

REVISITING EMPOWERMENT: HOW BLACK WOMEN DEFINE, EXPERIENCE, AND
CHALLENGE PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT THEORY

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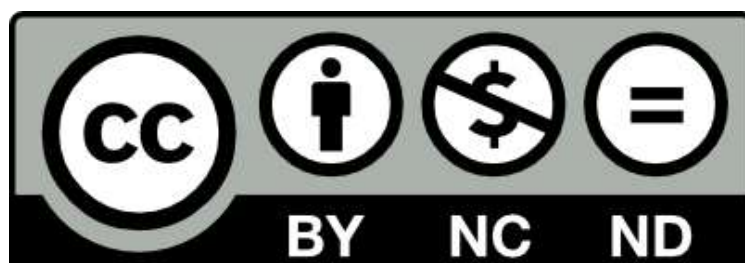
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ABSTRACT

Psychological empowerment is a construct that shapes social understandings of agency, resilience, and self-determination across various contexts. However, existing literature often overlooks the unique experiences of Black women, whose empowerment journeys are shaped by intersecting social, political, and cultural forces. This thesis seeks to address this gap by centering the voices of Black women to provide a more nuanced understanding of psychological empowerment. This study uses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how Black women define, experience, and interpret empowerment in their everyday lives. IPA is a qualitative methodology that privileges idiosyncratic meaning-making and employs interpretative analysis whereby the researcher saturates themselves within the life world of participants' experiential account to yield rich, nuanced, and often contradictory findings of a given phenomenon. This project is also grounded in the theoretical frameworks of radical qualitative inquiry, Black feminist qualitative methods, and Intimate Inquiry.

The findings of this project challenge theoretical models of psychological empowerment by revealing their dynamic, context-specific nature. Key themes include the significance of relationality, the impact of spiritual practices, and the role of the socio-political context in shaping empowerment experiences. Most significantly, spirituality and encounters with the natural world emerge as critical forces of motivation, inspiration, and reflection which inform the contours of psychological empowerment, dimensions not previously accounted for in the theoretical literature. These insights invite the reader to rethink psychological empowerment alongside the experiential accounts the participants provide.

By amplifying Black women's voices, this thesis provides a critical intervention in empowerment discourse, challenging existing paradigms and offering new pathways for scholarly inquiry and practical application.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my two children Karis (carrots) and Korrin (bunny). I am endlessly impressed by your intelligence, creativity, and heart. Thank you for your patience while mommy managed competing demands for the past several years. I am so proud to have the privilege of being your mother, and I can't wait to see what you do in the world. I love you.

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Finally, this thesis was written across a handful of cafes in Detroit. To those cafes that allowed me to work on this project for hours on end without disruption. Thank you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

...an introspective quality, kind of almost like, I'm empowered through knowing who I am. I'm empowered through accepting my existence as a Black woman, existing, surviving, and building relationships within a world that never wanted me to survive. So, I think empowerment is both a recognition of the self and knowing all of my capacities and what I can do with those things. - Combahee, Study Participant, 2023

Psychological empowerment, defined by Zimmerman (2000) as "an individual's belief in their personal competence, control over their life, and understanding of their social reality" (p. 2), is a consequential concept in numerous disciplines, political institutions, and social movements committed to liberation and justice. Empowerment is not merely an abstract idea but a dynamic process that has been continuously redefined and reshaped across time and space. From the American abolitionist movement to end slavery to the 19th-century anti-colonial uprisings across the African diaspora, from the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements to contemporary liberation movements advocating for Black lives, empowerment has served as both a rallying cry and a strategic framework for social justice movements.

Given this rich and diverse history, scholars and activists must engage with a concept of empowerment that reflects the diversity of cultures and communities for which power imbalances are most profound. This project, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that psychological empowerment is a culturally contingent and, thus, an inherently diverse and flexible construct. Moreover, this research aims to magnify why accounting for this diversity is fundamental to building culturally relevant interventions that seek to support psychological empowerment. Conceptual models of empowerment enable us to identify the mechanisms that are operative in its process and leverage that knowledge to inform policy, programmatic design, organizing

tactics, political education, etc. Absent an inclusive understanding of empowerment, efforts to address systemic inequalities risk being superficial and disconnected from the lived realities of those they intend to serve.

This project seeks to center the voices and experiences of Black women, whose perspectives have been severely underrepresented in the theoretical discourse on psychological empowerment. This study aims to challenge and expand the existing theoretical understanding of empowerment by interrogating its internal structure and the assumptions that have informed its evolution. The project is driven by the belief that without incorporating the grounded, lived experiences of those most affected by systemic and structural subjugation, any conceptualization of psychological empowerment remains incomplete. Consequently, scholarly and practical interventions that fail to engage with the insights and experiences of marginalized groups will likely fall short of addressing the most pressing and fundamental issues they face.

Guided by the following research questions: How do Black women experience empowerment? What factors contribute to or hinder their empowerment? And how do these experiences align with or challenge existing theoretical frameworks? This study draws from and intervenes in the literature that has defined and characterized the concept of psychological empowerment, specifically the models of psychological empowerment put forth by Zimmerman (1995), Peterson (2014), Christens (2012), and Hur (2006) which posit it as a dynamic, context-specific, relational construct involving personal, social, and community dimensions but fail to offer concrete exemplars for how these dimensions manifest. Furthermore, these frameworks do not fully capture the unique ways Black women experience empowerment in different contexts such as relationships, workplaces, and families, nor do they provide a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of race, gender, and empowerment.

In response, this study seeks to understand how Black women define, experience, and interpret empowerment and develop recommendations for practice-based interventions. Moreover, it aims to rectify the omission of Black women from the literature and contribute to a more inclusive and representative framework for understanding psychological empowerment. However, it is critical to note that any study on psychological empowerment that focuses on one group will be limited and cannot be assumed to be generalizable to other groups. Given this limitation, the present study provides a clear rationale and models for researching psychological empowerment with other diverse groups. In doing so, it aspires to foster more equitable and transformative approaches to social change that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the most marginalized.

Methodologically, this research is anchored in a pluralistic qualitative approach that combines radical qualitative inquiry, Black feminist qualitative inquiry, and a modified form of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Together, these frameworks enable a relational orientation and flexible methodological approach that is responsive to the nuance of Black women's positionality and allows for collaboration and co-creation in the process.

Radical qualitative inquiry (Parker, 2005) rejects conventional, positivistic approaches and instead foregrounds reflexivity, political engagement, and a critical examination of power dynamics within the research process. This approach is crucial given the study's focus on Black women's lived experiences, recognizing that research is inherently political and that knowledge production must challenge, rather than reinforce, existing social inequities.

In conjunction with radical qualitative inquiry, this study employs a Black feminist qualitative framework (Evans-Winters, 2019; Clemons, 2019) that centers Black women's voices and validates their lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. This approach

challenges dominant narratives that have historically silenced or distorted Black women's realities, instead affirming their perspectives as essential for a comprehensive understanding of psychological empowerment. By prioritizing an intersectional lens, the study acknowledges the complex interplay of race, gender, and class in shaping empowerment experiences.

The final theoretical framework employed in this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology that privileges idiosyncratic meaning-making and deploys interpretative analysis whereby the researcher saturates themselves within the life world of participants' experiential account to yield rich, nuanced, and often contradictory findings of a given phenomenon. While IPA typically seeks to capture the subjective experiences of individuals, this study breaks new ground and modifies the conventional protocol by building into the research design rigorous consideration of the relational dynamic between the researcher and participants and regards them not as subjects but as co-collaborators in the research process.

This emergent approach emphasizes the centrality of relationships and reimagines the research process as a shared, relational journey, embedding rituals of connection and participant involvement. This approach represents a significant theoretical and methodological contribution to qualitative research design by modeling how to foster a more equitable and participatory research dynamic. This modification is particularly significant when researching with Black women, who have often been subject to extractive or disempowering research practices. By involving participants as co-creators of knowledge, this approach seeks to dismantle hierarchical distinctions between "researcher" and "participant," ensuring that the research process itself aligns with the empowerment principles at the heart of the study. Specifically, this approach encourages collaborative dialogue and co-production during data analysis, allowing participants

to actively shape the research process. This methodological innovation not only enhances the authenticity and depth of the findings but also aligns with the study's broader aim of fostering a more inclusive, just, and reflective inquiry that honors the voices and contributions of Black women.

Perhaps most consequently, the participants in this study were recruited from my personal relationships. This decision was informed by Black feminist and relationality frameworks (Patterson et al., 2016; Halle-Erby, 2022; Mbah et al., 2023) which argue for the benefit of relationally driven research methods. Recruiting friends as participants necessarily implicates their positionality and mine and shapes the research design, ethical considerations, and reflexive engagement. Researching with friends presents specific ethical challenges; however, it also demands a research process rooted in trust, openness, and mutual growth, yielding rich, meaningful findings for both the study and the participants. Researching with friends heightens the ethical demand and necessitates a rigorous commitment to reflexivity. However, it also enriched our relationships, strengthened our trust, and led to deeper insights about ourselves and the research topic. As such, this project is fundamentally relational; the novel insights it generated were made possible by the foundation of trust and rapport that pre-existed the research process. As such, this project demonstrates the essential role of relationships in shaping research outcomes and highlights the critical importance of trust and relationship-building in the research process itself.

The six women who participated in this study were selected because of their unique experiences, capacity for introspection, genuine interest in the topic, and ability to articulate their perspectives effectively. The women represent intergenerational perspectives, ranging in age from 23 to 65 at the time of the interviews. Moreover, each woman has some connection to

social justice movements and has dedicated most of their advocacy work to the place they call home, the metro Detroit area. It is important to note that five out of the six women are from Detroit with one being from Michigan but outside of Detroit. Detroit has a history of radical Black working-class organizing (Tripp, 1994) that is alive in many of the participant's accounts presented in this study. Detroit is a majority Black city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), with a strong sense of cultural and racial pride and an equally strong identity as the epicenter of the working class. Detroit affirms Blackness in ways many other major cities in the United States do not. Black people are an integral part of social, cultural, and political life in Detroit. This geographical and cultural history and the generational diversity among the participants informs the perspective the participants bring to psychological empowerment. It has also informed the formation of the research question itself and my approach to it.

As a woman, mother, and native Detroiter, I come to the topic of empowerment with a deeply personal agenda to understand psychological empowerment for myself and others. Among other formative experiences, becoming a first-time mother was the catalytic event that sparked my curiosity about the mysterious nature of how empowerment forms in the psychic. As a woman who struggled with confidence, agency, and an overall sense of disempowerment, the sudden sense of empowerment that began to occupy me post-childbirth was both energizing and confounding. Without understanding why or how, I had become a woman and mother who found herself locating the power to stand up for my parenting choices, pursue those dormant, pre-kid interests, and begin to author a life that was in alignment with *my* vision rather than others'. My bewilderment at this transformation towards empowerment evolved into a serious empirical curiosity. I wondered what had occurred within and beyond me that engendered such a shift? Did other women experience something similar? Eventually, the question moved to a broader

question of how do women experience psychological empowerment? What does it look like in everyday life? Can women track this evolution over time, and if so, what meaning do they make of it? Though driven by personal curiosity, after reading the literature on empowerment theory, I recognized that answering these questions could yield necessary and overdue insights for me and other Black women and the discipline more broadly. That is the trajectory that led to this project. An empirical question grew out of my personal experience and evolved into a research project with the women in my life whose experiences offer rich, nuanced insights into a phenomenon that has remained empirically underexplored from Black women's perspectives.

Positionality

My positionality is an indispensable to understanding and interpreting the design, analysis, and outcomes of this project. Just like the participants, I am a Black woman from Detroit. I self-describe as a Black socialist feminist. My politics pervade both my personal and professional life. This means that I believe that research should have material utility. I am also a critical theorist and practitioner. I approach what is taken for granted about gender, race, and other domains of social construction, as well as politics, critically. My professional and academic pursuits are animated by the principles of critical theory. In this project, I try to wield critical theory towards both theoretical and material transformation. Transformation of both knowledge and social relations and the conditions in which they occur. My politics are grounded in a radical Black feminist ethic. This means that the plight of Black women is where my topics of concern and analysis begin. As a Black feminist, I espouse a theory of change that uplifting Black women (and here I am being inclusive in this terminology to include trans women), necessarily lifts everyone. As a critical theorist, I value and empirically engage with the contradictions and conflicts that animate not only Black women's lives but everyone living under white

supremacist, colonialist, capitalist domination. My motivation is political. Specifically, I am fundamentally oriented towards emancipation. This project represents one viable avenue towards that end.

Participant Bios

In keeping with this study's relational foundation and to amplify the voices at its center, the following are the self-authored biographical statements of the six participants whose insights and experiences are central to this research. The women, each remarkable, generously offered their time, attention, curiosity, and vulnerability, to produce a critical intervention in the literature. They were honest, enthusiastic, and challenging collaborators on this project. To uplift their voices and better situate the research process and the analytic findings, below are the biographical statements each woman was invited to write. In their own words, the women have briefly shared who they are and the experiences that shape their understanding of empowerment. Although participant names were anonymized by default, they were given the choice to self-identify. An asterisk next to a participant's name indicates the use of a pseudonym, while the absence of an asterisk indicates the participant's real name. Real names were used with explicit consent from participants.

Dominique*

I am a native Detroit mother, grandmother, community mother, wife, homeowner, social justice warrior, food justice warrior, world traveler, and soon-to-be-retired attorney. Growing up in Detroit, I have spent my life witnessing and experiencing and enduring some of the most important challenges life has to offer. I was 10 years old in 1967, when Detroit and much of the Black community erupted. I lived at the very epicenter of that explosion and watched with wonder and endless possibility from my living room. Talk about radical change, talk about

revolution, talk about radical love was all around me; it captured me and never let me go. I have spent my life thinking, caring, imagining, writing, discussing, debating, studying, organizing, screaming, shouting, crying, and praying about creating justice and joy for my community.

Tashmica

Tashmica is a queer, Black woman who centers her work around connecting dope ass people to liberatory ideas so that we can all get free.

As the founding CoDirector of The Firecracker Foundation, she continually grapples with the practices of power and control within herself, others, and the systems she must navigate to cultivate a healing community working to end child sexual abuse. Tashmica is an unschooling parent who believes in her children's right to be radically free and autonomous. Motherhood has become yet another site of practice for seeking out ways to liberate herself from beliefs, social norms, and institutions bent on oppressing Black children. As an abolitionist, Tashmica is cultivating her community's ability to imagine, build, and maintain ways to intervene on acts of violence without relying on police, prisons, or other state institutions as a path toward ending state-sanctioned violence against Black and brown people.

Barbara

Barbara, a Black woman rooted and raised in the heart of Detroit, which she knows as Waawiyaataanong, embodies the spirit of her city. As the middle child, an only daughter, and a sister, she treasures her deep family connections. Barbara's most rewarding roles are those of a devoted mother and a proud grandmother. Her life journey has been diverse, encompassing roles as an educator, lifelong learner, mentor, mentee, youth advocate, caregiver, healer, conflict manager, and steadfast social justice activist.

Combahee*

Combahee is a 20-something black femme working with Detroit and its beloved people. She is learning how to release patterns of codependency, generational curses, and all else that separates her from her highest self. A recurring lesson she faces is surrender and acceptance to what she knows to be true: no is coming to save her, and therefore she must save herself.

MinnieJ*

MinnieJ is a 30 something Black woman from Metro Detroit; she's a granddaughter, daughter, big sister, cousin, niece, girlfriend, feminist, a Survivor, mentor, mentee, friend, Dancing Queen, poet, problem-solver, and a whole lot in-between. She graciously – when she's not stumbling – leans into her lived experiences and relationship with God to guide her path forward, often navigating life with daily reminders of her trauma. She's one that cares deeply about her community and is always asking, "How can I do more? What can I do to create a better world for my people?"

Janet*

Janet is a 34-year-old woman, daughter, and sister. She is a clinical psychologist with a passion for serving others. Outside of her roles, she is committed to the journey of healing and self-discovery through pursuing her hobbies and interests. Currently, she is working on pouring into her relationships with others and focusing on self-care. You can find her at the beach or chilling with her favorite dog, Sherlock.

Through rigorous and repeated encounters with the analytic process and guided by the experiences of these women and the methodological frameworks mentioned above, the study yielded five themes that capture the richness and diversity of the participants' experiences.

Firstly, the study reveals that the participants experience empowerment through relationality and

locate it most acutely and profoundly when in supportive, caring spaces that allow them to embody their authenticity. Secondly, they understand empowerment as a state of consciousness that enables them to identify their desires, capacities, and goals and to advocate for them effectively. The participants also access empowerment through retrospective recognition of their personal growth – observing where they have been and where they are now. Lastly, the participants locate empowerment through their relationship with spirituality and the natural world, offering novel contributions to conceptual models of the constitutive dimensions of psychological empowerment. These findings offer compelling insights into how empowerment is conceptualized and experienced by Black women.

By uncovering areas of convergence and divergence in their experiences, the research highlights how racial and gender identities profoundly influence how individuals define and perceive empowerment. The study confirms that empowerment is highly sensitive to contextual, social, historical, and political forces (Zimmerman, 1995; Peterson, Hamme, & Speer, 2002; Hur, 2006; Christens et al., 2011; Christens, 2012; Speer, 2000; Peterson, 2014; Kabeer, 1999; Gutiérrez, 1990; Foster-Fishman et al., 1998) emphasizing the necessity of considering these factors in empowerment research. Novel insights into the role of spirituality and nature emerge as crucial sources of empowerment for the participants, adding new dimensions to existing theories, which under theorize their influence. Furthermore, the project's qualitative approach reveals the complexity of psychological empowerment, underscoring the importance of qualitative methods in future research to capture the nuanced experiences of marginalized groups.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter Two reviews the literature on psychological empowerment, mapping its evolution and highlighting the gaps this study

addresses. Chapter Three elucidates the methodological approach used in the study, considers the unique ethical implications of researching with friends, and details the multiphasic analytic process. Chapter Four presents the findings, organized around key experiential themes. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the findings in relation to existing theories, outlines the study's significance, and concludes with implications for future research and practice.

By placing Black women's voices at the forefront of empowerment research, this thesis challenges existing paradigms, expands theoretical frameworks, and opens new pathways for scholarly inquiry and practical application.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Empowerment theory has been widely used to inform interventions targeting health promotion, political participation, economic mobility, recovery from abuse, mental health interventions, etc., at the individual, organizational, and community levels. It has formed the basis of interventions aimed at aiding minority groups (Gutiérrez, 1990), young people (Gibson, 1993), unions (Almeleh et al., 1993), grassroots organizing (Almeleh et al., 1993; Speer & Peterson, 2000) and national policy (Peterson et al., 2002, p. 336). However, the literature on psychological empowerment theory has failed to include the perspectives of Black women and requires an intervention that accounts for their lived experiences.

The concept of empowerment pervades contemporary discourse across many disciplines, yet its theoretical underpinnings remain as diverse as the contexts in which it is applied. This literature review will introduce the seminal definitions and models that have shaped understandings of empowerment to the more recent critiques and interventions that underscore its dynamic nature.

Scholarship attempting to define psychological empowerment as a construct in and of itself rather than as a means to understanding another phenomenon (e.g., patient empowerment, workplace empowerment, etc.) has been largely theoretical. By critically engaging with the literature, this review surfaces critiques of empowerment theory and addresses concerns regarding the individualistic and conflict-oriented assumptions that may overshadow communal needs and values. In juxtaposing the various theoretical models, this review underscores empowerment's complexity as a construct constantly in flux, shaped by ongoing social actions and reflections, and demonstrates the need for qualitative approaches to uncovering the operative forces of empowerment in the everyday lives of Black women.

An exhaustive literature search was undertaken to identify scholarship that focused on the definitions and theoretical constructions of psychological empowerment. Searches were performed via electronic databases such as JSTOR, PsycINFO, Scopus, PubMed, and the Social Sciences Citation Index, utilizing a combination of search terms, including "psychological empowerment," "empowerment theory," "quantitative and qualitative research on empowerment," "empirical studies on empowerment," "conceptualization of empowerment," "economic empowerment," "political empowerment," "social empowerment", "women" "black women".

While this thesis focuses on empowerment theory as it emerged and evolved within specific academic and social contexts, it is important to acknowledge that alternative notions and explorations of empowerment have long existed outside this framework. Historical and social movements and thinkers have conceptualized empowerment in collective, structural, and revolutionary terms (Fanon, 1961; Luxemburg, 1913; Federici, 2004; Spivak, 1988; Moten & Harney, 2013) often emphasizing systemic change over individual agency. Though not the focus of this work, these perspectives remain critical to understanding the broader landscape of empowerment as a concept and practice.

Defining Empowerment

Several disciplines have taken up the task of theorizing empowerment, including social work, community psychology, education, women's studies, political science, and sociology (Hur, 2006). Over the years, various fields have sought to define empowerment, with the concept undergoing several amendments. Academic, cultural, and political shifts shaped the surge of research on empowerment theory from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. Academically, the rise of critical and participatory paradigms, alongside interdisciplinary influences from feminist

theory, community psychology, and social work, positioned empowerment as a key framework for addressing power imbalances and promoting social justice. Culturally, the growth of identity politics, social movements, and mainstream narratives around agency and inclusivity, combined with globalization, amplified interest in empowerment as a tool for marginalized voices.

Politically, neoliberalism's erosion of the welfare state, policy shifts toward participatory development, and post-Cold War democratization created a demand for grassroots, inclusive approaches to social change. Advances in qualitative methods and digital communication further supported this focus, enabling more collaborative and nuanced research. However, empowerment theory also faced critiques for its vagueness and potential co-optation by neoliberal agendas (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Bacchi, 2015; Sharma, 2008; Elyachar, 2005; Cruikshank, 1999, Wilson, 2008) which emphasized individual responsibility over structural change. Together, these factors made the 1990s and early 2000s a transformative period for empowerment theory.

Defined broadly, empowerment refers to a dynamic, contextually contingent, cyclical process by which individuals and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, and political power to access resources and promote social change, which increases individual and community well-being (Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1995; Gutiérrez, 1995; Page & Czuba, 1999; Carr, 2003; Christens et al., 2011). Zimmerman (1995) developed a model of psychological empowerment, which consists of three dimensions: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral. The intrapersonal domain refers to an individual's perceived self-control, efficacy, and competence. The interactional domain refers to the development of critical social consciousness, understanding cause-effect connections, acquisition and development of skills,

and the ability to mobilize resources. Lastly, the behavioral component refers to community involvement, organizational participation, and the ability to cope with adverse life experiences.

Zimmerman's (1995) formalization of empowerment theory has been the basis from which subsequent scholars have expanded and developed their work and has functioned as the predominant framework for measuring empowerment in empirical work. However, earlier scholarship developed dimensions of empowerment that are absent in Zimmerman's (1995) three-pronged model but warrant consideration in pursuing a more expansive conceptualization of the contours of psychological empowerment.

In 1988, Whitmore identified four common assumptions of empowerment, 1) Individuals are assumed to understand their needs better than anyone else and, hence, should have the power to define and act upon them, 2) All people possess strengths upon which they can build, 3) The process of empowerment is assumed to be a lifelong endeavor, 4) Personal knowledge and experience are valid and useful in coping effectively. She positions empowerment as rooted in an individual's strengths and argues for the importance of recognizing personal knowledge and experience in understanding empowerment. Whitmore's critical contribution also proposes an ethical framework for researchers and theorists that emphasizes individuals' strengths, experiences, and autonomy, thereby challenging the traditional dominance of authoritative experts.

The Cornell University Empowerment Group (1989) articulated an ecological perspective on empowerment. They described empowerment as "an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (Cornell University Empowerment Group, 1989, p. 2). This

definition underscores psychological empowerment as temporally bound, embedded in local community, emphasizes access to resources, introduces the notions of respect and caring, and gives primacy to group participation.

Peterson (2014) identified self-efficacy, motivation, and locus of control as variables of psychological empowerment, emphasizing that psychological empowerment, although focused on the individual, is experientially embedded in an "ecology" of external factors (p. 234). Moreover, Bolton and Brookings (1998) define psychological empowerment as a "personological construct that reflects the degree to which the values and attitudes associated with empowerment have been internalized." (p. 132). Furthermore, they posit that psychological empowerment occurs when an individual has internalized values and dispositions that become embedded in their worldview and lead to action (Bolton & Brookings, 1998, p. 132). Kabeer (1999) advances these definitions by incorporating subversive elements, rendering empowerment as the ability to self-determine one's life within a sociopolitical context that denies this ability and necessarily demands troubling the status quo. This is echoed by Christens (2012), who argued that psychological empowerment is a variable that is in a shared relationship with "processes and outcomes at other levels of analysis" (Christens, 2012, p. 115), implying that one's exteriority has a role in shaping the manifestation of psychological empowerment.

Complementing these perspectives, Gutiérrez (1990) outlines four interlocking processes of psychological empowerment: enhancing self-efficacy, fostering group consciousness, reducing self-blame, and embracing personal responsibility for change. Gutiérrez argues that these processes are not linear but dynamic and mutually reinforcing. Using these processes as a foundation, Gutiérrez bridges theory with practice by offering actionable interventions for practitioners that include:

1. Accepting the individual's definition of the problem.
2. Identifying and building upon strengths.
3. Engaging in a power analysis of the client's context.
4. Teaching specific skills.
5. Mobilizing resources.
6. Client advocacy.

Gutiérrez, a social work scholar whose work focuses on community-based research methods and praxis, stands out in the literature for providing pragmatic guidance for practitioners. The absence of actionable scholarship demonstrates the glaring gap between theoretical development and practical usefulness.

Integrating internal values and attitudes with external factors delineates psychological empowerment as a profoundly personal and contextually situated phenomenon. Peterson's (2014) emphasis on context specificity reinforces that empowerment is not a one-size-fits-all concept but a personal journey influenced by and impacting the larger social milieu.

The Empowerment Process: An Interplay of Consciousness, Action, and Change

Together, the authors above make clear that Empowerment can be defined as both a process *and* an outcome. One of the aims of this study is to uncover *how* empowerment manifests as a process in the lives of Black women. The following section explores how various theorists have conceived empowerment as a *process*.

Hur (2006) delineates four progressive processes involved in psychological empowerment: initial disturbance, development of critical consciousness, collective mobilization, and the creation of a new world order. The first stage is described as the antecedent condition or what Hur (2006) terms "social, political, or managerial disturbance" (p. 529), akin to

Gutiérrez's (1995) "stressful life events" (p.205) or Kieffer's (1984) "mobilizing episode" (p. 15). Hart (1996) echoed this position by arguing that novel challenges often prompt a shift in one's awareness of contextual embeddedness, fostering a communal sense of shared experience and purpose. During the disturbance phase, an unexpected event, either externally or internally, provokes individuals to question or problematize previously taken-for-granted perceptions of their social context, leading to identification with others sharing similar conditions.

According to Hur (2006), the next phase of the empowerment process involves cultivating a critical consciousness of systemic inequalities. Zimmerman (1995) also described this facet of the empowerment process as "a series of experiences in which individuals learn to see a closer correspondence between their goals and a sense of how to achieve them..." (p. 583). However, Watts et al. (2011) emphasize that critical consciousness of social inequities in and of itself is not sufficient to achieve psychological empowerment but also requires "a sense of personal efficacy or perceived capacity to effect change" (p. 48). Therefore, while individuals may develop a critical apprehension of systemic oppression at the macro and micro levels, they are unlikely to mobilize if they do not possess a sense of self-efficacy (Christens et al., 2011, p. 170).

The third stage of Hur's (2006) empowerment process involves collective mobilization, which is consistent with Zimmerman's (1995) behavioral dimension of empowerment. Both concepts speak to similar processes by which individuals instrumentalize their critical consciousness collectively toward social transformation. However, where Zimmerman concludes his theory at this stage, Hur (2006) extends the process to a fourth stage, whereby individuals work collectively to realize a new social order. Hur (2006) argues that psychological empowerment catalyzes collective social action to pursue new possibilities for world-building (p.

529). Uplifting the political dimensions of the empowerment process, Rees (1998) asserts that the empowerment process moves from dialogue to solidarity to action and, eventually, the development of political identity (p. 137). Similarly, Kieffer (1984) described empowerment as "a long-term process of adult learning and development, in which individual participants "mature" from "socio-political infancy" to sociopolitical "adulthood" (p. 9). What Hur (2006), Rees (1998), and Kieffer (1984) collectively uplift is the potential of collective empowerment to create enduring, transformative, material changes in the social order.

Notably, the trajectory and character of the empowerment process are highly divergent across individuals. The process manifests in infinite varieties contingent on contextual factors, yielding varying and sometimes inconsistent outcomes (Rappaport, 1984, p.3). The empowerment process is developmental rather than linear, is often unpredictable, and implicates a process of thought *and* action (Zimmerman, 1995; Hur, 2006, p. 535). Kaminski et al. (2000) argue that rather than proceeding in a prescribed, linear manner, the empowerment process is *circular*, mutually reinforcing, and does not unfold in a neat and tidy linear fashion. Elaborating the concept more precisely, Carr (2003) conceptualizes empowerment as a praxis of mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses where individuals move through a cycle of identifying and deconstructing problems, engaging in social action, and subsequent reflection (p. 13). Hur (2006) also points to the processual nature of empowerment, suggesting that empowerment evolves through coping with new types of powerlessness in new environments over the lifespan (p. 535).

This iterative understanding of empowerment as both a process of internal growth and a response to external stimuli implies the presence of temporal and contextual drivers that influence and shape the empowerment process. While these theories provide valuable theoretical

insight, they are limited in their ability to capture the nuanced and idiosyncratic ways Black women experience empowerment. Much of the research, such as Hur's (2006) progressive stages or Zimmerman's (1995) dimensions of empowerment, offers generalized models that describe empowerment as a linear or circular progression without adequately accounting for the complexity and variability inherent in individual experiences. These frameworks focus on broad, often abstract elements like "critical consciousness" or "collective mobilization" but fail to address how specific life events, cultural contexts, and environmental shifts uniquely shape Black women's empowerment trajectories. The following section will address how environmental and temporal factors influence the development of empowerment.

Contextual and Temporal Domains of Psychological Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-layered construct that operates across personal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and collective registers, exhibiting considerable temporal and contextual variability (Hur, 2006). Speer (2000) contributes to this dialogue by noting that psychological empowerment is inherently subjective, taking divergent forms across individuals and fluctuating across different settings and temporalities within the *same* individual, arguing that "psychological empowerment takes different forms for different people" (p. 52). This perspective aligns with Christens et al., (2011), who posits empowerment as a multi-component construct that varies across populations and contexts. It enhances individuals' control over their lives, engagement in democratic decision-making, and critical awareness of their sociopolitical environments. The holistic conceptualization of empowerment as a context-specific process contributes complexity to empowerment theories by acknowledging the transactional nature of empowerment within the socio-political milieu. These insights demonstrate the indispensability of a theory of empowerment that adequately integrates considerations of an individual's

sociopolitical, cultural, and economic context as modifiers of the form that empowerment might take for them (Speer, 2000).

The literature also established psychological empowerment as a process that is temporally bound. Speer (2000) highlights the temporal contingency of empowerment, emphasizing that it fluctuates within the same individual over time. This temporal variability underscores the dynamic nature of psychological empowerment, as individuals' experiences and perceptions of empowerment may change in response to evolving circumstances. Moreover, as Fishman-Foster et al. (1998) note, empowerment, being a contextually determined construct, is particularly prone to fluctuations over time (p. 511). According to Staples (1990), empowerment is an ongoing journey that involves continuous development. In this view, psychological empowerment is not exclusively about achieving a specific end goal or arriving at a destination but rather about cultivating the ability to take effective action under constantly shifting conditions (Staples, 1990). As suggested by Speer (2000), psychological empowerment is dynamic and fluctuates unpredictably between robustness and dissipation rather than as a static condition.

While the literature notes that psychological empowerment is subject to change over time and across contexts, it needs more empirical depth in exploring how these changes *manifest* in real-life situations. The reliance on generalized models does not fully capture the diverse ways that Black women experience and navigate empowerment within their specific socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts. The extant literature offers a surface-level understanding of variability in empowerment, without delving into the granular, everyday experiences that constitute these fluctuations. The present study addresses these gaps by offering a qualitative

exploration of how Black women uniquely experience and define empowerment throughout their lives.

Empowerment as a Latent Construct

Empowerment is a latent construct not directly observable but inferred through related, observable indicators. As a multidimensional construct, it encompasses several interrelated components that merge into a single theoretical entity. Researchers suggest that identifying and understanding these dimensions and how they are related is integral to developing a more holistic concept of empowerment (Edwards, 2001; Law et al., 1998)

The debate over how empowerment is structured focuses on whether it is a unified concept that affects its dimensions or if those dimensions culminate to create a sense of empowerment. The first perspective, the superordinate model, suggests that empowerment influences these dimensions from the top down. The second perspective, the aggregate model, argues the opposite: that these dimensions build up the feeling of empowerment from the bottom up (Peterson, 2014). In attempts to resolve this issue, researchers have examined how empowerment's dimensions (e.g., intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioral) are interconnected.

Zimmerman's (1995) empowerment model is typified as superordinate and suggests that empowerment's domains are interchangeable and exhibit significant overlap; therefore, omitting one would not alter empowerment's overall manifestation. Peterson (2014) challenged this assertion, arguing that each dimension encapsulates a distinct aspect of empowerment, and excluding any of them would inevitably change its meaning and experience. Peterson argues that the domains within Zimmerman's model do not consistently correlate strongly with one another and do not uniformly relate to other variables hypothesized as antecedents or consequences of

psychological empowerment, questioning the integrity of the superordinate model. As a result, Peterson advocates for a shift towards the aggregate model of empowerment, where the dimensions actively contribute to forming the construct. This model acknowledges the complexity of psychological empowerment and allows the distinct domains to retain their unique contributions without the presumption of interchangeability.

The implication for research here suggests that empowerment should be conceptualized and measured with attention to its dimensions' distinct and contributory nature, aligning more closely with the aggregate model that accommodates the diversity of experiences and expressions of psychological empowerment. Therefore, this study provides a critical lens to assess which model—or combination thereof—reflects the empowerment process in practice most accurately for the participants and, in doing so, reveals how different dimensions of empowerment (intrapersonal, interpersonal, behavioral) interrelate and manifest across the distinct socio-cultural contexts that Black women navigate.

Critiques of Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory has been a critical framework in discussions about social change. However, the dominant theoretical framework of empowerment has faced significant critique for its strong focus on individualism, which some argue overlooks the crucial role of collective action and structural change in achieving societal transformation. Scholars from various disciplines have offered critical perspectives on the limitations of empowerment theory, illuminating the complexities and nuances inherent in the theoretical framework. Such perspectives offer important insights into the potential drawbacks of an overreliance on individual empowerment and suggest alternative frameworks that consider the broader social, political, and economic factors that shape people's lives.

From Personal to Political: Empowerment in Sociopolitical Contexts

Woodall et al. (2012) argue that the focus on individual empowerment only serves to reaffirm a neoliberal ideology that emphasizes individual empowerment at the expense of collective action or political activity, diluting the concept of its political and radical potential and thereby failing to effect meaningful social change. They contend that while individual empowerment is not without merit, its isolation from broader political and social contexts overlooks the opportunity for transformative change in the structures within which individuals operate.

Staples (1990) echoes this sentiment by stating that individual empowerment alone cannot be the solution for powerless groups. Staples argues that to achieve true social equality, there must be a transformation in the power relations among the various strata of society, necessitating a structural change in power dynamics. Pease (2002) further criticizes individualistic notions of empowerment for focusing solely on enhancing the capacities of individuals without addressing the need for change in oppressive social structures.

Langan (1998) provides a critical view on how empowerment is conceptualized, suggesting that it implies an individualistic conception of power that reduces social relations to the interpersonal level, thereby obscuring the real power relations in society. This reductionist view may give the illusion of equality, particularly in professional-client relationships, while maintaining existing authoritarian dynamics (Langan, 1998). Therefore, it is imperative to understand empowerment as a collective process that considers the broader political and social contexts rather than an isolated individualistic endeavor.

Critiques of Individualism in Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory has been widely critiqued for its overarching emphasis on individualism, predominantly at the cognitive and organizational levels of analysis. This focus has led to a constrained understanding of empowerment, particularly in neglecting the significant role of relationships and communal processes at the psychological level. Christens (2012) critiques empowerment theory for ascribing primacy to individualism, independence, and control while overlooking the communal processes and outcomes equally pivotal to power dynamics and perceptions of power. This critique underscores a fundamental misalignment within empowerment theory, highlighting its failure to account for empowerment's broader, relational dimensions.

Riger (1993) and Speer (2000) have identified empowerment theory's foundational assumptions as predominantly individualistic and conflict oriented. This suggests that empowerment theory offers a skewed vision of empowerment that privileges conflict over cooperation and control over communal connection. This orientation has invariably resulted in an overemphasis on mastery and control, sidelining the values of cooperation and community.

Further, the dichotomy between individual autonomy and communal well-being highlights the paradox in empowerment theory's neglect of communal or expressive needs, deemed by some scholars as vital as autonomy and control (Riger, 1993; Speer, 2000). This paradox highlights the theory's inadequacy in fostering environments conducive to community and empowerment, suggesting a conceptual gap in understanding how these two dimensions can be reconciled.

The chronic under-theorization of relationality vis-à-vis empowerment has led to an incomplete understanding of how empowerment processes unfold within individuals. Christens

(2012) addresses this gap by augmenting Zimmerman's (1995) three-dimensional model of empowerment theory to include a relational dimension. Christens' intervention positions empowerment not merely as an individual or structural phenomenon but as deeply embedded in the fabric of interpersonal relationships through which power is developed and exercised. Through a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research insights, Christens proposes an enhanced empowerment framework that articulates five critical elements operative in psychological empowerment: relationality, collaborative competence, bridging social divisions, facilitating others' empowerment, network mobilizations, and passing on a legacy. This approach signifies a pivotal shift towards recognizing the complexity of empowerment as inherently relational.

Endorsing the relational perspective, Peterson et al. (2002) argue that power in community organizations lies in the strength of the relationships among its members. Peterson et al. (2002) posit that theories of psychological empowerment must account for the dynamics of interpersonal relationships to fully grasp how power is cultivated and manifested within these contexts. By integrating these perspectives, the literature points to a more nuanced understanding of empowerment, suggesting that the relational dimensions of power play a critical role in the empowerment process, thereby calling for a broader, more inclusive model that reflects these insights.

Feminist Critiques and Contributions to Empowerment Theory

Feminist scholars have played a pivotal role in empowerment theory by offering a sociopolitical lens emphasizing critical considerations such as self-alienation, conflicting social messaging, and institutional sexism (GlenMaye, 1998; East & Roll, 2015, pp. 280-281), significantly broadening the scope of empowerment discourse by highlighting the importance of

interpersonal and cultural relationality and intersectionality. East and Roll (2015) emphasize that empowerment involves embracing relationships characterized by mutuality, strength-building, and cultural humility (p. 281). To operationalize these principles, they proposed three interconnected components that support women's empowerment: engagement through storytelling, the development of a voice, and leadership and advocacy (East & Roll, 2015, p. 282), amending empowerment theory to include features previously outside of its purview.

Feminist scholars are also critical of the prescriptive nature of empowerment theory, which often focuses on unidirectional, predetermined stages while overlooking the intricate interactional processes inherent in women's lives (Stacki & Monkman, 2003, p. 173). Feminist perspectives resist the conventional dominant–subordinate relationship inherent in many empowerment models, advocating for a 'power to' rather than 'power over' paradigm (Stacki & Monkman, 2003, p. 181). This shift underscores the significance of empowerment in enabling individuals, particularly women, to exercise agency within their sociopolitical contexts.

Responding to the definitional imprecision that frustrated scholars attempting to measure empowerment as a programmatic outcome, Bennett-Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) developed a processual model of empowerment that introduces a dynamic approach, delineating three distinct yet mutually reinforcing steps (a) identifying personally meaningful goals, (b) taking action towards achievement, and (c) reflection and appraisal of the outcome in ways that enhance goal-specific competency (p. 647). By emphasizing goal orientation and incorporating reflection, Bennett-Cattaneo and Chapman's intervention distinguishes empowerment from related constructs like confidence, self-efficacy, and agency. Moreover, their model acknowledges the pervasive influence of one's social context throughout the empowerment process, extending the evaluation beyond intrapersonal feelings to encompass an assessment of the *actual* increase in

power (Bennett-Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010, p. 648), responding to other scholars who criticized empowerment theory for being overly focused on perceptions of power instead of the actualization of increased power in one's life (Perkins, 2010; Christens, 2012).

Another feminist intervention in empowerment theory, put forth by Kabeer (1999), posits that empowerment necessitates a starting position of powerlessness. Kabeer suggests that the ability to make choices and exert power in one's life is not necessarily being *empowered* if the individual is not starting from a position of powerlessness (p. 437). She extends this critique by including the notion of choice, emphasizing that genuine empowerment entails having access to *alternative* choices. Kabeer defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (1999, p. 437). Her delineation of choice into three domains, resources, agency, and achievements, underscores the importance of addressing the inequities in individuals' *capacity* to make choices rather than focusing solely on the *differences* in their choices (Kabeer, 1999, p. 439).

Black feminist thinkers have a long and rich tradition of critiquing notions of empowerment (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; 1994; Lorde, 1984; Davis, 1981, 2016). Collins (2000) criticized discourses on empowerment for consistently ignoring the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women and emphasized the importance of collective empowerment and self-definition, rooted in the lived experiences of Black women, and highlighted the role of community and solidarity in fostering resistance and liberation.

hooks (1984) and Lorde (1984) critiqued the individualism of mainstream feminist and empowerment discourses, arguing that true empowerment must address systemic oppression and center the experiences of marginalized groups and advocated for a transformative, intersectional approach to empowerment that challenges patriarchal, racist, and capitalist structures.

Lorde (1984) also critiqued the exclusion of Black women's voices from mainstream empowerment discourses. She emphasized the power of difference and the need for solidarity across diverse identities and argued that empowerment must be rooted in self-awareness, creativity, and collective action. Davis (1981) critiqued the commodification of empowerment in the neoliberal contexts and urged that true liberation requires dismantling systemic oppression. Moreover, she highlighted the importance of historical and global perspectives in understanding empowerment, linking local struggles to broader movements for justice.

In summary, feminist perspectives of empowerment prioritize the sociopolitical lens, relationality, and cultural sensitivity, challenging the static nature of traditional empowerment models and advocating for a "power to" paradigm. Bennett-Cattaneo and Chapman's (2010) model focuses on conceptual precision, goal orientation, and the influence of social contexts in addressing the imprecision within empowerment theory. Kabeer's (1999) intervention emphasizes the precondition of powerlessness and redefines empowerment as the expansion of strategic life choices, highlighting the importance of addressing inequities in the capacity to make choices. Each of these interventions contributes to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of empowerment theory, offering valuable insights into its multifaceted nature.

Critiques of empowerment theory underscore a need for reevaluation and expansion beyond its individual-centric focus. Insights from various scholars highlight the theory's shortcomings in addressing the complex interplay between individual agency and collective action and its neglect of the structural transformations necessary for genuine social change. By embracing a more nuanced understanding of empowerment—one that incorporates communal processes, relational dynamics, and the broader political and social contexts—there is potential to foster a more inclusive and practical approach to empowerment. A reimagined perspective on

empowerment theory and practice challenges existing neoliberal paradigms and opens avenues for more equitable and just societal transformations.

Building on these critiques, this study aims to respond to scholars' overemphasis on individualism and the under-theorization of empowerment's relational, communal, and sociopolitical dimensions by emphasizing the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in shaping empowerment experiences.

Conclusion

The literature on psychological empowerment delineates it as a composite and dynamic construct that encapsulates an individual's journey towards self-efficacy, critical awareness, and active engagement within their socio-political context. It is the expansion of an individual's capacity to make strategic life choices where such ability was previously obstructed and encompasses recognizing and utilizing one's inherent strengths and experiences to redefine and act upon needs and aspirations.

Psychological empowerment transcends the personal domain, entailing a relational dimension where the individual's empowerment is interlinked with the empowerment of others through mutual respect, critical reflection, and collective participation. It is a continuous interaction of enhancing self-belief, fostering group consciousness, reducing self-blame, and embracing personal responsibility for change.

The process of psychological empowerment unfolds through a non-linear progression of experiencing an initial disturbance that challenges existing perceptions, developing a critical consciousness of systemic inequalities, engaging in community mobilization, and contributing to establishing a new, equitable social order. Manifestations of empowerment are temporally and

contextually variable, influenced by personal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and collective domains.

In essence, psychological empowerment is the iterative process of growth and adaptation, where individuals and communities navigate and renegotiate power within their evolving circumstances, driving transformative social change and enhancing communal well-being.

Research Question and Study Aims

This study aims to fill the critical gaps in the existing literature by providing a nuanced, qualitative exploration of how Black women experience and define empowerment in their everyday lives. Prevailing empowerment theories, while offering valuable insights into the broad categorical dynamics of empowerment, often fall short of capturing the complexity, variability, and intersectional realities that shape Black women's experiences. By focalizing the narratives of Black women, this study seeks to bring forth a richer understanding of how empowerment is experienced at the intersections of race, gender, and class, reflecting the diverse ways it manifests in different socio-political and cultural contexts.

By centering Black women's voices, this study advances a more inclusive model of empowerment that accounts for both individual and collective dimensions. It challenges the dominant paradigms that often isolate empowerment from its broader social and political contexts and emphasizes the critical role of community, relationships, and structural inequalities in shaping empowerment processes.

The study's contribution to the theoretical discourse is significant because it extends the existing frameworks by integrating intersectional perspectives, highlighting how empowerment operates in varied and context-specific ways. By revealing how empowerment is both personally experienced and communally enacted, this research enriches our understanding of empowerment

as a dynamic, multifaceted construct. Ultimately, this project advocates for a reimagined approach to empowerment theory—one that is more sensitive to the complexities of lived experience and more aligned with the goals of social justice and structural transformation. To this end, this project seeks to answer the question: How do Black women define and experience empowerment in their everyday lives?

Chapter Three: Methodology

Why Qualitative Inquiry?

While quantitative methods have advanced our understanding of common factors influencing empowerment, they fall short of capturing the nuanced experiences of individuals within specific contexts (Rappaport, 1995; Tolan et al., 1990). This study aimed to increase the visibility and comprehension of empowerment processes among Black women who have been historically marginalized and underrepresented in empowerment research. Furthermore, it sought to expand what is known about the nuances of how empowerment operates in daily life through the experiences of Black women. These perspectives have hitherto been understudied in empowerment theory. Heeding Zimmerman's (1990) assertion that the cultural and contextual contingencies of empowerment require innovative research strategies for comprehensive apprehension of the intricacies of empowerment within varied life experiences, this study employed a pluralistic qualitative approach to elicit detailed, context-rich data to reveal how Black women construct meanings around empowerment within the varied contexts of their lives.

Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to elucidate the personal and collective narratives that form the core of the empowerment process, especially for groups whose voices have been marginalized (Rappaport, 1995; Joseph, 2020). Such methods allow for exploring empowerment as a continuous variable (Zimmerman, 1995) and accommodate the complexity of empowerment's temporal and contextual dynamics (Christens et al., 2011). Using qualitative methods to capture the voices and stories of Black women, this project contributes to the literature by providing insights into the lived realities of psychological empowerment, reflecting a diversity of experiences that are often overlooked. Furthermore, by focusing on psychological empowerment, this study responds to calls for research that moves beyond conceptions of

empowerment that privilege outcomes to examine the *process* of empowerment (Hur, 2006).

This project also addresses the issue that the research foundation of empowerment theory primarily relies on samples with primarily White participants. Thus, the absence of a robust research base on empowerment that includes racially diverse samples leads to theories that may be racially biased and affect the theory's application to diverse populations that the research has not adequately included or understood (Zimmerman et al., 1992; Peterson et al., 2002).

In summary, the literature justifies using qualitative methods to investigate psychological empowerment, as these methods provide the necessary depth, flexibility, and sensitivity to context required to appreciate how Black women experience empowerment. By employing a qualitative approach, the present study also addresses critiques that empowerment research has often silenced the very individuals it seeks to empower by failing to capture their unique and personal narratives (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998).

Methodological Framework

This project is informed by a pluralistic approach to qualitative inquiry. The following sections will briefly explain the various methodologies and how they shaped the contours of the study's design.

Radical Qualitative Inquiry

In advancing a methodological framework that diverges from conventional qualitative paradigms, this project draws upon the ethos of radical qualitative research developed by scholars such as Parker (2005); Smith (1999); Fine (2018); and Mohanty (2003). These frameworks provide an overarching philosophy to guide the research process, distinct from conventional qualitative methods in its critical stance toward the accepted norms within the positivistic and conventional qualitative research milieu. This approach does not shy away but

instead confronts and engages with issues such as justice, perceived objectivity, and the power dynamics between researcher and participants. It mandates a critical and introspective engagement by researchers with their role and the research process, encouraging a reflective practice to identify and challenge stereotypical or dominant assumptions (Parker, 2005). Because this research was undertaken with people from my personal relationships, it was particularly crucial that I embraced a research paradigm that privileged the role of reflexivity, given the potential ethical and empirical pitfalls of such an approach.

Additionally, the topic of empowerment inherently implicates processes and structures of power. Therefore, an approach that acknowledges the political nature of experiential accounts into focus is aptly suited to analyze the phenomenon of psychological empowerment. Moreover, this project involves Black women who exist within politicized and policed social positions and who are subject to persistent and harmful stereotyping, which limits how others apprehend their humanity, innovations, creativity, and intellectual contributions and capacities. As Parker (2005) articulates, the uniqueness of radical qualitative research is in its pursuit to eschew reductionism, essentialism, and the psychologization of the subject matter, values that are especially relevant for research with Black women.

Radical qualitative inquiry is also defined by its commitment to political engagement throughout the research process. It recognizes that research activities invariably contribute to either the perpetuation or transformation of existing social structures and necessitates a radical qualitative design that critically examines the researcher-participant relationship and its alignment with broader societal structures (Parker, 2005). Given the project's focus on Black women's experiences and the pre-existing relationship between participants and myself, the heightened awareness towards avoiding extractive or disempowering research dynamics that a

radical qualitative paradigm demands were imperative, as Black women have been the subject of scholarship that has reinforced stereotypes and engaged in extractive research practices. The reflexivity inherent in a radical qualitative approach ensures that the research process is subject to the same critical scrutiny as the data it produces to guard against the misrepresentation and suppression of vital political narratives and inappropriate impositions from my personal biases and misconceptions.

A radical qualitative research paradigm acknowledges the inherently political nature of research, especially in contexts involving marginalized communities. This approach empowers researchers to recognize and address the political dimensions of their work, contributing to a transformative agenda that seeks not just to understand but also challenge and change oppressive structures. Moreover, radical qualitative research resists simplistic interpretations and seeks to understand experiences within the broader socio-political context, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis. Lastly, this approach emphasizes the empowerment of participants as co-creators of knowledge and challenges power imbalances between researcher and participants, fostering a more collaborative and equitable research relationship. These principles are operative throughout this project, from subverting the assumed fixed and discrete positioning of “participant” and “researcher” to co-production during the data analysis. In addition to making explicit the political implications of the research findings, I have adapted my research praxis in ways that challenge conventions taken for granted within qualitative research to make visible how a politics of egalitarianism can be realized, which I will elucidate in later sections. In conclusion, the radical qualitative approach enriches the research process by embedding reflexivity, political engagement, resistance to reductionism, and empowerment at its core.

Black Feminist Qualitative Inquiry as Theory and Method

Black feminist qualitative inquiry serves as a paradigmatic counter to the historical marginalization of Black women, both as subjects and as scholars (Evans-Winters, 2019). This approach underscores the critical role of the researcher's positionality in influencing knowledge consumption, production, and dissemination (Evans-Winters, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Smith, 1999). Embracing a Black feminist qualitative framework entails a commitment to foregrounding the experiential knowledge of Black women, challenging pervasive "universal truths," and fostering a re-examination of theoretical frameworks and social policies. By moving beyond positivist criteria of validation, a Black feminist research paradigm affirms that the truths found within community experiences and the reflective discourse on these experiences are, as Evans-Winters (2019) asserts, "legitimate subjects of research and analysis" (p. 23). This project models this approach through its analytical methodology (the use of IPA to centralize the importance of idiosyncratic experience), collaborative analysis, and the amplification of the participants in their own voice (via the inclusion of biographical statements and robust verbatim excerpts).

The adoption of a Black feminist stance is crucial in the present study. It provides an appropriate lens through which Black women's experiences of empowerment can be examined, validates their lived experiences as a central element of scholarly inquiry, and affirms that the epistemological foundations derived from Black women's lived realities are essential for a comprehensive and authentic understanding of empowerment theory.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method designed to delve into individuals' subjective experiences, particularly concerning psychosocial and

emotional phenomena. IPA is informed by three core philosophical traditions—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography—each playing a formative role in shaping IPA's methodology and how it facilitates a rich, nuanced understanding of lived experiences. Procedurally, IPA unfolds accordingly: 1) manual transcription of the interviews, 2) immersion or close reading or listening and rereading of the transcript, 3) making exploratory notes about significant observations, 4) converting the exploratory notes into experiential statements, 5) grouping experiential statements into personal themes, and 6) cross analyzing personal themes across participants to form group themes. As such, IPA is inherently exploratory, aiming to understand rather than explain individuals' experiences on their terms, free from the constraints of pre-established categories (Smith et al., 2022).

IPA emphasizes engaging with participants' experiences in their most authentic form, avoiding the distortion that may arise from imposing pre-existing categories (Smith et al., 2022). This means that rather than using outside theories to structure or explain the data; the researcher relies on the data itself to reveal and interpret meaning. This is particularly relevant when researching with Black women, who frequently confront the delimiting and harmful effects of racist and sexist stereotyping in the apprehension and interpretation of their experiences (Cannon et al., 1988; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Gibson & Abrams, 2003). By utilizing a research paradigm that eschews fixed categorization, IPA allows Black women to express their realities without the constraints of biased presuppositions.

As Rappaport (1995) noted, socially, politically, or economically marginalized individuals often find the narratives available to them to be negative, restrictive, or created by others and not representative of their actual experiences (p.796). IPA, however, acknowledges the intricate and subjective nature of experience. It does not seek an objective truth or set narrow

confines for its analysis. Instead, it honors the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Accordingly, IPA is suited to uncovering the contours of psychological empowerment and pushes back against the tendency to configure it as a phenomenon rooted in an individualistic paradigm. The goal of IPA is not to declare the veracity of an experience but to engage in a dialogic process where both participants and researchers collaboratively explore the depth and meaning of experience and its consequential insights into their everyday lives. Within this methodological approach, Black women can narrate their stories of empowerment in their language and from their specific vantage point, which is critical in understanding the unique and heterogeneous nature of their experiences.

By circumventing preset classifications, IPA enables Black women to convey their experiences without being precluded by the imposition of societal stereotyping, confronting and potentially revising the restrictive narratives historically ascribed to them. Throughout my interactions with participants, from the first contact to data analysis and final write-up, I was mindful of the risk that introducing preconceived concepts or themes—either from my perspective or from the data of other participants—could compromise the data analysis's quality and integrity. Mitigating this risk demanded that I consistently practice reflexivity and accountability throughout the research process.

Defining Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be one of the most challenging facets of carrying out qualitative research, particularly with friends. A rigorous reflexive practice increases the quality of the research, supports its credibility, and deepens the understanding of the data (Dodgson, 2019; Smith & Luke, 2023)

Reflexivity is the ongoing process by which the researcher accounts for the impact of their self-knowledge, or lack thereof, on creating knowledge (Berger, 2013; Appleton, 2011). As Berger (2013) writes, reflexivity “means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation” (p. 220). Following Dodgson (2019), I have done my best throughout the research process to be attuned to how my shared identity as a Black woman, Detroit, and mother with the participants has influenced how I ask questions and respond to answers, how my prior knowledge of participants has the potential to both threaten and enrich the analysis; and how my respect for their experiences and intellectual capacities disposes me to a collaborative orientation. Throughout each phase of the research process, I have documented and critically engaged with my reflective practice, examining my positionality, assumptions, and evolving understanding to ensure rigor and transparency.

In brief, the present study employed a pluralistic approach to qualitative research using radical qualitative research, Black feminist qualitative inquiry, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Radical qualitative research brings a reflexive, politically engaged framework that validates the complex realities of Black women's lives, eschewing reductionist and essentialist tendencies. Black feminist qualitative inquiry contributes a lens that centers Black women's voices and lived experiences, recognizes their epistemological value, and challenges the status quo of scholarly and social understanding. IPA offers a structure for capturing the nuanced, subjective experiences of the participants, emphasizing the authenticity of narratives within the socio-political context of their lives.

Together, these approaches form a comprehensive methodology that honors participants' individuality and fosters an in-depth understanding of empowerment defined and experienced by Black women.

Design

Sample

IPA's idiographic focus necessitates small sample sizes for a thorough analysis that captures the intricacies of lived experience. As such, for doctoral-level research, Smith et al. (2021) recommend a sample size of six to 10 participants sampled from a homogenous group relevant to the topic of study.

While IPA provides general guidance on sample size, the researcher must use their discretion when deciding an exact number. Specifically, researchers must consider the complexity of the topic, the availability of participants, and the project's timeline. The literature established psychological empowerment as a broad phenomenon, spanning multiple contextual terrains. Given this, I chose to limit the sample to six participants. I understood that critically engaging psychological empowerment with Black women would necessarily mean I would also encounter race, gender, politics, religion, interpersonal relationships, professional identity, mothering., etc. As such, I determined that a sample of six would avoid the risk of being overwhelmed by the data, and allow me to develop a robust, in-depth analysis only made possible by having sufficient time to do so.

Given the small sample size, claims are circumscribed to the sample group. While this study is limited by its small sample size of six participants, this approach was intentionally chosen to allow for an in-depth, nuanced analysis of each participant's experiences. Although the findings are not generalizable to all individuals identifying as Black women, they reveal

critically important insights into the diversity and complexity inherent in how empowerment is experienced. By prioritizing depth over volume, this research highlights the varied and context-specific ways empowerment manifests, contributing to a richer understanding of its multifaceted nature and illuminating pathways for future research.

The participants were sampled from my personal relationships and needed to meet the following criteria: 1) identify as a Black woman, 2) be over 18, and 3) reside in Michigan. As discussed in the introduction, the regional homogeneity of the participants was a deliberate and significant aspect of the research design. As the epicenter of the Black middle class and a city with a rich cultural, racial, and economic history, Detroit provided a unique context for exploring empowerment among Black women. The city's legacy of resilience, activism, and community-building has profoundly shaped its residents' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, including the participants in this study. By ensuring that all participants came from the same geographical region, the study could delve deeply into the shared and divergent ways that Detroit's cultural and historical context influences empowerment. This approach allowed for a nuanced analysis of how place, identity, and social history intersect in shaping individual and collective understandings of empowerment while also highlighting the diversity of experiences within this specific cultural and geographical framework.

Recruitment

In many ways, this project was inspired by the women who participated in it. It was with them in mind that I began to concretize the research question and the methodological approach. Appreciating our preexisting relationship and what I know about their keen interest in psychosocial phenomenon, I recruited them both out of personal curiosity about their experiences and their faculties for critical introspection, a robust asset in phenomenological research. Moreover,

while I am friends with each of the participants, there are varying levels of closeness between us. However, each of these relationships is lateral, with no professional or other power asymmetries between us that would have created risk for coercion or adversely impacted their disclosures. The recruitment process was initiated by contacting participants by phone to introduce the project's topic, goals, and procedures. Once participants indicated an interest in the project, individual meetings were scheduled to discuss the details in-depth and attend to any questions or concerns they had. All six participants who were contacted provided preliminary consent to participate, after which point they were emailed the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix B). Participants were then asked to review the document and invited to ask questions about any aspect of the study. Once all questions were answered and participants indicated they agreed to move forward, they were asked to sign and return via email a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form.

Ethical Considerations

The Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham granted ethical approval for this research on September 8th, 2022 (Appendix A).

Consent and Compensation. Participants received the consent form by email and were asked to read, electronically sign, and return the form before scheduling the formal research interview. Consent was verbally reaffirmed at the start and end of the interview and before a follow-up meeting held three months after the interview. Participants were consistently reminded of their right to withdraw from the study before, during, or up to three months following the interview but before the start of the data analysis. This withdrawal right was communicated verbally multiple times throughout the research process and was explicitly detailed in the consent form, which also included a specific timeline for withdrawal.

Participants were informed that if they decided to withdraw from the project, they could either have their data excluded and destroyed or retained for inclusion in the final analysis and report. Each participant received a \$100.00 payment for their involvement, with the option to receive payment in cash, through CashApp, or Venmo. Funding was provided by the University of Birmingham's Research Support Fund. To minimize any potential for coercion, participants were informed that they would still receive compensation if they decided to withdraw at any point during or immediately after the initial interview, but not before. Ultimately, no participants chose to withdraw from the project.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. From the first point of contact, all participants were made aware of the limits of confidentiality in a qualitative research project. They were informed that verbatim excerpts from interviews would be used in the final write-up of the research to provide a rich account of the data and support the interpretive conclusions as part of the research findings. All participants in the study were given a choice to use a pseudonym or publish their real first name in the final write-up. The process for obtaining consent for pseudonymizing (or not) followed the same timeline as general consent. As the research project focused on empowerment, the practice of anonymity was reevaluated to ensure that it aligned with an ethos of empowerment, agency, and authorship. Therefore, the assumption of anonymity for the participants was reconsidered to accommodate the participants' preferences. This allowed the participants to publicly claim their stories if they chose to do so. By default, participants were assigned a pseudonym. After receiving a copy of their transcript participants were asked if they would like to keep the pseudonym or use their real first name.

During this process, four out of the six participants expressed dissatisfaction with their assigned pseudonym and requested to create their own, and two participants chose to use their

real first names. The other four participants later submitted pseudonyms of their own choice, which were adopted in the dataset and write-up. This unexpected development in the research process raised issues of agency, research ethics, and empowerment. Even when remaining anonymous, participants chose names that were culturally legible as Black or somehow alluded to Blackness. Evident throughout this process was that the women, who, due to their gendered and racialized identities, are often denied agency around their broader social representation, identified the issue of representation within the present study as a site where they could reclaim power over how they are represented. As such, this study provided valuable insight into how Black women navigate and creatively subvert attempts to distort and misrepresent them.

Data Storage. The participant consent forms, interview recordings, transcripts, follow-up meeting notes, and data analysis documents were securely stored on my password-protected computer. All files were kept in an encrypted and password-protected Google Drive folder that only I could access. The data was only accessible to me and the two assigned faculty supervisors on the project. Any paper documents such as transcripts, written notes, or other materials used during the research were kept in a secure, locked filing cabinet in my home. No one else had access to the filing cabinet. Once the Viva Voce is completed, all paper and digital documents associated with the study will be destroyed.

Distress. Although discussing empowerment was not expected to be distressing for participants, I discovered during the interviews that this topic could implicate almost every area of an individual's life. Reflecting on powerlessness sometimes led participants to touch on sensitive or painful issues. Additionally, some participants mentioned that they had never thought about the issue of power in their lives, and within the reflective space the interview offered, novel connections and insights surfaced that sometimes resulted in strong emotional responses.

Throughout the interview, participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question, pause, or postpone the interview at any time, and another time would be scheduled to resume the interview.

In the case of any distress, I relied on the trust and care between myself and the participants and my skills as a trained clinical psychotherapist to assess for signs of discomfort during the interview and offer support in whatever ways were helpful. As part of the Black feminist ethics that shaped this project, if participants experienced distress, they were given space to deviate from the interview schedule and process what was emerging for them. Pauses and acknowledgments of distress were part of the relational dynamic that characterized the research process. In those moments I responded to the participant as a friend as well as a Black feminist researcher who embraces relational methodologies that reject the notion of participants as objects to be extracted from. Rather, I responded to them as full and complex individuals whose wholeness of experience is welcome and not regarded as extraneous or an obstruction to the research aims. On the contrary, allowing for pauses, organic deviations, and acknowledgments of spontaneous or unexpected emotions or affect engendered increased trust and comfort with the interview process itself.

Managing the Ethics of Researching with Friends. All participants in this project were recruited from my existing friendships. Several considerations were weighed in making this decision. As the primary source of data collection in qualitative research comes from unstructured or semi-structured interviews, the depth and richness of data are significantly influenced by the level of trust and rapport established between the researcher and participant. Researching with friends means the research relationship occurs within the broader relational context between the researcher and the participant. The friendship brings all its attendant

affections, trust, empathy, and understanding, all of which serve a facilitative function within the research relationship. These elements are particularly crucial for a study centered on the empowerment of Black women, a nuanced psychological and social phenomenon that benefits from participants who feel safe and comfortable enough to offer insightful and nuanced reflections on their experiences.

Researching with friends challenges traditional research paradigms that advocate for a dispassionate, value neutral-stance and a clear demarcation between researchers and subjects (Tillman-Healy, 2003, p. 733). Instead, it embraces what Patricia Collins (2000) terms an "epistemology of empowerment," rooted in an ethics of care that prioritizes emotional resonance, expressiveness, and empathy (p. 229)—qualities intrinsic to friendship. This approach facilitates a more profound understanding of the topic and enriches the research process with enhanced rapport, communicative openness, and shared language and symbolic representation (Taylor, 2011). Furthermore, researching with friends advantages the interview process due to the researcher's increased perception of body language, awareness of sensitive topics, and familiarity with participants' self-image (Taylor, 2011, p. 11). This familiarity offers unparalleled insight into participants' non-verbal cues, sensitivities, and narratives, enriching the quality of the data collected.

It is important to clarify that this methodology is not merely strategic but signifies a deep engagement with participants' lives and equates the importance of these relationships with the research itself (Tillman-Healy, 2003). As Tillman-Healy (2003) emphasizes, friend-participants also benefit from the "empathic connection" with the friend-researcher, which "helps participants feel heard, known, and understood" (p. 737). Recruiting friends as participants in this study is a strategic choice and a profound manifestation of engaging with their lives on a level that

transcends traditional research boundaries. This methodological approach, grounded in an epistemology of empowerment and an ethics of care, offers a unique lens through which the intricate dynamics of empowerment among Black women can be explored with depth and authenticity. The established trust, empathy, and understanding inherent in these friendships provided a solid foundation for eliciting rich, nuanced insights. While the benefits of researching with friends are manifold, this methodology introduces specific ethical challenges that were addressed throughout the research process. These included managing preexisting knowledge, avoiding exploitation, and maintaining the delicate balance between personal and professional boundaries.

Managing Pre-Existing Knowledge. When researching with friends, the researcher's prior knowledge about participants is both an advantage and a potential liability. Following standard research ethics, researchers who use interviews as the only data collection method inform participants that only the information they provide during the interview(s) will be used in the analysis. However, because researchers who research with intimate others know more than what the participant offers in the interview, they must contend with the ethical complications around using supplementary knowledge in the data analysis; essentially, the dilemma for the researcher is to assess, through reflection and discussion with the participants, the value of integrating pre-existing insights or information about the participant into the research process (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009).

In the case of the present study, there were details about the participants' lives that I possessed prior knowledge of, but that were not offered in the interview and, thus, were not part of the dataset. In a few instances, I determined that specific information about a participant's life was either critical for contextualizing what was shared in the interview or offered a rich location

for the analysis of empowerment. In such cases, I asked participants explicitly about these experiences during the interview. McConnell-Henry et al. (2009) offer this approach as a strategic way for the researcher to weave their prior knowledge into interview questions, for example, asking, "I know you took part in X protest a few years back; can you tell me what impact, if any, the experience had on you". However, this does not preclude the researcher's obligation to ask for the participant's consent to use pre-existing knowledge in the analysis and interpretation. Like the ongoing process of revisiting consent to participate, the consent process to use prior knowledge must be revisited throughout the research process.

Additionally, researchers must obtain consent to use *specific* pieces of information. This means that consent must be presented as an *explicit* rather than a general request. For example, the researcher should not ask, "Is it okay if I use what I know about you from our friendship in the study?". Instead, researchers should ask, for example, "Is it okay if I use your involvement in the Black Lives Matter protests in my analysis?" and elaborate on the insights the researcher is trying to elicit by including such information. This is an imperative ethical practice with intimate others because participants may be comfortable with the researcher using one specific piece of information about them but not others. In the case of the present study, there was only one time when I had to ask for consent to include a specific piece of contextual information, and the participant agreed to have it included.

There is also the issue of boundaries between formal data collection events and non-research-related communication. Taylor (2011) writes about "off the record" moments when information relevant to the research topic is brought up in informal discussions when the researcher is outside their role as *researcher* and in their role as friend. Therefore, the researcher must draw clear boundaries around data collection events. The present study has two identified

data collection events: the initial interview and the follow-up meeting. These are the only situations where the participant's information was included for analysis. Apart from one event where a participant, a few weeks post-interview but pre-follow-up meeting, informed me that she had forgotten to talk about her partner and his role in shaping her sense of empowerment. I informed her that she should take notes and bring them to the follow-up meeting to discuss. She agreed, and at the follow-up meeting, she shared more information, which was used as part of her dataset. Outside of this incident, no information that was shared with me by participants outside of the interview and follow-up meeting was included in the data analysis.

Even within formal data collection events (e.g., interviews, observations, document review, etc.), the participant should have the agency to have input on what parts of their account they would like to omit. This helps to protect the trust between the researcher and friend-participant and distributes power in the participant's direction, giving them more control over how their experience is represented (Taylor, 2011). In one case, a participant asked to omit identifying information and an anecdote that she deemed too embarrassing to publish. Out of respect for her agency and to support her empowerment within the research process, I agreed to her request. Equally as important, my agreement demonstrated my commitment to empowerment and transparency within the research relationship. Participants made no other requests for omissions or modifications.

Avoiding Exploitation. Another ethical consideration in researching with friends involves potential exploitation (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). In conventional research methods, the researcher and participant dynamic inherently involve power imbalances. This imbalance raises concerns about exploitation when the research involves pre-existing friendships. Unlike in research with stranger participants, with whom the researcher may have limited or no contact post-data

collection, the current project takes place within the context of a friendship whose trajectory started before the research and extends beyond it. To mitigate concerns of exploitation, I adopted the following strategies.

Transparency. Procedural transparency was practiced throughout the study. Participants were informed of the procedural steps (i.e., informed consent, initial interview, follow-up meeting, data analysis, and write-up) and the methodological choices involved in the research process. Additionally, the data analysis process was reviewed with participants, from the initial reading of the transcripts to the construction of individual themes to the construction of group themes. This degree of transparency allowed participants to understand how their information moved from raw data to a collective commentary on the nature of empowerment.

Representation. Participants were empowered to represent themselves in the study. Specifically, they could choose a pseudonym or use their real name in the data and final write-up. Additionally, participants authored brief biographies to introduce themselves to the reader and contextualize the dataset. This approach minimized the risk of misrepresentation and positioned participants as active contributors rather than passive subjects.

Contribution to Data Analysis. Finally, participants were reengaged in the analysis through follow-up meetings, allowing them to review, modify, or clarify their contributions. This collaborative approach fostered a dialogue between researcher and participant, ensuring analytic integrity and participant agency. I will discuss the purpose and procedure of these meetings in depth in a later section.

Through these measures, the study aimed to respect and protect participants' autonomy, preventing exploitation while fostering an environment of mutual trust and respect. This ethical framework safeguards participants' interests and enriches the research with authentic, co-created

insights. The following sections discuss the procedural strategies employed throughout the project and how they fundamentally shaped the ethical considerations.

Data collection

Interview guide

Using a format outlined by Smith et al. (2022), the interview guide (Appendix C) included open-ended questions that were descriptive (exploring personal interpretations of empowerment), narrative (identifying significant life events influencing empowerment), comparative (assessing changes in empowerment over time), and evaluative (determining contexts in which participants felt most and least empowered). This approach allowed participants to navigate the complexities of empowerment as a layered and dynamic construct provoked deep reflection, encouraged comprehensive responses, and generated fresh perspectives.

The interview guide served as a flexible framework that guided an inquiry into the research question while permitting the natural flow of conversation. This strategy ensured the topic was adequately explored within the study's aims without constraining the dialogue to a rigid sequence. Participants were briefed on the idiographic focus of IPA, which is interested in the individual experience, and informed that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers to the questions.

Interviewing

The participants were given the option to be interviewed at their home, at the researcher's home, or in a neutral venue. Considering the preexisting relationship between the participants and me, including our homes as potential interview locations, was deemed appropriate. Four of the six participants chose to have their interviews conducted at their homes, while the remaining

two opted for my residence. Each interview spanned approximately two hours and was audio-recorded with a portable device to ensure accuracy and ease of transcription.

Before the formal interview, the participants and I spent time chatting about topics unrelated to the research and, in some cases, sharing a meal. This “pre-interview” phase lasted anywhere from one to two hours. I communicated to the participants when the formal interview began, clearly delineating from casual chatting to the data collection event. All prior unrelated conversations were discontinued at that point, and I initiated the interview per the interview schedule. Following the interview, the participants and I spent time reflecting on the experience. This practice, which I refer to as “before and aftercare,” evolved organically from the established relationships with the participants. This approach proved crucial in establishing a foundation of trust and mutual respect and facilitating the elicitation of rich insights during the formal interviews.

During the project's interviewing phase, a dynamic, agile approach emerged. The process involved alternating between asking structured questions from the interview guide and following the spontaneous and unexpected topics and insights introduced by the participants. This flexibility allowed for a conversational flow that enriched the inquiry into the research question.

During post-interview reflections, some participants revealed that they realized they rarely considered their experiences of empowerment. Additionally, I observed that participants sometimes struggled to disentangle related concepts, such as agency, confidence, or efficacy, from empowerment. Thus, the interviews functioned as containers for participants to construct a narrative about empowerment, leading to a highly diverse range of content across and within each interview. This presented a significant challenge during the interview, wherein I had to discern in real time whether what was being shared was relevant to the research question or an

extraneous tangent. This was especially true when narratives did not explicitly mention empowerment.

Using the philosophical framework of IPA, I approached each interview with the belief that during the interviews, most emergent accounts held some relevance to the theme of empowerment, even if not immediately apparent. This perspective was confirmed during the data analysis phase, where I could see connections across participants' accounts and more clearly understand how seemingly unrelated anecdotes illuminated important insights vis-a-vis empowerment. However, there were instances where narratives seemed only tangentially related to the research question. In such instances, I used targeted follow-up questions to steer the discussion towards the research question.

Ultimately, I allowed participants to use the research process to uncover new connections and insights without imposing preconceived notions of empowerment. By providing an open space for participants to explore their experiences, this approach yielded expansiveness in experiential meaning-making and novel understandings for me and the participants. Importantly, it avoided the pitfalls of extractive research methods by supplying a psychological and intellectual space for participants to learn more about themselves.

Transcription

Following the guidelines proposed by Smith et al. (2022), I carefully listened to each recording multiple times before transcription. This process enabled me to examine and capture the nuance, tone, pauses, emotional undertones, relational nuances between myself and the participants, and the essence of the interviewee's experience. As I listened to the interviews, I discovered that the preexisting relationship between myself and the participants resulted in rich nonverbal and non-speech vocalizations embedded within our shared cultural and relational

communication system. Therefore, listening to the audio of the interviews was crucial for capturing these important elements that might have otherwise been missed and allowed me to become familiar with each interview's content and narrative structure before beginning the transcription process. This was followed by a meticulous manual transcription process, which involved listening to the recordings on my laptop and transcribing them into a Word document. Once the first draft of the transcript was completed, I engaged in another round of listening to cross-reference the accuracy of the transcript. The transcriptions were completed in the order of the interviews. This also allowed for a deeper understanding of how my interview style evolved and facilitated a more immersive experience with each participant.

Follow-up meetings and co-analysis procedures

The IPA approach is founded on bridging the gap between a participant's experiences (data) and the researcher's process of meaning-making and interpretation. Given the prominent role of the researcher's idiographic approach to analysis, employing a *team* of researchers in IPA studies helps ensure a high-quality analysis. Research teams in IPA facilitate a more comprehensive analytic process that broadens the scope of analysis beyond the perspective of a single researcher. Including multiple analytic perspectives can help mitigate the potential drawbacks of a singular researcher, such as lack of reflexivity, imposition of theoretical frameworks, preconceived assumptions, personal biases, over-identification with the data, and limited cultural, racial, or political perspectives (Mjøsund et al., 2017).

Following this imperative, this research design included follow-up meetings with participants that positioned them as co-analysts in the interpretative process, effectively establishing a mini-research team comprised of myself and the participant. This decision stemmed from my commitment to designing an empowered research process that elevates

participants' voices not merely as subjects of analysis but as active contributors to the interpretative process. The meetings were created to achieve two primary objectives: first, to allow participants to critically engage with their transcripts, offering them the opportunity to clarify, amend, or elaborate on their accounts, and second, to incorporate their perspectives into the analysis, enabling them to confirm, challenge, or complicate my preliminary interpretations.

Participants were informed about the co-analysis meetings at the beginning of the research process verbally and via the Participant Information Form. Before the meeting, I completed the first phase of the analysis for each transcript, noting parts I identified as relevant to the research question. After, participants were emailed an unannotated version of their verbatim transcript. To maintain an unbiased analysis, I refrained from sharing my notes with participants and requested that they do the same until the day of the meeting. This approach reduced potential cross-contamination of our initial interpretive inclinations on each other's work. In addition to the transcript, participants were given guidance outlining how to engage with the transcript before the follow-up meeting. Specifically, they were asked to read and reread the transcript and note areas that stood out to them as relevant to the research question and, if they felt inclined, to begin noticing and naming any themes that emerged for them.

Additionally, participants were informed that they could add, amend, clarify, or complicate their data. However, they were explicitly instructed not to modify the original transcripts. Participants were encouraged to take notes during the process, either digitally or on paper, and were asked to bring the transcript and their notes to the meeting. Invitations to the post-interview meetings were sent out three to five months post-interview. This duration reflects the scheduling issues that emerged when trying to schedule meetings across six participants. Three meetings occurred in person at my home and three on Zoom. The duration of each meeting

ranged between one and two hours. As with the original interviews, the participants and I started and ended the meetings with unrelated conversations and, in the case of in person meeting, sometimes shared a meal.

At the time of the meeting, the participants and I shared notes so we could discuss them together. I also asked follow-up questions such as, "What was your experience reading through your transcript?" "Did you find anything surprising?" and "Is there anything missing from your account?" After reviewing the notes and discussing any necessary clarifications, I shared a broad overview of the areas of the transcript that stood out to me as relevant, and we reflected on them together.

Most of the meeting time was used reflecting on the experiences in the transcript, with participants providing additional context and adding new information. As mentioned in previous sections, at the time of the interviews, most participants expressed that they had spent little time reflecting on how empowerment/disempowerment was operative in their day-to-day lives. This indicated that participants could benefit from additional reflection post-interview and provided part of the justification for including the follow-up meetings in the research design.

The meetings proved vital for the analysis and the research/friend relationship. Some participants remarked that they enjoyed being allowed to read and reflect on their data, while others commented that reading the transcript offered novel insights into their experience. The additional data shared by participants during the follow-up meetings were used as supplemental data during the later stages of analysis, which I completed independently.

In summary, including follow-up meetings in the research design represented a deliberate commitment to embed empowerment within the research process. This approach enriched the data analysis with nuanced perspectives and reinforced the principles of agency and co-creation,

marking a departure from traditional qualitative methodologies towards a more inclusive and participatory research paradigm.

Reflexive Notes

Interviewing friends as participants presented challenges that required me to maintain a reflexive posture throughout the process. Before conducting the first interview, I was anxious about whether my questions were appropriate and constructed effectively enough to yield rich data. I was also concerned about how I would maintain my position as interviewer/researcher and avoid slipping into my role as friend or therapist (Berger, 2013; Appleton, 2011). To help alleviate concerns about the latter, I ensured sufficient time for the participants and me to chat about non-research-related topics before we began the interviews. This pre-interview phase recruited our typical rituals and relational norms (e.g., catching up, sharing a meal, etc.), allowed for a more natural flow to the process, and created space for us to feel more comfortable moving into the formal interview. Before starting the interview, I strategically moved us to another part of the space (e.g., from the kitchen table to the living room sofa, for example). I introduced the audio recorder to mark the transition from a non-research-related conversation to a formal research interview. This allowed the participants and me to make the mental shift necessary to effectively engage in the interview process.

As I proceeded through subsequent interviews, I became more skilled at bracketing any assumptions or judgments I may have had about the participants during the interview process. My genuine curiosity about psychological empowerment and respect for the participants as unique and interesting individuals led me to stay with them wherever they took the interview. I was eager to enter their lifeworld and understand the logics, formative experiences, interpretations, and practices attached to how they experience empowerment. As such, I worked

to stay with participants wherever they took the interview while also developing an ear for instances of convergences and divergence across interviews without imposing the experiences and meaning-making of one participant into another. This required intellectual and psychological discipline, and I often relied on my training as a psychotherapist to help me negotiate simultaneous threads of analysis during the interviews. This was most critical during parts of the interview where participants were taken with tangential anecdotes or seemingly unrelated storytelling. I found myself sometimes becoming impatient with participants during these times. After some reflection, I realized that my lack of patience was due to my confusion about whether a story was relevant to the research question and my insecurity about not knowing the best way to redirect the interview. Ultimately, I chose to follow the participants' lead. In cases where we needed more time and some areas remained unexplored (per the interview guide), I found a natural way to redirect the conversation without disrupting the flow and rapport that was active.

Reflecting on the overall process, the interviews were successful in yielding rich data. My interviewing technique evolved by avoiding strict adherence to the interview guide and embracing a more flexible and responsive approach, focusing on the core inquiries of the project. This evolution underscored the importance of adaptability, empathy, and reflexivity in conducting meaningful research interviews.

Data Analysis

In their 2021 publication, Smith, Flowers, & Larkin detail a multi-phasic approach to conducting IPA data analysis. Specifically, the authors outlined four stages of analysis, which are as follows:

1. Reading and rereading: This allows for rich immersion in the data and engenders intimacy with the participants' experiences.

2. Exploratory noting: After immersion in the data, the researcher makes initial notes throughout the transcript, noting descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. During this phase, the researcher notes parts of the transcript that appear to have the most potent relevance to the research question.
3. Constructing Experiential statements: This stage involves elevating exploratory notes to an advanced level of interpretation. Experiential statements reflect the original content of the transcript and the researcher's interpretations.
4. Constructing Experiential themes: The experiential statements are then grouped through an iterative process to develop experiential themes. Experiential themes reflect the highest level of interpretive activity while retaining the essence of the original content.

I began the data analysis process using the guidance from Smith et al. (2022). As I proceeded through the transcripts, I developed a method that emerged organically as I moved towards an analytic rhythm that allowed me to immerse myself in the data and develop interpretations more naturally. The following sections outline the specific steps of the data analysis procedure.

Exploratory Noting

The process of exploratory noting involved noting parts of the transcript that contained relevance to the research question. After the transcription was complete, I read through the transcript chronologically and made notes in the left-side margin of the document (Appendix E). Throughout the reading, I noted linguistic repetitions such as repeated words or metaphors, elements of experiences that express something important about the research question, areas where participants struggled to define and understand empowerment, and where they interrogated their assumptions about it. Contradictions in sentiment, experiences, and ideas that appeared to be connected to other parts of the transcript were also noted.

Developing Personal Experiential Statements (PES)

After thoroughly reading and annotating the entire transcript, I reread it through the lens of exploratory notes. Reading through the transcript, I converted the exploratory notes into more developed personal experiential statements (PES), which I wrote on the left-hand margin of the document (Appendix E). This visual structure helped me to track the analytic process and allowed me to evaluate my interpretations against the original content, ensuring interpretations remained grounded in the data. This approach also facilitated a reflexive practice during analysis, mitigating the risk of subjective or self-interested interpretations.

During this phase of analysis, the exploratory notes were condensed into personal experiential statements that reflected a high level of abstraction and captured overarching themes within the data. Personal experiential statements were also generated to reflect the explicit and implicit threads of connectivity within the dataset. These statements reflected a hybrid of the participant's language and my interpretations, which employed psychological terminology to construct themes.

Developing Personal Experiential Themes (PET)

During this phase of analysis, the personal experiential statements (PES) were clustered to establish super and subordinate personal experiential themes (PET). To accomplish this, I extracted all the personal experiential statements and compiled them into a separate document, which I printed out. I then cut out each statement, placed them on a table, and shuffled them to prevent working in a strictly chronological manner. This approach effectively circumvented the formation of themes that are excessively bound to the original narrative structure and facilitated the identification of novel connections.

After cutting out and shuffling the statements, I began organizing them into clusters, identifying patterns and relationships between them to construct a web of interconnected insights about the experiences under study, elevating the analysis to a higher level of abstraction (Appendix D). I continued this iterative process of grouping and regrouping until the clusters represented a relevant and rich thematic response to the research question.

After manually developing the experiential statements into related clusters, I used a photo-to-text app to transfer the data from paper cutouts to digital form. Next, I organized the data into a table, with each cluster of experiential statements pasted into a separate cell. Then, I listed verbatim excerpts from the transcript under the corresponding experiential statements. This ensured that my analysis remained close to the data as I developed the superordinate themes and subthemes. After including the excerpts, I began grouping the experiential statements into smaller clusters *within* each cluster to create subthemes, which I subsequently named to represent their thematic character. Finally, I synthesized the subthemes to develop a *superordinate* theme that reflected the overarching patterns and meanings contained within the cluster. I repeated this process for each cluster.

Analysis of Subsequent Cases and Moving Towards Group Experiential Themes (GET)

The IPA approach requires close attention to the details of each case before proceeding to the next. Once I completed one case analysis, I proceeded to the next. Heeding Smith et al.'s (2022) guidance, I approached each transcript on its terms without imposing the themes and patterns from the previous cases.

To construct group themes, I copied the experiential statements from each case into one document. As with the individual analysis, I printed and cut out each statement. I then began organizing the statements into clusters, identifying the thematic connections across participants'

accounts. Once the clusters were formed, I used the photo-to-text app, Text Scanner, to convert the data from printed form back to digital. Once the data was digitized, I created a table and pasted each cluster into a cell. From here, I returned to the original transcript for each participant to identify and extract the verbatim excerpt associated with each experiential statement. This ensured that my analysis remained tethered to the original data as I moved towards drafting the group themes across participants. I began developing names for the thematic clusters using the experiential statements and corresponding transcript excerpts. This final phase of analysis resulted in seven group themes, each with attendant subthemes.

Reflexive Notes. I started the analysis phase feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the data and intimidated by the process of interpreting and developing themes. I was also aware that the data I was analyzing were that of my friends, adding an extra layer of complexity and anxiety to the process. As such, I felt a great responsibility to analyze the data accurately without misrepresenting the participants or unfairly imposing judgments and expectations onto their analysis.

To ensure accountability and accuracy, I included verbatim transcript excerpts throughout the data analysis phase. This helped to ensure that my analysis remained rooted in the participants' actual words, even as I developed a higher level of interpretative analysis. I also shared my exploratory notes with the participants during follow-up meetings to ensure that my interpretations were consistent with the dataset.

Still, after analyzing each transcript, I revisited the analysis and found some instances where my judgments about a participant's sentiments and behaviors had shaped the thematic development. Specifically, some themes contained implicit judgments rather than representing descriptive interpretations. I reengaged with the interpretative process to check for biased or

overly subjective judgments. I completed steps two through four twice for each transcript to ensure that my final analysis remained close to the data and free from unchecked assumptions and biases. After conducting the group analysis, I felt confident that my final analysis reflected an accurate and accountable analytic process.

Assessing Quality and Rigor

Nizza et al. (2021) emphasize the necessity of method-specific criteria for assessing quality in qualitative research, particularly in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This insistence arises from the distinct objectives and processes of each methodological approach. Standardized quality guidelines may not fully capture the complexities of IPA, which is centered on a detailed exploration of personal lived experiences and the process of meaning-making. Having method-specific criteria ensures that the unique characteristics of IPA, such as its idiographic focus and the double hermeneutic process, are properly evaluated. This focus is essential for preserving and recognizing the richness, depth, and validity of qualitative analyses. To this effect, Nizza et al. (2021) propose four essential markers of high-quality IPA research:

1. Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative.
2. Developing a vigorous experiential and existential account.
3. Close analytic reading of participant's words.
4. Attending to convergence and divergence.

This study addressed each of the four markers accordingly:

Constructing a Compelling, Unfolding Narrative

The thesis presents a coherent and engaging narrative that traces the participants' experiences of psychological empowerment. By organizing the findings into five Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and subthemes, the analysis unfolds in a structured yet fluid

manner, allowing readers to follow the participants' journeys. The inclusion of rich, verbatim excerpts and biographical statements further enriches the narrative, ensuring that the participants' voices remain central.

Developing a Vigorous Experiential and Existential Account

The study prioritizes depth over breadth, capturing the nuanced and often contradictory ways Black women experience empowerment. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, emphasizing their subjective meanings. Themes such as relationality, spirituality, and resistance to stereotypes highlight the existential dimensions of empowerment, reflecting the participants' struggles, triumphs, and evolving self-conceptions.

Close Analytic Reading of Participants' Words

The analysis demonstrates meticulous attention to participants' language, including linguistic nuances, metaphors, and emotional undertones. For example, phrases like "*I thrive in aspects of nature*" and "*affirmation can be a tool of power*" were examined not just for surface meaning but for their deeper implications in the participants' empowerment journeys. The iterative coding process—from exploratory notes to experiential statements and themes—ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Attending to Convergence and Divergence

The study highlights both shared patterns and individual variations in participants' experiences. For instance, while relationality emerged as a dominant theme, its manifestations differed across participants (e.g., familial support vs. therapeutic relationships). The analysis explicitly notes where themes overlapped or diverged, such as the role of spirituality for some but not all participants, reinforcing the idiographic commitment of IPA.

The study achieves methodological rigor by adhering to these criteria while honoring the complexity of Black women's empowerment experiences.

Establishing Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I employed multiple strategies aligned with Ahmed's (2024) core qualitative criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants, reflexive interviewing, and co-analysis during follow-up meetings, which served as member checks to validate interpretations. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), along with a pluralistic methodological framework grounded in radical qualitative inquiry and Black feminist epistemology, further supported the authenticity and representativeness of the data. Transferability was achieved through thick, contextualized descriptions of participants' experiences, including biographical narratives and verbatim excerpts. Dependability was addressed through a meticulously documented research process, including manual transcription, iterative analysis, and an audit trail of analytic decisions. Confirmability was upheld through rigorous reflexivity, transparent articulation of researcher positionality, and the inclusion of participants as co-analysts, which mitigated researcher bias and reinforced the co-construction of meaning. Together, these strategies ensure that the data and findings are credible, contextually grounded, systematically derived, and ethically accountable.

Chapter Four: Findings

The final analysis yielded five Group Experiential Themes (GET) encapsulating the divergences and convergences of psychological empowerment across the participants' accounts. The five GETs emerged through a multi-phase analytic process of engagement with the data and represent the most robust areas of significance for the participants. Several themes emerged in individual transcripts, and those that appeared in at least half of the participant's accounts were classified as "group" themes. This approach maintains an idiosyncratic perspective while including more general themes across the transcripts. The themes are presented in descending order according to how many participants contributed to each theme and the amount of data therein.

The table below presents the five GETs and their corresponding subordinate themes. Participant names with an asterisk indicate pseudonyms, while those without indicate the participant's real name. Excerpts are italicized to distinguish the participants' voices from my interpretations. Short pauses during interviews are indicated by '...'.

Table 1: Group Experiential Themes (GET) and sub-ordinate themes

Group Experiential Theme	Sub-themes
GET #1 – Authenticity, Care, and External Affirmation in Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I feel powerful in my ability to connect”</i>: relational care as a driver of empowerment • <i>“It makes me think of the power of being yourself”</i>: accessing empowerment through authenticity • <i>“Affirmation can be a tool of power”</i>: The role of external affirmation in empowerment
GET #2 – Self-Affirmation, Advocacy, and Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and self-affirming their capacities • Empowerment as advocacy and action

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame and expectations as challenges to self-advocacy
GET #3 – The Impact of Representation and Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of representation in empowerment. • Defying stereotypes: empowerment through resistance
GET #4 – Recognizing Growth and Connecting to Innate Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retrospection and appreciating growth as mechanisms of empowerment • Unearthing the power within: reclaiming power as an innate source
GET #5 – The Metaphysical as Sources of Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I thrive in aspects of nature”</i>: nature as a source of empowerment • Spiritual foundations: harnessing faith for empowerment

Readers will find that this chapter is more substantial than is typical of quantitative or qualitative research projects. This is typical of IPA studies (Smith et al., 2022) and specifically due to the complex nature of psychological empowerment, the volume and richness of the experiences shared by participants, and the commitment to allow the analysis to unfold in the fullness of each participant’s lifeworld. According to Motta & Larkin (2022), “IPA research foregrounds the role of language, culture and other forms of contextual resources in coming to understand the meaning (and worldliness) of respondents’ accounts” (p. 58). Therefore, the focus of this chapter is to disclose, in all the relevant nuance and complexity, the participants’ efforts to make sense of their experiences. In doing so, the analysis facilitates a deeper understanding and offers a theoretically and experientially informed interpretation of psychological empowerment. Additionally, this approach provides a rigorous empirical foundation for making critical theoretical and programmatic interventions.

Accordingly, this chapter presents the analysis through a comprehensive narrative account of six participants' experiences by weaving analytic commentary with excerpts from the interviews. It is constituted by transcript excerpts and supported by granular analytic interpretations. The purpose of including verbatim extracts is to establish transparency of the evidentiary base on which the interpretations are derived. Moreover, the excerpts included in this analysis were chosen for their ability to encapsulate key recurring themes or to offer the most impactful expressions. While it was sufficient to incorporate short excerpts in some cases, it was often necessary to provide an expanded excerpt to adequately depict the participants' accounts.

This analysis represents a co-constitutive engagement and knowledge-production process between the participants and me. Therefore, several excerpts of dialogue between participants and me are included throughout the following sections. This was done in cases where the shorter excerpt was insufficiently contextualized or too abstracted from the conversation, particularly in cases where the participant's excerpt was in response to something previously said or asked. This chapter is discrete from the following chapter in that it provides an interpretive account of what the participants have shared without reference to the extant literature. In the following chapter, I will place these findings in a broader theoretical context, bringing the participants' experiences into dialogue with the literature to augment, challenge, and propose new considerations for empowerment theory.

Presentation of Themes

Each section begins with the title and summary of the GET and an outline of its subordinate. Next, a close reading and analysis of each subordinate theme is presented. Finally, each section concludes with a brief analytic statement synthesizing the findings and their significance.

Group Experiential Theme 1: Authenticity, Care, and External Affirmation in Relationships

This theme underscores the significance of relationality in the participants' experience of empowerment. Affirmation from others, the mutual offering of care, and the space to openly express one's authenticity were all identified as critical features of the relationships that most effectively supported the participants' psychological empowerment.

This GET is presented in three subordinate themes:

1. *"I feel powerful in my ability to connect"*: Relational care as a driver of empowerment.
2. *"It makes me think of the power of being yourself"*: Accessing empowerment through authenticity.
3. *"Affirmation Can Be a Tool of Power"*: The Role of External Affirmation in Empowerment.

Subordinate Theme 1: "I Feel Powerful in My Ability to Connect". Relational Care as a Driver of Empowerment. Some participants explicitly mentioned how caring relationships shaped their experience of empowerment. More specifically, some participants remarked on the mutuality of care in relationships. For Tashmica, providing care is where she sources power: "I also think I feel the most powerful when I am caring for other people...". Here, she describes how she accesses empowerment through demonstrating her competency and compassion in caregiving roles, which allows her to connect deeply with others and positively impact their lives. For her, empowerment is not solely an individualistic pursuit but is deeply embedded in the mutual and reciprocal nature of relationships. By caring for others, she experiences a sense of purpose, agency, and fulfillment, which reinforces her self-worth and amplifies her power.

Expanding on her previous statement, she provides an example: *"When I talk about caring for people, I specifically think about how I create our home, make it comfortable. Or when I*

literally make something for someone with my kitchen witchery. That to me feels powerful."

Tashmica enacts care through tangible acts and nurturing. These activities allow her to express her creativity, demonstrate her skills, and contribute to the well-being of those she cares about, underscoring the importance of relational and community-oriented actions in her experience of empowerment. Building on her reflections about caring for others, she says, "*I feel powerful in my ability to connect with other people.*" These accounts reveal that for Tashmica, empowerment is deeply rooted in her relational capacities—through acts of care, creative contributions, and emotional connections with others.

Similarly, Combahee describes how relationality and empowerment are connected:

"Empowerment is also through the love that I get from other people." Here, she echoes

Tashmica's articulation of empowerment as not solely an internal process but is also significantly influenced by the love and support received from others. Both participants illustrate that empowerment is deeply rooted in relationships and the mutual exchange of love and support. The love from others acts as a reinforcing agent, enhancing their sense of self-worth and capability.

Barbara also touches on this sentiment: "*I believe that we have to care for each other in order to care for others.*" This excerpt underscores the reciprocal nature of empowerment through care, resonating with the themes expressed by Tashmica and Combahee. Barbara's belief that mutuality is essential for effective caregiving aligns with Tashmica's notion of feeling powerful through caring for others and creating nurturing environments. It also complements Combahee's understanding of empowerment as derived from the love and support received from others.

The participants' narratives underscore the profound impact of caring relationships on their sense of empowerment. Whether through providing care, as emphasized by Tashmica, or through receiving love, as highlighted by Combahee, the mutuality of interpersonal relationships plays a

pivotal role in fostering empowerment. Barbara's focus on the ethical considerations of care and the essential nature of relationships further congeals this correlation. These insights reveal that the interconnectedness and mutuality within relationships are crucial components in participants' empowerment experiences.

Subordinate Theme 2: "It makes me think of the power of being yourself". Accessing Empowerment Through Authenticity. In addition to care, the participants identified authentic expression and acceptance in relationships as pivotal to their psychological empowerment. Discussing the critical role of authenticity and acceptance in her experience of empowerment, Janet states:

...What came up for me first was within my family I feel empowered...I think it looks like, you know, being able to be my true self, but it also looks like me being able to, I guess, be my true self in ways that maybe are not always comfortable for them, and I still know that they accept me. (Janet)

The ability to express her authentic self without fear of rejection or judgment from her family reinforces Janet's self-worth and confidence. This dynamic illustrates that empowerment is deeply intertwined with the presence of accepting and non-judgmental relationships, which provide a safe space for individuals to be their true selves. Therefore, for her, being accepted for who she is, even in the face of potential discomfort, is crucial for fostering a strong sense of self and empowerment. Later, she says, *"I was probably the least empowered in the space where I felt the least like I could be myself and it would be ok."* When Janet feels unable to express her authenticity, it significantly diminishes her sense of power and agency, reiterating how authenticity is a fundamental component of how she experiences empowerment.

Combahee's reflection underscores the pivotal role of safety and acceptance in fostering empowerment: *"I feel empowered around people that make me feel safe to be myself."* For her, feeling empowered is closely tied to being around people who create a safe environment for her to be her true self. This aligns with Janet's earlier reflections on feeling empowered within her family due to their acceptance of her authenticity and feeling disempowered in spaces where she could not be herself. Both participants emphasize the importance of relational contexts that embrace and support their authentic identities. Tashmica's insights into empowerment through caring for others and creating a comfortable home further enrich this theme by illustrating how empowerment can also be derived from fostering environments where others can be themselves.

Minniej also discussed how her greatest sense of confidence and empowerment comes from being her true self: *"I feel like the most confident that I am, most empowered is just being myself"*. Her assertion that her empowerment stems from her authenticity further underscores that empowerment is deeply rooted in the ability to express and embrace her true self. When asked if there are other places in her life where she feels empowered, she responded:

...I wanted to say family, but that wouldn't be truthful. Because when I think of why that doesn't make me feel the most empowered. It's because I feel...and I tow between the two like, do I not feel comfortable being myself? Or am I not accepted as my true self? So that's why with my friends it is...That's why I would say my friends take me for who I am. Because when they met me, this is what they got. So, I will say that. (Minniej)

And when asked to describe her friendship dynamics in more detail, she says:

I would say authenticity, trust, the act of being vulnerable, of like, my friends empower me to be the best person that I am...Just showing up to be honest. I don't even know how to verbalize it. It makes me think of a feeling. It makes me feel like home, which makes me

sad, because like man do you not get that from your family? Like I do, but it just feels different. It's no expectation. I can show up as myself and they show up as themselves and that's okay. (Minniej)

Minniej contrasts her feelings of empowerment between her family and her friends, noting that she can be her true self with her friends, which makes her feel at home. This sense of belonging and acceptance is crucial for her empowerment. Reflecting on the unique pressures and expectations she faces as the oldest child, she says:

As the oldest child, as a Black oldest child, I feel like I help so many, still holds so many responsibilities. And I feel as the kind, so caring person, it's disastrous when people see me emotional or we want to coddle you, make sure you're okay, but sometimes I want to cry without other shit. Sometimes I just want to be pissed. Or to be honest, sometimes when somebody expects that I should be this way, I might be the complete opposite.

(Minniej)

She describes her numerous responsibilities and the expectation to be constantly nurturing and composed. This dynamic often restricts her from expressing her full range of emotions authentically. Minniej points out that when she does show vulnerability or anger, it disrupts the expectations others have of her, which can feel disastrous. This tension highlights the conflict between societal and familial roles that dictate how she should behave and her desire to express her genuine emotions freely. She describes the strain of upholding an image of strength and care, which can stifle authentic self-expression. Her account ties back to her earlier insights about feeling more empowered and authentic with her friends, who accept her without the weight of such expectations.

...I feel like how powerful and how strong somebody can be if they are open to showing their true authentic self in that moment. Like right there. If they feel happy, they show it. If they feel sad, they're also going to show it... (Minniej)

Minniej's reflections suggest that empowerment is deeply connected to the freedom of emotional expression and authenticity. This authenticity validates her experiences and reinforces her sense of identity and personal strength. Later, she states, *"It makes me think of the power of being yourself."* Minniej's narrative consistently highlights that empowerment is deeply intertwined with the ability to live authentically, which allows her to navigate life's challenges with a strong sense of self and inherent resilience.

The participants' reflections underscore the intrinsic link between authenticity and empowerment. Janet emphasizes the importance of being her true self within her family, noting that acceptance, even in discomfort, enables her empowerment. Combahee similarly highlights that feeling safe to be herself among supportive individuals is crucial for her empowerment. Minniej further elaborates on this, stating that her friends' unconditional acceptance allows her to be her true self, free from societal and familial expectations that often constrain her. These narratives collectively illustrate that authentic self-expression, supported by accepting and non-judgmental relationships, is fundamental to empowerment.

Subordinate Theme 3: "Affirmation Can Be a Tool of Power": The Role of External Affirmation in Empowerment. Participants discussed the importance of affirmation and encouragement as crucial relational elements that supported their empowerment. These elements took various forms among the participants. Janet found receiving encouragement during a significant life transition that brought uncertainty and disempowerment pivotal in her journey to reclaim power.

“...when I was at the beginning of my divorce journey was when you told me that I needed to find something to be empowered about. That was said to me at a time where I was feeling very disempowered and so for somebody that I admire, that cares about me, that I care about, to be like, hey, find a way to reclaim your power; was very important.”

(Janet)

Janet reflects on a pivotal moment at the beginning of her divorce journey when she felt disempowered and when a significant person in her life, someone she admires and cares about, encouraged her to find something to help her reclaim her power. This suggestion from a trusted and respected individual amplified its impact, demonstrating the importance of supportive relationships in the empowerment process. For Janet, this moment highlights how external validation and encouragement can be instrumental in reigniting a sense of agency and self-worth during challenging times. This interaction underscores the broader theme in the research that empowerment often emerges from a combination of internal strength and external support, especially in the face of personal adversity. It illustrates how moments of vulnerability can be transformed into opportunities for growth and empowerment through the influence of meaningful relationships.

Other participants also described how their intimate relationships served as potent containers for encouragement and affirmation. Minniej shared, *“you need those other people to be that reflection to remind you so that I can be an empowered woman”*. Minniej’s use of “need” implies the necessity of having those around her whom she can rely on to reflect with her and remind her of her potential for empowerment. Her statement also suggests that her friends act as reflections, individuals in whom she can see herself, make contributions, and receive something in return. In this way, her intimate relationships function as vessels for self-recognition.

Furthermore, the use of “*remind*” in this statement suggests that she forgets her capacity for empowerment, and her intimate relationships are a place where she can be reminded when she struggles to do so alone. For Minniej, this statement demonstrates the indispensability of intimate relationships to her sense of empowerment.

Barbara's account also included themes of reflection and affirmation by intimate others.

Angel McKissic 00:07:56

Do you want to add anything to this idea that empowerment is knowing you can do it despite challenges, people telling you you can't, adversity...

Barbara 00:09:25

...having someone see in you what you don't see in yourself

Here, Barbara identifies the role of reflection, emphasizing that a significant component of empowerment involves having someone who believes in her and sees her potential, even when she might not see it in herself. Barbara's insight points to the importance of supportive relationships and their impact on her empowerment journey. The acknowledgment and encouragement from others can instill confidence and capability, enabling her to persevere despite societal and personal challenges. This underscores that empowerment is not solely an internal process but is also significantly influenced by the affirmations and support of others.

As in the case of Janet, there is a temporal element to these reflections and affirmations in that they become magnified when they are given at precise moments when needed. Building on this theme of reflection and affirmation, Barbara shares, "*They [family] just supported me. Always told me how beautiful I was when I felt that I wasn't beautiful or compared myself to how someone else looked.*" Again, Barbara describes how her family served as a reflective and affirming space when she struggled to see herself positively. Additionally, she says, "*For*

someone such as myself who dealt with a lot of low self-esteem issues. I attribute how I've navigated that to bring me to the sense of empowerment with such loving family support." This statement further substantiates how important her family's affirming support was in bolstering her sense of empowerment when she struggled with self-esteem.

Combahee also cited the critical role of affirmation during moments of disempowerment: *"Other people motivate me to be reminded that in my moments when I'm not empowered, there's other sources of energy that can get me back to that place to say that I have this strength within me"*. For Combahee, it is a reminder from others that when she struggles to access power, there are alternative pathways to locating it within herself. Here, she explicitly locates empowerment *"within"* her. This suggests that Combahee experiences alienation from her power, underscoring the importance of reflective and affirming relational spaces to help her recover contact with this source. She adds, *"An affirmation can be a tool of power because that's something that can make you feel closer to our self-power."* In this excerpt, she elucidates the instrumentality of affirmation as a means of gaining proximity to an internal connection previously lost. Minniej also described this loss of connection:

I have so much turmoil and tribulations that those were blinding me from my actual confidence. So, in that moment, I seek therapy for...my cup to be filled by someone else, or someone else putting up that mirror like, Minniej, you are empowered... (Minniej)

Minniej's past experiences of adversity were *"blinding"* her from accessing her power. She expresses a desire to be reconnected with her power and seeks out relational containers, such as psychotherapy, where she can experience reflection and affirmation.

For Barbara, receiving affirmation of her role as a mother and daughter is profoundly empowering:

I remember when my mother was dying from a terminal illness, and her last words to me were, "I am so proud of you. You have been such a good daughter. You have been such a good daughter. Continue to be a good daughter and take care of your stepmom. You took good care of me." So those are the things that you want to hear. And that was very empowering. (Barbara)

Receiving affirmation about how "good" of a daughter she has been was significantly empowering for Barbara. She later describes a similar instance, *"there's nothing more empowering than your children telling you, mommy, you did a good job, mama. I'm so proud of you"*. Her mother's words of pride and recognition for Barbara's role as a daughter served as a profound source of empowerment. This affirmation validated Barbara's efforts and sacrifices and reinforced her self-worth and identity. The experience highlights the importance of validation from loved ones in the empowerment process, particularly within familial relationships. For Barbara, the acknowledgment of her efforts and the expression of pride from her mother and later from her children underscores the significant role that familial affirmation plays in her sense of empowerment. These moments of recognition provide emotional support and reinforce Barbara's belief in her capabilities,

Some participants discussed how the trust and safety within their relationships, which allowed them to receive feedback and affirmation from others, created a space to experiment with novel embodiments and alternative ways of being. For Combahee, therapy provided a container for her to experience new relational dynamics:

I think it definitely can be the relationship between therapy and how I feel... I think you have to know what power you're seeking within that relation or not even within the relationship, through the service of therapy. So, I have a therapist, for example, that I

learned very early on she's big on affirmation. An affirmation can be a tool of power because that's something that can make you feel closer to our self-power or whatever. And it was cute for a minute cuz I definitely needed it...that's something I wasn't receiving from other things...in that sense, yes, my therapy helped me not only attain what I needed but it brought forth a new relationship to do that with, which I might not have been able to do on my own until I had a consistent person or voice motivating me and reminding me that it starts within. (Combahee)

Combahee's account of her relationship with her therapist reveals the intricate connections between affirmation, empowerment, and self-connection. For her, the therapeutic relationship functioned similarly to familial and friendship dynamics by providing a space for receiving positive affirmation and reminders of her inherent power. In Combahee's case, she views affirmation as a *form* of power rather than merely a means to power. Much like Minniej's experience of being "*blinded*" to her innate source of power, Combahee's remarks about getting "*closer to our self-power*" and "*motivating me and reminding me that it starts within*" both indicate a separation from their internal power. Thus, these relational containers become essential structures for affirming and reminding them of their power. Combahee's account also highlights how relational spaces can serve as opportunities for experimentation.

Similarly, Minniej found her friendships to be fertile grounds for experimenting with new ways of being:

...I'm like, alright, your family are also people, and just like with your friends...especially many of them I met while I was in college, we had to learn each other...It really was a practice ground. I was having these uncomfortable conversations with friends so why can't I do that with family? (Minniej)

Here, she describes these interactions as a "*practice ground*," implying that they provided her a safe space to develop and hone her communication skills and assertiveness. This practice with friends empowered her to consider applying the same approach within her family dynamics. By recognizing that her family members are "*also people*," Minniej underscores the potential to transfer the skills and confidence gained from her friendships to her family relationships. This insight highlights how she transfers learned behaviors from one context to another. Minniej's realization that she can engage her family like she engages her friends highlights the importance of supportive peer networks in developing empowerment skills. It also illustrates how empowerment can be a transferable skill cultivated in one area of life and then applied to others. The care and safety provided by her friendships allowed Minniej to embody new modes of relating. In this way, the support and learning she receives from her friendships provide a supportive function, facilitate her growth, and enable her to take risks in forging new relational dynamics that align with her values.

These experiences demonstrate the importance of affirmation and encouragement as crucial relational elements that support empowerment. These elements took various forms among the participants. Janet found receiving encouragement during a significant life transition that brought uncertainty and disempowerment pivotal in her journey to reclaim power. Similarly, Minniej emphasized the necessity of having relationships where others reflect and remind her of her empowerment potential. Barbara highlighted how familial support and affirmations from loved ones helped her navigate low self-esteem and reinforced her sense of empowerment. Combahee and Minniej also underscored the role of safe relational spaces, like therapy and friendships, for experimenting with new ways of being and reconnecting with their self-power.

These narratives collectively illustrate that empowerment is a dynamic interplay of internal self-recognition and external validation, deeply influenced by supportive and affirming relationships.

GET Summary. The participants' narratives collectively underscore the critical role of interconnectedness and mutual support in fostering empowerment. They reveal that empowerment is a dynamic interplay of internal self-recognition and external validation, deeply influenced by supportive and affirming relationships. The participants' experiences demonstrate that empowerment involves both the mutuality of care and the freedom to be authentic, reinforcing the importance of relational dynamics in the empowerment process.

Group Experiential Theme 2: Self-Affirmation, Advocacy, and Action

An essential feature of the participants' experiences of empowerment was how self-affirmation, advocacy, and action are interlocked. The participants derive empowerment through knowing and exercising their capacities, instrumentalizing that knowledge to advocate for their needs and desires and overcoming internal and external sources of adversity.

This GET is presented in three subordinate themes:

1. Identifying and self-affirming their capacities.
2. Empowerment as advocacy and action.
3. Shame and societal expectations as challenges to self-advocacy.

Subordinate Theme 1: Identifying and self-affirming their capacities. The first GET explored the facilitative role of external affirmation in intimate relationships and its effect on the participants' sense of empowerment. The present subordinate theme elucidates the function of self-affirmation in navigating adversity and self-doubt, highlighting its role in the participants' practice of cultivating empowerment. Central to this subordinate theme is how participants integrate external feedback into their internal dialogue to overcome self-doubt and adversity.

For Janet, self-knowledge of her efficacy as a psychotherapist is foundational to her sense of empowerment.

...I think I feel empowered a lot as a clinician...I think for me it means being able to...feeling...being able to help people but also like knowing that I can help people. It's like me being able to kind of not only observe their process as the client, but also like observe myself, like I'm capable. Like, I have skills, I know what I'm doing, is empowering. So, I think the way that empowerment as a clinician manifests for me is when I very much feel capable, and I can see the product, too. (Janet)

In this excerpt, she emphasizes that empowerment involves the ability to help others and the recognition of her skills and capabilities. Janet feels empowered not just by providing support to her clients but also through the self-awareness that comes from observing her effectiveness and growth as a clinician. This dual aspect of empowerment—derived from both external validation (seeing the positive outcomes in her clients) and internal validation (recognizing her competencies)—highlights the multifaceted nature of empowerment. Janet's account illustrates how empowerment is an ongoing process of self-evaluation and affirmation, reinforced by tangible evidence of her impact and abilities. Furthermore, she links her sense of empowerment to her ability to positively impact others' lives, stating, *"I have the ability to affect somebody else's life positively, and that can be very, very empowering."* This connection between ability and observable outcomes forms a recurring theme in Janet's narrative.

For Minniej, feelings of strength and capability are integral to her experience of empowerment: *"when I think of empowerment, I think of...what allows me or just anyone to be confident...that self-esteem of like, what do I do for myself to make myself feel...I hate to use the word strong, but strong, to feel capable of doing anything."* Minniej describes

empowerment in a broader sense than Janet but identifies similar themes. She describes empowerment as doing things for herself that build confidence and self-esteem, leading to a sense of capability. Her hesitation in using the word "strong" indicates a nuanced view of strength, suggesting empowerment is more than just outward displays of resilience or power; it is also about feeling capable and confident in one's abilities. Her account highlights the internal processes that contribute to empowerment, such as self-care, self-recognition, and the development of self-esteem. It underscores that empowerment involves cultivating an inner sense of strength and capability, which enables her to feel confident in her ability to handle various challenges. Both Janet and Minniej highlight the importance of self-evaluation in their empowerment experiences.

For Barbara, empowerment involves overcoming adversity: *"That empowerment definition really encapsulates that you can do it in spite of self-doubt."* This suggests a process of self-evaluation, goal-directed action, and the impact of affirming internal dialogue. In essence, Barbara experiences empowerment through confronting and overcoming self-doubt.

Minniej also uses internal self-affirmation to resist external attempts to undermine her sense of worth: *"as a Black woman...I don't know if it's from working so hard to be this person... I'm like, girl, you a bad bitch. Like there's no question about it. Even when I think about when I was a kid and thinking of being bullied and shit like that, I still knew I was great though".* She traces the origins of her self-affirmation practice to childhood bullying experiences, where she employed internal self-affirmation to counter negative external feedback. The use of the phrase *"girl, you a bad bitch"* signifies a powerful self-affirmation and an unapologetic embrace of her identity and strength. This excerpt highlights how her internal dialogue reinforces her self-esteem and empowerment.

These experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of empowerment, emphasizing the interplay of self-evaluation, internal affirmation, and external validation. Janet's empowerment is deeply rooted in her self-awareness as a psychotherapist, where her recognition of her skills and the tangible impact on her clients reinforce her sense of efficacy. For Minniej, empowerment is about cultivating self-esteem and confidence through self-affirmation, allowing her to feel capable of handling challenges. Barbara highlights empowerment as overcoming self-doubt, demonstrating resilience through goal-directed action, and affirming internal dialogue. These accounts collectively illustrate that empowerment involves an ongoing process of self-recognition and affirmation bolstered by internal resilience and external achievements.

Subordinate Theme 2: Empowerment as advocacy and action. This subordinate theme explores self-advocacy as a vital expression of the participants' empowerment. Moreover, it examines how participants develop novel insights about themselves through self-advocacy, leading to greater confidence and clarity that supports their empowerment.

For Tashmica, her process of self-advocacy involved gaining new insights about herself.

And so, I have witnessed multiple times now that I do have a natural skill and ability, and I was going to therapy to deal with my trauma in these years. So, it all just kind of came together all at the same time, where I was like, I don't have to do this. You know I mean? I don't have to work for this man.... It was this moment where all of these things converged, and I was like, wait a minute, this is bullshit. I am way too skilled for this, way too powerful. Look at all this stuff that I manifested just because I was willing to try it... I don't think I should do this anymore. (Tashmica)

In this interview excerpt, Tashmica reflects on a transformative moment when she realized her worth and capabilities. Through her experiences in therapy and recognizing her skills and

abilities, she reached a point of clarity and empowerment. This moment of convergence allowed her to see that she did not have to remain in a situation that undervalued her. Tashmica's declaration of "*I am way too skilled for this, way too powerful*" highlights a critical realization of her self-worth and potential. The confidence she gained from acknowledging her achievements and strengths led her to leave an unsatisfying job. Her narrative illustrates the importance of self-awareness and self-affirmation in the empowerment process. It underscores how therapy and personal reflection helped her recognize her value.

For Janet, empowerment involves discernment and action:

For example, my empowerment as a woman has evolved over time. Historically as a girl...what it means to be an empowered girl in society, I feel like I wasn't in a whole lot of ways. But now at this age and at this particular juncture in my life, I feel more...I would say definitely this is probably the first time in my life over the whole course of my dating years that I feel like I can be like I ain't putting up with this or I don't want to deal with this... I feel like I am a lot more discerning...less patient with stuff. Less patient with other people who are not able to meet my needs romantically than I have been historically. (Janet)

Janet contrasts her current state with her past experiences, noting that historically, she did not feel empowered as a girl in society. However, she feels more discerning and assertive at her current age and stage in life. At the time of the interview, Janet's experience of empowerment is characterized by her refusal to tolerate behavior that does not meet her needs, signifying a significant shift in her self-worth and expectations. This change indicates a deeper understanding and recognition of her value, which has led to greater self-advocacy and boundary-setting in her

relationships. Janet's narrative highlights the dynamic nature of empowerment, demonstrating that it can grow and strengthen over time through self-reflection and life experiences.

As a child, Tashmica was able to stand up for herself because she had a clear understanding of her identity as a survivor of sexual violence:

...if someone said or did anything that made me feel ashamed of the fact that I was sexually abused by my father, I would almost blurt it out... It was really important to me that anytime I felt a sense of both silencing and shame... Because I recognized really early on, for whatever reason, that was not my shame. (Tashmica)

Here, she explains that whenever someone made her feel ashamed or attempted to silence her, she felt compelled to speak out about her abuse. This reaction was driven by her early realization that the shame associated with her abuse did not belong to her. Her proactive stance in rejecting imposed shame and her determination to voice her truth reflects a significant expression of empowerment for her. Tashmica's experience highlights the importance of reclaiming her narrative and rejecting societal attempts to impose shame. By vocalizing her experience, Tashmica not only affirmed her self-worth but also resisted the silencing and stigmatization often associated with abuse. This act of self-advocacy was crucial for her empowerment, as it transformed a source of potential disempowerment into a declaration of strength and resilience.

For Janet, discernment and self-advocacy are the preconditions for empowered action, *"it's empowering to know what you want and what you deserve because then you can do something about it...[Laughing] when that's murky and you don't know...you kind of going with the flow...then anything can happen"*. Here, Janet discusses the significance of clarity in knowing what she wants and deserves as a foundational aspect of empowerment. She highlights that clearly understanding her desires and worth enables proactive and intentional actions. This

clarity contrasts with uncertainty, where not knowing what she wants leads to a passive approach of "*going with the flow*," which can result in unpredictable and potentially undesired outcomes. Her reflection underscores that empowerment is closely tied to self-awareness and the ability to articulate and pursue her needs and goals.

The participants' insights emphasize the importance of discernment and intentionality in the empowerment process, particularly in navigating societal pressures and expectations, allowing them to assert their agency and make decisions that align with their values and aspirations. Some participants emphasized the importance of capability, action, and control over one's destiny. When asked what empowerment means to her, Minniej responded, "*to feel capable of doing anything*," underscoring the significance of self-efficacy and confidence in her abilities as foundational to her empowerment. Janet described the transition from self-awareness to action, "*The part that feels empowering is maybe not so much I'm learning about myself, it's like I've learned about myself, and now I'm doing. It's in the doing. It's in the application of the learning where the empowerment is*", suggesting that empowerment is not merely about gaining self-knowledge but about applying that knowledge to effect change and take control of one's life. This active application of learning reflects a move from contemplation to decisive action, reinforcing that empowerment is rooted in the ability to act on one's understanding and insights. Describing the essence of empowerment as the capacity to influence and direct one's future, Janet states, "*empowerment is more like I can do something about this...I can be in control of my own destiny*", emphasizing autonomy and agency, suggesting that empowerment lies in the ability to make choices and take actions that shape her path and the outcomes along the way.

Dominique also reflects on her life experiences and the sense of empowerment that arises from her ability to pursue and achieve her goals.

I feel like when I have wanted something, I just, I went for it, and I got it. You know, that's the way my life has played out...I feel like I've been successful in my life...it's still in my mind and keeps coming back to making choices about how I want my life to be, you know, yeah. And I didn't really even realize this. Somebody said to me recently... And they just started name stuff. You wanted this, you did that...Every single thing you want to do, you did it. No doors have ever been closed; you know? So that's where when, when I hear that word [empowerment], that's what it stirs up in me. (Dominique)

She describes a pattern of setting her sights on what she wants and successfully attaining those desires, which has been a consistent aspect of her life. This success has reinforced her belief in her agency and capacity to shape her destiny. Dominique's narrative highlights the importance of self-determination and the ability to make choices that align with one's aspirations as key components of empowerment. The external validation she describes underscores the impact of recognizing her accomplishments and the empowerment that comes from acknowledging her successes. Dominique emphasizes her proactive approach to life, stating, *"I still see myself as a person who decides what I want to do and do it. Every step of the way"*. This perspective underscores her belief in her agency and the importance of making deliberate choices to achieve her goals. She further elaborates, *"I feel like when I have wanted something, I just, I went for it, and I got it"*. This statement reflects her confidence in navigating obstacles and achieving her desires through determination and effort. For Dominique, empowerment is deeply tied to the proactive pursuit of her desires and the affirmation that she can navigate obstacles to achieve her goals.

Combahee also highlighted the importance of practical strategies in achieving empowerment:

She [therapist] did help me with the reminders or the affirmations but sometimes life gets real to a point where it's like, okay, thank you for affirming that and I need some practical steps. I need you to help me strategize my next steps. (Combahee)

Here, Combahee underscores the necessity of actionable strategies beyond affirmation to achieve her goals. She discusses the role of her therapist in providing affirmations and reminders, which are essential components of empowerment. However, she emphasizes that there are times when life becomes particularly challenging, and affirmations alone are not sufficient. Combahee expresses the need for practical steps and strategies to navigate her circumstances during such times. This highlights a crucial aspect of empowerment: the balance between internal validation and valuable, actionable support. Combahee's account underscores that while positive affirmations and reminders of her worth are helpful, they must be complemented by tangible, strategic guidance to address real-life challenges effectively. This dual need reflects empowerment's complex nature, which involves emotional support and concrete action plans. The therapist's role in helping her strategize the next steps demonstrates the importance of a holistic approach to empowerment that includes both psychological and practical elements.

This theme is also present in Janet's experience, where she defines empowerment as having a plan and actively working toward achieving one's goals, *"I would say to be empowered would be maybe to have a plan of like what I'm gonna do or be working toward, whatever it is that I'm going to do to feel like I'm doing something about it"*. Here, she emphasizes the importance of intentionality and action in empowerment. Janet suggests that feeling empowered involves more than aspirations; it requires concrete plans and steps to bring those aspirations to fruition. These accounts demonstrate the proactive nature of empowerment, where having a sense of direction and purpose is crucial. Planning and working toward specific objectives

provide a sense of control and agency, reinforcing the idea that empowerment is both a state of mind and a series of deliberate actions.

The experiences shared by the participants in this subordinate theme show that self-advocacy is a complex form of empowerment that involves personal judgment, tangible goals, and self-driven action. For Tashmica, this recognition is a culmination of therapy and self-awareness that leads to decisive action against limiting circumstances. Janet's empowerment journey is marked by an evolved sense of discernment, allowing her to set boundaries and advocate for her desires with clarity. Dominique and Combahee underscore the importance of practical strategies and problem-solving, linking empowerment to achieving goals. Overall, the participant's experiences illustrate that empowerment emerges from a deep understanding of one's desires, the clarity to set meaningful goals, and the determination to act upon them.

Subordinate Theme 3: Shame and Societal Expectations as Challenges to Self-Advocacy. This subordinate theme explores the inherent complexities associated with practicing self-advocacy. For many participants, establishing boundaries and advocating for their needs and desires constitutes a crucial aspect of their empowerment experience. However, context, interpersonal dynamics, professional stakes, and stereotyping frequently influence the manner, timing, and settings in which they feel empowered to advocate for themselves.

Dominique reflects on her challenges in recognizing and responding to situations where she feels mistreated or disrespected:

I think I'm slow to realize that something is amiss. It's like I have a feeling, but I'm slow to be able to put a name on it and say, you don't like being handled like that. You did not assert yourself, or you did not tell the truth about how you feel about this. (Dominique)

She describes a delayed process in identifying her discomfort and articulating her feelings, which affects her ability to assert herself in the moment. This self-awareness of her reaction time and the struggle to express her truth points to a broader theme of the complexities of self-advocacy and empowerment. This introspective acknowledgment of her perceived shortcomings is a source of disempowerment for Dominique. Her experience highlights the internal barriers that can impede empowerment, such as difficulty recognizing and naming her emotions and the hesitation to assert herself. This delay in response can lead to regret and self-criticism, as she realizes retrospectively that she did not advocate for herself effectively. The excerpt underscores the importance of developing timely self-awareness and the confidence to express one's feelings and needs as crucial components of empowerment.

Similarly, Barbara has struggled with the guilt of not speaking up when she believed she should have:

I remember the times when I regretted that and how low that made me feel. That I should have said something, that I should have stood in my power. That I should have been brave. I shouldn't have been scared. I should not have let fear overtake me. I've gotten mad at myself. (Barbara)

Reflecting on moments when she regretted not standing up for herself, Barbara expresses disappointment and self-criticism for not asserting her power and allowing fear to prevent her from speaking out. Amplifying the internal conflict and emotional turmoil that can accompany instances of perceived disempowerment, her use of phrases like "*I should have stood in my power*" and "*I should have been brave*" underscores the expectation she has of herself to be assertive and courageous. These excerpts reveal the complex interplay between fear, self-expectation, and empowerment. Barbara's regret and anger towards herself for not acting indicate

a deep awareness of her potential for empowerment, coupled with frustration when she feels she has fallen short of this potential. Her reflection on these moments of inaction is a powerful reminder of the internal barriers to empowerment, such as fear and self-doubt, that she faces.

Later in the interview, Barbara explores the internal conflict and negotiations that she engages in when deciding whether to speak up at work:

I'm right in the middle. I'm right in the middle. Because of the culture of the organization. The old and the new. I'm right there in the middle as we speak. So, I don't consider that a bad thing. Because before the new I was just dealing with the old and I wasn't getting anywhere. Nowhere. It presented a lot of conflict for me. It reinforced the stereotype about Black women. And then that made me think, am I playing into this stereotype? Let me rephrase that. Am I playing into the intentional setup of a stereotype with how I feel about the situation...But at the same time, I'm struggling and feeling disempowered because I need to be saying more. And not feeling guilty or that fear of not saying anything at all. (Barbara)

Barbara discusses her feelings of being caught between her organization's new and old cultures. She describes this transitional state as one that has presented significant conflict, particularly in reinforcing stereotypes about Black women. Barbara's reflection on whether she is playing into these stereotypes reveals an awareness of the external pressures and expectations placed on her based on her racial and gender identity.

Barbara's account highlights the internal struggle between the need to assert herself and the fear of being perceived as conforming to negative stereotypes. This internal conflict leads to disempowerment as she grapples with the guilt and fear associated with either speaking up or remaining silent, illustrating the complex dynamics of empowerment in professional settings,

where organizational culture and societal stereotypes significantly impact Barbara's sense of agency and self-expression.

Janet also discusses the complexities of addressing issues related to sexism, misogynoir, and racism:

I don't know. I feel like that has to do with where society seems to be on these issues: sexism, misogynoir, racism. All of these things are very real, but I feel like I can...I feel as though I can speak out about these issues and see the racial issues and see them change. Whereas I don't feel as positive about the message and the sexism going anywhere...I would say I feel more empowered around speaking about racial issues than I do with gender...I definitely feel like it's just going into the void and [long pause] I think, and this is like I feel a little bit of shame about this, but I feel like to speak out about issues related to gender...I see how those women...it's not received well; they're not treated well at all.

(Janet)

Here, she expresses a sense of empowerment when speaking out about racial issues, feeling that her efforts can lead to tangible changes. However, she feels less optimistic about addressing issues related to sexism and misogyny, observing that those who speak out about these issues often face significant social backlash and are not treated well. Janet's hesitation and feelings of shame about this disparity highlight the differential impact that societal attitudes toward race and gender have on her sense of empowerment. Janet's confidence in addressing racial issues contrasts with her reluctance to engage as deeply with gender issues, revealing how societal responses influence her willingness to advocate and engender a fear of negative repercussions.

Similarly, Dominique cites the perception of futility, and the risks involved as reasons for not speaking up:

Angel McKissic 00:40:07

Okay, so you struggle with even identifying what your needs are in the moment?

Dominique 00:40:12

Yes, yes. It takes a lot for me to figure it out.

Angel McKissic 00:40:17

And then, when you do, what do you do?

Dominique 00:40:19

Usually nothing.

Angel McKissic 00:40:20

Why is that? [Laughing]

Dominique 00:40:21

[Laughing] Too much time has gone by. And there's so much risk and it's gonna be futile.

Because the person is gonna continue to see things the way they see them. And I'm not gonna get what I need out of it. And I will have spoken, and maybe that satisfies a need, but the outcome is not gonna change.

In certain circumstances, Janet and Dominique discuss their perception that expressing their needs will not change outcomes. These experiences highlight the internal and external barriers that can impede self-advocacy and empowerment for the participants. Dominique's struggle to identify her needs and the subsequent decision not to act on them reflect a sense of disempowerment rooted in the anticipation of unchangeable outcomes and the fear of negative consequences.

Combahee articulates the impact of not feeling valued in specific spaces on her sense of disempowerment. Her statement, *"I think in spaces where my voice isn't being valued...makes me*

feel... disempowered,” highlights the crucial role that acknowledgment and validation play in the empowerment process. When Combahee's voice and contributions are not recognized, it undermines her sense of agency and self-worth, illustrating how external validation is integral to the experience of empowerment.

These experiences illustrate the complex interplay between self-awareness, external pressures, and the struggle for self-advocacy in the empowerment journey. Dominique's delayed recognition of mistreatment and subsequent hesitation to assert herself highlight internal barriers to empowerment, such as self-criticism and regret. Barbara's experiences of fear and guilt for not speaking up reveal the emotional turmoil that can accompany perceived disempowerment. Both participant's reflections underscore the challenges of navigating internal expectations and societal stereotypes. Janet's differential sense of empowerment in addressing racial versus gender issues demonstrates how societal responses shape her willingness to advocate, while Combahee's feelings of disempowerment in spaces where her voice is not valued emphasize the importance of external validation. These accounts collectively highlight how self-advocacy as an expression of empowerment is sensitive to perceptions of shame, external influences, and perceptions of futility.

GET Summary. In this GET, participants described the intricate empowerment process through self-affirmation, discernment, and self-advocacy. They illuminate how external affirmations and internal self-talk bolster their confidence and efficacy, enabling them to navigate adversity and self-doubt. The importance of clarity and setting boundaries that align with one's values emerge as fundamental for self-advocacy as an expression of empowerment. However, this theme also highlights the complexities and barriers participants face, such as societal stereotypes and internalized expectations, which can hinder their ability to advocate for

themselves. These narratives underscore that empowerment involves an internal process of self-affirmation and self-awareness and the capacity to advocate for oneself and take purposeful actions toward one's goals.

Group Experiential Theme 3: The Impact of Representation and Stereotypes

This theme explores how the participants reclaim their social position as Black women as a space for resistance, community, and empowerment. The participants' accounts draw out the importance and complexity of representation, mentorship, confronting and defying stereotypes, and reclaiming notions of empowerment from cultural and political hegemony.

This GET is presented in two subordinate themes:

1. The role of representation in empowerment.
2. Defying stereotypes: empowerment through resistance.

Subordinate Theme 1: The Role of Representation in Empowerment. In this subordinate theme, the participants shed light on how representations of Blackness, specifically Black women, were and continue to be formative in how they understand and engage with their power. This theme also complicates the notion of representation by adding nuance to the specific forms of representation that the participants found most impactful. The participants located role models in a diverse range of contexts, from strangers on TV to close family members.

In this interview excerpt, Dominique reflects on the influence of her godmother as a model for empowerment:

My model for many aspects of womanhood is my godmother. And she's the type of person that if she went to the symphony with her eight kids, that she couldn't afford to go to, she was gonna get in that symphony with them kids. If she's got something that she wants to take back to the store, I don't give a goddamn what their policy is, she's taking that shit

back to the store... I just love it. I love it and I emulated I want to be that way.

(Dominique)

Dominique's admiration for her godmother's resilience and resourcefulness illustrates the impact of role models in shaping her understanding of empowerment. These examples also describe an expression of empowerment that involves concrete outcomes, reflecting Dominique's pragmatic orientation to power. Here, Dominique highlights the importance of having strong, determined role models in the empowerment process. Dominique's godmother embodied a form of proactive and unapologetic empowerment and demonstrated that a Black woman can navigate and overcome societal and institutional barriers through sheer will and assertiveness. By emulating her godmother, Dominique aspired to adopt these traits, reflecting empowerment's transmission through observed behavior and familial influence.

Dominique also reflects on the influence of her best friend's mother during her upbringing, *"I knew a woman that was like my best friend's mother growing up. The way she talked about herself, her body, her sexuality, which my friend hated and was always embarrassed. But I was so into that. I just thought, wow. She just chose who she wanted to choose"*. Dominique admired the woman's confident and unapologetic approach to discussing her body and sexuality. Her godmother's autonomy and assertiveness inspired her. She noted how she chose who she wanted to be with and embraced her identity fully, highlighting the significance of witnessing empowered behavior in others. Observing someone who confidently asserted her choices and identity gave Dominique a broader perspective on what it means to be empowered as a Black woman. This account illustrates how role models who defy societal norms and embrace their individuality can profoundly impact one's understanding of empowerment.

Barbara also articulated an understanding of empowerment that emphasized the significance of role models, and the inspiration derived from others' achievements:

Empowerment means to me a few things... things...that I've read, watched, listened to that allows me to think about achievements...I can have it too, I can accomplish that too. Role models...Achieving things that you thought were out of reach that you connect with someone else, and you see that they've done it with all of the challenges and roadblocks and disappointments...harms. Yeah, I think that's what empowerment means to me.

(Barbara)

She describes how reading about, watching, and listening to stories of people who have overcome challenges and achieved their goals allows her to believe in her potential for success. For Barbara, empowerment involves recognizing that accomplishments once thought out of reach are attainable, especially when she sees others who have faced similar roadblocks and disappointments achieve them. By connecting with the stories of others who have navigated and overcome adversity, Barbara gains confidence in her ability to fulfill her aspirations. Reiterating the importance of representation, she says, *"How can I aspire or be empowered for someone who looks like me when I don't see it out there?"*. This statement underscores the significance of visible role models who reflect her identity and experiences. Barbara's earlier reflections on drawing inspiration from the achievements of others are closely tied to this need for representation. Without seeing people who share her background and struggles succeed, it becomes challenging to envision similar outcomes for herself.

During the interview, Barbara describes a moment when, despite her hesitation to wear pink lipstick because she felt her skin complexion was too dark for such a bright color, she chose to wear it after seeing another Black woman do so:

I wouldn't wear a pink lipstick because I thought that I was too dark to wear such a bright color lipstick...I was never comfortable wearing those colors until either I saw it on someone else that had the same skin complexion as me like, wow, matter of fact, she's darker than me and it looks absolutely fantastic on her. Let me see if I can try that. If she did it and it looks beautiful on her then I'm going to do it and I'm hoping to get the same beautiful results as well. (Barbara)

It was only after seeing someone with a similar or darker complexion confidently wearing pink lipstick and looking beautiful that Barbara felt empowered to try it herself. This experience illustrates the profound impact of representation and visibility on her empowerment. Seeing others who share her skin tone embrace bold choices gave Barbara the confidence to step outside her comfort zone and challenge her self-imposed limitations.

Later, Barbara reflects on the empowering impact of seeing images of dark-skinned women:

...I saw those images on television...if I saw a dark skinned sista look like me with this great big afro and I see her on television, or I see her on Soul Train...or I saw her on sitcoms back in the 70s. It was someone that looked like me, that I could identify with. Someone that looked like me, whether it's in the magazine, whether it was on television, whether it was at church or in the community that really just reinforced what my folks always...was pouring into me. (Barbara)

These images provided Barbara with relatable role models who reinforced the positive messages her family instilled in her. Seeing women who looked like her represented positively in various media and community settings validated her identity and aspirations. This ties back to Barbara's earlier reflections on the critical role of representation in empowerment. Just as seeing someone

with a similar complexion wear pink lipstick gave her the confidence to try it herself, seeing dark-skinned women in prominent and positive roles affirmed Barbara's sense of self-worth and potential. These images were powerful reminders that she could achieve her goals and embrace her identity.

Janet also located role models of empowerment in her life:

...I think that you [Angel] had a role in my empowerment. We're friends and I admire you a lot. I get to see what it is, what it looks like to be empowered at school, and at work, and as a mom... (Janet)

This statement highlights the importance of close relationships and personal connections in fostering a sense of empowerment. Like Dominique and Barbara's accounts, Janet's account reveals how empowerment can be significantly influenced by the people one admires and interacts with regularly. Seeing someone close to her successfully navigate and excel in different areas of life has provided Janet with a concrete example of empowerment.

Janet reflects on the significant impact that other Black women have had on her life.

As far as other Black women, other powerful Black women. There have been plenty. I have been thinking about that how throughout my journey Black women have held me down all throughout my whole life. There's a whole bunch of Black women who have poured it into me to help me to be the person that I am today from a child to current...Modeling, to be able to see Black women be happy, Black women being loved. I think that's an important one. I really treasure the fact that I got to see my mom loved well. That feels important to me. (Janet)

Here, she emphasizes the importance of witnessing Black women receive love and experience happiness, emphasizing the communal and intergenerational aspects of empowerment. Janet's

recognition of the support from a "*whole bunch of Black women*" illustrates the collective nature of empowerment. The women's modeling of happiness, love, and strength has given Janet powerful examples to emulate, reinforcing her sense of self-worth and potential. Moreover, her role models embodied a form of empowerment that demonstrated relational flourishing and well-being.

Tashmica also discussed how she accessed power through representations:

At that time. It's like Lifetime movies, where most abuse in those movies was either so terrible that you ended up in foster care or it was a college co-ed who was attacked by a stranger; then they go to court, started nonprofit and then everybody's [inaudible]. He goes to prison. It's great. Everything is tied up. And none of those things reflected my experience. The only thing that I ever saw that reflected my experience was The Color Purple, Lady Sings the Blues, the Women of Brewster's Place, again, all of the media that's being created by Black women or Black queer women, that were very honest and frank about these kinds of stories. And anything I read. The Bluest Eye. There were books... Toni Morrison, Alice Walker... (Tashmica)

In the absence of role models, Tashmica found validation and a reflection of her experiences in media. Continuing, she states:

So oddly even with no Black parent, no Black mother. My stepdad was there but... somehow encountered these stories, horrible stories, that I could relate to, to some degree that told me that, number one, CSA was a real thing. That it could happen in the context of a relationship. That I wasn't the only person, I guess just that sense of like, oh shit, this thing is real. There are people who are writing about it... I don't have a community around me talking about it. I'm not really talking about it. I'm kind of processing it internally. And in

isolation and thinking that the fact that I'm still thinking about it, there's something wrong with me. (Tashmica)

These excerpts highlight the critical role of culturally relevant and authentic representation in media for empowerment. Tashmica's identification with stories created by Black women underscores the importance of seeing one's own experiences and struggles accurately portrayed. These representations offer validation and a sense of connection, demonstrating that her experiences are shared by others and worthy of being told.

While representations of Black women can be positive and affirming for some participants, others discussed the role negative representations and role models had on their sense of empowerment. Combahee reflected on the complexities of understanding power and empowerment through representation:

...if I only understood power through representation ...if I'm looking at all these other Black women figures...our values might not be aligned at all...I'm only seeing power through representation, like...Kamala Harris...If I'm viewing it as that, then...I'm shaping how I understand myself through that vision. It's an alien existence...we're both Black women, but that's an entire alienation of who I am or who I understand myself to be. (Combahee)

She critiques the notion that simply seeing other Black women in powerful positions is sufficient for shaping one's concept of empowerment. Combahee points out that the values and experiences visible representations may not align with her own, leading to a sense of alienation. She stresses that empowerment comes from seeing herself and her values reflected in others, not just from seeing people who share the same racial or gender identity in positions of power.

Reflecting on her professional experience with other Black women, she says:

I worked under a Black woman when I was working corporate. I didn't feel empowered by her at all. Because I think for me what came up was, one, our social class difference...she's oriented in the world drastically different from me... Even beyond the age difference. She was a lighter skinned Black woman...There's always these reminders that her access to status was wider than mine... (Combahee)

Combahee felt a lack of empowerment due to the social class differences, the age gap, and the lighter skin tone of her supervisor. These differences created a sense of disconnection and highlighted the varying degrees of access to status and opportunities within the same racial group. Combahee's reflection underscores that empowerment is not a one-size-fits-all concept and that shared racial identity alone does not guarantee a sense of empowerment or solidarity. The intersection of social class, skin tone, and other factors can significantly influence one's experience and perception of empowerment.

Minniej also adds complexity to overly simplistic notions of representation of Black womanhood. Reflecting on her mother's display of emotions and how it influenced her perception of strength and vulnerability, she states:

...I don't really remember seeing my mom sad... I've seen her upset, but just that vulnerability, I didn't see that. When I think about those strong women, I never saw that. So, I feel subconsciously I took that on of like, you don't do that. (Minniej)

The lack of visible vulnerability among the women in her life resulted in the internalization that showing vulnerability is unacceptable, accepting the belief that strength requires emotional suppression. Realizing that vulnerability was not recognized or discussed during her upbringing, she reflects, “I’m like, wow, I’ve been a strong Black woman since I was a kid...something that maybe I didn't recognize as a kid, like true vulnerability. It just wasn't talked about”. The

absence of conversations about vulnerability further reinforced the notion that being strong meant not showing certain emotions or weaknesses. Minniej's reflections illustrate how her early experiences shaped her understanding of power.

Recognizing how her familial socialization impacted her, she reflects on the power and strength that come from being open and authentic about one's emotions:

I feel like with me unlearning things and like you said, I feel like how powerful and how strong somebody can be if they are open to showing their true authentic self in that moment. Like right there. If they feel happy, they show it. If they feel sad, they're also going to show it because it takes...if I had to say a definition of who a strong person is or even a strong Black woman or a Black person is, feeling liberated to wear all of these...I can still be liberated without the pressure of these outside. (Minniej)

For Minniej, a strong person, specifically a strong Black woman, feels liberated to express their genuine emotions. She acknowledges that this openness requires shedding previous beliefs about the relationship between power and vulnerability. In her journey to reclaim power for herself, she has become the role model for her family that she did not have:

I feel vulnerable enough to share my emotions with [my family]. So, I feel like for my elders and just the Black woman around me, I modeled what that was to make them feel comfortable... everybody said...Minniej, you create a space where I feel okay to be myself. Whether that is me upset, me sad, you know, all these things. And I feel like I do that because I did not have that. (Minniej)

For Minniej, reclaiming her power has meant being vulnerable enough to share her emotions and modeling this openness to her elders and other Black women around her. Minniej's journey towards embracing vulnerability has empowered her to create supportive environments for

others. In this way, Minniej's account builds on the theme of representation by acting as a role model of empowerment for those around close to her.

Reinforcing this notion of the interconnectedness of personal growth and generational change in the empowerment journey, Barbara states:

I believe that in every generation that is birthed there's a shift, there's a change in how our children handle things that's going to empower them to be able to go wherever they need to go and to achieve the things that they need to achieve in order to be fulfilled based off of their desires, based off of their wants, based off of their needs. (Barbara)

Both accounts emphasize the importance of evolving perspectives and behaviors to foster empowerment. Minniej's journey of unlearning early socialization and modeling vulnerability for her family represents a generational shift in understanding and expressing strength. By creating spaces where others feel comfortable being themselves, Minniej contributes to transforming how empowerment is perceived and practiced within her community. Barbara and Minniej's experiences illustrate how role models and representation catalyze change. They show that empowerment is not a fixed concept but evolves through the actions and examples set by individuals within a community. By modeling new behaviors and challenging outdated norms, role models help to redefine what it means to be empowered.

The participants' experiences illustrate the critical function of role models and representation in empowerment. Whether through personal connections, media portrayals, or community influences, these role models provide tangible examples of strength and authenticity. The participants also troubled the durability of representation as an inherently positive influence, uncovering the complex influence of class, economics, and skin color in how power gets represented. Additionally, the generational shift towards embracing vulnerability and emotional

honesty, as illustrated by Minniej and Barbara, underscores the evolving nature of empowerment. This dynamic process is fueled by the visibility and actions of empowered individuals who challenge outdated norms and create supportive environments for others. Ultimately, these narratives emphasize that empowerment can be accessed through engagement with role models who reflect and validate the participant's experiences and aspirations.

Subordinate Theme 2: Defying Stereotypes: Empowerment Through Resistance.

This subordinate theme explores how the participants confront and resist negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Black women and how it informs their sense of empowerment.

Reflecting on her experience as a single Black mother and how it has influenced her sense of power, Barbara shares:

Angel McKissic 00:22:40

Yes, can you talk a little bit more about how your role as a mother influenced your sense of power?

Barbara 00:23:14

...I did that. Even with the absent parent. And it was empowering for me to even tell him: I did that, you didn't. I felt real good about that. Even though I made him [children's father] feel bad [laughing]. That part right there, that was powerful for me...I did that despite...as a young mother, as a single mother. Because the expectation and the stereotype of Black women who are unwed young mothers...I defied those stereotypes.

Here, Barbara also discusses the broader societal context, acknowledging the negative stereotypes and low expectations often placed on unwed Black mothers. Her success in defying these stereotypes and raising her children was a significant source of empowerment. Her account

highlights how personal achievements and her ability to challenge and surpass external expectations contributed to a stronger sense of empowerment.

Tashmica also found empowerment through resisting stereotypes about Black women:

It was discernment. It took me number one, being really frustrated and overwhelmed and realizing that I was not okay and that no one was asking first. Requests were coming in, but no one was like, hey, Black people are being murdered and you know, police violence is at an all-time high and in a way that's very visible, because we're recording everything now. And literally, we can't go a month without another Black person being murdered in the streets. But anyway, do you have time for a meeting to talk about some fucking random ass bullshit? I was just done with superficial, exploitive relationships, but also ones that are tokenizing. Of course, because I'm the one Black person, palatable Black person that they know. So of course, they want to send me messages about how sad they are. We're not doing this. So, I just got rid of my phone. I shut off all my notifications... The fact that not only was I unprotected in so many ways but also tossed to the wolves. And being like, yeah, she can handle it like. No, she will not. She will not be handling it. No, you guys are, you're on your own. (Tashmica)

Tashmica articulates her frustration and sense of being overwhelmed by both societal violence against Black people and the exploitative and tokenizing nature of her professional relationships. She describes the turning point where she decided to set boundaries to protect her well-being, highlighting her discernment in recognizing toxic dynamics and her courage in rejecting them. Tashmica's disengagement from superficial and exploitative relationships shows how exercising agency and setting boundaries are expressions of empowerment. Both participants highlight the significance of rejecting societal expectations and stereotypes as a form of empowerment.

Combahee also discussed how she is constantly navigating harmful tropes about Black women:

...the tip I'm leaning on slightly is that I think my power is tied to how well I know myself. Yeah, I think my power is tied to how well I know myself. And I think as a Black woman, there's so much richness in both understanding who I am, but also understanding the forces that try to define who I am. So, it's like this dance between being my authentic self or being all these numerous tropes of what a Black woman should be or could be... Because some folks might say a Black woman is someone that's nurturing, someone that's motherly. I got conditions on how I show up like that. I'm not just bout to be like that for anyone. That's just not who I am. (Combahee)

Here, she emphasizes the importance of understanding both her authentic self and the external forces that attempt to define her identity. This dance between authenticity and societal expectations, especially the numerous tropes surrounding Black womanhood highlights the complexity of navigating empowerment as a Black woman. Combahee's refusal to conform to stereotypical expectations illustrates her commitment to authenticity and self-definition. For Combahee, to be empowered is to define herself authentically without the imposition of cultural, social, and political “forces” that attempt to do it in ways that limit her humanity and assign values, beliefs, and behaviors that are not her own. In this way, she is resisting the alienation of being subject to racist and sexist stereotyping.

Addressing the inherited legacy of silence and tolerance of pain that many Black women experience, Dominique notes:

...there's a whole legacy that women, all women have, and all Black people have, about being quiet, being silent, tolerating pain, not making your needs known, not requiring

people to treat you the way that you want to be treated. We inherit all of that...I'm sure that I think that I've done a good job of conquering it. (Dominique)

Acknowledging the cultural and historical pressures to be quiet, endure suffering, and refrain from asserting needs or demanding respect, Dominique reflects on the significance of breaking free from these oppressive norms and reclaiming her voice and agency.

These experiences reveal the importance of rejecting imposed identities and asserting self-defined empowerment. For the participants, empowerment involves setting boundaries and embracing one's authentic self against societal expectations.

GET Summary. The participants' experiences highlight the crucial role of representation and the resistance of stereotypes in their journey towards empowerment. Role models in close relationships, media, or community settings significantly shape their understanding and engagement with their power. These examples underscore the importance of role models who reflect their identity and struggles, providing tangible examples of overcoming adversity and embracing authenticity.

Simultaneously, the participants articulate the importance of rejecting negative stereotypes and societal expectations imposed on Black women. They emphasize the need for authenticity and self-definition when navigating the complexities of external forces that attempt to dictate their identity. Thus, for the participants, empowerment involves consciously rejecting imposed identities, setting boundaries to protect their well-being, and asserting their authentic selves.

Group Experiential Theme 4: Recognizing Growth and Reconnecting to Innate Power

This theme delves into the impact of looking back on past experiences in shaping psychological empowerment. Several participants articulated how engaging in reflective

evaluation of their progressive growth—emotionally, behaviorally, and psychologically—fosters empowerment. Additionally, they elaborated on how the interplay of temporality, introspection, and critical evaluation yields insights about personal development, culminating in a reclamation of empowerment as an internally derived source.

This GET is presented in two subordinate themes:

1. Retrospection and appreciating growth as mechanisms of empowerment.
2. Unearthing the power within: Reclaiming power as an innate source.

Subordinate Theme 1: Retrospection and Appreciating Growth as Mechanisms of Empowerment. Some participants discussed how the practice of looking back in time and realizing their growth was instrumental in supporting their empowerment. For Combahee, memory and recognition were strong themes in her account of empowerment:

...memory as a tool to recognize. Memory as a tool to simply recognize. Whether that recognition be my resilience, whether that recognition be that I can always be powerful even in my most scarce or vulnerable moments. (Combahee)

Emphasizing the importance of memory in recognizing and affirming her resilience and power, Combahee discusses how, recalling past experiences, she uses memory to validate her strength, particularly in moments of scarcity or vulnerability. This suggests that reflecting on past challenges and triumphs reminds her of her inherent power, reinforcing her sense of empowerment. Memory, therefore, becomes a crucial component in her empowerment journey, providing a reservoir of evidence that she can draw upon to sustain her confidence and resilience in the face of adversity.

Combahee further elucidates that empowerment is profoundly introspective and rooted in self-awareness and self-knowledge, “*empowerment being kind of an introspective quality, kind of*

almost like, I'm empowered through knowing who I am". She asserts that understanding and knowing herself is fundamental to feeling empowered.

Combahee elaborates her reflection on empowerment by emphasizing the significance of understanding both her current and past selves, *"To not only know who I am now but who I was. That's empowering to me"*. This continuity of self-awareness enhances her sense of empowerment, bridging her present identity with her past experiences to recognize growth. Tying this to her previous insights, Combahee illustrates that empowerment is a comprehensive introspective process that involves recognizing past resilience and power, understanding her evolving identity, and integrating these insights into a cohesive self-concept. Underscoring the enduring nature of her resilience and capabilities. She reflects on her younger self's resilience,

When I look at myself when I was younger, I see resilience... as an adult, especially in moments where I'm feeling down on myself or wanna be harsh to myself as I hold the many sides of me, memory is a tool to remember... Recognizing that that's me, but now it's just my present self. I still have those exact same tools and capacities to remake both who I know of myself and what I want to be...(Combahee)

Recognizing that her past and present selves share the same inherent tools and capacities, she reiterates empowerment as deeply introspective and rooted in self-knowledge.

Barbara also reflects on the value of resilience and learning from past experiences:

Having that belief and being thankful and grateful that I was able to withstand it, go through it. Coming out on the other side, whether it was successful or a failure, because failures teach you lessons, valuable lessons....Whether it was a good decision or a bad decision and what I learned from that and tried not to repeat the same mistake or make

the wrong decision... sometimes you have to take two steps back in order to get three steps forward, so the back and forth, and having that mental muscle. (Barbara)

Barbara's perspective on empowerment involves recognizing the lessons inherent in failures and using them to make better decisions in the future. Her analogy of taking "*two steps back in order to get three steps forward*" illustrates the non-linear nature of progress and the importance of persistence. By cultivating "*mental muscle*", she highlights the significance of developing inner strength and resilience.

Janet also articulates an understanding of empowerment as a retrospective process.

I feel like there might be something to the idea of the process of empowerment is like in the moment process for some and in certain situations. But for me, in a lot of ways, it has been in retrospect. It's like being able to look at past in a new way and apply that to current life. (Janet)

She suggests that empowerment often involves reflecting on past experiences and reinterpreting them to inform and enhance her current life. Janet's view complements Barbara's emphasis on learning from successes and failures and Combahee's use of memory to recognize her resilience and power. Highlighting the empowerment derived from retrospective reflection, Janet states, "*I think that it's empowering...yeah it's empowering to be able to look back on the past with new eyes...So like looking back and thinking, wow that's where I was and this is where I am now*". She finds strength in reassessing her past experiences with a fresh perspective, allowing her to appreciate her growth and progress. This ability to look back and see how far she has come enhances her sense of empowerment, reinforcing that understanding and learning from the past is crucial for empowerment.

Together, these narratives illustrate that empowerment involves a continuous cycle of reflection, learning, and applying past experiences to current and future challenges. By appreciating their growth and understanding the capacities they have developed over time, the participants harness the power of their histories to reinforce their present and future selves. They reveal the intricate ways memory and introspection serve as foundational elements in their experience of empowerment.

Subordinate Theme 2: Unearthing The Power Within: Reclaiming Power as An Innate Source. Some participants talked about how, through retrospective reflection, they recognized and connected with their internal source of empowerment. In essence, reflective recognition of past triumphs, resilience, and, in some cases, survival allows the participants to locate an internal well of empowerment as a resource they can access but is sometimes forgotten or obscured by trauma, societal expectations, or harmful stereotypes.

Minniej reflected on how her experiences of an abusive relationship and assault led to a significant decline in her self-worth and sense of empowerment:

...when I was ...going through an abusive relationship or ...when I was assaulted... My empowerment was down because my self-worth...felt like it was at zero...I had to take a step back and do healing and go into therapy; I realized all of those things were within me...(Minniej)

She describes feeling that her self-worth was reduced to “zero” during these traumatic events. Her journey toward healing involved stepping back, seeking therapy, and engaging in self-reflection. Through this process, she discovered that empowerment and self-worth were always within her, highlighting the critical role of healing and self-discovery in locating power as an internal resource. Minniej’s account demonstrates that empowerment can be reclaimed and

strengthened through intentional efforts to address trauma, seek support, and recognize one's inherent value and strength. Acknowledging that her intrinsic strength, resilience, and greatness were always within her, she says, *“it's within! It wasn't like I didn't know that I'm a great person that I'm strong, resilient; it was just...I have fucked up shit blocking it that wasn't allowing me to just be myself”*. This realization ties back to her previous insights about how the abusive relationship diminished her self-worth and sense of empowerment. Through her healing journey and self-reflection, Minniej uncovered that her empowerment and self-worth were not lost but temporarily obstructed by external and internal adversities, revealing empowerment as an internal, intrinsic quality that can be reclaimed through personal growth and healing.

Reflecting on the influence of the powerful Black women she was surrounded by, echoing findings in the previous section on representation, she says, *“being around powerful Black women...I was just around strong, resilient women. That was just innate. It was something that was like, the women around me are powerful, and I come from those women, so that is inside of me”*. Here, she claims strength and resilience as innate qualities that she inherited, stressing that empowerment is not just a result of her individual efforts but also a legacy passed down to her.

When discussing her conception of empowerment, Combahee describes the interactive effects of internal and external forces: *“Other people motivate me...to be reminded that in my moments when I'm not empowered, there's other sources of energy that can get me back to that place to say that I have this strength within me”*. She emphasizes that when she feels disempowered, the support and motivation from others serve as vital sources of energy, helping her reconnect with her inner strength.

GET Summary. The participants' reflections emphasize that empowerment is fundamentally an intrinsic resource. Their accounts illuminate how, through retrospective reflection, they recognize their inherent resilience, strength, and value. These narratives collectively affirm that empowerment, while sometimes obscured by life's challenges, remains an intrinsic resource that can be accessed and strengthened through personal growth, healing, and the support of a nurturing community.

Group Experiential Theme 5: The Metaphysical as Sources of Empowerment

This theme delves into how the participants find empowerment through their connection with spirituality and the natural world. While previous sections have focused on the role of intra- and interpersonal dynamics, this theme discusses the significance of non-human relationships on empowerment. Specifically, some participants draw inspiration from nature's life cycles and physicality, while some find strength in faith-based belief systems.

This GET is presented in two subordinate themes:

1. *“I thrive in aspects of nature”*: Nature as a source of empowerment.
2. Spiritual Foundations: Harnessing faith for empowerment.

Subordinate Theme 1: “I Thrive in Aspects of Nature”: Nature as A Source of Empowerment. Some participants talked about their relationship to nature and how it functions in their experience of empowerment. Combahee articulates how nature is a powerful metaphor for personal growth and resilience:

...nature makes me feel really empowered. Nature has also kind of been this reminder of what I can be or what I can do, especially when we're thinking about growth and decay. And I've really been thinking a lot about how trees, for example, trees are living giants basically informing our ability to grow within any condition. So, to witness that

empowers me to be like, dang, these trees in my backyard they be all beautiful during the summer and spring or whatever, but right now, within this period of transition, they're dying. But what does it mean to know that they'll be back within the new season? So, I think that motivates...So being in nature definitely is empowering. (Combahee)

She reflects on the cyclical processes of growth and decay observed in trees, seeing them as "living giants" that demonstrate the capacity to thrive under various conditions. The cycle of decay and flourishing mirrors her understanding of human resilience. Combahee finds motivation in the trees' ability to endure adverse conditions and regenerate with the changing seasons. This illuminates how Combahee's observations of nature reinforce her internal strength and the belief in her capacity for growth and renewal, even after periods of decline or hardship.

Similar to Combahee's reflections, Barbara highlights the empowering effect of nature:

Angel McKissic 00:33:31

Are there places where you feel most powerful?

Barbara 00:36:50

Yes. Nature. I think that brings a sense of power. And what I mean by that, the environment. I thrive in aspects of nature, living things, beauty, being outside, that causes me to not just reflect, but to think forward but in the present, being fully present. And then thinking about those things... the next phase, the next steps, the next phase of my life where I want to go. Thinking about the things that I haven't done that I have yet still to do and thinking of ways on how I'm going to achieve it.

Barbara describes how being in nature brings her a sense of power and fosters mindfulness and forward thinking. She explains that nature's beauty and vitality enable her to reflect on her past, be present in the moment, and envision her future. While immersed in nature, the holistic

engagement with time—past, present, and future—enhances her sense of empowerment.

Barbara's narrative underscores how the natural environment can catalyze self-reflection, goal setting, and a deeper connection with one's sense of purpose and direction. This parallels Combahee's insights about nature's role in symbolizing growth, resilience, and renewal. Both participants emphasize that nature provides a powerful context for recognizing internal strength, resilience, and the potential for continuous personal growth.

Subordinate Theme 2: Spiritual Foundations: Harnessing Faith for Empowerment.

Some participants discussed how their spiritual beliefs enable them to access power when they struggle to feel powerful. Minniej discusses how her faith has been a vital source of strength, helping her recognize her worth and resilience, especially during challenging times:

“...my faith too. I feel like that's what has brought me to a space of, like, girl, you've been through it, but you can continue; you're worthy to live and experience new things...I feel like my power comes from that...I think in those days of when I was in that [abusive] relationship or away from family, that's what I was able to turn to. I would say that's just carried me through”. (Minniej)

Here, she describes how her faith is a constant undercurrent in her sense of worthiness. Her faith has carried her through hardships and thus provides a foundation for empowerment. In this way, her faith is foundational and utilized as a crisis response system. Minniej's reflection on her college experience reinforces the pivotal role of faith in her empowerment journey. She shares that during challenging times in college, she didn't turn to her mother or others for support but instead leaned into her faith, *“When I was going through shit in college, I wasn't calling my mom about that...So, I had to lean into my faith because I wasn't comfortable talking to anyone else if that makes sense?”*. Reliance on faith provided her with the necessary strength and comfort

when she felt isolated or uncomfortable seeking help from others. This further emphasizes that empowerment for Minniej is deeply tied to her spiritual beliefs, which act as a personal refuge and source of resilience. Her faith helps her navigate personal adversities and reinforces her intrinsic worth and ability to persevere, revealing how empowerment can stem from an internal spiritual resource.

Combahee also discusses the role of “*higher beings*” as a source of empowerment:

What does it look like to be empowered? I'm just gonna say the first thing that came to my head. I think, what it feels like to be empowered...it feels like a reminder that I don't have to take on things alone. I think I take a very decentralized approach to empowerment. Because I think I'm also realizing that a lot of times it's hard for me to feel empowered by myself, to be honest. If I don't have the connections to higher beings and I don't have a connection to community, than it can be hard for me to source my power or to feel like I'm capable of feeling empowered. (Combahee)

Combahee's perspective suggests that while intrinsic strength is vital, the presence and support of external connections are equally important in fostering a sense of empowerment.

Like Minniej, Barbara's spiritual foundation encourages and motivates her to persevere: “Really having a powerful spiritual faith-based grounding...Really focused on my spirituality and having that carry me to encourage me to continue to move.” This perspective resonates with Minniej's earlier reflections on how faith sustained her through abusive relationships and periods of isolation. Similarly, Combahee's insights on empowerment underscore the importance of connections, including those to higher beings and communities.

These narratives illustrate that empowerment is deeply intertwined with spiritual faith and external support systems. Spirituality acts as a source of inner strength, while community

connections reinforce and validate this strength, creating a holistic framework for understanding how the participants experience empowerment.

GET Summary. This subordinate theme illuminates how nature reminds the participants of their inherent capacity to thrive under various conditions and acts as a container that fosters mindfulness, reflection, and forward-thinking, enhancing their sense of empowerment. In parallel, participants' experiences demonstrate how spiritual beliefs can offer comfort and strength when other support systems are inaccessible or insufficient, highlighting that while intrinsic strength is essential, external support from spiritual and communal sources is crucial for feeling empowered.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals the intricate tapestry of the participants' psychological empowerment through the diversity of their lived experiences. The themes reveal a multifaceted and interconnected understanding of empowerment shaped by various internal and external influences.

Authenticity and supportive relationships emerge as cornerstones of empowerment in the participants' accounts. Participants find their strength and power significantly enhanced when surrounded by individuals who allow them to be their authentic selves without judgment. These relationships provide a safe space for self-expression, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance crucial for empowerment. This theme underscores the importance of relational care and mutual support in developing and sustaining psychological empowerment.

The synergy between self-affirmation and self-advocacy was revealed to be a function of empowerment. The participants illustrate how internally generated and externally received affirmation is a powerful tool for overcoming adversity and self-doubt. This internal dialogue of

affirming one's worth and capabilities is often reinforced by encouragement and validation from others, highlighting the complex interplay between internal and external sources of empowerment. Self-advocacy emerges as an essential expression of empowerment, where participants gain confidence and clarity by speaking their truth and setting boundaries.

Reflecting on past experiences and growth provides another layer to understanding empowerment. The participants' narratives demonstrate that looking back on their personal histories allows them to recognize their resilience and inherent strengths. This retrospective reflection, guided by memory and introspection, is about acknowledging past achievements and reclaiming an innate source of power that may have been obscured by trauma or societal expectations. This theme underscores the role of temporality and the importance of cognitive processes in constructing a continuous and evolving sense of empowerment.

The analysis also uncovered that resistance against stereotypes is a significant expression of empowerment. Defying societal expectations and reclaiming their identity as Black women become acts of self-determination and power. This resistance is not just against external perceptions but also involves an internal struggle to define oneself authentically against imposed narratives.

Lastly, spirituality and the natural world emerged as dimensions of empowerment. For some participants, connections to a higher power and the natural world offer profound strength and inspiration. Nature's cycles of growth and renewal serve as metaphors for personal resilience and rebirth, while spiritual beliefs provide a stable foundation of support during challenging times. These non-human relationships enrich the participants' sense of empowerment by grounding it in something larger than themselves.

In summary, the themes presented in this chapter collectively illustrate that empowerment is a dynamic, multifaceted process. It involves a delicate balance of internal reflection, relational support, and spiritual grounding. The participants draw strength from their relationships, reflections on past growth, and connections to nature and spirituality. Through self-affirmation, advocacy, and resistance against stereotypes, they construct and reconstruct their sense of power and agency. This analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the complex pathways through which the participants experience and sustain psychological empowerment.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter will discuss the study's significance, summarize the research findings, highlight its interventions in the theoretical literature on psychological empowerment, explore its limitations, and outline the implications for future research and practice.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature on psychological empowerment. By centering the voices of Black women—a group historically marginalized in empowerment discourse—the research uncovered both converging and diverging experiences of empowerment, highlighting its dynamic and context-specific nature. The findings confirm that empowerment is deeply shaped by contextual, social, historical, and political forces, as suggested by Zimmerman (1995) and Peterson (2014), while also introducing novel insights into the role of spirituality and encounters with the natural world as critical, yet previously underexplored, sources of empowerment. The study further endorses Christens' (2012) relational empowerment model, demonstrating how relationality—whether through care, authenticity, or affirmation—is a cornerstone of participants' empowerment experiences. By amplifying Black women's narratives, this work challenges homogenized assumptions about empowerment, revealing how racial and gender identities profoundly influence its conceptualization and lived reality. Additionally, the research underscores the complexity of psychological empowerment, advocating for qualitative methodologies to capture its nuanced, intersectional dimensions. These findings expand theoretical frameworks and provide a foundation for culturally relevant interventions in mental health, education, and community development.

The following sections will summarize the findings and discuss the interventions they contribute to the prevailing discourse.

Summary of Themes

The Group Experiential Themes (GETs) that emerged from the analytic process provide unique insights into the research question. Below is a summary of each theme.

GET #1 - Authenticity, Care, and Affirmation in Relationships

This theme highlighted the importance of relationships in the participants' experience of empowerment. Affirmation from others, mutual care, and the opportunity to openly express one's authenticity were all identified as crucial aspects of the relationships that best supported the participants' psychological empowerment.

GET #2 - Self-Affirmation, Advocacy, and Action

This theme explored the interlinking of self-affirmation, advocacy, and action as critical features of empowerment. Participants felt empowered by understanding and utilizing their abilities, using that knowledge to advocate for their needs and wants and overcome both internal and external sources of adversity.

GET #3 – The Impact of Representation and Stereotypes

This theme examined how the participants assert their social position as Black women, using it as a platform for resistance, community, and empowerment. The accounts provided by the participants highlight the significance and intricacy of representation, mentorship, challenging and defying stereotypes, and reclaiming notions of empowerment from cultural and political dominance.

GET #4 – Recognizing Growth and Reconnecting to Innate Power

The theme demonstrated how reflecting on past experiences influences psychological empowerment. Many participants expressed that evaluating their emotional, behavioral, and psychological growth fosters empowerment. They also discussed how reflecting on the past, introspection, and critical evaluation provides insights into personal development in ways that constructively contribute to their empowerment.

GET #5 – The Metaphysical as Sources of Empowerment

This theme illustrated how the participants derive empowerment from their spiritual connections and interactions with the natural world, emphasizing the importance of non-human relationships in fostering empowerment.

Summary

Taken together, the five GETs demonstrate psychological empowerment as a phenomenon that is:

- Relationally embedded in practices of care, affirmation, and authenticity.
- Divergent and contingent on contextual factors.
- Complex and continuously evolving in nonlinear ways.
- Involves deep relationships to spirituality and the natural world.

The following sections will discuss these findings in relation to the literature on psychological empowerment.

Connections to the Extant Literature

This study's findings confirm existing conceptual models of empowerment while offering new perspectives that contribute significant insights to the literature.

Unexpected Findings and Novel Insights: Nature and Spirituality as Forces of Empowerment

During the data analysis, two dimensions of empowerment emerged that have hitherto been absent from the prevailing theoretical models: the role of nature and spirituality. Group experiential theme five, Nature and Spirituality as Sources of Empowerment, uncovers how participants recruit their spiritual beliefs and practices and their relationship to the natural world as a means of inspiration, support, and meaning making. These novel insights expand and enrich what is known about the constitutive dimensions of empowerment.

The findings from this research align with and expand upon the broader literature on spirituality and empowerment (Abdoli et al., 2011; Agyepong, 2024; Hipolito et al., 2014; Maton & Wells, 1995; Sadati et al., 2014). The present study highlights spirituality as a critical source of strength, resilience, and meaning making, particularly in the face of systemic challenges such as racism, sexism, and personal adversity. For example, participants like Minniej and Barbara described how their faith provided a foundational sense of worthiness and perseverance during periods of isolation or trauma, reinforcing that spirituality is an internal resource deeply tied to identity and self-efficacy. This mirrors the literature's emphasis on spirituality as a transformative force that helps individuals transition from powerlessness to agency (Abdoli et al., 2011; Sengupta, et al., 2024).

However, the research also introduces nuanced insights into how spirituality operates within the lived experiences of Black women. While quantitative studies often correlate spirituality with higher empowerment levels (Hipolito et al., 2014), the present study reveals the processual and relational dimensions of this connection. For instance, Minniej's account illustrates how spirituality functioned as both a crisis response system ("leaning into faith" during an abusive relationship) and a sustaining force for daily resilience. Similarly, Combahee's

reflection on "higher beings" underscores spirituality as a relational anchor, not just an individual coping mechanism. These findings deepen the literature by showing how spirituality is woven into Black women's empowerment through communal and introspective practices, challenging homogenized portrayals of faith-based empowerment.

Additionally, the research highlights the intersection of spirituality with other empowerment pathways, such as nature (e.g., Combahee's metaphor of trees as symbols of cyclical resilience) and relational affirmation (e.g., Barbara's spiritual grounding reinforcing her self-worth). This aligns with the literature's recognition of spirituality as a framework for meaning-making (Vonarx, 2012) but extends it by demonstrating how spiritual empowerment is often *embodied* and *contextual*—rooted in cultural legacies and environmental interactions.

While much of the existing literature on empowerment has focused on intra- and interpersonal dynamics, this research uncovers the profound impact of non-human relationships—specifically connections with nature and spiritual belief systems—on participants' sense of empowerment. These dimensions, previously underexplored in empowerment theory, expand the understanding of how individuals locate and define empowerment.

The study also demonstrates how nature is a powerful metaphor and source of inspiration for participants. For example, Combahee's reflections on the cyclical processes of growth and decay in trees reveal how natural elements can symbolize human resilience and the capacity for renewal. Nature is experienced as a backdrop *and* an active force that mirrors participants' internal struggles and triumphs. This project, therefore, positions nature as a critical influence on psychological empowerment, demonstrating that participants draw critical lessons about perseverance and strength from their observations of the natural world. This insight encourages a reevaluation of how environmental contexts contribute to psychological empowerment.

These findings have significant implications for the current literature on psychological empowerment. Traditional empowerment models, such as Zimmerman's (1995) three-dimensional model (intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral) and Peterson's (2014) aggregate model, have primarily focused on individual capacities, social interactions, and behaviors within a community context. However, the emergence of nature and spirituality as critical dimensions in this study suggests that empowerment cannot be fully understood without considering these additional elements. This research supports the argument for an expanded model of empowerment that includes relational Christens (2012) and spiritual components and calls for a deeper exploration of non-human relationships in empowerment processes.

Empowerment as a Process

The findings demonstrate psychological empowerment as a fluid, evolving phenomenon. Participants describe how past reflections, engagement with therapists, and supportive interpersonal relationships have, over time, shaped their understanding and experience of empowerment. This maps onto Zimmerman's (1995) and Hur's (2006) conceptualizing of empowerment as unpredictable and emergent, and Kaminski et al.'s (2000) assertion that empowerment is a process that does not unfold in a linear trajectory but instead implicates a circular and mutually reinforcing process. Examples of this are found in Minniej's account, where she discusses how her friendships and experience in therapy mutually reinforced each other to help her feel empowered after a period of disempowerment. The findings also confirm Carr's (2003) conceptualization of empowerment as a praxis of mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses. This is evident in other areas of the data where participants discuss how they moved from a state of powerlessness to empowerment. For example, Barbara discusses how, after seeing another dark-skinned Black woman wearing bright-colored lipstick, she felt

empowered to do it herself. The data demonstrate that empowerment involves subprocesses that unfold over time and often in nonlinear ways.

Overall, this study reveals that psychological empowerment is not a static state or destination but rather an ongoing, dynamic process. Participants' experiences underscore the significance of reflection, introspection, and growth over time as critical components of empowerment. This process-oriented view of empowerment highlights how individuals continuously navigate and reinterpret their past and present experiences, fostering a deeper connection with their innate power and resilience. It illustrates that empowerment is a journey of continuous self-discovery and self-affirmation.

Contextual and Temporal Domains of Empowerment

Christens et al. (2012) asserted psychological empowerment as "...inherently subjective, taking divergent forms across individuals and fluctuating across different settings and temporalities within the *same* individual" and argued that "psychological empowerment takes different forms for different people" (p. 52). The present study confirms this claim by illustrating the diversity across participant's experiences. While all the participants identify as Black women, their experiences are diverse and contain divergent qualities. For example, where spirituality significantly influenced some participants' experience of empowerment, it is absent in others. Furthermore, where some participants found empowerment through superficial representation, others problematized this type of representation and found it determinantal to how they define and access empowerment.

The findings also uncovered how empowerment is shaped by the temporal dimensions of the participant's life. Group Experiential Theme four, *Recognizing Growth and Connecting to Innate Power*, adds dimension to Speer's (2000) work, which established the temporal

contingencies of empowerment and posited that empowerment fluctuates within the same individual over time. The study's findings show that participants use retrospective reflection to reinterpret past experiences and use those interpretations to evaluate and interpret their present. This finding endorses Speer (2000) and others who have emphasized how temporal factors shape empowerment.

Overall, the study's findings align with and expand upon existing literature by emphasizing the contextual and temporal sensitivity of psychological empowerment. The data reveal that empowerment is deeply influenced by the specific social, historical, and cultural contexts in which individuals live and by the temporal progression of their personal experiences. This underscores the importance of understanding empowerment not as a universal or fixed phenomenon but as one intricately shaped by an individual's unique life circumstances.

Endorsing the Dimensions of Empowerment: Toward an Aggregate Model

Zimmerman (1995) developed a model of psychological empowerment consisting of three dimensions: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral. The intrapersonal domain refers to an individual's perceived self-control, efficacy, and competence. The interactional domain refers to the development of critical social consciousness, understanding cause-effect connections, acquisition and development of skills, and the ability to mobilize resources. Lastly, the behavioral component refers to community involvement, organizational participation, and the ability to cope with adverse life experiences. This study provides evidence for these dimensions through the participant's lived experience. In addition, the findings also endorse Peterson's (2014) aggregate model of empowerment, which uses Zimmerman's constitutive dimensions.

Peterson (2014) argued for an aggregate model of empowerment, which posits that the dimensions of empowerment, intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral, are structured such

that they each feed up to and actively contribute to forming it as a construct. Furthermore, the aggregate model acknowledges the complexity of psychological empowerment and allows the distinct dimensions to retain their unique contributions without the presumption of interchangeability. Essentially, Peterson (2014) argues for a conceptual model wherein the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral dimensions shape empowerment from the bottom up.

The findings from this study provide empirical support for both Zimmerman and Peterson's models by demonstrating how these dimensions operate in the participants' lived experiences. The intrapersonal dimension was evident in how participants engaged in self-reflection and introspection, recognizing their resilience and inner strength over time. This is particularly illustrated in how participants like Combahee used memory and introspection to affirm her resilience during vulnerable moments, reinforcing her sense of empowerment as an internal and dynamic process.

Similarly, the interactional dimension emerged in how participants navigated and negotiated their social environments. For example, Tashmica's decision to set boundaries in response to tokenizing and exploitative relationships highlights how interactional processes contribute to empowerment by allowing individuals to assert control over their social interactions and environments.

The behavioral dimension was also apparent in how participants took action based on their self-recognition and social interactions. Dominique's proactive pursuit of her goals and Janet's emphasis on discernment and boundary-setting in her relationships underscore the behavioral aspects of empowerment, where participants translate their internal realizations and social negotiations into concrete actions.

Finally, the study's emphasis on the relational dimension—as seen in the importance of supportive and affirming relationships—complements and expands Christens' (2012) model. The participants' narratives underscore that relational dynamics are not merely interactional but are foundational to empowerment, as they provide the emotional and social support necessary for the other dimensions to flourish.

Finally, the findings demonstrate the indispensability of any of the constitutive dimensions of empowerment. For example, eliminating the interpersonal dimension, the process by which participants learn and gain confidence in their capacities would significantly impact the participants' overall sense of empowerment. Therefore, this study confirms Peterson's aggregate model of empowerment.

Beyond Individualism in Empowerment Theory: Foregrounding Relationality as a Constitutive Element of Psychological Empowerment

Zimmerman's (1995) seminal work established empowerment as constituted by three dimensions: interactional, behavioral, and interpersonal. This model has become the foundation on which later empowerment theorists have based their work. However, in 2012, Christens intervened on Zimmerman's model by arguing for the inclusion of relationality as the fourth dimension of empowerment. His work responded to feminist theorists who argued against the overemphasis on individualism and personal mastery in theorizing empowerment (Woodall et al., 2012; Staples, 1990; Langan, 1998) by positing the centrality of relationality. Christens (2012) argued that this overemphasis neglects the significant role of relationships in understanding how empowerment unfolds within individuals, which contributes to a limited understanding of empowerment. According to Christens, scholars must account for the role of interpersonal relationships to comprehend how empowerment is cultivated and manifested.

The findings from this study strongly endorse Christens' relational model. The data revealed that empowerment was deeply intertwined with relational dynamics for the participants in this study, as they repeatedly highlighted the significance of supportive, affirming relationships in their empowerment journeys. For example, the participants described how relationships that offered mutual care and validation were pivotal in their processes of self-discovery and empowerment. These findings align with Christens' argument that relationality is not just an add-on to empowerment but is a core component that underpins and enhances the other dimensions of empowerment.

Moreover, the study demonstrated that relational empowerment also functions as a mechanism for resisting oppression and asserting agency within broader sociopolitical contexts. The participants' narratives illustrated how relationships provided the social capital and emotional support necessary for challenging stereotypes and reclaiming their empowerment from dominant cultural narratives. This further supports Christens' assertion that relational dynamics are central to the collective exercise of power and social action.

Overall, the study confirms that relationality is a critical dimension of psychological empowerment, validating Christens' theoretical expansion. By incorporating relationality into the empowerment framework, the study provides a more holistic understanding of how empowerment operates in the lives of marginalized individuals, particularly Black women, and how it is sustained and nurtured through relational networks.

Implications and Considerations for Methodological Approaches to Studying Empowerment

One of the interventions to emerge from this study is the demonstration of the complexity of psychological empowerment. Unlike other qualitative methods that aim for thematic saturation

or convergence, IPA embraces the complexities and divergences in participants' narratives. Psychological empowerment is a multifaceted construct influenced by personal, social, and cultural factors that vary widely across contexts. IPA's ability to highlight these variations—rather than suppress them—demonstrates the value of this approach in understanding empowerment as a dynamic and evolving process. This is crucial for developing interventions and theories sensitive to the diverse ways individuals experience and enact empowerment.

Quantitative methods often rely on predefined categories and scales, limiting the depth of insight into psychological empowerment. While these methods are valuable for measuring broad trends and outcomes, they may inadvertently suppress the subtleties and nuances that define individual empowerment experiences.

The findings from this study underscore the importance of using methodologies attuned to the intricacies of psychological empowerment. As future research continues to explore this construct, researchers must employ qualitative approaches that do not merely quantify experiences but seek to understand them in their full complexity. This approach can lead to more effective and contextually relevant interventions, policies, and practices better aligned with the real-world experiences of those they aim to empower.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings from this study open several pathways for future research that could further advance the understanding of psychological empowerment, particularly among Black women. Given the novel insights uncovered in this research, future studies should consider the following.

While this study's qualitative design provided rich, in-depth data, it was limited by a small and homogenous sample. Future research should expand the sample size to include a more diverse group of participants across various demographics, such as age, socioeconomic status,

geographic location, and cultural background. This approach would help to capture a broader range of experiences and enhance the generalizability of the findings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of psychological empowerment among different groups of Black women.

Building on the study's focus on Black women, future research should further explore the intersectionality of empowerment by examining how multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) shape the empowerment process. This would provide a more comprehensive view of how different social identities interact and influence empowerment, helping to develop more inclusive and equitable models of empowerment.

One of this study's unexpected findings was identifying nature and spirituality as critical sources of empowerment. Future research should explore these dimensions by examining how different groups, beyond Black women, experience empowerment through connections with nature and spiritual practices. Additionally, researchers could investigate how environmental and spiritual factors interact with other dimensions of empowerment across various cultural, social, and geographic contexts, thereby expanding the current theoretical models of empowerment.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how psychological empowerment evolves over time, building on the process-oriented view confirmed by this study. This approach helps capture the dynamic, nonlinear nature of empowerment and how it is influenced by changes in personal, social, and environmental contexts. Additionally, mixed-methods studies that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches could offer more nuanced insights by integrating statistical analyses with the rich, descriptive data that qualitative methods provide.

While this study endorses Christens' (2012) proposition of relationality as a critical dimension of empowerment, future research should further examine the various facets of relational empowerment. For example, studies could investigate how different relationships (e.g., familial, community-based, mentorship, etc.) contribute to or inhibit empowerment and how intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, and class, influence these relationships.

Finally, this study's use of personal relationships to recruit participants presents unique ethical considerations and methodological challenges. Future research could investigate the implications of this approach in greater depth, examining its impact on data quality, researcher bias, and participant-researcher dynamics. Additionally, researchers should develop best practices for maintaining ethical standards and mitigating potential biases when conducting research within close relational contexts.

Recommendations for Practice

This study's findings offer several important implications for practice, particularly in the fields of mental health, community development, education, and organizational leadership. By highlighting the unique ways Black women experience psychological empowerment, this research provides valuable insights that practitioners can use to develop more effective and inclusive strategies for fostering empowerment. The following are recommendations for practice-based interventions.

The study revealed that connections to nature and spirituality are significant sources of empowerment for the participants. Mental health and community practitioners should integrate nature-based activities, such as outdoor retreats, gardening, or mindfulness exercises in natural settings, for example, into their empowerment programs. Similarly, incorporating spiritual

practices, such as meditation, faith-based discussions, or community prayer circles, could help individuals draw strength from their spiritual beliefs, especially during times of adversity.

The findings also underscore the importance of culturally relevant approaches to empowerment that acknowledge and honor the unique experiences of Black women. Practitioners should ensure that empowerment programs and interventions are tailored to reflect the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which participants live.

Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of relational dynamics in fostering empowerment. Practitioners should prioritize building supportive, affirming relationships in therapeutic, educational, and community settings. Examples include creating spaces for peer support groups, mentorship programs, and community networks that encourage mutual care, validation, and the sharing of personal narratives. By fostering relational connections, practitioners can help individuals develop a stronger sense of belonging, support, and empowerment.

The data indicate that reflection, introspection, and critical self-evaluation are central features of empowerment. Practitioners should encourage reflective practices, such as journaling, guided self-reflection exercises, or narrative therapy, to help individuals explore and understand their experiences of empowerment. These practices can facilitate personal growth, foster self-awareness, and help individuals reconnect with their innate strengths and capacities.

Recognizing that empowerment is experienced differently depending on intersecting identities; practitioners should adopt intersectional approaches that consider how race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other factors shape empowerment experiences. Practitioners should be trained to understand these intersections and develop interventions that address the unique

challenges individuals with multiple marginalized identities face. This might include specialized training, resources, and support tailored to the specific needs of different demographic groups.

As empowerment is a fluid, evolving phenomenon, practitioners should design interventions that recognize it as an ongoing *process* rather than a fixed outcome. This could involve creating flexible and adaptable programs that allow participants to set personal goals and benchmarks for empowerment while providing continuous support and opportunities for growth. Programs should focus on building long-term resilience and adaptability rather than just achieving specific short-term outcomes.

This study emphasizes the importance of agency and participant involvement in the empowerment process. Practitioners should ensure that individuals are actively involved in designing and implementing empowerment programs. This might include participatory decision-making processes, co-designing workshops or interventions with participants, and incorporating feedback mechanisms to adapt programs to participants' needs and desires. By fostering a sense of ownership and agency, practitioners can create more empowering and effective programs.

Given that empowerment often involves navigating and overcoming adversity, practitioners should employ trauma-informed approaches in their work. This involves recognizing the impact of trauma on individuals' empowerment experiences and providing support that is sensitive to its effects. Practitioners should also create safe, supportive environments that foster healing and growth and use techniques that promote trust, safety, and resilience.

By incorporating these implications into practice, professionals in various fields, particularly those working with Black women, can enhance their approaches to fostering

psychological empowerment and ensure that their strategies are inclusive, culturally relevant, and responsive.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides significant insights into the psychological empowerment of Black women, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The use of qualitative methods, notably Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), inherently limits the generalizability of the findings due to the small, purposively sampled participant group. This research relied on a sample size that, while suitable for in-depth qualitative inquiry, does not allow for broad generalizations across different populations or contexts. Stephens (1982) posits that generalizability is bifurcated into horizontal and vertical categories. Horizontal generalizability refers to data that can be applied across settings. Alternatively, vertical generalizability refers to data that informs the development of interpretative theory by enhancing understanding of a phenomenon through novel or confirmatory insights (Stephens, 1982). As such, the findings from this study have vertical generalizability because they confirm, augment, and enrich the understanding of psychological empowerment. Rather than claiming that the findings are applicable across settings, a claim antithetical to empowerment given its established inherency as a contextually contingent construct, this study offers a set of diverse entry points to theorizing and practically engaging with psychological empowerment. Heeding Johnson's (1997) guidance on how to engage with qualitative findings, readers should engage with these data through a process of interrogation whereby they identify resonances with prior experience or knowledge and assess whether the data stimulates a reevaluation of what has been taken for granted about psychological empowerment.

Additionally, recruiting participants from personal relationships introduced unique ethical considerations and potential biases. While this approach facilitated rich, trust-based data collection, the pre-existing relationship with the researcher may have influenced participants' responses, potentially limiting the range of perspectives captured.

Lastly, the findings are context-specific, reflecting the participants' unique experiences within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. As such, they may not be directly applicable to other groups or settings, particularly given the study's focus on the distinct experiences of Black women in the United States. Moreover, the study's emphasis on non-human relationships, such as nature and spirituality, as sources of empowerment introduces novel dimensions that, while offering new perspectives, have yet to be extensively explored or validated in broader psychological empowerment literature.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored psychological empowerment among Black women, a group whose experiences are often marginalized in academic discourse. Through a qualitative approach grounded in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study has revealed empowerment's multifaceted, dynamic, and contextually sensitive nature. By centering the lived experiences of Black women, it has expanded the theoretical frameworks of empowerment to include not only traditional dimensions such as intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral but also the relational, spiritual, and environmental elements that have emerged as critical sources of strength and resilience. The findings endorse existing empowerment models, like those of Zimmerman (1995) and Peterson (2014), while also supporting Christens' (2012) call for the inclusion of relationality as a fourth dimension. Moreover, this research introduces novel insights into the roles of nature and spirituality, challenging existing paradigms to fully consider these

dimensions. Despite its limitations, this study underscores the importance of contextually relevant, inclusive approaches to researching empowerment and advocates for future research that continues to explore empowerment as a diverse, evolving, and complex process. Through this work, the voices of Black women have been brought to the forefront, enriching the field's understanding of psychological empowerment and offering new pathways for both theory and practice.

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Appendix A

Ethics Committee Approval

From: Susan Cottam (Research Strategy and Services Central) <s.l.cottam@bham.ac.uk>
Date: Friday, September 9, 2022 at 8:46 AM
To: Katharina Karcher (Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music) <k.karcher@bham.ac.uk>
Cc: Michell Chresfield (Former Member of Staff) <m.chresfield@bham.ac.uk>, Angel McKissic (PhD Dep Mod Lang DL 4Yr) <axm1883@student.bham.ac.uk>
Subject: Application for Ethical Review ERN_22-0106

Dear Dr Karcher

Re: "What Does it Mean to Be An Empowered Black Woman? A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Experience of Personal Empowerment"

Application for Ethical Review ERN_22-0106

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project, which was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that this study now has full ethical approval.

I would like to remind you that any substantive changes to the nature of the study as described in the Application for Ethical Review, and/or any adverse events occurring during the study should be promptly brought to the Committee's attention by the Principal Investigator and may necessitate further ethical review.

Please also ensure that the relevant requirements within the University's Code of Practice for Research and the information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages (available at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Links-and-Resources.aspx>) are adhered to and referred to in any future applications for ethical review. It is now a requirement on the revised application form (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-Forms.aspx>) to confirm that this guidance has been consulted and is understood, and that it has been taken into account when completing your application for ethical review.

Please be aware that whilst Health and Safety (H&S) issues may be considered during the ethical review process, you are still required to follow the University's guidance on H&S and to ensure that H&S risk assessments have been carried out as appropriate. For further information about this, please contact your School H&S representative or the University's H&S Unit at healthandsafety@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

Appendix B

Participant Informed Consent to Participate Form



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Informed Consent to Participate

Project Title: What Does It Mean to be An Empowered Black Woman? A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Experience of Personal Empowerment.

Purpose of Project: To better understand what empowerment means to Black women and how they experience empowerment in their daily lives. In addition, another goal of this project is to learn about the intrapsychic, social, cultural, political, economic, and carceral factors implicated in Black women's experiences of empowerment. It is expected that the findings from this research will function to inform policy and practices across sectors (public health, mental health, social services, education, academia, employment, governmental legislation). It is also expected that the insights learned through the research will contribute to the preeminent sociological and psychological theories of personal empowerment.

Project Supervisors: Dr. Katharina Karcher - [REDACTED]

Dr. Michell Chresfield - [REDACTED]

Post-Graduate Researcher: Angel McKissic, MA - [REDACTED]

Fair Processing Statement

This information is being collected as part of a research project concerned with understanding Black women's experiences of empowerment within and without the psychotherapeutic encounter by the Department of Modern Languages in the University of Birmingham. The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorized personnel involved in the project. The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information, you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. No identifiable personal data will be published.

Ethical Review

This study has undergone review by the University of Birmingham's Humanities & Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

Procedure: This project will use Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodological approach. The focus of IPA is to use experiential accounts from individuals as the main source of “data” to be analyzed and interpreted. In essence, in IPA the researcher is trying to make sense of the way the participant makes sense of their experience. The research process will involve the following steps:

1. *Interview* – After providing signed consent, the participant will be invited to a semi-structured interview, which involves the researcher asking a few predetermined questions while leaving most of the room for the participant to answer and lead the interview. The interview will take place in one session and ***is estimated to take between one to two hours.***
2. *Initial Data Analysis* – Once all interviews have concluded, the researcher will begin the data analysis. IPA involves multiple phases of analysis, beginning with identifying important phrases or words, developing themes, and making interpretations about what meaning participants ascribe to experiences they have shared.
3. *Participant Analysis* – One-month, post-interview, participants will be sent a copy of their interview transcript. The participant will be given instructions to review the transcripts and make any notes on areas that they determine to be significant for the analysis. They will have one month to complete this process. At two months post-interview (and one month after they have received the transcripts) the researcher will follow-up with the participant to schedule the data analysis meeting. At this point, participants will be given a final opportunity to withdraw from the project. If they consent to proceed, the researcher will schedule the meeting, which will take place three months post-interview. If a participant elects not to proceed, the researcher will compensate the participant and destroy any related data (interview recording and transcript)
4. *Analysis Meeting* – At the analysis meeting, the researcher and participants will review their initial notes, comparing any similarities and differences in findings. At this point, participants may choose to add information to their account, provide feedback on the quality of the researcher’s analysis, and/or progress the analysis further alongside the researcher. Feedback may include providing additional information/insight, a critique of the researchers’ analysis, and/or contribute to the interpretive analysis. The duration of the debrief meeting will be contingent on the participant’s involvement and ***is estimated to take between one to three hours.***
5. *Final Analysis* – The researcher will conduct a final analysis, inclusive of the original analysis as well as any additional feedback/data that was given at the debrief meeting. As draft of the final analysis will be shared with the participants.

Anonymity: Participants may elect to keep their identity anonymous or remain public. If participants elect to be anonymous, their identity will be anonymized in any report on the results of this research. This will be done by changing the name and disguising any details of the interview which may reveal the participant’s identity, or the identity of any persons discussed during the interview. If participants elect to maintain their identity, their names will be published in the final write up of the interview. Participants may also elect to be publicly named but use pseudonyms for persons discussed during the interview.

Risk and Benefits: There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Minimal risks may be involved in the discussion of life experiences related to the topic of empowerment. The researcher will provide a list of free mental health resources to participants prior to the interview to be available as a form of support throughout the research process. The insights gained through participating in this study may be useful to participants' understanding of their experiences. Benefits also include the contribution of Black women's experiences to sociological and psychological theories of empowerment. Lastly, the design of this study involves an additional layer of participant involvement via the debrief meeting. The purpose of this design is to give participants more power over how their experience is analyzed and presented. The use of this approach will add precedent for participant involvement in future qualitative research.

Compensation: All participants will be compensated \$100.00 for their participation. Participants will be compensated beginning at the first interview. **You may choose to be compensated in cash or via Visa gift card.** Participants who start the interview but chose not to continue will still be compensated the full amount. Participants may choose to withdraw from the research process at any time as outlined below. Participants who withdraw at any time after the first interview has started will still receive the full compensation amount.

Withdrawal: You may choose to withdraw your consent to participant in this research at any time during the research process as outlined in the table below. You are not required to provide a reason for withdrawing. You may withdraw from the project by indicating so either verbally (e.g., in-person, phone, video conference) or in written form (e.g., email, text, etc.).

Interview	Participants may withdrawal from the interview at any time by informing the researcher of their desire to do so.
One-month post-interview	Participants will receive a copy of their transcript to review and note. Participants may withdraw from the project at this time.
Two months post-interview	This is the cut-off date for withdrawing consent. At two months post-interview (and one month after participants have received the transcripts) the researcher will follow-up with the participant to schedule the data analysis meeting. At this point, participants will be given a final opportunity to withdraw from the project. If they consent to proceed, the researcher will schedule the meeting, which will take place three months post-interview. If a participant elects not to proceed, the researcher will compensate the participant and destroy any related data (interview recording and transcript)

Data Sharing and Storage: Interview audio will be stored on the University of Birmingham Research Data Store, a secure online data storage service. Paper copies of the consent forms, printed transcripts, and written analysis notes will be scanned and stored as digital files in the Research Data Store. Paper copies will be kept securely in the researcher's home office in a locked filing cabinet. At the end of the project life cycle, they will be shredded. The researcher may discuss some information from the interview with the project supervisors. However, only the researcher will have access to research files. The data in the University of Birmingham Research Data Store will be deleted after ten years.

Results of the Study: The data you provide will be used in the complete of a doctoral thesis which is required as part of the PhD. The final thesis will be published online in an open access database.

Questions: Participants may ask questions of the researcher throughout the research process. Questions about timeline, data analysis, publication, communication with supervisors, etc. are welcome. If you have any questions or concerns about the conduct of this research, you may contact the research supervisors: Dr. Katharina Karcher - [REDACTED] or Dr. Michell Chresfield - [REDACTED].

Statement of Understanding/Consent

1. Do you give the researcher permission to audiotape your interview (in-person interview) or videotape your interview (online interview)? Please initial next to your choice below.

Yes, I agree to be digitally recorded (audio) ____ (initials)

No, do not audiotape my interview ____ (initials)

2. I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. If I withdraw, the researcher will ask me how I want my data to be handled. I may choose to have it destroyed or kept as part of the data set and used in the final analysis.
4. I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.
5. Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

Name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Dat

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Topic Guide

Project Title: What Does it Mean to Be an Empowered Black Woman? A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Experience of Personal Empowerment

Researcher: Angel McKissic, MA

1. Can you tell me why you decided to participate in the project?
2. What does it mean to you to be empowered?
3. When do you feel empowered?
4. When do you feel disempowered?
5. Does your experience of empowerment change with certain people or situations?
6. How has your experience of empowerment changed over your life?
7. Can you discuss what you believe have been the most significant impacts on your experience of empowerment?

Appendix D

Group Experiential Themes with Participant PET's

AUTHENTICITY, CARE, AND EXTERNAL AFFIRMATION IN RELATIONSHIPS (GET)

"I feel powerful in my ability to connect": Relational Care as a Driver of Empowerment (Subtheme)

Relationships as sites of care and support towards personal growth (Barbara)

"I believe that we have to care for each other in order to care for others."

"I'm seen. I'm heard. I'm cared for in a way that focuses on my future. The things I want to do. The things I need to do. The things I don't want to do."

The primacy of interpersonal relationships (Barbara)

"Relationships are very key to me. I thrive off of them. I really, really do."

The empowering effects of cultivating care with others (Tashmica)

"There are so many different ways that for me when I think about wielding power that's very gentle and very much about cultivation and care."

"I also think I feel the most powerful when I am caring for other people..."

"When I talk about caring for people, I specifically think about how I create our home, make it comfortable. Or when I literally make something for someone with my kitchen witchery. That to me feels powerful."

Empowerment through relational support, care, and affirmation (Combahee)

"Empowerment is also through the love that I get from other people."

Collaboration and connection with others (Tashmica)

"I feel powerful in my ability to connect with other people."

"It makes me think of the power of being yourself": accessing empowerment through authenticity (Subtheme)

Needing a place to be her authentic self (Janet)

"Acceptance is the wrong word. I think I can be myself within my family in ways that are not always comfortable, and I will always be loved. Accepted, not so sure."

"I think it looks like...being able to be my true self, but it also looks like me being able to, I guess, be my true self in ways that maybe are not always comfortable for them and I still know that they accept me."

"...it's the acceptance but it's also the love too, you know, my knowledge that that they love me and they actually welcome my true self too."

"...that was like where I was probably the least empowered in the space where I felt the least like I could be myself and it would be ok."

Empowerment through relational support, care, and affirmation (Combahee)

"I feel empowered around people that make me feel safe to be myself."

Internalizing a familial culture of emotional concealment (Minniej)

"I tell my family like, y'all gotta stop calling me emotional because as a kid if I wanted to cry, I knew that y'all would think of me as weak. So instead, I would just cry in my room."

"...growing up I did not talk about issues...I was so used to just hoarding all my feelings..."

"I wasn't comfortable expressing my emotions fully. I have been doing it for eight years. So then to come back, and I'm just like, whoa, no wonder why little Minniej didn't feel comfortable, because y'all just like pit bulls sometimes."

Unlearning historical practices of silence and suppression (Minniej)

"I feel like with me unlearning things...I feel like how powerful and how strong somebody can be if they are open to showing their true authentic self in that moment. Like right there. If they feel happy, they show it. If they feel sad, they're also going to show it..."

The strength of being true to oneself (Minniej)

"I feel like that is where the most confident that I am, most empowered is just being myself..."

"...It makes me think of the power of being yourself."

The power of expressing authenticity in relationships (Minniej)

"I would say authenticity, trust, the act of being vulnerable, of like, my friends empower me to be the best person that I am."

"It's no expectation. I can show up as myself and they [my friends] show up as themselves and that's okay."

"...my friends take me for who I am."

"She [therapist] let me just exist. There was no expectation."

"Affirmation can be a tool of power": The role of external affirmation in empowerment (Subtheme)

Relationships as a source of support and encouragement (Janet)

"...when I was at the beginning of my divorce journey was when you told me that I needed to find something to be empowered about..That was said to me at a time where I was feeling very disempowered and so for somebody that I admire that cares about me, that I care about, to be like, hey find a way to reclaim your power, was very important."

- 2 -

Empowerment through relational support, care, and affirmation (Combahee)

"Other people motivate me...to be reminded that in my moments when I'm not empowered, there's other sources of energy that can get me back to that place to say that I have this strength within me..."

"...therapy helped me not only attain what I needed but it brought forth a new relationship to do that with, which I might not have been able to do on my own until I had a consistent person or voice motivating me and reminding me that it starts within."

"An affirmation can be a tool of power because that's something that can make you feel closer to our self-power."

Loved ones acknowledging her dedication and hard work (Barbara)

"I get it now. I understand why you were the way you were." Just that recognition...for your children to tell you that..oh, my goodness. That's all you want."

"I remember when my mother was dying from a terminal illness and her last words to me were, "I am so proud of you.""

"You have been such a good daughter. You have been such a good daughter. Continue to be a good daughter and take care of your stepmom. You took good care of me." So those are the things that you want to hear. And that was very empowering."

"there's nothing more empowering than your children telling you, mommy you did a good job, mama I'm so proud of you."

Drawing on the affirming support from family to combat negative self-talk (Barbara)

"For someone such as myself who dealt with a lot of low self-esteem issues... I attribute how I've navigated that to bring me to the sense of empowerment with such loving family support."

"having someone see in you what you don't see in yourself."

"...my dad, to my mother, to my grandmother, really pouring in me my gifts, my talents, my capacity to make people laugh."

"They [family] just supported me. Always told me how beautiful I was when I felt that I wasn't beautiful or compare myself to how someone else look."

"It's kind of hard to describe it into words from a physical aspect of low self-esteem and constantly being fed positive affirmations."

Her confidence is bolstered by having the support and affirmation of others (Tashmica)

"Here I am, number one, being respected and validated and affirmed in this space with people who don't even fucking know me, have no reason to gas me up."

"...I was at a conference for fund development...And while I was there everyone was gassing me up. I was responding to questions and people were like, wow you're really smart, you're really good at this blah, blah. And I was like, wait, I'm not getting paid what I deserve?"

"...that was another moment where it was like, not only were these skills emerging, and I was having success, but I also had someone who valued them."

Reflection, Introspection, and affirmation in reclaiming empowerment (Minniej)

"you need those other people to be that reflection to remind you so then I can be an empowered woman..."

"I have so much turmoil and tribulations that those were blinding me from my actual confidence. So, in that moment, I seek therapy for...my cup to be filled by someone else, or someone else putting up that mirror like, Minniej, you are empowered..."

SELF-AFFIRMATION, ADVOCACY, AND ACTION (GET)

Identifying and self-affirming their capacities (Subtheme)

Self-affirming her competence and capabilities (Janet)

"...like I'm capable. Like, I have skills, I know what I'm doing, is empowering."

Recognizing her clinical skills as a strength (Janet)

"I have the ability to positively affect somebody else's life, and that can be very, very empowering."

"...you did this, you know you helped this person, you've worked with this issue, you know you can also do this next thing as well. So I think being empowered certainly."

"This feels important too like empowerment also has to do with feeling like what you do matters or has an effect on others."

Observing her effectiveness as a clinician through therapeutic impact and witnessing growth (Janet)

"When they say...something really helped them or they were able to think about things differently because of our work together, I definitely feel like, oh wow, I really can help people."

"...being able to see my agency and efficacy play out is empowering."

"Empowerment for me is related to these feelings of efficacy and agency..."

Using affirmative self-talk to overcome self-doubt and external obstacles (Barbara)

"That empowerment definition really encapsulates that you can do it in spite of self-doubt."

Reclaiming responsibility for her self-worth from external perceptions (Minnie)

"...as a Black woman...I don't know if it's from working so hard to be this person...I'm like, girl, you a bad bitch. Like there's no question about it. Even when I think about when I was a kid and thinking of being bullied and shit like that, I still knew I was great though..."

Efficacy and strength as pillars of empowerment (Minnie)

"when I think of empowerment, I think of... What allows me or just anyone to be confident...that self-esteem of like, what do I do for myself to make myself feel...I hate to use the word strong, but strong, to feel capable of doing anything."

Empowerment as advocacy and action (Subtheme)

Exercising discernment and asserting her value (Tashmica)

"...I was like, wait a minute, this is bullshit. I am way too skilled for this. Way too powerful. Look at all this stuff that I manifested just because I was willing to try it...And I'm like, I don't think I should do this anymore."

Adeptness in articulating difficult things (Tashmica)

"...my skillful communication and my ability to say hard things when I don't even realize I am saying a hard thing."

"...So, there's just this natural gift of being able to, I don't know, do shit and say things to people and they're able to hear it in a different way."

"And to be willing to say things that are hard. And then to be willing to say things in service of others"

Gaining confidence towards self-advocacy (Barbara)

"I feel very empowered that I'm not there. Building up that courage. Being real brave but not have any regrets."

"I am in that space now to be able to vocalize, verbalize, and have conversation about that balance, as far as salary, as far as work, as far as outputs, achieving the goals, the objectives, and the mission of others, but still being paid less."

Empowerment through self-discovery, discernment, and assertiveness (Janet)

"I would say definitely this is probably the first time in my life over the whole course of my dating years that I feel like I can be like I ain't putting up with this or I don't want to deal with this...I feel like I am a lot more discerning...less patient with stuff. Less patient with other people who are not able to meet my needs romantically than I have been historically."

"...it's empowering to know what you want and what you deserve because then you can do something about it..."

Achieving self-determination through concrete achievements (Dominique)

"But I still see myself as a person who decides what I want to do and do it. Every step of the way."

"I feel like when I have wanted something, I just, I went for it, and I got it."

"You wanted this, you did that. You plan your life out. Every single thing you want to do, you did it. No doors have ever been closed."

Choosing who she enters into professional and intimate relationships with as an expression of personal power (Combahee)

"I think even the act of choosing your therapist...it's connected to power... even within that it's an exercise in power. I get to choose who gives me this service."

Seeking concrete strategies/tools (Combahee)

"Tell me how to do the work or give me some tools, like something."

"she did help me with the reminders or the affirmations but sometimes life gets real to a point where it's like, okay, thank you for affirming that and I need some practical steps. I need you to help me strategize my next steps."

The drive to seek systematic solutions (Dominique)

"Yeah, like the capacity to solve it or to find a solution or to find the resources or to find a solution or resolution."

"...it's a very, very difficult thing for me when I can't figure out how to solve something."

Taking control of her life (Janet)

"Can I say that I feel empowered in a more general sense around⁵ like my life trajectory? Yes, absolutely..."

"...empowerment is more like I can do something about this...I can I can be in control of my own destiny..."

Not wanting to be a passive participant in her life (Janet)

"...my divorce felt very much like my power is being taken away, like somebody else was in the driver's seat. So to go on ahead and push forward with this thing was empowering. "The part that feels empowering is maybe not so much I'm learning about myself, it's like I've learned

about myself and now I'm doing. It's in the doing. It's in the application of the learning where the empowerment is.

Empowerment through action and application (Janet)

"I would say to be empowered would be maybe to have a plan of like what I'm gonna do or be working toward, whatever it is that I'm going to do to feel like I'm doing something about it"

Finding sites of power during challenging life events (Janet)

"I feel like part of my disempowerment in the past was wrapped up in my unwillingness to be fully responsible for myself or fully accountable."

"I had all the justification in the world to not attend [grad school]. So for me, to make the decision to attend in the face of all that was going on, all the transition, was empowering."

Shame and expectations as challenges to self-advocacy (Subtheme)

The complex interplay between shame, sexuality, gender, and empowerment (Janet)

"I think, and this is like I feel a little bit of shame about this, but I feel like to speak out about issues related to gender...I see how those women...it's not received well they're not treated well at all."

Reclaiming her identity from shaming narratives (Tashmica)

"...if someone said anything or did anything that made me feel ashamed of the fact that I was sexually abused by my father, I would almost blurt it out... It was really important to me that anytime I felt a sense of both silencing and shame..."

The struggle to identify and articulate feelings (Dominique)

"It's like I have a feeling, but I'm slow to be able to put a name on it and say, you don't like being handled like that. You did not assert yourself. Or you did not tell the truth about how you feel about this."

The internal conflict: negotiating fear and guilt (Barbara)

"...at the same time, I'm struggling and feeling disempowered because I need to be saying more. And not feeling guilty or that fear of not saying anything at all."

"I remember the times when I regretted that and how low that made me feel. That I should have said something, that I should have stood in my power. That I should have been brave. I shouldn't have been scared. I should not have let fear overtake me. I've gotten mad at myself." "having those conversations with those same family members who were disempowered based off of what they went through. You don't say anything. You keep your head down. You do what you need to do in order to live another day. That's the way they live their lives. Because they knew if they said the thing, that punishment, of the fear of losing a job or whatever. Listening to family members tell me that. And putting myself in their position as the person that I am now..It's almost like they got you either way. If you say something you're a problem. If don't say anything..."

Black women are negatively impacted by a lack of education and information (Barbara)

"We need to be more educated on it [mental health care], because I didn't understand what all of the credentials, MSW..."

"I didn't like that I wasn't educated or walked through the steps for the process. I think that's another disservice to us as black people as black women."

Disempowering to not be informed of or included in how she is labeled by others (Combahee)

"What does it mean for me to be in a position where I don't even know my diagnosis. And what if have I had a diagnosis that's unattractive to these things that also have power over me?"

"I don't even know what that [medical diagnosis] is and that creates another power imbalance. How are you defining me for other people to record keep?"

Inability to access resources needed to realize an aspiration (Combahee)

"I feel powerless when I don't have the resources to enact on things I want to do."

Felt coerced because her choice was being taken away (Barbara)

"I was totally against. When I voiced my concern that I didn't want to do the medicated prescriptions and the therapy, I was told... you're not going to be able to be off work if you don't go on these pills. I thought it was the coercion. I felt coerced, like I didn't have any other choice."

Trying to influence the other's perception is futile (Dominique)

"Because the person is gonna continue to see things the way they see them. And I'm not gonna get what I need out of it, and I will have spoken. And maybe that satisfies a need, but the outcome is not gonna change."

Feels disempowered when her voice/presence isn't valued or acknowledged (Combahee)

"I think in spaces where my voice isn't being valued doesn't make me feel...makes me feel...disempowered...?"

[Interviewer: Where are the places where you feel disempowered?] *"Where I feel my presence isn't acknowledged"*

THE IMPACT OF REPRESENTATION AND STEREOTYPES (GET)

The role of representation in empowerment (Subtheme)

The significance of representations of Black women in popular media/culture (Barbara)

"How can I aspire or be empowered for someone who looks like ~~me~~ when I don't see it out there?"

"...I saw those images on television...if I saw a dark skinned sista look like me with this great big afro and I see her on television! Or I see her on Soul Train... Or I saw her on sitcoms back in the 70s. It was someone that looked like me, that I could identify with. Someone that looked like me, whether it's in the magazine, whether it was on television, whether it was at church or in the community that really just reinforced what my folks always...was pouring into me."

Role models enable imagining of possibilities (Barbara)

"I wouldn't wear a pink lipstick because I thought that I was too dark to wear such a bright color lipstick... I was never comfortable wearing those colors until either I saw it on someone else that had the same skin complexion as me like, wow, matter of fact, she's darker than me and it looks absolutely fantastic on her. Let me see if I can try that. If she did it and it looks beautiful on her then I'm going to do it and I'm hoping to get the same beautiful results as well."

"this was...with another black woman who is a director that I shared the same values with...we were actually able to discuss and talk...In having that conversation and that dialogue...when I learned that about her and she learned that about me, it was like, yes, I got another...because it's not many of us [Black women] in the workplace. I'm looking at this black woman I could work with or I can work for her. I see myself in the role that we're discussing...and she's a black woman in this particular avenue of leadership."

"Achieving things that you thought were out of reach that you connect with someone else, and you see that they've done it with all of the challenges and roadblocks and disappointments...harms. Yeah, I think that's what empowerment means to me."

"...someone embodying that example. Not just what I see. Something to actually be or even given the opportunity to create or be created in order to set the tone that this is possible."

Finding connection, recognition, and validation through representation (**Tashmica**)

"The only thing that I ever saw that reflected my experience was The Color Purple, Lady Sings the Blues, the Women of Brewster's Place, again, all of the media that's being created by Black women or Black queer women, that were very honest and frank about these kinds of stories."

The significance of role models of self-determination (**Dominique**)

"My model for many aspects of womanhood is my godmother. And she's the type of person that if she went to the symphony with her eight kids, that she couldn't afford to go to, she was gonna get in that symphony with them kids. If she's got something that she wants to take back to the store, I don't give a goddamn what their policy is, she's taking that shit back to the store... I just love it. I love it and I emulated I want to be that way."

"I knew a woman that was like my best friend's mother growing up. The way she talked about herself, her body, her sexuality, which my friend hated and was always embarrassed. But I was so into that. I just thought, wow. She just chose who she wanted to choose."

Seeing possibilities through the embodiments of others (**Janet**) - 8 -

"Modeling, to be able to see Black women be happy, Black women being loved. I think that's an important one."

"It comes up pretty regularly about what it means to be a Black woman psychologist and I feel like she [supervisor] is modelling that for me in many ways."

"...I think that you had a role in my empowerment. We're friends and I admire you a lot. I get to see what it is what it looks like to be empowered at school, and at work, and as a mom..."

The inherited façade of unyielding resilience in Black womanhood (Minniej)

"I'm like, wow, I've been a strong Black woman since I was a kid...something that maybe I didn't recognize as a kid, like true vulnerability. It just wasn't talked about..."

"...I don't really remember seeing my mom sad... I've seen her upset, but just that vulnerability, I didn't see that. When I think about those strong women, I never saw that. So, I feel subconsciously I took that on of like, you don't do that."

Unlearning historical practices of silence and suppression (Minniej)

"I was so used to just hoarding all my feelings that now it's like...like that RJ training, I was like, oh wow, this is how you actually have uncomfortable conversations with people? Oh, wow, that structure makes sense, oh, okay. Truly unlearning these things."

"I [now] feel vulnerable enough to share my emotions with [my family]. So, I feel like for my elders and just the Black woman around me, I modeled what that was to make them feel comfortable... everybody said...Minniej, you create a space where I feel okay to be myself. Whether that is me upset, me sad, you know, all these things. And I feel like I do that because I did not have that."

Changing the tides of generational patterns (Barbara)

"...I'm able to share with a couple of family members how it's [therapy] helped me... I share how it's helped me or I'll share a tool."

"I believe that in every generation that is birthed there's a shift, there's a change in how our children handle things that's going to empower them to be able to go wherever they need to go and to achieve the things that they need to achieve in order to be fulfilled based off of their desires, based off of their wants, based off of their needs."

Beyond surface representation: Class, gender, and race and the nuanced search for authentic identity (Combahee)

"if I only understood power through representation...if I'm looking at all these other Black women figures...our values might not be aligned at all...I'm only seeing power through representation, like...Kamala Harris...If I'm viewing it as that, then...I'm shaping how I understand myself through that vision. It's an alien existence...we're both Black women, but that's an entire alienation of who I am or who I understand myself to be."

"I worked under a Black woman when I was working corporate. I didn't feel empowered by her at all. Because I think for me what came up was, one, our social class difference...she's oriented in the world drastically different from me... Even beyond the age difference. She was a lighter skinned Black woman...There's always these reminders that her access to status was wider than mine..."

Defying stereotypes: empowerment through resistance (Subtheme)

Resisting racial stereotypes through critical analysis and truth telling (Barbara)

"I did that despite - as a young mother, as a single mother. Because the expectation and the stereotype of black women who are unwed young mothers. I defied those stereotypes."

"It reinforced the stereotype about black women. And then that made me think, am I playing into this stereotype? Let me rephrase that. Am I playing into the intentional setup of a stereotype with how I feel about the situation."

"I was frustrated with the whole process, now I'm trying to do this, I'm trying to learn how to do this, and I'm not getting the help and the resources that I need. I'm like, so is it my insurance, is it because I'm black, is it because I'm a woman, is it because I'm in the city of Detroit, all of these things."

Dancing between authenticity and Black women stereotypes (Combahee)

"as a Black woman, there's so much richness in both understanding who I am, but also understanding the forces that try to define who I am. So, it's like this dance between being my authentic self or being all these numerous tropes of what a Black woman should be or could be."

Overcoming the inherited legacy of racist and sexist social expectations (Dominique)

"I mean, there's a whole legacy that women, all women have, and all Black people have. About being quiet, being silent, tolerating pain, not making your needs known. Not requiring people to treat you the way that you want to be treated. We inherit all of that...I think that I've done a good job of conquering it."

Early cultural and generational influences on self-expression and agency (Dominique)

"There's an expectation in my age group. And it's all of it, it's not just my age, it's also all things that we inherit, about how we have to behave in society as women."

"And then on top of that, you have a whole lifetime that starts with obedience and submission."

"I got trained from very early on to be...there's a certain part of my molding that is don't ask no questions. You know, my nature is very, very much the opposite of that."

Feels disempowered when her expertise is undermined because she's a Black woman (Tashmica)

"I think as a Black woman leader people don't trust my expertise, period."

Lack of protection and safety for Black women (Tashmica)

"...It is really sad how much I felt exposed and unprotected."

"The fact that not only was I unprotected in so many ways, but also¹⁰ tossed to the wolves. And being like, yeah, she can handle it like. No she will not. She will not be handling it. No, you guys are, you're on your own."

The perceived incompatibility of being powerful and needing protection (Tashmica)

"People are less protective of you if they think you're powerful."

"...people are like, why would I need to be careful with you? You're very powerful."

Black womanhood, resilience, and resistance (Minnie)

"I was raised not only you are Black, you can do whatever you want, that's just how you look on the outside, and the resiliency because I would not want to be anything but Black. Truly."
"one of the other places I feel most empowered is just being a Black woman... Being Christian, being Black, and being a woman..."
"...that's one thing that nobody can question me about anything, being Black and being a woman..."

Confronting systemic inequities (Combahee)

"Being able to fuck up something so terrible without consequence? That really shook me. So, moments that reveal how imbalanced systems are and what that means for me as a person that lives in a system that wasn't made for me. That definitely makes me feel powerless."

"...the realization that I live in a very fucked up power dynamic of a world. So, if I can't find this shit [power] for myself, no one's bout to just openly give this to me."

Race/gender positionality shape understanding of power (Combahee)

"there were moments in time where Black women couldn't even fathom having power over anything. So, we're forced to go to the power-with or power-within or whatever. Because that's all we were allotted in a particular world. So, I feel like my existence as a Black woman is intrinsic to how I analyze power."

"who I am is tied to how I'm able to navigate the social and political landscape of our reality."

"I feel like my embodiment as a Black woman is really vital to how I...grasp power..."

Black woman's positionality enables subversive creativity, innovation, alternatives (Combahee)

"...it's so interesting having the identity of Black womaness...we're always the collective that's like, oh this doesn't exist? Let's make it exist. Oh, this isn't for us? Let's make the space that is for us. So, there's so much beauty in that."

"I love being a Black woman. I feel like being a Black woman just gives you a particular magic to be an inventor. Like constantly inventing something new, like something alternative, something that isn't bound by one thing. So, I feel like my embodiment as a Black woman is really vital to how I both grasp power, but also to how I accept being this vessel for innovation."

"I think when you're in the periphery and you become the unseen it generates new ways of thinking. And it requires new ways of thinking and new ways of being."

"I feel the destiny of Black women is to take hold of our power as creators. So, I think it's an honor."

"I think when you're in the periphery and you become the unseen¹¹ it generates new ways of thinking. And it requires new ways of thinking and new ways of being."

RECOGNIZING GROWTH AND CONNECTING TO INNATE POWER (GET)

Retrospection and appreciating growth as mechanisms of empowerment (Subtheme)

Reflection, Introspection, and affirmation in reclaiming empowerment (Minnie)

"...for me to feel empowered, I have to do some self-reflection."

Learning from experience (Barbara)

"Coming out on the other side, whether it was successful or a failure because failures teach you lessons, valuable lessons."

"Whether it was a good decision or a bad decision and what I learned from that and tried not to repeat the same mistake or make the wrong decision."

Self-learning and expanding perspectives (Janet)

"I'm able to self-reflect a lot better."

"...recognizing what my patterns are..."

Retrospective reflection and application of learning (Janet)

"...for me, in a lot of ways, it has been in retrospect. It's like being able to look at past in a new way and apply that to current life."

"...looking back and thinking, wow that's where I was and this is where I am now."

"...I can kind of refer back to those things and be like ok you know you did this, you know you helped this person, you've worked with this issue, you know you can also do this next thing as well."

"...it's empowering to be able to look back on the past with new eyes."

"A new perspective on past events contributes to my sense of control over my destiny, leading to empowerment."

Recognizing growth over time (Combahee)

"To not only know who I am now but who I was. That's empowering to me."

"I feel like we're not remembering everything that I've done to become...to be at this point or we're not remembering, with this experience, I was doing this, but now I'm here."

Introspection as a tool for self-awareness, acknowledging inherent sacredness, and identifying capacities (Combahee)

"I'm empowered through knowing who I a..."

"I think my power is tied to how well I know myself. Yeah, I think¹² my power is tied to how well I know myself."

"...empowerment being kind of a introspective quality, kind of almost like, I'm empowered through knowing who I am."

"I think empowerment is both a recognition of the self and knowing all of my capacities and what I can do with those things."

Remembering her capacity for resilience (Combahee)

“memory as a tool to recognize. Memory as a tool to simply recognize. Whether that recognition be my resilience, whether that recognition be that I can always be powerful even in my most scarce or vulnerable moments.”

“When I look at myself when I was younger, I see resilience... as an adult, especially in moments where I'm feeling down on myself or wanna be harsh to myself as I hold the many sides of me, memory is a tool to remember... Recognizing that that's me, but now it's just my present self. I still have those exact same tools and capacities to remake both who I know of myself and what I want to be...”

Unearthing the power within: reclaiming power as an innate source (Subtheme)

Introspective recognition of her innate power (Combahee)

“it's [power] both in me and it's beyond me.”

“Other people motivate me...to be reminded that in my moments when I'm not empowered, there's other sources of energy that can get me back to that place to say that I have this strength within me...”

Rediscovering empowerment from within (Minnie)

“we were all taught to be that way. No matter what you look like, no matter your education, no matter your career, no matter all these variables, you are a strong woman and you come from strong women.”

“...when I think of empowerment, I think of choosing the power within.”

“...when I was...going through an abusive relationship or...when I was assaulted... My empowerment was down because my self-worth...it felt like it was a zero... I had to take a step back and do healing and go into therapy, I realized all of those things were within me...”

“...it's within! It wasn't like I didn't know that I'm a great person, that I'm strong, resilient, it was just...I have fucked up shit blocking it that wasn't allowing me to just be myself.”

“...being around powerful Black women...I was just around strong, resilient women. That was just innate. It was something that was like the women around me are powerful and I come from those women, so that is inside of me.”

METAPHYSICAL AS SOURCES OF EMPOWERMENT (GET)

“I thrive in aspects of nature”: nature as a source of empowerment (Subtheme)

Learning from nature about change and growth (Combahee)

“nature makes me feel really empowered. Nature has also kind of been this reminder of what I can be or what I can do. Especially when we're thinking about growth and decay. And I've really been thinking a lot about how trees, for example, trees are living giants basically informing our ability to grow within any condition. So, to witness that empowers me to be like, dang these trees in my backyard they be all beautiful during the summer and spring or

whatever, but right now within this period of transition, they're dying. But what does it mean to know that they'll be back within the new season? So, I think that motivates...

Reimagining and navigating power in response to societal discrimination and violence
(Combahee)

[Interviewer: Where do you feel most empowered?] – “When I'm around Black people...I've really been recognizing how both myself and the communities I build with are literal walking miracles. We're not supposed to exist. We're not supposed to exist.”

“I have no choice but to reimagine and to reinvent a new way of being and a new way of understanding power so I can self-approve my right to exist, because all these other forces aren't going to do that. All these other forces are trying to kill me.”

...we're operating in spaces that want to kill us and that can be a very harsh truth and reality to navigate.”

The evocative force of nature as a space for reflection and forward-thinking (Barbara)

“Nature...I think that brings a sense of power...the environment. I thrive in aspects of nature, living things, beauty, being outside, that causes me to not just reflect, but to think forward but in the present, being fully present...thinking about...the next phase, the next steps, the next phase of my life where I want to go. Thinking about the things that I haven't done that I have yet still to do and thinking of ways on how I'm going to achieve it.”

Spiritual foundations: harnessing faith for empowerment (Subtheme)

Finding her inherent worthiness through faith (Minnie)

“...in my mind, if you are a true believer in God and you truly believe that you are a child of God, I'm worthy all the time.”

“my faith...I feel like that's what has brought me to a space of like, girl you've been through it, but you can continue, you're worthy to live and experience new things.”

“I remember being in my dorm room and I was looking for scriptures of worthiness.”

Faith as a source of support, resilience, and solace (Minnie)

“in those days of when I was in that relationship or away from family that's what [faith in God] I was able to turn to. I would say that's just carried me through.”

“...I had to lean into my faith because I wasn't comfortable talking to anyone else...”

Connecting to ancestral and spiritual roots as sources of empowerment (Combahee)

“it's hard for me to feel empowered by myself, to be honest. If I don't have the connections to higher beings and I don't have a connection to community, than it can be hard for me to source my power or to feel like I'm capable of feeling empowered.”

Religious faith and therapy are used in Tandem as tools of resilience (Barbara)

“I'm glad I'm doing it [therapy]. Coupled with me just having a strong faith in God that I'm gonna get through. So, you know, we need Jesus and therapy.”

“Really focused on my spirituality and having that carry me to encourage me to continue to move.”

“Really having a powerful spiritual faith-based grounding.”

Appendix E

Barbara Transcript Excerpt with Exploratory Notes and Experiential Statements

TRANSCRIPT	EXPLORATORY NOTES	EXPERIENTIAL STATEMENTS
<p>Angel McKissic 00:00 The first question that I ask is not actually related to the topic. It's actually a question about why you agreed to do it.</p> <p>Barbara I agreed to do this because I think that it is a very important topic and based off of the topic we're not really consulted or even asked. I think it's kind of horrible. Where we are as a society, where we are as black women, related to family, career, achievements, failures, successes, finances, all of it. And a few other things I could name. I would say, spirituality. I would say how we feel about ourselves. Why or why not is there more investment in us, which can be empowering and disempowering, especially when we have to seek our own resources in order to get to the next level or get to an aspect of our lives where we're told this is what you need to do, and you do it, and then you don't get to that next level. So, I like being asked. I like people taking that interest in me. Where it's not the normal breakfast, lunch ,or dinner conversation. The caring aspect. I believe that we have to care for each other in order to care for others. So, with that interest comes, yeah okay, I'm seen. I'm heard. I'm cared for in a way that focuses on my future. The things I</p>	<p>Black women not asked about empowerment</p> <p>Lack of investment in Black women's professional development</p> <p>Working hard and being denied the rewards</p> <p>Likes when others are interested in her experience</p> <p>Wants to be cared for</p> <p>The reciprocity of caring</p> <p>Someone caring about her future</p> <p>Being seen and heard</p> <p>Empowerment is knowing where to locate resources</p> <p>Empowerment is role models, mentorship</p> <p>Empowering to invest in herself</p>	<p>Her voice as a Black woman has been excluded on the issue of empowerment</p> <p>Frustrated with a lack of institutional investment and support of Black women's personal and professional development</p> <p>Values reciprocal care in relationships</p> <p>The importance of mentoring relationships that support her aspirations and provide concrete guidance</p> <p>Feels empowered through representations of accomplished Black women via role models and mentoring</p>

<p>want to do. The things I need to do. The things I don't want to do.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 03:22 I'm gonna jump in then with the first question, which I think is a good place to start before getting to all the other questions, which is, what is your definition of empowerment? When you hear that as applied to you, what does it mean to be empowered?</p> <p>Barbara03:52 Empowerment means to me a few things. I would say knowing that there are resources, information, education, things that I wouldn't necessarily think about that I've read, watched, listened to that allows me to think about achievements...I can have it too, I can accomplish that too. Role models, mentorship, investing in myself. That can come in a few different forms. In order to not just prove to myself, but prove to my children, prove to my family, that if I can do it, you can do it too. Achieving things that you thought were out of reach that you connect with someone else, and you see that they've done it with all of the challenges and roadblocks and disappointments...harms. Yeah, I think that's what empowerment means to me. That's a big definition because it involves so many things. That empowerment definition really encapsulates that you can do it in spite of self-doubt, negative speak</p>	<p>Proving to herself and others that she's capable</p> <p>Wants to be a role model for others</p> <p>Achieving things that she once thought out of reach</p> <p>Representations of others who have overcome similar challenges</p> <p>Empowerment is the ability to transcend self-doubt, and negative sentiments from within herself and from others</p> <p>Encouragement from others</p> <p>Self generating confidence helps overcome disempowerment</p> <p>Empowerment has a multiple forms</p>	<p>Feeling empowering to invest in herself in the absence of institutional investment</p> <p>Wants to be a role model for her children</p> <p>Has had to prove to herself and others that she is capable of achieving things once thought impossible</p> <p>Using affirmative self-talk to combat self-doubt</p> <p>Empowerment has a multiple forms</p>
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07:24 Right.

Barbara07:28

Empowerment is empowering. It's motivation...motivational. Those are many different definitions. I've tried to use some descriptors in order to set some examples.

Angel McKissic 07:56

Yes, it's a very rich description what you offer. I'm hearing two threads. I'm hearing about all the things that maybe influence...having role models, seeing that someone else has come before you and done it. Having that example. Also, like you said, exposing yourself to information. Seems like those are things that help inform...and you also mentioned that you experience empowerment in all these different areas of your life, like career. I don't know if you want to expand a little bit more, where you

Empowerment is the absence of fear

Having others believe in your ability

Taking risks and receiving affirmative feedback

Empowerment is having wisdom

Fear holds her back from taking risks

Mobilizing others' confidence in
her
when she doubts herself

Affirmation by others as a reward
for taking risks

Acquiring the courage to take risks

<p>said that it is knowing you can do it despite...what is the actual experience? What does it feel like? What are the thoughts? If you could give that textbook definition. If you want to add anything to this idea that empowerment is knowing you can do it despite challenges, people telling you can't, adversity. Any other things?</p> <p>Barbara09:25 I would say the absence of fear. That's a lot of self-talk or having someone see in you what you don't see in yourself. A compliment, trying a new lipstick, choosing a lipstick with a color that you would never wear. Feeling good about how that shade of lipstick looks good on you when you thought that you would never wear that color lipstick. Wisdom. And that comes with life experiences.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 10:41 Right, correct. Yes.</p> <p>Barbara10:46 I'm hoping that I kind of...cleared...</p> <p>Angel McKissic 10:48 Yes, you did. No, no, it was very clear. I think it's one of the richer definitions that I've heard. I want to go back to the lipstick thing because that's a really interesting example. Because to me it's illustrating maybe a cycle? Where you said you try out a lipstick that maybe you would never</p>	<p>Was impacted by role models who were similar to her</p> <p>Having conviction about her choices regardless of societal perception</p> <p>Affirmation from others reinforces confidence in her decisions</p> <p>Positive reinforcement from others</p>	<p>Role models enable imagining of possibilities</p> <p>Releasing attachment to others' evaluation of her choices and feeling confident</p> <p>Affirmation from others bolster her confidence</p>
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<p>wear and then maybe you get affirmed by somebody out in public and that probably feeds that. I'm interested in how you would even get to the place where you would choose to wear lipstick you wouldn't normally. How do you get there to be like, I wouldn't normally do this, but I'm gonna do it?</p> <p>Barbara 11:38 I'll reinforce that wisdom...having the courage at a certain point in your life. I'll give you an example. I talk in examples.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 12:04 That's great. That's wonderful.</p> <p>Barbara 12:09 So because of the hue of my complexion, I always relegated myself to certain colors just because of the rich darkness.</p> <p>Angel McKissic That's right!</p> <p>Barbara Melanated! Okay? Melanated! Where I wouldn't wear a pink lipstick because I thought that I was too dark to wear such a bright color lipstick. Red nails. I'm sporting red nails. I'm loving this fiery red nails. So now I want some red lipstick. Some fiery red lipstick to wear. I was never comfortable wearing those colors until either I saw it on someone else</p>	<p>Struggled with low self-esteem</p> <p>Loving family support is empowering Family affirmed her abilities</p> <p>Affirmative support from family helped her resist/combat negative self-talk</p> <p>Was "fed" positive affirmation by family</p>	<p>Drawing on the affirming support from family to combat negative self- talk</p>
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<p>that had the same skin complexion as me like, wow, matter of fact, she's darker than me and it looks absolutely fantastic on her. Let me see if I can try that. If she did it and it looks beautiful on her then I'm going to do it and I'm hoping to get the same beautiful results as well. Then again that wisdom. Getting to a certain point in your life, whether it's age, maturity, absence of age, a life experience, to say, you know what, this is what I want to do. I don't care what anybody thinks. If I like it, that's all that matters. The compliment reinforces like, I made the right decision. This shade must be looking really good.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 14:15 Like, you right!</p> <p>Barbara14:16 Exactly! It reinforces that I'm happy that I bought or took a chance and purchased that color.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 14:27 Yeah, that makes sense to me. That's a great segue to a question that I have about...because you were talking about things that come with age. One of the questions I have is, how has your experience of power...and I'm not using it here as if it's just like this even experience that you feel powerful in every part of your life. We know typically it doesn't work that way, but if you reflect over the</p>	<p>The positive impact of dark skin Black women on TV</p> <p>Representation of Black women/girls like her in media</p> <p>Seeing herself through the gaze of the other</p>	<p>The significance of representations of Black women in popular media/culture reinforced familial affirmations of her beauty and self- worth</p> <p>- 20 -</p>
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<p>trajectory of your life, can you talk, in whatever way feels natural to you, about what your journey has been with experiencing your personal sense of power over your lifespan?</p> <p>Barbara15:19 Related specifically to age? Or?</p> <p>Angel McKissic 15:23 Yeah, well think about where you were as an adolescent, in your 20s versus now. Can you track how powerful you felt? Thinking about all relationships, professional, academic, as a mother. Whatever is popping up of how your experience of empowerment has evolved over your life.</p> <p>Barbara16:01 Got it. For someone such as myself who dealt with a lot of low self- esteem issues. From a teenager to early adulthood, 30s, 40s, and now where I am today. I attribute how I've navigated that to bring me to the sense of empowerment with such loving family support. From my dad to my mother, to my grandmother, really pouring in me my gifts, my talents, my capacity to make people laugh. Where I've always looked at my physical appearance as not attractive, but because my family saw how I suffered growing up as it relates to my complexion...not so much my weight, but just overall appearance on how I appear to others</p>	<p>Raising her daughter to avoid the challenges of her adolescence</p> <p>Breaking generational habits so the next generation feels more powerful</p> <p>Empowerment is pursuing one's desires, wants, and needs</p> <p>Becoming a mother and embracing her position as a role model for her children</p> <p>Role modeling love, respect, and a sense of belonging for her children</p>	<p>mobilizing her life experience into actionable lessons to break generational cycles of adversity</p> <p>the importance of loved ones support and encouragement in becoming empowered</p> <p>Felt a responsibility to model values; love and belonging</p> <p>Positive feedback bolsters her confidence in taking risks</p>
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<p>or how I appeared to the world. They just supported me. Always told me how beautiful I was when I felt that I wasn't beautiful or compare myself to how someone else look. And being mad, like how come I don't look like that? Just really trying to find...I don't know. It's kind of hard to describe it into words from a physical aspect of low self-esteem and constantly being fed positive affirmations.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 18:22 Wow, that beautiful.</p> <p>Barbara18:23 Positive things as far as the history and where I come from and who I come from. My dad is very fair skinned, biracial. My mother is very dark, and I used to always question...I didn't get it growing up. Why does my dad look like this? My mom looks like that. Then the era that I grew up in, the timeframe during huge civil strife with our people. That was never really talked about, but I saw those images on television. Or if I saw a dark-skinned sister look like me with this great big afro and I see her on television! Or I see her on Soul Train. Now I'm telling my age.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 19:35 I was just gone say Soul Train [both laughing]. Yes. Yes. Yup.</p> <p>Barbara19:41</p>	<p>Committed to making her children feel loved even during her physical absence</p> <p>Have a strong work ethic is empowering</p> <p>Empowering to claim her accomplishments.</p> <p>Felt powerful to defy the odds against her</p> <p>Defying expectations of her based-on race/gender identity – defying stereotypes is powerful</p>	<p>Important to her that people around her feel love and belonging</p> <p>A work ethic that supported herself sufficiently is empowering</p> <p>She did not succumb to stereotyped expectations of her</p> <p>The positive impact pf consistent familial support and affirmations of her worth and abilities in moments when her self-esteem was low</p>
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<p>Or I saw her on sitcoms back in the 70s. It was someone that looked like me, that I could identify with.</p> <p>Someone that looked like me, whether it's in the magazine, whether it was on television, whether it was at church or in the community that really just reinforced what my folks always...</p> <p>Angel McKissic Pouring into you.</p> <p>Bethany Yeah, was pouring into me as well. And then relationships...</p> <p>Angel McKissic 20:33 Romantic relationships?</p> <p>Barbara20:34 Yeah, romantic, intimate relationships. We're visual people. We don't look at the inside before we look outside. That's just not the way it works. It just isn't. It's the total opposite.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 20:53 That's what you see first.</p> <p>Barbara20:54 Exactly that's what you see first. So, all of that has an effect on how you see yourself to feel empowered whether it's through beauty, or brains, or both. And then, me being a young mother. And then my firstborn being a girl. Pouring into her what I didn't</p>	<p>Retrospective reflection on her accomplishments</p> <p>Affirmation from her children that she did well in her role as a mother</p> <p>Having her hard work acknowledged by her children</p>	<p>Derived power through retrospective recognition of her accomplishments</p> <p>Using multiple sources of affirmative messaging/images from media, family, and community as sources of self-esteem</p> <p>Loved ones acknowledging her dedication and hard work</p>
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<p>want her to go through as a young girl, adolescence, young adult, on and on and on. How I was gonna handle it in a way that either I needed more.</p> <p>And not saying that my family didn't do a good job, they did an excellent job. But I believe that in every generation that is birthed there's a shift, there's a change in how our children handle things that's going to empower them to be able to go wherever they need to go and to achieve the things that they need to achieve in order to be fulfilled based off of their desires, based off of their wants, based off of their needs.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 22:40 Yes, can you talk a little bit more about how you your role as a mother influenced...what impact did that have on your sense of power?</p> <p>Barbara22:55 Oh, my goodness, I needed to be a role model for my children.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 23:00 Okay. Yeah.</p> <p>Barbara23:03 Respect, love, to be loved, to feel a sense of belonging. I have these children that I have to provide and protect. And as a single mother I had to double down and triple down in order to be able to provide needs that it's a little tough when you're doing it by yourself. Because you</p>	<p>Affirmation from her mother</p> <p>Mother was proud of her as a daughter</p>	<p>Acknowledgment from loved ones that she did a good job</p>
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<p>overcompensate on so many things, because you don't want your children to feel that they got this one parent. Why don't they have two. So you just keep doing doing, doing, and doing it more so that at least for my children. Even though they experienced that lack.</p> <p>Angel McKissic 24:13 Yeah. Trying to make up for the absence.</p> <p>Bethany Yeah, making up for that absence or the lack. Even down to if I didn't have the family support to be able to provide for my children, whether it was one or two or three jobs, then I just wanted them to know that they were loved even if they didn't see me because mama's working all the time. Even if they didn't understand why they did not see me and there was their grandparents, they needed to know the reasons why. I'm in school. I'm at work. One of the two things. I come from a family, you're gonna do one or the other. You gone work or you gonna go to school. And I'm grateful for that. That built my work ethic, which is empowering too. Because when I look back at my life, although I had the family support, I've been the sole provider for my family, and I can look back and I can take ownership. I got bragging rights.</p>	<p>Being a good daughter</p> <p>Affirmation from her father</p> <p>Receiving validation from loved ones that she occupied her various roles well</p> <p>Passing down tools for empowerment</p> <p>Feeling of personal empowerment has strengthened progressively over her lifetime</p> <p>Having life experience</p> <p>Transcending negative self-talk</p>	<p>Empowering to receive validation from her loved ones that she was a good caregiver</p> <p>Generational transmission of love, support, as tools for personal empowerment</p> <p>Empowering to overcome self doubt</p> <p>Looking back on her life and acknowledging her accomplishments</p>
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Appendix F

Barbara Final Table of PETs and Subthemes

THE EMPOWERING IMPACT OF RECOGNITION, SUPPORT, AND AFFIRMATION WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS

Care, empathy, and connection in relationships with others

Relationships as sites of care and support towards personal growth

"I believe that we have to care for each other in order to care for others."

"I'm seen. I'm heard. I'm cared for in a way that focuses on my future. The things I want to do. The things I need to do. The things I don't want to do."

The primacy of interpersonal relationships

"Relationships are very key to me. I thrive off of them. I really, really do."

"...it's about relationships. The therapist I have now doesn't look anything like me. But I like this therapist. She's a good therapist. I really like her."

"...and having the opportunity to develop those relationships. Yeah. And the conversations, yeah."

Shared identity and life experience enables connection and trust in relationships

"...she had the same type of grief that I was presently experiencing... her mother losing a child and the things that she witnessed that her mother went through that just resonated with me...we were talking about our daughters. Just so many things that I was able to identify. She was able to connect with me. I was able to connect with her. We built that relationship. In my mind, I trusted her."

"And went to the [therapy] session. And here, lo and behold, this therapist is a black therapist."

Presence as a force of connection

"First of all, she just listened."

"And she held so much space. She cried with me... So when I saw that deep impact on my story...man it was just powerful."

"She was real instead of doing the thing that I expected."

The importance of familial support and affirmation in building self-esteem and empowerment

A work ethic that supports self-sufficiency is empowering

"I come from a family, you're gonna do one or the other. You gonna work or you gonna go to school. And I'm grateful for that. That built my work ethic, which is empowering too."

Loved ones acknowledging her dedication and hard work

"I get it now. I understand why you were the way you were." Just that recognition...for your children to tell you that..oh, my goodness. That's all you want."

"I remember when my mother was dying from a terminal illness and her last words to me were, 'I am so proud of you.'"

"'You have been such a good daughter. You have been such a good daughter. Continue to be a good daughter and take care of your stepmom. You took good care of me.'" So those are the things that you want to hear. And that was very empowering."

"there's nothing more empowering than your children telling you, mommy you did a good job, mama I'm so proud of you."

Drawing on the affirming support from family to combat negative self-talk

"For someone such as myself who dealt with a lot of low self-esteem issues... I attribute how I've navigated that to bring me to the sense of empowerment with such loving family support."

"having someone see in you what you don't see in yourself."

"...my dad, to my mother, to my grandmother, really pouring in me my gifts, my talents, my capacity to make people laugh."

"They [family] just supported me. Always told me how beautiful I was when I felt that I wasn't beautiful or compare myself to how someone else look."

"It's kind of hard to describe it into words from a physical aspect of low self-esteem and constantly being fed positive affirmations."

ACCESSING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH REPRESENTATION

The consequence of representation and role models in envisioning possibilities

The significance of representations of Black women in popular media/culture

"...I saw those images on television...if I saw a dark skinned sista look like me with this great big afro and I see her on television! Or I see her on Soul Train... Or I saw her on sitcoms back in the 70s. It was someone that looked like me, that I could identify with. Someone that looked like me, whether it's in the magazine, whether it was on television, whether it was at church or in the community that really just reinforced what my folks always...was pouring into me."

"things...that I've read, watched, listened to that allows me to think about achievements...I can have it too, I can accomplish that too."

Hard to feel empowered in the absence of role models or representation

"How can I aspire or be empowered for someone who looks like me when I don't see it out there?"

The importance of embodied exemplars in moving from impossibility to possibility

Role models enable imagining of possibilities

"I wouldn't wear a pink lipstick because I thought that I was too dark to wear such a bright color lipstick... I was never comfortable wearing those colors until either I saw it on someone else that had the same skin complexion as me like, wow, matter of fact, she's darker than me and it looks absolutely fantastic on her. Let me see if I can try that. If she did it and it looks beautiful on her then I'm going to do it and I'm hoping to get the same beautiful results as well."

"this was...with another black woman who is a director that I shared³ the same values with...we were actually able to discuss and talk...In having that conversation and that dialogue...when I learned that about her and she learned that about me, it was like, yes, I got another...because it's not many of us [Black women] in the workplace. I'm looking at this black woman I could work with or I can work for her. I see myself in the role that we're discussing...and she's a black woman in this particular avenue of leadership."

"Achieving things that you thought were out of reach that you connect with someone else, and you see that they've done it with all of the challenges and roadblocks and disappointments...harms. Yeah, I think that's what empowerment means to me."

[Interviewer: "...what does it mean to be empowered?"] - *"Role models, mentorship, investing in myself."*

"...someone embodying that example. Not just what I see. Something to actually be or even given the opportunity to create or be created in order to set the tone that this is possible."

Leading the way: modeling empowerment for the next generation

The responsibility to model personal values and possibilities

[Interviewer: "...can you talk a little bit more about how you your role as a mother influenced...what impact did that have on your sense of power?"] - *"I needed to be a role model for my children...Respect, love, to be loved, to feel a sense of belonging. I have these children that I have to provide and protect. And as a single mother I had to double down and triple down in order to be able to provide needs that it's a little tough when you're doing it by yourself."*

"In order to not just prove to myself, but prove to my children, prove to my family, that if I can do it, you can do it too."

"...I'm able to share with a couple of family members how it's [therapy] helped me... I share how it's helped me or I'll share a tool."

Changing the tides of generational patterns

"I believe that in every generation that is birthed there's a shift, there's a change in how our children handle things that's going to empower them to be able to go wherever they need to go and to achieve the things that they need to achieve in order to be fulfilled based off of their desires, based off of their wants, based off of their needs."

PROPELLING PERSONAL GROWTH THROUGH CONTINUOUS REFLEXIVE LEARNING AND ENVISIONING FUTURES

The capacity for learning, and determination to persevere as instruments of personal growth

The evocative force of nature as a space for reflection and forward-thinking

"Nature...I think that brings a sense of power...the environment. I thrive in aspects of nature, living things, beauty, being outside, that causes me to not just reflect, but to think forward but in the present, being fully present...thinking about...the next phase, the next steps, the next phase of my life where I want to go. Thinking about the things that I haven't done that I have yet still to do and thinking of ways on how I'm going to achieve it."

Reflexive learning and will as instruments of resilience

Learning from experience

"Coming out on the other side, whether it was successful or a failure because failures teach you lessons, valuable lessons."

"Whether it was a good decision or a bad decision and what I learned from that and tried not to repeat the same mistake or make the wrong decision."

"...sometimes you have to take two steps back in order to get three steps forward, so the back and forth, and having that mental muscle based off of that spirituality, because some people, depending on hits you take in life, some people don't bounce back mentally or physically from that. So that strong will, that determination, that strong mind."

"But I needed to tell you that experience...to where it didn't turn me off from therapy because I'm still in it."

PROMOTING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION, AGENCY, INCLUSIVITY, AND COLLABORATION

The necessity of education, awareness, and equity in institutional care

Black women are negatively impacted by a lack of education and information

"I didn't like that I wasn't educated or walked through the steps for the process. I think that's another disservice to us as black people as black women."

"We need to be more educated on it [mental health care], because I didn't understand what all of the credentials, MSW..."

"Why or why not is there more investment in us, which can be empowering and disempowering, especially when we have to seek our own resources in order to get to the next level or get to an aspect of our lives where we're told this is what you need to do, and you do it, and then you don't get to that next level."

Felt coerced because her choice was being taken away

"I was totally against. When I voiced my concern that I didn't want to do the medicated prescriptions and the therapy, I was told... you're not going to be able to be off work if you don't go on these pills. I thought it was the coercion. I felt coerced, like I didn't have any other choice."

The relationship between collaboration, communication, and inclusivity in cultivating empowerment

Collaboration and effective communication increases her sense of power

[Interviewer: "...what you just added there about the outcome of that advocacy and that accountability... Does that impact your sense of power?"]

"Yes, absolutely because I feel now there's a true collaboration in communicating or at least me communicating with that accountability piece the next steps that's gonna get me to where I need to be."

The desire to have her perspective considered in decision making and knowledge production

"And that's just that creative collaboration and inclusive...it felt inclusive."

"based off of the topic [empowerment] we're not really consulted or even asked. I think it's kind of horrible."

TRAVERSING TABOO AND CULTIVATING HYBRIDITY: DEPLOYING SPIRITUALITY AND THERAPY AS ADJUNCTIVE FORCES TOWARDS HEALING AND RESILIENCE

Recruiting the harmonious forces of spiritual and professional supports in times of adversity

Religious faith and therapist are used in tandem as tools of resilience⁵

"I'm glad I'm doing it [therapy]. Coupled with me just having a strong faith in God that I'm gonna get through. So, you know, we need Jesus and therapy."

"...the spiritual, the faith, my trust in God. Having that belief and being thankful and grateful that I was able to withstand it, go through it."

"Really focused on my spirituality and having that carry me to encourage me to continue to move."

"Really having a powerful spiritual faith-based grounding."

The importance of supportive relationships in navigating the antagonism between religious stigma and mental health treatment

Relationships as a vehicle for confronting social/religious stigma

"...I grew up and grew up in the church, that that's not what black people did. Coming from a faith-based family. We went to church, we pray about it, we did this that the other, and just to see a black woman in that capacity from the faith base...for us to really talk it out and really sharing with her that from a spiritual standpoint I'm not really supposed to be sitting in this chair. That my faith is supposed to be so much stronger.

"She was a minister, and I needed that spiritual advisor-therapist that understood all of the nuances with therapy, especially the stigma and the black church."

"Just the education from her. The stigma, us talking that through. Me learning from her while still trying deal with everything that I'm going through."

GROWING THROUGH EXPERIENCE: CONFRONTING FEAR, OVERCOMING SELF-DOUBT, AND EXERCISING THE COURAGE TO SPEAK OUT

Experience and maturation as engendering confidence and self-advocacy

The impact of maturation and life experience on empowerment

"...wisdom. Getting to a certain point in your life, whether it's age, maturity, absence of age, a life experience, to say, you know what, this is what I want to do. I don't care what anybody thinks. If I like it, that's all that matters."

"Life experiences. And me not to succumbing to that 20-year-old self-doubt, that negative speech that I did to myself, as well as others. Lived experiences."

"having the courage at a certain point in your life."

"...when I look back at my life, although I had the family support, I've been the sole provider for my family, and I can look back and I can take ownership. I got bragging rights."

Gaining confidence towards self-advocacy

"I am in that space now to be able to vocalize, verbalize, and have conversation about that balance, as far as salary, as far as work, as far as outputs, achieving the goals, the objectives, and the mission of others, but still being paid less."

"I have really gained a lot of confidence to be able to speak and have these conversations in a very professional manner."

"...being able to feel confident to say that you put this goal on me that's not achievable..."

"...being able to confidently let them know that, A, it's not going to be achieved, B, someone needs to tell you."

"in claiming that power some negotiations are going on in my favor, because I was able to address it."

"I feel very empowered that I'm not there. Building up that courage. Being real brave but not have any regrets."

Recognition of achievements against self-doubt, racist societal expectations, and structural obstacles

Using affirmative self-talk to overcome self-doubt and external obstacles

"That empowerment definition really encapsulates that you can do it in spite of self-doubt, negative speak from others, sometimes we do it to ourselves."

"...reflecting on what could have happened, and would've happened, and the life lessons that I've taken away. After deep reflection on how to get better, or patting myself on the back and said, okay, I

did that. Job well done. And that's something that I would never really do. I would do a lot of that self-destructive, negative talk."

"...when I look back at my life, although I had the family support, I've been the sole provider for my family, and I can look back and I can take ownership. I got bragging rights."

"I did that despite - as a young mother, as a single mother. Because the expectation and the stereotype of black women who are unwed young mothers. I defied those stereotypes."

Stereotypes, discrimination, and resisting the fear of speaking out

Resisting racial stereotypes through critical analysis and truth telling

"It reinforced the stereotype about black women. And then that made me think, am I playing into this stereotype? Let me rephrase that. Am I playing into the intentional setup of a stereotype with how I feel about the situation."

"I was frustrated with the whole process, now I'm trying to do this, I'm trying to learn how to do this, and I'm not getting the help and the resources that I need. I'm like, so is it my insurance, is it because I'm black, is it because I'm a woman, is it because I'm in the city of Detroit, all of these things."

"In a white male dominated department. I want to make sure that I'm very intentional with my words."

"And not being afraid as a black woman to present the truth to white men"

Recognizing familial legacies of silence

"having those conversations with those same family members who were disempowered based off of what they went through. You don't say anything. You keep your head down. You do what you need to do in order to live another day. That's the way they live their lives. Because they knew if they said the thing, that punishment, of the fear of losing a job or whatever. Listening to family members tell me that. And putting myself in their position as the person that I am now. It's almost like they got you either way. If you say something you're a problem. If don't say anything..."

The internal conflict: negotiating fear and guilt

"...at the same time, I'm struggling and feeling disempowered because I need to be saying more. And not feeling guilty or that fear of not saying anything at all."

"I remember the times when I regretted that and how low that made me feel. That I should have said something, that I should have stood in my power. That I should have been brave. I shouldn't have been scared. I should not have let fear overtake me. I've gotten mad at myself."

"I would say the absence of fear."