

YOU AND ME WILL NEVER PART:
A STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN'S
BEST FRIENDSHIPS

by

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ABSTRACT

The existing literature on women's friendship lacks information about Black women's friendships. Few researchers (e.g., Goins, 2011; Denton, 1990) have looked specifically at Black women's friendship and the role they play in Black women's lives. This project answers the call set forth by Houston (2002) and others for more work to be done in interpersonal communication about African Americans from within the African American community. This project found that Black women's best friend relationships begin with similarities, loyalty, understanding and dependability. Once the women become best friends, they must be honest, loyal/trustworthy, understanding, positive, and spend time together. They maintain their friendship with open communication within their friendship, the modes of communication they choose, and the topics of conversations that they have.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who has helped and encouraged me on this journey. Without your support, I do not know if I would have finished what I started. In particular, my family, partner, friends, teachers, students, and my First Scholars who told me over and over again that it was going to be alright and that I would finish this project. I would also like to dedicate this to all the Black women who have been told that other Black women are their enemies instead of their friends. This is for us.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Friendship requires one to show care, loyalty, assistance, and so on, at some inconvenience to one self, surpassing what is owed to others in general. Marilyn Friedman (1993, p. 212)

Friendships are one of the most important relationships a person has during a lifetime. Friends choose to be in each other lives, and friendship is usually based on commonalities and experiences. These commonalities can be representative of a person's race, gender, class, or shared experiences. Women's friendships are seen at times as spiteful and competitive (Rind, 2002) but research has shown that women's friendships can be satisfying (Wright, 1982; Hall, 2010). Women's friendships often are categorized as lacking loyalty and being competitive because women are seen as passive aggressive (Chesler, 2001). Although women's friendships have a negative connotation, they have numerous benefits. Research has found that individuals who have friends and other social ties are more likely to live healthier and longer lives (DuPertuis, Aldwin, & Bosse, 2001). All relationships, including friendships, require work. Friendships require work and time placed into them to receive the benefits they have to offer (Chesler, 2001).

My Position and the Problem

When I was younger, I remember women saying, "I don't have female friends because females are too messy," or "women talk too much." When I heard these quotes, it was usually a Black woman was talking about another Black woman. Some of the women and young girls that

I know are still saying these comments. Ironically, the women saying these things normally have at least one close girlfriend who they confide in. Whenever they made general statements about women, specifically Black women, they did not mean their friends. They were talking about other women who lived in the same area and probably felt the same way about them. I was once one of those girls who did not like to be friends with other girls. As I look back, I realize however, that my closest friends were Black girls. My best friends now are two Black women who I have known my entire life. They are my best friends because they understand and accept everything about me.

It took me a while to see what Black women had to offer when it came to friendships, because I was accustomed to thinking that all women, especially Black women, were not to be trusted. The people that I grew up with and my family made it clear that Black women were never really each other's friends. They insinuated that Black women be kept at a distance. According to the Black women I knew, women were likely to do one or two things: they were either going to take your man or talk behind your back. Either way they were going to cause you pain or embarrassment. According to the tales that I was told, Black women did not have any sense of loyalty to other Black women. I was told that you could not be too close to anyone unless that person was family, because no one except family will have your back. These lessons affected how many friends I had and how many of them were Black girls. The school I attended was predominately Black. Most of the White people who started school with me transferred to another school, so my graduating class consisted of two White students, one girl and one boy. Having girlfriends who were not Black was difficult because there were not many girls at my school who were not Black.

The idea of friendships with Black women changed for me, as I grew older. As I was growing up it became evident that we had things in common. We all wanted to be better than what people thought we should be and had heard all the same warnings about being friends with other Black girls. Hearing these stories instilled fear into us, because we did not want to have to deal with those things we were told about. Once we realized that all we had was each other, things began to change. This change happened in the 7th and 8th grade. It was during this time that none of us really fit in with the older crowd or the younger crowd. The one thing we did have in common was the way we all were raised. Everyone was just a step above having nothing, and everything we had was hard earned. Whenever anyone tried to pretend to be above someone else, someone would remind them of their surroundings and how they “don’t have a pot to piss in, or a window to throw it out of,” meaning you cannot say anything because you are in the same situation. Although all of this was going on, people still found ways to create a hierarchy. The hierarchy that was created was based on popularity, who your relatives were, and where you lived. This hierarchy allowed me to see whom I could and could not trust. When it boiled down to it, I realized who was there for me and they just happened to be Black girls like me, who lived close by. One friend lived up the road from me and the other one rode the bus with me to school. We were all Black girls, trying to graduate from high school and become something in the world. We did not live in the same city that our high school was in, so that excluded us from everybody else. We all lived in the country areas of the county and that made it easier for us to connect. When everyone else thought where we lived was too far to drive or go, we would always be there for each other. My two best friends have always been there for me when I needed them.

The friendships that I have now, my two childhood friends and one friend I made as an adult, have changed the way that I feel about other Black women and the type of friendships that

are possible between us. My friends made me aware that there are some Black women I can trust. I was able to see and appreciate that friendships do exist and they are not as uncommon as the people I was surrounded with made them out to be. I was able to see that Black women can be trusting, loyal, and supportive instead of backbiting, disloyal, and man stealing. I appreciate the relationships that I have with my best friends because at the end of the day, they know who I am and accept me for that.

My best friendships are different from my casual friendships and my romantic relationship. I feel like I have a responsibility to my friends. I am responsible for being there for them when they need me and apologizing when I cannot be there. I am responsible for supporting them in the things that they want to do but also telling them the truth when they need to hear it. My friendships have taught me that I am responsible for them just as they are responsible for me. Being supportive and listening goes a long way with my friendships, because at the end of the day we are responsible for each other. In order to make the friendship work, I have to put in time and effort just as I would any other relationship. In order to maintain my friendships, I have to be willing to treat them like any other relationship. I am willing to put my friends before my partner, if I know they really need me. It was not until college that people began saying, “don’t leave your friends for your boyfriend because, if and when you don’t make it, you need someone to cry with you.” Although throughout my entire life I was taught to be skeptical of Black women, it was not until college that the importance of friendship became a factor in everyday life. My best friendships have changed how I view Black women’s friendship with each other and how they are maintained. Instead of the negative view that I was fed as a child and teenager, I have learned that I need other Black women just as much as they need me. The only difference is that I am willing to admit it and try to make it work.

What's Missing?

The current literature surrounding women's friendships leaves a hole where Black women's friendships can be studied. Most of the research done on women's friendships can be placed into these categories: differences in women's and men's friendships, (e.g., Wright, 1982) interracial friendships, women's friendship (e.g., Rind, 1992) in which most of the participants are White women, and comparative studies that look for differences among different cultures. Although some of the literature acknowledges that a more diverse sample may garner the different results, the studies do not add to the literature on Black women's friendships. Some studies (e.g., Goins, 2011) have centered Black women experiences in friendships. Some of the studies (Hughes & Heuman, 2006; Denton, 1990; Niles, 2007) done about Black women friendships, stated that there is a difference in their friendships with Black women as opposed to other races. Audre Lorde, a noted Black feminist scholar (1984) declares,

At this point in time, were racism to be totally eradicated from those middle range relationships between Black women and White women, those relationships might become deeper, but they would still never satisfy our particular Black woman's need for one another, given our shared knowledge and traditions and history. (p. 164)

The participants in Hughes and Heuman's research (2006) reiterated what Lorde is pointing to in her statement. The participants stated that one reason why Black women's friendships are more important is that they feel accepted as Black women by other Black women. Black women's friendships with each other provide understanding and support, that the women thought could not be found within an interracial friendship. Neither Lorde nor the participants are discouraging interracial friendships; they are simply stating that Black women need friendships with other Black women. The friendships between Black women are important to the

participants and Lorde (1984) because the identity of the women as Black women forms a foundation for the friendship. In interracial friendships if one of the people is White and the other is Black then they both have to deal with being a woman but the White person will not be able to understand what it is like to be a “raced” woman. “An identity as a Black woman is a result of being *both* Black and woman—one cannot be a genderless Black person or a woman stripped of racial identity” (Scott, 2002, p.55). The underlying principle is that Black women have to deal with racism, because they are Black, sexism, because they are women, and stereotypes, because they are both of these things simultaneously. If you do not have to deal with racism along with sexism instantaneously, then trying to offer support to a situation you do not entirely understand does not create a great working friendship. It is not that interracial friendships are not important, but the literature surrounding women’s friendship looks to highlight this specific type of friendship while neglecting Black women’s friendships with each other.

The literature surrounding women’s friendships not only excludes or slightly includes Black women’s friendships but it does not cover Black women’s best friendships. The literature that surrounds Black women’s friendships looks at it in a general sense. It looks at how their friendships begins (Hughes & Heuman, 2006), what is talked about in small groups of friends (Niles, 2007; Goins, 2011), and how they support one another (Denton, 1990). The current literature does not look at Black women’s best friendships and how they are maintained through communication and action. The literature leaves it up to interpretation to understand how Black women’s best friendships are continued. While some literature (e.g., Rinds, 2002) talks about women’s best friendships, the samples do not contain any Black women.

The interpretations of Black women and their friendships can be found in media representations or stereotypes. Common stereotypes not only have an effect on how Black women are viewed as individuals but also how Black women see themselves. Just as I once thought that all Black women talked too much and could not be trusted, these ideas had to begin somewhere in order for them to continue to circulate. The images that plague Black women are also the same ones that can plague Black women's friendships.

Images and Portrayals of Black Women

The images of Black women friendships vary from positive to negative representations. The current representations (e.g., angry Black woman) of Black women's relationships and friendships leave a lot to be desired; however, the representations are not new. The representations currently displayed through reality television (e.g., *Basketball Wives* and *Real Housewives of Atlanta*)¹ and other media outlets are old images with a modern twist. The angry Black woman that is portrayed on almost every reality television show is a mixture of the matriarch, Black Lady, and jezebel/hoochie controlling images. She is emasculating and probably does not have a man, and she is defined by her sexuality. She is angry for no apparent reason, and takes it out on everyone she encounters. These historical images and other images plague Black women friendships and perceptions of other Black women.

¹ *Basketball Wives* is a reality television series that follows the lives of women who have some connection to the NBA, specifically basketball players. The *Real Housewives of Atlanta* is a reality television series that follows the lives of six women, mostly African American, from Atlanta's social elite.

Controlling Images

Collins (2000) points out five controlling images that affect Black women: mummies, matriarchs, Black ladies, welfare mothers/queens, and jezebels/hoochies. These controlling images not only affect the way Black women view each other but also whether they will enter into a friendship with someone who fits these characterizations. Each of the controlling images contain parts that make Black women seem irredeemable and too much to handle.

A mammy is described as being asexual, overweight, nonthreatening, and most likely dark skin. Historically, mammy figures took care of White families and their children more than her own. She is also submissive and knows her place.

The matriarch is the mother figure in Black household. She is seen as emasculating and too aggressive. She has children but because she is so aggressive, their fathers refuse to marry her. She is deemed unfeminine because she is so aggressive. She is viewed as a bad mother because she spends so much time away from home working. Matriarchs are accused of being the reason why her children grow up in trouble or in the same situation she is in (Collins, 2000).

The welfare mother/queen is the unemployed, living off the system mother who keeps having children that she cannot afford. She has children and expects the government to take care of them while she sits at home. She is blamed for disseminating laziness to her children. She is known for not having a husband to assist her and that is why she is on welfare.

The black lady can best be described as a middle class professional mammy. She has worked her way into middle class status yet she does not have a husband or children. She is likely to be identified by the ties she has to her job. It is assumed that most men will not marry her because she is deemed too assertive and non-feminine. She is regarded as less feminine because she competes with men at work.

The last controlling image is the jezebel/hoochie. This controlling image is all about the Black woman's sexuality. The jezebel/hoochie is viewed as insatiable sexually and wants sex as much as men want. Her unquenchable desire for sex is deemed so strong that her interests may include women. She is defined by her sexuality and is everything that a true woman should not be according to the standards set by dominant society (Collins, 2000).

According to Barbara Welter (1966), a true woman possesses four virtues: "purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity" (p. 152). The controlling images of Black women do not allow them to possess these virtues of true womanhood. Each of the controlling images that have been given to Black women has taken away one of the virtues of true womanhood. The mammy, matriarch, jezebel/hoochie, Black lady, and welfare queen are each deemed unfeminine. The matriarch, jezebel/hoochie, and Black lady are overly aggressive. The mammy and welfare queen are not aggressive enough. The controlling images do not allow Black women to possess the virtue of purity because everyone except the Black lady has children, and they probably are not married. The controlling images do not allow Black women access to true womanhood because each controlling image contradicts what a true woman is, and a true woman is not a Black woman because she does not fit the criteria.

The five controlling images: mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, Black lady, and the jezebel/hoochie; talk specifically about Black women's sexuality, fertility, appearance, and families. "These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustices appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 2000, p. 69). These images do not leave room for Black women to define what it means to be a Black woman. These images instead define Black women instead of letting Black women

define themselves. Black women are then stuck trying to overcome the barriers that these controlling images and stereotypes create.

Beauty in the Eyes of the Whom?. Controlling images of Black women have an impact on how Black women view themselves and other Black women. Collins (2000) talks about the hegemonic forces that instill a sense of dislike for women who do not look like the implied standard of beauty set forth by White society. These standards not only create a rift between Black women and White women, but also impacts Black women's friendships with each other, Black men and White men. The aspiration to meet the specific standard of beauty recreates the controlling images, stereotypes, and dominant message that society established by creating a hierarchy within the Black community among women. This hierarchy affects the relationships that Black women are able to create and maintain with each other.

The ideal standard of beauty is a White, blue-eyed, thin, and straight haired woman. "African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty- standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another" (Collins, 2000, p. 90). These standards are able to create a divide within the Black community. Black women of different complexions are treated differently depending on things such as hair texture and color. Because the idea is to be White, the closer you are to being White the better you fare in society. "Institutions controlled by Whites clearly show a preference for light-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject White images of beauty" (Collins, 2000, 91). This preference has a history in slavery. During slavery, it was common for light-skinned Blacks to work within the house, while dark-skinned Blacks worked in the sun. This created a divide within the Black community because the severity of the work depended upon whether you were inside or outside.

Discrimination is caused inside and outside the Black community because not everyone is able to live up to the standard of beauty that has been set by the dominant society. A person who embraces and receives benefits from the imposed standards of beauty can encounter strife from people who are discriminated against because of those same standards.

This tension is felt among Black women more than Black men, because the standards of beauty are set for women. The women who have lighter complexions and “good” hair reaps some benefits that women with darker complexions and “nappy” hair do not have. This concept plays out with weight, because the standard is to be thin with straight hair. This standard of beauty pits Black women against each other because it plays such a significant role in dating. In Jeffrienne Wilder’s (2008) dissertation, she looks at everyday instances of colorism and looks at dating and friendships. Light-skinned Black women are seen as having an advantage when it comes to dating because they are what Black men are attracted to because they are closer to the standard of (White) beauty. Dark-skinned women and light-skinned women’s relationships are thus in flux, because of the attention of or lack thereof of attention when it comes to dating. This relationship creates a divide between Black women because they each harbor negative feelings about the other when it comes to dating. Light-skinned Black women do not want to be approached or seen as beautiful because of their color, whereas, dark-skinned Black women feel like they cannot get a date because they are not light-skinned. The entire idea of colorism places both light and dark skinned Black women in a place where they feel uncomfortable. One participant states that, there is always an “Ugly Betty” in a group of friends. An “Ugly Betty” is “a part of the group in order for the other women who are a shade lighter or a tone lighter to feel better about themselves and [she] is always a dark-skinned black woman” (Wilder, 2008, p. 143). This notion alone strains the friendships that Black women have with each other because

although it might not be intentional, colorism plays a role in the type friendships that Black women have with each other.

The standard of beauty was created to define what is beautiful and Black women either reject or accept these standards of beauty. Either course of action has an impact on how Black women view themselves and their relationships with other Black women. Whether she is light or dark-skinned, the standard of beauty causes tensions if Black women are not able to look beyond the ideal standard of beauty. Some Black women sustain the ideal standard of beauty by continuing to try to fit into them. Although the ideal standard of beauty affects Black women more so than Black man, it does not always hinder friendships among Black women, it just serves as an obstacle that Black women have to work out within and among themselves.

Angry and Disappointed. Controlling images can also cause anger between Black women. Audre Lorde (1984) addresses the anger and hatred that Black women have toward each other, but also their need for a relationship with each other in the essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.” In the beginning of the essay, she states who not the cause of Black women’s anger is. “Other Black women are not the cause nor the source of that pool of anger” (Lorde, 1984, p.145). Lorde says that Black women are not each other’s enemies. She explains that Black women’s “have not been allowed to experience each other freely as Black women in America, we come to each other coated in myths, stereotypes, and expectations from the outside, definitions not our own” (Lorde, 1984, p. 169). According to Lorde, Black women do not know how to create and maintain friendships outside of the stereotypes they have been exposed to.

Even though Black women may have similarities, the similarities may not be enough to sustain the relationship if they both are not willing to work past their anger (Lorde, 1984). Black

women must be willing to get to know one another. Black women have to manage to play a part in each other's lives.

Research Purpose

I wanted to conduct this research because I am a Black woman who loves the friendships that I have with other Black women. This study did not seek to categorize Black women's friendships as uniform and generalizable but instead its purpose was to shed some light on how their friendships are maintained. Most of the research that looks at friendships takes a specific angle and viewpoint of the people being studied. This study uses the same notion of spotlighting specific aspects of a particular group's friendship and looks at Black women's best friendships.

The purpose of this study was to explore the communication dynamics in Black women's best friend relationships. This study adds to communication literature about Black women's friendships by asking Black women to explain in their own words what makes their best friendships last. It also looks at the way Black women use communication to maintain their best friendships. The study answers the call from Houston (2002) and other scholars, for more work to be done within the African American community from the African American's standpoint. Past research has looked at small groups of Black women friendships (Niles, 2007; Goins, 2011), friendships among Black women professionals (Denton, 1990), the meaning of friendship among Black women (Hughes & Heuman, 2006), and numerous comparative studies of different patterns for friendship communication among different cultures. This study looks at Black women who identify as best friends and the role that communication plays in maintaining that relationship.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have looked at Black women's friendships in comparison to other races and gender differences. Few studies (e.g. Niles, 2007; Denton, 1990) have looked at Black women's friendships. In this section, I will discuss friendships in a general sense. Second, I will look at the literature surrounding the differences in men and women's friendships. Third, I will look at the literature on women's friendships. Next, I will look at interracial women's friendships. Then, I will review current literature that investigates Black women friendships. Lastly, I will explain the basis of my project.

Friendship

Friendship can be defined in numerous ways. Wright (1982) defines friendship as "a relationship characterized by voluntary interdependence, in which the individuals involved respond to one another personalistically, or as persons qua persons" (p. 5). Knickmeyer, Sexton and Nishimura (2002) define friendship as "one type of social support characterized by intimacy, self-disclosure, mutual concern, a sharing of resources, equality in power, and ultimately empowering" (p. 38). Over the years, friendship has become the focal point of research. Many factors can influence friendships among people. These factors can include gender, race, class, sexuality, religion and the combination of these characteristics.

There has been some extensive friendship literature that used dialectics as the foundation for the research. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) developed relational dialectics theory from Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism. Relational dialectics are tensions and contradictions that make up

relationships and are enacted through communication. These tensions and contradictions are caused by changes within a relationship. Change in a relationship affects how and what is communicated among people. As a relationship goes through each phase, change can provide tensions and contradictions because the relationship has moved from one area to another.

Although many relational dialectics have been discovered, Baxter (1988) looks at three sets of dialectics: autonomy-connection, openness-closeness, and novelty-predictability. Baxter (1988) found autonomy-connection to be the most important dialectic of the three, but also stated that each set works together to begin, maintain, and end relationships. Autonomy-connection is important because of its use within relationships. Relationships exist when each person gives up a part of themselves to each other, but is also able to maintain some individuality. Openness-closeness and novelty-predictability play a part in the connection and individuality by allowing the people to deal with the level of relationship they would like. Openness-closeness and novelty-predictability are each important factors in relationships. Each factor is constantly in flux because a relationship is never stable (Baxter, 1988).

Some scholars have chosen to look closely at how specific dialectics are communicated at different stages of friendships. Rawlins (1983, 1989, 1992, 2009) and Rawlins and Holl (1987) talks about friendship across the life span and applies dialectics theory to each subject. For example, Rawlins (1983) looked at the role openness played in friendship. The research found that people wanted others to be open with them but not entirely. There still needed to be some sense of privacy because if a person felt they were being too open they may feel vulnerable (Rawlins, 1983 & Baxter, 1988). Although the preceding statement has been found to be true, Rawlins (1983) found that if a person felt that their close friend was not being completely open with them, then the amount of disclosure changed.

Rawlins' (1992) book *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and The Life Course* looked at dialectics over the life span of a friendship beginning with childhood to later adulthood. He found that regardless of age everyone looked for the same characteristics in a friend. The only time things changed was when circumstances changed, such as getting married or going to college. Rawlins (1992) found four dialectics that were reflected in the communication of friendship over the life span. The dialectics he found were freedom-dependent, affection-instrumentality, judgment-acceptance, and expressiveness-protectiveness. Each set of dialectics play a role in maintaining friendships. Rawlins (1992) also introduced the dialectics of individuation and participation from his findings.

Individuation is based on noticing the differences among each other while participation is built on discerning similarities and commonalities. These two concepts of friendship work together on a continuum throughout a friendship. "Friends seek ways to treat each other as equal despite differences in personal characteristics or social circumstances (Rawlins, 2009, p. 9). Although this may be the goal for some friendships, others may view differences as a way of determining where they fit in.

Individuation and participation are important in viewing how friendships begin, maintain, and end. "Practicing friendships invites us to belong with others at the same time that it values who we are as individuals" (Rawlins, 2009, p. 206). Friendship embraces the similarities and the differences among each person, so that they are free to be who they are without having to fit a particular mold. We are able to explore who we are as individuals and who we are among others. These dialectics are important in the study of Black women's friendships because of the nature of the study. The research on women's friendships looks to either draw distinct

differences in which they are not able to see similarities, or they treat Black women's friendships as similar to every woman's friendship without taking a look at what makes it different.

Existing literature on women's friendships include interracial friendships (e.g., Granger, 2002; Jackman & Crane, 1986), comparing men and women friendships styles (e.g., Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Hall, 2010; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982), and women's friendships comparative studies (e.g., Greif & Sharpe, 2010). Each of these types of friendships falls within the dialectic of individuation and participation, because they each seek to understand women's friendships based on how they are similar or different to other types of friendships.

Women's friendship literature has a chronological nature in the way it has been explored. Most of the early research about women's friendship looked at the differences in men and women's friendships (e.g., Booth, 1972; Reisman, 1990). Shortly after that, the literature began to explore the similarities between men and women's friendships (e.g., Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Buhrke & Fugua, 1987). Once similarities were found, a movement into looking specifically at women's friendships began (e.g., Becker, 1987; Rind, 2002). This type of research looked to center the experiences of women friendships that were not in relation to men's friendships (Johnson & Aries, 1983). Most of the early research on women's friendships looked at how the key factors in beginning, maintaining, and dissolving of a friendship were communicated among same sex friends, specifically women. As the study of women's friendships took off, interracial women's friendships were explored. This type of research combined not only gender but added the element of race. It looked for the differences in specific groups of women's friendships but it also looked for some similarities. The late 80s and early 90s began the exploration of Black women's friendships. This new topic of interest created a space to explore Black women's friendship, not in relation to men or other women. Since Black women are neither male nor

White, most of the previous research about women's friendships did not include a large sample, if any, of Black women. The research did however add that factors such as race could garner different results (e.g., Johnson & Aries, 1983; Becker, 1987; Rind, 2002).

Gender Differences in Women's and Men's Friendships

Women's friendships have been deemed stronger than men's friendships (Booth, 1972). According to some research (e.g., Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Hays, 1984), this is because women's friendships are more about self-disclosure and the expression of feeling whereas men prefer sharing activities (Floyd, 1995). Research has found that both women and men look for the same core characteristics in friendships: "trust, commitment, loyalty, and genuineness" (Hall, 2010, p. 742). These core characteristics may be the same yet the act of maintaining friendships have shown differences. Women's friendships are characterized as person oriented and holistic, whereas men's friendships are described as segmented and activity oriented. Booth (1972) found that women's friendships are stronger because they are more spontaneous and devote more time to the friendships than men's friendships. The research surrounding the strength and satisfaction of women's friendship in relation to men's friendship has sparked a vast amount of literature about the differences and similarities in women and men's friendships. Researchers have looked at the similarities and differences in intimacy (e.g., Monsour, 1992), affection (e.g., Dindia & Allen, 1992), supportiveness (e.g., Buhrke & Fugua, 1987), and satisfaction (e.g., Sapadin, 1988) on same and cross-sex friendships (Fehr, 1998).

Caldwell and Peplau (1982) found that men and women do not differ much on the number of friends that they have but they do differ on how they interact with them and the amount of intimacy that is present within the friendship. The study found that women's friendships are based on emotional sharing. Women's friendships consist of more talking and

self-disclosure than activities, which could lead to more intimacy. Men's friendships are activity centered and the conversations are not as personal as women's friendships. According to the research, men are not accustomed to disclosing personal information to each other, so that is why they do not disclose. Although, they differed in the interactions they preferred with their friends, men and women preferred to spend more time with a small number of intimate friends as opposed to a large number of casual friends. Contrary to Caldwell and Peplau (1982), Wright (1982) found that although the literature would state there are differences, the differences between the two are marginal as the friendship becomes closer. The differences found are present mostly in the beginning stages of friendships. Once a person identifies someone as their close or best friend differences based on gender are almost nonexistent.

Reisman (1990) conducted three studies containing adolescent and young adult participants. The research looked at the role of self-disclosure and satisfaction within male and female same and other-sex friendships. Each study found that disclosure was more common among same-sex female friendships than same or other-sex male friendships. In the first study, Reisman (1990) found that during adolescent age (15-17 years of age) males indicated that they disclosed the same amount of information with females as they did with males. Females, on the other hand disclosed less to male friends. These results changed slightly among young adults (20-29 years of age) where males disclosed more to female friends and female friends disclosed almost the same amount to male and female friends. This study also concluded that female same-sex friendships are closer and satisfying than male same-sex friendships. Although the first study concluded that female same-sex friendships are more disclosing, closer, and satisfying, the second study found that men wanted to discuss things such as feelings and personal problems more than they currently did in their same-sex friendships. The final study found that when it

came to closeness and self-disclosure the majority of the participants, male and female, placed other-sex friendships and relationships in this category. These results were based on single and married participants, in which they both felt the need to disclose to the opposite sex whether it was their husband or wife or just an opposite sex friend. These studies overall, found that women's and men's same-sex friendships did contain some differences but when it came to whom a person would disclose information they chose other-sex friends rather than same sex.

Some of the research has found that contrary to popular research some of the most satisfying relationships are cross-sex friendships instead of same-sex female friendships (Elkins & Peterson, 1993). Elkins and Peterson (1993) explored the differences and similarities in men and women best friendships. Previous research (e.g., Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987) made assumptions that stated that as long as one or both people in the friendship was a female then the relationship is viewed as more satisfactory. The researchers looked into this phenomenon again to see if these assumptions were entirely true and found that women were indeed more satisfied with their friendships but that was because they held them to higher standards. The study found that women's friendships with each other were not more satisfying than their friendship with men. Men's same-sex friendships were seen as the least important because they held their relationship to the lowest standard. The most satisfying friendship would be a cross-sex friendship.

Women Friendships and Best Friend Relationships

Conversation has been found as a distinguishing characteristic of women's friendships. Conversation encompasses the intimacy that most early research (e.g., Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Floyd, 1995) found to be different in women and men friendships. Johnson and Aries (1983) looked at the talk among women friends and found that talk is central to women's friendships. Conversations between women friends create a space for women to gain support, have someone

that will listen to them, and encourage self-worth and growth. Communication in women's friendships serves as an area where women are able to be themselves and express their feelings without being judged harshly or perceived as gossiping

Becker (1987) looked at two sets of women friends to get an understanding of the importance of women's friendships. She found that women's friendships consisted of developing conversation that was based on "care, sharing, commitment, freedom, respect, trust, and equality" (p. 65). These findings supported the findings that women's friendships are intimate and personal (Fisher & Narus, 1981). Although the findings support previous findings, Becker (1987) notes that the study should not be generalized because the sample size is small and she only looked at White women who were in college and 21-years old.

Rind (2002) found that women best friend relationships are valuable to women and their existence. She interviewed seven women about their closest women friendship. She finds that one of the most important elements of women's close friendships is the fact of knowing and being known. The women who participated made a point to say that their best friend knows them more than anyone else does. The fact that they know each other so well creates a sense of security for the women. They are able to be themselves around their friends. Although they are able to be themselves, the women also stated that they do not tell their best friends everything. There is a fear that they do not want to be seen as vulnerable around certain friends. One participant stated that she would call one of her best friends over the other because of the notion of being seen as vulnerable. Another concept that was captured in the study was the idea of competitiveness. The women showed signs of competitiveness with their close friends but did not label it as such. The concept of competitiveness and women friendships carry a negative association, so these women were reluctant to admit to competitiveness. The women in the study

showed the complex nature of women's close friendships. Although some of the actions portrayed were contradictory to what is deemed as a healthy relationship, the participants felt their friendships were one of their most important relationships.

Overall, the literature pertaining to women's friendships almost entirely excluded Black women friendships. Besides the articles that specifically concern Black women's friendships (e.g., Denton, 1990; Niles, 2007) most of the literature examines White women's friendships. These studies add to the literature about women's friendships but as Johnson and Aries (1983) states: "Just as friendship has taken a back seat to other relationship, female friendships has historically taken a back seat to male friendship" (p. 353). This analogy can be used with the concept of race and gender because just as women friendship has taken a back seat to men friendships, Black women's friendships have taken a back seat to White women's friendships. This is because most of the literature about female friendships includes either entirely White participants or only a few Black participants.

Interracial Friendships

Granger (2002) looked at the friendship between Black and White women. She looked for ways that the friendship was maintained among this group of women. She interviewed four dyads of friends. She found that issues such as race did not come up in most of the relationships. In one of the friendships, the dynamics of the friendship began to change after the interviews because one of the women felt more comfortable talking about race and the other did not. This did not cause the friendship to end, but both parties noticed a change in the relationship. One of the dyads discussed race issues and its implication because they viewed things similarly. They both did social justice work so they each were comfortable talking about race-related issues. For the other two dyads race was not mentioned, instead they only perceived the friendship as a very

close and important relationship. Although the women did not speak of race, the researcher was aware of the power differences and other factors that affected the friendship.

Jackman and Crane (1986) looked at contact theory and whether it applies to interracial contact. The study suggests that if White people have more contact with Black people then interracial relationships, can flourish. Proximity, distance, and socioeconomic status were factors that influenced White people's views of Black people. The study asked the participants about their closest friends and whether they had Black people who they considered friends or acquaintances. The study found White people who had Black friends or acquaintances were more likely to change their social disposition about Black people. However, the study also found that although more exposure and creation of friendships have the ability to change the social disposition of some it did not necessarily change racial attitudes. The only time racial attitudes positively changed was when White people encountered Black people who were of a higher socioeconomic status. When Whites have constant and personal contact with Blacks then their views of Blacks are altered yet inequality will still exist in which the White people will benefit. In order for White people to have a positive representation of a Black person, the Black person cannot be the White person's equal but has to be greater in status than that individual is.

Greif and Sharpe (2010) looked at the friendships of Black and White women to see if there was a difference between their friendships. The study found that one of the main qualities necessary to make the friendship work was trust and being supportive. Both groups of women emphasized these qualities in their friendships. Some of the differences included how the friendships were maintained and stories about other women. Black women were all told stories or saying about other women, which could have been a factor in the number of friendships, they

maintained. White women were more likely to go drinking to maintain a friendship whereas, while Black women went to church.

Samter and Burleson (2005) examined the role communication played in same-sex friendships among European Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans. The study found that among these three groups, ethnicity seemed to be a larger identifier of how communication was used in friendships. Most of the research that looked at same-sex friendships, examined a White middle class sample. The researcher wanted to see if the use of communication in European Americans friendships could be generalized to other ethnic groups. The study found that generalizing was not the case, specifically for women.

The women in each group differed on most of the communicative practices that were used in friendships. European American women placed more value in communication skills, such as conflict managing and listening, than Asian and African American women. African American women had more differences in communication skills than European American women did. African American women's emphasis was not on understanding but instead persuasion, which could mean getting a point across. The study discussed that communication skills are less important to African American women than the other two groups of women because African American women may have a different focus within their friendships. The authors concluded that because of the numerous differences between African American and European American women, it might be difficult to maintain an interracial friendship.

The studies in this section looked at interracial women friendships. The studies looked for differences between Black women and other groups instead of making one group the entire focus of the study. By comparing two or more groups there has to be a perceived normal way of communicating. Samter and Burleson (2005) looked specifically at different races of friendship

but wanted to see if the European American style of communication could be used with other races. Comparing the communication behaviors of Black women and White women positions White women's communication as normal (Houston, 2002).

Black Women's Friendships

Friendship allows Black women to talk about issues of race, gender, finances, family, sex, and religion (Niles, 2007; Goins, 2011). It has given scholars information into some of the important things that are communicated between these friends (Hughes & Heuman, 2006). The research about Black women's friendships has looked beyond social interactions in casual settings. It has looked into the friendships among professional Black women in the workplace (Denton, 1990). These studies create a place for Black women's voices about their own friendship. It constructs a place where Black women are defining the things that matter to them in their friendships and how they are sustained.

The emergence of literature about Black women's friendship began during a time when movies about Black women's friendships began to emerge. In 1995, Terry McMillan's book, *Waiting to Exhale* was transformed into a movie. The movie followed the ups and downs of four Black women friends. It showed their bond as friends during times of finding and losing love. The movie became a staple of Black women friendship. The four women in the movie each dealt with issues. One character had to accept the fact that her husband was leaving her for a White woman; another only had eyes for one man whom she had known for years but he was married. Another woman would not allow herself to love anyone other than her ex-husband who was gay; and the last woman kept falling in love with all the wrong men including a married man. Through all of their heartache and pain, they had each other.

In 1996, the movie *Set It Off* was released and it followed the lives of four Black women who experienced trials, tribulations, and heartbreak. After encountering obstacle after obstacle and not being able to overcome the adversity, they devised a plan to get out of their current lifestyle. They planned to accomplish this goal by robbing banks. Although the women are bank robbers, the movie shows just how strong their friendship and bond is with each other. They were willing to put their freedom on the line to help each other have a better life.

The release of these movies and numerous other movies and books, began a public discussion of Black women friendships. The existing literature creates a space to examine Black women's friendships in different aspects of Black women's lives. The literature surrounding Black women's friendships began by exploring the supportive relationships that Black women have in the workplace.

Denton (1990) found that in the workplace Black women engage in two types of supportive relationships: self-enhancing and other-oriented. Self-enhancing relationships tend to focus more on self or equality within the relationship. Other-oriented relationships emphasize providing support to other women. The function of the types of support offered was social companionship, task help, and supportiveness. Supportiveness concluded to be the most important element when offering support. Supportiveness increased the closeness of the friendship in each type of relationship. Social companionship included social activities and doing things together. The study showed that in self-enhancing relationships the more activities that were shared the closer the relationship became, yet in other-enhancing relationships, they were least likely to have a closer relationship by doing activities together. In self-enhancing relationships, task help and supportiveness helped promote growth within the relationship but it

did not change in other-oriented relationships. The study showed the significance of support among Black women friends.

Hughes and Heuman (2006) looked at Black women friendships and found that closeness was enacted through solidarity. The purpose of the study was to understand how Black women described their experiences within their friendships with other Black women. Solidarity was one of the principal values within the participant's friendships. Solidarity was communicated through friendship dichotomies, Black vernacular, and "authentic" communication. The research found that according to the participants interracial friendships and intraracial friendships were not the same. The need for intraracial friendship was the deep understanding that only someone who is like you can understand. This shared understanding continues with the use of Black vernacular. The language spoken is understood among these women and continues to create the solidarity within the friendship. Black vernacular and friendship dichotomies work together to strengthen the friendship but for some of the women communicating authentically is key. The point of using the word authentic looked at the way communication was used and evaluated within the Black community, precisely within friendships. The authentic phrase was used to evaluate people within the circle and make sure they were being true to themselves among the people who knew them the most.

Niles (2007) looked at an informal group of Black women friends using the narrative paradigm. The study found that these groups of women created a safe space for each other where they could talk about issues that were important to them. They discussed "family, finances, other friends, appearance, men and sex, connectedness and race" (Niles, 2007, p. 97). The study also found that the women maintained their friendship by "spending time with each

other and by incorporating honesty, care, humor, and loyalty” (Niles, 2007, p. 97). The participants in the study used narratives to explain themselves and their daily lives to each other.

Goins (2011) looked at the dialectical tensions that were present among the conversations of two Black women’s friendship groups. The research found that the women contradicted most of the things they discussed. The contradictions could all be found within the dialectical tension of oppression/activism that Collins (2000) mentioned. The study found four types of tensions presented within the conversations. The topics, finances, language, appearance, and race, discussed were broken down into tensions. The tensions were spending/saving, “good”/“bad” English, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and acceptance/rejection of otherness. The study found that these women used their friendship to help manage these tensions. They managed the tensions by either making a connection to or distancing themselves from the dominant discourses.

Houston (2002) called for more work to be done about African Americans from the African American experience. In order to understand African Americans experiences you must include race, gender, socioeconomic class, education and other distinguishing factors. You cannot neglect the impact that race, age, gender, and class, have on conducting research. So that you do not generalize about all African Americans, you must implement different criteria and ways of reporting data (Orbe, 1995). The current studies (e.g., Denton, 1990; Goins, 2011) were not only conducted within the Black community but they were conducted specifically about Black women. They looked at how women in different surroundings communicated friendship to each other. By looking at small groups, dyads, and a workshop setting, each author was able to gather data from different surroundings that had an effect on Black women. The authors made Black women the center of their research. Each author added to the literature on Black women’s friendships.

Maintaining Friendships. Relational maintenance has been defined in four ways: “(1) to keep a relationship in existence, (2) to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition, (3) to keep a relationship in a satisfactory condition and (4) to keep a relationship in repair” (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Research has found that women’s friendships are therapeutic in nature (Davidson & Packard, 1981). In order to receive the therapeutic effects of friendships, friendships must be maintained to a certain degree. Women who are best friends tend to receive the most therapeutic benefits from female friendships because there is a higher level of trust and disclosure (Davidson & Packard, 1981). In order to maintain relationships different tactics can be employed. These tactics differ depending on the type of friendship.

Ayers (1983) looked at strategies people used to keep their relationships stable and if these strategies would differ depending on the nature of the relationship. The research found that participants used three strategies to maintain a stable relationship: avoidance, balancing, and directness. Each of the strategies was employed differently depending on the nature of the relationship. Although maintenance strategies differed depending on the nature of the relationship, the research indicated that there were no differences found as it relates to gender and stability.

Oswald, Clark, and Kelly (2004) found that same-sex women friendships reported using more intimate maintenance behaviors such as openness and supportiveness than same sex male friendships. The differences that occurred in maintenance behaviors based on the level of the relationship are consistent with other studies (e.g. Hays, 1984; Rose & Serafica, 1986). Best friendships contained more maintenance strategies than casual or close friendships. Close friendships also received more benefits from the relationship and were more exclusive than casual friends were (Hays, 1989). Oswald, et. al. (2004) also looked at dyads of friends to see

how they used maintenance behaviors and how they perceived their friends use of maintenance activities. They found similarities in the way each person used these behaviors and concluded that the strategies employed were reciprocal. Friends used as many maintenance behaviors as they perceived the other person used. This use of maintenance activities creates equality within the friendship, and allows each person to appear to give as much as they receive.

Current Project

This project looks at Black women's best friendships and how the friendships are maintained through communication. In order to evaluate Black women's friendships fully, I used intersectionality theory and Black feminist theory to situate the research. These theories take into account some of the most important aspects of exploring Black women, which is looking at some of the factors such as race and gender, which contributes to Black women's understanding of the world and their friendships. The project looks at the role communication plays in maintaining Black women's best friendships.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory is vital at looking at Black women's friendships. Intersectionality is based on the fact that people are not just one identifier but are actually influenced by different portions of their identity that can oppress and privilege them at the same time. These identifiers are interlocked and multilayered, meaning you cannot separate them from each other. Crenshaw (1989) analyzed the effects of race, gender, and the law as it relates to Black women. She argues that because of the way discrimination is viewed Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist and anti-racism discourse. They are excluded because when the law says women they mean White women and when the law talks about Black people it means Black men. Although Crenshaw coined the term, she was not the first to mention the intersection of the multiple

oppressions of Black women. Truth (1851) delivered a speech asking “a’n’t I a woman,” which addressed the fact that Black women are actually women and should be treated as such. Beale (1970) talked about being Black and a woman and the things that Black women had to endure including being like “a slave of a slave” because of the way Black men treated Black women (p.148). The Combahee River Collective (1982) stated, “we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (p.232). The struggles that they mention (racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism) are all connected and cannot be separated. Beale (1970), Truth (1851), and the Combahee River Collective (1982) laid the foundation for Crenshaw’s (1989) extended analysis of the interlocking oppression of Black women.

This paper uses intersectionality theory to view the communication of Black women’s friendships. Intersectionality theory is appropriate for this project because most Black women experience some type of oppression or discrimination in their daily lives, and this project looks at the people they confide in about those incidents. Race and gender cannot be separated in order to understand the viewpoint of a Black woman and her friendships. Other factors such as class and sexual orientation must be taken into consideration in the exploration of Black women’s friendships. Each identifier adds something different to each Black woman’s story, because although they are all Black women they do not experience Black womanhood the same way.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought is based on self-definition. It allows Black women to define what it mean to be a Black women, what counts as intellectual work, and offers Black feminist thought as a theory to explore the intersecting oppressions Black women face. Black feminist thought

opens up a space for Black women's lived experience to count as knowledge. Black feminist thought is essential to exploring Black women's best friendships because it allows the participants to become intellectuals of their own experiences. It gives each woman who participates the opportunity to define what friendship means to her and what role it plays in her life. Most of the literature on women's friendships omits Black women. This omission of Black women in literature about women's friendships denies Black women the opportunity to have their experiences heard. Using Black feminist thought for this project allows the participants to have a voice and make their experiences as Black women friends the focus of the project.

Collins (2000) breaks down Black feminist thought into six distinctive characteristics. The first characteristic of Black feminist thought is that it "aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (p.22). It is because of the oppression that Black women face that Black feminist thought exists. As Americans, everyone is promised freedom, equality, and justice; however Black feminist thought exists because Black women receive differential treatment that is not always equal and just (Collins, 2000). The second characteristic deals with the different experiences and responses to those experiences of Black women. Black women are not a homogenous group and differing experiences will render different responses. No one understands what being a Black woman is like, except for a Black woman and not all Black women are the same (Collins, 2000). The third characteristic focuses on a self-defined standpoint for Black women. "For U.S. Black women as a collectivity, the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another" (Collins, 2000, p.30). In order to have action against the injustices that Black women face, there has to be dialogue that happens about these injustices that will encourage self-definition and action.

The fourth characteristic Collins (2000) points out is the contributions of African American women intellectuals. Black women intellectuals are not just the women in academia but also an intellectual can be any Black women (e.g., Sojourner Truth, 1851). Everyday knowledge is the information that Black women intellectuals take and re-define. Black women intellectuals are invested in bettering the conditions of Black women by not overlooking the taken-for granted knowledge of the everyday woman, not turning their back on the injustices that Black women including themselves have to face and not giving up. The fifth characteristic explores the necessity of change within Black feminist thought. Instead of remaining constant, Black feminist thought has to change with the social conditions. The last characteristic of Black feminist thought is its relationship to other plans for social justice. Most of the early Black feminists saw the struggle of Black women as a part of a larger struggle against injustice. Black feminism searches for justice for Black women and for everyone else who has been treated unjustly.

This paper uses intersectionality theory and Black feminist thought to look at Black women's best friendships. These two concepts allow me to give the women an opportunity to redefine Black women's friendships. It also creates a space for Black women to talk about maintaining their friendships, not as just the Black friend but as a Black woman who is best friends with another Black woman.

Research Questions

From the literature surrounding Black women's friendships, the following research questions were asked:

RQ1: How do Black women distinguish friends from best friends?

RQ2: What do Black women find important in their best friendships?

RQ3: What role does communication play in maintaining Black women's best friendships?

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study provides a voice for Black women's best friendships and looks at the role of communication in maintaining best friendships. This project is based on the experiences of individual Black women and their friendships, therefore providing an avenue for them to talk about what is important in their best friendships. In order to understand and provide more insight into the maintenance of best friend relationships among Black women, I conducted a qualitative study using interviews and focus groups. Interviews and focus groups provided each woman with the opportunity to have a voice and to have her voice heard by other people. This chapter includes specific information about how the women were selected, how the study was conducted, how the data was collected, and lastly how the data was analyzed.

Participants/Recruitment

Participation in this study was voluntary and all information confidential. The women in this study were between the ages of 19 and 30. The selection of this age group was because as the researcher, I am within this age group and I wanted the participants to feel comfortable talking about certain topics. This age range also allowed the women to be able to understand certain situations that are relevant to them during the focus groups. All of the women in the study were Black. The women also have a Black woman who is their best friend. Further, this age range was selected because factors such as age, income, occupation, education, and race can influence responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). By keeping the age range between 19 and 30, it takes into account different factors such as education and income, this is likely to increase

comfort among the women (Krueger & Casey, 2000). If women are comfortable around each other, they are likely to share more information. All of the women met the specific requirements of the study. In addition to being a Black woman, participants had Black woman best friends and had been friends for at least 2 years. Best friends who were family members did not qualify for this study.

Women were recruited in numerous ways. I used snowball sampling for this project to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is asking people who have participated in the study to recruit other participants who fit the study criteria (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Once the first focus group was complete, the snowball sampling process began. I asked the women if they knew anyone else that would be interested in participating and if so to give them my contact information. Snowball sampling was used for this project because it allowed me to reach women that were beyond my networks. By asking women who had previously worked with me, they were able to speak about their experience in the focus group.

Most of the participants for the study were college students, but the study was open to the entire community. Flyers were placed throughout a large Southeastern school and a *Facebook* message (See APPENDIX E) was created and distributed to my *Facebook* friends. The *Facebook* message allowed the recipients to pass the information along to anyone who they thought would be interested in the study. Along with the message, there was a flyer attached detailing some of the specifics of the project and contact information.

Ten women were interviewed for this study (See APPENDIX G). The women's real names were not used for the study. They were assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. At the time of the study, one of the women was 19, four were 20, and others were 22, 24, 25, 28 and 30. Hope, 20, was engaged to be married and expecting her first child. She

worked part time in a grocery store. Chloe, 22, single with no children who worked part time. Kennedy, 20, single with no children and worked two part time jobs at a Southeastern University. Avery, 30, divorced with one child and employed full time in the automotive industry. Rachel, 28, single with no children who works full time in an administrative position. Miranda, 24, single with two children who was employed full time as a pharmacy technician. Xena, 25, single with no children and worked as an elementary teacher. Brittany, 20, single with no children and worked full time in the automotive industry interning in the Human Resource department during the study. Brielle, 20, single with no children who worked part time in the retail industry. Ayanna, 19, single with no children and is employed part time in the customer service field.

The women participated in the first focus group or the individual interviews. The final focus group was only for the women who had previously participated in the study. Therefore, no new women were interviewed for the final focus group.

Data Collection: Focus Groups

Focus groups interviews involve putting people together who have something in common, (e.g., race, education), and listening and understanding how they feel about a specific topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Using intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) I allowed the women to define their friendships using their own terms and voice. It also provided them with a voice and an opportunity to discuss a relationship that is important to them. For this study, I conducted focus groups so that the women could create their own sense of voice and define their friendship for themselves.

Focus groups allowed individuals participating to engage in conversations about the overarching topic of friendship (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Along with engaging in the conversation, it allowed the women to draw upon each other's experiences as they were

discussing the topic (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Although the women in the study had diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, incomes, and education, they had the comfort and similarity of being around other Black women. For the women who shared a similar socioeconomic background, education, race, and age, it provided them with a level of comfort that they may not have had in a more diverse group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The women's comfort level was important because the more comfortable the women were the more they would share and join the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Two focus groups were conducted for this study. The first focus group had four participants. The first focus group was video and voice recorded. This ensured that I, as the researcher, was able to interpret nonverbal communication along with having a backup measure just in case one method failed. The first focus group took place before individual interviews began. This allowed some of the women the opportunity to begin thinking about their best friend relationships. It also gave them a chance to get to know me as the researcher, so that when we sat down for an individual interview they were more comfortable.

The first focus group lasted one hour and 30 minutes. During the first few minutes, we went over the consent form and explained the study. Each of the women agreed to the terms of the consent form and the audio/video consent form. The women also introduced themselves and gave a little information about the length of their best friendship. The focus group was scheduled for an hour and once the hour mark hit, the women were informed of the time and they continued with the discussion. The women expressed their ideas and opinions openly and freely because they were all previously acquainted or had a mutual friend. The focus group ended with most of the women scheduling a time for their individual interview and reflecting on their friendship.

The second focus group was conducted after all the individual interviews had taken place, been transcribed and saturation was reached. The reason for the second focus group was to share the findings with the participants and give them the opportunity to offer final remarks. The second focus group gave the participants an opportunity to talk about whether they felt the findings were reflective of their friendships. They felt the findings (as discussed in Chapter 4) were accurate depictions of their experiences and captured a portion of their best friendship. Three of the women who participated in the first focus group and the individual interviews participated in the final focus group. The other women either chose not to participate in the second focus group or were not able to attend.

The second focus group lasted one hour. Once the time limit was reached, the women were made aware that they had reached the one-hour marker and had the opportunity to continue or wrap-up the discussion. Letting the women know that the time limit had been reached is vital in focus groups and other methods because the participants have only been recruited for that amount of time (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The women were asked 10 questions (See APPENDIX A) during the first focus group, in which I asked follow-up question and probes, to further understand the responses. The follow-up questions and probes were asked to encourage discussion and offer some insight into each woman's friendships. The women in the second focus group were asked three questions (APPENDIX C).

Data Collection: Interviews

Interviews are essential to understanding Black women's friendships. "The qualitative interview creates an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages another person to articulate interests or experiences freely" (Lindlof, 1995, p.163). Individual interviews offered the women the opportunity to recreate a scenario that happened during their friendship and tell in

detail how that event changed the nature of their friendship. Since the study included a commitment to provide a space for Black women to talk about their best friendships, individual interviews were necessary to understand how each friendship was maintained. Some of the goals of qualitative interviewing include “learning about things that cannot be observed directly by other means, understanding a social actor’s perspective, and inferring the communicative properties and processes of interpersonal relationships” (Lindlof, 1995, p.166). Most of the studies (e.g., Denton, 1990; Hughes & Heuman, 2006) that have focused on Black women’s friendships have used interviews to gather information. Since the literature, surrounding Black women’s friendship is not sizeable, then the goal of each individual interview is as Lindlof (1995) described. The way a friendship is maintained cannot be observed directly without questioning, and how else would you learn about Black women’s best friendships without asking Black women about their experiences? Using interviews to collect data about Black women’s best friend relationships provided the women a chance to give their perspective about what makes their relationship important and how it is maintained.

Interview Protocol

The women were each asked eight questions (APPENDIX B) about their best friendships. The questions followed a semi-structured interview protocol. This allowed me to stay on topic, but it also gave the women the ability to say more about their experience. The semi-structured format allowed me to ask follow-up questions pertaining to the answer given by the women. Using the semi-structured interview approach also allowed for revision of questions and clarification of responses. In addition to interview questions, participants graphed their friendship over time. This method was adapted from Sias and Cahill (1998), in which the women, who participated in the study, graphed the changes in their friendships from

acquaintances to best friends. The women filled out the chart (APPENDIX F) as a way of answering question 2 (APPENDIX B) in the interview protocol. The chart provided a visual aid for the women to be able to look at the progression and transitions in their friendships.

This study did not look entirely at transitions because the focus was to look at maintaining friendships. By having the women chart the progression of their friendships, they were able to recall some key points in the friendship that brought them closer. The events that brought them closer were key in how they became best friends and why they remain best friends.

The women chose to label the x-axis using months, years, days or weeks. It was all dependent upon how long it took the women to become best friends. The women then plotted on the y-axis, the current state of their friendship. Figure 1 shows a chart that Brielle, 20, who along with her best friend participated in the study, filled out. Since the study looked specifically at best friendships, each woman plotted a point in the best friend category. Most of the women were not able to plot this point until they had gone through the other stages of friendship. As they plotted each point about their friendships, the women were asked about each point and what led to the change in friendship status. This approach gave the women an opportunity to reflect on how they became best friends and what events led up to it.

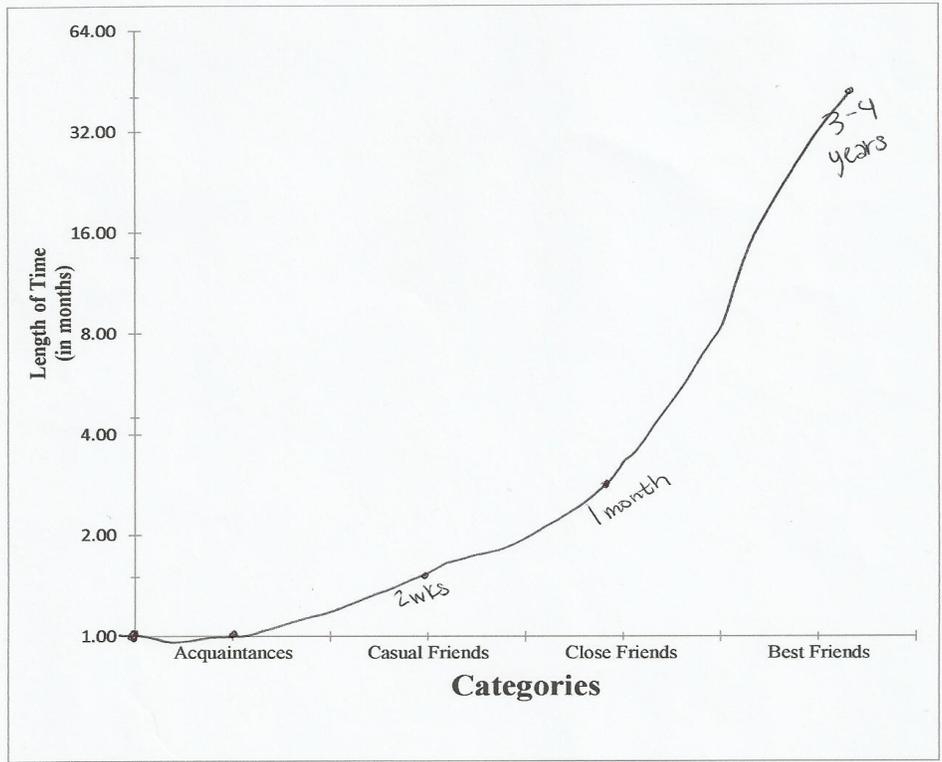


Figure 1

Friendship Transitions

Interview Procedures

Almost all of the interviews were conducted face-to face in public locations selected by the women. The women picked the location so that they would be comfortable during the interview process. One interview was conducted via email, and one interview was conducted over the phone. Most of the face-to-face interviews took place at a local bookstore, and one interview was in the library of a Southeastern university. The women were not entirely comfortable at first in the public setting talking about race and friendship but as the interviews continued, they began to relax. I began each interview with an overview of the study and informed consent form. The women who participated in the first focus group were given an overview of the study and consent form they signed. The women had the opportunity to ask questions about the study before we started the interview. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. They ranged from 15 minutes to 49 minutes.

Data Analysis

One of the main reasons this study was conducted was to give Black women a voice to speak about their friendships, so the grounded theory approach seems necessary to analyze data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first introduced grounded theory in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Grounded theory was founded on the idea of “discovering theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.1). This study used grounded theory to let the data that was collected speak for itself, instead of applying an existing theory that may exclude some important factors from the data collected. Combining intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought, and grounded theory allows for the data that was collected to create a voice for the women. The voices of the women were preserved by not changing or tweaking the quotations that were used.

Instead of changing the quotations, I chose to maintain authenticity by including direct quotations as stated by the women during the interview and focus groups.

The data was coded using the open coding approach. After the transcription of the focus groups and interviews, I went over the data line-by-line and looked for all possible categories that emerged from the data. Looking for any and all categories, I coded and compared each interview to see if any categories were becoming prominent. This ensured the prominence of the core categories. I then went back through the data to confirm the categories and see how they connected to each other. The focus groups served as a way to validate the individual interviews. Although only two focus groups were conducted, they served as the beginning and end factors of the data collected. The first focus group gave an overall picture of Black women's friendships, in which the individual interviews went into details about. The last focus group served as the culmination of the entire process and allowed the women an opportunity to discuss the findings and how they felt about what was found. The data included subcategories that further explained the data at hand. Once the data was collected and coded for core categories, a link was made between the categories. After that process, the data set was "theoretically saturated" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.110). Once theoretical saturation was reached, the coding process was complete.

Summary

In order to allow Black women's friendships the opportunity to stand by themselves, I used focus groups and in-depth interviews. Using focus groups and interviews along with intersectionality theory and Black feminist thought, allowed the women to express in their own words the importance of best friends. Using the grounded theory approach allowed the theory to originate from the data, instead of applying a theory to Black women's best friendships that may exclude some key components of the relationship. These theories safeguarded that the women

from being placed into categories that did not truly define their experiences. Using these approaches allowed the women to create their own categories. They were not being placed into categories that did not originate from their experiences.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter will discuss the results of the study. The results of the study will be addressed in the same order the research questions were asked. The results begin with distinguishing the difference between friends and best friends. Next, I look at the important factors in a Black woman's best friendship, and last I discuss the role of communication. The role that communication plays in best friendships will appear throughout the results. The chapter concludes with an overall summary of the findings.

The research questions (See APPENDIX D) asked about distinguishing between friends and best friends, important factors in best friendship and the role that communication play in maintaining friendships. The study found that friends and best friends were similar when it came to specific qualities they should possess. According to the findings, friends are loyal, understanding, dependable, and fun. The women who participated in the study found honesty, understanding, trustworthiness/loyalty, positivity, and spending time together as important factors in their best friendships. The role that communication played in maintaining each friendship was displayed through the topics of conversations, preferred modes of communication, and open communication as a means to understanding and being honest with each other.

Distinguishing Factors

Friendship

Friends and best friends are in two different categories yet the same qualities are expected from both groups. During the first focus group, the women were asked to define friendship, friends, and best friends. Each term garnered similar answers from the women. Hope, 20, defined friendship as “someone that you have similarities with that you can compare to.” Chloe, 22, saw friendship as “unconditional understanding and acceptance of one another and your differences.” Although the women defined friendship in this manner, the numbers of Black friends they have are few and they have either one or two best friends. Their friends were the people who possessed their definition of friendship and for most of them, they were exclusively Black women. Friendship was based on commonalities and being able to understand, so for most of the women this is why most of their friends were Black women. There was a particular level of understanding that they sought after, that Black women possessed.

The study looked specifically at Black women friendships, so most of the women found race and sex similarities to be a key factor in how close their friendships were. The women did not think that the qualities they sought in a friend were limited to one specific race or ethnicity. They did emphasize that as Collins (2000) stated that for them, they felt that only other Black women could understand and know what it is like to be a Black woman.

Once the women began to talk about their friendships with other Black women, they began to break down what kind of understanding they expect from their friends. Brielle, 20, said:

I think it is important to have women of other races in your casual friends, but your immediate friends know this is my Black struggle, this is my woman struggle, this is my young adult struggle, they know that struggle.

Brielle mentions the importance of having non-Black women friends but Black women as your best friends. She implies that Black women understand the struggle of being Black and a woman at the same time that women of other races cannot understand. It is the unspoken understanding that these women have with other Black women that make understanding important in their best friendships. They are able to relate to each other because they deal with similar discriminations based on both their race (being Black) and sex (being a woman).

Kennedi, 20, states:

I have a lot of friends from everywhere, but just my Black friends, they will understand when it is test time and I got to go this place, this place, this place, this place. They understand because they are probably doing that same thing, or when you just get that stress of just life.

Here the participant explains that while she has “friends from everywhere,” her Black friends understand her. Kennedi has friends from various ethnic backgrounds, but she only gets the understanding she is looking for from her Black friends. Her friendships with non-Black women would require her to explain her concerns about things such as stereotypes, societal pressures, and racial discrimination during test time. However, her Black friends would “understand because they are probably doing that same thing.”

Chloe talked about her best friend in elementary school who was a White girl. They became best friends because they shared the same birthday. Chloe went on to explain how their relationship changed because their level of understanding changed.

My twin was a White person and I had, we still cool to this day, but I can't talk to her like a friend. She don't understand when I say my edges are nappy. She don't understand that

I don't have a relaxer and that if I, you sitting out there trying to tan, it is hazardous for me but good for you. She is not going to understand.

The women found friendships to be easier with other Black women because of the level of understanding they received. They each felt like their friends understood them more. According to the women, friends should understand or at least be able to relate when it comes to the struggles they face, such as hair, and everything in between about being a Black woman.

Although there are commonalities between Black women, there are also differences. The women in the study each mentioned that they looked for commonalities and they connect more with other Black women, but they brought up the affect differences can have on a friendship even though you have things in common. Brielle states:

It was like we both were spoiled but she was always spoiled on a different level. She can get whatever she need or want. There is always a difference. I don't know about the financial aspect pulling you apart more. I just like the fact that she is Black and we can sit and talk about our struggle in that way.

Although Brielle and her best friends shared similarities by being Black young adult women, they did encounter differences. The differences did not separate them, but it was a factor. The biggest thing was that they could sit and talk about a common struggle which was being Black young adult women furthering their education. Brielle experience highlights differences on a financial aspect as it relates to family. Hope gives a different outlook on finances and best friends when asked about the qualities or things she looks for in a best friend:

Money, not so much, but it is like if you don't. When we hang out everything cost money, and I feel like if you don't have the money okay, suggest we stay at home and

watch a movie. But don't be like okay let's go hang out and then we get out and you know you don't have money and I have to end up paying for everything.

Hope still considers this person a close friend, but having money and not a significant amount makes a difference. Although her friend never has money when they go somewhere, they are still friends. The fact that she does not have money all the time does not diminish the friendship that they have. It does however make the differences become more apparent especially when they go out. So financially, these women's friendships are different but differences can occur when it comes to what their relationship will become once one of them decides to marry. Brielle and her best friend discussed what their friendship would be like once they married and it transformed over time. She states:

She [Brielle's best friend] was like, you know whoever gets married first, the single friend can't be friends with the married friend and I was like that is not true... The thing is, she still gone be my friend. I am just not going to talk to her like every day or every other day like we do, communication is going to go down, but at the same time, this is my best friend. I have been knowing her since I was three, been close with her since I was eight or nine, been best friends with her since I was 14. Husband if her mama or daddy done died or something happen, I am sorry husband I have to go.

Brielle did not agree with her best friend statement about marriage but they talked about how their friendship would change. The differences that marital status will make were apparent but they did not necessarily affect the friendship. Brielle wanted to still be best friends but limit the communication because they are at a different point in their life and they have a husband and a family.

Brielle and Hope talk about financial and marital status differences but Ayanna, 19, discussed differences in friends and goals in life. She talks about some of her best friend's friends and that the things they do not talk about make an impression on her. Ayanna states:

All of our friends [her and her best friend] are not the same. She has friends that I would be like, I speak but it is not going to do. They like to, you talk about school and they never talk about school and you in school, school should come up in some type of conversation. You know, never talk about studying, you know, I mean I never seen someone, you never talk about a test.

Ayanna points out that to her, school is important and you should discuss it. Although her and her best friend are both planning to be successful, her best friend still have friends who are not as committed as she is about her education and future. For Ayanna, having goals is important for her friends and best friends, but her best friend does not let that difference affect her other friendships.

None of the women had similar experiences when it came to differences in their friendships and best friendships. That is because they each valued some things more than others did at a particular moment. Brielle and her best friend think and talk about how their friendship is going to work once they get married and have children. Hope values money in a friend when they want to go out or at least be honest about not having money and suggest something else. Ayanna looks for people with goals and ambition who takes school as seriously as she does. All of the things that are valued tie into the similarities that they look for in a friend and a best friend. The different views do not affect the women's friendship because for most of them they are able to work it out because that person possesses other things that are important to them.

Chloe said, “because we all possess something different and I think that is why it makes us strong.”

Although differences occurred among the women and their best friends, they still saw the differences among people of a different background as more significant. They may not be against having close friendships with someone outside of their race but they feel the other person may be uncomfortable. Ayanna would not have a problem with having a best friend who was not a Black woman. She states, “I have White friends but they are not as close because I think most of them are afraid.” Brittany, 20, who has had the same best friend since elementary school, on the other hand does not see the significance in having best friends who are not Black women because there is too much of a difference between them. She said:

I have never had a best friend outside my race, but as far as like. I think that the cultures would clash. People say yeah, interracial, yeah you should but we come from two different backgrounds, two different styles, walks of life. Like things I could connect on with Haley, I probably wouldn't connect on them with. I don't see myself connecting.

For Brittany, she has the connection with her best friend that she does not think she can have with women of a difference race or ethnicity. Interracial friendships are difficult to maintain because of that level of understanding and ability to connect that the women look for. It is also the fear that Ayanna mentioned when she talked about her friends who are White but will never be her best friend because of fear.

The women defined friendships as having similarities, understanding, and acceptance. Friends and best friends both possess things in common such as loyalty, understanding, dependability, and being fun. A best friend must possess those qualities and be trustworthy, positive, and available to spend time together to catch up on life's events.

Friends and Best Friends. The women in the study wanted their friends and best friends to possess most of the same traits but to certain degrees. Brielle states that, “a casual friend is just somebody you can hang out with.” Casual friends are not those people that you can truly depend on. Hope states:

Your best friend is your go to guy, go to girl. No matter what is going on, you can call them at 3:00 in the morning, 2:00 in the morning but a casual friend would be like ‘are you serious? Did you just wake me up right now for foolishness?’ If it is your best friend, you call them and they be like ‘tell me what happened’, ‘I’m up, do you need me to come whoop somebody?’

Hope points out that friends and best friends react differently in certain situations, which is what makes them either a casual friend or a best friend. It is here that the women began to distinguish between who they would call at 3 in the morning. Chloe says, “I am not going to call a casual friend at 3:00 in the morning, so that is what makes a best friend.” If the women feel comfortable to call someone at an odd time of the night, it is probably their best friend because they know who will help or listen to them.

The women categorized their friends into casual and best friends for the study, and they think that both groups should possess certain qualities. Chloe states:

When it comes to casual friends it is not too much that I don’t require from a casual friend that I WOULDN’T require from my best friend. If I take that step to even call you a friend, I need you to have some qualifications such as being honest with me, being loyal to me, supportive. I need to know, yes I have my best friend but you know they can’t always run to my rescue but as a casual friend I do want somebody to just have lunch with, just talk with.

When asked to explain why they would want the same qualities, they began mentioning that all of the qualities were necessary but to a certain degree depending on your title. Chloe goes on to say:

Even though I require the same requirements, even though I think my casual friends possess the same requirements as my best friends it is to a certain extent. I expect you to be loyal but I don't expect you to be loyal to the fact that you tell me every little thing that you know, cause I don't require that of you because you are just a casual friend.

There again is the emphasis on the nature of the relationship. Casual friends need specific qualities to be considered a friend, but they do not need to cross an imaginary line, because they are only a casual friend. The women want these qualities so that they know you are a friend, but you have not proven you are a best friend yet. This can take time because the women do not want to feel like they have put energy into a friendship that was not going to become more.

The qualities that each woman named are necessary because they do not want to feel like they have wasted time and energy on a best friendship that would not have worked in the beginning had they known. Brittany talks about wasted energy. Brittany states, "If I don't see the real you I can't give you no title, like you change once you get it, and now that means I have to take it away from you and that is a waste of energy." Not only is it a waste of energy but that bad experience with someone who you thought was your friend can affect how you view future friendships. If the person betrays your trust then it may be difficult for you to trust other people. The women in the study all had experiences where they thought someone was their friend but they found out the person was not. Although they had a bad experience, they did not let that experience dictate their later friendships with other people who they encountered. Each of the

women in the study encouraged other Black women who have had a bad experience with a Black woman to give the next person a chance. That next person may be your friend. Chloe states:

don't shut anybody out because of something you know you may think this person may not come through but some people, people are shocking. Humans are a shocking breed. I would just say keep living, get you one, keep living and pay attention to all the people that are good to you cause those might be the people, y'all may need each other, and they may end up being your best friend.

It is those people who you least expect who may become your best friend. You cannot let one bad experience with one Black woman hinder future friendships with other Black women. For the people who claim that they do not have other Black women as their closest friends Chloe goes on to say:

I think that when you come across people that say 'oh I don't talk to girls and things like that', I think they say that because of one bad experience. Being burned by that one experience may get them to the point where they feel like I am not finna put myself back through that situation . . . You can't live your life letting one experience pretty much rule your whole life . . . You are going to have negative, ups and downs, so get up, dust yourself off and find a new group of friends.

One bad experience with a Black woman not only affects your future but it also defines for you what you think other friends will be. Brielle asserts that by letting one experience dictate your future experiences you are placing Black women in a box and saying that we are all the same. Although Black women have the power of self-definition, they have to be willing to redefine what it means to be friends with each other and not define all friends the same way.

First Impressions

As the women began to talk about their best friends, they provided a variety of responses pertaining to their first impressions and the process of becoming best friends. Each woman ran a different course to find a best friend. Some women have had the same best friends since elementary school, whereas, others did not meet their best friend until high school. Some met in high school but did not become best friends until college. As they began to reminisce on the progression of their friendships, they recalled their feelings about the person when they first met them. It was not only a variety of reactions but also their responses showed the progression of the friendship whether it took years, months, weeks, or days. Some of the women had a positive first impression of their best friend. Miranda, 24, felt her first impression of her best friend was positive, “She reminded me of me, she was cool, silly and could dance.”

Brittany, on the other hand, has known her best friend since elementary school but they did not have the best first impression. When asked what her first impression of her best friend was she states, “She came and stole a crayon from me and so like kinda like a b-i-t-c-h around that area in fourth grade terms.” Not all Black women are the same and neither are their friendships, or the way people view them. Ayanna’s first impression of her best friend was not positive; however, it provided an avenue for them to become closer friends. They realized that their first impression of each other was wrong and that they had many things in common.

Ayanna states:

She thought I was mean and I think I started, I just randomly one day said, ‘you know I didn’t like you at first but I see you cool.’ She laughed but I was like ‘I’m serious’ and she was like ‘I thought you were mean. That is why I never said anything to you’. I was like, ‘well I am not mean, I am actually nice’ and she was like, ‘well I don’t think that I

am all that.’ Then we went on and on and on about that and then eventually it just, without her even knowing we started doing more and more stuff.

For Ayanna it would have been easy for her to base her decision off her first impression. Her first impression was not positive but they found commonalities between each other through a mutual friend and found out that their first impressions were not accurate. Because of the experiences that the women talked about, it is easy to let past experiences dictate what happens in the future. First impressions for these women played a role in how long it took the friendships to progress to the next stage.

Timelines

Each woman in the study gave a different timeline relating to their progression towards becoming best friends. The amount of time it took each woman to become best friends varied depending on what stage of life she was in and whether the first impression was positive or negative. For most of the women, it took at least two years for them to become best friends. When the women were plotting each points on the chart, for most of them it took longer to go from casual friends to close friends than it did any other time. Once they became close friends, the amount of time it took to become best friends ranged from a week to two months. That is compared to it taking two months to two years to go from casual friends to close friends. Some women progressed from friends to best friends in a matter of months. One woman progressed through each stage in a matter of two weeks. Although the amount of time it took to transition from one stage to the next varied from woman to woman, most of them chose to take a little longer to make sure this person was actually there for them.

One of the women specifically chose to take a longer process in getting to know her friends before they became best friends. Rachel, 28, states:

I am not the type of person to just jump on the first bandwagon I see. Every nice person or every nice person that cross your path that you may think mean you good, not necessarily is meaning to be your friend.

As the process continued from acquaintances to casual friends to close friends and then to best friends the women began to recall events that they went through that made them closer. These events made their bonds stronger. Although the events played a major part in transitioning from casual friends to best friends, along the way the women found that the most important things that they were looking for were the qualities that were shown during these transitions.

Best Friends

Important Factors

As friendships began to progress towards something more than just casual conversations the women in the study described some of the key qualities they looked for in a best friend. These qualities were honesty (bluntness), understanding, trustworthiness/loyalty, positivity and spending time together. Proximity plays a major factor in who the women became best friends with also.

Honesty. More than three fourths of the women in the study listed honesty as one of the qualities that they look for in a best friend. Honesty was also referred to as being blunt throughout the study; because the women felt like in order to be honest you have to be able to tell it like it is and not sugarcoat anything. Miranda states:

I can't stand a liar. I have to know that you get what I am saying when you are talking to me and we are talking about something and I ask you to give your opinion. I want you to

give it to me. Don't sugarcoat a lie and try to make me feel like, okay this is what you should do, tell me what I want to hear. I like that give it to me straight up.

The idea is that your best friend has your best interest at heart and would not mind being honest and straightforward. Honesty is needed and expected in a best friendship. The women expected their best friends to be honest with them because they knew them better than anyone else did.

Although most of the women expect and require honesty, it is not always well received. Rachel states that her best friend, "may have said something that I didn't want to hear, but it was the right thing and that was when I kinda realized that she means me well."

Honesty seems to keep the women's best friendship intact. They are able to talk about things without getting offended to the point that they are no longer friends. Most of the women saw honesty as an important factor because it really showed that they cared enough about each other to be completely honest regardless of the consequences. Kennedy goes on to say that honesty is the reason her best friendships have lasted. Kennedy states that:

We don't hide anything from each other. We are blunt with each other, what I say to her, negative or positive she is going to take it after the situation is done, it is over with. Whether they like it or not, I am going to tell you the truth. That has to keep it together cause I don't see how you can be friends with somebody and walk on eggshells around them.

Honesty is a way of showing that you care about another person. In order to show that you truly care about your best friend, the women in the study found honesty to be an important trait. Without honesty the women in the study were concerned if the people they thought were close to them were truly there for them. Honesty provided a way to see whether a person who is in the friend zone is able to progress to something more than just casual friends.

Understanding. Not only is honesty important in these relationships but being able to understand each other is another key factor. Most of the women looked for someone who would understand what they were going through and could connect with them. Honesty is needed to see if someone truly cares enough to be harsh, yet understanding is important because the women want to know that they are not in a situation alone. Chloe makes it known that understanding is important. She states:

You may not be going through it or been through it but if I am telling you that I am struggling and my bank account is at \$2 and I got to buy books that I don't have money for, be able to relate, be able to understand.

Most of the women in the study looked for that level of understanding. Even when asked to give a general definition of friendship, they stated that they have to have similarities. Most of the women went on to say that the reason their best friend is a Black woman is because they are able to relate more than they could in an interracial friendship. Chloe goes on to mention a few more qualities that are important. She goes on to say, "like if I cry you will be right there wiping my tears. You ain't got to cry with me but I need to know that you are there and you understand. I need understanding."

Understanding can occur because of similar backgrounds and interests. The women wanted people that understood what it was like to be Black, a young adult, single, engaged, divorced, with or without children, in school or not, and a woman. Children played a role in how important understanding was in the friendships. Two of the women in the study have children and two were pregnant during the study. Children sometimes played a role in helping the women find their best friends. If the women could get along with the other person's children then it made the women closer. Avery, 30, states:

Her kids love me and we just have that bond and my daughter has a bond with her and I think that is what really make her, we have gotten a lot closer because of our kids and the children have a lot to do with it.

Either for the individuals that have children, their best friends have children themselves or want children in the future. There has to be some type of relationship between the women and their respective children. Understanding helps them relate to each other, yet the women had to feel like they trusted the person that was their best friend.

Trustworthiness/Loyalty. When asked what some of the qualities the women looked for in a best friend, almost all of them stated trust/loyalty or mentioned as they talked about the other qualities. For most of the women, they have to be able to trust their best friends because they tell them everything. Kennedy describes her best friends as her human diary because they know everything about her, the good and the bad. Knowing all of this information about a person is why the women declared trust and loyalty as important qualities for friendship.

They want to know that their friends are there for them and whatever happens or said will stay between them. Kennedy states:

I don't know how many of us can say we trust half of the people who are in our circle as far as we can throw them but having that friend, knowing that there is at least one person you can trust makes a world of difference.

Being able to have someone that you can talk to that you know is there for you is important.

With all of the people that cannot be trusted, having a friend that knows you and that you can trust helps with the trust issues you may have. The women in the study felt like trust and loyalty were self-explanatory. In order to have a friendship you had to have these qualities. They were not divulging personal information to anyone that they did not feel like they could trust. If they

did then they learned from the experience. Brielle states about her past best friend and divulging information:

the fact that we were in the 10th grade when we became best friends, I guess, I didn't have common sense enough to say 'okay, before you confide in her and things like that, you need to make sure this is really your friend.

This experience of Brielle had an effect on her future friendships. Although Brielle was still best friends with her current best friend, she started to confide in this other person thinking she was her friend. She trusted her enough to tell her information but then after the friendship ended she questioned whether she should have told this person anything because she did not fully trust her. All of these women want a best friend they can trust and know that they will be there for them. Along with being trustworthy and loyal, they seek friends who are positive about life.

Positivity. More than half of the women looked for someone who had a positive outlook on life. This outlook included where they thought they would be in the future and how they gave advice in situations. Most of the women wanted someone who would encourage them when needed, instead of bringing a negative attitude into the situation. Rachel states:

You know I have such and such going on and I am already negative about it. I need you to feed me something positive to help change the atmosphere, to keep me okay, keep me sane and give me that peace of mind. I don't need you to be like, girl, yeah you know such and such, and you giving it back to me and now I am more corrupt.

Having a positive friend should benefit you when you are in a bad mood or have a negative outlook on something. Positivity should serve as a pick me up; instead of a let us have a party in the negativity. Rachel also goes on to say that positivity makes the day go by quicker. Being positive allows the other person in the friendship to see that you have a positive outlook

on things and they should to and if not you will help them get through what is causing the negativity. Avery gives an example of how her best friend helped her when she needed her by being positive about everything. Avery states:

Even when I became pregnant you know she was just, you know when you feeling sick and she had already had a couple kids so she just really comforted me, telling me positive things, telling me it was going to be okay because I was emotional when I first became pregnant and sick.

It was during a time Avery needed someone to tell her that everything would be all right that her best friend offered encouraging words. This situation shows how positivity made a situation better. It helped Avery through a tough time. Although she was emotional, her best friend was there for her. Positivity not only works in situations such as Avery's but some people just looked for someone who had a positive outlook on life in general. Kennedi states:

You don't want to definitely hang around people who are going to bring you down. I always try to put myself around, surround myself with positive people. You know when you surround yourself with negative people you don't want any negative ways around you. So I want all positive.

Positivity is important because it affects your outlook on life. If you have a positive outlook on life then as Rachel said it can make your day go by quicker. The women look for positivity in a best friend, so that they would have someone who could encourage them when they need it. Positivity is important when best friends are spending time together, because the time they spend together is important to the sustainability of their friendship because they may not live close to each other anymore.

Spending Time Together and Proximity. Most of the women in the study were best friends with people they have known for most if not all of their life. They ranged from elementary friendships to adult friendships, but they all began somewhere. Two of the women met their best friend in elementary school. Six of the women met at least one of their best friends in high school. Two of the women met one of their best friends at work. Three of the women met one of their best friends in college. When asked how they met their best friend, it was always a story about them taking a class together, growing up in the same place/subdivision, or working together. The friends that met in college, high school or elementary school met because they spent some type of time together whether it was in class or after class. They valued the time that they spend together because for most of them it is not as frequent as they would like.

Although the women do not get to spend time with their best friends every day, most of them try to communicate at least one a week or once a month. It is not that they do not want to spend time together, but they have busy schedules. Their schedules will not permit them to get together except for that once a week, once a month, or twice a month. This change in schedule became more evident for some of the women when they transitioned from high school to college, once someone moved away, or when someone began to work full time. With such a change in the friendship, it may not be able for them to see each other every day as they did in high school. Chloe mentions that during her senior year in high school her and her best friends were trying to figure out how they were going to deal with not being able to see each other every day. They were considering going to see a therapist. Although she would like to spend time with her best friends as often as possible she knows that circumstances prevent that from happening. Chloe states, "I don't get to spend time with them that often because we are scattered out." Even with

them being scattered out going to different schools and working they still try to get together at least once a month no more than once every two months. Spending time together is important to the women. Brittany explains why it is important that she spend time with her best friend:

For one she doesn't talk to her family like that. She isn't that close to them, so I am the only person that can like, other than her new found boo, that she can talk to about everything. So it is really good just to get everything out that you don't get out with other people.

Spending time with her best friend gives her someone to talk to and it gives her best friend someone to talk to when she needs to talk. Even though she spends time with her best friend it is not the same way it was when they first because friends in elementary school. Things have happened that have hindered them from being able to spend a lot of time with each other, but as Rachel states, it is not always possible. She states, "We are grown now. She has her stuff going on and I have my stuff going on but as long as we see each other every now and then and we talk and we communicate and keep in touch."

Rachel knows that because they no longer have those classes together and nothing to worry about that they cannot spend as much time as possible together. The main thing is that they maintain communication. Spending time also allowed the women to have someone to talk to about what is going on and who understands. Avery stated, "You need to have that time to spend with each other, cause we all need someone to talk to, someone you can trust and open up to." Miranda expounds upon that same thought saying, "just because we are not around each other and spend time together that don't change our friendship. We still pick up where we left off, so it really don't matter." Although spending time together is important, it is not always possible.

Most of the women viewed things similar to Miranda by just picking up where they left off, as if time had not passed.

The women looked for all of these qualities in a best friend. The qualities that they named were all qualities that they felt their best friend(s) possessed to some extent. Some of the qualities were necessary regardless of the nature of the friendship and others depended on how close the friendships were. Overall, the women looked for honesty (bluntness), understanding, trustworthiness, loyalty, positivity and being able to spend time together. Although none of the participants explicitly mentioned proximity, they all implied that they met their best friend because they lived close to each other, grew up together, worked together, or were in a class together. Throughout the development of the friendships, the women all felt that communication was important in maintaining their best friendships.

Role of Communication

Topics of Conversations

As the women began to talk about their best friendships, they began to bring up what they talked about and how they chose to communicate. The women looked for specific qualities in a best friend and the person they considered their best friend had to communicate to them the qualities they were looking for. The topics of conversation differed depending on what whether they were talking to a casual, close, or best friend. If they considered the person a casual friend then the conversation was very basic and they did not divulge too much information. If they considered the person to be their best friend then they gave more details and the conversations were more personal. Although they still have the basic ‘cute shirt, where did you get it from’ kinds of conversations, that was only the tip of the conversation because the conversation can

become personal quickly. As Kennedy said, “it is like you always have a story for your best friend. You wait all day just to tell her. It is like you are holding water.”

Some of the main things that the women say that they talk about are relationships, men, school, work, goals in life, religion, family and life in general. Although these are the topics of conversation for most of them, it all depends on whom they are telling. Some of the women place a hierarchy on the things they talked about based on whom they were having a conversation with. Brittany knows that if she wants to talk about religion she would talk to her best friend because they are on a similar level as it relates to religion. Chloe states that when she talks to her best friends it normally starts off like, “you won’t believe what this blanketed blank, blank did,” emphasizing that she is about to tell a story about something that happened. Some of the times, the conversations happened because they are caught up in what is being said. Ayanna says that the conversations vary because they will be talking about something and wonder where that came from.

Although most of the women were able to name some of the things they talked about, some had never really thought about it. It was just something that happened that did not take thought or planning. They talked about whatever was going on in their life and in the world and the conversation changed numerous times throughout. Most of the women have already made it known that they do not see their best friend as often as they would like but they do stay in contact with each other. They found a way to stay connected even though they cannot be with each other frequently.

Modes of Communication

All of the women had a certain mode of communication that they preferred with their best friends. The preferred mode of communication is face-to-face. Since spending one-on-one

time together is not frequent, they have to stay connected in other ways. Most of them communicated via text messages or social media networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, because they knew face-to-face communication was not possible due to schedules. None of the women used Skype to chat over the web, even though it is face-to-face communication. The women felt like some things should be said in person. Ayanna states:

I don't like text messages. You know certain things and there are certain things that I will text her and there are some things I say we need to talk in person because I feel like I can get my point across better in person than through text message.

The women felt that with their best friends they could not communicate mainly through text messages because they were too close for that. Besides face-to-face communication, the telephone was the next best thing. Chloe explains that she prefers to communicate with her best friends face-to-face, but she settles for "conference calls" on the phone. All of the women in the study communicated via phone when necessary.

The number of times they communicated in a month varied from woman to woman. Most of the women would send out a quick text message once a week just to see how their best friend was doing. If their schedule was hectic, they may not communicate for at least a month. The age range of the women in the study provided different answers to how often they communicated with their best friends. The younger women who were 19-23 were more likely to text or talk on the phone at least every day or every other day. The women who were 24-30 were more likely to talk on the phone and text when their schedules permitted and that was usually once every two weeks or once a month or maybe longer. It was not that the younger women in the study valued communicating with their best friend(s) more than the older women in the study; it really depended on the friendship and work schedule. Most of the women in the 24-30

age range worked full time, some went to school as well, and some had children. These things affected how often they communicated compared to the 19-23 year old group, who were chosen randomly, were mostly working part time and full time students.

The way, in which the women stay in contact with each other, helps sustain their best friendships. They use the phone to keep in contact so that their relationship status does not change. They also have specific conversations that they will only have with their best friends because they trust them. The way that they communicate, helps maintain their friendship because they keep the lines of communication open. They may not be able to spend as much time with each other as they would like, but they still communicate on a regular basis. As Chloe said when she talked about how she knew her, best friends were actually her best friends:

I feel like we get to the point where you know, if you in church and the pastor done said something that really speaks to you and you are like amen that's for me. Yeah it gets to the point where you know you are for me.

Summary

Overall, the women in the study explained that friends and best friends must possess specific qualities. Although they do not discourage interracial friendships, they value their best friendships that they have with other Black women. Other Black women provide them with a level of understanding that they feel they cannot get from anyone else, because they do not know what it is like being a Black woman. The findings show that the women look for similarities, honesty (bluntness), trustworthiness/loyalty, understanding, and positivity. They valued spending time together and became best friends because they lived in the same area, worked together, took a class together or did something where they had a lot of contact with each other. Once they have found someone or maybe a few people who they call their best friends they talk about

specific things in more detail than they would with a casual friend. Some of the things they talked about were relationships, men, religion, family, work, goals in life, school and life in general. They preferred to communicate face-to-face, but they stayed in contact through text message, social media, and phone calls. The women in the study defined what being a best friend is to them and how they manage to maintain the friendship using communication. It also opened up a dialogue for the women to talk about their best friendships and helped them recognize that their friendships are complex.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the findings from the study. I will discuss implications and limitations of the study. Lastly, I will provide a summary of the discussion.

Conclusions about Findings

Based on the findings, I have come to three conclusions about Black women's best friendships. The first conclusion is that there are some consistencies between Black women's best friendships and other women's best friendships, but there are differences that should be addressed. Black women's best friendships should not be looked at as if they are completely the same as other women's friendships because then Black women are not given the agency to define what their friendships mean to them. One of the things that make Black women's friendships different is the importance of understanding. Also, knowing what it is like to be a Black woman and the handling the challenges that we face. This type of understanding is important because the women looked for someone who understood a little bit about their life and some of the things they went through. They did not expect their best friends to understand everything about their life, because they understood they were not the same people, but they had to be able to understand the culture. They valued a certain level of understanding because they could not get that type of understanding from anyone besides another Black woman.

Second, age plays a part in how the women in the study expressed their friendships. The age range for the study was 19-30 years old. This age range garnered different conclusions on how often they communicated and what they talked about based on age.

The final conclusion is that proximity is one of the main reasons these women became best friends. Most of the women agreed that their best friend(s) are different than they are, be it personality or style. Being in the same space with each other helped them to become friends and later best friends. They were able to get to know each other better, by having conversations and learning more about each other than just the things they saw on a daily basis. Living close to each other, working together, going to the same school and taking the same classes together played a role in how the women became best friends.

It Doesn't Matter BUT...

Throughout the results, the women talked about their best friendships with other Black women. When the first focus group and individual interviews were conducted, the women were asked if race was an important factor in how they selected their best friends. None of the women thought race played a big part in their best friend selections, but when asked if they had or have ever had a best friend who was not a Black woman, they answered “no.” It was also during these questions about the race of their best friends, that the women began to speak more softly so that no one else could hear their response to the question. Although they did not discourage interracial best friends, they felt that they could not have a best friend who was not a Black woman because they felt the other person would be uncomfortable in the friendship. They believed that non-Black women would feel intimidated or embarrassed to be friends with them.

As mentioned earlier, the women in the final focus group emphasized the importance of understanding in their friendships. Understanding was one of the main reasons the women's best friends were other Black women because of a certain level of understanding that they found with each other. Although the women wanted a certain level of understanding with their casual friends, it was different from with their best friends. Understanding on the best friend level was

being able to understand the discriminations they faced as Black women. They also talked about understanding as it pertained to relationships with Black men or family members.

Rawlins (1992) talked about the dialectics of individuation and participation in friendships. The dialectic of individuation looks for similarities and commonalities and ignores the differences in a relationship. The dialectic of participation looks for differences and overlooks similarities. This study looked at this specific dialectical tension in relation to Black women best friendships. The women used both the dialectic of participation and individuation when they selected, established and maintained their best friendships. They looked for things they had in common with their casual friends and somewhat ignored everything else. When it came to their best friends, they enacted the dialectic of participation because they looked for women who were like them and subconsciously they were women who were also Black. For all of the women except for one, they did not dwell on differences consciously when it came to selecting best friends; it just happened that their best friends were also Black women. Once we started talking about why their best friends were other Black women they began, to realize that they wanted someone who understood their struggle as a Black woman and who understood them when no one else did.

The dialectics of participation and individuation are tensions that are always at play and are never perfectly balanced. The women looked for understanding among other Black women because other Black women could understand the battle they had been through or were going through because they were also Black women. Although understanding was important, there were still differences among the women. They may not have the same level of education or come from the same socioeconomic background but those differences did not have a huge impact on their best friendship.

This level of understanding is needed for these relationships to flourish because of the history that Black women have had with other women and Black men. Most of the research that has looked at friendships does not look at Black women's friendships but instead look to generalize their friendship with everyone else. The representations of Black women affect how they view themselves and others. It is because of these representations and stories that Black women do not have numerous close friendships with other Black women. Once these women find a friendship and it begins to flourish, they require a certain level of understanding from the other person. This level of understanding is required because no one besides another Black woman understands what it is like to be a Black woman (Collins, 2000). In fairness, Black women also cannot completely understand what it is like to be another race.

Age Ain't Nothing but a Number...

The results found that age factored in the role of communication played in maintaining a friendship. The women who were in the 19-23 year old age range valued frequent communication in their best friendships. The women ages 24-30 years old did not value frequent communication, because of the different things they had going on in their lives.

Age has not been a factor that has been discussed while doing research on friendships. All of the research selects a specific age range, but none have looked at the influence of age on the participants in the study or reported how the responses differed based on age. Age became a defining factor in how often the best friends communicated. The women who were in the age range of 19-23, expressed their friendship by communicating every day or every other day via text or phone call. If they did not communicate in some fashion at least two or three times a week, then they thought something was wrong. This means of communicating often was present with most of the women and their best friendships. The women who were 24-30 years old,

experienced this during high school and early college years, but then communication became less frequent and it was okay with both parties. The women who were 24-30 years old communicated once every two weeks or once a month. They did not have to text or call every day or every week because they knew the dynamics of their friendship had changed. Their friendship now could include a full time job, children, a husband, school and other commitments that make it difficult for them to communicate every day.

Rawlins (1992) talks about how things such as marriage and children can change the dynamics of a friendship. The women in the study revealed how certain things such as marriage and work can change the amount of communication in a friendship, but not the friendship. Although the women who were 24-30 years old, did not communicate with their best friends every day, that did not mean they considered their friendship less important than it was previously. For the women who were 24-30 years old, the topics of conversation began to change with their commitments. Instead of just talking about school or work, they talked about the past, children, their families and things they could not talk about with other people. The women, who were 19-23 years old, were still working on how to balance all of their commitments without making their friends feel neglected.

The concept of age affects all friendships and not just Black women's best friendships. Age warrants different things for different people and different conversations. As people age what they consider important changes. Race can influence topics of conversation, but it does not completely diminish the impact that age has on all best friendships.

We are Always Close...

All of the women agreed that if they would not have shared a common space or lived near their best friends, they would not have become best friends. Their best friends were people they grew up with, worked with, took classes with, or shared a common interest or hobby with. If they had not been in constant contact with their best friend, they probably would not have established a friendship that progressed into a best friendship.

Jackman and Crane (1986) looked at contact theory to see whether it applied to interracial contact. The study found that the more contact White people had with Black people the more positive their impressions became. The contact theory would not have worked if used in this study because most of the women were in constant contact with other women of different races, but their impressions were not changed. Most of the women attended diverse high schools and colleges, but they did not have a close or best friend who was White or any other race except Black. They were in constant contact with women of different races, but that did not change their closeness with other women. Most of the women had casual friends that were White or of a different race, but they only got as close as a casual friend.

For the women who attended schools that were not as diverse, it changed their impression of other Black women. The closer the relationship the women had with other Black women, the more positively they thought about Black women in general. They were not as hesitant about establishing friendships with other Black women, after they had a successful friendship. Most of the women had a childhood best friend and a young adult best friend, who they met a few years after their childhood best friend. They described how slow their first friendship progressed but for the women who had more than one best friend, the second friendship progressed a lot quicker.

Proximity and race influences friendships. Most of the women became friends because they lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same school or college. Other people worked together and still saw each other every day. Whether it was at school, home, or work race influenced how these friendships began. For most of the women who met in high school, they became friends because they went to a predominately-White school and there were only a few Black people in the school. They did not automatically say that they were going to be friends, but they did assist each other with assignments and finding classrooms. A few of the women attended a mixed high school where there were just as many Black students as there were any other races of students. The women became friends because they lived close to each other and all of their classes were the same. They saw each other on a daily basis and eventually developed a friendship. College worked the same way as high school. The workplace provides different avenues on how proximity and race influence friendships. Although two people may work for the same company, they may not hold the same position and amount of power. The women in the study, who met at work, actually held the same position and worked together. Just like in high school and college, they interacted every day. They also discussed race issues in the workplace. Race and proximity work together because when the women were in diverse settings they found comfort in each other.

Implications for Future Research and Limitations

The findings of this study have both practical and theoretical implication for communication research on Black women's best friendships. Since the study of Black women's best friendships is almost non-existent, this study provides a point of insertion for more work to be done about Black women's best friendships. A theoretical implication of the study is that the use of focus groups and individual interviews can help look at the complexity of Black women's

best friendships. In order to explore Black women's best friendship fully, you must acknowledge the role that intersectionality plays in communication. This study also builds the dialectics of individuation and participation along with the openness-closeness dialectic. A practical implication of this study is the importance of best friends among Black women. Another practical implication is that the study allows Black women to challenge media representations and myths about Black women best friendships. The study offers Black women the opportunity to see that Black women's best friendships are possible.

Qualitative Measures and Theory

Qualitative measures are useful in studying Black women's best friendships because it allows the women in the study to have a voice and the ability to define what their friendship means to them. Using focus groups allowed the women to talk in general about the importance of their friendships. The individual interviews allowed the women to go into details about their specific friendships.

In chapter three, I discussed the benefits of using focus groups and individual interviews for this study. These two measures allowed me as the researcher to learn how these women maintained their best friendships. I would not have been able to fully understand their friendships without asking them how and why they are important and question them about the role of communication in their relationship. The interviews and focus groups created an image of words of these women's friendships that I may not have been able to gather without asking questions. The focus groups also allowed the women to think about their best friendship in a space where everyone was talking about their friendships. The women were able to think about the ways in which their friendships continue through the open discussion format (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

I found that by using the focus groups and individual interviews, I was able to promote discussion among the women without it feeling like I was only probing. The focus groups and interview also allowed the women to understand a little more about the project and why it is important to me. Before each focus group and the individual interview, I gave an overview of the study.

Focus groups are supposed to be based on commonalities so that the participants are more comfortable in the group. Since all of the women in the focus group knew me or one of the other women, they were comfortable talking with each other. It allowed the women to feed off each other's comments because they were comfortable in the situation. The individual interviews would not have been as successful without the focus groups, because after the first focus group the women were thinking about their best friendships and what made them work. Once it was time for the individual interview, the women were able to remember things from the focus group and reflect on how that fit or did not fit with their best friendships. Interviews are meant for one person to encourage another to express their feelings about a specific experience (Lindlof, 1995). Without the focus group, I do not think the women would have opened up so freely about their friendships. It would have taken more than one interview to get the information I received in one interview.

The focus group and individual interviews also allowed me to ask them specifically about race and their friendships. The women were able to talk out the complexity of race and friendships with each other during the focus groups and really hone in on the issue during the individual interview. When the topic of race and friendship came up, the women were more comfortable in the focus group setting than the public individual interview setting. The focus groups allowed them to talk about the intersection of race, class, education and gender without

feeling like they should not be talking about this in an open setting. During the individual interview, race was mentioned but it was not discussed as freely and openly as it was in the focus groups. Although race was not mentioned as much in the individual interview as the focus group, the women talked about, class, education, and gender openly during the interviews with it being implied we are talking about race.

This study adds to the dialectics of openness-closeness (Baxter, 1988), individuation, and participation (Rawlins, 1992). These dialectics are present throughout the study. The dialectics of openness-closeness is present when the women distinguished between friends and best friends and how they communicate differently. They are looking for similar qualities but they are not going to open up completely to just a friend. They will keep a sense of privacy when it comes to revealing information and allowing friends to reveal information to them. This study agrees partially with the findings of Rawlins (1983). The women in the study wanted their friends to be open with them but not entirely. The thing that this study adds to this statement is that the women in this study expected their best friends to be equally open with them. Most of the time openness was not expected because it was already done. The women chose not to disclose personal information to friends regardless of how much they disclosed to them, which contradicts Rawlins (1983). They placed a barrier where only best friends were allowed to cross because that was whom they disclosed personal information to.

The dialectic of individuation and participation expanded through the findings of this study. The women in the study tried to balance the dialectical tensions of looking for differences and looking for similarities in how they selected friends and best friends. The women tend to cling more to the dialectic of participation when it came to their best friends. They looked for women who were like them and who understood them. Although they looked for these

similarities, they also looked for differences and saw that as a way of looking at their friendship. Most of the women considered their best friends to be complete or almost entirely different from them. It was the differences that made some of the friendships flourish into best friendships. Rawlins (1992) talked about the dialectic individuation as noticing differences and not being able to see the similarities. The women in the study were able to see and appreciate the differences along with the similarities. The differences became an important part in the friendship. Although the dialectic of participation and individuation look specifically at seeing differences and similarities isolated as two separate things, this study saw them as tensions at play. Both dialectical tensions were needed in order for the women in the study to become best friends and to maintain their best friendship.

Best Friends are Important...

The study found that Black women's best friendships are important in how they make sense of everything around them. The women in this study described their best friends as people who understands and knows them very well. It is because they trust these women so much that they are comfortable around them. They place a high value on their best friends because they know that they have their best interest at heart and that they tell them the truth. The importance of best friends creates what Collins (2000) calls a safe space in which they can be themselves. It is a space where the women can let their hair down and talk about things that may garner negativity if done in any other space among any other person or group of people.

The women in the study talked about the importance of having Black women best friends and that it is important because of the level of understanding that they can provide. Their best friends are important because they are always there and they judge them openly and honestly. It is because they accept the women as they are, flawed and all, that they feel these relationships

are important. This type of relationship gave the women a place of belonging and being around people who care.

This study serves as a way to challenge the media representations and myths that have plagued Black women and their friendships by giving Black women the opportunity to say what their friendship are like. Television shows such as *Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Basketball Wives*, portrays Black women friendships negatively. Each episode contains some sort of conflict in which the women are called derogatory names or even get into physical altercations. The shows do not portray Black women's friendships in a positive light. This study not only challenges these representations, but it gives Black women another way to look at their friendships. This study shows that Black women's friendships are possible and that current media representations and myths are not true for all friendships. Along with media representations, some Black women are told stories about other Black women that could have an impact on the number of friendships they have (Grief & Sharpe, 2010). This study serves as another narrative that Black women can tell to other Black women.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations to this study. The first limitation is that most of the women involved in the study were currently in college. It was not the intent to gather participants who were all in college but because of the nature of the study and the time commitment, Black women who were in college were available. Another limitation of the study would be the time the data was collected. The data collection took place during the summer, so finding women who would participate and who had extra time was difficult. Most college students were gone home for the summer. Most of the people who worked full time were only able to participate in the individual interview because it was more flexible in nature and the length of the interview

depended on how thorough they answered the questions. Another limitation for the study was the age distribution. It was more difficult to find women who were over 25 years old to participate in the study than it was 19-22 years.

Future research should look at intergenerational Black women's best friendships to see how their friendships are maintained. Since there was an apparent difference in how frequent 19-23 years old women communicated compared to 24-30 years old women, it would be interesting to see how Black women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s maintained their friendship and how frequently they communicated. A study looking at dyads of best friends using individual interviews and focus groups could be conducted. During this study, two of the women who participated were best friends and the information that I received from them was interesting. Although they were best friends, the amount of time it took to get there and some of the major events in their friendship were noteworthy.

Summary

This study set out to look at how Black women's best friendships are maintained and what role communication played in the maintenance process. The study found that the process of maintaining the friendship began with first impressions and specific qualities. The women looked for honesty (bluntness), understanding, trustworthiness/loyalty, positivity, and spending time together. As the friendship progressed, the amount of communication became more frequent. Age and proximity played a part in how big of a role communication played in best friendship maintenance. Communication also played a role in the topic of conversations and mode of conversation. The study found that the women talked about relationships, men, school, work, goals in life, religion, family, and life in general. They preferred to talk face-to-face, but they often had to settle with text messaging, social media, email, and phone calls.

The study sought to give the Black women who participated in the study a voice and an opportunity to talk about a relationship that is important to them. It allowed them the opportunity to think about and discuss their best friendships in an open and safe environment. The women were able to define what a friend and best friend was to them, in their own words, without someone else defining it for them.

Black women's best friendship creates a space for Black women to engage one another and to be themselves without feeling as if they are being judged. Maintaining Black women's best friendships offers the women a place to be Black and a woman and not feel out of place.

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APPENDIX A

Focus Group #1:

1. Let us start by introducing ourselves. Tell everyone your name and how long you have known your best friend(s).
2. How would you define friendship?
 - a. What is the difference between casual friends and best friends?
3. Can you name some Black women friends you are familiar with in the media?
 - a. Would you say they are casual friends or best friends? Why?
 - b. What are some of the things that make them casual or best friends?
4. What characteristics do you look for in a friend?
 - a. What characteristics do you look for in a best friend?
5. What are some differences between casual friends and best friends?
6. What are some of the topics you talk about with your casual friends?
 - a. What are some topics you talk about with your best friends?
 - b. How and why do these topics differ?
7. How important is it to have a best friend?
 - a. How important is it that your best friend is a Black woman?
 - b. Does the fact that your best friend is a Black woman make a difference within the friendship?
 - i. Are you comfortable, stressed, relaxed, alert, or skeptical?
8. How do you know when you have become best friends?

- a. Do you have to tell someone they are your best friend in order for them to know?
 - b. What if anything, changes in the relationship?
9. Given your experience, if you could give someone without a best friend advice on the importance of best friendship, what would you tell them?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to say about your best friends?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions:

1. How many friends do you have that are Black women?
 - a. How many of those friends would you consider a best friend?
2. Tell me about your best friend(s).
 - a. How did you all meet? What was your first impression of the person?
 - b. When did you become friends?
 - c. How long were you all friends before you became best friends?
3. When did you realize that this person was your best friend?
 - a. What happened to prompt this change in status?
4. How often do you spend time with your best friend?
 - a. When you all spend time together, what do you do?
5. A normal day out with your best friend would consist of.
 - a. How important is spending time together to your friendship?
6. What are the most important qualities you look for in a best friend?
 - a. Why are these qualities important?
 - b. Do all of your best friends possess these same qualities?
 - c. Is there a way to find out if someone possesses these qualities before they become your best friend?
7. Tell me about some important events that defined your friendship.
 - a. What made these events important?

- b. What effect did your friend have on the outcome of these events?
- 8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your best friendships?

APPENDIX C

Focus Group #2

I am going to go over some of the findings from the data I have collected.

1. Do you think my findings are an accurate depiction of Black women's friendships?
 - a. What do you think I am missing?
 - b. What part of the data is true?
2. How do you think I could improve the study?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say about your friendship?

APPENDIX D

Research Questions

RQ1: How do Black women distinguish friends from best friends?

RQ2: What do Black women find important in their best friendships?

RQ3: What role does communication play in maintaining Black women's best friendships?

APPENDIX E

Facebook Message

Hi everyone,

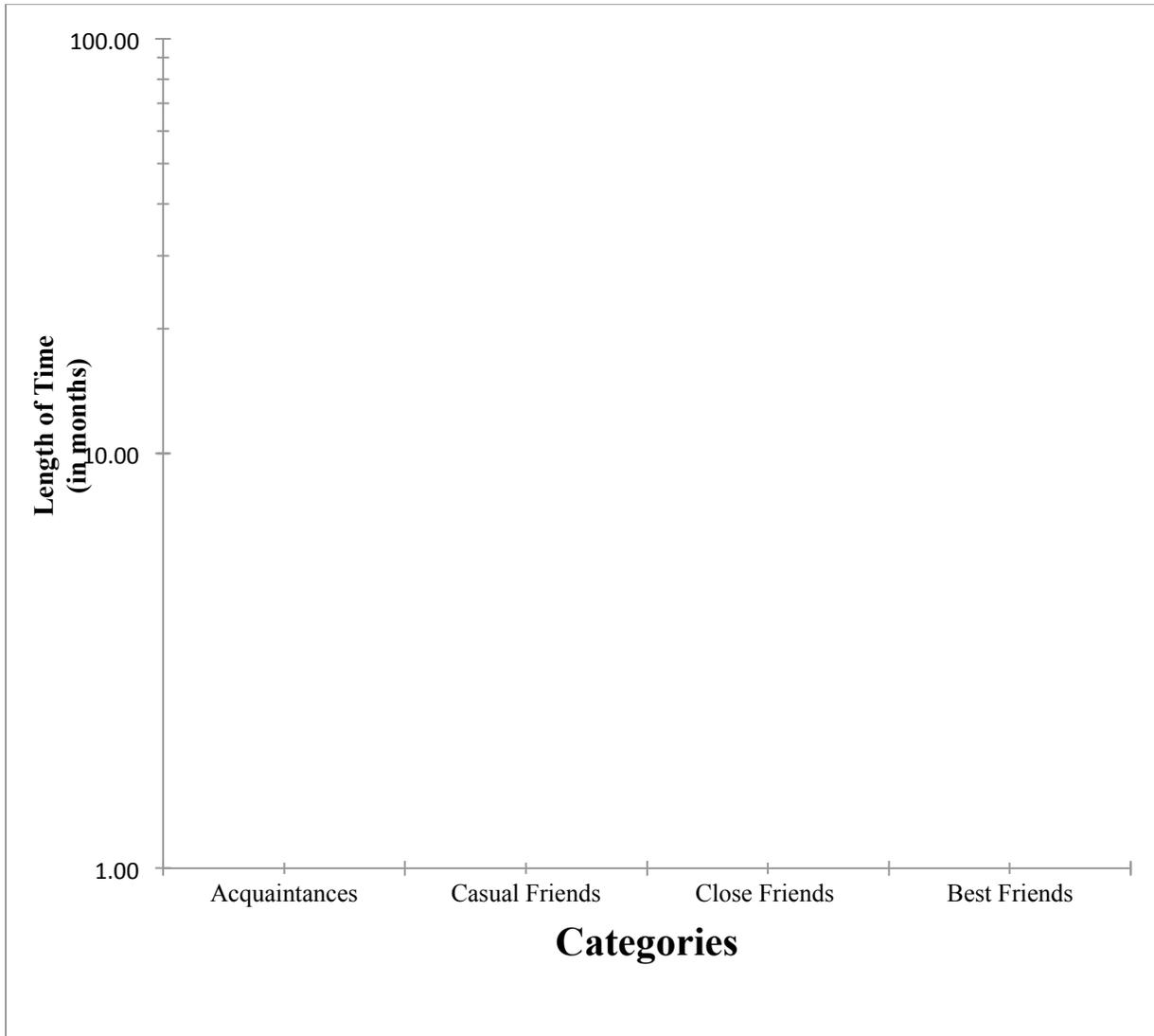
I am currently working on a project and I need some participants. My project looks at Black women's best friendships. I hope to understand Black women best friendships and how they communicate with each other about their friendship better. I hope to use this information to understand positive friendships among Black women better.

In order to participate, you must be between the ages of 19 and 29 and have a best friend who is a Black woman. You all have to have been best friends for at least 2 years. If your best friend is also a family member, then you cannot participate.

The study is voluntary, so there is no pressure if you do not want to participate. The study will consist of two focus groups and individual interviews. If you would like to participate, you will need to be available for at least one of the options. If you have any questions or would like to know more about the project, I am attaching a flyer. If you know of anyone who would like to participant, you can pass the flyer along.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

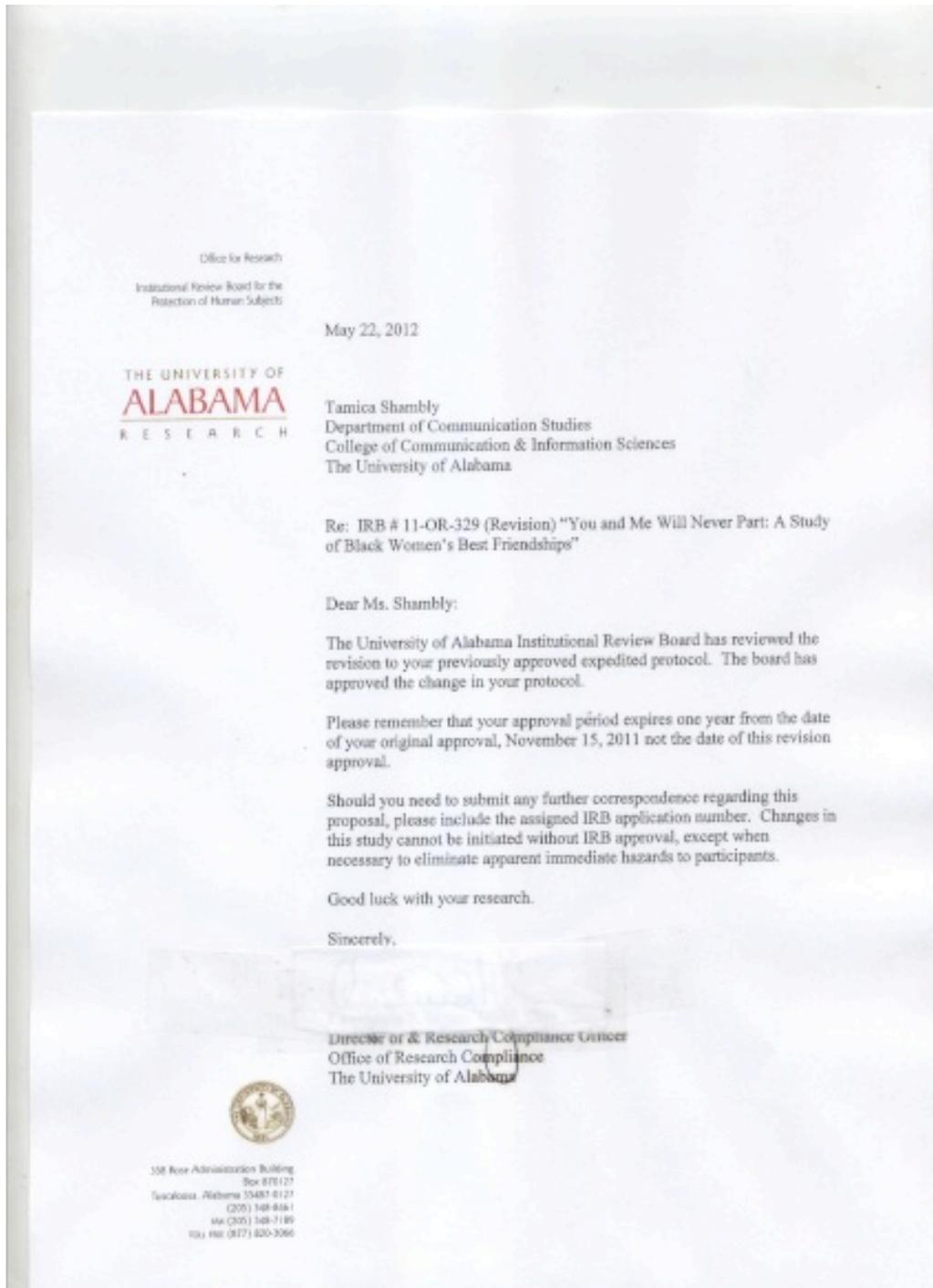
APPENDIX F



APPENDIX G

Name	Age	Marital Status	Children	Employment
Hope	20	Engaged	1	Part time and Student
Chloe	22	Single	None	Part time and Student
Kennedi	20	Single	None	Part time and Student
Avery	30	Divorced	1	Full Time
Rachel	28	Single	None	Full Time and Student
Miranda	24	Single	2	Full Time
Xena	25	Single	None	Full Time
Brittany	20	Single	None	Full Time and Student
Brielle	20	Single	None	Part time and Student
Ayanna	19	Single	None	Part Time and Student

APPENDIX H



INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF STUDY: You and Me Will Never Part: A Study of Black Women's Best Friendships

Primary Investigator: Tamica Shambly

INFORMATION: Through this research, I hope to better understand Black women friendships. I specifically hope to see how and why Black women become best friends and how they communicate transitions in the friendship. I also hope to use the information I gather in the study to better understand positive friendships among Black women.

You are being invited to take part in this study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

STUDY PROCEDURE: The project will investigate Black women's best friendships by looking at the transition from casual friends to best friends and how they are maintained. The interviewees will be Black women who have Black female friends and best friends. This study will look at the communication process and factors that influence Black women's best friendships. Each person will be asked to participate in a focus group, individual interview or both. During the focus group the participants will be asked at least 10 questions. The focus group will last at least an hour and a half. Each person will be interviewed at least once and asked at least 8 questions. Interviews will take at least one hour.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research project. Every effort will be made to minimize any risks.

BENEFITS: There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, you will be contributing to the researcher's knowledge on the subject. Further, we hope that the information obtained from this study may be useful to you in gaining insight for your current and future friendships.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you (including the use of your name) will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Each participant has the option to use pseudonyms. If the participant wishes to use a pseudonym they will be allowed to choose their own pseudonym. All audio and videotapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's office. All tapes will be transcribed either immediately or locked until transcription which could be as long as a year. After transcription all tapes will be destroyed. Keep in mind, however, that I will need to disclose identifying information with my professor, Dr. Robin Boylorn, solely for the purposes of confirming my compliance with research protocol and class requirements.

CONTACT: I am happy, at any time, to answer any questions you might have about this study. I

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: SC-22-12
EXPIRATION DATE: 11-19-12

can be reached by phone at (205)-454-3354 or email at trshambly@crimson.ua.edu. If you have any additional questions later, Dr. Robin Boylorn, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama, would be happy to answer any questions you might have. She can be reached at (205)-348-8078 or rboylorn@ua.edu.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD: If you have questions about your rights as a person taking part in a research study, make suggestions or file complaints and concerns, you may call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html. You may email us at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. You are free to not answer any question or questions if you choose.

COSTS TO SUBJECT: There are no costs to you for your participation in this study.

COMPENSATION: There is no monetary compensation to you for your participation in this study.

- I will participate in **only the focus group**
- I will participate in **only the individual interview**
- I will participate in **both the focus group and individual interview**

CONSENT: By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understood information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form and certify I am at least 19 years of age. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Research Investigator

Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 5-22-12
EXPIRATION DATE: 11-14-12

Audio/Video Taping Consent

As mentioned above, the individual qualitative interview will be audio/video recorded for research purposes to ensure accuracy in order to completely understand your friendship with Black women. These tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked room and only available to the researcher. The researcher will only keep these tapes for no more than a year and will destroy them after they have been transcribed.

I understand that part of my participation in this research study will be audiotaped/videotaped and I give my permission to the research team to record the interview.

Yes, my participation in this study about Black women's friendships can be audio/video taped.

No, I do not want my participation in this study about Black women's friendships to be audio/video taped.

Signing below constitutes your agreement to be videotaped. You will be provided with a copy of this form.

Printed Name

Date

Signature

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CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 5-22-12
EXPIRATION DATE: 7-14-13