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3/5ths of Freedom: The Analysis of {With} Black Individuals in Higher Education and Navigating Society Post-Justice-Involvement

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3/5THS OF FREEDOM: THE ANALYSIS OF {WITH} BLACK INDIVIDUALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND NAVIGATING SOCIETY POST-JUSTICE-INVOLVEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

3/5THS OF FREEDOM: THE ANALYSIS OF {WITH} BLACK INDIVIDUALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND NAVIGATING SOCIETY POST-JUSTICE-INVOLVEMENT

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Black individuals have been disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system in the United States (*Federal Bureau of Prisons,* 2022). Because of their criminal justice involvement, Black individuals are perceived as *second-class citizens* making their quest for "freedom" an endless journey impacted by oppression and domination post-justice-involvement (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Johnson, 2021; Pager, 2003). To combat domination and oppression, Freire (1970) emphasized pursuing higher education helps individuals who experience marginalization become more humanized and aids them on their plight to freedom. Research highlighted pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement is a liberatory yet challenging experience because of discriminatory on-campus experiences, and policies that inhibit admission, engagement, and accessing support services (Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr. et al., 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2017; Stewart & Uggen, 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Amongst the growing body of research examining individuals' experiences navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement, scholars have advocated for more research that centers and examines Black individuals' reintegration and higher education experiences post-justice-involvement (Johnson, 2021; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Therefore, this dissertation centers and explores Black individuals' higher education and societal experiences, and the interconnectedness of freedom and domination post-justice-involvement. Using a social constructivist paradigm and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR)

approach, this study analyzed the impact of race and justice-involvement, examined Black individuals' ideologies of freedom, and their experiences in higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement. To conduct this study, myself and three Black individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system were engaged as co-researchers to curate and execute the study. The data for this dissertation was collected through a journal prompt, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. The findings should be used to influence future research, legislation, and policy reform to eradicate barriers that affect Black individuals in higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement to help them actualize and experience freedom in its fullness – freedom physically, psychologically, and ontologically.

This dissertation is dedicated to everyone that was involved in this study.

I was honored to collaborate with the co-researchers and participants who allowed me to listen, learn, engage, and amplify their perspectives, experiences, and recommendations. This dissertation would be nothing without the thought partnership and involvement of all the individuals involved in the study. I am immensely grateful.

Let this body of work continue to advocate for total liberation and the restoration of humanity for Black people in all ways, always

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Galatians 6:9 | Jeremiah 29:11 | Isaiah 40:31

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I. INTRODUCTION

All humans should have the right to freedom—physically, psychologically, and ontologically, and be free from forces of domination such as racism, discrimination, sexism, and other isms by virtue of humanity. Freedom should be regarded as a human right because of how much it impacts the human experience in a country with espoused liberatory and democratic values. Framing freedom as a necessary human right eliminates the discourse of who is deserving of freedom which is fundamental to eradicating oppressive systems enacted during a time where humanity was defined based on race, status, class, and gender. Black[1] people in America have been denied freedom(s), protection, provision, and access because of their race (Anderson, 2016; Kendi & Blain, 2022; Tuck, 2011). Although there has been an increased amount of legislation to better protect nonwhite individuals, the legislative changes have not abolished the ideology of how Black people are viewed or treated as inhumane and institutionalized. Black people have been marginally positioned in society which has posed obstacles navigating society, educational environments, and trying to economically advance (Anderson, 2017; Bobo, 2011; Sexton, 2015; Wright, 2015). As a result, Black individuals, are further marginalized navigating society and in higher education[2] post-justice-involvement[3] because of discrimination and anti-Blackness (Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014;

[1] Black: In this study *Black* is used as an inclusive term in reference to people who identify as part of the Black community. Using the term Black instead of African American recognizes that language has evolved and reflects a shared identity and culture. This includes Black people who are born in the United States and those who have African lineage from the African diaspora and globally. While the term *African American* is widely used in the United States *Black* is used in this study to recognize cultural underpinnings and to acknowledge the self-emancipation of enslaved individuals.

[2] Higher Education: *Higher education* in this study refers to any postsecondary education course. Postsecondary courses are defined as any course with a learning level beyond high school and offered by a college or university. Additionally, in this study postsecondary education also includes noncredit and adult basic education courses.

[3] Post-justice-involvement: *Post-justice-involvement* or post-release is used in this study and refers to when an individual has completed the terms of their judicial order and has been relinquished from additional court-ordered responsibilities (i.e., jail, prison, house arrest, parole, etc.)

Strayhorn et al., 2013; Taylor, 2016). Not only is their race perceived as subordinate, but Black individuals' other salient identities or experiences including prior engagement in the criminal justice system influence how they are treated (Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Morales, 2014; Museus & Griffith, 2011). Direct and indirect examples of systemic and anti-Black racism are exhibited through stereotyping, discrimination, exclusionary policies in higher education, and navigating society post-justice-involvement (Custer, 2018; Dancy et al., 2018; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr. et al., 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2017; Mustaffa, 2017; Stewart & Uggen, 2020; Sulé et al., 2022; Yucel, 2022). Black individuals lived, and higher education experiences have provoked the need for further inquiry of the interconnectedness of freedom and exploration, and the impact and effects of identity and education post-justice-involvement.

Higher Education as a Microcosm of Society

Higher education was not widely accessible for Black students until the expansion of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and policy change at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) in the 1900s (Karkouti, 2016; Stulberg & Chen, 2014; Sulé et al., 2022). To diversify the campus community and expand the higher education landscape for Black students, race-based affirmative action admission, enrollment, and initiatives were implemented in the 1960s (Fischer & Massey, 2007; Karkouti, 2016; Sulé et al., 2022; Warikoo & Allen, 2019). The implementation of inclusive admission policies has correlated to more Black students pursuing higher education. Pursuing higher education has unlocked doors of opportunity and equipped Black students with skills to excel in their future careers (Carnevale et al., 2018; Itkowitz, 2022). There is a positive relationship between completion of a college degree or postsecondary certificate and greater earning potential and economic mobility for Black students (Carnevale et

al., 2018; Itkowitz, 2022). Black students view higher education as essential and an avenue for economic mobility; notwithstanding, Black students have endured many challenges pursuing higher education (Allen et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Haynes et al., 2020; Karkouti, 2016; Morales, 2014; Stewart, 2008).

Although higher education has become more accessible, higher education policies and university campus cultures were created with white supremacy and anti-Black racism deeply rooted and embedded in campus culture (Harper et al., 2009; Mustaffa, 2017; Patton, 2015; Sulé et al., 2022). Researchers amplified the differences in college experiences amongst students with different racial and ethnic identities (Blom & Baker, 2022; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano, 2000). Exclusionary policies, non-inclusive environments, increasing costs, and basic needs insecurities act as barriers to success in higher education have affected Black student experiences and presented challenges that impede persistence and degree completion (Blom & Baker, 2022; Griffith et al., 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Haynes et al., 2020). Black students have persevered in higher education amid barriers to success, anti-Blackness, and violent environments, which is similar to Black individuals' experiences navigating society (Mustaffa, 2017). To provide a more holistic perspective of Black students and their experiences in higher education, scholars have underscored the need for more rigorous analyses that examine the institutional context, campus culture, and the dialectics of access and exclusion in higher education (Blom & Baker, 2022; Haynes et al., 2019; Tichavakunda, 2020).

Black Students in Various Institutional Contexts & Environments

Black students' experiences in higher education are multifaceted and shaped by the type of institution and campus culture (Allen et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2017; Harper, 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In the fall of 2021, Black students made up 15% of all students enrolled in

higher education, 12% of the student population entering two-year institutions, and 17.5% of the student population entering four-year institutions (*School enrollment in the United States: October 2021,* 2022). Increased Black student enrollment has coincided with more analyses of the experiences, value, and effects of Black students attending various institution types such as community colleges, HWIs, and HBCUs.

Nearly half of Black students begin their higher education journey at community colleges (Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Lin et al., (2022) acknowledged how accessible community colleges are for all students and especially students from low-income backgrounds, non-traditional students, and historically excluded students (p. 1). With open access policies, low costs, and additional support services, community colleges have been depicted as an avenue of social mobility. Researchers amplified positive Black student experiences at community colleges and highlighted the impact of academic performance and social engagement (Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Academic performance and social engagement have correlated to Black students' satisfaction, retention, and degree attainment at community colleges (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Scholars also explored how community colleges can advance equity with diverse student demographics and interrogated if community colleges are avenues of social mobility for Black students based on low transfer and completion rates (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Lin et al., 2022). Amongst increasing literature about students in community colleges, scholars have continued to emphasize the need for more research examining Black student experiences in community college, transfer experiences matriculating into four-year universities, and economic mobility post degree attainment (Lin et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012).

Compared to most community colleges, HWIs are typically less diverse; however, HWIs enroll over 50% of Black students in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Research studies amplified Black students' adverse experiences at HWIs and examined the effects of anti-Black racism engrained in the campus culture and policies (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Griffith et al., 2017; Harper, 2013; Kartkouti, 2016). These studies underscored how white supremacy is deeply rooted and permeates higher education institutions and more specially HWIs. Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022) explained whiteness co-constructs curriculum, traditions, and the campus climate (p. 1491). Scholars described HWIs as sites of violence and domination for Black students which impacts Black students' sense of belonging, academics, self-esteem, and mental health (Dancy et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2017; Harper, 2013). Viewing HWIs as sites of violence acknowledges how impactful and influential institutional culture, climate, and the campus community can be for Black students. Because of the research highlighting adverse Black student experiences, scholars have critiqued HWIs, emphasizing the lack of change and culture of exclusion despite affirmative action and diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments and policies (Haynes et al., 2019; Karkouti, 2016; Sulé et al., 2022).

Unlike Black student experiences at HWIs, research studies that explored Black student experiences at HBCUs illustrated the campus culture and environment are culturally affirming and Black students value the campus community, opportunities, and resources (Gasman et al., 2017; Morton, 2021; Wrinkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). Literature also revealed culturally relevant pedagogy and practices, leadership development, the emphasis on identity formation, and affordable college expenses at HBCUs promote student success for Black students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Williams et al., 2021). While only ten percent of all Black students pursuing higher education attend HBCUs, Gasman and Commodore (2014) amplified HBCUs are a vital

part of higher education (p. 4) (Bevins et al., 2021). The overwhelmingly positive Black student experience at HBCUs has been underscored by current and former students which emphasizes the significance and value of HBCUs.

Although scholars highlighted the impact of the campus environment and positive Black student experiences at HBCUs, Mobley and Hall (2020) identified the challenges Black Queer and Trans* students experience on campus (p. 502). Mobley and Hall (2020) overviewed intersectional identities (sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression(s) contest Black "respectability politics" which obstruct notions of "decency" within Black communities (p. 503). This study also highlighted Black student experiences at HBCUs are not monolithic and the importance of analyzing the intersections of race, sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression(s). To help promote success and increase retention, Mobley and Hall (2020) stressed the need for more targeted resources and support such as gender-inclusive practices, ongoing staff training, and Queer and Trans* Student-Centered Programs (p. 507 – 514). The vast research about Black students at HBCUs underscored how valuable attending an HBCU is for Black individuals and includes critical perspectives that recommend and encourage the reimagination of policies and practices at HBCUs to better serve the diverse campus community.

Despite the institutional context, research studies acknowledged the indispensability of student engagement and community for Black students (Harper, 2013; Tichavakunda, 2020). Thelamour et al., (2019) underscored Black students amplified how vital community is in providing affirmation and support when pursuing higher education (p. 274). Community, affirmation, and support have correlated to positive experiences and cultivated a sense of belonging in higher education. In addition, Black students also acknowledged how valuable representation and student engagement were to enrich their collegiate experience and provide

them with opportunities to build community and engage in cultural traditions and activities (Thelamour et al., 2019). Exemplifying the impact of community and student engagement, research studies that included Black women and Black justice-involved students, also highlighted how instrumental engagement with other like-minded students was while enduring challenges on campus (Domingue, 2015; Harper, 2013). Leaning on like-minded Black individuals for support or guidance made a difference in their collegiate experience and helped them excel and persist in higher education (Domingue, 2015; Harper, 2013).

College Affordability: Student Debt, Financial Aid, Basic Needs

In addition to student experiences in higher education, college affordability has also correlated to Black students' success, persistence, degree attainment, and economic mobility post-graduation. Although data revealed the positive impact of degree attainment for Black students, the value of a college degree has been interrogated because of the lack of affordability and debt acquired which disproportionately affects Black people pursuing higher education and after degree attainment (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Davis et al., 2020; Miller & Akabas, 2022; Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021; Peters et al., 2019). Research about race and college affordability has largely focused on examining the effects of student loan debt and the effectiveness of financial aid programs (Mustaffa & Davis, 2021; Peters et al., 2019). Mustaffa and Davis (2021) framed the Black student debt crisis as a repercussion of systemic racism (p. 3). As a result, Black individuals feel marginalized by their student loan debt. Nearly 70 percent of Black borrowers regret taking out student loans because of the collateral effects including lengthy repayment plans, financial stress, mental health effects, and the inability to afford basic needs (Mustaffa & Davis, 2021). Black individuals have contested the idea of student loan debt as "good debt" or an investment to acquire more wealth; however, they also acknowledged taking out student loans is

the only option to help them pursue higher education with rising college costs (Mustaffa & Davis, 2021, p. 4).

To address college affordability concerns, research studies indicated state financial support programs such as free college programs are valuable to help Black students pursue higher education (Collier & Parnther, 2018; Jones et al. 2020; Li & Gándara, 2020; Miller-Adams, 2015). Free college programs, often referred to as promise programs, were established to help eliminate tuition, decrease student loan debt, and increase college access and degree attainment (Miller-Adams, 2015). Free college programs offer different scholarships which provide varied financial assistance to use solely for tuition expenses (Collier & Parnther 2018, p. 574). First dollar scholarships cover tuition before any supplemental aid and last dollar scholarships seek to bridge the gap after other fiscal aid is applied (Granville, 2023). Regardless of the different types of free college scholarships, tuition free does not equate to debt free, and data revealed most students in free college programs have student loan debt (Collier & Parnther, 2018).

Because most students take out student loans to afford nontuition costs, scholars have investigated the value, impact, and effectiveness of free college programs (Granville, 2023; Jones et al. 2020; Li & Gándara, 2020). Data has shown free college programs have been impactful to increase Black student enrollment in higher education (Billings, 2018; Gándara & Li, 2020; Nguyen, 2020). Furthering the research beyond the rise of enrollment, Jones et al., (2020) critically analyzed the impact and effectiveness of free college programs for Black and Hispanic students. Since there are disproportionate enrollment rates of Black students in free college programs, a lack of fiscal support for non-tuition expenses, and rigid eligibility requirements that can exclude adult and justice-involved students, Jones et al., (2020)

emphasized the need for an equity-driven framework for free college programs (p. 14). The increasing research about free college programs and their effectiveness has been used to advocate for target need-based financial aid and financial support for non-tuition expenses to help students reduce the cost of college attendance and afford their basic needs (Granville, 2023; Miller-Adams, 2015; Peters et al., 2019).

Since the establishment of federal grants and loans in the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, federal policymakers have continued to modify the student loan program, financial aid programs, and re-allocate higher education funding each year (Smith, 2016). The price of higher education has increased making federal, state, and institutional grant aid insufficient to adequately support students. As a result, advocacy for more financial aid for students and equitable dissemination processes have been implemented (Peters et al., 2019; Smith, 2016). Smith (2016) recognized the opportunity for higher education stakeholders to engage with state and federal policymakers to address funding gaps (p. 143). Sustained advocacy efforts influenced the further development of free college programs, the increase of state higher education funding, and the recent allocation of $126 billion in discretionary and mandatory funding for federal student aid in the 2023 Fiscal Year budget (*Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Summary*, 2022; *State Higher Education Finance: FY 2022,* 2023). The recent boom in higher education funding boosted the maximum Pell grant by $500 and builds on the $400 increase allocated in 2022 (*Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Summary*, 2022). Additionally, the Biden Administration announced plans for loan forgiveness initiatives and proposed revisions for Revised Pay As You Earn (REPAYE), two targeted initiatives that address systemic inequities for student loan repayment (The United States Government, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These initiatives

prioritize equity and aim to provide debt relief and student loan forgiveness which will positively impact Black borrowers.

In addition to focusing on college affordability, policymakers and researchers have also started exploring how to address college students' basic needs insecurities (Broton et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Martinchek & Gupta, 2022). The rising costs of attendance has caused more students to require basic needs and essential resources like food, housing, healthcare, childcare, internet, and transportation (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Michell et al., 2019; The Hope Center, 2024). Basic needs insecurities have been recognized as barriers to success for students because of their impact on academics, well-being, and persistence in higher education (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017). The demand for resources to help meet students' basic needs has continued to increase and institutions have sought out ways to bridge the gap and offer more resources to students in need. Goldrick-Rab et al., (2019) highlighted the importance of support and targeted resources for historically excluded students to address basic needs' insecurities (p. 2-3). Connecting research to practice, institutions have begun providing food, housing, mental health initiatives, and financial assistance which has increased retention and degree attainment rates (Broton et al., 2020; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017).

While Black students make up approximately 15% of all current college students, researchers highlighted the degree attainment gap for Black students in comparison to other students with different racial and ethnic identities (Anthony et al., 2021). Recent data revealed Black students have a 17% point gap in bachelor's degree attainment compared to white adults (Allen et al., 2018; Anthony et al., 2021). To further explore degree attainment rates, Ciocca and DiPrete (2018) conducted a research study analyzing the bachelor's degree completion rates for Black and white students using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(IPEDS) (p. 1171-1214). The study assessed the factors that are associated to disparities in degree attainment and outlined the bachelor's degree attainment gap for Black students is correlated to a lack of academic and socioeconomic resources before and during higher education (Ciocca & DiPrete, 2018). With efforts to promote student success, scholars have advocated for more targeted resources that help Black students excel, persist, and graduate (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Herbaut & Geven, 2020). Although the degree attainment gap has slowly improved over time, this data draws attention to a larger systemic issue. Merolla and Jackson (2018) conceptualized race as a mechanism of social order and underscored the interconnected relationship between structural racism and educational disparities which have impacted the educational trajectory of Black individuals (p. 5). The effects of racism in various forms continue to impact Black students' access, experiences, and success in higher education.

Statement of Issue

Although there is vast body of research about Black student experiences, scholars have contested the linear view of identity and indicated race does not exist in isolation, highlighting the need for more research and analyses that explore Black individuals and intersectionality (Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Morales, 2014; Stewart, 2008). Building on this perspective, Potter (2015) advocated for more analyses of intersectionality in studies that examine the criminal justice system and individuals who have been directly impacted by the justice system (p. 3). Because of the disproportionate involvement of Black people and the criminal justice system, there is an increasing number of Black individuals that have lived experiences in the carceral system and are pursing higher education post-justice-involvement. Despite the increasing rates of Black students pursuing education post-justice-involvement, their experiences are seldom

examined in research. Therefore, this study was conducted to advance interdisciplinary research and scholarship, provide insight about Black individuals' experiences in higher education, and examine the relationship and impact of race and justice-involvement navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement.

Pursuing Higher Education in Prison and Post-Justice-Involvement

Pursuing education in prison and post-justice-involvement has been correlated with personal growth, lower recidivism rates, employment, and continuing education after prison (Baranger et al., 2018; Chesnut et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2013; Evans, 2018; Fine et al., 2001; Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Kim, 2013; MacCormick, 1931; Rose 2004). With the cumulative benefits of higher education, colleges and universities have prioritized accessibility and have extended their reach to individuals in prison (Chesnut et al., 2022; Custer, 2018; Wright, 2001). The beginning of educational programming in prison dates to the 18th century (Gehring, 1995). The purpose was to provide individuals who are incarcerated with religious education for rehabilitation. To aid the growth and development of the rising correctional population in the 1990s, education began to expand to provide vocational programming, Basic Adult education, General Education Development, and higher education. Subsequently, the early twentieth century marked a time of rapid growth and establishment of higher education in prison programs nationwide with the creation of academic and technical education programs (Baranger et al., 2018; Chesnut et al., 2022; Gehring, 1997; Littlefield & Wolford, 1982; Wright, 2001).

The landscape of higher education in prison has further expanded because of the development of more educational programs nationwide and the Second Chance Pell experiment. Therefore, research has increased to examine student experiences, the quality of programming, and evaluate the impact of higher education in prison and post-justice-involvement (Boyce,

2019; Castro et al., 2018; Chesnut et al., 2022). Literature has highlighted the positive experiences of current and former students and the multitude of interpersonal benefits from receiving an education in prison (Anders et al., 2011; Baranger et al., 2018; Binda et al., 2020; Evans, 2018). The findings overviewed how much the participants valued educational programming because it served as a tool to transform carceral spaces and allowed them to academically engage with other people in the community (Baranager et al., 2018; Castro et al, 2015; Chesnut et al., 2022; Contardo & Williams, 2010; Torre & Fine, 2005). The findings from each study revealed the positive benefits and generated best practices to help guide institutional and prison stakeholders, foster student success, and help individuals in prison attain postsecondary credentials.

Degree attainment and/or the completion of a postsecondary certificate in a correctional facility can affect an individual's life in prison and post-release (Baranager et al, 2018; Davis et al., 2013). Larson (2015) emphasized individuals who leave prison with an associate degree are 75% more likely not to be reincarcerated (p. 9). Consequently, most students who begin taking higher education courses in prison do not complete a degree program because of rigid enrollment policies, transferring facilities, and the limited spaces for students to participate in educational courses (Castro et al., 2015). As a result, researchers and practitioners have advocated for the development of equitable and targeted initiatives that address the scarcity of resources, lack of financial support, gender inequities, policies that inhibit individuals for taking courses, and imperious control from the Department of Corrections which impede individuals from obtaining postsecondary credentials in prison (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Castro & Gould, 2019; Torre & Fine, 2005). The experience pursuing higher education in prison is not without difficulties similar to the experience of students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement.

Student Experiences in Higher Education Post-Justice-Involvement

Interdisciplinary research revealed higher education has aided individuals when re-entering their community and trying to economically advance post-justice-involvement, while also exposing the challenges of community reintegration and pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement (Anderson et al., 2023; Brazzell et al., 2019; Goger, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Williams et al., 2019; Yucel, 2022). Studies that explored the experiences of individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement underscored students have endured academic challenges, had basic needs insecurities, and lacked financial and community support/re-entry resources (Abeyta, 2020; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Johnson, 2021; McTier et al., 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Furthermore, there are exclusionary policies that act as barriers to enroll, persist, and complete such as mandatory disclosure of criminal history, rigid rules of engagement with the campus community, and limited or regulated access to resources (Custer, 2016; Johnson, 2021; McTier et al., 2020). The challenges students undergo pursuing higher education and barriers they face post-justice-involvement have correlated to negative student experiences and low completion and degree attainment rates (Johnson, 2021; McTier et al., 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Yucel, 2022).

Academics are a core component of pursuing higher education and degree completion. With varied educational backgrounds, students who have transitioned into a collegiate classroom post-justice-involvement have explained the campus culture and academic experience is a culture shock due to the intense academic rigor and lack of familiarity (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Strayhorn et al. (2013) noted Black students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement are more likely to have educational gaps because of the high incarceration rate which disproportionally effects Black individuals (p. 77).

Adjusting to a classroom or college campus post-justice-involvement, with a lack of familiarity with the campus environment and no recent educational experience are impact factors that play a role in students' transition. The vigorous academic experiences along with the struggles to adjust to the classroom and campus culture impacted students' ability to excel in their courses and search for support services (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Livingston & Miller, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Yucel, 2022).

While some institutions provide targeted support(s) to help students personally, academic, and socially, there is a lack of targeted widespread resources exclusively for students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. Having a criminal record can also exclude individuals from receiving additional academic or transitional support resources made available to other students enrolled (Johnson, 2021). Trying to successfully re-integrate and navigate society, individuals also have many competing priorities outside of pursuing higher education such as finding stable employment, housing, familiar obligations, etc. Therefore, basic needs insecurities such as financial need, lack of housing, and employment have affected students' ability to provide for and take care of themselves and family while pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement (Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier et al., 2017; McTier et al., 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Yucel, 2022). Since each state and institution has varied resources, students with a criminal record have basic needs insecurities and endure many hurdles trying to receive financial assistance that can also be used for higher education and their personal lives (Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier et al., 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013). The lack of diverse and targeted support impacts students' ability to persist, succeed, and graduate post-justice-involvement.

Research Gap & Rationale of the Study

Literature has amplified the barriers individuals face navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement (Custer 2018; Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr. et al., 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Consequently, there is a lack of research studies that analyze the impact of criminal justice involvement in conjunction with individuals' other salient identities, such as race, and explore the dialectic of freedom post-justice-involvement. The barriers that individuals face post-justice-involvement have been highlighted in research, but scholars have not explored the ideology of freedom which is intrinsically connected to the intersections of race and justice-involvement. Scholars also do not interrogate the definitions and experiences of "freedom" post-justice-involvement beyond exploring the impact of race or identity based on physical or linear understandings. As a result, there is a need for more literature that exclusively explores Black individuals' ideology of freedom, the impact of race, and higher education experiences post-justice-involvement because they are all interconnected. Therefore, this study examined Black individuals' perspectives of freedom, analyzed the impact of identity, and explored their experiences pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. Conducting this CPAR study with Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system was instrumental to gather and analyze diverse experiences, perceptions, and worldviews to generate effective action-oriented recommendations that can be implemented in higher education and society. The findings of the study amplified Black individuals' needs post-justice-involvement, their understandings of freedom, and the experiences and impact of higher education post-justice-involvement. Furthermore, this study should influence more critical and participatory analyses of Black experiences post-justice-involvement and encourage the development of studies that examine the impact of justice-involvement, intersectional identities, and their interconnectedness within the societal systems and structures.

Theoretical Framework

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire (1970) overviewed the impact of identity for individuals who are marginalized in society such as Black and individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system (p. 48). Freire (1970) highlighted reality is socially constructed and people who experience oppression develop their perspective of society and how they are viewed (p. 104). The intersections of oppression can affect how people are perceived, treated, and what individuals have access to in society. The discourse about the philosophy and value of freedom has been dominated by scholars trying to define freedom and interrogate who is "eligible" to be free or who has freedom(s). The discussions and perspectives have explored both physical and psychological understandings of freedom but seldom acknowledge the ontology of freedom and how Black individuals socially construct freedom post-justice-involvement. Using Freire's (1970) ideology illustrating oppression prevents marginalized individuals from having access to their humanity and human rights, is foundational to analyze Black individuals' ideology of freedom and their perspectives of freedom post-justice-involvement.

Freire (1970) also stated individuals who experience oppression are on a quest for freedom and emphasized education has liberatory properties which helps individuals become more humanized (p. 81). Freire (1970) underscored using education as an avenue for humanization aids individuals when pursuing freedom. Freire (1970) also advocated for education reform to better serve oppressed people to help them become more "free" (p. 93). In congruence with Freire's perspective (1970), multiple research studies have acknowledged how impactful education is and the numerous benefits for students in prison and post-justice-involvement (Baranager et al, 2018; Chesnut et al., 2022; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023). To explore the liberatory properties of education, this study examined the experiences and impact of

higher education for Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement and includes recommendations to advocate for educational reform.

Relevant Theories: The Theory of Intersectionality

The framework of intersectionality was foundational to this study to analyze the impact of identity and race amongst the participants other salient identities. The theory of intersectionality explores the impact of identity and how it helps construct self-perception and worldviews (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Using intersectionality as a foundational framework in this study acknowledged the impact of Black individuals' intersectional identities in relation to their experiences in higher education, how they socially construct their worldviews, and navigate society post-justice-involvement. Moreover, this study explored how Black individuals analyze their intersectional identity and perceive their intersectional identity impacts their experiences.

Research also underscored Black women, Black people who are a part of the LGBTQIA community, and Black individuals that have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system are privy to mistreatment, stereotyping, and discrimination because of their intersecting identities (Livingston & Miller, 2014; Potter, 2015; Williams et al., 2019). As a result of Blackness being heavily politicized and victimized, the presence of other marginal identities such as gender, socioeconomic status, justice-involvement, etc. influence how individuals are viewed, treated, and conceptualize freedom. Freedom has been illustrated in research as unattainable, unactualized, and questionable for Black people because of the history of enslavement and its collateral effects such as anti-Black racism, discrimination, and Black deprivation (Davis, 2016; Walcott, 2021). Additionally, having a justice-involved background can influence and change Black individuals' ideology and definition of freedom both physically

and/or theoretically especially post-justice-involvement. Therefore, this study explored Black individuals' ideology of freedom as an entry point to examine their perspectives of *freedom to* and *freedom from*, worldviews, and experiences in higher education and society post-justice-involvement.

Research Paradigm

Social constructivism was used as the research paradigm to frame the participants' experiences and interpret their constructed worldviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In social constructivism, a universal reality does not exist, but reality is constructed by human activity/engagement with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The social constructivist paradigm is most effective to attempt to disentangle, analyze, and understand the complexity of freedom, race, and the impact of domination from the participants. During the data collection, each of the participants reflected on their worldviews, interactions with others, and the environment to make meaning of their experiences.

Assumptions

The first assumption for this study was the idea that Black individuals have had experiences of oppression and marginalization in society and/or higher education post-justice-involvement that have altered their worldview and perspectives. This study explored participants' knowledge, understanding, and perspectives that have been affected by various life circumstances and environments. Additionally, this study also analyzed how experiences of marginalization and oppression has impacted each participant's experiences and development. Using social constructivism as a research paradigm was useful to acknowledge and assess how society, higher education environments, and carceral experiences have constructed their reality and perspectives.

Research studies have amplified being Black and post-justice-involvement causes individuals to be affected by various forms of domination and control (Johnson 2021; Okello, 2022; Potter, 2015; Sexton, 2015; Williams et al., 2019). In this study, it was assumed that each participant was affected by some form of domination and imperious control that has impacted their life and educational experiences post-justice-involvement. This assumption, supported by research, was necessary for the context of the study and is introductory to exploring the participants perceptions of freedom and how their intersectional identity has impacted navigating society and pursuing higher education.

In this study, there was also an assumption that each participant is enrolled in a college or university that has exclusionary, discriminatory, or gatekeeping practices and policies. Gatekeeping, exclusionary, and discriminatory policies in higher education have been prominent in most colleges and universities has affected students in higher education post-justice-involvement (Castro & Magana, 2020; Custer, 2016; Custer, 2018; McTier, 2017; McTier et al., 2020). The findings of the study illustrated Black individuals' experiences in higher post-justice-involvement, exposed exclusionary and discriminatory policies, and revealed the personal effects of these policies in higher education.

Participant Demographics

This study centered five Black individuals' experiences to analyze their ideologies of freedom and the impact of intersectional identities navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement. All Black individuals were 18 years or older, completed at least six months of any court-ordered mandatory supervision, and were pursuing higher education or recently graduated from a degree program post-release between 2015-spring 2023. Most of the participants also identified as men and were formerly incarcerated. Pursuing higher education in

this study also referred to individuals currently enrolled in a postsecondary degree program or have taken at least three postsecondary courses on a college or university campus post-justice-involvement. Majority of the participants were pursing graduate degrees and also had experiences working in higher education as a student or after degree attainment.

Methods & Procedures

Data for this study was collected from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. The focus groups and interviews were opportunities to explore perspectives of freedom, the impact of identity, and experiences pursuing higher education. Each co-researcher also participated in a semi-structured interview and helped conduct the focus groups if they were not a participant in the focus group. All individuals involved in the study, including the co-researchers, answered a journal prompt before engagement in the focus group or interviews. The journal prompt was used as a tool to prompt reflection about the impact of their identity and what freedom means to them as Black individuals navigation society post-justice-involvement. The data collection procedures required rich participation and are further outlined in chapter three.

Dialectical Thinking & Data Analysis

In the *Dialectic of Freedom* Greene (1988) overviewed her Marx inspired perspective of both negative (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to) (p. 38). Greene (1988) specified individuals' quest toward positive freedom (freedom to), the ability to be authentically themselves and live determined lives, not solely based on consumerism (p. 83). However, Greene (1988) acknowledged deeply rooted inequities in society that challenges the ability for all individuals to have total liberation or feel fully free (p. 83). Greene (1988) described negative freedom (freedom from) as the ability to be free from oppression and domination (p. 38). Based on Greene's (1988) perspectives of the dialectic of freedom, the participants' ideals and

experiences of both ‘freedom to’ and ‘freedom from’ were explored. Greene (1988) amplified the need for questioning, challenging, and creating a synthesis. Dialectical thinking was used to deconstruct the linear ideology of freedom and investigate the interconnected relationship of race, freedom, and domination post-justice-involvement.

When exploring the dialectic of freedom, it was essential to have Black individuals directly impacted by in the criminal justice system involved in the data collection, data analysis, and curating the recommendations. The data analysis procedures for this study included first and second cycle coding, examining patterns, thinking diffractively, conducting a thematic analysis to generate findings, and developing practical policy recommendations and implications for future research. The co-researchers analyzed the participants’ narratives and reflections on Blackness, freedom, and experiences in higher education and society. After data analysis was complete, the participants had an opportunity to review the findings, confirm the accuracy of their narratives, and refine the recommendations. Each of the data collection and analysis procedures involved Black individuals with experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement and more detailed information about the methodological processes and procedures are included in chapter three.

Nature of the Study & Methodological Rationale

Research has been an avenue to explore Black student experiences, Black justice-involved student experiences, and the impact of anti-Blackness in higher education (Dumas, 2015; Harper et al., 2009; Griffith et al., 2017; Haynes et al., 2019; Morales, 2014; Mustaffa, 2017; Sulé et al., 2022). Consequently, these studies about Black or any justice-involved student experiences rarely include justice-involved individuals in the design, execution, or analysis of the study. Although studies have been qualitative and included narratives from individuals

navigating society post-justice-involvement, the participants have been situated as the object of study (Abeyta, 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023). When individuals are positioned as the object of the study, they lack agency to share insight outside of data collection and fully be immersed in the study and curate the findings and recommendations. Therefore, this study utilized a qualitative inquiry and a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) framework to engage communities impacted by the research phenomena. CPAR was applied as a framework to thoroughly explore Black individuals' various educational and other experiences after criminal justice involvement with them as both co-researchers and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014). The rationale for the chosen approach was to engage in ethical research practices and center Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system to amplify experiences, illuminate insights, and generate action-oriented recommendations for practical and policy change. Ethical research practices are inclusive, affirm, and aim to give agency to all participants engaged in the study. Using CPAR research practices allowed each participant and co-researcher to lean in and learn, contribute, reflect, and advocate for social change as a collective (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014).

Scope of the Study

This study explored the complexity of identity for Black individuals, ideologies of freedom, experiences in higher education, and the impact of domination post-justice-involvement. This study was limited to the examination of higher education experiences and navigating society after criminal justice involvement. The scope of the study did include an analysis of employment experiences outside of higher education post-release or educational experiences while incarcerated. Additionally, the comparison of non-carceral and carceral higher

education experiences was also not within the scope of the study because each participant had not been enrolled in a higher education in prison program. This study also did not include an analysis of the impact of socioeconomic status or educational background before criminal justice involvement. While socioeconomic status and educational background are relevant to each participant's experiences, it is not within the scope of this study.

Race is one boundary of the study. Because the study solely analyzed Black individuals' experiences, identifying as a Black individual is essential to the study. Although all the participants identified as Black, they had different backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable for all Black individual's post-justice-involvement. Criminal justice involvement is broad, and an individual's background and post-justice-involvement experiences can impact their future in different ways regardless of their race. In addition, each participant possessed various intersectional identities, qualities, and skill sets which also affects their future post-justice-involvement.

Limitations

Black individuals do not have monolithic experiences. The findings of this study should not be used to nullify various backgrounds and experiences when generating a collective final narrative. Moreover, being Black and having prior engagement with the criminal justice system cannot be adequately captured by this study alone. Additionally, each of the participants spent different amounts of time incarcerated which also impacts their experiences post-justice-involvement. However, having a diverse group of participants generated a variety of perspectives in hopes of developing effective practical and policy implications to serve students with lived experiences in the carceral system. Another limitation of this study was the various amounts of time the participants have been pursuing postsecondary education or navigating society post-

justice-involvement which influences their perspective and experiences. To be eligible for the study, all participants were required to be enrolled in higher education for at least six months or have graduated from a non-carceral campus between 2015-spring 2023. Because of the six-month education requirement, the participants in the study have been post-justice-involvement for at least six months. Nevertheless, any amount of time an individual has been pursuing higher education or navigating society post-justice-involvement can impact their perceptions, worldviews, and ideology of freedom.

Significance

Research has progressed to identify the value of higher education for individuals in both non-carceral and carceral educational environments. More research has also helped develop and advance higher education initiatives created to serve students post-justice-involvement. As legislation continues to expand to eliminate barriers for students with justice-involvement backgrounds, the recommendations and findings of the study should be used as another tool to advocate for accessibility and the development of targeted support resources intended to increase enrollment, positive experiences, and degree or credential attainment. Black student experiences post-justice-involvement have been under-researched, and Black individuals are seldom involved in research processes and studies. This study is significant because it utilized a CPAR framework to address content and methodological gaps in literature. Examining Black individuals' experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement in a nuanced way that incorporates individuals with lived experiences, analyzes intersectionality, and explores the dialectic of freedom is a unique contribution to literature.

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlights the purpose, overviews the rationale, and summarizes foundational research and research procedures for this study. Research emphasized Black students commonly experience marginalization because of their background and intersectional identities which challenges linear and transactional ideologies of restoration, access, and freedom post-justice-involvement. Nevertheless, Black individuals have additional and nuanced challenges pursuing higher post-justice-involvement that are not commonly acknowledged in research. The need to analyze Black students' experiences and perceptions of freedom is critical with the rising numbers of Black individuals released from correctional facilities each year and pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. To support Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement, it is vital to understand their perspectives and reflections from various environment including navigating society and higher education. Therefore, this study analyzed the intersections of race and justice involvement, examined the participants' ideologies of freedom, and investigated the impact of identity by exploring Black individuals' experiences in societal, and educational environments post-justice-involvement. The next chapter establishes a robust literary foundation by summarizing relevant literature that includes various perspectives about freedom, Blackness, justice-involvement, and higher education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Black individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system experience intersectional oppression and domination because of their race and justice-involvement. Post-justice-involvement, Black individuals gain freedom in a physical sense, but they still experience oppression domination which provokes a further analysis of freedom physically, psychologically, and ontologically (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Denver, 2018; Williams et al., 2019). To aid individuals who experience marginalization, Freire (1970) theorized individuals who experience oppression are on a pursuit of freedom and engaging in education is a liberatory practice that helps individuals pursue both positive and negative freedom, *freedom to* and *freedom from* (Gould, 1978; Greene, 1988; Freire, 1970). Aligning with Freire's (1970) theory of education being related to liberation, findings from research studies revealed pursuing higher education has been illustrated as a liberatory and transformative experience which has opened doors of opportunity for all individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system (Baranager et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2015; Chesnut et al., 2022; Fine et al., 2001). Higher education has been valuable to help Black and justice-involved individuals economically advance and socially develop, but their experiences pursuing higher education unearthed anti-Black racism, systemic inequities, and white supremacy ingrained in the campus culture and policies (Castro et al, 2015; Custer, 2016; Custer, 2018; Dumas, 2015; Johnson, 2021; McTier Jr. et al., 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013; Rosenthal et, al., 2015; Weissman et al., 2010). This literature review examines interdisciplinary research about Black student experiences, individuals' experiences in higher education in prison and post-justice-involvement, exclusionary practices in society and in education that impacts justice-involved communities, and the value of higher education for marginalized communities. The research and literature selected explores various historic,

philosophical, and sociological perspectives about the ideology and interconnectedness of freedom, *un*freedom, Blackness, higher education, and criminal justice involvement to frame this dissertation study.

Black People in America & Glimpses of Freedom in Legality: A Brief History

The complex relationship Black people in America have with freedom physically, psychologically, and ontologically cannot be grasped without acknowledging the history and effects of the transatlantic slave trade (Haynes & Bazner, 2019; Kendi, 2017; Taylor, 2016; Musolf & Denzin, 2017). The transatlantic slave trade began in the 1500s and is often referred to as an act of genocide (Kendi & Blain, 2022; Tuck, 2011). Millions of people of African descent were forced on European and American ships along transatlantic routes during the slave trade, and many individuals who were enslaved lived and died in bondage. The transatlantic slave trade exacerbated slavery in the United States and continued after the slave trade was outlawed in the 1800s (Kendi & Blain, 2022; Smallwood, 2009). Although the slave trade was prohibited in the United States, Congress did not end domestic slavery and legislation justified acts of violence and civil mistreatment in society based on race (Tuck, 2011). The enslaved state Black individuals remained in after the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed cultivated an inhumane view of Black people and impacted how Black people conceptualized and experienced freedom. Because slavery was so prevalent in Europe and the United States it stripped Black people of their humanity and impacted their ability to see themselves beyond enslavement. The long period of enslavement in the United States altered Black individuals' identity from a human being to a piece of property (Kendi, 2017; Taylor, 2016; Wilkerson, 2020). Black individuals who were enslaved were viewed as animalistic, aggressive, inhumane, and treated as dispensable (Kendi & Blain, 2022). The power and control "owners" had over Black people who were enslaved kept

them bound mentally, physically, and economically. As a result, legislation was created to liberate Black people who were enslaved. The first proclamation to "end" slavery was the Emancipation Proclamation, signed on January 1, 1863, by Abraham Lincoln (Wong, 2009). The executive order was an official order that "freed" people who were enslaved in states that succeeded from the United States. After the Civil War ended, the Constitution was ratified with the 13th amendment in December 1865 (Wong, 2009). The 13th amendment "abolished" slavery and prohibited involuntary servitude in the United States (Carter, 2007). Although individuals that were enslaved had new "freedom," they still did not have all access, rights, and privileges like white men. And new legislation did not restore humanity or change how Black people were perceived.

The Emancipation Proclamation and 13th amendment have been commonly framed as the inauguration of freedom for Black people in the United States (Woog, 2009, p. 1). Scholars have examined each legislative document to identify the purpose, explore the legal implications, and analyze the ambiguous language. Gabbard et al., (2007) pointed out that the intent of the Emancipation Proclamation was for military strategy and not to liberate all Black people who were enslaved which is why it included an exemption to keep individuals in bondage in border states and the "union-occupied portions of the Confederacy" (p. 67). Similarly, Carter (2007) analyzed the 13th amendment and argued the abolishment of slavery was a discretionary legislative decision based on the ambiguous language that states Congress has jurisdiction to define what is considered "badges and incidents of slavery" (p.1314). Revealing the performative intent of the legislative documents recognizes developing new legislation is sedentary and instigates further questioning about if Black people were ever supposed to be free from enslavement. Both the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th amendment were strategic ploys

to eliminate statutory barriers. But with embedded policies of confinement, the legal loopholes and equivocal language undermines the power of each document and emphasizes the continued (un)freedom rather than mark the beginning of freedom for Black individuals (Gabbard et al., 2007; Carter, 2007).

Freedom Fighting Past & Present

The 14th and 15th amendment were passed with a purpose to restore all liberties, privileges, and rights for people who were enslaved (U.S. Const. amend. XIV; U.S. Const. amend. XV). Consequently, with new outlined and "restored" constitutional "rights and liberties" Black people were still treated unequally (Cullors & Bandele, 2018; Kendi, 2017; Tuck, 2011). The reinstatement of rights and liberties for Black people that were established coincided with a lack of change and dismantling of systems of oppression which undermined their ability to actualize their rights and liberties (Kendi, 2017; Tuck, 2011; Williams, 2016). Legal slavery was abolished, but the subordinate perception of Black people was still embedded in the fabric of the United States which influenced new laws to keep Black people economically bound. Black codes and Jim Crow laws originated in the southern states and were used to enforce harsh punishments and inhibit Black people from buying property, receiving employment opportunities, and voting (Tuck, 2011). These statutes and laws limited the mobility of Black people. Additionally, segregation created more restrictions in most public places such as schools, restaurants, transportation, etc. Although, Black people had the same legal rights and liberties as white people, Black people still felt psychologically and physically bound based on the new ways they became institutionalized.

As a result of continued segregation and discrimination, Black communities began to speak out which led to the Civil Rights movement that began in 1954. The Civil Rights

movement was the apex of unified efforts to demand systemic change. (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). During the Civil Rights movement there were several organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Black Panther Party that employed different strategies and approaches Black communities used to advocate for change (*Groups during the American Civil Rights Movement*). Amongst diverse approaches and strategies, scholars highlighted the importance of the Black Power ideology during the civil rights movement (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; Williams, 2016). Embedded in the Black Power ideology was the reclamation of power and advocacy for societal reform and Black liberation. The Black Power ideology also emphasized self-emancipation and the value of freeing oneself psychologically. Adopting the self-emancipatory mindset helped Black people persist in their advocacy efforts to make their demands reality (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; Williams, 2016). Furthermore social, economic, radical transformation, Black pride, self-determination, and unity were core tenets of the Black liberation movement and were fundamental to advocacy initiatives and collective activism (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020, p. 49).

Black unity and persistent activism during the Civil Rights movement influenced the illegalization of segregation in public schools with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the creation of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Tuck, 2011; Winquist, 1958). With the eradication of legal discrimination practices, scholars illustrated the Civil Rights movement increased Black individuals' positive freedom—access, privileges, and rights (Kendi & Blain, 2022; Tuck, 2011). The Civil Rights movement was an important period in history because of the unified advocacy efforts of Black individuals and targeted policy change to address racism and

discrimination; however, the analysis of the Civil Rights movement differentiates from a legislative turning point in history to examining inert change (Theoharis, 2018). The Civil Rights era is commonly framed in literature as the beginning of a progressive era and seldom addresses the continued unfreedom for Black people (Theoharis, 2018; Walcott, 2021). The idea of racial progression does not exist without the eradication of white supremacy and the systems that perpetuate and inhibit radical change. Seamster and Ray (2018) interrogated the idea of racial progression by acknowledging individuals live in a racialized social system and challenged scholars to see race and racial hierarchy as fundamental (p. 336). Legislative initiatives to aid Black people in their plight to freedom and systematic issues that perpetuate anti-Black racism continue to coexist because of the pervasiveness of white supremacy. And the pervasiveness of white supremacy has continued to incite freedom fighting and continued activism.

Post-Civil Rights Era

Amid the wars and colonization in Africa in the 20th century, Fujino and Harmachis (2020) explained there was an outcry for unity among Black people in the United States and Black people in the African Diaspora (p. 119). Pan-Africanism, illuminated by Marcus Garvey and W.E.B Dubois in the early 1920s, was viewed as revolutionary and became an extension of the Black liberation movement in the United States (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). In one of his speeches, Kwame Ture, formerly known as Stokely Carmichael, underscored the ideological evolution from civil rights to Black panther party to Pan-Africanism (Carmichael, 1971; Carmichael & Nkrumah, 1971). Ture's leadership, influence, and evolved thinking led to the creation of new guiding principles advocating for the decolonization of Africa, freedom, unity, and solidarity of all individuals of African descent in the United States and globally (Carmichael, 1971; Carmichael & Ture, 1997; Karenga, 1997). Black leaders in the United States started

engaging in political efforts to support and advocate for Black people in the African diaspora. The second Pan-Africanism movement began in the late 1970s and redefined Black unity after the Civil Rights movement (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). The collective advocacy efforts were effective and during the second Pan-Africanism movement Black people in the United States also embraced African culture in art and traditions. The reclamation of African culture enmeshed with Black pride cultivated Black people's sense of self and values.

The unity of Black communities during the Pan-Africanism movements and the economic progression post-civil rights movement were viewed as threatening which inspired objectives to demolish Black communities (Hinton & Cook, 2020). Racial profiling and hyper-policing became more prevalent in the 1980s and surged in the 1990s targeting Black communities nationwide (Hinton & Cook, 2020). What started as a federal initiative to decrease drug use and distribution in the United States, the War on Drugs from 1979-1984 exacerbated the Black communities' involvement with the criminal justice system (Small, 2001). The police presence and activity increased in Black communities and caused more reprimands, raids, and arrests. And Black people were commonly viewed as the offender(s) regardless of the actions that took place (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Policing as a practice and divisive tactics used by the police were directly correlated to the obliteration of Black families, neighborhoods, and communities. Racial profiling and hyper-policing also resulted in Black individuals' increased engagement with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. The Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, and the 1994 Crime Bill also encouraged law enforcement to continue targeting Black communities and created new mandatory sentences (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). As a result, Black people received harsher consequences, longer sentences, and no due process (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011; Small, 2001).

The proliferation of policing in predominantly Black communities also led to more police brutality (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Hinton & Cook, 2020). The publicized beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the acquittal of police officers involved in 1992 re-ignited protests and advocacy efforts in Los Angeles and nationally (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). The senseless violence was incomprehensible and negatively impacted Black individuals' view of law enforcement. The advocacy and activism efforts against police brutality were an outcry to influence law enforcement to take accountability and abolish violent approaches used to confront Black people. The murder of Rodney King was another significant realization that Black people were still institutionalized after the civil rights era.

Scholars have acknowledged Black people's polarized view of law enforcement is correlated to the history of legal injustice, policy brutality, and racial profiling which expose anti-Black racism embedded in the criminal justice system (Baldwin, 2018; Chaney & Robertson, 2015). Scholars have examined Black people's perception of law enforcement in comparison to white people and revealed Black people have less faith in law enforcement because of their personal experiences and public instances of racial profiling, police brutality, and injustice in legal proceedings and rulings (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Hueber et al., 2004; Nadal & Davidoff, 2015; Nadal et al., 2017). The findings of these studies indicated the lack of trust and skepticism Black people have in law enforcement continues to shape the turbulent relationship Black communities have with police and the criminal justice system. The lack of trust, faith, and confidence Black people have in law enforcement is important to emphasize because it is contextual to their resistance towards law enforcement.

Because of police brutality, racial profiling, and targeted violence towards Black communities, Black people have tried to resist and evade engaging with law enforcement by

fleeing. The self-emancipatory Black Power ideology aligns with the philosophy of actively resisting and fleeing from forces of domination. Black people leveraging their autonomy to flee from forces of control, despite the potential harm and consequences, is a physical actualization of self-emancipation. Fujino & Harmachis (2020) grappled with the term and meaning of fugitivity while exploring the lives of many who were victims of violence and fled (Assata Shakur, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Black Panthers, etc.). There are liberatory properties that exist in fugitivity that Black people do not experience living in the United States because of anti-Black racism, oppression, and Black deprivation. Fujino & Harmachis (2020) contested the negative connotations of being a fugitive and explored the idea of being free from (capitalism, oppression, and the law) while also balancing hysteria and fear. Hysteria and fear are mental implications of domination and control that have impacted Black people who fled (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). Fujino & Harmachis's (2020) viewpoints on fugitivity and freedom amplified the dual realities of being a Black person living in the United States trying to escape the violence while knowing there is no "safe haven" for Black individuals to be free from domination psychologically.

Despite systemic racism and the continued negative experiences of Black people trying to survive amid the eternal cycle of oppression through each era, the "post-racial" era was coined after former President Barack Obama was elected in 2008 (Dawson & Bobo, 2009). The election of a Black man as President of the United States, was viewed as a turning point in history and the beginning of a new era which sparked critical analyses of existing social and systemic issues. Dawson and Bobo (2009) compiled and analyzed interdisciplinary media and literature one year later (2009) revealing concurrent issues such as racialized workplaces, mass incarceration, declining education achievement levels for Black children, immigration, and political unrest (p. 247 - 249). Having President Barack Obama, a Black man, in office as president did not

eradicate the systems of oppression or societal issues with anti-Black racism at the crux. Davis (2016) also underscored the dichotomy of being in a "post-racial" era and living in the height of senseless murder by law enforcement and reoccurring police brutality which inspired the Black Lives Matter Movement (p. 84 – p. 86). The Black Lives Matter movement began during President Obama's tenure as a protest for justice in direct response to the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 (Cullors & Bandele, 2018). The creators of the Black Lives Matter movement, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi stated the mission of the movement is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene when violence is inflicted on Black communities (Cullors & Bandele, 2018). Developed during 2013 and 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement was a platform for organizing with aims to affirm Black humanity, contributions, and resilience (*Herstory*, Black Lives Matter). The Black Lives Matter movement has mirrored other freedom fighting movements and amplified the intergenerational plight toward Black liberation. Despite the mistreatment during and post enslavement, Black people in America have tried to forge a path to freedom physically and mentally. Overviewing the historical and current plight toward freedom is foundational to understanding the ideology of freedom for Black individuals.

Exploring Black(ness) & (Un)freedom in Research

Research and literature about Black people and freedom in America have been polarized. Some literature has solely focused on the increased access, rights, and privileges that changed during freedom fighting movements, and other researchers have drawn attention to Black people consistently fighting to restore their humanity (Bobo, 2011; Davis, 2016; Rose, 2018; Smith & Harris, 2023; Tuck, 2011; Williams, 2016). Both perspectives are interrelated and coexist with each other. The reinstated rights and privileges are directly related to consistent organizing and

activism; however, the restoration and ideology of humanity for Black people is the underlying issue that remains unchanged because of legislation and new policies. Scholars have highlighted the impact of reinstated rights, privileges, and new legislation, but seldom address whiteness as a conduit of social order (Seamster & Ray, 2018). The lack of viewing systemic racism as a demonstration of societal structure in research limits the understanding of the breadth, depth, and operationalization of white supremacy in the United States. Haynes et al., (2019) overviewed the need for Black liberatory research and used the term Black liberation to center Black people's humanity as well as emphasize how the promise of freedom outlined in the United States Constitution excluded Black people (p. 1069).

Theorizing Freedom

There are multiple philosophies and perspectives such as humanism, structuralism, and poststructuralism that illustrate different implications of language and meanings of freedom. Humanism is defined as "something, essential, and universal, with a defining quality that is shared by everyone, despite race, class or gender" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021, p. 69). Humanist perspectives illustrate linear, universal, and unchanging meanings of terms and emphasize language was made up of ideals disconnected from the world or social structures (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). The linear understanding of freedom does not acknowledge white supremacy and anti-Blackness which creates a nuanced and complex understanding of freedom for nonwhite individuals. Additionally, the linear view of freedom only acknowledges physical implications of freedom and does not address the conceptual, psychological, and ontological facets of freedom. Structuralism challenges the universal framing of terms and theorizing language disconnected from social structures (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Structuralists "analyze the world in terms of locating and describing permanent" and view language as connected to the structure of society

(Jackson & Mazzei, 2021, p. 70). This perspective acknowledges the existence of social stratification and structures that individuals inhabit which is produced by language. Advancing this perspective and framing language as active and produces order, the poststructuralism perspective deconstructs linear meanings, and opens up the possibilities of language by reconstructing coherent structures as situational, contingent, and historical (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Aligning with structuralists and poststructuralists perspectives, researchers have amplified that freedom is not a collective experience nor does it have a universal or linear understanding (Boltanski, 2021; Malaeb, 2021; Walcott, 2021). Freedom as a term and individuals' ideology of freedom is socially constructed yet is narrowly described, referenced, or examined in research (Malaeb, 2021).

Freedom for Black people in America has been frequently analyzed through a physical, linear, and transactional sense such as increased labor market access (employability) and economic accessibility and advancement (ability to own and contribute to society) (Walcott, 2021). Walcott (2021) explained Black freedom is beyond the scope of our imagination, it is a radical reordering phenomenon, and encompasses nuanced ways of being (p. 5). Consequently, Black freedom has been conceptualized exclusively as relational to enslavement and judicial, which constrains the understanding of the capabilities of freedom. To advance scholarship and theorize Black freedom as boundless, scholars have used Afrofuturism to expand linear thinking (Scott, 2021). Intersecting art, literature, scientific research and practice, technology, futurism, and race, Afrofuturism gives agency to Black people to use their "truth" and experiences to weave together a positive view of Blackness, reimagine freedom, and conceptualize a future that is not connected to enslavement or defined by whiteness (Anderson, 2016; Eshun, 2003; Scott, 2021, p. 140). The concept of Afrofuturism has expanded to a radical literary practice that

challenges contemporary and concrete ideologies of freedom by conceptualizing freedom with ontological implications. Analyzing and conceptualizing freedom as ontological centers the interrelationship of identity, knowing, experiencing, and being (Stewart & Haynes, 2019; Walcott 2021).

Black Truth: Knowing & Being

Ontology and epistemology have used in research to inform methods and analyze data to examine being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology). Ontology and epistemology have often been separated or not explored in relation to each other (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Exploring knowing and being as separate concepts does not acknowledge how individuals actively construct knowledge by their experiences in relation with their environment, worldviews, perspectives, and beliefs. Scholars like Barad have provided critiques of the practice of theorizing ethics, knowing, and being as disconnected from each other (Barad, 2007). Barad emphasized the value of viewing ontology and knowing as one concept because of how individuals co-constitute the world (Barad, 2007, p. 90). Barad stated, "We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 185). The concept of onto-epistemology underscores there is knowledge that is interrelated to and extracted in and from 'being' and emphasizes the 'what' that is being research is interconnected to how it's being researched (Barad, 2007; Jackson & Mazzei, 2021, p. 116). This framing is important because it interrogates the knowledge making process and reframes what is constituted as knowledge.

Ladner and Walters (1973) described "Black Truth" as a knowledge that goes beyond academic insights and amplifies the value of using "living while Black" experiences to add real-world context when researching about Black experiences (p. 152). Black Truth has been used as

an entry point to explore Black individuals' experiences in America (Hartman, 2019; Okello et al., 2022; Okello, 2022). Ladner and Walters's (1973) definition of Black Truth framed Black experiences as essential to research because it examines how anti-Blackness and Black deprivation is exhibited. Using Black Truth as an entry point in research helps adequately analyze the impact of race and how it influences individuals' worldview and experiences.

Embodied knowing is a component of Black Truth and incorporates knowledge gained through physical observations (sound, look, and feeling) (Okello, 2022). Like onto-epistemology, this concept of viewing experiences as a form of knowledge is important and is a unique contribution that reconstructs what is cogitated as knowledge. Okello (2022) used his "Black Truth," and embodied racialized experiences, "living while Black," to emphasize how whiteness is viewed as a conduit of social order (p. 8). Examining how Black people socially construct their worldview(s), self-perception, and make meaning of their racialized experiences exposes the connections and impact of their identity in relation to systems of oppression. Analyzing different situations using embodied knowing as an entry point, Okello (2022) illustrated Blackness is still viewed as inferior and highlighted how much anti-Black racism and oppression have influenced how Black people view the world, think of themselves, and what they experience in society (p. 8). Okello (2022) concluded by discussing the interconnectedness of anti-Blackness, generational oppression, and violence which has adverse psychological effects that impact Black people's psyche and worldviews (p. 5).

Blackness is situated at the crux of interrelated systems that operate to restrict and confine Black people physically, economically, and mentally (Carruthers, 2019; Okello, 2022; Taylor, 2016). As a result, Black people in America have internalized carcerality and the ongoing cycle of *mental* incarceration is perpetuated by slavery by other names (school-to-prison

pipeline, mass incarceration, discrimination, police brutality, etc.). Okello (2022) underscored that carcerality has psychological properties that are independent of any physical context (p. 5). Viewing internalized carcerality as contextual to Black people's worldviews acknowledges the psychological implications bondage. Exploring the physical, psychological, and embodied effects of Black individuals' experiences is vital and amplifies how important it is to use various ways of knowing to analyze Black freedom, the impact of race, and the effects of anti-Blackness and Black deprivation.

Collateral Effects of Slavery

Research has amplified anti-Blackness and Black deprivation are all collateral effects of slavery (Carruthers, 2018; Dumas, 2016; Haynes et al., 2019; Taylor, 2016; Walcott, 2021). Anti-Blackness is defined as a "system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people" (Carruthers, 2018 p. 26; Haynes et al., 2019). Taylor (2016) expressed that Black deprivation is the manifestation of institutional and structural anti-Blackness that entrenches Black people in the 'culture of poverty,' placing them on the bottom of scales used to measure national and institutional economic, educational, and health outcomes (p. 9). Anti-Blackness and Black deprivation have impacted Black individuals' ideologies of freedom and have impacted how Black people view themselves and conceptualize what is accessible to them (Taylor, 2016; Haynes et al., 2019; Stewart & Haynes, 2019). The theories and implications of anti-Blackness and Black deprivation reveal the fragility of humanity of Black people and the systems that seek to eradicate it. Walcott (2021) used the term Black-life forms to capture the essence of Black individuals residing in America as an entity more than a [human] being due to the deeply rooted anti-Blackness, violence, and discrimination in the United States (p. 9). Blackness has been centered in research as the issue, but the problem is not

just race. Therefore, researchers have advocated to center anti-Blackness or Black deprivation as the research phenomenon instead of Black people or Blackness to focus on the problem and how it manifests (Dumas, 2016; Haynes et al., 2019; Mustaffa, 2017; Stewart & Haynes, 2019).

Assessing the Relationship Between Race and Crime

Understanding the effects of anti-Black racism and Black deprivation is vital when examining race and crime. Although every citizen is subject to the *rule of law*, criminology statistics and research show clear racial profiling and discrimination against Black people (Ayers & Borowsky, 2008; Lantz et al., 2021). Relative to white individuals, Black people are 127% more likely to be frisked, 76% more likely to be searched, and 29% more likely to be arrested when stopped (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). As a result, there are more Black people who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system because of the prejudice against them. In 2021, the Black male incarceration rate was six times higher than white males and the incarceration rate for Black women is nearly two times higher than white women (Ghandnoosh, 2023). Black people only make up 13% of the United States population; yet Black people make up over 30% of all arrests (Beck, 2021). The statistics reveal the effects of hyper policing, racial profiling, and the impact of anti-Black racism in the criminal justice system. Criminology literature has amplified racial disparities within the criminal justice system and the need for research centering Black people and their experiences with law enforcement (Lantz et al., 2021; Lohner, 2007; Unnever & Gabbidon 2011).

Interdisciplinary research has interrogated the imbalanced relationship between Black people and the criminal justice system. When examining the relationship of race, crime, and justice-involvement, scholars discovered a correlation between Black people's perceptions of the criminal justice system/law enforcement and crime (Ayers & Borosky, 2008; Lantz et al., 2021;

Lohner, 2007; Small, 2001). Rose (2018) highlighted "the United States police continue to violate the Constitutional rights of Black people with impunity" (p. 10). Feeling inferior, disrespected, or receiving unfair treatment causes emotional responses which can escalate into action or perceived violence in which law enforcement is then engaged (Lantz et al., 2021). Rose (2018) argued police abolition is necessary for Black lives to matter and amplified the need for Restorative and Transformative Justice to reform the criminal justice system, reframe the ideology of Black people, and force the United States to address anti-Black racism. Restorative and Transformative justice approaches incorporate rehabilitative healing practices and seek to hold law enforcement accountable to restore agency to Black communities who live under the control of the police (Rose, 2018). This action-oriented and practical approach centers humanity by integrating holistic care, equity, empathy, and will affect how law enforcement engages with Black individuals.

Carcerality Continued: Power & Control

Over 600,000 individuals are released from prison each year (Sawyer, 2022). While being released from a correctional facility is physical emancipation from carceral control, the locus of carceral control continues to influence individuals post justice-involvement (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2022; Pager, 2003; Williams et al., 2019). The mark of criminal justice involvement is not erasable and gatekeeping policies further oppress individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement (Custer, 2018; Pager, 2003). The consequences of being involved in the criminal justice system have affected individuals' ability to vote, access government support services, educational experiences, employment eligibility, and can include additional supervision (Custer, 2016; Custer, 2018; Goger et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2022; Pager,

2003). Furthermore, scholars emphasized once Black people become justice-involved they are more likely to experience stereotyping and marginalization because of their race and lived experiences in the carceral system which impacts their experiences post-justice-involvement (Livingston & Miller, 2014; Unnever, 2018). Acknowledging both race and criminal justice involvement as dually impacting is important to further analyze how race and criminal justice involvement are interrelated. Navigating society as a Black individual post-justice-involvement can be challenging trying to combat multiple systems of oppression. As a result, Black individuals have sought out resources and avenues of support to aid their reintegration journey post-justice-involvement. Furthermore, pursuing higher education has been useful to help Black individuals interpersonally develop and acquire employment skills to be successful post-justice-involvement (Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Transcending: Higher Education, Economic Mobility, & Liberation

Higher education and other postsecondary credentials have been illustrated as the new threshold to qualify for entry-level positions, career advancement, and economic mobility (Ma et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021). The value of higher education has been widely researched in addition to the assessment of return-on-investment and career earnings post-graduation. The research suggests higher education and degree attainment is essential for career advancement and higher paying jobs (Ma et al., 2019; Miller & Akabas, 2022; *Ranking 4,500 colleges by ROI,* 2022). With the economic benefits of postsecondary credentials, scholars have advocated for increased accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education to help more individuals economically advance and mobilize.

Higher education has become more accessible since the origin of American higher education due to affirmative action, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. With increased

access, Black people have used education as an avenue for better opportunities (Allen et al., 2018). Gaining access to higher education was revolutionary for Black individuals and made possible through the second Morrill Act of 1890. (26 Stat. 417; 7 U.S.C. §321 et seq.). Similarly, the development of Historically Black land grant institutions also increased Black student enrollment which generated more opportunities for social mobility and degree attainment. As the educational landscape changed due to the eradication of legal segregation in public schools and the favorable ruling in *Meredith v. Fair*, which constituted the denial of college admission based on race unconstitutional in 1962, Black people were permitted to attend all postsecondary institutions (*Meredith v. Fair*, 1962). Black student enrollment has continued to grow, and Black students currently make up nearly 15 percent of all college students (*Fact Sheets, Black Students in Higher Education,* 2022). With the rising numbers of Black student enrollment, postsecondary institutions have extended their reach to serve Black individuals more effectively from all backgrounds including Black students who are first-generation, low-income, adult learners, and justice-involved or post-justice-involvement.

Pursuing education has cultivated and developed students' ideologies, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills by encouraging individuals to reflect, learn, and challenge worldviews and perspectives (hooks, 1994). Haynes and Bazner (2019) emphasized educational environments that interrogate whiteness can be pedagogical sites for Black liberation (p. 1157). Framing education as an avenue for Black freedom is essential for social change and educational reform. Building on Haynes and Bazner's (2019) perspective, Kirkland (2021) described Black pedagogy as a "pedagogy for Black people that is useful for the social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and political emancipation of not only our bruised bodies but also our tethered souls" (p. 61). Black pedagogy is an emancipatory educational practical that aims to help Black people

feel more humanized, broaden their scope of thinking, and increase their opportunities to interpersonally develop (Haynes & Bazner, 2019; Kirkland, 2021). The advocacy to develop more courses that use Black pedagogy is imperative to create more educational environments that engage students and disrupt traditional pedagogical practices that reinforce whiteness (Haynes & Bazner, 2019; hooks, 1994).

Pursuing education has also been viewed as a transformative and liberatory experience for students and recognized in research as an opportunity to transcend sites of domination, specifically in correctional facilities (Binda et al.,2020). Educational programs in prison originated in the 18th century (Gehring, 1995). The purpose was to provide individuals who are incarcerated with religious education to aid their growth and development. Education in prison has increased opportunities for interpersonal and career development (Binda et al.,2020). As the population continued to grow in correctional facilities, educational programming expanded to serve more individuals. Vocational, basic adult education, general education development, and higher education programs were created and offered with the help of local educators (Gehring, 1995). The early twentieth century marked a time of rapid growth and establishment of higher education in prison programs nationwide (Gehring, 1997; Littlefield & Wolford, 1982; Wright, 2001). Although higher education in prison enrollment peaked in the mid-1990s, the revocation of federal funding in 1994 decreased enrollment, participation, and eliminated courses offered (Gehring, 1997; Gould, 2018; Wright, 2001). Because of the revocation of federal funding, local nonprofit organizations, colleges, and universities began to provide funding and resources to develop and continue offering postsecondary education courses in prison.

Postsecondary educational programs in prison have been rebuilt and reimagined to include vocational, adult education, associate, and bachelor's degree courses (Contardo &

Williams, 2010; Meyer et al., 2010). Through partnerships with nonprofit organizations, local colleges, and universities, the courses and degree programs have increased in capacity, and resources have been provided through grants and federal funding (Chesnut et al., 2022; Chesnut & Wachendorfer, 2021). The Second Chance Pell Experiment was introduced in 2015 with aims to expand access and further develop the educational landscape in prison after the revocation of Pell grant funding in 1994 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The initiative began in 2016 with 67 participant colleges and has expanded to nearly 200 programs to pilot the future reinstatement of Pell grant access (Chesnut & Wachendorfer, 2021). As a result of the added course offerings and diverse degree programs, enrollment has increased and students have earned over 7,000 credentials (Chesnut et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The success of the Second Chance Pell Experiment, along with the persistent advocacy of students, practitioners, and scholars influenced legislators to re-extend Pell grant access to students who are incarcerated in December 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The Second Chance Experiment has been impactful for students and allowed them to build their academic and vocational repertoire to help them gain skill sets needed for personal development, future employment, and community reintegration post-justice-involvement (Chesnut et al., 2022; Chesnut & Wachendorfer, 2021; Contardo & Williams, 2010). Additionally, the Second Chance Pell Experiment provided an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to generate best practices for Pell grant implementation in July 2023 and analyze the approaches, practices, and effectiveness of educational programming in prison (Chesnut et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Educational programs in prison programs have operated with a student-centered model and a strong focus on classroom engagement to achieve the mission of providing individuals

with interpersonal, academic, and career skills that will impact the trajectory of their life post-justice-involvement (Binda et. al, 2020; Sibley & Hoven, 2009). Most higher education in prison programs have a cohort model and classes are filled with a diverse group of people and consistent classroom engagement is a motivator for students (Binda et al.,2020). The classroom has been recognized as a sacred space and opportunity for individuals to engage freely despite the heavily controlled correctional environment. Beyond the classroom experience, students have continued to develop and share their insights with their communities inside and outside the correctional facility they reside (Wright, 2001). Educational programs have provided opportunities for individuals to be intellectually engaged with research, local community members, and has given individuals access to learn about topics of interest and current events in prison. The positive experiences shared by current and former students have correlated to the development and expansion of educational programming in prison (Baranger et al., 2018; Binda et al., 2020; Castro & Gould, 2019; Evans, 2018).

Education in prison has enriched individuals' experiences inside and outside of prison (Baranger et al., 2018; Evans, 2018; Gould, 2018; Torre & Fine, 2005). The impact of education goes beyond the walls of each facility. Education has been viewed and used as an opportunity to mentally escape from the carceral environment (Binda et al., 2020). Students who were in educational programs in prison have attributed the further development of their critical thinking, academic skills, and intellectual abilities to being engaged in educational courses (Baranger et. al, 2018). The opportunity to be heard, acknowledged, and challenged was appreciated by the students (Baranger et. al, 2018). Students who participated in education programs have built on their educational accomplishments as well as be change agents in their community's post-justice-involvement. Torre and Fine (2005) stated, after students were released, they were able to better

"recognize structural obstacles and discover personal and collective capacities to resist the obstacles" (p. 582). The positive student experiences shared by current and former students reflects how valuable and empowering intellectual engagement is which underscores the success of higher education prison programs (Binda et al., 2020; Evans, 2018).

Carceral Properties in Higher Education: Pursuing Higher Education Post-Justice-Involvement

Although education in prison has been viewed as an empowering, transformational, and liberatory experience, when individuals have continued higher education post-justice-involvement it is a culture shock and an immense challenge (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Johnson & Abreu, 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2020; Pager, 2003; Strayhorn et al., 2013). As a result of more individuals embarking on a postsecondary education journey post-justice-involvement, more research studies have examined individuals' prospective and on-campus student experiences to amplify their narratives and positive and negative student experiences. Colleges and universities have created rigid enrollment policies to which prospective students must adhere; however, there are additional admission policies that have hindered individuals with a criminal history to be accepted and enrolled (Castro & Magana, 2020; Custer, 2016; Custer, 2018; Ramaswany, 2014; Rosenthal et, al., 2015). Special Admission Process, often referred to as felony review procedures, were created to inquire about a student's criminal history and take a proactive approach to prevent crime (Custer, 2016; Dickerson, 2008; Ramaswany, 2014). When introduced, the felony review process intended to prevent future crime on campus by using a person's criminal history to determine future actions (Custer, 2016). Many states have admission policies that prevent individuals from applying without the disclosure of their criminal history, depending on their offense (Rosenthal et, al., 2015; Weissman et al., 2010). During the

enrollment process, students must await admission decisions and hope to be allowed to continue their education post-justice-involvement. Applicants with a criminal record are twice more likely to be rejected when applying to college (Stewart & Uggen, 2020). Felony review and criminal disclosure questions or processes have been challenged in both research and practice because they perpetuate a view that individuals should continue to be penalized because of their past actions and that their past actions are directly correlated to their future actions post-justice-involvement. Although the intent of Special Admission Process procedures was to keep campuses safe through exclusion, inquiring about criminal history hindered applicants and has been proven as an ineffective way to proactively prevent crime on campus. To offer blind or bias-free admissions for students with a criminal history, "*Ban the Box*" policies were created to omit any application questions that inquire about criminal history (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As a result, students with a criminal history have been able to apply without their previous experiences affecting their admission decisions. This decision influenced states such as Maryland, Louisiana, and Washington to pass laws prohibiting public universities to ask about criminal history on college applications in 2017 (Jaschik, 2017; Roll, 2016). The Common App also removed questions inquiring about prospective applicants' criminal history in 2018. The Ban the Box movement has been influential to reform admission policies (Jaschik, 2017).

Consequently, admission policies are just some of the exclusionary practices that have been changed for students with a criminal history. Having a criminal history can impact every aspect of the college experience including on campus experiences and engaging with other students after being admitted and enrolled (Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier et al., 2017). The rationale to limit or prevent student engagement for individuals with a criminal history on campus has been centered around campus safety (Castro & Magana,

2020; Custer, 2016). Safety became a prominent concern on college campuses because of the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act. P. L. 101-542. 20 U. S. C. § 1092. (1990) passed in 1990 (Janosik & Gregory, 2003). This legislation was a direct response to a murder in a college residence hall and now all colleges and universities are required to report all crimes on campus and make the reports accessible to the public (Janosik & Gregory, 2003). As colleges and universities have enhanced their safety protocols, they have also depicted individuals who have a criminal record as "threats" to safety which is exclusionary (Castro & Magana, 2020; Custer, 2016). This framing is inaccurate and problematic because it limits the accessibility of education and its benefits to specific populations and individuals who are deemed acceptable. As a result, restrictive on-campus policies for individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement have been acknowledged as structural barriers that inhibit success. Furthermore, the population of individuals who desire and pursue education post-justice-involvement has increased therefore these restrictions and the exclusionary rationales will restrict who can be admitted, attend, and will determine students' engagement on campus and/or which university support services and resources are accessible to students who are pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement.

Navigating the College Campus

Findings from research studies revealed students have a hard time integrating on campus post-justice-involvement (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Scholars have outlined the different challenges individuals face pursuing higher education with a criminal record such as adjusting to the academic rigor, expensive costs, and being denied admission, support services, and resources available to other students (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2020; McTier et al., 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2013). The combination of

navigating the campus, balancing their time, and the lack of support or resources has presented difficulties which has impacted academic performance, persistence, and completion. Because of the size of colleges and universities, being a new student has caused justice-involved students to be overwhelmed and feel ostracized (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr. et al.; Strayhorn et al., 2013). In addition, students have struggled to adjust to the academic rigor and course load while balancing employment or familiar priorities (Livingston & Miller, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Most individuals who are navigating society post-justice-involvement have focused on prioritizing employment, but the addition of college coursework and expensive educational costs are additional stressors (Livingston & Miller, 2014). Operating within the rules and regulations that limit engagement for students in higher education post-justice-involvement, they have been left to find innovative ways to try and connect with the campus community and seek out support resources (McTier Jr. et al., 2020; Johnson, 2021; Yucel, 2022). Depending on their criminal history, students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement can be barred from residence halls, have technology limitations, and have regulations for engaging with other students or participating in group activities and organizations which can impact their social experience (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2020).

Individuals' experiences pursing higher education post-justice-involvement are not monolithic, but many have challenges because their intersecting identities and lived experiences in the carceral system continue to impact them post-justice-involvement (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Strayhorn et al., 2013). College and university campuses have a variety of student demographics and there should not be practices, and procedures that inhibit students with diverse lived experiences and backgrounds (Morales, 2014; Museus & Griffin, 2011). Higher education scholars and stakeholders should move beyond the focus of simply acknowledging the difference

in experiences amongst students and begin eradicating the invisible barriers and policing policies that impact students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement.

To combat the exclusionary practices in higher education and influence retention and degree completion, colleges and universities have created reentry initiatives and targeted support services at colleges and universities to help students transition (Anderson et al., 2023; Yucel, 2022). Higher education systems in California have been committed to supporting individuals educational and reintegration journey. Universities in California developed transitional programs such as the Project Rebound Consortium and Rising Scholars Network: Justice-Involved Students. California AB 417. (2021) (Anderson et al., 2023; Yucel, 2022). Each program was established to supply wraparound services including mental health, transportation, employment assistance, housing, and legal resources for individuals transitioning post-justice-involvement. These resources were introduced to help individuals to build community, excel academically, and persist to graduation. Students have expressed how grateful they are for the programs and attribute their success post-justice-involvement to the resources (Yucel, 2022). To expand the campus-based reentry services, California created the *Rising Scholars Network: Justice-Involved Students Bill* in 2021 which allocates funding to aid the further development and sustainability of these programs (Yucel, 2022). Students' experiences pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement reveal many challenges that could be addressed by the development of universal targeted support services such as tuition waivers, housing, academic supports, scholarships, and on campus employment. Moreover, advocacy efforts have increased to continue to bring awareness to the challenges students face post-justice-involvement and call on universities to uphold their espoused values of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion (Anderson et al., 2023; Yucel, 2022).

“Measuring” Value: Education for Individuals in Prison and Post-justice-involvement

Higher education in prison research studies have focused on the positive benefits of education or include post-release numerical outcomes that assess the value of education in prison (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Kim & Clark, 2013). The MacCormack Survey conducted in 1928 was one of the first research studies which analyzed the impact and effects of prison education (Roberts, 1971). MacCormack’s (1971) findings and recommendations led to the creation of vocational and post-secondary academic programs. The MacCormack Survey and the results of multiple studies have suggested educational programs are transformative experiences for students pursuing education in prison (Baranger et al., 2018; Binda et al., 2020; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Roberts, 1971). The many benefits of completing an educational program include better psychological health, interpersonal development, and lower recidivism rates.

Recidivism is defined as the re-incarceration rate within three years of being released and has been used to advocate for educational programs in prison (Bhuller et al., 2016; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Kim & Clark, 2013). However, recidivism has been disputed as a useful assessment tool to measure the value and effectiveness of education for justice-involved students because of the emphasis on numerical data compared to the assessment of educational quality or benefits, identification of interpersonal benefits, or analysis of students’ perspectives or other reasons of why individuals recidivate (Gould, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022; Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Recidivism does not adequately measure the value of higher education in prison which has influenced researchers to expand their analysis to provide a more holistic view of the impact of pursuing higher education and obtaining postsecondary credentials. Therefore, other factors including job acquisition, continuing higher education post-release, interpersonal benefits, and student experiences have been used to

evaluate the value of higher education in prison (Baranger et al., 2018; Binda et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022).

Scholars have used qualitative and quantitative methods to assess and evaluate the impact of higher education in prison and post-justice-involvement (Baranger et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Fine et al., 2001; Kim & Clark, 2013). In conjunction with the numerical data, the inclusion positive student experiences from qualitative data have been used to illustrate the effects and benefits of higher education in prison and post-justice-involvement. The results and findings have attributed low recidivism rates, individuals' academic and economic success, and/or mental fortitude primarily to education and illustrated the impact and effects of education as more of a casual and not correlative relationship (Baranger et al., 2018; Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Gaes, 2008; Kim & Clark, 2013). Although education is a strong impact factor, there is less research that acknowledges the foundational skills, knowledge, cultural capital, and intellectual abilities that individuals in the carceral system already possess which also contributes to their interpersonal and academic success in prison and post-justice-involvement (Johnson & Manyweather, 2023). Conducting more critical analyses that seek to evaluate and interrogate the correlative and causal impact(s) of education would increase the existing knowledge and reveal vital information about the experiences, value, impact, and effectiveness of education for who and for whom in prison and post-justice-involvement.

Black Students' Experiences Pursuing Higher Education Post-justice-involvement

People with lived experiences in the carceral system do not have monolithic experiences pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement (Crenshaw, 1991; Mitchell et al., 2014; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Potter, 2015. Therefore, it is important to explore the intersections of identities such race, gender, age, etc., and justice-involvement and how intersectional identities

impact individuals' experiences. Research about individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement has begun to center Black individuals and examine their experiences in various institutional contexts (Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Strayhorn et al., (2013) emphasized the challenges of formerly incarcerated Black males (FIBMs) pursuing higher education at predominantly white universities (p. 73). The aims of the study were to amplify experiences of FIBM in research, examine the challenges they face, and explore what supports helps FIBM persist (p. 73). The findings revealed navigating higher education as a FIBM affected academic and social experiences, the difficulties of transitioning post-justice-involvement, value of support networks, and the power of resilience which helped students persist in higher education despite the challenges (Strayhorn et al., 2013). The participants in the study highlighted their adverse experiences of being stereotyped and verbally assaulted which impacted them but also motivated them to persist (p. 85). This study is foundational to understanding the challenges FIBM face and influenced more research to center Black student experiences post-justice-involvement. Although this study was conducted over ten years ago, recent research amplified the same challenges FIBM face post-justice-involvement (Johnson & Manyweather, 2023).

Relatedly, Johnson (2021) also explored Black student experiences pursuing higher education at predominantly white four-year universities. This dissertation examined how Black students experience a sense of belonging in higher education post-justice-involvement and analyzed the interconnections of race and criminalization (p. ii; 7). Similar to Strayhorn et al., (2013)'s study, the findings of the study highlight the unique challenges Black students with a criminal record faced such as feeling hypervisible, experiencing re-criminalization, and re-traumatization while pursuing higher education. Johnson (2021) amplified how the participants

did not feel like they belonged because of the marginalization they experienced and being in another system that perpetuates white supremacy. The findings and participant narratives outlined in the study draws attention to intersectionality and the ways in which Blackness and justice-involvement is dually impacting when pursuing higher education.

To advance research about Formerly Incarcerated Black Men (FIBM) pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement, Johnson and Manyweather (2023) explored the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men at community colleges to learn more about "how FIBM experience the college-going process to inform policy and practice aimed at broadening their participation and increasing their persistence" (p. 287). This study is a unique contribution to literature because it focuses on experiences in community colleges and used Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to challenge deficit framing to acknowledge various forms of FIBM have which is seldom recognized when exploring the experiences of individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The findings of the study amplified the participants' aspirations and conceptualizations of higher education as a transformational avenue of interpersonal, social, and economic mobility both in prison and post-justice-involvement. The study revealed the impact of support, resources, and transmitted knowledge that was instrumental in helping FIBM navigate the college campus and succeed in their educational endeavors.

These studies provide key insights about Black student experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement and advocate for more research and analyses that center Black students and advance current scholarship. The findings of these studies interrogate how Black students are analyzed in research, investigate the relationship of criminal justice involvement and higher education, emphasize the adverse challenges Black students face, and amplify structural barriers

and discriminatory policies (Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Although these studies acknowledge systemic racism, white supremacy, and the negative societal ideology of Black people, the studies do not provide further exploration of the ideology of humanity and freedom which are foundational when analyzing systems of oppression but are beyond the scope of these studies.

Chapter Summary

There is only a small body of research and literature that focuses exclusively on Black individuals' reintegration and higher education experiences post-justice involvement (Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Most literature about Black student experiences post-justice-involvement also does not analyze the dialectic of freedom nor their higher education experiences with Black individuals with lived experiences as co-constructors of knowledge. Scholars have used various methodologies and research approaches which have framed justice-involved individuals as the object of the study and do not prioritize the democratization of knowledge between researchers and individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system. The purpose of this social constructivist Critical Action Participatory Research (CPAR) study is to explore what *freedom* means to Black individuals post-justice-involvement, analyze the impact and complexity of identity, and explore their experiences in higher education. This study is also a unique methodological contribution to literature because it utilized a CPAR research design, unlike most research and literature about Black students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The inclusion and collaboration with Black individuals in higher education post-justice-involvement to analyze of the relationship of identity, freedom, and education in this study addresses the need for more critical studies about Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement. Employing ethical and action-

oriented research practices that center and engage individuals with lived experiences at the center is an impactful approach to prioritize equity in research and advocate for the eradication of barriers for Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement.

III. METHODS

Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement have nuanced challenges and experiences that are not widely acknowledged in research (Goger et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021; Williams et al., 2019). This study addresses the need to analyze Black individuals' experiences and worldviews amid the rising numbers of Black individuals re-entering their communities, pursuing higher education, and navigating society post-justice-involvement. This study utilized qualitative inquiry and a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) approach to engage Black individuals who are pursuing or graduated from higher education post-justice-involvement as co-constructors of knowledge to explore the relationship of freedom, domination, and education and examine the impact of intersectionality. The research questions for this study were "How do Black individuals define and experience freedom post-justice-involvement?" And "What are the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" The purpose of the study was to explore the dialectic of freedom, examine their experiences pursuing higher education, and analyze the impact of identity and education while navigating society as a Black individual, post-justice-involvement. Examining Black student experiences post-justice-involvement brought awareness to challenges they face and revealed exclusionary practices in higher education that further marginalize historically excluded students. This chapter overviews the methodology, research design, and data collection and analysis processes conducted. This chapter also shares how a (CPAR) approach was employed and describes the rationale for including Black individuals with lived experiences in the design, execution of the study, data analysis, and creating the recommendations.

Research Design: Background and Rationale

The foundational principles of CPAR originated from the development and expansion of action research. The creation of action research is attributed to Kurt Lewin, and it was transformational when established (Kemmis et al., 2014). Lewin defined action research as a cycle of planning, execution, observing, and re-planning, which is known as the 'self-reflective spiral' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 18). The self-reflective spiral was used as a reference to develop specialized procedures and various methods of action research. Although the 'self-reflective spiral' is not used broadly today, reflection is still a core component of action research. Unlike other research approaches, the purpose of developing and using action research was to involve the communities being researched in creating and executing research studies (Lewin, 1946). Lewin's concept of researching 'with' individuals being researched was foundational to many action research approaches later created. As a result, action research studies began to leverage participant engagement and experiences to create study findings with aims to revolutionize policies, practices, and society (Lewin, 1946; Kemmis et al., 2014). Since the creation of action research, other research approaches have further developed and include a participatory framework such as Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-Based participatory research (CBPR), and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) (Kemmis et al., 2014). Participatory and action research approaches have different processes, but all seek to collaboratively engage, center, and advocate with individuals proximate to the research phenomena to democratize research and construct actionable findings and recommendations.

Critical Participatory Action Research

Eurocentric research designs can act as a form of domination because of the extractive processes and non-inclusive or unethical procedures that situate individuals directly impacted by the research phenomena as objects of the study (Kemmis et al., 2014). To reform research

practices, activists and historically excluded communities amplified the need for inclusion and collaboration when conducting research about historically excluded communities (Fine & Torre, 2021). CPAR is a methodological approach that seeks to embrace community desires and incorporate them into a research framework (Fine & Torre, 2021). CPAR "refracts expertise so that those most adversely affected by structural violence are architects rather than objects of social inquiry" (Fine & Torre, 2004; Torre et al., 2017, p. 493). One of the core principles of CPAR is to amplify the experiences of individuals "living at the margins" (Fine & Torre, 2021, p.12). Because CPAR is considered a framework focused on social change and is "rooted in inquiry, community knowledge," studies that use CPAR have an interdisciplinary focus to examine the relationship of the phenomena being studied and the current social conditions (Fine & Torre, 2004; Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 85). With a commitment to intertwine social analysis, (self)- reflection, and transformation in CPAR, researchers and participants have explored the impact of social conditions and examined their worldviews and values by reflecting on their individual experiences navigating society (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 12).

A CPAR approach was selected for this study because of the social justice foundation, emphasis on advocacy, and engagement with communities impacted by the phenomena being researched. This study intentionally used CPAR to decolonize the traditional ideals of subject and object, prioritize collaboration *with* Black justice-involved individuals, and engage in democratic knowledge production. The collaborative approach allowed Black individuals to provide a critical analysis of their experiences and advocate for the reformation of policies and structures that directly affect them post-justice-involvement. When exploring the participants' ideologies of freedom, navigating society post-justice involvement, and the pursuit and impact of higher education, it is essential to engage in reflection and dialogue to analyze structural

inequities, anti-Black racism, and the interconnectedness of freedom and domination. Because CPAR intends to provoke change and widen social consciousness, it was an effective and impactful methodological approach to advocate for the eradication of barriers that impede Black individuals from actualizing the fullness of freedom – freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically post-justice-involvement (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 63; Fine & Torre, 2021, p. 17). To make radical change in higher education and society to enhance the experience(s) and provide effective support for Black students after justice-involvement requires a critical examination of their experiences, institutional practices, and policies. Therefore, this study explored and examined the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement. The findings and recommendations should be leveraged to help advocate for the humanization of Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement, policy reform, and eradicate unwarranted barriers in higher education and society.

Design Strategy

The acronym (CPAR) describes how the approach was applied in this study. The "C" stands for critical. Research studies that employ this framework have commonly examined the roots of power, domination, inequities, and structural violence when analyzing social conditions and research phenomena (Kemmis et al., 2014). CPAR is grounded in theoretical perspectives such as Marxist, feminist, post-structural, and critical race theory to conduct a critical analysis (Fine & Torre, 2021). The dialectic of freedom, theory of intersectionality, and Freire's theory of education have a critical framework, social justice foundation, and emphasize the analysis of Black individuals' intersectional identities, their ideology of freedom, and educational experiences (Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw, 1991 Freire 1970).

The “P” is for participatory (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014). CPAR studies seek to engage research communities analyzed during the study as researchers and participants. This study had different levels of engagement which offered various opportunities that individuals could take part in. On the participant recruitment interest form, each individual selected if they wanted to be exclusively a focus group participant or be involved as a participant and researcher, as a co-researcher. Leo, William, and Kameron were engaged in the study as co-researchers and they helped create the research questions, conduct data collection, execute data analysis, and develop the findings. The co-researchers participated as researchers and as study participants sharing their experiences through the journal prompt and two semi-structured interviews if they were not a participant in the focus groups. The co-researchers involved had a desire to learn more about research and gain experience conducting a study in preparation for their scholastic and research endeavors. Additionally, Forrest and Devonte’ were engaged in the study exclusively as focus group participants. Despite the different levels of involvement, each participant and co-researcher was excited to be a part of the study and eagerly shared their personal experiences, insights, and perspectives. The compensation for the study also incentivized individuals to participate as co-researchers or exclusively as focus group participants.

The “A” in CPAR is for action and includes teaching, learning, and knowledge production when curating, executing, and engaging with the research team members and study participants (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2014). The forms of action that occurred in this study were learning, reflecting, collaborating, and knowledge production. The data collection elements were open-ended to foster dialogue and engagement with other researchers and participants to generate rich discussions. The research findings are also action-oriented and

focused on advocacy, social justice, and reform. The findings and implications from this study amplified the experiences of the co-researchers and participants, to influence the production of more research, and advocate for policy reform.

The "R" in CPAR stands for research or systematic inquiry which can be applied in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research designs (Fine & Torre, 2021, p. 118). To critically examine the social conditions that impact Black individuals broadly and post-justice-involvement, a robust literary foundation was established in chapter two to explore the complexity and develop both a historical and interdisciplinary understanding of Blackness, intersectionality, freedom, domination, and the impact of higher education for Black and justice-involved students (Kemmis et al., 2014; Fine & Torre, 2021).

Research Paradigm

In addition to the CPAR framework, this study utilized a social constructivist research paradigm. The ontological assumption in social constructivism is that reality is constructed by individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Exploring Black individuals' ideology of freedom requires a belief reality is constructed through human activity and is impacted by external forces such as systemic racism, structural policies in higher education, and carceral logic. The epistemological assumption of social constructivism is that knowledge and reality can be constructed, understood, and interpreted through experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). To examine the dialectic of freedom this study used participant experiences such as social interactions, higher education, and reintegration experiences. Using the participants experiences to construct, understand, and interrogate the relationship of freedom and domination aligned with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of social constructivism. Conducting this study

with a social constructivist paradigm, the co-researchers engaged in reflexivity by exploring how their personal values, beliefs, and experiences impact their observations, responses, interpretations, and conclusions during the study (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Walsh, 2003). Reflexivity also increased transparency during the research and analysis process and helped the co-researchers consider their role and the impact of how they are positioned as a researcher in the study (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020; Gilgun, 2010).

Rationale

Reforming higher education practices and eradicating all barriers for Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement requires a collaborative evaluation of experiences institutional policies, and societal practices with Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. There is a lack of participatory studies about Black individuals' higher education and reintegration experiences post-justice-involvement (Fine et al., 2001). As a CPAR study, this dissertation is significant because it provides new insights about Black individuals experiences that are seldom underscored by engaging with Black individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system to analyze the participants' ideology of freedom, the impact of identity, and explore the challenges navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement (Fine & Torre, 2021). The humanizing research design gave the co-researchers and participants opportunities to expound on their experiences, evaluate the impact of their intersectional identity, and influence policy reform and social change. Utilizing a CPAR approach redefined participants as collaborators and rather than objects of the study. To effectively include Black individuals who are directly impacted by the criminal justice system as co-constructors of knowledge, the study included ethical considerations, prioritized collaboration, and egalitarian knowledge production. The ethical considerations offered

protection for each participant and support while engaged in the study and gave autonomy to determine how the co-researchers and participants wanted their experiences to be included in the study and findings.

Role of the Researcher(s)

Positionality Statement

In CPAR studies, it is essential to understand how the researchers are positioned in the study and how their positionality influences the research design, perspectives, observations, execution, and analysis (Fine & Torre, 2021). As a Black woman, I have wrestled with the accessibility of freedom conceptually and psychologically. I have experienced anti-Black racism and barriers in society because of my intersectional identities which has caused me to continually question why Black people have had to continually fight for both freedom and humanity. My own wrestling with freedom has motivated me to seek out opportunities to advocate for, help, and amplify struggles of Black individuals impacted by interlocking systems of oppression. After getting proximate to individuals who have been system-impacted or justice-involved through volunteering at an adjudicated youth facility and the Virginia Department of Corrections, I entered this work angry with the disproportionate and increasing rates of Black people involved with the criminal justice system and the existence of numerous barriers that still impact individuals' post-justice-involvement. Although I have dedicated my research to advocate for Black individuals who are facing systemic barriers and interlocking forms of oppression, I know it takes collaborative effort with individuals with lived experiences at the center. As an outsider to justice-involved communities, I have an ethical responsibility and an opportunity conducting this study to center and amplify the experiences of individuals who are directly impacted by the criminal justice system. To build a collective "we" when designing and executing this study, I

identified and was aware of my privilege without a criminal history and its impact on my experiences and ideology of freedom. While I am not included in the participant count, I also participated as a co-researcher. As a co-researcher in this study, it was important to be conscious of how I engaged and collaborated with the other co-researchers to engage in egalitarian knowledge production. I was cognizant of power dynamics and tried to foster positive and efficient research team member and participant engagement. Furthermore, I was honored to collaborate with Black individuals in higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement and utilized research as an opportunity and bridge to advocate for policy and institutional reform.

Research Team / Co-Researchers

Research teams are vital in CPAR studies to incorporate individuals who are impacted by the phenomena being researched (Kemmis et al., 2014; Fine & Torre, 2021). For this study, I assembled a research team that included myself and three Black individuals that are pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. As rationale for including co-researchers in my study, CPAR studies include a team of co-researchers to gather diverse narratives and experiences to collectively construct, execute, reflect, and develop action-oriented recommendations for radical change (Kemmis et al., 2014; Fine & Torre, 2021). The co-researchers in this study had a shared interest in examining the relationship of Blackness and freedom as well as higher education practices that affect individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. The co-researchers that were engaged in the study also had to meet the participant requirements because they contributed to the study as participants by responding to the journal prompt, being interviewed, and/or contributing to the focus group. Having co-researchers proximate to the phenomena researched helped curate and assess the research design to make sure it is ethical and

none of the materials, processes, and procedures are obstructive. Together, the co-researchers were able to reflect and share their perspectives and insights during the study based on their lived experiences, and diverse scholarly, research, and professional skills.

Leo, William, and Kameron participated as co-researchers in the study. Larry "Leo" is a current graduate and his lived experiences in both the foster care and the criminal legal systems informs his scholarly agenda. Leo is very passionate about his work and his research aims to analyze the intersection of social support (investment) on adolescent development, access to health, fatherhood engagement, citizen reentry, community participatory engagement methods, social/public policy change, and social entrepreneurship. Similarly, William is also pursuing a graduate degree and is passionate about practical and policy change to eradicate barriers for individuals impacted by the criminal justice system. Along with his lived and diverse educational experiences, William believes sociology helped inform his research on the historical social construction of systemic racism. Both Leo and William decided not to use a pseudonym and gave consent to share additional biographical information. Although Kameron was engaged in the study as a co-researcher, Kameron did not finish the study and did not provide information for a biography.

The co-researchers were essential to the design, execution, and the findings of this study. I began the study with three co-researchers Leo, William, and Kameron. Having Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system helping with data collection and analysis, added rich perspective, incredible ideas, fostered community, and brought awareness to any inequitable and unethical procedures and study components because of their lived experiences being a part of the communities being researched and scholarly expertise. During the study, Leo helped with the design and execution of the focus group and completed two semi-

structured interviews. William helped to design and execute Leo's semi-structured interviews and participated as a focus group participant. Kameron started data analysis for the journal prompt and focus groups. Both Leo and William remained engaged for the duration of the study and executed their various roles. However, Kameron began data analysis processes but did not finish the study.

Methods & Procedures

There is a demand for more studies that center and amplify racially diverse student experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement. Having more studies that examine the impact of intersectionality and how exclusionary practices in higher education further marginalize Black students will bring awareness to specific challenges that affect racially diverse students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. To advance current scholarship with new insights and amplify Black student narratives, the study analyzed Black students' experiences and societal perspectives after incarceration.

To participate in this study, all participants had to have prior involvement with the criminal justice system, be currently pursuing higher education at any college/ university in the United States or have graduated from a non-carceral college or university degree program between 2015 and spring 2023. Criminal justice involvement in this study referred to at least six months of any judicial order of mandatory supervision i.e., jail, prison, house arrest, parole, etc. Next, pursuing higher education in this study refers to individuals currently enrolled in a postsecondary degree program or have taken at least three postsecondary courses. Correspondingly, the study also included participants who have recently graduated from a non-carceral campus between 2015 – spring 2023 because they have relevant experiences in higher education that are applicable to the study. I selected an eight-year time frame to gather more

recent perspectives. The time frame is also longer than the past three to five years because of the pervasive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected individuals' higher education journey. Moreover, a "non-carceral" campus in this study was defined as higher education environments that are not conducted in a correctional facility. The rationale for only including students that have graduated from non-carceral higher education programs was to examine the experiences of students post just-involvement because they are a minority on *traditional* campuses. Students who participated in higher education in prison were also eligible to participate if they matriculated to a degree program after incarceration. Lastly, to gather a variety of perspectives, this study incorporated all Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system regardless of gender or age. The justification for the eligibility requirements was to guarantee the sample group is reflective of diverse and intergenerational experiences.

Sampling

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval in August 2023, I began participant recruitment immediately utilizing a criterion sampling approach (Patton, 1990). The criterion approach is a sampling method in which participants must "meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 1990, p.176). Criterion sampling is used in studies where the participants and eligibility criteria are essential for the execution of the study. Identifying as Black, being formerly involved with the criminal justice system, and pursuing or recently graduating from a higher education program were essential to this study design and research questions.

Because this was a CPAR study, participant involvement was instrumental. To recruit participants and co-researchers I created a flyer with a google form link for each interested individual to fill out. I first circulated my recruitment materials individually to higher education in prison and re-entry organizations via email. I reached out to justice-involved organizations or

higher education in prison programs such as the Petey Greene Program, Tennessee Higher Education Initiative, Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network, and the Trojan Underground Scholars. Subsequently, I contacted higher education practitioners and researchers in my network to help spread the word about the study and inform their current former students. Next, I circulated a flyer on social media detailing the study's purpose, intent, an overview of the research team, participant responsibilities, and compensation. For each method of communication, I provided my contact information and met with any interested individuals to share more information about the study and answer questions. Although, I had visibility and was able to contact leadership of higher education in prison and reentry organizations, I did not have many individuals fill out the inquiry form, so I continued recruitment simultaneously while I began to prepare for the focus groups to engage the three interested participants. After consistent recruitment efforts, I was able to begin the study with five individuals who met the participant criteria.

Exclusions and Inclusions

This study excluded other racial groups to highlight and explore Black student experiences post-justice-involvement. Black individuals make up a large population of individuals involved or impacted by the criminal justice system (*Federal Bureau of Prisons,* 2022). However, there is a lack of literature explicitly focusing on Black people post-justice-involvement and pursuing higher education. Most higher education studies that have explored Black student experiences post-justice-involvement primarily focused on male experiences, but this study welcomed all genders to amplify under researched perspectives and experiences (Johnson & Manyweather, 2023; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Although this study was open to all genders, all the participants who were engaged for the duration of the study were men. This

study also excluded individuals who graduated before 2015 to gather more recent experiences. Higher education policies change often. Therefore, gathering recent experiences helped the co-researchers strategize to generate practical and policy recommendations to address current policies and systemic barriers.

Ethical Considerations

This study required Old Dominion University Institutional Review Board approval because the data collection methods incorporated engagement with the participants during each phase of the study. Although individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system are commonly considered vulnerable populations in some research studies, the individuals involved in this study were not subject to any other protocols or considered a vulnerable population since they were able to give voluntary informed consent post-justice-involvement. The participants' responsibilities, roles, risks, and benefits were thoroughly explained on the call for participants poster and informed consent form. Additionally, reaching out to specific organizations was an intentional decision to respect individual privacy and to eliminate individuals feeling targeted based on their former criminal justice involvement. Lastly, after the participants filled out the inquiry form to participate, each participant had to read and sign a consent form before being fully engaged in the study or data collection. Because this study also included confidential and identifiable information, the consent form summarized the approaches to keep the data confidential and reiterate the possible risks and benefits of participating in the study.

Setting

This study had a virtual setting to prioritize accessibility since the participants were in different geographic regions. The meetings with co-researchers, journal prompt, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and data analysis were all completed via zoom or using internet

mediums (i.e., google docs, email, word documents). Using virtual mediums was intentional to make the study accessible for all and create a convenient collaborative space for everyone to help plan, conduct data collection, and complete data analysis.

Preparation & Planning: Introductory Co-Researcher Meetings

In this CPAR study, there were several phases. Phase one was the reconnaissance and planning phase. Before each co-researcher began participating in the study, I conducted separate introductory co-researcher team meetings to get to know each individual, inquire about how they wanted to be involved, and answer any preliminary questions they had about the study. The first preparatory meeting also was a space where the co-researchers could share feedback about the study. The meetings took place in August and September to overview the study, co-researcher responsibilities, expectations, commitment, and compensation. During the introductory meeting(s), I referenced the historical analysis outlined in the literature review that provided an analysis of the history of Black people and their plight for freedom, described the criminalization of Blackness, and outlined the roots of systemic racism and domination in the United States. Once each co-researcher agreed and expressed how they wanted to participate, I used the remaining meeting time to overview the research design, engaged in discussions about the research questions, and began generating a plan and ideas for how to conduct data collection and analysis. Although I initially proposed the study design, I remained open to their feedback and made changes to the data collection methods to include their input to make the study collaborative. The research plan included a potential schedule for interviews/focus groups and an overview of their responsibilities depending on how they wanted to be involved. By continuing to engage in communicative action through virtual meetings and check-ins during the study, the research team altered the plan and prepared for each method of data collection in phases.

After the initial co-researcher meetings with the three co-researchers, I began compiling and reference materials in folders which overviewed the data collection and analysis methods/procedures we decided to utilize. Each folder was created to give more information about the data collection and analysis procedures correlated to their specific responsibilities when independently working. Resources such as articles, YouTube videos, book chapters were combined in a google drive folder. Also included in the folder was my dissertation proposal and more information about CPAR, the theoretical framework, and the dialectic of freedom for reference. For the duration of the study, I remained in contact with co-researchers via phone calls, emails, zoom meetings, and text messages to be a resource, collaborate on tasks, discuss progress, and next steps.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in phase two of the study. The data collection methods included focus groups, co-researcher interviews, and one personal reflection (journal prompt). The data collection methods captured the participants' narratives as a Black individual navigating society post-justice-involvement, ideologies of freedom, and experiences pursuing higher education. First, the journal prompt was used to learn detailed individual information about the interconnections of race and justice-involvement and help participants reflect on their experiences with the criminal justice system. Similarly, the focus groups and co-researcher interviews gathered perspectives and definitions of freedom and provided insight about the realities, challenges, and the impact of pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. In addition, the focus group provided collective information about the ideology of freedom, navigating society post-justice-involvement, and recommendations to amend or eradicate exclusionary higher education and societal policies and practices.

Data collection was conducted and completed in two parts from October 2023 to December 2023. Part one was for the focus groups and part two was the co-researcher interviews. The focus groups were held in October and the co-researcher interviews were conducted in December via zoom. The focus groups and co-researcher interviews were underscored with CHE (connectivity, humanness, and empathy) to promote authenticity and build a reciprocal relationship (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Additionally, the co-researcher interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and video recorded to capture the observations, experiences, perspectives, and produce a transcript for the research team to code. The co-researchers helped conduct each interview or focus group also took notes during the focus groups and co-researcher interviews to document observations, group dynamics, and noteworthy themes.

Before both the focus group and co-researcher interviews, a journal prompt was emailed to all participants and completed before each focus group or co-researcher interview. The journal prompt included two open ended questions created by Leo and me. The first question was "Describe an experience in your life where you noticed the impact of your race?" The next question was "Do you think your racial identity as a Black individual has influenced your engagement or experiences with the criminal/legal system? If so, explain why and how?" The questions were purposefully created to align with exploring the impact of race and identity which was the theme of the focus group and co-researcher interviews. In the journal prompts the participants shared multiple experiences where they realized being Black was connected to how they were viewed as a threat, constantly surveilled, racial profiled, betrayed, and falsely accused by law enforcement. Feelings of anger, sadness, helplessness, and numbness were articulated during and because of their experiences. The journal prompt responses were complex and

acknowledged both the impact of their actions leading them to be engaged with law enforcement which were illustrated as disconnected from race, and underscored the view that Blackness is always an impact factor and contextual to their experiences. Majority of the participants described feeling targeted because of their race exposing the criminalized stigma that affects Black men. As a result of the criminalized stigma that has been projected on them, the participants shared their humanity, intelligence, honesty, and innocence has been interrogated and/or illegitimated. After going through these adverse experiences some of the participants mentioned they began to curate a different, less hopeful, and critical view of law enforcement.

The journal prompt was given to help foster some reflective thinking before the first focus group and co-researcher interview. The rationale for the responses being collected before the focus group was to give space to the participants to share and reflect on their experiences personally and privately before they expand on their response in the focus group. The journal prompt did not have a length requirement so participants could be as descriptive as they wanted. The participants were also given the opportunity to expand on their responses to start up the discussion in the focus groups and co-researcher interviews.

After the participants completed the journal prompt, Leo and I conducted two 1-hour focus groups with three participants: William, Devonte', and Forrest. Focus groups are used in qualitative research to allow the participants to "share and compare their experiences and outlooks" (Morgan, 2018, p. 6). Focus groups were selected for this study to allow the participants to expand on their rationale and definition of freedom and life experiences. The questions asked in the focus groups were created by Leo and me. When co-creating the questions, we used the research questions as a foundation to inform the topics and questions we wanted to cover and ask in each focus group. We also decided to make open-ended questions

that encouraged reflection to empower participants to drive the discussion. The first focus group focused on learning their understanding of freedom and exploring the impact of their multidimensional identity as Black, justice-involved, and a student, amongst other salient identities they also have. The second focus group explored the participants' experiences navigating society and pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The second focus group included two the participants William and Devonte'. Forrest was not present for the second focus group but shared his experiences in a separate semi-structed interview to make sure his perspectives and experiences were captured.

Both focus groups were so impactful. The participants really leaned into the discussions and were vulnerable with each other. The focus groups also helped foster a sense of connection between the participants and co-researchers and curate an environment conducive for reflection, affirmation, support, and learning. Sharing stories, emotions, and more about their journeys in life was a source of connection and support. Although Leo and I prepared and asked some questions, the participants were able to lead the conversation and expound on topics they desired. The discussions had so much depth, complexity, insight, and nuance. The robust discussions in focus group one caused the participants to request the questions before focus group two to reflect prior and be more directed in sharing their responses. Talking about freedom and the impact of higher education, the participants not only shared their worldviews and experiences, but they also inquired more about each other's perspectives. The participants emphasized their positive experiences in the focus groups. Additionally, they also underscored the need for this study which advances current literature and scholarship. Leo and I left each focus group with so much to unpack and inspired by the wisdom shared.

The final part of data collection was the co-researcher interviews. The two one-hour semi-structured interviews allowed the research team members to share their experiences and be participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study to allow autonomy to diverge from the script" (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 4). Because Kameron did not finish the study and William participated in the focus group, Leo was the only co-researcher that participated in two semi-structured interviews. For the co-researcher interviews, myself, and William interviewed Leo, and created questioned to be asked in each interview. Similar to developing the focus groups questions, William and I overviewed the topics and themes we wanted to cover which were consistent with the focus group themes and topical areas. The themes of the interviews were the same as the focus groups. The first interview was focused on learning their understandings of freedom and exploring the impact of their identity. Subsequently, the second interview was centered on exploring their experiences pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. As a result of participating in the focus groups, William used his experience to influence the questions he wanted to create for the co-researcher interviews. We co-created open-ended questions that would foster engagement and reflection. In addition to creating the questions, William assisted as a moderator for the interview and took notes. Because Leo was a moderator for the focus groups, he was very excited to share his experiences. Since it was a semi-structured interview with just Leo as a participant, he was able to detail his experiences and uninterruptedly share his stories, worldviews, and perspectives. Leo's interviews were incredible, and he was very vulnerable and shared about his life experiences in education, foster care, and pre- and post-justice-involvement. The interview had a conversational tone and we engaged in philosophical, sociological, and intellectual discussions exploring his ideologies and experiences navigating higher education and society post-justice-involvement. Despite

sharing some challenging, disheartening, and unjust experiences Leo kept underscoring his hope for his future and the importance of advocating for change. William and I left the interviews overwhelmed with thoughts, ideas, and motivated to continue thinking about freedom, the impact of education, and power of perseverance and advocacy.

Data Analysis

The critical component in CPAR was operationalized in this study methodologically and analytically. Using a CPAR framework, the research team worked "with" participants in the data collection and analysis phase to explore the complex intersectional relationship of systems, policies, oppression, and freedom. Moreover, phase three of the study was the reflection and data analysis phase (Kemmis et al., 2014). The historical analysis outlined in the literature review and the participants' lived experiences captured through data collection were used as an entry point to examine the ideology of freedom and experiences navigating higher education and society post-justice-involvement. A hybrid coding approach was selected for this study to examine personal written narratives, interviews, and focus group transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inductive and deductive coding approaches were selected and used as a grouping method and thinking diffractively was also used in data analysis to help the researchers analyze individuals' experiences and make connections encompassing the participants' emotions, values, and experiences.

During our first data analysis meeting, Kameron and I overviewed the data analysis methods we were going to use and collectively created priori codes to guide the deductive coding process. When co-creating the priori codes, Kameron shared more about their experiences and challenges post-justice-involvement which informed the terms we used and the definitions we created. The priori codes were: emotions, freedom, intersectionality/identities, access, support(s),

gender impacts, bias and discrimination, imposter syndrome, self-perception, authenticity, worldview, Blackness, higher education experiences, technology/digital divide, and community. The 15 priori codes and associated definitions were used as a foundation to examine patterns and themes in the data. Before analyzing the data, we also agreed to use emotion and in vivo coding for the inductive approach to document emergent themes in the data when analyzing the transcripts. Emotion and in vivo coding were utilized for this study to honor the participant's voice and to explore participant experiences, worldviews, and perspectives (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65). Emotion coding incorporated in vivo coding and used the participants' language as codes to label specific emotions said or inferred by the participants. (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65). Utilizing both deductive and inductive coding methods allowed us to have a uniform approach to analyze the data as well as leave space for the data to drive the patterns and findings. The chosen coding methods and approaches were effective to organize, analyze, interpret the data, and generate emergent themes. After our initial coding meeting, I struggled to get in contact with Kameron, and finished the coding and data analysis process by myself. When analyzing the data, I added 20 additional codes that emerged from the data. I then examined the patterns and connections between all the transcripts examining which codes were used the most, the relationship between codes, and creating broad categories to group the related codes. The broad categories derived from the data were higher education experiences, post-justice-involvement experiences, emotions, understandings of freedom, impact of identity, recommendations/direct action, reflection- others' perception and self-perception, access, barriers, and challenges. Subsequently, I then reviewed the data once more to examine and reflect on the "absent presence" or observations in the data that aren't directly stated on the transcript. While analyzing the data, I thought about my positionality and how my own worldviews and perspectives influence the data

collection. I also engaged with the co-researchers to hear their perspectives after the focus groups and interviews and analyzed the field notes to examine additional observations during data collection.

Dialectical Thinking

Dialectical thinking also guided the data analysis when examining the participants' lived experiences, the "process of becoming," and the pursuit of freedom (Freire, 1970; Pouwels, 2019). Dialectical thinking has two opposing ideals, and, in this study, freedom is the thesis and domination is the antithesis (Greene, 1988; Gould, 1978). In this study, positive freedom (freedom to), is defined as the ability to be authentically themselves and live determined lives and negative freedom (freedom from) is the ability to be free from oppression and domination (Greene, 1988). Dialectical thinking is also change-oriented and challenges the idea of linear relationships of subjects and objects (Freeman, 2017). When examining the participant's narratives or perspectives, their experiences were viewed as multidimensional.

Dialectical thinking was selected and utilized for this study to examine the interconnectedness and meaning of freedom and domination for Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement. Being outside of a carceral environment and or being relinquished from mandatory supervision is *freedom from* domination; however, navigating society and higher education as a Black individual with a criminal history can challenge an individuals' view of liberation and limits justice-involved individuals' ideals of *freedom to* (Greene, 1988; Gould, 1978; Pouwels, 2019). Both freedom and domination are opposing forces but are interconnected for Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Engaging in praxis, reflection, and action, the connections of both domination and freedom and exposed inequities and barriers that inhibit success for Black individuals navigating society and

pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. Although, dialectical thinking was essential to this study there is no synthesis elevated as a singular result for the study or emphasized to influence research and practice. However, the recommendations included in chapter five are a culmination of guidance, advice, and wisdom shared from the participants to influence policy and practical change.

After the data was analyzed and synthesized through first cycle and second cycle coding, I conducted a thematic analysis to generate the final themes from the data. Thematic analyses are used in qualitative research to help examine the connections in the data. Once all the data was coded, I first began looking at the categories of related codes and grouping them together based on topic areas (freedom/ideologies of freedom, experiences in higher education, impact of identity/Blackness, self-perception/personal impacts, recommendations/direct action). Diffractive thinking was also used during data analysis because it embraces complexity and explores beyond what is told, experienced, or discussed, and examines what is formed in the "intra-action between the material and discursive" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012 p. 130). When analyzing the data, I not only examined what was in the transcript, the codes or the themes that emerged, but also how systems and power relations were formed and impacted the participants and influenced their experiences that were shared. Using diffractive thinking with social constructivism was important to move beyond just examining experiences and analyze the systems that influence the creation of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and societal power relations. Throughout data analysis I continued to grapple with both the participants' experiences and how they are positioned in society and how systems and social stratification impacts the construction of the participants, perspectives, and worldviews of freedom.

From the data analysis processes three themes emerged: The Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom, Degrees of Freedom Access & Exclusion in Higher Education, and ~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative. I then compiled the findings, themes, recommendations, and policy suggestions shared, and then presented them to all the participants in a meeting and sent them via email to give them an opportunity to provide feedback. The virtual meeting was conducted in January and included William, Leo, and Devonte' and I. During the meeting, I began overviewing the data analysis processes and sharing how the themes derived from the data. I also used quotes, provided examples, and discussed how I understood the data. After I shared, I opened the discussion for live feedback about the findings and recommendations. The participants were in agreement about the findings, offered additional opinions and viewpoints, and shared feedback to refine the recommendations. Although Forrest did not attend the meeting, he provided his feedback through email.

Building Trust & Confidentiality

Using effective communication and prioritizing transparency was essential to build and maintain trust with the participants throughout the study. Before engaging in any data collection processes, the participants signed a consent form to ensure they were aware of the risks, benefits, and ways their information was going to be stored and used. The participants were current students, recent graduates, employed, and family members so doodle polls were also used to gauge everyone's schedule and calendar invites were sent to keep everyone informed. In efforts to prioritize transparency and build trust there were protocols for the focus groups and interviews to help keep all individuals knowledgeable and accountable. The trust built between me, and the individuals involved in the study was helpful to authentically engage the co-researchers and study participants in the data collection and analysis process. Following the data collection and

analysis, the study findings were shared with the participants to review, confirm the accuracy of their narratives, overview the findings and recommendations.

In efforts to protect all individuals participating, there was no expectation for them to detail their involvement or experiences in the criminal justice system. In addition, all participants, including the co-researchers, had the option to use their names or a pseudonym to protect their identity and have their perspectives included anonymously. Using pseudonyms was a strategy used to protect their identity and allowed individuals to be fully transparent about their experiences with no retaliation from potential employers or educational colleagues. Giving participants the option to use their name in the study was purposeful and gave them agency over their experiences and voice. In efforts to prioritize confidentiality, the data gathered for this study was also kept in secure folders only accessible to the co-researchers as needed. There were also separate folders for each co-researcher to prevent duplication or tampering with the data and participant files.

Evidence of Trustworthiness: Credibility & Validity

Qualitative research studies have used different strategies to address credibility and validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Stahl & King, 2020). When designing and conducting the study, Krefting's (1991) credibility strategies including member checking and triangulation were applied to establish trustworthiness with the participants. Member checking and triangulation aided the research team in interpreting, evaluating, and confirming participant experiences during data analysis and were used to increase credibility, dependability, and ensure trustworthiness. (Krefting, 1991, p. 220).

Triangulation of data is used in CPAR studies to comprise a vigorous understanding of the phenomena being studied (Merriam, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2017; Stahl & King, 2020).

Triangulation in this study was used as a strategy for dependability. Using multiple methods of data collection, such as journal prompts, interviews, and focus groups created multiple opportunities for reflection, collaboration, engagement, dialogue, and knowledge production between the researchers and the participants. The journal prompt, focus groups, and interviews were intentional to give participants several opportunities to share their perspective and each data collection component was complementary to each other. Multiple methods of data collection also generated varied data for the team to analyze, accurately comprehend the participants' experiences, and produce patterns to develop a comprehensive narrative (Merriam, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). With rich data from the data collection methods, the findings were representative and inclusive of a variety of perspectives and experiences.

Including multiple individuals with various perspectives and lived experiences is an integral part of participatory studies. Moreover, participating as a co-researcher during data collection, also gave William and Leo an opportunity to examine Black individuals' post-justice-involvement experiences besides their own and create significant questions to explore the impact of intersectionality and analyze higher education and societal experiences. For the data collection methods and procedures used in this study, at least one co-researcher and I conducted the focus group and co-researcher interviews and shared notes to assure credibility. Also, as a co-researcher not directly impacted by the criminal justice system through lived experiences, I made sure to acknowledge my privilege and reflect on my interpretations of the data. Although I am knowledgeable about how Black individuals experience higher education and navigate society post-justice-involvement, I am limited in my understanding of the full scope of their experiences and how justice-involved individuals are continually impacted post-justice-involvement. Having co-researchers engaged during the study helped me uncover my bias and challenge my

assumptions. Correspondingly, when thinking of recommendations on how to better support Black and justice-involved individuals broadly, I amplified the participants' responses and included their recommendations and confirmed the accuracy of the findings through member checking.

Member checking is included as another strategy used in this study to explore the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking is a technique used to involve the participants to check for accuracy in capturing their experiences. After the research team compiled the data from the journal prompt, focus groups, and interviews, the data, analysis, and findings were overviewed with the participants for validation (Merriam, 1995; Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking in this study was especially useful after the one-on-one interviews with the co-researchers and helpful to reflect and interpret thoughts, opinions, and perspectives said in the focus groups.

Limitations

This study was an opportunity to amplify worldviews, perspectives, and experiences of Black individuals navigating higher education and society post-justice-involvement. Although the study was intentionally thought out and designed, it had limitations such as a focused participant criterion, small sample size, subjectivity, unprecedented challenges with participant engagement, limited scope, and generalizability.

The study had a selective participant criterion which excluded some of Black individuals depending on their current or former academic endeavors post-justice-involvement. The selective participant requirements narrowed down the number of eligible individuals that could participate in the study. Additionally, despite efforts of spreading the word about the study, the recruitment efforts did not yield a large sample size. Because of the same sample size, there was a lack of

gender diversity among the participants. All the participants that were engaged for the duration of the study identified as male. Correspondingly, the small sample was valuable to ensure a good focus group experience for all participants. The smaller sample size helped the co-researchers capture each participants' experiences, connect with each other, and make sure everyone's voice and recommendations were heard.

This study was also conducted to complete requirements for a dissertation. Therefore, I had to abide by specific ethical and regulatory guidelines which limited participant engagement until my proposal was passed and after IRB approval. Although this is CPAR study, the participants were not able to be engaged or involved in the preliminary phase of creating the study and selecting the methodology. While I was able to overview the study and was willing to adjust the procedures once the co-researchers were involved, not having the participants engaged in the curating the research processes and design from the beginning was a limitation because it restricted how the participants were able to construct the study. Nevertheless, once the co-researchers were involved, we began collaborating on all data collection, analysis, and curating the recommendations and policy implications.

Subjectivity was another limitation in the study. The research team analyzed all the data based on our interpretations of the data. To ensure the co-researchers were adequately capturing and analyzing the participants' narratives and experiences, there were at least two co-researchers involved in data collection and in the beginning phase of data analysis. I, Leo, and William conducted the focus group and interviews and Kameron, and I were involved in data analysis. During the focus groups and interviews we took notes and compiled our annotations. Our notes were used to capture observations and helpful to revisit and reflect on during data analysis. Additionally, thick description was used to provide detail of the research context and lived

experience of Black individuals with experiences in the carceral system. In chapter two, I overviewed literature that described the cultural, social, and historical context of Black individuals in America. Correspondingly, the questions created for the journal prompt, focus groups, and co-researcher interviews, were created to learn a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences. After data collection and when writing about the themes of the study, I also described in detail both the context and participants' worldviews that were foundational to their response.

Furthermore, engaging with individuals to conduct and complete the study presented some unprecedented changes. I began the study with three co-researchers. However, one co-researcher (Kameron) did not stay engaged for the duration of the study. As a result, I completed the rest of the analysis by myself. Upon completion of the data analysis, I engaged in member checking to present the findings with to participants. All participants involved in the study were given an opportunity to overview the final themes, provide feedback on the recommendations, and confirm the accuracy of their narratives.

Another limitation of this study was the limited scope. The scope of the study was concentrated on the impact of identity, the participants' ideology of freedom, experiences navigating society post-justice-involvement, and more specifically analyzing higher education experiences. The connections of the participants' other salient identities are acknowledged in this study, however only the interconnectedness and impact of race, justice-involvement, education, and freedom are primarily examined. Pursuing higher education in this study referred to admissions, classroom, academic, on campus employment and extra-curricular experiences. Engagement with higher education stakeholders as support staff and as colleagues were also experiences analyzed in the data since they were situated in higher education and were relevant

to the study. Additionally, some of the participants also had higher education experiences in prison, but they were not analyzed since it was beyond the scope of the study.

Lastly, there was an overwhelming amount of data from the journal prompt(s), focus groups, and interviews. Consequently, the findings of this study are not generalizable and do not capture or explain experiences of all Black individuals who are pursuing higher education or navigating society post-justice-involvement. The themes from this study should not be used to overgeneralize or simplify the complex experiences of Black individuals navigating society or pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The findings of this study should be used to provoke further analysis and research amplifying the thoughts, perspectives, experiences, and worldviews of Black individuals' post-justice-involvement.

Chapter Summary

This CPAR study involved intentional engagement with Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement in all aspects of the study. This chapter detailed the research design, data collection, and analysis procedures which were purposeful to critically and collaboratively examine Black individuals' experiences and perspectives post-justice-involvement. The methods included a CPAR framework which influenced the data collection and analysis process and procedures of the study. The data collection processes included a journal prompt, two focus groups, and two semi-structured interviews for the co-researchers. Moreover, the data analysis processes included using dialectical thinking to examine the interconnections of freedom and domination, inductive and deductive approaches to code the data, thinking diffractively, and conducting a thematic analysis to generate final themes to create findings. The findings will be thoroughly overviewed in chapter four and should be used for

collective action and influence future research, legislation, and policies that humanize, include, and liberate Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore freedom, the impact of identity, and examine the relationship of freedom and education with Black students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The rationale for this Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) study was to engage Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system to collaboratively conduct the study and amplify their perspectives, experiences, and recommendations to add more depth to existing research and literature. The research questions for this study were: "How do Black individuals define and experience freedom post-justice-involvement?" and "What are the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" In chapter three, I provided an overview of the need for more critical analyses that center Black student experiences pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. Additionally, I explained the methodological processes used to conduct data collection and data analysis. The CPAR research design guided the methodological approaches, data collection components, and data analysis procedures for this study. Moreover, in this chapter, I will provide more detail about the participants' narratives and present the findings of the study.

Participant Demographics & Involvement

Table 1.

Participant Demographics & Involvement

Name	Gender	Higher Education	Geographic Region	Study Involvement
Devonte'	M	Doctorate Degree	Mid-West	Focus Group Participant

Forrest	M	Bachelor's Degree	West Coast	Focus Group Participant
Leo	M	Pursuing a Dual PhD & Master's Degree	Mid-West	Co-Researcher
William	M	Pursuing a Master's Degree	East Coast	Focus Group Participant & Co-Researcher
Kameron	W	Pursuing a Dual Master's & PhD Degree	East Coast	Co-Researcher

The participants involved in the study identified as Black, had previous experiences in the U.S. criminal justice system, and were currently pursuing higher education or graduated between the years 2020 and 2023. Although the participants had various education backgrounds and different majors, the participants were all pursuing degrees or careers within the social science and humanities field(s). Each of the participants also grew up, attended higher education, and currently live in various geographic regions of the United States. Majority of the participants identified as male, were formerly incarcerated for at least two years, and were pursuing or recently graduated with an undergraduate or graduate degree. Most of the participants also had more than one degree, and their various experiences in higher education impacted their perspectives of the value and experience of higher education post-justice-involvement. Likewise, most of the participants in this study had a dual point of view being a student and working in higher education or in academic adjacent organizations with a focus on higher education while pursuing their degree or post degree attainment. Having so much engagement with students, staff, and higher education stakeholders is contextual to their experiences and responses.

The study included five individuals involved as participants and/or co-researchers: Leo, William, Forrest, Devonte', and Kameron. Whilst I am not included in the "official" participant count, I consider myself a co-researcher since I collaboratively engaged with individuals

involved during each phase of the study. During the study, Devonte' and Forrest were exclusively focus group participants and Leo and Kameron were exclusively co-researchers. And William was a focus group participant and a co-researcher because of his interest in both. Although the study started with Leo, Kameron, and William as co-researchers, only Leo and William were involved as co-researchers from the beginning and until completion of the study. To learn more about the co-researchers, Leo and William also gave consent to share their biographies which are presented below. Both Leo and William were very engaged for the duration of the study as co-researchers and participants, and their backgrounds, insights, and experiences were very contextual to constructing and executing components of data collection and analysis. Therefore, the term participant(s) is used in this chapter to incorporate the narratives shared from all individuals involved in the study.

Larry "Leo" Davis is a dual-degree student pursuing a Ph.D. and a Master's of Business Administration in Social Work and Business. His research interest focuses on the intersection of social support (investment) on adolescent development, access to health, fatherhood engagement, citizen reentry, community participatory engagement methods, social/public policy change, and social entrepreneurship. Leo's higher education background is robust. He has earned a master's degree in Social Work Policy & Program Evaluation and in Public Health Administration, and a bachelor's degree in social work. In addition to his scholarly achievements, Leo has overcome both the foster care and the criminal legal systems which informs his research, community engagement work, and business development.

William Freeman III is a native New Yorker who grew up in Baltimore. As a youth, he struggled to find a community wherein he could assimilate, thrive, and experience a healthy sense of self. Acting on the desire to be accepted, he began to engage in violence with a belief

that in the absence of money violence was the next best social capital. Consequently, being engaged in violence earned William a 35-year sentence in a prison cell. In prison, William learned to deconstruct the myth of manhood under the guidance of incarcerated elders. Also, while incarcerated, he got involved in the Goucher Prison Education Partnership (GPEP). From 2014 until his release from prison after serving just over 20 years—he completed more than 83 self-help, vocational, educational, and therapeutic programs. He also completed 75 college credits through GPEP before transferring to Goucher's main campus where he earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology & Anthropology and delivered the commencement for his graduating class. William believes sociology helped form his policy perspective in combination with his lived experience, and structured and unstructured education concentrated on the historical social construction of systemic racism. Currently, William is pursuing a master's degree in Public Health, works in higher education policy, and is the President of RAW (Redistribute Agency & Wealth) Trust. RAW Trust is an organization that seeks to collectively deconstruct a suppressed latent pathology formed from trauma experienced, reclaim the narrative about formerly incarcerated people, and develop action plans and establish networks to dismantle systemic economic and social barriers.

Data Collection: Methods and Procedures

The data collection procedures began with a journal prompt which was completed by all individuals involved in the study. The journal prompt was created by Leo and I and we asked the everyone engaged in the study to "Describe an experience in your life where you noticed the impact of your race?" and "Do you think your racial identity as a Black individual has influenced your engagement or experience with the criminal/legal system? If so, explain why and how?" The journal prompt included very personal experiences of the participants' engagement with the

criminal justice system and law enforcement. The responses revealed how impactful racial identity is and assessed the connections of race and criminal justice involvement.

Focus Groups

The next phase of data collection included conducting two one-hour focus groups to gain more insight on their perspectives and experiences of race, education, and freedom. Three participants (Devonte', Forrest, and William) participated in the focus groups and Leo and I were moderators. The first focus group focused on exploring the impact of their intersectional identity as Black, formerly incarcerated, and a student, amongst other identities they have. The second focus group questions focused on learning of the focus group participants' understandings of freedom and exploring their higher education experiences post-justice-involvement. The questions Leo and I created cultivated a great discussion and yielded robust responses centered on the focus group participants' perspectives of access, race, control, and lived educational, employment, and societal experiences. During both focus groups, the participants eagerly shared their varied negative and positive emotions, viewpoints, and experiences. Conversations of freedom and domination, control and power, access and exclusion, and the impact of interlocking systems of oppression were throughlines in the focus groups.

Co-Researcher (Leo's) Semi-Structured Interviews

After the focus groups were conducted, William and I shifted our focus to creating interview questions for the co-researcher semi-structured interviews. The topic areas were the same as the focus groups. The first interview explored the impact of his intersectional identity and in the second interview Leo shared his understandings of freedom and explored his higher education experiences post-justice-involvement. Leo was enthusiastic about his interviews and eager to share his perspective. Like the focus groups, the semi-structured approach was useful to

help guide William and I as interviewers, but also to let the conversation flow based on Leo's responses. Because Leo was the only person answering the questions, we were able to explore his perspectives and worldviews in depth and he was able to share more of his stories, thoughts, and experiences. Leo shared more about his background being directly impacted by the foster care and criminal justice system(s) and wrestled with the dialectics of freedom. He also shared his ideology of "levels of freedom" and the importance of reframing education as an equalizer.

Both focus groups and interviews were a communal space for data collection, and an opportunity for networking, wisdom sharing, and venting. The atmosphere of the focus groups and interviews were affirmative, supportive, and receptive to the experiences that were being shared. The participants expressed how much they enjoyed the reflective, thoughtful, and engaging atmosphere and appreciated the topic areas covered underscoring the significance of the research study. The depth of vulnerability each of the participants shared during the focus groups and co-researcher interviews was impactful and instrumental for curating the overall themes and recommendations.

Data Analysis

To conduct data analysis, Kameron and I used a hybrid coding approach for first and second cycle coding. The codebook we created had 15 priori codes with definitions and examples to help us identify/classify codes in the data. In addition to creating a codebook, we also decided to use in vivo coding to include the participants' voices to capture their experiences and perspectives. While analyzing the data I used dialectical and diffractive thinking to examine how knowledge was produced, how systems are operationalized, and how power relations manifest and impact individuals (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Deductive and inductive coding approaches and conducing a thematic analysis were used to identify, group, and categorize

related perspectives. During the thematic analysis, I compiled all the themes highlighted from the pattern coding to merge, re-organize and synthesize the patterns and themes into four all-encompassing themes.

Overarching Themes

Since Black individuals' experiences post-justice-involvement are nuanced, I wrestled with dialectics when exploring freedom and domination physically and psychologically and when examining the impact of identity in education and navigating society because of the paradox of access and freedom elevated in data collection, and the existence systemic forces that impede Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement to actualize freedom and negatively impact their experiences in higher education. The findings from thematic analysis underscored three overarching themes: The Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom, Degrees of Freedom Access & Exclusion in Higher Education, and ~~You Are~~[4] I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative. To check the accuracy of these themes, I engaged in member checking with all of the participants. I wanted to ensure the participants agreed with how their narratives were captured and give them an opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy of the overall themes. I sent the final themes of the analysis and recommendations shared prior to the meeting to give participants some time to review before they provided feedback. During this meeting, I created an open space to discuss their thoughts and get feedback on the themes. After providing feedback, they confirmed the accuracy of the themes and we also discussed recommendations and implications for policy change federally and in higher education.

Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom

[4] The subscript is intentional to recognize societal and other peoples' false, narrow, and biased perspectives, narratives, and opinions that have been projected on the participants based on their intersectional identities and experiences and more specifically race, justice-involvement, gender etc.

The "Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom" is a theme that elaborates on the participants'[5] ideologies of freedom and integrates the participants' conceptualizations and perspectives of freedom that were throughlines in the data. The theme title "Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom" is correlated to the research question "How do Black individuals define and experience freedom post justice-involvement?" The participants definitions of freedom were foundational to the study and led to discussions about the accessibility, attainability, abstract, and concrete implications of freedom in the focus groups and interviews which are presented in this chapter.

Defining Freedom

According to the participants, freedom does not have a universal meaning and it is more than words can comprehend. The participants shared freedom is access to resources to economically advance, "the ability to do things they could not do in prison," the agency to create their own path (career and education), being able to define who you are regardless of what others define you, "being able to freely express yourself," and the ability to choose when, how, and what to withhold or disclose about their justice-involvement experiences. Their understandings of freedom were influenced by personal experiences, worldviews, and societal understandings and perspectives. Moreover, all participants noted their perspectives were explicitly shaped and interconnected to their race, justice-involvement, and reinforced by experiences navigating society with multiple intersectional identities.

Additionally, the participants emphasized how their definitions and perceptions of freedom or lack thereof have changed over time. Forrest highlighted his experiences being incarcerated reaffirmed how important freedom is. He shared while in prison he used to dream of

[5] The co-researchers also were engaged as participants in the study, the term participant(s) is used in this chapter to incorporate all the perspectives shared during the different phases of the study.

"going outside, going to the refrigerator late at night, and being free to express himself". Reflecting on these dreams now realized post-justice-involvement, Forrest noted he took for granted the freedom(s) he had before he was incarcerated. Correspondingly, Leo, Devonte', and William shared their ideologies of freedom have evolved over time because of increased consciousness and gaining more awareness of the impact of Blackness and justice-involvement. They discussed realizing the "limitations of freedom" growing up as Black adolescent boys, learning about systemic racism, their experiences in prison, and experiencing interlocking forms of oppression navigating society post-justice-involvement as Black men. These experiences led them to question what freedom is and if they would ever experience it compared to other individuals that are not Black or are not directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Living within the bounds of control because of race and justice-involvement, their ideology of freedom has expanded beyond more physical understandings because of paradox of freedom post-justice-involvement. For example, being physically free pre-and-post-justice-involvement but not feeling "free" curated a more abstract view of freedom that encompasses ontological implications.

Along with the broad and abstract ideas of freedom mentioned, the participants had an opportunity to describe their own definition of freedom. The participants took time during the focus group and interviews to ponder and think deeply about their own definitions of freedom. The participants shared coming up with a specific definition was challenging but each definition shared was unique and aimed to describe freedom in its entirety which encompassed nuanced understandings and inferences. Both William and Devonte's' definitions of freedom highlighted the abstract and ontological implications and conceptualizations of freedom or the lack thereof. Devonte' shared,

> “I think freedom for me really means the ability to move, to act freely without people's opinions or people's thoughts controlling or containing you into this box. I think it's a feeling of liberation. That's something that I think is different for every individual. Because freedom does look different, and it feels different. It's one of those things that I can't necessarily put a particular definition on, but it's a feeling that you can't describe when you feel free. Free in the mind, free in the spirit, free in the thought. And so that's kind of the freedom that I aspire to [have] that while my physical body might be chained, my mind is free.”

His definition emphasized different facets of freedom and include physical, psychological, and ontological implications. Devonte’s’ definition of freedom also includes aspects of positive and negative freedom or “freedom to” and “freedom from.” The “freedom to” component highlighted in his definition was the ability to move freely and “freedom from” was living without being or feeling control. In his quotes, Devonte’ referred to control both physically and mentally. He discussed how interesting it is that there are more people serving time in prison than there are correctional officers, yet revolts from individuals in prison are rare. Devonte’ emphasized how powerful mental bondage is and his definition of freedom enthused some in-depth thinking of the ontological and intangible properties of freedom and control that are internalized, felt, or experienced. Similarly, William shared his definition of freedom which underscored the impact of his identities and accessibility to resources or having agency to make and recover from his decisions.

> “So, freedom means to me again, this is simply put, not being other. Because I'm formerly incarcerated, or because I'm Black, or because I'm a man. Additionally, it means having access to the resources that people like me need to dismantle the generational

> poverty, and degradation we have inherited both educationally and economically. So lastly, freedom means the ability to recover from the worst decisions I've made in my life, because others get to make better decisions and recover" -*William*

William's definition illustrated how he conceptualizes freedom and agency as unattainable or inaccessible to him based on his criminal justice involvement, race, and gender. His use of "other" is profound and acknowledges that there are individuals that have more power to actualize freedom. William's definition of freedom also elaborates on the limitations of freedom for Black people because of generational, and systemic effects of anti-Blackness and Black deprivation such as internalized bondage, lack of agency, poverty, economic debilitation, and educational disenfranchisement.

The participants' specific definitions of freedom sparked discourse and further questioning if freedom is accessible or attainable based on their intersectional identities. There are some components of freedom the participants have experienced such as physical freedom from carceral control and increased agency like Forrest mentioned. The participants are grateful for the freedom(s) they experience post-justice-involvement; however, there was a unified view that they have not actualized, experienced, or may not be eligible to realize freedom in its fullness or freedom physically, psychologically, ontologically. For example, despite being physically "free" from carceral control, Leo acknowledged how his view of freedom has been altered due to the locus of control that extends from criminal justice-involvement and his experiences navigating society as a Black man.

> "Whereas once your freedom is taken, and once you're confined with that F on your record, freedom no longer looks the same to you no more. It's difficult to answer the question because it's like once you enter that system, you can never be truly free again. I

> think it's only one thing that really makes you feel some type of freedom, and I think that's economic justice because we know society is filled with a lot of social injustice and racial injustice and all of that." - *Leo*

Leo's quote aligns with William's sentiments contesting the attainability or accessibility of "true" freedom post-justice-involvement. His verbiage "you can never be truly free again" underscores continued unfreedom and that marginal freedom is only accessible to Black individuals post-justice-involvement due to social and racial injustice. Leo's quote supports other participants' perspectives that freedom looks and feels different post-justice-involvement.

While discussing being physically "free", the participants engaged in conversations acknowledging the persistent struggle for survival that exists post-justice-involvement which has led to participants being strategic to find sustainable ways to create the life they desire. The cycle of trying to survive has been perpetuated because of barriers of entry and restrictions post-justice-involvement. All the participants passionately emphasized how background checks and criminal disclosure questions have impacted what employment, housing, and support resources are available to them. The barriers and exclusions the participants discussed were illustrated as 'control mechanisms' to impede success re-entering and navigating society post-justice-involvement. Trying to find stable and sustainable employment, housing, the arduous processes to enroll, afford, and pursue higher education caused individuals to have multiple jobs, persevere amid discrimination and microaggressions, and "work twice as hard" as non-Black or individuals without a justice-involvement background. Correspondingly, Devonte' shared,

> "I think you wonder why the prison system is still booming. It ain't because people are necessarily committing additional crimes. They can't survive out on the goddamn street because we've shut every f****** door."

Devonte's' sentiments emphasize the impact of having a criminal record and the lack of resources to support individuals re-entering and re-integrating in their community's post-justice-involvement keeps individuals in a relentless cycle of trying to survive. Supporting William's perspective, Leo stated "re-entry is a form of freedom" but the support services that are provided to individuals post-justice-involvement determine if individuals stay "free." Leo discussed how impactful it is to have basic needs resources such as employment, housing, food, and emergency fiscal aid post-justice-involvement. Contrary to Devonte's' notion that individuals post-justice-involvement are not committing additional crimes, when talking about the struggle to survive post-justice-involvement, Forrest mentioned being denied support resources "causes individuals to be desperate" and revert to engaging in old patterns and behaviors that may have led them to prison. Although different perspectives, Devonte', Leo, and Forrest's sentiments emphasize physical freedom does not eradicate challenges post-justice-involvement and failing to overcome the challenges of re-entry and re-integration can impact whether individuals recidivate.

While talking about how hard it is to navigate society post-justice-involvement, the participants shared the sacrifices or decisions they made to survive and thrive post-release. There was a somber tone in the focus groups and interviews when talking about the sacrifices the participants made. Some of the sacrifices included time away from family, working multiple jobs, persevering in oppressive environments, and taking out loans to afford personal and college costs. Because of the sacrifices the participants made trying to persist and thrive navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement, they highlighted some personal effects they have endured or continue to withstand which include mental health challenges and questioning if their sacrifices or the aspired goals of career advancement and degree attainment were or are worth it.

Upon acknowledging the sacrifices and the challenges they have experienced post-justice-involvement, the participants emphasized there are always "costs" to freedom. "Costs" were illustrated and understood as necessary sacrifices vital for progress or advancement. They reflected on various "costs" and necessary sacrifices vital for progress or advancement, such as Black freedom fighting in history. They also reflected on sacrifices from individuals that have gone before them that are also directly impacted by the criminal justice system, advocates speaking out to influence policy change and reform, and their own existence and work experiences that are now paving the way for other people with similar intersectional identities. The participants expressed gratitude for individuals that have paid the "costs" or paved the way for them and acknowledged the collateral effects such as suffering, pain, anguish, and other personal effects due to paying these "costs." Specifically, the participants amplified the personal toll it takes to constantly having to disclose or explain their experiences/background, and the challenges of trying to seek support from individuals that do not understand what it means to be Black and/or directly impacted by the criminal justice system.

Degrees of Freedom: Access & Exclusion in Higher Education

The participants' ideologies of freedom challenge the accessibility and actualization of freedom beyond physical implications post-justice-involvement because of their intersectional identities and more specifically their race and justice-involvement. Aligning with research highlighting education has been used as an avenue to aid individuals in pursuing freedom, the participants shared various ways higher education has been an avenue of access which has influenced their "freedom to." The theme Degrees of Freedom: Access & Exclusion in Higher Education is connected to the research question: "What are the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" and explicates the participants'

experiences pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement and the impact of higher education post-justice-involvement. Although higher education has become more accessible for individuals' post-justice-involvement, the participants discussed barriers that exists which have impacted the participants while pursuing higher education. Despite being admitted, the participants' continued to emphasize the challenges, exclusionary practices, and their polarizing experiences in higher education. Therefore, this theme also includes the participants' perspectives of both the accessible and exclusionary practices and properties of and in higher education.

The Relationship of Education & Freedom

The participants' definitions and ideologies acknowledged both the infinite properties and limitations of freedom. While freedom in its fullness, or freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically, was considered more unattainable psychologically and ontologically, there are 'levels of freedom' which participants think are accessible to them through economic influence or advancement. Leo described his concept of levels/degrees of marginal freedom that he believes can be attained through education, wealth, self-emancipation, and policy change. He shared that pursuing higher education, employment, wealth, etc. increase individuals' freedom (freedom to) marginally. Although the participants did not overview this theory in detail like Leo explained, they did mention the impact of education, economic capital, cultural capital, and community support which helped them advance in society and aid them in their plight toward boundless freedom.

The questions asked in the interviews and focus groups explored the relationship between education and freedom. The theoretical framework for this study was Freire's (1970) framing of freedom as interconnected with education and humanization for individuals with marginalized

identities. Freire (1970) theorized that pursuing education helps individuals become more humanized and aids them on the plight to freedom. Underscoring the relationship of freedom and education, Leo shared, “I believe education gave me a sense of freedom when I felt like everything else, all systems, everybody else was against me.” Pursuing education was also recognized as an opportunity to increase knowledge in interested subjects, develop a critical consciousness, and prepare for future scholastic and professional goals both in prison and post-justice-involvement. The participants highlighted the interpersonal benefits of education such as being able to critically reflect on their worldviews and experiences, building confidence, acquiring knowledge to make community and social change, and becoming more conscious of the systems of oppression. William shared he valued both “informal and formal” education and noted education is an essential tool especially coupled with “community knowledge,” understandings or ways of knowing shared between individuals in their community. The participants have valued their various educational experiences which has also opened doors of opportunity, helped them interpersonally develop, network, strategize to economically mobilize, and advocate for the dismantling of systems in research and practice.

Access & Exclusion in Higher Education

As a result of the participants’ impactful educational experiences before and in prison, they decided to pursue higher education post-justice-involvement for various reasons such as economic stability, a “safety net,” career advancement, higher learning, to finish what they started in prison, and their personal goals to finish higher education as a first generation undergraduate or graduate student to be an example for their families and communities. Higher education has been instrumental post-justice-involvement and has aided the participants in their scholastic and professional endeavors which has helped them economically advance and acquire

skills needed for their passions and careers. Forrest said, “The more credentials you have, the pay comes with that credential. There's a scale of pay that comes with that. The higher you go, the more you get, and I knew that's what it was going to take.” In his quote Forrest acknowledged the economic benefits that are correlated to postsecondary credentials and degree attainment. Along with career advancement, economic stability and mobility were strong impact factors for most of the participants when considering pursuing and continuing higher education post-justice-involvement.

Although the participants decided to pursue higher education post-justice-involvement, some of their expectations were drastically different from their personal experiences in higher education. While sharing personal experiences, the participants emphasized the paradox of access amid exclusion practices in higher education. The participants detailed the immense challenge(s) of pursuing higher education, integrating on campus, and engaging with higher education stakeholders post-justice-involvement from a student and employee perspective. The experiences the participants shared included moments of discrimination, mistreatment, exploitation of their pain, receiving undue criticism, not being acknowledged for their expertise, and being outed by professors and support staff. When sharing details and stories about their experiences, the participants mentioned ‘putting on a mask’ and not feeling welcomed or accepted as their authentic selves navigating higher education as an employee or student. Forrest shared,

> “There are times on campus you could be walking towards a white student or a Hispanic student and they'll either turn around and go the other way or go around you just to not come across your path. It's little stuff like that, that woke me up and let me know that, hey, they're not comfortable with people who are previously incarcerated. But not just the

> fact that I was previously incarcerated. It's the fact that I'm Black and I was previously incarcerated."

Forrest's quote highlights the dual impact of Blackness and justice-involvement which was also affirmed by other participants. The intersection and relationship of marginalized identities both visible and invisible influenced how the participants were treated and negatively perceived. Enduring intersectional oppression because of their race and being directly impacted by the criminal justice system influenced the participants' experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement. Pursuing education as a student as well as working in higher education was described as a siloed experience because of the microaggressions and mistreatment from ignorant classmates and colleagues which left the participants feeling ostracized. The participants expressed the basis of mistreatment commonly stemmed from their race, how they presented themselves, and their justice-involvement background. Leo added,

> "Nobody wanted to work with me because they assumed because I'm tatted up and got on a fitted cap on that I don't know what I'm talking about. Then when it's time to put the pedal to metal and produce the material, I had the best quality work, and they didn't know how I did it. You know what I'm saying? Sometimes I got a lot of hate because of that. As a formerly incarcerated person education has not been the traditional or the glamorous side."

Leo's sentiments exposed the ignorant thinking and behaviors demonstrated from students simply because of how he presented himself. Despite being equally or overqualified compared to other students or colleagues in higher education, receiving "hate" or being perceived as "lacking knowledge" were common experiences amongst the participants in higher education as a student and professional. Devonte' shared his frustrations of being criticized, dismissed, and exclaimed

“How can I help people when they don’t see me as an asset?” As a result of being perceived as unknowledgeable, feeling unwelcomed, or unheard as a student and professional, William talked about not feeling motivated to contribute or uncomfortable to show up as his authentic self. William said, “I'm a shell in the space. I don't even take my real self into the space, much less the classroom. I feel it already, and I haven't even gotten to a PhD.” Although physically present, William acknowledged the absence of his authentic self. Similarly, Forrest added he would have preferred attending class virtually instead of having to deal with the behavior and attitudes of his classmates. William and Forrest’s statements expose the personal effects of consistently receiving negative treatment and being in an inimical environment while pursuing higher education.

Along with prejudiced classroom experiences, the participants also noted feeling hyper-visible and other tangible effects after disclosing their criminal history or being outed. When describing specific interactions on campus, the participants highlighted how their experiences in prison were outed and exploited by professors and university support staff. Some of the participants detailed how the atmosphere shifted and the demeanor and behavior of their classmates or colleagues shifted from being welcoming and engaging to uncongenial. Feelings of discomfort, frustration, and anger were expressed when discussing the apparent lack of agency they had over when and how their justice-involvement was shared. Being formerly incarcerated is not commonly described with visible implications or having physical effects post-justice-involvement yet being outed was described as becoming hyper visible to others which influenced how students and colleagues perceived and engaged with the participants.

The participants also shared stories about how their college or university used their pain for journalism and other means of profitable gain. Being tokenized yet having no agency over

their narratives and how they are shared publicly was a point of contention amongst the participants. As a result of these exploitative experiences, some of the participants called out how performative higher education as an institution and higher education administrators and stakeholders can be. The “progressive access policies” or researchers “advocating” publicly for change amongst the lack of accountability, mistreatment, and the incessant centering of whiteness continues to provoke further questioning of if higher education stakeholders actually prioritize access, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The act of producing research, altering mission statements to be politically relevant, and increasing access for individuals to pursue higher education post-justice-involvement with no actionable change was declared inefficient, disingenuous, and enabling of more harm. Devonte’ declared,

> “People talk a good game, they talk about advocacy, but behind closed doors they don't want it, especially if it targets their back door. They don't want to air it out, and they don't want to show their hand, but they'll do everything to smile in your face and to make you feel good and to make you think you're crazy. But in reality, sometimes, I think people are just trying to get money, trying to exploit your pain or your issues so that way they can get the donors and all this other stuff and yet leave you empty”

Devonte’s’ sentiments were affirmed by other participants because he underscored how extractive and manipulative institutions and higher education stakeholders can be and emphasized the damaging effects of manipulation and exploitation. Devonte’s’ statement “leave you empty” is truly reflective of how some of the participants have felt doing everything they can to try and persist in higher education and navigate society post-justice-involvement.

Nevertheless, despite the negative experiences shared, the participants acknowledged they did not regret pursuing their education and wrestled with various negative and positive

emotions when sharing their experiences and acknowledging the sacrifices they made to pursue, persist, and/or leave higher education post-degree attainment. Each focus group was filled with the participants sharing more negative experiences in higher education and how much their experiences have really affected their self-perception, mental health, and future goals.

~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative

Amongst the participants many intersectional identities and experiences, the participants emphasized their race and experiences in the carceral system shaped how other people viewed, treated, and perceived them. The theme ~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative expounds on the fallacious narratives projected on the participants and the effects of being mistreated, misrepresented, and unfairly judged based on the participants' identity and experiences. Additionally, this theme also shares more about how the participants have combated, denounced, and risen above the negativity, projected narratives, and narrow representations of who they are and aspire to be.

The influence of the participants' background, race, and other salient identities were consistently mentioned when reflecting on life and educational experiences. Navigating society as a Black individual was contextual to their experiences and was viewed as an impact factor in how they were treated in society and higher education post-justice-involvement. William said, "I'm not in any form of physical incarceration. I'm still incarcerated by this flesh." William's framing of Blackness as another form of bondage post-justice-involvement underscores the continued unfreedom he experiences despite being "free from" carceral control. His conceptualization of Blackness being a form of incarceration also emphasizes Black people's continued plight for freedom amid the pervasive effects of systemic racism.

Because the participants identify as Black and have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system, they experience interlocking forms of domination and oppression. As a result of the dual impact and interconnectedness of race and justice-involvement, the participants emphasized the personal toll it takes to navigate spaces like educational environments sometimes as 'the only one' with lived experiences in the carceral system. The struggle to 'fit' or be included was discussed amongst constantly combating multiple forces of oppression such as systemic racism, discrimination, and prejudice based on their marginalized intersectional identities. The relentless mistreatment, exclusion, and being misrepresented brought out feelings of unhappiness, discontentment, and frustration during the focus groups and interviews.

Although the participants did not agree with the narratives that were projected on them, being constantly misjudged, and misrepresented impacted their self-esteem. Forrest declared,

> "At one point it made me feel like, is there something wrong with me? Do I have any self-worth? And not only that, but those years as I was in my undergraduate studies when I was dealing with this on this campus, it made it difficult for me to focus on my studies."

In the quote, Forrest mentions he began to question his self-worth which reveals the personal effects of experiencing marginalization. Forrest's quote sheds light on how impactful social experiences can be while focusing on the curricular or academic components of pursuing a college degree. Notwithstanding the advocacy efforts to humanize, provide care, increase accessibility, and better support individuals post-justice-involvement in higher education and in society, the participants' experiences expose the adverse reality and need for change that makes a difference in how individuals are perceived and treated post-justice-involvement.

Similarly, Devonte' asserted,

> “I feel like we're often mistreated, and it's become a numbing factor because it continuously happens over and over again. I talk about numbness, not because I don't have any other feelings. I have all of the anger and the frustration. I also have that numbness because at some point it feels like there's nothing that I can do. I've done everything you said I needed to do, and yet here we are still in the same spot, in the same space, experiencing the same things.”

Devonte’s’ quote amplified his feelings and frustrations of feeling like he is in a bound and stagnant state. This bound and stagnant state is associated with the locus of carceral control that extends beyond the walls of a correctional facility, systemic barriers, and the lack of change in society. Regardless of how much the participants have evolved, some of the participants still felt bound because they continued to be viewed as subordinate in various educational, employment, and societal environments. And the apparent lack of agency to change how they are perceived and treated has weighed on the participants. Like Devonte’, William also shared his thoughts of feeling “stuck” in an identity that is not representative of who he is.

> “I don’t care what my credential ever gets to, I’ll always be a formerly incarcerated person to somebody. I’ll always be a felon to somebody. I hate the ways that white supremacy doesn’t even have to do the work anymore.”

William’s quote highlights how his experiences in prison affect him regardless of how much he continues to grow, develop, and advance post-justice-involvement. His use of “always” in the quote is important to recognize and reflects how he believes his identity will eternally be subjugated and interconnected with his experiences in prison. In the quote William also stated, “I hate the ways that white supremacy doesn’t even have to do the work anymore,” which

extrapolates his perspectives of feeling bound based on his carceral experiences which are disconnected from race.

Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative

To combat the bias and discrimination, the participants have been intentional about the environments they work in and the people they surround themselves with. Being around people that affirm them like family, friends, and removing themselves from negative environments also made a difference in their personal life, careers, and educational journeys; however, having to make hard decisions to leave adverse environments led them back into the cycle of hustling and surviving. Additionally, the participants have continued to reaffirm themselves and not succumb to others' ignorant perceptions. Positive self-talk, communal support, and self-visualization have encouraged the participants to denounce how the world has defined them based on their identities and experiences, to persist, and to achieve their goals. Forrest shared,

> "I have not allowed it to overtake me. I see it for what it is, and I'm still able to, as a Black man, whether it's in the community, whether it's on campus, whether it's in my hometown, I'm able to walk over my head held high because I know that the people who are exhibiting these types of attitudes towards me are doing it out of ignorance."

Forrest's quote acknowledges how ignorance influences people's prejudice behaviors and attitudes. Despite the demonstration of these behaviors, Forrest has used his mental fortitude to persevere and not be consumed with these false perspectives and narratives. Furthermore, the participants shared how they have used their identities as scholars, fathers, Black, first generation, etc. as motivators to progress and give back to their families and communities. Both Leo and William amplified the importance of generational wealth, providing for their family, and being a role model for their children which has been a source of motivation and has helped them

persevere post-justice-involvement. Knowing who they are and knowing their "why" is something that has kept all the participants grounded to write their own stories beyond their experiences in the carceral system. Living life confidently and self-assuredly, the participants are actively writing their own holistic stories, creating their own narratives, as well as achieving the dreams they have for themselves. Leo noted the importance of creating and sharing his own narrative. He said,

> "We have to understand that we have to be able to tell the narrative. We have to continue to tell the story. Because if we don't, they will, and they're going to lie. You can see through history; they've lied through history. That's why we have to tell our own story. We have to be the writers so we could tell the truth.

The "they" in Leo's quote refers to researchers, historians, and other people that fail to tell accurate narratives and humanize Black and individuals impacted by the criminal justice system. In Leo's quote he recognized the various narrow, negative, or deficit framed narratives that are amplified in research and society about Black and justice-involved communities. Aligning with Leo's quote above, the findings of this study seek to the tell the truth and amplify Black individuals' stories and experiences navigating society and pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. Notwithstanding the challenges they have faced to persist and survive, the participants are still willing to advocate for others directly impacted by the criminal justice system and other forms of systematic oppression by sharing their stories to bring awareness to specific barriers, the prevalence of mistreatment, and discrimination in higher education and in society.

Summation of Themes

The three overarching themes of the study are the Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom, Degrees of Freedom Access & Exclusion in Higher Education, and ~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative. Each of the themes underscore the central topics, perspectives, and experiences overviewed in data collection.

The first theme Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom shares more about the participants' definitions of freedom and how their ideologies of freedom or the lack thereof have been conceptualized and evolved over time. The participants ideologies and definitions of freedom encompassed both abstract, tangible, and ontological implications. The participants defined freedom as access, the ability to economically advance, agency to do things they could not do in prison, creating their own career and educational trajectory, defining themselves despite others' perception, and choosing when, how, and what to withhold or disclose about their justice-involvement experiences. Their definitions of freedom were also influenced by the participants' experiences growing up, their experiences in prison and post-justice-involvement, and by their worldviews curated navigating society as Black men. The participants experiences were contextual to their perspectives and viewpoints shared throughout the study.

Majority of the participants also spoke at length about how only marginal freedom(s) and physical is accessible to them and questioned if they would every experience freedom beyond just physical implications like freedom ontologically and psychologically. The theme Degrees of Freedom: Access & Exclusion in Higher Education encompasses the discussions about the accessibility of freedom, the relationship of education and freedom, and the accessible and exclusionary practices in higher education. Pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement have been instrumental to professional endeavors and economic success; nevertheless, the participants' experiences have been challenging because of exclusionary policies that inhibit

access, mistreatment, exploitation of their pain, and microaggressions from classmates and colleagues in higher education. Despite their experiences, the participants still see value in their degrees and higher education experiences and have used the knowledge learned for their scholarly pursuits, career endeavors, and economic mobility. Consequently, the participants have continued to withstand the personal impacts such as mental health declines, the burden of student loan debt, and being perceived or treated as inferior as they persist pursuing graduate degrees or post degree attainment.

The theme ~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative exposes and amplifies the damaging personal mental health effects from the consistent inaccurate projections, perceptions, and adverse treatment and the ways the participants have denounced, reclaimed, and recreated their narratives. While sharing more about their life, educational, and post-justice-involvement experiences in the focus groups and interviews, the participants continued to share how individuals narrowly perceived, mistreated, and projected inaccurate narratives on them based on their intersectional identity and experiences. These incomplete projects and perceptions influenced how individuals treated them in higher education as a student and professional. Despite the adverse experiences, the participants have found ways to persevere by denouncing the false narratives, leaving harmful environments, using their identities and family as motivators, remembering their goals, and cultivating a positive self-perception disconnected from prejudiced societal narratives.

The participants were aligned on majority of the central themes however there was one outlier: hope. Each of the participants expressed different levels of hope or hopelessness which was influenced by the participants' personal experiences navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement. This hope or hopelessness has influenced the participants motivation to

keep advocating for change and persisting in higher education environments as a student or employee. Although the participants were eager to share recommendations in the study, it was apparent that each person had different beliefs on if change would occur in higher education and society to positively impact and better serve Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. It's important to note this outlier and acknowledge hope has been impactful to help some of the participants persevere and continue advocating for change and the feelings of hopelessness that affects some of the participants and their inability to believe in change is interrelated to their experiences enduring systemic barriers, and the effects of anti-Blackness and Black deprivation that have impacted them in society and higher education.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a thorough analysis of the four overarching themes of the study which include the Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom, Degrees of Freedom Access & Exclusion in Higher Education, and ~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative. The final themes are a culmination of the participants' engagement in the study along with their ideologies, worldviews, perspectives, experiences expressed in the journal prompt, focus groups, and co-researcher interviews. The data collection procedures yielded rich information and provided answers to the research questions. The research questions for this study were "How do Black individuals define and experience freedom post-justice-involvement?" And "What are the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" The findings from this study revealed the profundities of freedom, the entangled relationship and impact of identity and experiences, the relationship of freedom and education, and the power of carceral control which extends beyond the walls of a correctional facility. The context, concepts,

and themes overviewed in this chapter influenced the recommendations and implications for future policy, practice, and research, and are further discussed in chapter five.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black individuals in higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement. This study also included an analysis of the impact of identity and more specifically the interconnectedness of the participants' intersectional identities and experiences as Black, men, students, and being directly impacted by the criminal justice system. This critical analysis contributed to existing knowledge as it examined the nuances of freedom and domination which is seldom explored collaboratively *with* Black individuals in interdisciplinary research and literature. The research design of this study encompassed a CPAR framework, social constructivism paradigm, and used dialectical thinking as the mode of thinking for observation and analysis. The research design was an active approach to deconstruct how research is traditionally conducted and exemplified the importance of involving and centering individuals impacted by the research phenomena. The study included five participants and three of out the five individuals were engaged as co-researchers. Although the co-researchers helped conduct the study, they also were able to be participants of the study. Therefore, the term participant(s) is used in this chapter to encompass all the perspectives shared during the different phases of data collection. The data collection and analysis methods encouraged dialogue, fostered reflection, and presented an opportunity to listen, curate actionable recommendations, and amplify Black individuals' experiences and perspectives navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement. The rich data yielded from the journal prompt, focus groups, and co-researcher interviews exposed the barriers and challenging experiences Black justice-involved individuals face in higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement. The findings also highlighted the personal impacts of these experiences, which have influenced the participants' worldviews and perspectives of freedom,

race, and access. Moreover, this chapter includes a discussion of the findings, recommendations, and implications for future research and practice.

Interpretations of the Findings

The research questions for the study were "How do Black individuals define and experience freedom post-justice-involvement?" And "What are the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" The findings of this study answer these questions and offer novel insights valuable for scholarship and practice. The data from the study was synthesized into three themes: Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom; Degrees of Freedom: Access & Exclusion in Higher Education; and ~~You Are~~ I am**:** Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative. The themes advance existing literature and present new understandings, questions, and considerations to inspire further exploration and analysis.

Ideology of Freedom: Defining Freedom

The research underscored in the literature review outlined historic and present Black freedom fighting (Davis, 2016; Fujino & Harmachis, 2020; Kendi & Blain, 2022; Tuck, 2011; Walcott, 2021; Williams, 2016). Black individuals in the United States have continued to fight for full restoration and the power to actualize constitutional rights and privileges since enslavement was "outlawed" (Kendi & Blain, 2022). The findings of this study exemplify how Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system are still freedom-fighting in multiple ways despite being physically free post-enslavement and post-justice-involvement. The participants continued experiences navigating society highlight the eternal pursuit of freedom and current unfreedom. The term unfreedom has been used by scholars to highlight the contradictions of freedom for Black people that began during enslavement and are still woven into the fabric of American values, norms, and practices (Smith & Harris, 2023; Walcott, 2021).

Relatedly, when asked to define freedom, the participants wrestled with the accessibility and attainability of freedom, which recognizes the abstract implications and the limits of freedom for individuals' post-justice-involvement beyond physical understandings. The physical implications of freedom are fully realized post-justice-involvement, yet the abstract and ontological properties of freedom continue to be contested and not experienced. Similarly, the participants' ideology of freedom was disconnected from legal insinuations. Freedom or 'being free' was viewed by the participants as more than a term or expression used to describe an individual released from incarceration. Extending this thinking beyond transactional or legalistic understandings, majority of the participants emphasized that even after reentering their community's post-justice-involvement they still did not feel free nor did they believe that they could realize freedom in its fullness which is freedom physically, psychologically, and ontologically. Freedom physically is being free from physical control such as being released from prison. Freedom psychologically was illustrated as the absence of internalized control or mental unfreedom that is correlated with the participants' salient identities experiences as Black individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement. And in this study, freedom ontologically underscores the participants' desire to feel, be, and experience freedom in abstract and tangible contexts which include increased access, being viewed and treated as humane, and the eradication of structural barriers that impede Black individuals and individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement. Therefore, the idea that freedom(s) are "restored" post-justice-involvement fails to recognize the depths of bondage that affects Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. The legal implications of freedom are interconnected with systemic bondage which means legality never included access to freedom in its fullness. Furthermore, the participants inability to conceptualize experiencing "freedom to and freedom from" based on their intersectional

identities defies the ideology that freedom is or can be theorized, experienced, or accessible to everyone simply by virtue of humanity.

According to humanists, the virtues of humanity have been illustrated as accessible for everyone and the term "humanity" has been used to describe all individuals or the human race as a whole (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). However, the humanist perspective of language being sedentary, and universal ideals of humanity does not contribute to marginalized communities being viewed or treated as equal. Being a human and ineligible to access the full rights and privileges of humanity as a Black individual challenges the humanist perspective which states humanity is entitled and is eligible to everyone. Walcott (2021) introduced the term "Black life forms" which emphasizes the fragility of humanity for Black people (p. 9). The findings of the study align with this framing and exemplify how fragile humanity is for Black people post-justice-involvement. The participants' inability to realize or actualize the full capabilities of freedom is correlated to living in a society that reinforces the view that freedom was never intended for Black, justice-involved, or anyone nonwhite. This perspective aligns with the structuralists view of freedom which acknowledges the structural or systemic implications such as white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and Black deprivation that impede Black people from conceptualizing, experiencing, and actualizing freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). The pervasiveness of systemic racism is a continued realization of history continuing to repeat itself and a constant reminder all [men] were never going to be equal regardless of words stated in legislative texts. Legal insinuations of freedom in the United States post-justice-involvement will always hinder Black individuals from being entitled to the ideals of humanity based on the continued use of legislation to exclude and reinforce systemic racism, oppression, and Black disenfranchisement. Future research and

scholarship should seek to interrogate the relationship of language, humanity, and freedom. Exploring how humanity is defined and who is seen, treated, or reaps the full privileges of being human will provide more insight about how attainable or accessible freedom is experienced, conceptualized, or theorized. Both humanity and freedom are the foundation of social issues and language is directly related to how systems are produced, perpetuated, understood, and eradicated. Analyzing the active properties of language and its relation to the conceptualization and actualization of freedom and humanity will provide a more thorough analysis and advocate for the deconstruction of linear ideologies and analyses of freedom, domination, and Blackness. Additionally reframing freedom in research and analyses to align with a post-structuralist perspective, acknowledges the structural implications and expands linear thinking with aims to reconstruct how freedom is viewed, conceptualized, and the ways in which individuals can pursue and experience it.

Degrees of Freedom: Access & Exclusion in Higher Education

During the study, the participants shared their ideologies of freedom. Their ideologies of freedom were expansive and encompassed physical, psychological, and ontological implications. Although the participants' definitions were expansive, in the focus groups and interviews the participants detailed how they only experience marginal freedom(s) in relation to the boundless freedom they can imagine. Their experiences shared exposed the dichotomy of access navigating society and higher education as a Black individual post-justice-involvement. The theme "Degrees of Freedom" aligns with the literature epitomizing continued unfreedom Black individuals experience and endure ontologically, philosophically, and psychologically navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement. The unfree ontological and psychological ideology and worldviews the participants illustrated in the data provided a holistic view of the

infinite collateral effects and impact of both racial identity and criminal justice involvement. The participants' experiences navigating society and higher education also exposed the cycles of oppression Black individuals withstand and the impact of carceral control that extends post-justice-involvement. Despite economic and educational advancement, the locus of carceral control showed up through requirements to disclose criminal history as a prospective applicant in some states, being outed, being viewed as a threat to safety, and being barred from specific higher education grant aid programs, on-campus jobs, housing, and on-campus employment.

Furthermore, the locus of carceral control and continued unfreedom also impacted the participants mentally. The psychological implications of being previously incarcerated and unfree as a Black individual post-justice-involvement have continued to influence how individuals perceive themselves and navigate society. In the literature review, I highlight Okello's (2022) framing of viewing carcerality as contextual. Okello (2022) noted that Black people have internalized carcerality which has psychological properties independent of physical incarceration. Black individuals internalized view of carcerality has been curated by enslavement and perpetuated through anti-Blackness, Black deprivation, and mass incarceration, which disproportionately affect Black communities. Extending Okello's (2022) theory, there is a dual internalization of carcerality for Black individuals that have been physically confined in a carceral environment. Understanding carcerality as dually implicative based on the internalized implications pre-and-post-justice-involvement in conjunction with physical experiences in the carceral system underscores the psychological properties of incarceration internalized by race and also denotes the grave impact of carceral control beyond the walls of a correctional facility. The participants highlighted the interminable impact of physical and mental control which stems from the entanglement of race and incarceration which influences their understandings of

"freedom from" and how they have navigated society post-justice-involvement. The participants amplified the struggle to find sustainable ways to survive mentally and physically amid barriers to success in higher education and society which is directly related to the manifestation of various control mechanisms and demonstrates how carcerality is dually implicative and permeates their daily lives post-justice-involvement. Acknowledging both abstract and concrete implications of carcerality emphasizes the interconnectedness of physical incarceration and psychological carcerality that Black individuals already have internalized. Reframing carcerality as dually implicative is important because it recognizes navigating society as a Black individual post-justice-involvement is having to operate within a matrix of perpetual control mechanisms that have been internalized and extracted from a physical experience.

Liberatory Properties of Higher Education

The theme 'Degrees of Freedom' highlights the limits of freedom and emphasizes some reinstated access post-justice-involvement. Higher education has been highlighted in research as an impactful and a liberatory tool to help individuals grow and develop in prison and post-justice-involvement (Binda et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2015; Johnson & Abreu, 2020; Johnson, 2021). Correspondingly, Freire (1970) theorized education aids individuals who experience marginalization in their pursuit of freedom. Aligning with Freire's concept of education being interconnected with freedom, the findings highlight pursuing higher education aids individuals in their pursuit to another degree/level of freedom. Comparable to existing research, the study's findings underscored liberatory properties in education exist (Castro et al., 2015). When discussing the liberatory properties of education the participants mentioned pursuing education gave them a mental escape or "freedom from," and provided them an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills useful for their future, which increases access or "freedom to." Education

does have liberatory properties however, pursing higher education exclusively does not equate to experiencing freedom. Degree attainment or pursuing education does not diminish the exclusionary, emotionally taxing, and inequitable realities of navigating society that Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement must face. In chapter four, I highlight Leo's, a participant's, theory of reframing education as an 'equalizer' rather than an avenue for liberation. This new framing is important because the term 'equalizer' has more grounding capabilities compared to viewing education as a linear avenue for liberation. Considering the participants have only experienced marginal freedom post-justice-involvement using the term equalizer acknowledges the power of education but also recognizes educational attainment only marginally impacted individuals' reality, perception, and how they are treated. Reframing education as more of a counterbalance rather than a direct avenue to experience freedom in its fullness draws attention to the interconnectedness of the participants' identities and systemic oppression as perpetual opposing forces on the plight to freedom. This reframing is important because it more adequately describes the impact of education in relation to the continued unfreedom Black individuals experience post-justice-involvement.

Research has amplified the challenging experiences individuals face pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement (Custer, 2018; Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr. et al., 2020). The findings are also aligned with existing research and literature about the exclusionary or challenging higher education experiences individuals endure post-justice-involvement. Scholars have noted students that have a criminal history have different student experiences in higher education compared to students without a criminal history (Custer, 2018; Johnson, 2021; Livingston & Miller, 2014; McTier Jr. et al., 2017). The differences include being more likely to be denied admission, varying access to on campus resources, lack of

financial support, and rigid rules for student engagement depending on the type of criminal history an individual has (Johnson & Abreu, 2020; McTier Jr. et al., 2020; Stewart & Uggen, 2020). Similarly, the findings of this study revealed the specific and polarizing experiences Black individuals undergo post-justice involvement as students and employees of the university while pursuing education and post-degree attainment such as being ostracized, outed, or exploited, perceived as lacking knowledge, being mistreated, and experiencing microaggressions by classmates and colleagues. The negative experiences and maltreatment have caused justice-involved individuals to have siloed journeys in higher education, change their career trajectories, and re-evaluate their future goals. The study's participants' adverse experiences and the accompanying personal effects of these experiences reveal how pursuing higher education is more than an academic endeavor.

Being academically enriched is only a portion of the student experience in higher education and most students emphasize the impact of noncurricular experiences and the campus culture alongside the academic components. Higher education is often viewed as a microcosm of society, which can be another oppressive environment for individuals who experience marginalization in society such as Black and other racially diverse individuals post-justice-involvement (Johnson & Dizon, 2021). Despite their institutions prioritizing accessibility and creating an inclusive environment for students with diverse backgrounds, the participants mentioned how their higher education experiences have been more dehumanizing, unwelcoming, and isolating than they expected. The participants' expectations being different than their expectations is notable to highlight because it acknowledges how colleges and university can mirror society by cultivating oppressive environments failing to actualize the core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion that most colleges and universities have. It also highlights the

need for future research to interrogate and examine why institutional missions, visions, and values, are incongruent with some students' experiences. Correspondingly, continuing to amplify the actual experiences Black students have post-justice-involvement will optimistically urge higher education stakeholders to make actionable change to actualize the goals and values of diversity, inclusion, and equity. With higher education becoming more accessible for marginalized communities, eradicating barriers, and creating a more equitable and inclusive campus culture will lead to more positive academic and noncurricular student experiences which positively impacts individuals' decision to continue their education and degree attainment.

Literature underscored various performative practices, responses, or proposed strategies for transformational change from higher education institutions and stakeholders that fail to adequately address or eradicate white supremacy (Aja & Bustillo, 2015; Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Dancy et al, 2018; Ezell, 2023; Sulé et al., 2022; Ziff & Wynn, 2022). Likewise, this study's findings amplified how higher education institutions' missions, policies, and stakeholders can be performative by highlighting the participants' experiences of exploitation, outing, and prejudice conducted by higher education stakeholders. The participants experiences in higher education revealed stark contradictions from university missions, goals, and values of accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion. William and Devonte' discussed the "gatekeepers" in higher education and the challenges they have faced trying to advocate for change and advance academically and in their careers post degree attainment. In both academic and professional settings, William shared he has been invited to roundtable discussions and was "purged" for his stories and experiences. As a result, William highlighted he intentionally chooses to remain quiet to combat the extractive practices. As an employee, Devonte' discussed having various roles in higher education and being in positions of power to make changes that

would impact justice-involved students pursuing higher education, yet he was not given the same respect, treatment, or compensation compared to his peers. Devonte' shared he felt dismissed when trying to advocate for change and felt people began to ban together and outweigh his voice. Although Devonte' had both the academic credentials and influence because of his position he still had different experiences compared to his colleagues in higher education because of his identity and experiences.

The participants also acknowledged the lack of accountability from university stakeholders including professors, administration, and support staff when they were confronted about their behavior. When confronting higher education stakeholders and staff about instances of mistreatment or marginalization, William shared that individuals did not take responsibility for their actions. William said that a professor offered him a test out option instead of being accountable for his actions and taking an active approach to create a more inclusive classroom environment. These experiences shared exemplified how higher education leaders and staff utilized their professional power to mistreat, manipulate, and control individuals as students and employee's post-justice-involvement. The constant advocacy for diversity, inclusion, and equity in research and practice conducted by professors, university administration, and higher education support staff that also mistreated the participants influenced some of their perspectives to view higher education stakeholders and institutions as performative.

The paradox of access is exhibited through individuals being accepted to the institution yet receiving unjust treatment as if they are unwelcome and excluded which interrogates the legitimacy of progression. Strategizing to implement policies to increase accessibility for individuals in higher education post-justice-involvement is ineffective and does not contribute to advancement without the eradication of white supremacy, discriminatory practices, and with a

campus community cultivating an environment that perpetuates systemic oppression. This study and its findings should influence higher education institutions, stakeholders, and campus communities to practically actualize the espoused values of access, equity, and inclusion by listening to individuals' experiences in higher post-justice-involvement, humanizing individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system, being aware of unconscious bias, engaging in cultural competency training, and learning effective ways to intervene when people are mistreated. These strategies are foundational to create a culture of inclusion for students' post-justice-involvement and impacts their sense of belonging which is correlated to a positive student experience, the increase of retention rates, and degree attainment (Johnson & Abreu, 2020).

~~You Are~~ I am: Creating & Reclaiming my Narrative

Foucault's theory of power relations includes an overview of multiple facets of power that are "uninterrupted, subject our bodies, and govern our behaviors" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021, p. 62). Situating Foucault's theory of power relations in academe, both students and higher education stakeholders have and power and produce power in relation to each other. Because individuals have different levels of power, Foucault also highlights that "power forms a chain that relies on relations in social networks" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021, p. 51 – 52). The participants adverse experiences with college and university professors, support staff, and colleagues exemplify how "the deployment of power makes visible how the subject is constructed" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021, p. 54). The deployment of power is correlated to how the participants understood themselves in relation to higher education stakeholders and the campus community. Subjectivity encompasses individuals' sense of self and how their understanding of their relation to the world is produced within power relations (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). The participants emphasized in some ways their sense of self was cultivated or influenced by

internalizing mistreatment and negative experiences in higher education and society post-justice-involvement.

Exploring the participants' identities and how their sense of self has been constructed, this study used an onto-epistemological perspective to analyze the mutual implications of having intersectional identities, lived experiences in the criminal justice system (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). In this study both knowing and being— and the participants past and present lived experiences, were viewed as sources of knowledge. The participants' experiences were used as a point of entry to examine *savoir*, or constructed knowledge about oneself and how individuals participate in the world (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Foucault's utilization of savoir frames knowledge as an active production of interactions, engagement, and understanding within and against social and material worlds (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Correspondingly, "Black Truth" and embodied knowing were utilized as entry points to examine the connections the participants made about how or if they believed their identity directly affected their experiences and self-perception (Ladner & Walters 1973, p. 152; Okello, 2022). Viewing knowledge as socially constructed and a process between individuals and their environment acknowledges how much influence individuals and environments have which also shifts the discourse to examine the interconnections of how individuals are situated in systems and how systems are operationalized. Both perspectives are contextual to Black individuals societal and higher educational experiences post-justice-involvement.

During the journal prompt, focus group and interviews, the participants noted their justice-involvement, race, and other salient identities greatly impacted their self-perception, worldviews, and experiences post-justice-involvement. Race and justice-involvement were the most mentioned as direct influences and contextual to their experiences. When discussing the

impact of identity, often the participants' experiences as a Black individual navigating society post-justice-involvement were directly correlated and parallel to what they "know," – their socially constructed views influenced by society and their own experiences, about how Black males are treated, perceived, and misrepresented in society and in higher education post-release. When sharing their experiences, the participants underscored the copious effects of anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness is defined as a "system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people" (Carruthers, 2018 p. 26; Dumas, 2015; Haynes et al., 2019; Mustaffa, 2017). The effects of anti-Blackness were exhibited though discrimination and being perceived as inferior which contributed to imposter syndrome, questioning their future goals, negative opinions, mistreatment, and the decline of their mental health. Despite the participants economic and educational success, the participants continue to endure challenges and unprecedented adversity due to the manifestation of anti-Blackness in concurrence with navigating society post-justice-involvement.

Black individuals who have had prior engagement with the criminal justice system have experienced twofold stereotyping, prejudice, and bias (Williams et al., 2019). The negative perceptions, unconscious bias, and incorrect narratives have stopped people from seeing who the participants are beyond their race and experiences in the carceral system. The inability to view individuals beyond their previous actions puts limits and constraints on their aspirations and future. Treating individuals more as an entity than a human, continues to subject marginalized individuals to the control of others. Restorative justice ideals and practices highlight the need to humanize, deconstruct, and reframe the subordinate perception of individuals who are impacted by the criminal justice system (Rose, 2018). Seeing and treating Black individuals who are navigating society post-justice involvement as human and deserving of rights and privileges

regardless of their racial identity and past experiences, is a restorative practice. Furthermore, humanizing Black and justice-involved individuals begins with recognizing their identity and experiences as holistic and not perceiving who they are based on societal perceptions or personal prejudices.

Despite the portrayal of Black individuals as "second class citizens", self-emancipation is a generational concept that has been used by Black individuals to psychologically free themselves, reclaim their narratives, and create a positive view of oneself (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020). The participants have tried to free themselves of psychological bondage by using self-emancipatory approaches to curate a positive self-identity/perception and continue creating their narrative beyond their justice-involvement experiences. Positive self-talk, developing confidence, combating self-doubt, removing themselves from adverse environments, and community support were strategies and tools used to reclaim their own narrative. Walking proud and acknowledging all their intersectional identities are acts of resistance against the systems of oppression. The participants' choices to actively resist and persist in higher education, along with using self-emancipatory approaches and education as a tool to combat the forces of domination, has allowed Black individuals to stay motivated to press onward to reach their goals (Fujino & Harmachis, 2020).

Renouncing Linearity: Thinking Without Bounds

Although not a finding related to the research questions, Renouncing Linearity: Thinking Without Bounds is a theme that encompasses insights from data and the methodological processes of conducting this CPAR study. This theme acknowledges the impact of the participatory research designs, highlights the implications of using dialectical thinking, and

advocates for the relinquishing of rigid understandings of conducting research and universalizing broad concepts such as freedom, domination, identity, race, and access.

This study or findings would not be what they are if not for the engagement, wisdom, and feedback from the co-researchers and participants. The findings of this study are directly correlated to prioritizing collaboration through the inclusion of ideas and feedback in curating the data collection and analysis processes. Eliminating a "sole" point of view and using participatory approaches to conduct this study encouraged diverse points of views and ways of knowing. Positioning individuals with lived experiences as experts and participants also was foundational to center and amplify their perspectives, ideas, and points of view. Additionally, having co-researchers positively influenced the atmosphere of the focus groups and interviews because it provided a point of connection for the participants. Establishing an affirming, supportive, and humanizing atmosphere influenced engagement. As a result, the dialogue centered approaches used for data collection fostered reflection and the participants responses challenged all linear implications of freedom, race, identity, post-justice-involvement, control, agency etc. The participants' responses during data collection were then used as an entry point for data analysis. Moreover, using dialectical thinking for data analysis was intentional to examine opposing ideals and contributed to a more critical analysis where all experiences, ideologies, and perspectives were examined which influenced the ejection of linear thinking.

The theme "Renouncing Linearity" also emphasizes the need to interrogate the meaning of words and the active properties of language. While freedom, domination, identity, race, and access have been reduced to physical or linear understandings in literature, the study's findings emphasized these terms should also be understood as binary and/or ontological. In this study, it was important to recognize how participants define and understand these topics beyond physical

implications to fully grasp what they are trying to convey and to conduct a critical analysis. Exploring freedom, domination, identity, and race as ontological and binary recognizes the need for more scholarship that analyzes nuanced and complex implications and understandings. Current research and literature often fail to investigate analyze the nuance and complexity of terms like freedom, race, intersectionality, and the experience of navigating society post-justice-involvement which does not create a comprehensive or fully representative view of individuals' experiences. Analyzing and acknowledging the nuance and complex understandings of freedom, domination, race, intersectionality, and navigating society post-justice-involvement will shift the scholarly discourse to examine these broad concepts systematically and focus on the manifestation of systems of oppression rather than exclusively analyzing the research phenomena. The participants' complex experiences and exclusionary policies that still exist and affect Black individuals' post-justice-involvement, characterizes the limits and linear understandings of freedom, domination, and access. These terms do not have a universal meaning so they should not be described linearly or merely antithetical to domination. Oversimplifying these concepts neglects the depth of how Black and other individuals who experience marginalization are impacted by domination, control, and systemic racism and oppression psychosocially, physically, and ontologically.

The themes of this study's findings draw attention to how Black individuals exist and operate in a system not built for them to access, attain, or experience total or limitless "freedom" post-justice-involvement. How freedom is understood and commonly used in research, legislation, and colloquially aligns with the humanist perspective. The humanist perspective of freedom frames freedom as linear, fails to acknowledge how social structures impact individuals' view and access to freedom, and does not address the active properties of language that

constructs social systems (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). In alignment with the poststructuralist perspectives, the theme Renouncing Linearity rejects linear thinking, acknowledges the power and production of language, and opens up the endless possibilities of meaning (Jackson & Mazzei, 2021). Freedom in its fullness is freedom that can be conceptualized, experienced, and attained ontologically, physically, and psychologically. Although freedom can be theorized and conceptualized by Black individuals, there are varying limits of actualizing and experiencing freedom in its fullness because of the social structures and systems that exists to exclude and impede. Furthering this thinking, the data from this study emphasizes "total freedom" is never "given" or "restored" once individuals are post-justice-involvement. There are aspects of physical freedom that can now be experienced post-justice-involvement including having agency over their time, being able to engage with other people and family, ownership, economic mobilization, access to pursue education and career endeavors, etc. The physical aspects of freedom are very impactful yet still only marginal based on their intersectional identities and more specifically race and justice-involvement. Therefore, the pursuit of Black freedom psychologically and ontologically continues which emphasizes current unfreedom post-justice-involvement. Although the liberatory properties of higher education were amplified in this study, attaining a college degree is not intrinsically linked to help individuals be viewed as more humane which is interconnected with the accessibility and eligibility to actualize freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically. Acknowledging the structural barriers that limit the actualization of freedom in higher education and society begins to create a more realistic perspective of freedom or unfreedom that Black individuals experience post-justice-involvement.

Recommendations/Policy Implications

There are over 600,000 individuals that are released from prison each year and there is a need and opportunity to make systemic changes to better support and help individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2022; Sawyer, 2022). A core tenet of CPAR studies is to amplify community experiences, wants, needs, and desires to advocate for actionable change (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Therefore, it was important to ask the participants about recommendations and practical ways to positively affect individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. During this study the participants shared insight and recommendations and implications for practical and policy change to serve individuals navigating higher education and society post-justice-involvement more effectively. The recommendations include advocating 'with' individuals impacted by the criminal justice system, eradicating exclusionary policies, implementing target support services, creating data generating policies and initiatives, revising discriminatory language to include "justice-involvement," and advocating for the development of more nuanced research studies to analyze justice-involved communities. The recommendations from this study are actionable and should influence change in higher education and society.

Eradicate Exclusionary Practices & Policies

Aligning with current research and literature, the participants acknowledged some exclusionary practices or policies that acted as barriers to success in higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement (Custer, 2016; Custer, 2018; Johnson & Abreu, 2020; McTier et al., 2020). Discriminatory housing and employment practices were mentioned in societal and higher education contexts. While specific policies were not mentioned, the participants strongly supported the elimination of restrictions to access or qualify for housing or employment on campus based on prior justice-involvement. If individuals are admitted to higher

education institutions, they should have full access of the opportunities, resources, and support services available to students who are not directly impacted by the criminal justice system.

Discrimination in any form is inequitable and can have both tangible and intangible impacts. Federal laws prohibit discrimination based on a person's national origin, race, color, religion, disability, sex, familial status. Moreover, adding “justice-involvement” to standard discriminatory language will help reduce mistreatment and bias against individuals re-entering their community’s post-justice-involvement. Adding justice-involvement to standard language is an intentional way to hold higher education institutions, federal, state, and local organizations accountable to eliminate discriminatory practices. Updating discriminatory language to include “justice-involvement” also recognizes the severity and impact of the carceral control that extends beyond justice-involvement and is an active equitable approach to eradicate invisible barriers to success and re-entry post-justice-involvement.

Implement Targeted Support Services

Creating targeted support services was the most mentioned recommendation. The participants expressed how important it is to have basic needs and essential resources such as food, housing, employment, and communal support programs to help persist and excel in higher education and navigate society post-justice-involvement. Implementing target support services and initiatives that provide basic and essential needs in higher education exclusively for individuals post-justice-involvement such as scholarships, monetary support for basic and essential needs, on campus jobs, academic enrichment, mental health resources, parental support programs, and on campus housing would be instrumental and impactful. Additionally, collaborating with justice-involved individuals during the design phase of future support

resources and initiatives will also help ensure the initiatives are beneficial and can adequately serve justice-involved communities.

College affordability is a concern for many students in higher education, especially for students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The creation of scholarship and grant aid programs would be beneficial to support students and decrease the amount of student loan debt acquired. Scholarship or other monetary aid that also allows students to use the funding for living expenses such as childcare, housing, food, etc., would be instrumental to eliminate personal priorities which will increase the ability to prioritize pursuing education.

Moreover, when discussing specific support resources that need to be prioritized, the participants recommended higher education institutions should offer diverse mental health resources such as anger management, post-traumatic stress disorder, behavior management, and other psychotherapy counseling and/or courses for individuals post-justice-involvement. Diversifying mental health resources is important to address the effects of justice-involvement and the behaviors that also impact decision making pre and post justice-involvement. The findings from this study highlights the importance of mental health and the need to prioritize offering diverse mental health supports and services at colleges and universities.

Create Data Generating Policies & Initiatives

Having a criminal history has been used as justification to deny students from pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement which has inspired advocacy efforts around “Ban the Box” or eliminating criminal history disclosure questions when applying for higher education. However, some of the Ban the Box influenced policies are also eliminating data that is needed to explore how many individuals are pursuing and graduating higher education post-justice-involvement and the postsecondary value of higher education. There is a vast need to have and

create data generating initiatives and robust data systems to examine postsecondary trends, advocate for more research, increase federal and state funding, and to develop more targeted and support services to increase enrollment, retention, and completion. Therefore, higher education institutions should find ethical ways to collect data from students who are continuing or matriculating into higher education post-justice-involvement after they are admitted. To ensure data privacy and allow students to give consent to using their data, majority of postsecondary institutions use the National Student Clearinghouse, a voluntary student level data system, to collect and report student demographic information such as gender, race, age, and enrollment, transfer, and graduation data (*About,* 2024). Students with lived experiences in the carceral system should be included and considered a subgroup in postsecondary federal, state, and national data systems like the National Student Clearinghouse. When collecting, reporting, and housing data about students who have a criminal history, institutions and organizations should prioritize confidentiality and privacy of student level data. Additionally, there is a need for more student level data systems that expand state level longitudinal data systems. Having more data will continue to increase the awareness about individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. More data will also give higher education administrators and policy makers insight to make informed decisions and create policies to effectively support, serve, and champion individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement to increase enrollment, retention, graduation rates, and earnings post-graduation.

Mandatory Anti-Bias & Cultural Competency Training for Higher Education Stakeholders

Colleges and universities should be educational and work environments that are genuinely welcoming, engaging, and inclusive for individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. To build a better institutional culture, the participants recommended higher

education stakeholders – professors, administration, support staff, receive anti-bias and cultural competency training specifically designed to focus on how to effectively support and work with individuals who are pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. The current lack of guidance has resulted in mistreatment, harm, humiliation, and stereotyping. Anti-bias and cultural competency courses have been used to create a climate of inclusion and provide individuals with tools to be more aware of their prejudiced behavior and learn about different practices and worldviews. Individuals with lived experiences pursuing higher education in prison or post-justice-involvement, and individuals with subject matter expertise in researching student experiences in prison and post-justice-involvement, should be involved in developing and administering the training. It is important to have individuals with proximate lived experiences and scholastic knowledge involved in the development and implementation of these anti-bias & cultural competency trainings to leverage their knowledge and provide specific information to effectively serve students directly impacted by the criminal justice system. With effective anti-bias and cultural competency training higher education stakeholders will be able to better prevent, intervene, and address implicit and explicit bias. Additionally creating and mandating these courses will help higher education stakeholders cultivate an environment conducive, accepting, and supportive for individuals' post-justice-involvement to thrive, feel included, and succeed in higher education.

Development of More Nuanced Research Studies

Individuals who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system have varied post-justice-involvement experiences. However, there are a lack of research studies that explore and analyze the difference between individuals' post-justice-involvement experiences based on their nonviolent or violent criminal history. During the study, the participants amplified the

differences in access, treatment, and discrimination post-justice-involvement for individuals with a violent criminal history compared to individuals with a nonviolent criminal history. Because scholars do not always explicitly state what kind of criminal history participants have for ethical or confidentiality reasons, there is a lack of information about the difference in experiences or analysis on specific barriers individuals face post-justice-involvement. Exploring the impact of a violent vs nonviolent criminal history extends current research to analyze impertinent factors that influence what resources are available, additional rules of engagement, and the barriers that exist and impede how individuals navigate higher education and society post-justice-involvement. Amplifying the experiences of individuals with different justice-involvement backgrounds will reveal to what extent the type of criminal history is correlated to individuals experiences post-justice-involvement. Relatedly, higher education research has highlighted individuals with lived experiences in the carceral system are more likely to get denied (Stewart & Uggen, 2020). Moreover, the development of more research that explores the experiences of individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement with different justice-involvement backgrounds will examine if whether a violent or nonviolent justice-involvement background is a factor that contributes to being denied admission or enduring adverse experiences in higher education. Extending the work of this study to analyze intersectionality and other factors that impact individuals pursuing higher education and navigating society post-justice-involvement, conducting more nuanced research studies will help researchers, policymakers, and higher education stakeholders better understand the complex impact of justice-involvement and how it effects people post-justice-involvement.

Advocating 'With': Listening, Centering, and Humanizing individuals, perspectives, experiences, and recommendations

During interviews and focus groups, most participants mentioned not being heard or valued by colleagues, stakeholders, administration, students, and staff in higher education or that their suggestions were not being implemented in higher education spaces and in their higher education adjacent careers. The participants also expressed their justice-involvement experiences were exploited or being invited to spaces for performative reasons. Although they were encouraged or requested to be in various higher education, policy, or legislative settings because of their identities and experiences, all of the participants shared situations where they were dismissed, undermined, or felt tokenized. To help individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system mentally, educationally, and economically advance in society, their experiences, perspectives, and recommendations cannot be silenced, disregarded, or extracted for profitable gain. Being heard and valued is essential to humanizing and amplifying Black individuals' stories. Subsequently, as experiences and recommendations are shared, individuals should have agency over what and how their narratives should be used or published.

The aim of these recommendations is to help individuals actualize and experience freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically. Most of the recommendations mentioned are specifically related to improving the student experiences of Black individuals in higher education post-justice-involvement. These recommendations are especially useful to advance scholarship and equip higher education leaders, scholars, and practitioners with insights to conduct new research, educate staff, and implement more academic and essential needs support programs to effectively serve individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Additionally, these recommendations should also inform the development of new policies created to eradicate barriers, provide re-entry support, generate new data, and aid the economic

and educational advancement of individuals post-justice-involvement at the local, state, and federal level.

Higher education stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers should prioritize the implementation of these recommendations. However, practical changes in higher education and society do not dismiss prejudice, ignorance, and the negative societal narratives that are projected on Black individuals who are navigating society post-justice-involvement. There are policies that can be changed and new initiatives that can be developed to support individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system; however, if the ideology of Black individuals does not change, Black individuals' experiences navigating higher education and society post-justice-involvement will not improve. Therefore, integrated in these recommendations is a call to action to stop discriminating, mistreating, and start humanizing Black individuals who are navigating society post-justice-involvement. The practical recommendations should be implemented in conjunction with reimagining how society perceives, engages, and treats Black individuals in higher education and society post-justice-involvement.

Discussion: Considerations for Future Research

This study expands existing research about Black individuals navigating society and pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement, advances current understandings and explorations of freedom, and provides an overview of the interconnectedness of freedom, domination, and identity post-justice-involvement. Furthermore, the methodological implications of this study address the value, need, and significance of utilizing participatory methods to humanize, center, advocate with Black individuals who are directly impacted by the criminal justice system.

Black individuals' experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement are seldom centered and explored. Additionally, CPAR is not a common methodological approach that has been used to examine Black individuals' experiences in higher education or their experiences navigating society post-justice-involvement. The CPAR framework influenced the research design, methods, and approaches used for data collection and analysis. Using a critical research design and social constructivism paradigm was an opportunity to foster reflection, examine experiences in a less extractive way compared to traditional methodologies that see participants as the object of the study, as well as collaboratively explore and analyze Black individuals' worldviews, interpretations, and ideologies. The social constructivism paradigm was useful when analyzing the participants' lived experiences with their understandings and constructions of knowledge as a point of entry. Likewise, dialogue and reflection were core components of the study. As underscored in CPAR literature, dialogue and reflection were valuable to help stimulate thoughts, expressions, and exposed the evolution of ideals, ideologies, and worldviews. Moreover, having semi-structured approaches and open-ended questions for the focus groups and interviews encouraged dialogue and reflection to produce rich data reflective of the participants' experiences and ideals. Both semi-structured and open-ended approaches were especially important and used to empower the participants to direct the conversation, express whatever they feel, prioritize listening, and engage in knowledge sharing instead of knowledge extraction. Future research exploring individuals' experiences in higher education post-justice-involvement should use critical and participatory methodologies as well as continue to include semi-structured, open-ended, dialogue centered, and reflective methods to foster rich discussions and encourage participants to share their experiences. Producing more research that utilizes critical and participatory methodologies will continue to decolonize research and prioritize democratic

knowledge production needed to advocate for and *with* Black individuals navigating society and education post-justice-involvement and other communities who experience marginalization. Furthermore, using semi-structured and open-ended approaches to generate rich data will provide more holistic data of individuals experiences and perspectives which contributes to adequate representation and portrayal of Black individuals in research.

The positive participant experiences and robust findings from the study highlighted the value and need for more participatory studies. As a researcher with no justice-involvement experiences, I collaborated with the co-researchers in the data collection and analysis phase. I found collaboration to be helpful especially when creating questions for the journal prompt, focus group, co-researcher interviews, and creating the recommendations and policy implications. Having individuals with lived experiences' as thought partners was crucial and impactful to prioritize inclusion, hear and implement their innovative ideas, and make sure the methods were ethical and humanizing. The co-researchers' involvement truly elevated the rigor in the study and enhanced the focus groups and interviews. When conducting the focus groups and interviews having another individual with similar experiences and background was a point of connection, a source of affirmation, and created a communal experience for the participants. The study's impact went beyond just the recommendations it was also about the learning experience and wisdom shared.

Utilizing a CPAR framework would be instrumental and impactful for researchers who do not identify with the participants that will be engaged in the research study. CPAR studies challenge who is considered an expert and how knowledge is produced (Fine & Torre, 2021). Conducting this CPAR study, I had to be aware of my privilege and bias as a researcher and relinquish control in efforts to democratize knowledge. To execute a successful collaborative

project, I also had to prioritize relationship building, support, organization, clarity, and cohesiveness. Conducting this study with individuals proximate to the research phenomena caused me to self-reflect and analyze the ways in which I engage and advocate for and with justice-involved communities. Learning to decenter what I think is necessary or useful helped me become a better researcher, listener, and collaborator to collectively conduct and complete the study. Furthermore, advocating with individuals who experience marginalization in society starts with listening and centering individuals beyond just curating recommendations or partnering to help disseminate findings. Collaborating with individuals with lived experiences to construct and execute research studies is an active approach to democratize knowledge and use the researcher's privilege to amplify silenced voices.

This study extends prior research adding an analysis of the impact of racial identity along with justice-involvement. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality underscored how all individuals have characteristics such as race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. that are interconnected and impact their experiences. The theory of intersectionality has been used in research as a theoretical framework to analyze and compare different students' experiences pursuing higher education. Using the theory of intersectionality was foundational to this study because it helped conceptualize the ways Black individuals' experiences post-justice-involvement are contextual and reflective of how their identities are stratified in society and succumbed to multiple forces of oppression. The participants in this study identified themselves as Black, men, fathers, scholars, practitioners, first-generation students, from low-income backgrounds, various geographic regions, etc. During the study the participants were vocal about their identities and how their race and justice-involvement impact their lives. Research studies should always acknowledge

individuals have intersectional identities and explore how their experiences are interconnected to their identities.

Relatedly, examining individuals' criminal justice involvement disconnected from race is limiting and fails to acknowledge the full extent of systemic oppression and experiences racially diverse individuals undergo post-justice-involvement. The relationship of race and criminal justice involvement has been explored in sociology and criminology research (Lantz et al., 2021; Lohner, 2007; Potter, 2015; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). This research highlights the disproportionate involvement of Black individuals with law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Lantz et al., 2021; Lohner, 2007; Potter, 2015; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Black people have been victimized and are more likely to be engaged with law enforcement because of how they are perceived. The ideology of Black people as inferior, blameworthy, violent, and/or unlawful has led to increased rates of Black individuals being arrested, incarcerated, and wrongfully convicted. The participants shared at length the effects of anti-Blackness and Black deprivation that have impacted them. 'Existing while Black' made a difference in how the participants were treated, accepted, and perceived in all environments. Unlike backgrounds and previous experiences, race is one identity that is not invisible. The physical attributes being Black are intrinsically linked with ideologies, perceptions, and predispositions. Not acknowledging race in research inadvertently leads to an erasure of context and meaning necessary to grasp and understand participants narratives and experiences.

The practical implications of the findings and recommendations are intended to address challenges reintegrating and pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement that were amplified by the participants. The practical recommendations advocate for the humanization and care of individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system by providing basic needs and

essential resources and deconstructing how they are treated, perceived, and engaged with in society and educational environments post-justice-involvement. The challenges of reentry were discussed in the study especially for individuals that spent multiple years or decades incarcerated. Creating more initiatives and programs that offer food, housing, fiscal support, and employment on campus and in local communities is an action-oriented and restorative approach to prepare and support individuals re-integrating post-justice-involvement. With the increase of more research underscoring the positive impact of providing basic needs and support resources to students, higher education stakeholders and institutions are well positioned and resourced to create targeted support programs for students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. Additionally, mandating cultural competency and anti-bias training(s) should help higher education stakeholders create a more inclusive campus and classroom environment. Inclusive higher education practices and targeted support programs will help cultivate a sense of belonging, increase student success, and degree attainment. Furthermore, with more research and data generated from creating these support programs at colleges and universities, policymakers can leverage these findings to advocate for the establishment of more federal, state, and higher education initiatives that address the needs of students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement. As mentioned in the findings, some reentry and targeted support programs and initiatives do exist at some higher education institutions, in specific counties, states, and federally, but the participants mentioned there is a large demand and some of the resources were not the most desirable specifically relating to housing or employment. Working with individuals that have lived experiences in the carceral system to develop more resources that can adequately meet the needs and wants of individuals using these services is a way to strengthen or revamp current practices, policies, and initiatives. While some of the practical recommendations

mentioned in this study are more directed for higher education stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers, humanizing, listening, and being compassionate to individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement is a recommendation that should be implemented by everyone.

Although this study expands on current research and literature, there are still more questions that were elevated from conducting this study that need to be further explored. My first research question: "How do Black individuals define and experience freedom post-justice-involvement?" was robust and generated lots of discussion, viewpoints, and responses. The findings emphasized the complexity of freedom and proposed considerations on how it should be analyzed in research. Moreover, evaluating the varying ideologies and nuanced understandings of freedom also inspired more questions about the connectedness of freedom and humanity. While overviewing the themes of the study in the beginning of this chapter, I drew attention to the relationship of language, freedom, and humanity which is correlated to the perception, treatment, and actualization of agency, rights, and privileges for Black individuals. However, the relationship of language, freedom, and humanity are seldom viewed and explored in research as interconnected. Acknowledging the intersection of language, freedom, and humanity in research more adequately portrays individuals' experiences on their quest to freedom and is contextual to their ideology, worldviews, and perception of accessibility of freedom. Humanity, freedom, and the ideals and operationalization of language is foundational to how humans operate in the world and engage with each other; therefore, it should be explored more in interdisciplinary research.

The theory of intersectionality was essential to the curation of the study and exploring the impact of identity (Crenshaw, 1989). The scope of this study only included an analysis of race, justice-involvement, and student status. Likewise, the participants engaged for the duration of the study were all men leaving the experiences of Black women still under researched. Therefore,

there should be an increase in studies that analyze the impact of gender and the experiences of Black women navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement. The population of Black women impacted by the criminal justice system continues to rise which correlates to the increase of Black women also being released from the carceral system. Moreover, current higher education research and literature does not include an exclusive analysis of Black women's experiences pursuing education post-justice-involvement which limits the understanding of justice-involved communities in higher education. Future research that centers Black women's experiences post-justice-involvement will reveal specific challenges they are facing and amplify supports needed to help them be successful navigating society and higher education.

Correspondingly, the participants highlighted the intersectional impact of both race and justice-involvement. While this study viewed race and justice-involvement as interconnected, this framing incited additional thinking about if either race or justice-involvement was more of an impact to individuals navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement. Forthcoming research should explore and compare the experiences of nonwhite and white individuals' societal and educational experiences post-justice-involvement to evaluate the impact of race and/or justice-involvement. Having racially diverse participants in a study will provide more comprehensive understanding of the effects, impact, and interconnectedness of race and/or justice-involvement. This future study involving racially diverse participants will also share innovative insights about if there are varying levels of the impact of race and justice-involvement for individuals navigating society and higher education post-justice-involvement.

The second research question in the study was: "What are the experiences of Black individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" The data in the study included rich discussions about the participants positive and negative experiences in higher education. The

participants described the discriminatory culture on their campuses and explained how higher education stakeholders misused their power as a professor, colleague, or support staff to exploit, mistreat, and typecast them. Although this study did not conduct an examination of the college or university they were attending, the negative experiences discussed by the participants raised more questions about if their experiences were correlated to the type of institution they attended. In the literature review, I highlighted the different experiences Black students face at HWIs and HBCUs (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Griffith et al., 2017; Johnson & Manyweather, 2023). Expanding on this research there should more studies that analyze the experiences and examine the relationship of Black students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement at different institution types. Colleges and universities have a distinct culture that is related to the type of institution and demographic of the campus community. Exploring participants experiences in relation to the institutional type, campus culture, and demographics of the campus community will expand current higher education literature about student experiences and success and contribute to the development of more explicit recommendations to help specific institution types become more inclusive.

When curating the recommendations about developing more support programs and initiatives for individuals' post-justice-involvement, I began to think about the need for evaluation metrics to measure the effectiveness of these initiatives. A research question scholars can begin to explore is "How can higher education practitioners, leaders, and scholars evaluate the effectiveness of support programming and initiatives for individuals pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement?" There is a vast body of evaluation research that can be foundational to creating future metrics that prioritize ethical measures beyond recidivism (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Anderson et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2013; Gould, 2018). The

development of support initiatives and programming is very important to help individuals, however the sustainability and evaluating the effectiveness of future targeted support programs is equally important. Creating evaluation metrics and research analyzing program effectiveness will generate more data which can be used advocate for the development of more support resources and ensure the programs are adequately serving students post-justice-involvement.

Conclusion

This dissertation is a culmination of unfathomable thinking to expand knowledge about Black individuals experiences post-justice-involvement. This purpose of this study was to provide a critical analysis and evaluate the interconnectedness of freedom, domination, race, identity, higher education, and justice-involvement. The aim of this study goes beyond just providing new insights to interdisciplinary fields and is an intentional approach to center, bring awareness to, and amplify needs, desires, and experiences of Black individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system to help them actualize and experience freedom in its fullness – freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically.

This CPAR study is a unique contribution to the field and an example of how to advocate and work "with" communities impacted by the research phenomena. Relishing on the power of collaboration, this study is a direct product of the brilliant participants that were engaged. It was an honor to conduct this work with all the individuals engaged. Eradicating western ideals of research is key to acknowledge the transformational power of connection, learning, and knowledge sharing. This study is remarkable result of what happens when scholars prioritize listening, leverage the expertise of individuals with lived experiences, and collaboratively curate the recommendations for future research and practice. Reimagining research as a collaborative learning and meaning making process is an important aspect of democratizing knowledge.

Involving individuals with lived experiences is essential to amplify the needs and desires of marginalized communities. The findings not only reveal Black individuals experiences post-justice-involvement but also acknowledges the continued marginalization Black individuals face navigating society post-justice-involvement. The experiences, desires, and recommendations to better serve Black and other individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system were overviewed in this study. The actionable recommendations are examples of how research can influence social change and seek to influence the creation of humanizing, transformational, and revolutionary research studies with actionable recommendations. The methodological process and the recommendations should influence future research, inspire, and advocate for the continued use of transformational approaches to conduct research.

The participants experiences reveal the importance and impact of prioritizing access and eradicating barriers for individuals in higher education post-justice-involvement. The participants amplified how impactful education has been for them interpersonally, economically, and for their future endeavors and careers which emphasizes the need to continue enacting radical change. Despite negative experiences the participants have been passionate about continuing to remove all legal, economic, and educational barriers for individuals navigating society post-justice-involvement. The participants enthusiasm to inform higher education stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers to advocate for change influenced their engagement in the study and should be used as inspiration for others to continue advocating for and with individuals with lived experience in the carceral system.

The findings specifically amplified areas of growth and opportunities for colleges and university administration and practitioners to make change. Pursuing higher education is an impactful experience which presents an important opportunity to implement practical initiatives,

policies, and strategies in ways that actualize espoused values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. With the overwhelming evidence of degree attainment as an impact factor for economic mobility, creating more avenues of access to pursue higher education is naught without creating a sustainable campus environment that fosters positive engagement, retention, and student success. Black students pursuing higher education post-justice-involvement are finding ways to persist and succeed, but imagine if the campus community, support staff, and colleagues were more accepting? What if they had access to more resources, and weren't combating multiple forces of domination? The mere fact that we can take a second to think about the possibilities means there is more work to be done.

Freedom Dreams

The findings of this study highlight the complexities and nuances of freedom, and the continued unfreedom Black people experience. Acknowledging my privilege of having no lived experiences with the criminal justice system, I still deeply wrestle with my own limited view that I, a Black woman will ever experience freedom in its fullness– freedom psychologically, ontologically, and physically. I think about what it will take for Black individuals to feel free. I also think about how much Black people have already fight for the right to access freedom in various ways. Was the blood shed not enough? Was the mass genocide not enough? What will be enough? Although my hope is distorted by the pervasiveness of white supremacy and systemic racism, there are glimpses of freedom I have experience like belly laughs at my family's kitchen table, graduating as a first-generation college student, or advocating for my dissertation to be a participatory dissertation study amplifying the experiences of other Black individuals' freedom fighting. Despite my ability to experience freedom in its fullness, it is the glimpses of freedom that keep me motivated to lift as I climb and continue to advocate for other individuals to

experience freedom. My hope is that this study inspires “us” as researchers to use our privilege to build a bridge for others in research, practice, policy, and in life. Doing the work collectively ensures impactful change.

No one is fully free until we all are free---psychologically, physically, and ontologically.

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VITA

Education

Master of Science, Higher Education & Administration
Florida International University, Miami, FL May 2020

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- Partners with course instructor to complete grading and administrative tasks
- Gathers and compiles data for current studies and literature reviews
- Manages project databases throughout the research process
- Collaborates with Faculty Advisor to analyze data on governance, equity, leadership, and historically marginalized students

Correctional Education Intern, Virginia Department of Corrections
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- Championed higher education initiatives in Virginia correctional facilities
- Abetted with research on Pell Grant restoration and implementation
- Completed administrative tasks and analyzed state correctional education data
- Developed a presentation about Second Chance Pell Sites and ways to Guide Correctional Educators for future implementation

Published Work & Conference Presentations

***Smith Finnie, G**., (2023, April). *Participatory Research: A Humanistic Approach to Higher Education in Prison Research.* AERA Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.

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