taylor et al., 2016).

Peers, parents, and the school environment also have a significant influence on decision-making. Taylor (2016) found that in lower socioeconomic communities, schools may be of poor quality and may offer little payoff in terms of future prospects of employment. The mesosystem is another component of ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, as cited by Kloos et al., 2016); it suggests that children's development consists of a variety of sources such as familial environment as well as the surrounding environment. The exosystem is the connection that may exist between two or more settings that affect the child indirectly.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, as cited by Kloos et al., 2012) suggested that the exosystem includes the world of work, the neighborhood, the mass media, the distribution of goods and services, and the informal social networks within the adolescent's environment contributes to the exosystem. As it

pertains to the world of work, lower socioeconomic communities may have limited exposure to career opportunities. The macrosystem is described as the living environment of the child, which consists of a larger realm of influence. These influences include socioeconomic status, ethnicity, parents, school, and the parent's workplace (Kay et al., 2017).

Poverty is another factor that has an impact on psychological well-being and an influence on career development. Taylor et al. (2016) showed that many African Americans are inordinately poor; the stressors of poverty make them susceptible to an increased level of disagreements and conflict within the home, and create a strain on a child's development. McDonald and Armstrong (2001) found that when resources are limited in a poverty-stricken household, there may be increased conflict and discord. This could lead to unhealthy relationships that magnify insecurities and that hinder the achievement of individual goals.

Purtell and McLoyd (2013) suggested that parents have a significant impact on the developmental trajectories of youth and are the key factor for the development of positive career decision-making within low-socioeconomic environments (p. 224). Taylor et al. (2015) suggested that students who experience poverty are less likely to seek a transition to post-secondary school because of the lack of resources. This is a disadvantage that results in a lack of preparations for career choices and future employment. Mello (2009) suggested that low income youth and adolescents exhibit a decrease in optimism about educational and occupational expectations and aspirations compared to middle-class students.

There are defined differences in parental involvement within the upper and lower socioeconomic environments due to the availability of resources. Blustein et al. (2002) found the opposite to be true for upper socioeconomic status as it relates to person inputs variables that shape the individual's learning experiences. "Individuals from a higher level of socioeconomic

status, for example, are more likely to have higher educational resources and expectations, more occupational role models, and greater access to parental support, and such efficaciousness may help facilitate higher career self-efficacy beliefs” (p. 30). Therefore, resources and quality opportunities are not available for students experiencing lower socioeconomic status, which suppresses the development of these individuals. However, Ali et al. (2005) found there was no relationship between socioeconomic status and educational self-efficacy with a study of students from a low socioeconomic background. A study by Thompson and Subich (2006) did find a positive relationship among college students and self-efficacy in career goals. The inconsistency of the studies may have been caused by the measurement style of gathering data (Liu et al., 2004; Turner & Lapan, 2003). It is clear that socioeconomic status has a facet of influence in the process of decision-making.

Socioeconomic status has various components that contribute to the advancement of career development. Evans (2002) suggested that psychological well-being is an integral part of the social structures that influence career development. Kraus et al. (2012) found that the beliefs surrounding psychological processes could influence behavior regarding a person’s direction in pursuing a career. Kay et al. (2017) explained that opportunities for career success for individuals are limited by their SES and found this to be consistent across generations. However, adults associated with higher SES often believe they have control of the environment, and their children share the belief because of social learning and the direct engagement of the parents (Jennings et al., 2009; Whitbeck & Gecas, 1988). Along with SES, varied psychological processes, parental engagement, and the environment all work together to inform an individual’s personal characteristics, which also influence career choice.

### **Personal Characteristics**

Contentment with decision-making on career choice is a necessity because it is an influential factor for the foundation of quality of life (Lent & Brown, 2008). Song and Park (2005) found that “in modern society, careers carry not only economic and social significance but also psychological value. There has been a shift in career choice from objective values, such as slavery and reputation, to subjective ones, such as joy and feelings of achievement” (p. 98). People are increasingly focused on whether their personal characteristics fit a particular career path. Within the career development paradigm, the concept of personal characteristics refers to not only a person’s gender and ethnic identity, but also their interests and abilities. These factors are mediated by social cognition and have a strong influence on an individual’s self-efficacy. Each factor plays a part in affecting career choice (Gushue & Whitson, 2006).

There are several studies that review different types of career-related self-efficacy as it relates to the role of gender and career choice, including the impact on high school students of color (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Flores & O’Brien, 2002; Lent et al., 1994; O’Brien et al., 2000; Pope-Davis & Hargrove, 2001). Career Decision Self-Efficacy (CDSE) is the confidence level an individual has in their own competence to engage in tasks related to career decisions (Kniveton, 2004). This has been identified as important for high school students of color. According to Gushue & Whitson (2006), career exploration activities and career outcomes are positively related to CDSE. Also, CDSE can serve as a reinforcement to other domains such as confidence.

The confidence skills of an individual could contribute to their career decisions. The literature explored the importance predictor of Mexican American high school students in their ability to explore and master career goals, and their belief of achievement even if it is against the societal supposition. A study by Gushue and Whitson (2006) revealed support for the role of

gender attitude and ethnic identity in vocational guidance of African American and Latinx girls. They suggested that when gender role and ethnic identities of girls of color are embraced, it leads to a more profound sense of self, which then strengthens their beliefs and confidence related to career choice. Aside from these studies, there is very little literature that includes substantial research on African American women and their influences for career choice.

Another personal characteristic is that gender can be a factor in career choice and is a strength of SCCT, which includes variables such as race, ethnicity, and gender. These factors are influential to career development because they indirectly affect self-efficacy in the formation of career goals, as well as outcome expectations (Gushue & Whitson, 2006). These factors related to gender roles provide for a range of different gender orientations. Gender role attitude refers to what an individual believes and expects is suitable for males and females. Females who are performing a traditional gender role are less likely to pursue roles usually held by males because of the traditional values placed on the roles of men versus those of women. For example, Spitze and Logan (1990) found that domestic expectations can influence career choice. They suggested that it is more common for girls to be expected to assist with household tasks and family care than it is for boys; hence, girls are more likely to choose professions in care-related fields. On the other hand, many studies have shown that “women with egalitarian (nontraditional or liberal) gender role attitudes reported higher levels of career orientation, aspirations, and expectations compared with women with traditional gender role attitudes” (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; McWhirter et al., 1998; O’Brien & Fassinger, 1993, p. 380).

Creamer and Laughlin (2005) suggested that gender expectations influence women’s beliefs regarding their career choice. For example, they found that young women needed the approval of authority figures. This study also found that women were more likely than men to

consult others, as well as to accept the opinions of others regarding decisions related to career choice. In addition, Creamer and Laughlin (2005) found that African American adolescents were motivated the most when they inserted themselves in social contexts. The social context has been documented in the literature as an influential factor of career choice. Lips (1995) found it “emphasized relations between self and the world, and desired careers in fields related to people and relationships, such as medicine and health sciences” (p. 106). Career influence is a combination of the individual’s personal self and parental influences.

There are other gender-related factors, outside of family dynamics and beliefs about gender roles, that influence career choice. Creed and Patton (2003) studied the difference between males and females and found that females matured earlier in career attitude than males and therefore their reactions to early work experiences were different. Wilgosh (2002) conducted a study on the impact of stereotyping on academic achievement for different subjects and how the media has influenced career choices.

Social media and images have an influence on individuals’ decision-making. Wilgosh (2002) suggested that females focused on appearance and popularity as a form of career influence, which steered them away from the science-based jobs that males were more oriented towards. Heckert et al. (2002) found that female students focused their career choices on factors such as work conditions, child-care facilities, career stability and expectations for hours worked. Also, males were more likely to mirror their father’s career path. Small and McClean (2002) indicated males were more likely than females to want to be entrepreneurs, while Kniveton (2004) found that females were more interested in intrinsic motivators rather than extrinsic rewards for employment. Whether as a result of family influence or other factors, gender, as a

personal characteristic, is a basic influence on a person's interests and their perceptions of what they can and should choose for a career.

Ethnic identity is another personal factor that can influence career choice. Phinney and Alipuria (1996) described ethnic identity as "a multidimensional construct that includes feelings of ethnic belonging and pride, a secure sense of group membership, and positive attitudes towards one's ethnic group" (p. 142). They further suggested that this identity is a gradual process and can be achieved through the natural attrition of exploration and dedication to one's identified group. Pearson and Bieschke (2001) explained that ethnic identity is an essential component of vocational identity during high school years among African Americans. It is part of the integration of self-concept and creates the foundation to stabilize the interest and goals of ethnic groups. Ethnic identity is a vital component to generating the interest of developing goals centered around career choice.

Regardless of gender or ethnicity, career choice is a major concern for students approaching the end of high school, and the influences on these career choices are complex. Coogan & Chen (2007) found the individual's conceptualization of his or her abilities and preferences sometimes did not translate to the job requirements while they were choosing a career. Personal characteristics other than gender and ethnicity could be a part of the decision-making process (Kniveton, 2004). For example, people know their interests and desires, which lead them towards the appropriate career. Holland (1985) as cited by Kniveton (2004) found six personal characteristics that may influence a career choice. They are described as follows:

"Realistic, linked with a preference for outdoor and physical work, with few interpersonal demands; investigative, linked with thought and creativity, with minimum social demands; artistic, disliking structure and requiring intense involvement; social, linked

with communication and helping others; enterprising, linked with power and needing management behaviors, and finally, conventional, linked with high structure, self-control and low interpersonal demands” (p. 48).

However, Holland’s attempt to categorize these approaches was not well received, and was criticized by other researchers as being too simple (Schein, 1993; as cited by Kniveton, 2004).

Self-regulation is another relevant personal characteristic; it is the process of self-awareness and behaving to initiate and achieve goals (Zimmerman, 2000). Lord et al. (2010) found that self-regulation as it relates to vocational behavior has been researched in various fields with an emphasis on regulatory abilities (as cited in Eun et al., 2013, p. 43). The individual that is self-regulated develops a plan in search of achieving goals through the process of generating, evaluating, and learning phases (Byrnes et al., 1999; Miller & Byrnes, 2001). In addition, Nam (2007) found that the process of self-regulation has a positive relationship to job satisfaction and an individual’s self-efficacy, whereas Miller and Byrnes (2001b) reported that self-regulation is only necessary for important decisions. Therefore, self-regulation is influential in the decision-making process.

### **Barriers to Career Development**

Career development for women is complex. Research indicates that the complications and restrictions women face are related to internal and external barriers, which prevent the development and advancement of career choices (Betz, 1994; Sullivan & Mahalik, 2000). These barriers reflect sociocultural components such as early gender-role orientation, employment inequities, and family responsibilities (Coogan & Chen, 2007). While it is obvious that the effects of barriers are mitigated by an individual’s ability to cope with them (Lent et al., 2000), it is nonetheless important to take note of barriers that specifically affect women.

Social stereotypes have created a perceived standard for roles for men and women. Betz (1994) found that roles for women are different than that of men because their career priorities are different. The emphasis for women is placed on the socialization of home and family, with the chief role of caretaker for the children. Also emphasized for women are the characteristics of nurturance, interpersonal concern, sensitivity, and the ability to express emotions (as cited in Coogan & Chen, 2007, p. 193). Other research has suggested that the role of women as caretakers is ingrained during childhood, and career aspirations are superseded by this role. Coogan & Chen (2007) found two consequences for early gender-role orientation:

- (1) The emphasis for pursuing a successful career is different for girls than for boys.
- (2) Girls place limits on themselves as to the careers they would consider, with less emphasis on the stereotypical male occupations (p. 193).

Kniveton (2004) proposed that men have occupational dreams of creating a career and providing for their families, whereas gender roles for women encourage dreams of career choices related to domestic aspirations. For many women, the aspiration of pursuing a career develops later in life. Research suggests two reasons for delaying the advancement of career choice for women: the lack of pursuing an education after high school, and the knowledge that pursuing a career would be added to the primary responsibilities of raising children and managing the household duties (Coogan & Chen, 2007).

Another external barrier for women's career development is employment inequity. Research shows that these barriers are associated with discrimination, sexual harassment, and mentorship limitations. One reported reason that women's salaries are less than males is because women often do not enter occupations that pay well, which is attributed to gender role orientation (Matlin, 2004). Even when women enter the same career fields as men, they get paid

less; according to the controlled gender pay gap, women earn ninety-eight cents for every one dollar earned by men (PayScale, 2019). Other factors that contribute to career choices for women is their role of raising children and putting their career path on hold, as well as discrimination. Phillips and Imhoff (1997) found that discrimination represents a major external barrier that can influence career choice, job entry, job promotions, and job satisfactions (as cited in Coogan & Chen, 2007, p. 194).

Many women are faced with sexual harassment in the workplace. Coogan & Mahalik (2007) found that “many women have their career paths compromised when they are forced to deal with unwanted sexual advances from men both inside the organization, such as supervisors and co-workers, and outside the organization, such as clients and vendors” (p.194). Further, research suggests that sexual harassment creates interpersonal barriers that affect the individual’s career growth and personal well-being (Cook et al., 2002).

Another barrier is the limited resources for mentorships for women. Sosik and Godshalk (2000) suggested that mentorship is beneficial as it promotes self-esteem, job satisfaction, compensation, increase in promotions, and a sincere commitment to the chosen profession. Additionally, the process of mentoring is vital for women because mentors can provide the needed support for guarding against discrimination and ill treatment. According to Joseph-Obi (2000), mentorships were designed to assist with developing skills to perform efficiently; however, this practice falls short because it has not been embraced as an integral part of the promotion to professionalism. On the other hand, Kram (1996) found that mentorships are a vital relationship that serves as a platform for personal learning and an enhancement of personal growth.

Lastly, caring for a family could be a barrier for the advancement of career development because of the added responsibilities. Matlin (2004) found that in the United States, women performed 60-90% of the household and childcare responsibilities. According to Coogan and Mahalik (2007), this results in two consequences for women:

- (a) A pattern of interruptions due to household responsibilities, such as needing to leave work to take care of a sick child.
- (b) Limited career advancement opportunities when reentering the job field after taking time to focus on domestic concerns.

Quick and Moen (1988) showed that because of the pattern of disruptions, women often rotate in and out of the workplace depending on the home situation, and often receive lower salaries when reentering the work force. Also, women that choose to have families are not considered for positions because they are viewed as unable to keep up with the needed skill set to function effectively and competitively within the workplace.

According to Coogan & Mahalik (2007), career development is difficult when barriers such as early gender-role orientation, employee inequities, discrimination, lack of mentorship, sexual harassment, and family responsibilities limit the opportunities to pursue a fulfilling career. These obstacles lead to the decrease in career opportunities and the increase in the number of interruptions experienced by women in the work force. These disadvantages for women facilitate the inequity between men and women (Coogan & Mahalik, 2007).

### **The Counseling Profession**

The counseling profession is important because it assists and guides diverse individuals in the resolution of social and psychological difficulties (Gladding, 2000). The history of the counseling profession in the United States has been well documented in the literature over many

decades. In part, it developed out of a humanitarian concern to improve the lives of those adversely affected by the Industrial Revolution (Arslan, 2018). Kaplan et al. (2014) defined counseling as “a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (p. 366). The counseling profession in America has struggled to establish itself within the growing field of human services within a diverse setting and with populations across the spectrum of age, gender, cultural background, and needs for assistance (Lichtenberg et al., 2016; Arslan, 2018; Smith, 2012). In the United States, the counseling profession began in the American Counseling Association and developed independent accreditation, certification, and licensure processes within new organizations. Thus, the developments in counseling in the United States parallel ACA’s history (Arslan, 2018).

It wasn’t until the middle to late 1960s that the counseling profession acknowledged any concerns about the status and welfare of racial, ethnic, or other minority groups. White (2000), said “the counseling needs of minority groups, as well as the aged, homosexuals, and other groups, were subsumed under assumptions consistent with existing normative values. Such client groups constituted a substantial percentage of the client population but were not considered as having needs or characteristics different enough from the majority clients to warrant any specialized attention” (p. 319). The literature is limited on career influences of the African American culture and, more specifically, on African American women.

The counseling profession has evolved over decades, leading to the definition of standards of practice in the counseling profession. These standards include professionalism, accountability, health care consumerism, credentialism, and public demands for better health care. According to Anderson (2001), the influential factors of the counseling profession are (a)

the growing concern for quality mental health services, (b) increasing public awareness of mental health issues and general health consumerism, (c) expanding quality assurance, (d) a growing progression of state by state credentialism and licensure, and (e) the national emphasis on counselor professionalism. During the 1990s the counseling profession focused on clear and definitive standards of practice (p. 22). Standards are needed to govern the expectations for demonstrating professionalism. In addition, these changes are constantly evolving.

The profession has also focused attention on several areas that would advance the vision for the future of the counseling field, including defining the profession. David et al. (2014) suggested that the priority is strengthening identity, representing as one profession, and improving public perception and recognition. Next, creating licensure portability, expanding and promoting the research base of professional counseling, and focusing on students and prospective students. Finally, promoting client welfare and advocacy for the profession are goals. These areas provide the framework for the Principle for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). This led to defining the profession so that all professional counselors and counseling organizations could use it with their external ventures (David et al., 2014).

Counseling is an answer to the need for mental health services, and provides assistance with navigating through developmental milestones in life. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the counseling profession has seen changes in the treatment of individuals, especially in prisons, asylums, and factories (Kloos et al., 2012). Attention was focused on remediation of all, regardless of circumstance. Concurrently, the education system became a catalyst for change, with a focus on self-actualization and cooperation as part of a humanist education. It became more common to have counselors in schools, for both mental health issues and social and career

guidance. With a widening range of services, the counseling profession grew in response to societal needs and new opportunities.

The lack of African American counselors is a problem (Coker, 2014, p. 132). The counseling profession is seen as a White endeavor (Sue & Sue, 2003) that operates from a White middle-class value system. There continues to be a suspicion and mistrust of the counseling profession held by the African American community. Historically, African Americans were studied to highlight and illustrate negative aspects to export a particular pathology. Coker (2014) found, “there continues to be a lack of counselors who possess the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to work with African American female clients. In addition, some African American women may have had prior negative experiences with intruding White social workers or other social/mental health service providers” (p. 132). Therefore, creating a need for more African American women counselors and knowing the motivational factors help to foster a therapeutic connection for better counselor-client outcome.

Black women have been affected by racism, sexism, classism and colorization (Coker, 2014), which reflects on their career development. Also, there are several roles and responsibilities that African American women juggle, such as careers, raising children, and taking care of extended family members. Coker (2014) explains that the unique challenges faced by African American women, in their efforts to navigate through life’s demands, have a vital impact on their sense of self, level of resiliency, and overall psychological development. They are reluctant to seek counseling, opting to use sources of support within family, friends, and spiritual outlets. The need to seek outside sources is viewed as a sign of cultural or personal deficiency (Coker, 2002; 2014) which creates additional need for more African American women in the counseling profession.

Research suggests that African American women give little focus to their own mental health needs. As a result, many African American women suffer from exhaustion, depression, and numerous stress-related illnesses. Coker (2014) expressed that “the myth and stereotype of being a superwoman adds a serious racialized and gendered twist to the social stigma many fear in using counseling services” (p. 131). The stereotype of being a superwoman results in psychological repercussions or emotional fatigue. The expectation of the African American women to endure all, manage all, and be strong without complaint, has inhibited women from seeking help. Coker (2003, 2014) suggested that the demands placed on African American women indirectly work as an oppressive force, almost to the point of being dehumanizing, limiting the range of vulnerable emotions one can express without being called weak (p. 131). This need may be best met by the presence of more African American women in the counseling profession, because of their cultural ability to relate to the client’s experiences and help alleviate the stigmas and obstacles to better mental health.

Historically, many African American women embraced the superwoman attitudes and behaviors as a result of slavery, racism, and oppression. Slavery represented a time of suffering and physical pain for all African American people. The societal norm during this time period was the use of legalized oppression, torture, and racial terrorism. Slavery was especially difficult for African American women because they were subject to sexual abuse. Coker (2002) found that African American women were used as reproduction machines, having no parental rights, and forced to watch as family members were sold off, beaten, lynched (p. 131). The patterns of dealing with trauma have deep roots in the African American community.

The coping mechanisms for trauma including reliance on family members who were experiencing the same situation, as well as faith, spirituality, and being emotionally intact to

endure the level of intense trauma. The survival of African American womanhood was dependent solely on their ability to control emotions. Further, the identity of African American women was constructed on building and maintaining their relationships with others (Coker, 2014). Therefore, the cultural legacy is both positive and negative and can interfere with African American women's ability and willingness to seek help, leading to them staying in a stressful situation (Coker, 2002). Also, the cultural history of juggling multiple tasks and stressors without adequate physical or mental relief can have harmful effects on one's life (Coker, 2014; 2002). Finally, the image of the self-sacrificing matriarch is still embedded in the minds and hearts of culture, community, and family (Coker, 2014, p. 131). African American women continue to face many challenges and responsibilities. The social stigma, mistrust of the counseling process, multiple daily tasks, and economic instability are influences that reflect the way African American women perceive counseling services. The lack of representation of African American women in the profession is another restriction on seeking services.

### **Summary**

There are many factors that influence career choice, such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, gender-based barriers, and personal characteristics. Encapsulating these factors, the theoretical framework of SCCT provides a comprehensive guide to understanding the ways in which people develop decision-making skills and self-efficacy for the purpose of choosing a career path. While SCCT and the related research can be applied generally, a review of the literature revealed that there is limited material related to career influences specifically for African American women. Clearly, familial, societal, and environmental influences, along with other factors, have an influence on African American women's career choices. However, there is not enough research dedicated to examining the extent to which African American women are affected by these factors, how they overcome barriers to choosing a career, or why they might

select counseling as a profession in spite of the challenges they face. Therefore, this study seeks to address those issues, and to create and implement interventions for African American women, with emphasis on the decision to enter the counseling profession.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the factors that influence African American women to enter the counseling profession and, using qualitative research, to build a theory about those influences. Little is known about the career influences of African American women in the counseling profession. A phenomenological methodology was chosen to capture the participants' perspectives and personal experiences, thereby enabling the researcher to identify common themes. This chapter presents the research methodology and discusses the processes for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, as well as limitations related to the study.

### **Qualitative Methodology**

The process of choosing a research methodology should cater to the participants selected for the study and the research question (Creswell, 2007). This project is dedicated to discovering what influences African American women to enter the counseling profession. While the literature revealed several factors that influence career choices generally, little is known about how they apply specifically to the unique population at the heart of this study. Also, these factors are subjective, variable, and interconnected. Research conducted from a phenomenological framework recognizes that the individual's subjective experience is important in understanding the essence of the phenomenon. Therefore, this topic is best explored and expressed through a qualitative approach.

The current study explored participants' experiences to gain an understanding of their meaning. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was selected because the researcher places value on the ability of the participants to share their experiences, understands that the nature and goals of the study are not useful for a quantitative approach, and believes this study of

African American women in the counseling profession would add rich data to the body of literature.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described qualitative research as having a foundation of the following characteristics: (a) research is conducted in the natural setting, (b) multiple methods are used for data collection, (c) the understanding is emergent, (d) the study is interpretive, (e) the holistic perspective is the view of the researcher, (f) the reasoning is complex, (g) it is reflective, and (h) it requires one or more strategies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Essentially, the focus is on gaining an in-depth understanding of the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants and applying them theoretically to a larger group.

The phenomenological approach provides the researcher with an opportunity to engage in the data gathering process, hereby gaining in-depth data from the participants. This study investigated the underlying influences, factors, and personal characteristics that motivated the participants to pursue a career in the counseling profession. Therefore, the qualitative approach was the most effective for this study and the outcomes are written in an in-depth, illustrative style that provides a full understanding of the participants' true experiences related to the subject matter.

Phenomenology is the development of a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It endeavors to explore the genuineness of the phenomena and examines the profound experiences of the participants through the interpretation of their expressed stories (Merriam, 2009). This approach is designed to investigate an area where limited information is known, as is the case with the career influences of African American women in the counseling profession. The research participants were chosen because they have lived the phenomenon and agreed to share their direct experiences.

Phenomenology has developed through different philosophical arguments since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Edmond Husserl, a German mathematician, was known as the father of phenomenology (Cohen, 1987; Garforth & Scruton, 1995; Koch, 1996). He wrote about the philosophy of transcendental phenomenology with an emphasis on the holistic approach of being open to exploring all possibilities rather than being limited to certain situations related to the phenomenon. This idea suggests that a dynamic, conversational interview structured on open-ended questions is a better tool for gathering data than a static method such as a written survey. The interview process provides the opportunity to experience a genuine understanding of the phenomena.

The phenomenology approach is important because of its unique ability to learn from the experience of others. Due to the limited data on African American women, this approach provides an in-depth view of the motivating factors for entering the counseling profession. Also, it can provide a profound, detailed understanding of these factors. As it relates to African American women, the perception of being in the helping field and the motivating factors could contribute to successful outcomes.

The philosophy of transcendental phenomenology was developed by Moustakas (1994) and focuses on the description of the participant's identified experiences, as opposed to the hermeneutic phenomenology, which allows for the researcher's interpretation. Moustakas (1994) utilized Husserl's work and focused on putting personal bias away, to receive the perspectives of the participants. This concept is known as *epoche*, being cognizant of experiences and not letting this experience tint the data collection and interpretation. Therefore, "researchers [...] embrace this idea when they begin a project by describing their own experiences with the phenomenon and bracketing out their views before proceeding with the experiences of others" (Creswell &

Poth, 2018, p. 78). One methodological challenge this study presented was in emulating the transcendental approach because the researcher is an African American woman in the counseling profession. However, the participants' experiences were described and analyzed strictly from the participants' viewpoints and not from the researcher's experience. The phenomenological approach was chosen to understand the essence of the lived experience of African American professional women who chose to enter the counseling profession.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative design was chosen because it best fits the scope of the research. The use of quantitative research design would have devalued the scope of the study by restricting the participants' expression of their experiences, due to the confines of predetermined questions. This approach focuses on cause and effect variables and the use of a reliable instrument to collect data to develop conclusions (Creswell, 2007). The quantitative research methodology is unable to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the participants.

Interviewing was chosen as the best method for gathering qualitative data for this study. Donalek (2004) found that in qualitative research, "participants may write of their experiences but are more often interviewed" (p. 516). The interview process is a collaborative effort on the part of both researchers and participants to explore their experiences and co-create meaning. The researcher identifies the themes and then examines these themes to describe the phenomena (Donalek, 2001).

The phenomenon of African American women in the counseling profession has received limited empirical research. Although this study is exploratory and does not seek to test preexisting theories, it is possible to form a general expectation about what the results will show. Based on the literature, it is likely that general career influences such as the family of origin,

gender expectations, personal interests, and socioeconomic status will play a part in the career choices of African American women, as they do for most people. However, the findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge by providing concrete evidence regarding African American women in the counseling profession, specifically.

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling is the intentional sampling of a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the problem under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). This transcendental phenomenological study chose participants based on purposeful sampling (Boeije, 2010), selecting a small sample, as indicated by this methodology, and in order to have more control over the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) found a variety of different types of purposeful sampling: maximum variation, homogeneous, critical case, theory-based, confirming and disconfirming cases, snowball or chain, extreme or deviant case, typical case, intensity, politically important, random purposeful, stratified purposeful, criterion, opportunistic, combination or mixed, and convenience (p. 159). Homogenous sampling was the best choice for this study because of the narrow research question, which seeks information on one specific population in one career field. The selected participants had similar characteristics in that they are all African American women in the counseling profession.

The sampling criteria represented the identified population sought in this research. The participants were chosen according to the needs of the study. For this study, the criteria were as follows: (a) African American women (b) currently employed as Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors, (c) at least one year of direct client contact, and (d) available to engage in face-to-face interviews.

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that the sample size for a phenomenological study range from three to ten participants, and one phenomenon. This study had eight participants volunteer to engage in the study. It has been noted that the views of individuals who are in the counseling profession for at least one year may be different from those just entering the profession (Hill et al. 2013). Therefore, the study sample consisted of participants with one or more practicing years in the counseling profession. This approach captured a holistic view of why participants entered the field of counseling.

This study employed the public memberserv list from the North Carolina Counseling Association (NCCA), and the Whova App obtained during the 2020 North Carolina Counseling Association conference, to identify African American women in the field. Participants were recruited from the members of the NCCA. The project lead sent a recruitment notice to prospective participants through the memberserv list (Appendix A). Some participants became interested through word of mouth among private practice counselors and volunteered to participate without being solicited. Potential participants were directly contacted via email to assess their ability and desire to engage in the study. Interested participants volunteered to participate in the study by responding to the email invitation.

The initial contact included a description of the study, research guidelines, and procedures. Interested participants were sent an information letter providing details on the study as well as ethical guidelines (Appendix B). The letter provided information regarding the purpose and goals of the study, the researcher's credentials, details on the interview process, including information on the right to stop the interview at any time, and the impact that engaging in the study may have on the participants. Potential participants were informed that there would

be a therapist on standby if they needed to speak to someone as a result of unexpected emotions during the interview.

The participants were pre-screened to ensure that they met the stated criteria and had been practicing with individuals for at least one year. Once the screening was completed, the researcher confirmed the willingness to continue with the process by asking, "are you willing and able to participate in this research about the influences that led you to enter the counseling profession?" The researcher then sent a follow-up email with the confirmation to participate, a description of the purpose of the study, assurance of confidentiality, and the time and date of the interview.

### **Materials**

The qualitative process encourages face-to-face interactions and observations of the participants; therefore, the interview process was an appropriate choice as the instrument for gathering data. The questions were open-ended to permit the participants to offer full and rich responses. Triangulation was present in the study to increase trustworthiness and to protect the study from any potential errors in data collection. According to Creswell (2014), triangulation involves multiple sources of gathering data from the participants, such as face-to-face interviews, audiotaping, and the participant's review and corrections of the transcript.

Before the initiation of the interview, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire related to the number of years they have worked in the profession, the number of hours working with clients, and a description of the counseling setting in which they currently see clients (Appendix C). This data provided the researcher with a better understanding of the demographics of the sample, as well as the setting in which the participants provide direct counseling services. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview

questions. Open-ended questions guided this process to elicit responses for factors that influence career choice (Appendix D). For example, the literature review suggested that family of origin, personal characteristics, and gender role expectations all have a significant impact on career decisions; these topics were suggested as points of inquiry in the interview, and participants were encouraged to expand upon their responses.

Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were used as a guide to assist the participants to reflect on their experiences of entering the counseling profession. The researcher asked questions related to career influences that motivated the participants to enter the profession. The participants were provided the opportunity to express their thoughts on each question and were encouraged to elaborate by using probes to enlist a deeper response. Probes are an interview strategy, a reminder to the researcher of two types of question: to ask for more information, or to ask for an explanation of ideas, using phrases such as "tell me more" and/or "could you explain your response?" The interview protocol was created by the researcher based on principles gathered from the literature review. Also, the researcher's personal experiences of working in the counseling profession assisted in formulating certain questions and employing effective interview techniques.

The interview questions were designed to seek a deeper understanding of the motivating factors that influenced the participants to become counselors. Motivating factors have a unique influence on how each individual brings these intrinsic components to the field of counseling. Along with data collection, a secondary purpose of the interview style was to validate the participants' career choices and help them to reflect on the factors they deemed significantly influential on their choice to enter the counseling profession.

## Procedures

### Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that the researcher's responsibility is to protect the study participants, develop trust, advocate for the integrity of the study, protect against misconduct that may harm the participant or the organization, and to deal with new and challenging problems (p. 88). Steps taken before the study included a review of the standards set forth by the American Counseling Association, gaining approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB), obtaining permission from the participants, and adhering to confidentiality and privacy recommendations.

Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent agreement to participate in this study before providing data. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that consent forms are a standard set of elements that grant the safeguarding of human rights. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a consent form should include the following:

1. Identification of the researcher,
2. Identification of the sponsoring institution,
3. Identification of the purpose of the study,
4. Identification of the benefits of participating,
5. Identification of the level and type of participant involvement,
6. Notification of risks to the participant,
7. Assurance that the participant can withdraw at any time,
8. Provision of names of the person to contact if questions arise (p. 92).

These elements were followed in this study. Finally, the IRB approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at National Louis University.

The requirements for this study posed minimal risk to participants. There was some chance of a participant experiencing an overwhelming emotional response during the interview; however, there was a counselor available to assist any participants who became overwhelmed with emotions or who wanted to process feelings that surfaced during this process. All participants received a letter of interest informing them of the purpose of the study and eligibility criteria. The participants who chose to engage in the study were provided with information as to how to contact the researcher. The participants that initiated contact with the researcher were provided detailed verbal and written information related to the study requirements, potential benefits, and risks, as well as their right to withdraw from the process at any time without any penalty.

Successful interviewing requires engagement, sensitivity, and collaboration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the study to promote engagement and were allowed to ask questions. This was provided to the participants to initiate the development of the therapeutic working relationship and acknowledged the feelings, concerns, and opinions of each participant. This aspect was important for the study as it aided in creating a comfortable environment for the sharing of information. The collaboration process encouraged the participants to focus on providing rich descriptions of their experiences during the interview process.

Informed consent was presented to the participant and signed before the initiation of the study. The participants were allowed the opportunity to ask questions before the interview to provide them with a sense of security and were informed that they would be given a summary of the results upon completion if so desired. They were also provided with anonymity for their protection. Each participant was assigned a unique code number that represented their interview

and transcript. All documentation and recording will be kept in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after two years.

### **Data Collection**

After the study participants were identified, the researcher provided a participation letter (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix E) via electronic mail which they returned before the interview. The researcher arranged an interview time at the discretion of both the participant and the researcher. During each interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, the content of the study, their right to stop the interview at any time, and advised that the interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes and to ensure that the researcher had accurately portrayed the participants' experiences. The researcher then reviewed how their confidentiality would be maintained and the limitations of their anonymity.

The data was collected from the participants using a semi-structured interview that was recorded and transcribed. This provided the researcher an opportunity to review for accuracy before proceeding to the data-analysis process. Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour. The participants agreed to audio record the sessions to assist with ensuring accuracy. The interview transcripts were available for the participants to review. All feedback and corrections were incorporated in the final analytical report. This process served to assist in controlling the researcher's assumptions and unknown biases. The researcher took notes during the interview and included them in the participant's file. Notes included the researcher's observations regarding the participant's non-verbal communication. The researcher then transcribed, organized, analyzed, and synthesized the data using NVivo as a means to gather themes and meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Data Analysis

Data analysis makes sense of text and image data by segmenting and taking apart the data as well as reassembling the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There were several general points about the process of qualitative data analysis that influenced the researcher's process. The overall process included simultaneous procedures, winnowing, and the use of the qualitative computer software program for assistance. Simultaneous procedures focus on other parts of the study such as analyzing the data throughout the process, including writing that would be included in the final report. This process is different from quantitative research in that the researcher collects the data, then analyzes the information, and finally creates the written report (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Because of the dense and rich information that is gathered, winnowing may be necessary; this process focuses on certain data and disregards that which is deemed irrelevant or insubstantial. This is different from quantitative research, in which researchers use all the data and, through projection, replace any missing data. In qualitative research, the data is placed in small numbers of themes. The use of qualitative computer software programs is an effective way of storing and locating qualitative data.

The procedures analyze various forms of qualitative data using specific steps. Creswell and Creswell (2018) found the following steps as essential to analyzing the data in sequence from specific to general and consisting of multiple levels of analysis. Creswell's first step is to organize and prepare the data for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this step, the researcher transcribed each interview recording by listening to the audiotape and typing each word. Then the researcher double-checked the accuracy by reading the transcription while listening to the recordings, making corrections as needed. Next, the researcher created a physical

file for each participant that contained the printed transcription and the researcher's notes, and labeled it appropriately with the interviewee's identifying code. Also, the researcher double-checked the notes and labels for accuracy.

The transcribed interview was provided to the participant for review. If the participant made any corrections or wanted to add new information, notes were made and included with the file. Creswell and Creswell (2018) found that at times, qualitative researchers write notes in the margins of the transcript, usually observational field notes and/or general thoughts about the data. This practice assisted the researcher to maintain accuracy throughout the process. This fulfilled Creswell's second step, which suggests reviewing the collected data and adding notes as needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After the participants approved the transcriptions, the next step, coding the data, was undertaken.

In coding the data, Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested organizing the data by bracketing chunks of the data and writing a word in the margin that could represent categories. The researcher then took all the data collected and placed it into categories that represented similar ideas. Then the researcher labeled the different categories with the language of the participants. The researcher reviewed the data several times to ensure the accuracy of the information.

The coding process was developed using descriptive codes, especially *vivo* codes that would be a reflection from the statements of the participants or identified common phrases from the examined text. The initial coding identified broad sections for future reference. A line-by-line approach was conducted to provide details that became more profound. Following this process, similar themes were collected in each category and then placed together with similarities. The identified codes reflect the themes.

Coding consisted of three cycles. The first cycles of coding were the emerging data that provided the first impressions through taking notes while reading page by page and line by line. The second cycle of coding was used by collapsing and expanding the data to get a better understanding of any observed patterns. The characteristics of the patterns observed were the frequency, sequence, similarity, and difference embodied in the collected data. The first cycle codes were based on the first four interviews as a sample to find common codes. A second look at the data was used to determine which codes to collapse, which codes were of importance, and which codes were not going to be important. These codes were determined to be the set codes and used to start the next level of coding. The second level coding was started using the first level codes to help guide the rest of the data more efficiently. The third cycle of coding involved writing memos that included the theoretical basis for this study, and which guided the process of writing the report. These cycles may overlap, as descriptions and themes emerge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The generation of descriptions and themes was the fourth step in analyzing data, as identified by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The researcher made notes about the major themes discovered in the data, and described the multiple perspectives of the participants, as supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence. The researcher reviewed all the notes, made a list of each thematic label, made a tally mark for each time a particular theme came up in the transcriptions, and then highlighted the ones that were discussed most frequently.

The final step is to represent the description and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this step, the researcher's description and themes are presented and discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Next, the researcher displayed this information in various ways such as a spreadsheet, list, and graphic. Also, the researcher used a graphic tool to organize and structure the data. NVivo is a

software tool used to assist with undertaking the analysis of qualitative data. It assists with managing ideas of conceptual and theoretical knowledge generated during the study, and query data for simple or complex questions. Also, it helps the researcher to visualize the data by showing the content and/or structure of ideas and concepts and to report the data using the original data sources (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 3). The researcher used the software by selecting nodes in the navigation view, selecting the unit of text in the sort item, adding it to List View, entering the name and description, and saving by clicking “okay” (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). A conceptual map was created to organize and structure the data. The researcher used this map to present the findings of the study. Creswell and Creswell's steps are an essential part of analyzing data and were followed during this study. The conclusions drawn are suggestive based on the exploratory qualitative approach of this study.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Qualitative research incorporates criteria that solidify results such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009). To ensure the study measured the intention, questions were developed and analyzed using the software NVivo. A random sample of participants was gathered from the memberserv list of the North Carolina Counseling Association (NCCA) from the member portal during the NCCA 2020 Conference. The methods used for gathering data included individual interviews and observation of behaviors during the interview. Documents provided by the participants created more insight into the influential factors related to career influence for women in the counseling professions (Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Another form of triangulation was used by counselors within a variety set that

provided a rich picture of the attitude, needs, and behaviors based on the contributions of a range of people (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

The assumption that participants would answer honestly is a factor of trustworthiness. Several strategies were used to ensure the honesty of the participants when collecting the data. Participants were informed that they could refuse to engage in the study or could stop the interview at any time. At the beginning of each session, they were informed that there were no right or wrong answers to any of the questions, and encouraged to be truthful and open. Interviewees were reminded of the independent status of the researcher, so that they had no fear of losing the credibility of the researcher (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Debriefing sessions were held between the researcher and the committee chair throughout the process, to review the methodology and scope of the project as participants engaged in the study. These sessions were used as a sounding board to discuss ideas and interpretations, and assist with recognizing the researcher's own biases and preferences. The collaborative session was also helpful in keeping attuned to the research. The opportunity to receive feedback was welcomed. This process assisted the researcher to refine the method, develop a greater discussion of the research design, and strengthen the argument with new information (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

The use of reflective commentary was incorporated into this study to reevaluate throughout its development. The effectiveness of the techniques was evaluated and adjustments made. The initial impression of the data collected and emerging patterns were recorded and generated into themes. The reflective commentary assisted with monitoring the developing constructs that are critical for credibility. The researcher is the major instrument of data

collection and analysis and personal and professional information was included. This study was not funded by any source and participants gave informed consent to participate. (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Member checking was used for accuracy at the end of the data collection process. Participants were asked to review the transcript once received from the researcher. The emphasis was placed on the review of information collected to check the accuracy of the data provided (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009). Also, member checking was used to verify the emerging theories and inferences that were formed during the interview process (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009). These strategies for ensuring integrity helped to shape the project and were given utmost importance in establishing trustworthy research methods.

### ***Transferability***

Thick descriptions and journaling were used to explain the phenomenon. Amankwaa (2016) explained that by describing the phenomenon in sufficient detail, one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people (p. 122). The interview questions were peer-reviewed for clarity; they were open-ended and called for extended answers, and the research was replicated with each participant and each question. The interview was conducted in such a way as to obtain a detailed, thick, and robust response to reproduce the phenomenon of the research in as much detail as possible. The interview continued until all questions were discussed. The researcher was mindful of two issues related to thick descriptions: receiving thick responses, and writing up the responses of the participants that describe the phenomena as a thick response (Amankwaa, 2016; Shenton, 2004).

Journaling was planned to be used in advance with the preset interview date, and the journal entry was completed immediately after the session. The use of journaling after a major event during the interview was also recorded in the journal. The effort to express thoughts and ideas was peer-reviewed to help with making the connection to the participant's experiences. The format of the journals was the use of emails. Each journal entry would consist of significant and insignificant activities of the research; it started on the first day the research was initiated and concluded once all the participants were interviewed. A timeline (Appendix F) was created based on the dates of each activity related to schedule interviews (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

### ***Dependability***

Inquiry audits were used to determine whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data. The auditor was a colleague within the counseling profession. The inquiry audits were reviewed by the auditor for authenticity and consistency. She was able to provide honest feedback to maintain audit documents. A timeline (Appendix F) was created based on the dates of each activity (Amankwaa, 2016).

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability was used to reduce research bias and increase motivation. The intent was to incorporate triangulation to verify that the findings were shaped by the participant and not the researcher. Audit trails were used after each interview, maintaining details of the data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the data. The researcher identified topics of interest, uniqueness, personal thoughts about coding, the emergence of certain codes, and the explanation of the meaning by each theme (Shenton, 2004).

### **Limitations**

In this study, limitations for collecting the data depended on the availability of the participant during the identified collection period. The interview schedule remained open until the interviews were completed. The sample size was critical in collecting the most essential data. There was also a limitation with the small sample size. The results of this study may not generalize to men, students, and people of other cultures. Also, the use of a questionnaire could be developed and implemented with a larger population to determine the generalizability of the findings. This study also represents the counseling profession; the results of the study cannot be generally applied to other professional fields.

### **Summary**

This study of the career influences of African American women entering the counseling profession was most appropriately achieved through a phenomenological approach. This approach was identified as the best approach to uncover the essence of the lived experience of career influences. The selected participants were able to respond to semi-structured questions to reveal their experiences of the influential factors for their choice to enter the counseling profession. To ensure validity, multiple strategies were employed to protect the integrity of the sample selection, the privacy of the interviewees, and the authenticity of the collected and analyzed data. The results of using this methodology were beneficial to the researcher by providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The study of career influences of African American women in the counseling profession adds to the body of literature from a positive perspective, as it may encourage further research on the subjects or other populations within the counseling field; it also provides examples of contextual factors that are influential for African American women.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to reveal the career influences, choices, and motivations that led a sampling of African American women to choose careers in the counseling profession. The qualitative data analysis resulted in the discovery of key themes as they relate to the central research question: What motivating factors influence African American women to enter the counseling profession? This part of the study focused on the exploration of the factors that led a sampling of Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors to work in the counseling field.

Phenomenology was used as a tool to understand the genuineness of the foundational concerns that stem from the participant's experience, and to assist in the process of accurately interpreting organizational themes. Therefore, a phenomenon is used to understand the essence of how individuals lived (Creswell, 2012). Also, Flynn and Korcuska (2018) suggested that phenomenological research methodology endeavor to discern the essences of participants' lived experiences and to lay aside their prevailing understandings of a phenomenon to authentically explore the participants' experiences (p. 35). Finally, Creswell explained that phenomenology has similar characteristics to ground theory due to both methodologies attempt to develop an understanding of individuals' experiences using the process of induction.

The participants were recruited in North Carolina at the North Carolina Counseling Association (NCCA) 2020 Conference. There were eight participants, several of whom were licensed in more than one category. All participants were Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors (LCMHC). However, the breakdown includes licenses in the following categories: four were LCMHC, two were LCMHC and Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselors (CADC) one

was an LCMHC and a Licensed Recreational Therapist, and one was LCMHC with a specialty in victimization (Table 1).

The researcher gathered information on the type of occupational setting from each participant. Seven participants worked full time: three in private practice, one in a school-based setting, one in an outpatient setting, one in the prison setting, and one in an agency. One participant worked full-time in a different position (psychiatry and agencies) and worked part-time in a Level 4 group home. Aside from working on a full-time basis, two participants also were involved part-time in a private practice setting.

The data collection method for this research study comprised of in-depth virtual individual interviews with eight African American participants in the counseling profession. All eight interviews were transcribed and then interpreted using the NVivo software. This method of data analysis requires the researcher to create nodes for significant data, which were retrieved from the text and clustered into themes. The data-analysis reviewed in this chapter comprised of the participants' responses to the interview questions. The researcher developed clusters and themes taken from the participants' descriptions. Also, the data analysis included a presentation of the participants' nominal data, such as participants' demographic factors, including areas of practice.

The most popular form of data collection compared to any other data type is Nominal data collection (Creswell, 2014). Nominal data was used to encapsulate the demographic characteristics of the study's participants. In addition, the demographic factors and the phenomenon being studied may be discovered using Nominal data. Therefore, Table 1 is a representation of the demographic data collected from the participants during the interview process.

**Table 1.**

*Demographics of Study Participants. MA – Participant’s Degree*

| <b>Code No.</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Years of Experience</b> | <b>Setting</b>                      | <b>Childhood SES</b> | <b>Dual Licensed</b> |
|-----------------|------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| <b>001</b>      | <b>34</b>  | <b>12+</b>                 | <b>Private Practice, Psychiatry</b> | <b>Middle Class</b>  |                      |
| <b>002</b>      | <b>49</b>  | <b>20</b>                  | <b>Agency and Private Practice</b>  | <b>Lower Class</b>   |                      |
| <b>003</b>      | <b>31</b>  | <b>8+</b>                  | <b>Outpatient</b>                   | <b>Lower Class</b>   |                      |
| <b>004</b>      | <b>50</b>  | <b>12</b>                  | <b>Level 3 Group Home</b>           | <b>Poverty</b>       | *                    |
| <b>005</b>      | <b>43</b>  | <b>14</b>                  | <b>School-Based</b>                 | <b>Middle Class</b>  | *                    |
| <b>006</b>      | <b>53</b>  | <b>30</b>                  | <b>Prison</b>                       | <b>Lower Class</b>   | *                    |
| <b>007</b>      | <b>45</b>  | <b>20</b>                  | <b>Private Practice</b>             | <b>Lower Class</b>   | *                    |
| <b>008</b>      | <b>59</b>  | <b>30</b>                  | <b>Private Practice</b>             | <b>Middle Class</b>  |                      |

The data in Table 1 indicates the participants in this study were middle age and had at least 8 years of experience in the counseling profession. All of the participants were master level counselors, and Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors, with four holding a dual license. Two participants were licensed in substance abuse, one as a recreational therapist, and one with a certification/specialty working with sex offenders and victims of sexual abuse.

The demographic characteristics of the study participants revealed the participants were seasoned professionals and practiced in different setting within the counseling profession. Two of the participants worked in dual setting with one setting in common of private practice. Four of the participants were affiliated with private practice, one outpatient, one group home, one school based, one forensic, one agency, and one psychiatry. These participants worked with children, adolescents, adults and older adults. The socioeconomical status of the study participants ranged from poverty to middle class.

### **Data Collection Findings**

Data was collected from eight African American Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors via virtual, one-on-one interviews between study participants and the researcher. These women were interviewed for approximately one hour each by the researcher, using semi-structured questions. The questions were designed to facilitate an open-ended dialogue, allowing the participants to provide an in-depth exploration of their emotions regarding their experiences in the counseling profession.

The participants provided rich details of their experiences, which included concrete examples with insightful details. All of the participants were comfortable with the interview and wanted to share their experiences of their influential factors for entering the counseling profession. They appreciated the opportunity to share their perceptions about the phenomenon being studied. They also expressed the hope that this data would encourage others to enter the profession, as it is a fluid process that helps so many people, and more African American women are needed in the field. They hope that this research will be informative and initiate the interest of African American women to enter the field.

The interviews began with the review of the informed consent, the collection of demographic information that included age, the practice setting, the number of years in the profession, and the number of direct weekly contacts. Following the collection of the demographics, the interviewer began asking the participants questions about their perceptions of the counseling profession, their influences, and their motivations to enter the field. The interviewer allowed each participant the time needed to complete their response.

The participants' responses were analyzed based on the phenomenology method, which included the identification of the following: (a) descriptive clusters of the phenomenon, (b)

themes, (c) subjective interpretations of the identified themes, and (d) developing a concept of universals (Creswell, 2018). The interpretations of the phenomenon were based on the participants' interview responses.

### **Research Question**

This study was centered around one research question that explained the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, the experiences of African American women in the counseling profession. The research question responses represent the participants' experiences in the form of clusters and themes accompanying supportive examples directly from the interviews.

Question: What motivating factors and challenges are experienced by African American women who become Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors? Six dominant themes emerged from the responses of the participants: family influence, personal characteristics, work experience, adult influence, the absence of African American women in the profession, and education.

This section will address the participants' responses to the identified six themes (Table 3). Five of the themes were continuously repeated in the participants' responses. While the themes are somewhat related, the participants indicated that there was some difference in that of adaptability and the personal characteristics that were motivators.

#### **Family Influence**

All eight participants cited family dynamics as being a primary influence for choosing to enter the counseling profession. Participant 001 explained her perspective, linking it with resources and trauma. She said, "My parents were a big influence on my career. My father was diagnosed with cancer out the blue and we had to take him to the VA in Miami, and the services were not quality services, based on the type of services you would provide anyone with a

military career. It was very disappointing. I wanted to provide quality care services to personnel who served and became underserved. This was probably the most impact, which is why I will probably continue to serve the military personnel for the rest of my life."

Participant 002, in listing family influence as an influential factor in the context of not being exposed to certain resources, explained, "It was limited finance, including lacking clothing, limited involvement in activities. Things that my sisters and I wanted to be involved with, we couldn't because of my father's infidelity; we weren't able to do things, so this contributed a lot to my decision to want to help others. My family was not warm and fuzzy. My parents did not show a lot of affection towards each other and it was only a minimal amount of affection that they showed us. My family experiences created the drive to work to do things differently, and to be there for people to let them know it's okay to express their feelings."

Participant 003 found her supportive mother to be the motivating factor, saying "I think my mom was always very involved. My mom's approach to parenting and being present in our lives was influential. The relationship she had with myself and my sibling, how supportive she was. I think that influenced me wanting to make sure as a provider that I make a safe place for kids. There was not a time that I did not ever feel supported when I was growing up in my family."

Participant 004 cited family, low socioeconomic status, and trauma as contributing factors within her household that influenced her to join the counseling profession. She explained, "My family was the biggest influence because it showed me that I wanted to help other adolescents see that their family dynamics did not have to guide their future. My mother being in a lot of abusive relationships, and witnessing the different type of things that happened in the family, I think it's what led me into health care and counseling. As I got older and found out what exactly

occurred to her during childhood, it really kind of pushed me to say and think, you know, there's a lot behind the reason people are the way they are, and learning to explore that, to help not only that person if they need some support, to help other people view and see things differently. I feel that my culture helped me to know adolescents, black adolescents, and help them understand how their family dynamic can and will shape them and how they can shape themselves differently if they want to. They don't have to go by the card they were dealt."

Participant 005 found that the support of her family was key to her success and desire to help others, sharing, "My childhood experience, I just had a supportive family, a very supportive mom and dad that said, 'Whatever you want to do, we got you. Whatever, tell us what you want to do and we will fight through it.' My mom worked on the line in a factory and they just said, 'It's whatever you want. We can help you,' and to this day, you know, my mom is still that kind of force. I was afforded supportive parents that said, 'We'll do as much as we can to help you,' and it wasn't about what I wanted to go to college to be; they didn't care, they said 'If this is what you want, this is what we are going to do to get you there.' I think just having very supportive, dedicated, and hard-working parents, a brother, uncles, and grandparents, that we were very strong, connected family, and I just think having that family, and if I needed a shoulder to cry on, I have my aunt that was seven years older than me, my mom had a really large family of siblings. I just feel like the experiences that I had early on cultivated my opportunities to become a therapist, to become a licensed counselor. My experiences and the family support, these are the foundation of what led me to the profession and led me to one of the most important influences".

Participant 006 cited that her family dynamics were instrumental in choosing healthcare as a profession. She linked this influence with trauma and substance abuse, explaining, "I came from a very dysfunctional family, and I think as much as that education helped me to prepare to

help others, [it] changed who I was. I didn't look, walk or talk the same way after all of that experience. I had a difficult childhood, so I can relate to those who show trouble in those areas. My mother had an anxiety disorder, and I am convinced that she has a personality disorder, and I'm very clear about that. It's taken me many years to come to terms with that. I'm 50 years old and that still tears me, makes me cry, because my mother showed me that she saw me and that I mattered. That was one time that she did something outside of my father, and showing me that I mattered."

Participant 007 also cited that her family structure was instrumental in her choice to enter the counseling profession, and is also linked with trauma, sexual abuse, and substance abuse. She said, "[There was an] influence within my family structure; so like, alcoholism, which was why I was drawn to the substance abuse [area of counseling]. My dad was killed by a family member who was driving drunk, under the influence. Just growing up, and things that emotionally had me where I was fearful, nervous, and back then things were kind of swept under the rug, not having an outlet for that kind of stuff. So those two things growing up, the things that kind of haunted me most, were the things that I wanted to help others with. Just really trying to culturally change that perspective; African-Americans have trouble growing up, and things that were instilled in them, their parents didn't believe it and it kind of goes on to the next generation. Watching things that they went through in their experience, and the effect that it had on them, the depression and the anxiety. So, I think it is ongoing, just observing things around me. The kids, and the adults themselves, suffering because counseling was never something they believed in, so they have the same mentality."

Participant 008 found her family was influential in understanding education and hard work as factors for choosing the counseling profession. She shared, "The only influence of

family structure, maybe due to my relationship with my grandmother—we were very close and she worked at WSSU, and therefore I attended that college and obtained my bachelor's in Psychology, minor in Sociology. I think the adults in my family all contributed; my grandparents showing me the importance of hard work and dedication, my maternal grandmother teaching me the importance of education, my mom being my cheerleader with any direction I pursued, and my dad being self-employed, taught me that you can control your destiny, but seize opportunities that are presented to you and listen to all that provide you with knowledge, but make your own choice.”

In summary, family influences were described in many responses as the family’s ability to be flexible with family dynamics that included socioeconomic status, available resources, trauma, and substance use where everyone in the family is affected. Socioeconomic resources are limited in low and sometime middle-class neighborhoods. Research suggest that individuals in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods were not likely to find employment related to their aspiration (Blustein et al., 2002). However, the participants in this study that could identify with being raised in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood indeed found the job of their aspirations and are doing well in the field. The results of the literature in this area contradicts the finding in this study.

Participants’ overall themes related to family structure indicated that the need to help others evolved out of chaos, as well as family dynamics that valued work and helping others. Although each participant experienced different family dynamics, the majority of the responses could identify with family as being instrumental in their decision to enter the counseling profession. However, the literature revealed that the relationship between family background and work values plays a critical role in career choice, and the focus is more on extrinsic work than

intrinsic work values (Fouad et al., 2016). The results of this study confirm that family is instrumental in career choice; however, the focus is more on the intrinsic work values for these participants due to their desire and skills to be present in the process, genuine, compassionate, open, and flexible with their clients.

Three participants indicated that they found culture to be an important factor within the context of career influence. Closely related in their responses was what they identified as the lack of resources and fair treatment. Participant 001 emphasized that she was encouraged to talk to Jesus about her problems, and that this was the only resource mentioned within her family. "I think everything within my community was, 'don't talk to anybody but Jesus, go to Him with all your issues.' We believe in that very heavily, but also understand that there are other resources, and understanding that we don't have to continue being placed in a box in the community and as a culture."

Participant 004 highlighted the lack of understanding as a culture, and the need for diversity. In discussing personal concerns, she shared, "It was difficult not being able to have things that my peers had, or being able to experience things outside of my culture that I would see others do. Being looked upon as not being worthy. I definitely think my culture pushes me into the field a bit more. I think that in the African-American community we really don't understand the need for counseling."

Participant 005 emphasized that racial tension, and not being acknowledged during her life, assisted her culturally in deciding her career choice. "I spoke to the college advisor; she steered me to social work. I don't know if it was racially motivated and I don't know if it was intentional, because we know that the social work field has a tendency to be browner, and our counseling field is not necessarily as brown. So, I wonder; those were cultural and racial

disparities that maybe factored into at least the advisement that I received, even though I decided that wasn't the direction. I didn't know there were cultural influences or that it was microaggression that might have been happening again. I didn't know how that worked, but now, in hindsight, I can kind of look at it like, that's interesting. I wonder if my white counterpart that came in there that said, 'Yeah, I want to be a therapist,' they're a psychologist now, or if the licensed counselors were those that were told to go to social work."

In summary, participants identified culture as being a motivating factor to want to branch out and do things differently, because, due to racial disparity, their upbringing did not encourage them to explore the careers that others were choosing. Kawaii-Bogue et al. (2017) suggest that disparities within the African American culture included the limited access to healthcare, the stigma of receiving mental health services in the African American community, and the underlying racism and stereotypes related to counselors who are unfamiliar with African American culture. The responses of the participants highlighted that their culture emphasized religion, being confined to the surroundings, limited resources, the experience of microaggression, and not being seen as being on the same platform as a Caucasian person. A couple of the participants' responses also indicated that resources, including counseling, were not an option for the African American community.

### **Personal Characteristics**

All participants listed personal characteristics as a primary influence for wanting to help others and pursue a career in counseling. Participant 001 explained, "I believe I am very open, I'm very creative, I [...] don't hold any bias, and I think that makes me effective. I have served every population, from every diverse cultural group. I think my ability to be open and to be authentic with them makes me the most effective. I try to connect their day-to-day experiences,

so that's what makes me a very effective clinician. I wanted to be a sound counsel, I wanted to be effective, I wanted to be very impactful, even if the reward wasn't monetary, and I think because of who I am, I'm able to commit more to the healing."

Participant 002 described personal characteristics as being a helpful attribute for working in the profession, sharing, "I have a love for people, I have the patience, I listen well, I validate, and it doesn't take me long to develop a rapport with my clients. I'm pretty approachable, kind of down to earth."

Participant 003 spoke about how the focus on herself was needed. "As a professional counselor," she explained, "[it's important to practice] self-care and be able to take care of yourself and do the self-work that you need to do, to make sure that you create a safe space for the kids that you work with. Not only the kids, but the families that you work with. I always put self-care as one of the things I need to do for professional growth. I think, professionally, I am very flexible, I'm willing to meet people where they are, I feel like everybody needs somebody to listen to them and be validated. Just being kind and being willing to hear people out and being a good listener. I think that is something that helps me in my career."

Participant 004 emphasized the task of bringing two roles together and finding the best tools for each client, explaining, "I'm able to resonate with the kids. I feel that the recreation background and the counseling background allowed me to be more hands-on with the kids, and I think kids have to have that part to make that connection. My therapist's background has provided me with the tools to work effectively with the kids and give them the support they need to make better choices in life. My personal characteristics played a big factor in deciding between social work and counseling. I felt with counseling and my personality being a little more direct, 'let's talk about it, let's engage, you know you can do differently, and let's move forward'

is definitely my personality. Flexibility to move around, and counseling added on to the recreation, [works] for me, and so that really was my motivating factor.”

Participant 005 highlighted the ability to build a rapport, and that cognition creates a unique atmosphere and is an effective characteristic of the counseling profession. She said, "I think it's just as important when I am in the therapeutic relationship with someone, my mind works like a little kaleidoscope, and I can see things through a lot of different lenses, and my view is not black and white; it's not just what standing in front of me, but I also have the capacity to be a mirror and really look at a person. I can see sometimes what people are trying to hide, and based on my affect, my relationship building, and just what I learned early on, I feel that I can build that rapport with someone and they develop a level of trust. I think those are some of the skills that two decades of practicing this type of work have really afforded me. I think also that I am interchangeable, and I can connect with children like I can connect with an adult as well as connect with older people. I'm not pigeonholed within a demographic. I think those are just different things that make me an effective therapist and an effective counselor, but again, one of the things that I think is really different, maybe, for me, is that I'm not a black-and-white thinker. I have the capacity to say to a person [that] I can see them that I can empathize with them and their life experiences. I can help a person hear their own voice of reason, and in a place where they have their own aha moment. I think that I can be very grounded. I am not as whimsical as some people, but being able to tap into another person's personality helps me, and being able to navigate that, and I'm just very grounded in a lot of different ways.”

Participant 006 specifically talked about her personal qualities as a factor that drew her to the profession. She said, “I’m sort of the nurturing kind of person; the core of me was nurturing. My belief is that the quality of work that I do is based on the results I see. I’m empathetic and

compassionate, [and that] has really shifted the way I see things, it's a motivator."

Participant 007 explained that professionalism and practicing ethics are personal characteristics that influenced her choice to enter the profession. She shared that she tries to "make sure to build a good rapport with my clients or the client and the families. Being open and allowing them to express their feelings and allowing them to take part in driving the treatment plan and the things they need to change in their lives. Using an integrative approach and not one way for all. Processing and catering my approach to what best fits that person so I use an integrative approach. I think those are some of the things that make me a good professional counselor and always remaining professional and ethical. Some of the characteristics just like being compassionate and wanting to help others" were motivational factors.

For Participant 008, having the ability to build rapport from the beginning was a personal characteristic that showed she was able to be successful in this profession. She explained, "I find a way to connect with the client during the first session. I listen for the magic words coming to the client: "you are right, or you get it," and I listen more than talk, as well as read their nonverbals to determine when to speak or just be silent. I think I look at my success with my clients' success rate and retention rate as well as other accolades that they give me. I also provide an eclectic approach, which I think is vital, as well as I continue to seek out new training and therapeutic techniques. I think I am more of a listener and observer, which I see as an asset. I think my ability to adapt and change and see opportunities was a vital part."

In summary, the participants identified personal characteristics as being an influential factor for entering the counseling profession. The responses of the participants frequently referred to the ability to build rapport, connectedness, flexibility, the ability to create an environment that is safe, and being open in the process. Some participants' responses also

indicated that the ability to develop trust provided their motivation to want to be in the profession. In addition, all participants referred to their confidence in decision-making, which was developed from the lack of exposure that others had the opportunity to experience. This created the drive to want to have the control over their destiny in life, and to be engaged with people that were underserved. This confirms the research that females relate better to others, and are more interested in intrinsic motivators rather than extrinsic rewards for employment (Kniveton, 2004) and that personal characteristics are a basic influence on their perception of career choice. Also, research suggest that ethnic identity is a personal factor that contributes and influence an individual choice to enter a certain profession (Heckert et al., 2002).

### **Work Experience**

Seven participants cited that working and/or volunteering in healthcare was influential and impactful within the context of career influence. Participant 001 described her work experience as being insightful. She said, “I was working with this healthcare agency as a personal care assistant for [people with] autism. That’s when I think I initially learned that I could do this for a living, just being able to help people serve as an effective counselor, someone that can advocate for others.”

Participant 002 explained her experience working in healthcare and the impact it had on her influence for her career choice: “I used to work with, and work well with, a lot of at-risk youth, and with the experiences that they were going through, I felt that I didn't have enough training to assist them. I felt bad that I did not have the skills needed to assist the youth that needed someone to help them, and I wanted to be that person. Working with at-risk youth is still my passion and now I have the skills that I can provide therapeutic services that can be beneficial for them. [I’m in the] counseling [profession] because I want to help the youth.”

For Participant 003, working with children was impactful and influential in her career. She said, "I started to work with children in an after-school program teaching kids social and emotional skills. I love working with the kids in a school setting, I love that I can see them every single day, I like that I saw them for a full year and I love that I saw them from kindergarten all the way up. Some of the kids were in fifth grade by the time I was finished working with them, so I like that kind of close relationship, being able to see the kids that often. I decided to go into counseling because I knew there would be so many different things I could do with a degree in counseling. Every year at the end of the year just to see the growth that the kids have and just to be able to see that they can express themselves better, to talk about their feelings."

Participant 004 explained that working in healthcare was influential in deciding a career choice, saying, "I had been working in the healthcare field so many years already and saw how big of an impact counseling played on people that need the services. Just being around everyone that were either social workers, counselors, doctors, just being in the healthcare field with the motivating factors. I was working with these people and wanted to do some of the work."

Participant 005 also explained that working in community mental health inspired the need to advocate for community resources, saying "Working in community-based mental health at that point with a bachelor's degree, I needed more training." Participant 006 echoed the experience, sharing that "working part-time at a nursing home was impactful and one of the major reasons I entered the profession."

Participant 007 considered her experience volunteering as the essence of her healthcare experience. "[I was] working with the elderly, but in the midst of that there was a young adult in that facility. That was something different that I wouldn't expect to see at a nursing facility, and just really seeing how [counseling] was able to uplift her on being in there, and talking to her;

just having people there to talk about things that she had suppressed inspired me to go into the profession because I wanted to help her process her emotions.”

In summary, the aspiration of working within the healthcare field has reflected on the experience of these participants. Another facet of influence was growing up in an environment surrounded by family values, and learning that they had to work for what they wanted, that not all people have access to the same resources. This was the underlying factor that guided these participants to want to help others in a way that was impactful, meaningful, and purposeful. Fouad et al. (2016) confirms that social connections fulfill individual aspirations and offer meaning to one’s life, becoming an influential factor for career choice. These participants all reported the need to have resources within the African American neighborhood, and to instill that change is not all bad. They want to encourage emotional health through counseling. This confirms the research that suggests that women place an emphasis on socialization of home and family, with the focus on the caretaker role, with identified characteristics such as nurturance, interpersonal concern, sensitivity and the ability to show and communicate emotions (Betz, 1994; as cited by Coogan & Chen, 2007, p. 193).

Two participants indicated that working with children was a factor when choosing to enter the counseling profession because they believe this is an age that is the most impressionable and having a role model that resembles them would be impressionable and powerful because they would know that they too could have a professional job. Participant 007 shared, “I worked with Department of Social Services as a counselor for at-risk children within the elementary school setting for a couple of years, but it was during that time that I really started thinking about going back to graduate school and actually getting a master’s in counseling and becoming licensed to be able to do further work. It’s been rewarding ever since.” Participant 008

shared that her experience working with teenagers in a group home setting was instrumental in identifying which population she was passionate in working with to make a difference. Zunker (2016) states that as students receive the proper guidance the resulting outcome is positive. In addition, the understanding of character and being more social was a factor in choosing a vocation (Zunker, 2016).

### **Adult Influence**

Seven participants indicated that they found influential adults to be important factors for guiding them to their career decision. Closely related in their responses was what they identified as adults, colleagues, the observation of others, and other counselors. There were eight participants' responses describing the influences of these interactions. The participants frequently addressed these areas with examples of how the different dynamics of adult influence were contributing factors to their choice. The influence was generally categorized in the participants' response and will, therefore, be described as such.

Two participants connected to adult experiences as strong indicators of career influence. Participant 003, in identifying adult influence as important to her career choice stated, "I had a lot of really good adult influences. If you are an adult and you create a positive impact on the life of a child you can really influence the choices that they make throughout their lives. Having the support of my trusting adults throughout my childhood was something that I would say definitely influenced my role as a therapist. I think my third-grade teacher was inspiring in my career choice."

Participant 006 emphasized that the use of encouragement from adults was influential in life decisions. She shared that "[A] client's mother said to me that I could get a license, and no one had ever said anything to me about getting licensure. I had very few adults in my life that

would say, and my mother would say, I can do it and I deserve it, I deserve it if I work hard for it, I deserve to get what I want."

Three participants identified the connections to colleagues as instrumental. Participant 003 indicated that having a dialogue with others was insightful. "I had a colleague that was actually in a Master of Counseling program at the time and after talking with her about some of my career goals, she shared with me that I may want to look into doing counseling and becoming a child therapist, and so that kind of inspired me to take the route of counseling."

Participant 005 described how working alongside different disciplines was impactful in her choice to enter the profession. She explained, "Working in that field, not everybody there was in social work; there were therapists that were counselors, licensed counselors, psychologists, which was a great foundation for me to get a snapshot to what my future would look like if I applied myself and I really decided what I wanted to do, but probably some of the impactful experiences in my early career were working with those clients." Participant 007 described the connection with colleagues as meaningful for her, saying "My colleagues, several of them, were in grad school at the time as well, so that was like a positive influence for me to see them go through that, and we were in a counseling role."

Three participants emphasized that the observations of others played a role in their career choice. Participant 003 identified being around women as an impact on her decision-making skills. "A couple of other females in my life, like women that I looked up to growing up, kind of helped, influenced me to be a good helper, just because of the relationship I had with them."

Participant 004 indicated that having access to others helped her to gather the information needed to make informed decisions. "I was here at work around social workers and counselors and I started asking questions about the difference between the two, and I kind of went from

there. I know just counseling itself was more important than the focus that social workers have, and yes, social workers do therapy, but they are more in tune to connecting services and I wasn't into that part." Participant 006 described in simple terms how her observation was impactful, "I saw a lady that makes old people feel good in a rest home and she is the main reason why I chose to go into counseling."

Five participants indicated that direct interactions with professional counselors were trivial in their chosen career path. Participant 002 highlighted that people can be helpful, "Learn from other people outside of your race and think; partnership is part of a big influence in the field because you learn and you get other people's experiences and information that can help you along with way. Other influences are partnering with people and learning from them."

Participant 005 described her interactions as being the contributing factor for her clinical skills. "I have been afforded the opportunity to be supervised and trained under some very strong clinicians," she said. "I have had an opportunity to really explore my clinical skills, working on my certifications and CBT training."

Participant 006 emphasized her interactions with counselors from different perspectives as a major influence in her life, and on the choice of entering the counseling profession. She shared, "I have been involved with watching a counselor when I donated a kidney to my sister and we did some counseling right before it happened, and the lady was so kind and so supportive, because underneath I was scared. I couldn't tell my mama and them because they were so excited about me doing it, but I couldn't talk to them about how scared I was about doing it. But she talked to me about it, and the statistics related to it, and even talked to me about it being okay to be afraid, and I knew then that I needed to be a counselor. My clinical supervisor, who continues to be a friend today, she is the reason that I am a counselor. She is the

reason I am who I am, and why I have the level of concern about people. My clinical supervisor is a really good one who really taught me; she didn't just sign off on the paperwork. She really helped me with the theories, she really helped me with all the approaches and the understanding of confidence and therapy. I also came in contact with a counselor with my EAP program with my job. My experience with the lady at the transplant agency and the EAP counselor, had they not really taken their time to talk to me and do their job, I would probably still be walking around with a chip on my shoulder."

Participant 008 described encounters with counselors that helped to guide her in making decisions related to her career choice. "I met a lady that worked with the school system as a school counselor; she mentioned obtaining her Masters in Counseling. It was the school counselor that opened my eyes to utilizing my bachelor's [degree] in the counseling field. I think counseling chose me and I followed the path. Possibly meeting the school counselor opened the door for me to look at the options of counseling and the internship helped me to determine the population and direction I did not want to take and treat. The only situation would have been meeting the school counselor; not only did she open my eyes to those options but also provided me with information about the college she attended."

In summary, the majority of the participants listed adult influences as factors for their choice to enter the counseling profession. The responses of the participants frequently linked to observation, interactions, and professional counselors as influential. DiCaccavo (2002) suggested, from a study conducted with psychotherapists, social workers, and doctors, that observation leads to early experiences in guiding career paths. This confirms the data in the literature review that others can influence career choice. The theme of working within the healthcare field was a factor for these participants to enter the counseling profession. Some of the

participants' responses also indicated that guidance and direction from these adults helped them in their decision to enter the counseling profession.

### **Absence of African American Counselors**

Seven participants indicated that they found there was an absence of an African American counselors. Closely related in their responses was what they identified as "no one that looked like me," a lack of African Americans working in professional jobs, and/or access to certain jobs. Thirteen participant responses described the absence of African American counselors. The participants frequently addressed this as a motivational factor because of the inability to make connections from an African American perspective, counselors being unable to relate to their experiences, and having the feeling of being stereotyped, judged, or misunderstood. These references were combined in the participants' responses and will, therefore, be described as such.

Participant 002, in identifying the absence of African American counselors as important to their influence for entering the counseling profession, stated, "There are certain agencies, not all, where most of the counselors are white people and the majority of the clientele were black people, and just felt like any counselor of any race can assist with anybody with whatever the issue is, but I just felt like some of our children need to see us in this role and they may decide to become a counselor one day. At times, having someone to talk to of your race is very therapeutic because the clients do not feel judged in any way, and they can feel free to talk in their language. I work with all clients, but that bond can be close when I can relate to the client."

Participant 005 identified the lack of African American counselors as a contributing factor for entering the profession, saying, "I think one of the things that may have contributed to my decision is not seeing therapists and counselors who look like me. I grew up in a small town and

there were school counselors, of course, guidance counselors, people from that population, or that focus, but none of them looked like me. There was not one black therapist that I ever encountered. I remember going to speak to the school counselor and/or the guidance counselor, and just trying to go to college and applying for college and doing those things, and I didn't feel like I was the population that they were necessarily as concerned about. Thinking back again, in witnessing not having any counselors that I could relate to, anybody that was supposed to be in the helping professions that I could relate to that looked like me, sounded like me, that had my life experiences, were some outside factors.”

Participant 003 related to the clients’ feelings of being able to physically connect with the counselor, explaining “There is a connection and the sense of understanding that I believe a lot of young people that I work with in this particular field, when they walk into the room and see somebody that looks like them. From the standpoint of, I can do this too, there's a Black therapist, and I can do this too. Being a Black provider, we're not widely represented in the community. I know that [in] the system that I work for, I'm one of few in the room, being able to represent our clients who look like me. To be able to speak from a culture standpoint, being able to give a different perspective, because I think sometimes the ways things are looked at, it's not looked at from a culture perspective, and just being able to be that voice in the room that can say, ‘Hey, you know, this is why this may not work for all of our clients’.”

Participant 006 also referenced the physical characteristics of the counseling experience, saying, “This convinced me that this field was wide open and not very many people that looked like me were doing it then. That was another reason and there was a need. I never have seen a Black therapist, and there was a Caucasian lady at the transplant--she was White, the lady at the nursing home--she was White. I think that the absence of African Americans influenced me to

want to do it because I knew it was a need. There is a need for African American counselors."

In summary, half of the participants identified the absence of African American counselors as being a primary reason for choosing to enter the counseling profession. According to the Census Bureau there are more than 139,000 mental health counselors practicing in the United States; however, only 19.8% of them are African American women; meanwhile, the need for counselors is increasing (Mental Health American, 2020). The responses of the participants frequently linked to connectedness, demonstrating that they too could be a professional counselor and someone that could relate to the African American culture. The responses also indicated the need for increased representation and diversity in the community. The literature confirms that many variables affect career choice and the underrepresentation of African Americans in the profession, especially that of African American women (Mental Health American, 2020), continues to increase.

### **Education**

Three participants indicated that taking a psychology course was an important factor in choosing a career in the counseling profession. It was revealed that educational courses sparked interest in human behaviors. Participant 001 stated, "I was taking this psychology course for an elective after my undergraduate school, and I fell in love with it, and I said, I can do this and I started learning more about myself." Participant 008 revealed a similar experience, saying, "I took my first psychology course as an elective and loved it." In addition, Participant 005 said that her first experience with psychology was during high school and she enjoyed the course. All three participants suggested that learning about human behaviors was indeed a factor for choosing to go into the counseling profession. Evidence was not found on the influence of taking psychology courses as a contributing factor for African American women entering the

counseling profession. Therefore, this data would add to the body of knowledge related to influential factors for choosing to enter the field of counseling.

**Table 2.**

*Clusters/Themes*

| <b>Themes</b>            | <b>Sub-Themes</b>    | <b>Number of Responses</b> | <b>Number of References</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Family Influence         |                      | 8                          | 27                          |
|                          | Resources            | 5                          | 7                           |
|                          | Socioeconomic Status | 4                          | 12                          |
|                          | Trauma               | 5                          | 10                          |
|                          | Substance Use/Abuse  | 2                          | 4                           |
| Personal Characteristics |                      | 8                          | 33                          |
| Work Experiences         |                      | 8                          | 17                          |
| Adult Influences         |                      | 7                          | 6                           |
|                          | Colleagues           | 3                          | 3                           |
|                          | Observation          | 3                          | 4                           |
|                          | Counselors           | 5                          | 16                          |
| Absence of AA Counselors |                      | 4                          | 13                          |
| Education                |                      | 3                          | 3                           |

The themes presented in Table 2 were discovered by reviewing the interview responses related to the research question and organizing similar experiences and/or perceptions into clusters. The representation of the experiences that occurred more frequently between the participants are represented above. In addition, these clusters were created using the phenomenological techniques of horizontalization, which implies that each statement has equivalent weight (Creswell, 2014). Finally, the clusters were identified based on the individual statements extracted from the transcribed interviews that reflected a similar statement made by the participants.

The most common influential factor stated by the study participants included family influence (C1- 100% of the participants), personal characteristics (C2-100% of participants),

working experience (C3-100% of the participants), adult influence (C4-88% of the participants), the absence of African American counselors (C5-50% of the participants), and education (C7-38% of the participants). These factors led to the desire to help others, which led to the counseling profession.

According to participants' responses, personal characteristics developed as a result of life experiences, whether nurturing or harmful, which created the need to help others through tough times, create a space to allow and encourage the expression of emotions, or to know there are other resources in the African American community that can be beneficial to a persons' overall well-being. The assistance of support may be influential of an adult figure that is of African American descent, who would be able to relate to their experiences, and demonstrate genuine empathy from a cultural perspective.

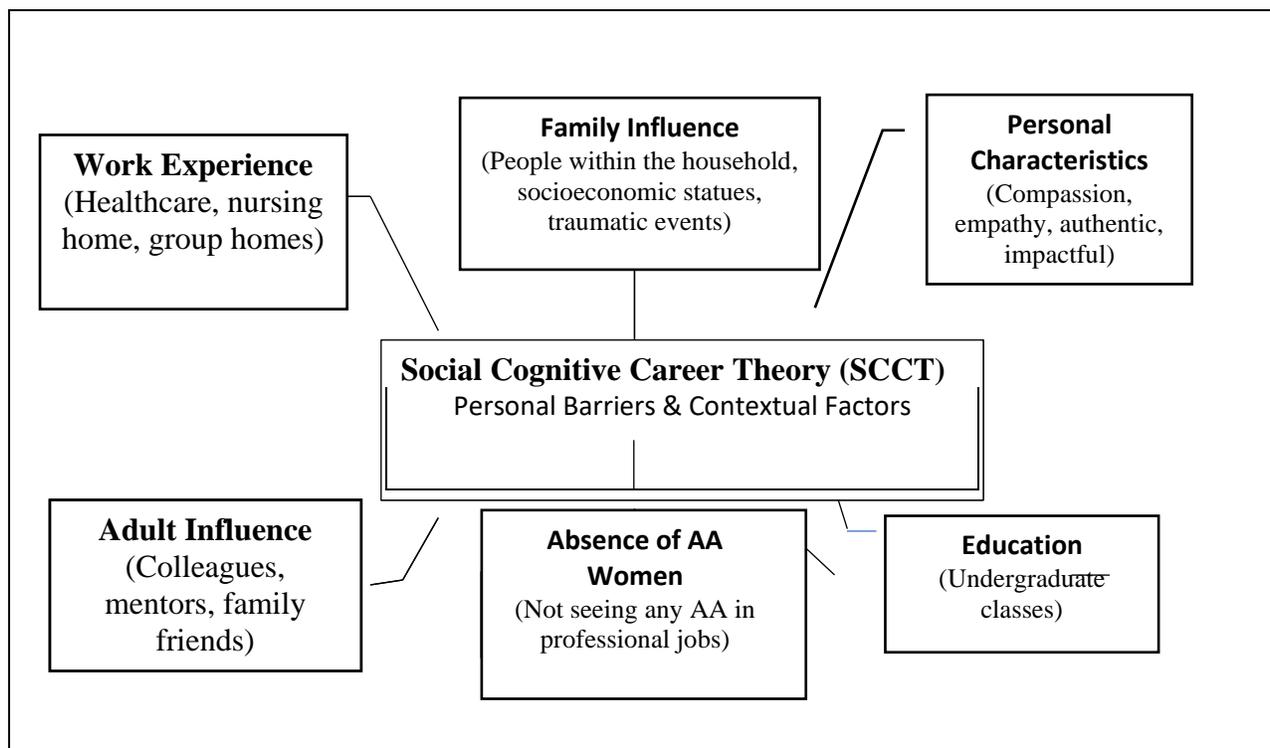
According to participants' responses, barriers and influences that were out of their control, such as poverty, racism, lack of resources, lack of exposure, and the level of support from parents and grandparents, affected their access and desire to pursue their career dreams. Some participants did not know that opportunities existed to become a professional counselor due to the internal and external barriers they faced daily that included not seeing anyone of color in professional roles.

The African American women in this study were able to overcome their barriers because all of the participants had family influences throughout their lives, including other adults, and personal characteristics, all of which were a guide to their career choice. Also, the participants had counselors and colleagues that were instrumental. Therefore, they had positive influences even when chaos was prevalent.

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings of the study in order to gain a better understanding of the career influences of African American women in the counseling profession. African American women face many obstacles to their career development, including socioeconomic status, limited resources, psychological factors such as self-efficacy, family influences, personal characteristics, and gender biases. Career decisions are influenced by many factors, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and are often facilitated by career guidance and counseling (Zunker, 2016). The data and the primary themes emerged from the audiotaped transcriptions of data resulting from in-person virtual individual interviews with eight licensed clinical mental health counselors, four of whom were dually licensed, with two being licensed as substance abuse counselors, one licensed as a recreational therapist, and one licensed with a specialty in working with victims and sexual perpetrators.

For many years, women, specifically African American women, have faced criticism, inequality, lack of support, and unrealistic societal expectations when pursuing a career. African American women continue to be underrepresented in the field. Diversity within the counseling profession is important because the African American clientele has and continues to increase. The presence of African American women in the profession could attract more clients to enter the counseling process. This research and the shared experiences of these eight counselors, it is hopeful that the situation will improve and more presence of African Americans women will hold degrees in counseling.

**Figure 1.***Theoretical Framework*

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This phenomenological research study examined the influences that led African American women to careers in the counseling profession. The purpose of the research was to discover the factors that may have contributed to the study participants' career choices. The theoretical framework for the study was Social Cognitive Career Theory, used as a model to structure open-ended questions for one-on-one, virtual face-to-face interviews between the researcher and the study participants. It is hoped that this study will provide useful understanding of the phenomenon in order to enhance recruitment techniques, increase representation of African American women in the counseling profession, and improve mental health care for the African American community.

This chapter will review the stated research problem, the research question to be examined, and the literature review. It will then describe the results of the phenomenological study, particularly the relationship between the literature and the participants' responses, and the conclusions that may be drawn from the study, as well as the limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

### **Study Overview**

This research study was an exploration of the lived experiences of eight African American women in the counseling profession. The study explored the influential factors that led the study participants to a career in the counseling profession, the barriers the study participants experienced in their career development journey, and personal characteristics that led to the desire to enter the counseling profession. The basic qualitative research methods were used for the research design, and semi-structured interview questions were used to capture the stories and explore the phenomenon of being an African American woman in the counseling profession.

Little is known about the specific career influences and/or motivations that lead African American women to choose careers in the counseling profession. Literature revealed that African Americans were underrepresented in this profession while it would be advantageous to have greater representation. The reason for this underrepresentation is unknown. A thorough review of the literature suggested that 19.8% (U.S. Data, 2020) of African American women are practicing in the counseling profession. Data obtained from the EEOC suggested that African American women are underrepresented in the counseling profession. However, no current data existed regarding possible influences, choices, or motivations that might explain why the underrepresentation exists. This confirms the importance of adding to the body of literature regarding African American women who are licensed clinical mental health counselors practicing in the counseling profession.

Amongst the themes that developed from the participants' lived experiences were also conclusions that derived from the study. The lived experiences of the participants interviewed allowed these women to describe their perceptions and their journey to the counseling profession. It also allowed for an explanation of the motivational factors for aspiring to become a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor.

The instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview, approximately one hour in length. These semi-structured interviews were immediately transcribed to capture the lived experience of each participant and to ensure accuracy during the transcription. Each participant was asked to do a member check to confirm the data was correctly transcribed, followed by using NVivo to analyze the data, where themes and patterns developed. This data was thoroughly reviewed line by line to uncover similarities.

This study was conducted using a phenomenological, qualitative design so that the lived experiences of the eight participants could be described through the perceptions of their stories. Phenomenology describes peoples' experiences with a certain phenomenon; therefore, this was the best design to utilize in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Phenomenology provided the participants the opportunity to discuss their lived experiences amongst a particular group, specifically, African American professional women licensed in counseling. Semi-structured interviews were used in the study to answer the research question and to gain first-hand knowledge of each participant's lived experience. The goal was to encourage and record open, in-depth discussions of the participants' lived experiences in the counseling profession. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to conduct data collection that would develop into themes, as well as interpretations of the data, to expand on the knowledge of the participants who shared their own lived experiences (Creswell, 2014).

### **Findings Summary**

The study participants offered open, in-depth, candid descriptions of their backgrounds and experiences in the counseling profession. Their stories validated the theories presented in the literature review for this study, confirming that education, mentoring, and role-modeling were all influential in their career choices. In addition, they were impacted by familial, adult role models, work experiences, societal, socioeconomic, and cultural influences. Self-efficacy, motivation and social-cognitive theories were all supported by the participants' recorded statements. This chapter will show the relationship between the researcher's questions and the participants' responses, as well as the relationship of the study participants' responses to the literature review.

#### **Family Influence (C1)**

One hundred percent (eight out of eight study participants) specifically identified a strong belief in their abilities and desire to succeed and to be in a therapeutic profession that would be of assistance to others. Most expressed their family was instrumental in their decision to do things differently, because there were more resources available to assist with education, and knowing that sharing feelings, expressions, and stories was not negative and it didn't have to stay within the household, such as the lack of family resources, substance abuse, and socioeconomic status. This was a significant motivator in their determination to have success in the counseling profession. In addition, all participants identified wanting to be supportive and not wanting others to have to experience their challenges. Lastly, three of the participants referenced their mother as a positive source of support and encouragement. Participants reported that racial disparity, as well as the racial motivations of others, limited their ability to experience other cultures outside of their community, and they did not receive resources that would help them with their career journey. Not being able to have things, and engage in life as compared to the White culture, was detrimental and a reason for wanting to help others so they wouldn't have to experience the same generational cycle. There is a need for counseling within the African American community to address the hurt and pain that so many people have experienced and are experiencing. This was a guiding force for choosing to enter the counseling profession.

### **Personal Characteristics (C2)**

One hundred percent (eight out of eight study participants) mentioned that their personal characteristics (caring, genuine, compassionate, direct, a good listener, rapport building, and empathic) influenced their decision to strive to develop professional skills so they could be successful in the counseling profession. These are essential for anyone contemplating a career in the counseling profession. They expressed that belief in their abilities and desire to succeed

helped them to choose a career in the counseling profession. Finally, these characteristics continue to develop as they practice within the counseling profession.

### **Work Experience (C3)**

One hundred percent (eight out of eight study participants) believed that their experiences working in the healthcare field, along with volunteering, were instrumental in the desire to enter the counseling profession. Their experiences confirmed that they wanted to be of assistance to others while using a theoretical framework to build the working relationship. This experience was significant because of the therapeutic connection made during their experience. Participants believed their experience working with children in low socioeconomic status was inspiration to create an environment that was inviting and would provide youth with resources not available at home, and which these counselors didn't have at their patients' age. This had an impact on the individuals' motivations to seek a career in a profession that empowered children to understand that they are important, and to be able to talk about their emotions, promoting psychological well-being. There is a need within the African American community for more African American women counselors who can relate, connect and not have any underlying bias; they work with genuine empathy.

### **Adult Influence (C4)**

Eighty-eight percent (seven out of eight study participants) believed that adult influences, such as colleagues, family friends, professional counselors, and teachers, as well as observations of others, were essential motivating factors for this career choice. A small number of teachers, two out of seven study participants, were influenced to strive to help others so they could be successful in any profession. Three out of seven participants reported that they were motivated to seek careers in the counseling profession by others who worked in the field. Adult influence was

defined as being a person who provided mentorship, or simply words of encouragement, and someone to talk to when emotions became high. Participants believed that role models were instrumental in helping them with their career pursuits and influential in career development for choosing a career in the counseling profession.

#### **Absence of African American Counselors (C5)**

Fifty percent (four out of eight study participants) indicated not seeing any professional African American women in any setting was a motivating factor for choosing to enter the profession. In every endeavor, African Americans did not hold professional jobs; instead, they were factory workers with limited education. Participants believed that African American children and adults need to see women of color practicing professional counseling as this could be an inspirational message, suggesting that they too could be a licensed clinical mental health counselor. In addition, being present in the field would encourage more African Americans to engage in the process because they can see that people that look like them are working and the process may be helpful in some aspect. Also, it would help to create an individual's self-efficacy in developing the ability to think outside the norm of what has been taught and seen within their community.

#### **Education (C6)**

Thirty-eight percent (three out of eight study participants) mentioned that taking a course in psychology helped them to understand human behavior. Being intrigued and wanting to learn more to help others was instrumental in wanting to pursue a career in counseling. Taking part in this learning environment gave these participants the knowledge they could use in their decision-making process. This had an impact on the individual's self-efficacy belief and expectations, which guide career choice. Also, when these participants felt good about themselves and their

ability to pursue goals, it was helpful in choosing a career, confirming the theoretical framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory.

The most common barriers to entering the counseling profession, as expressed by the participants, included lack of resources, lack of exposure to the counseling profession, underrepresentation of African Americans in the profession, and limited opportunity for role modeling, as well as a cultural backgrounds that downplayed the need for counseling. However, in overcoming these barriers, the women in this study named internal factors such as having supportive parents, positive adult influences, personal drive, work experience, and personal characteristics that were meaningful in their pursuit to enter the profession.

To reveal the essences of the study, the researcher uploaded the participants' transcripts using the NVivo software to assist with identifying the themes, and to examine the responses to the interview questions in an attempt to discover the meaning of the lived experiences of eight African American women currently working in the counseling profession. Six major themes emerged from the previously discussed clusters that helped to answer the study's research question.

## **Themes**

### **Theme 1: Family Influence**

Family is cherished within the African American community. Due to turbulent historical events from slavery to racial segregation, family bonds in this culture are very strong. Family is one of the leading factors for African American women choosing to enter the counseling profession. Family involvement, or the lack of it, was a contributing factor to motivate the decision to be a part of the resources that are missing in the African American community, namely, African American counselors. Family support and encouragement were present,

especially mothers. In addition, positive role models and mentors in schools, churches, and African American communities are needed to help support African Americans to develop strong feelings of self-efficacy, self-worth, self-determination, and positive outlooks for the future.

The lack of available resources and traumatic experiences within home and community tends to create barriers for African Americans who might otherwise take more chances, become more open to flexibility, and take more career risks. Socioeconomic pressures and the stigma of counseling force many African Americans to not trust the counseling process because “one shouldn’t talk about problems outside of the home.” These factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of African Americans in the counseling profession.

The African American culture is rooted in the historical experience of the African American people. The culture is both distinct and enormously influential to American culture as a whole (Libraries Keep You Connected, 2018). Participants in this study previously believed that cultural issues and/or problems should remain in the home and not be discussed publicly. For example, being from a low-income neighborhood was especially difficult as a child because it was not explained or discussed. As a family, participants spoke of family activities, and reunions while dealing with cultural and racial disparities.

## **Theme 2: Personal Characteristics**

African American women in this study tended to enter the counseling profession through learning the African American community was underserved with limited resources, a persistent desire to help people, a genuine interest in the dynamics of how counseling could be beneficial in handling trauma differently, being an instrument for African Americans, and being successful in the professional environment. The essences of personal characteristics centered around the desire to be present and impactful, so that students and seasoned professionals know that, at times,

being present with someone of the same race could create a therapeutic bond, because they know the struggles and can relate personally to the African American culture and environment.

### **Theme 3: Work Experience**

The women in this study had experience in the healthcare field, such as nursing homes and community agencies, before becoming licensed professional counselors. Here they experienced the need to serve others in the capacity of providing quality care, being the person that listens to others' problems and validated their feelings. Also, study participants had worked with children to provide a therapeutic connection of being present, encouraging, and purposeful. In fact, a lack of training in earlier positions created the motivation for four of the participants to seek training in the counseling profession. The first-hand experience reiterated the need for resources within the low-income neighborhoods, as they were being underserved and overlooked for the needed assistance that would give the local students tools to help guide their career decision processes.

African American children historically are not exposed to diverse programs academically. However, the overt racism may not be quite as strong as it once was, and African American children may have more opportunities now due to the Civil Rights movement. African Americans who grew up deprived of the basic necessities of life are able to relate and have the desire to work with children so they would have the tools needed to overcome challenges such as poverty and racism. They can provide a cultural context that only African Americans can provide because of the bond, rapport, and the ability to truly understand without judgement. Being able to have supportive teachers, pastors, peers, and communities helped to buffer African Americans from negativity by providing support, networking, validation, and encouragement. Working with

clients, especially from low socioeconomic neighborhoods, was influential in entering the counseling profession.

#### **Theme 4: Adult Influence**

In addition, study participants acknowledged that adults outside of the family dynamics played an influential role in their decision to enter the counseling profession. Three participants identified colleagues within the healthcare setting who provided encouragement, because their work was meaningful and colleagues spoke highly of their investment in making a difference in the lives of others. Also, three participants were able to observe others in different professional fields that catered to working with students, such as social work. Five participants identified the interactions with professional counselors as inspirational and impactful for their decision for entering the counseling profession. Being able to hear first-hand information, with an opportunity to ask questions, was influential in deciding to enter the field of counseling. Adult influence is needed to help African Americans develop the need and feelings of self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-determination in their pursuit to enter the counseling profession.

#### **Theme 5: Absence of African American Counselors**

The African American culture has experienced discrimination in various forms for centuries, and been sustained in a state of disparity for generations, evident in the lack of resources, religion as the problem-solver, a restriction on talking to others about issues, and limited exposure to professional opportunities. This aided in limited knowledge of possible career opportunities and the absence of African Americans in professional careers, especially women, due to the history of African American women as the caretakers of household responsibilities. The participants in this study did not see any African American women counselors in any professional setting. They believe that children need to see Black women in

counseling roles for the following reasons: (a) African American women can relate to the essence of the underlying issues experienced by African Americans, (b) effective multicultural marketing is in place for the profession, and (c) they will see African Americans holding professional positions within society.

### **Theme 6: Education**

Education is important in gaining the skills needed to be effective when working with clients. Engaging in classroom discussions, and the information provided from the course content, was instrumental in the desire to be in the helping field and the pursue to choose counseling as a profession. Engaging in educational pursuits was instrumental in the desire to enter the field of counseling as it was intriguing to learn about human development and psychology.

### **Limitations**

The current study was subjected to several limitations. First, the study consisted of only eight licensed African American professional women practicing in the counseling profession; therefore, it cannot be generalized to the entire population of African American women in the counseling profession. In addition, the study participants were located in the state of North Carolina; therefore, their responses cannot be generalized to the United States. A third limitation is that the researcher is an African American woman with experience as a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor; while every effort was made to bracket her experiences and biases during the interview and analysis of the data, one cannot rule out the possibility that some bias may be present in the study. Lastly, the study could have benefited from a quantitative component, which could have added statistical significance to the experiential qualitative data.

### **Recommendations**

There is limited research that explicates the influences for African American women to enter the counseling profession. Therefore, using a qualitative method to gain in-depth knowledge on the participants' lived experiences was deemed appropriate to uncover the motivating factors for choosing to enter the counseling profession. However, the use of a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) could be completed with a larger sample of participants to add statistical significance to the experiential qualitative data of this study. A larger statistical sample could allow the results to be generalized to the entire population of licensed African Americans in the counseling profession.

The review of the literature provided only limited information on Social-Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as related to African Americans. Coogan et al. (2000) suggested SCCT as a model that focuses on personal variables and contextual factors that affect self-efficacy as well as career goals and outcomes. In this model, background variables (e.g., race, gender, and ethnicity) and contextual barriers (e.g., familial influence, SES, perceived barriers, other adult influences) were viewed as impactful for career self-efficacy and outcome expectations. A study of African Americans in the context of SCCT would add to the body of literature related to the career choices of African Americans.

### **Conclusion**

African American women face challenges that limit their career choices and opportunities within the workforce. Gaining an in-depth understanding of career influences assists to encapsulate the phenomenon, and identify reasons for entering the counseling profession. The literature confirms the underrepresentation of African American women in the counseling profession but does not elaborate on the driving force for the low statistics; consequently,

reasons that the current percentage is low continues to be unknown. This research was conducted to discover the factors that influenced the career choice of African American women in their pursuit of a career in the counseling profession.

The African American women in this study typically entered the counseling profession based on their desire to help people, a genuine interest in being a vessel for change, and/or to promote the overall well-being of the underserved population, especially the African American community. Many had limited or no knowledge of the counseling profession due to the absence of African American counselors, narrow opportunities to obtain higher education due to limited funds, and the overwhelming number of African Americans' denial of professional positions. Many experienced this as a restriction to work in a white-collar job and especially in the counseling profession. Their experiences of limited resources and access to different cultural opportunities sparked an interest in wanting to help others. The research revealed six themes: (a) family and culture influence, (b) personal characteristics, (c) work experience, (d) adult influence, (e) absence of African Americans in the profession, and (f) education.

The family structure was a strong influence on career development among all participants both with single-parent households and two-parent households. The parent figure(s) within the home was instrumental in providing an environment that created a variety of characteristics such as compassion, positive regard, and genuineness to intentionally be a tool for support and encouragement during the counseling process. Some participants experienced being raised in low-income neighborhoods, trauma, and witnessing abusive relationships, with the home environment as a leading factor for wanting to help others handle this type of situation differently than their own experiences. Also, one participant had more access to resources than the other participants due to parental support, and the assistance of other family members outside

of the home. Participants believed that individuals don't have to live within the parameter of their environment, that there are resources that are available for all people, including African Americans, and that African Americans can provide these resources.

Adult influences including colleagues, mentors, and other counselors were identified as factors for entering the counseling profession. Some participants identified with the observation of others in their role as being inspirational and intriguing. It was seen as motivational and impactful because African Americans were taught that counseling was not an option, whether for religious or cultural reasons. These participants acknowledged that resources are different now; however, some individuals of color don't have access to services, cannot afford mental health services, and/or don't believe the services are helpful. These reasons were identified as a strong indicator of wanting to enter the counseling profession.

All participants expressed their experiences that led to a career in the counseling profession; however, their challenges during their journeys speak to the development of wanting to be of assistance to others and especially within the African American communities. Each participant also discussed their environmental experience of parents being blue collar workers, and not knowing that there was another way of being for women, especially African American women. According to study participants, growing up in a dysfunctional household and witnessing various traumatic experiences helped them to develop compassion and have the ability to understand and relate to the perspective that people of African American descent carry as a result of experiencing the disadvantages caused by discrimination and racism.

Participants stated that resources within their environments were limited. Their community did not generate people of color in a professional role within the confines of their environment, nor did they experience a different cultural perspective in regard to careers. The

inability to observe African Americans in professional roles and specifically African American women were motivating factors to enter the counseling profession. Also, the participants acknowledged the presence of African American women in the profession is needed due to the limited representation in the field, and African American clients would benefit from having someone that can understand their struggles and not feel they are being judged when telling their stories. The support of a positive role model and someone that has “been in the trenches” and has dealt with overt oppression can be an influential factor for change.

According to the study participants, their personal characteristics were influential in deciding to choose the counseling profession, because of their nurturing nature and their ability to be present in the process. The development of personal characteristics varied among participants; however, it was instrumental in career development and their decisions to choose counseling as a career. Some of these characteristics, as expressed by the participants, are dedicated, compassionate, a good listener, impactful, genuine, creative, patient, approachable, empathetic, able to see things from different perspectives, able to be the voice of reason, adaptable, and able to engage in self-care. These characteristics are the foundation for these participants to want to help others tell their stories and improve their lives. Also, the characteristics were derived from seeing environmental factors, including traumatic events, family communications, the lack of communications, work experience, having influential adults, and observing others make a difference in the lives of others. The literature suggested family and environmental structure as common influences (Whitson & Keller, 2004). In addition, study participants had volunteer and work experience that enlightened them to a different way of helping, while providing individuals with the support and encouragement that was needed to help them to become better decision-makers through the counseling process.

Finally, career development derives from a variety of sources and stems from the contextual framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory. The results of the study indicate that each participant spoke of motivational factors consisting of family influence, personal characteristics, adult influences outside of the family structure, work experience, the absence of African American women in the profession, and education as instrumental in choosing a career in the counseling profession. The strong indicator suggests that family, personal characteristics, and work experiences were identified by most of the participants as influential for entering the counseling profession. One participant suggested that observation of one counselor was the driving force for entering the field, and family influence was not a factor because of the difficult environment. However, she acknowledged that within this difficult environment she developed a nurturing personality because she had to help with taking care of her sibling. Four of the participants did not see any African American women with a professional job and wanted to see the cycle change and demonstrate compassion for helping others and the will to break the generational cycle of working on a factory line. The findings of the study established that family influence, personal characteristics, work experience, adult influence, and the absence of African American women, and education had an influence on the participants decision to enter the profession.

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APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT NOTICE

Prospective Participant,

I am a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at National Louis University. I am interested in exploring the career influences of African American women who are licensed in North Carolina in the field of counseling.

I am seeking research participants in Counseling who meet the following criteria:

- Are currently practicing in the counseling profession
- Have the credentials of a Licensed Professional Counselor
- Have at least 1 year of direct client experience

Interested counselors would be asked to participate in one interview. You will be asked to discuss your influence to entering the counseling profession. This is a qualitative study that seeks to understand your subjective experiences related to influential factors to choose to enter the counseling profession.

If you can meet the above criteria and are interested in participating with sharing your experience and/or would like more information about the study, please contact:

Tamara Ford  
980-236-1930  
tlford86@gmail.com

APPENDIX B  
CAREER INFLUENCE RESEARCH STUDY  
INFORMATION LETTER

Contact Persons: Tamara L. Ford, Researcher  
704-236-6071

Dr. Caroline Perjessy, Committee Chair  
800-366-6581  
Martin Wesley, Committee Member  
800-366-6581

Dear Participant,

I am a Doctoral student in the Department of Counseling Psychology at National Louis University. My research dissertation is centered on the processes involved in the factors that influence African American women to enter the counseling profession. I will be speaking to individuals who are in the field of counseling who have completed at least one year of direct clinical experience working with clients. My interest is in understanding what has influence counselors to entering the profession. Furthermore, I would like to interview ten counselors about the influential factors that led to choosing a career in the counseling profession.

As a volunteer participant you will be asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately 1 hour. The first part of the interview will consist of completing a brief pencil and paper questionnaire related to background history information. Following this I will be speaking to you about your experiences of influential factors for your chose to enter the counseling profession. During this interview, you will be asked to speak candidly about your experience for choosing to enter the field of counseling.

The interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed. These audiotapes will be deleted once they are transcribed. Your identification or any other information will not be used on the questionnaire, transcripts or final written materials. I will use codes to mark information and all materials will be kept confidential and secured in a locked filing cabinet that only the principle researcher will have access to. The data will be kept for seven years after the completion of this study and will then be destroyed. It is possible that information for, the study will be used for future publication and presentation however, your confidentiality will be maintained. Your name or other identifying information will appear on any materials.

Participants in this study is voluntary. If you chose not to discuss a topic during the interview you are free to decline to speak about it. You may refuse to answer any questions during the

interview. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, or request the withdrawal of your data from the study during or after the interview, without consequences. Additionally, it may be possible that you may know other participants and/or others may know that you are participating in this study. If this is a concern for you, or if you decide at any time during the interview that you do not wish to continue with the study or answer certain questions, you are free to terminate the interview and/or withdraw. The research will honor your request without negative consequence.

Participation in this study is unlikely to provide any direct benefit to you. However, some people have found that engaging in the interview process allows affords them the opportunity to express their opinion and in doing so to appreciate and get a greater understanding of their own experiences. In addition, the knowledge gained through understanding your experience may contribute to a richer and more meaningful of the process of the counseling process. The risk to you as a result of participating in this research are likely to be nonexistent or minimal. It is possible that talking about your influential factors may create an uncomfortable space. Should you choose to seek counseling during this process, I will assist you in finding a counselor. Your confidentiality will be protected, however there are exceptional circumstances that require me to break confidentiality. These situations are as follows: a) If you indicate that you are going to hurt yourself or others; b) If you express knowledge of a child being abused or neglected or in danger of being hurt; c) If you report that you were or are being sexually abused.

If you wish to participate in this study, you are requested to please complete the consent form. A copy of this form will be given to you. Any questions about this study may be addressed to Tamara Ford at 980-236-1930 or Dr. Caroline Perjessy at 800-366-6581

Thank you.

APPENDIX C  
BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET

1. Date of birth:       Year\_\_\_\_\_ Month\_\_\_\_\_ Day\_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Country of birth: \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Which setting are you currently practicing? \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. How many years of experience in the counseling profession? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Approximately how many hours of direct contact do you have weekly in your role as a counselor? \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. Describe the counseling setting in which you practice \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about your experience related to making a decision to enter the field counseling?
2. Tell me about the first time you thought about becoming a counselor?
3. Describe any changes in your plans to enter the counseling profession.
4. What encouraged you to choose counseling over other professional careers?
5. Tell me about any meaningful experiences that led you to the counseling profession?
6. Describe how you believe you are a good professional counselor.
7. What influence, if any, did experiences in your childhood contribute to your decision to enter the counseling profession?
8. Describe a childhood experience that was a contributing factor for your career choice.
9. What influence, if any, did experiences within your family structure contribute to your decision to enter the counseling profession?
10. What influence, if any, did personal characteristic contribute to your decision to enter the counseling profession?
11. What influence, if any were there outside of your family that led you to want to choose counseling as your profession?
12. What influence, if any did your culture contribute to your decision to enter the counseling profession?
13. What else can you tell me related to career influences for wanting to enter the counseling profession?

APPENDIX E  
CAREER INFLUENCE RESEARCH STUDY  
INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

As a participant in this research study I understand that I will be asked to talk about my experiences of factors that the influenced my choice to enter the counseling profession.

My participation in this research involves speaking to the researcher in a personal interview that is expected to last approximately 1 hour. I will be asked to fill out a background information questionnaire. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. The researcher will contact me approximately 2-3 weeks after the interview if additional information is needed. At any time, I can withdraw from the study.

I understand that the interview material will not identify me by name of any other characteristic. The transcripts and questionnaire will use a coding procedure for identification. The material will be kept in a secured locked filing cabinet which only the researcher has access. All information will remain confidential but may be used in future publications and/or presentations. If this is so, my mane will not be disclosed.

I am aware that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study. It is possible that by revealing issues surrounding the influential factors for entering the counseling profession may bring up emotions. If I am upset by this process, I will advise the researcher who will help me obtain suitable counseling. I am aware that if I know the researcher and if I become uncomfortable with this lack of anonymity, or the thought that others whom I know may be aware of my participation, that I may terminate the interview and /or withdraw my data without any consequences to me.

I understand that confidentiality will be maintained throughout this process. However, should I reveal to the researcher any of the following, she will be obliged to break this agreement: a) If I am planning on hurting myself or someone else; b) If I report child abuse or neglect or the danger of such; c) If I reveal a sexual abuse.

My participation in this research is strictly voluntary. I may terminate my involvement at any time and/or withdraw my data from the study without consequences. If I do not which to discuss any topic or answer any questions, I am free to do so.

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F  
TIMELINE

1. Interview participant 001- 05/02/2020
2. Interview participant 002 – 05/04/2020
3. Interview participant 003 – 05/06/2020
4. Interview participant 004 – 05/10/2020
5. Interview participant 005 – 05/14/2020
6. Interview participant 006 – 05/16/2020
7. Interview participant 007 – 05/18/2020
8. Interview participant 008 – 05/19/2020

(Journal entries were completed following each interview.)

APPENDIX G  
RECRUITMENT FLYER



**CAREER INFLUENCE**

African American  
Professional Women  
in the Counseling  
Profession

Tamara Ford LCMHC, NCC

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If you would like to participate in this dissertation research study, please contact me by telephone or email. All information provided is confidential.

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