Black bisexual women's experiences of growth following gendered racism and biphobia

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BLACK BISEXUAL WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF GROWTH
FOLLOWING GENDERED RACISM AND BIPHOBIA

by

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ABSTRACT

The psychological impacts of marginalization have been well documented in the social science literature. Black bisexual women are a group that has experienced marginalization and oppression related to their racial, sexual, and gender identities. What has not yet been examined is the extent to which Black bisexual women report experiencing growth following instances of discrimination. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study aimed to explore and understand the growth experiences of Black bisexual women who have experienced biphobia and gendered racism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-identified Black bisexual women, ranging in age from 21 to 63. Nine interviews were completed, including one pilot interview that was not used in data analysis. The resulting themes were (a) Experiences of Discrimination at the Intersections, and (b) Pride in the “B,” each with subthemes. Clinical practice implications and future research recommendations are discussed.
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Black Bisexual Women’s Experiences of Growth Following Gendered Racism and Biphobia

The psychological impacts of marginalization have been well documented in the social science literature. Meyer’s (2003) minority stress theory suggests that the stress of a negative social environment causes mental health problems for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. Prejudice events such as discrimination in the workplace or at school, expectations of rejection, decisions about disclosure of sexual identity, and internalized discrimination all contribute to the excess social stress that LGB people experience (Meyer, 2003). Research suggests that bisexual people, those who form and/or engage in sexual, romantic, and/or emotional attraction and relationships with people of the same gender or to those of different genders (APA, 2017; GLAAD, 2016), are a group that faces unique challenges.

Studies of bisexual people have focused on risks and deficits. Compared to their monosexual counterparts, bisexual people are at increased risk for negative health outcomes, such as self-injurious behavior (Balsam et al., 2005) and diagnoses of major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and substance abuse (Cochran & Mays, 2009). At times, risk-focused research can overshadow strengths-based research foci (Bowleg et al., 2003; Meyer, 2003, 2010). Researchers assert that the focus of LGB empiricism must shift from risk and deficit to resilience and strengths (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016) in order to capture the breadth of LGB peoples’ lived experience. Studies of growth are consistent with strengths-based approaches and can answer this call in the literature.

Stress-Related Growth

Stress-related growth is the potential for experiences of positive psychological change resulting from adverse events (Park et al., 1996). Previous research has also used the terms adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004), benefit finding (Affleck & Tennen, 1996), and
posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 1998). In the current study, the term “growth” is used, defined as the perceived benefits resulting from adverse events (Park et al., 1996) with development that surpasses previous functioning before a stressor. Growth may occur as a result of emotion-focused, cognitive, or behavioral changes following a stressful event or experience (Park, 1998). Growth can include changes in oneself, changes in interpersonal relationships, and changes in one’s worldview (Sumalla et al., 2009).

Both quantitative and qualitative studies of growth have been conducted with varying populations and foci. Some quantitative research has examined growth with the recently bereaved (Caserta et al. 2009), veterans (Moore et al., 2010), survivors of breast cancer (Cordova et al., 2001), and survivors of Hurricane Katrina (Chan & Rhodes, 2013). Some qualitative research has explored growth with immigrants (Kim & Kim, 2013; Kim et al., 2012), athletes (Salim et al., 2015), women with HIV/AIDS (Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2000), and child survivors of road traffic accidents (Salter & Stallard, 2004). Each of the diverse groups under study experienced a life stressor often related to a single, major traumatic event (LoSavio et al., 2011; Tedeschi et al., 2018). The growth construct has been applied to people of varying racial and sexual identities, including Black and African American people (Baker, 2017; Dickerson, 2011; Kissil et al., 2010) and LGB people (Cox et al., 2010; Vaughn & Wachler, 2010; Wang et al., 2016). Research focused specifically on bisexual people, rather than in aggregate with lesbian and gay people, has increased over time; however, there is limited research that represents bisexual people of color (Ghabrial & Ross, 2018). The current study addresses this gap, as it is focused specifically on Black bisexual women’s growth experiences.

In the current study, it is conceptualized that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color (LGB POC) – namely, Black bisexual women – experience stress related to their racial, sexual,
and gender identities (Cyrus, 2017), and that this stress may be ongoing. This focus on an ongoing stressor contributes to the growth literature by extending the growth construct beyond one-time, major stressors. It is important to explore growth for this population because they may experience discrimination based on their identities and have the potential to grow as a result of these experiences. This study expands the growth literature by focusing on experiences of growth for Black bisexual women as they relate to continual discrimination due to biphobia and gendered racism.

**Biphobia and Gendered Racism**

Biphobia and gendered racism are salient stressors for Black bisexual women (Bates, 2012; Bowleg et al., 2008). Biphobia is defined as negative and prejudiced attitudes about bisexuality and towards bisexual people (Mulick & Wright, 2002; Yost & Thomas, 2012), including beliefs that bisexual people are simply uncertain if they are lesbian or gay, are sex obsessed, reject monogamy, are not loyal to the lesbian or gay communities, and spread sexually transmitted infections (Israel & Mohr, 2004). Bisexual people experience biphobia from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals, as well as other bisexual people (Friedman et al., 2014; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Yost & Thomas, 2012). Bisexual people also experience microaggressions, or subtle forms of discrimination based on their sexuality, including invisibility (e.g., assumed to be gay or lesbian) and exoticization (e.g., sexual objectification or the assumption that they are more open to sexual activity than others; Nadal et al., 2016).

Gendered racism is the combined experience of racism and sexism (Essed, 1991) and can function as microaggressions that are nonverbal, verbal, behavioral, and environmental forms of oppression based on race and gender (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Gendered racial microaggressions for Black women include assumptions and stereotypes related to beauty and sexual
objectification; being silenced and marginalized in professional and academic settings; and being strong, independent, and assertive (Lewis et al., 2013; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). A significant limitation of extant research is that studies have tended to examine only two aspects of identity at a time, such as either Black women’s experiences of race and gender (Thomas et al., 2011), or bisexual women’s experiences of biphobia (DeCapua, 2017; Molina et al., 2015). However, Black bisexual women’s racial, gender, and sexual orientation identities predispose them to experience increased stressors related to racist, sexist, and biphobic social structures and cultural norms that warrant intersectional investigation (Cerezo et al., 2020).

Given that women simultaneously experience their gender and racial identities (Lewis et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2011), the examination of Black bisexual women’s experiences of growth necessitates an intersectional research approach that attends fully to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality refers to how systems of oppression are interconnected (Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Shin et al., 2017), and research in this domain requires that race, gender, and sexuality be examined together rather than as separate, additive parts (Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989). The present study directly addresses this gap in the literature by applying an intersectional framework in order to examine the interconnected identities of race, sexuality, and gender all together in one study, rather than only two aspects of identity.

The Present Study

The aim of this research was to explore and understand the growth experiences of Black bisexual women who have experienced gendered racism and biphobia. The primary research questions guiding this qualitative work were: (a) How do Black bisexual woman define and describe their experiences of gendered racism and biphobia? (b) How, if at all, do they grow as a
result of these experiences? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996, Smith 2018), a qualitative approach developed to examine personal lived experience, was the chosen methodology for this study. IPA is most concerned with experiential significance of an event, which can relate to an individual’s identity (Smith, 2018). Previous research has used IPA to study growth and related constructs (Adams et al., 2015; Benites, 2014; Hinds, 2011; Smith et al., 2011), and IPA has been identified as an appropriate method for research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) people (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Method

Participants

Nine self-identified Black bisexual women over the age of 18 (see Table 1 for a description of participants) were recruited for this study. All names used herein are pseudonyms. The first interview and transcript, with participant Celeste, served as a pilot; consequently, data from the pilot interview was not included in the results section below. All participants self-identified as bisexual, though some participants used the terms “bisexual” and “queer” interchangeably to describe themselves (see Table 2 for a sample of participant definitions and descriptions of bisexual and queer). The nine participants ranged in age from 21 to 63. In terms of education, one participant earned a GED, one completed the third year of undergraduate education and was on leave, one completed a bachelor’s degree, five completed a master’s degree (one of whom was working towards a doctorate), and one completed a doctoral degree. Five participants identified as single, eight participants endorsed a religious or spiritual affiliation, and eight participants reported being employed.

Procedure
This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the principal investigator’s institution. Purposeful sampling, or intentional participant selection due to ability to inform an area of study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Smith, 2017), was used to recruit participants through listservs and social networking websites. Using a flyer (see Appendix A), the principal investigator recruited participants by contacting organizations and online communities for bisexual people, LGBTQ POC, LGBTQ people, as well as academic and professional listservs. Potential participants who reached out via email received a link to a screening questionnaire. Inclusion criteria were (a) being 18 or older, (b) identifying as a Black bisexual woman, (c) experiencing discrimination based on their identity, and (d) experiencing growth as a result of that discrimination. People who met the inclusion criteria were scheduled for an interview via Zoom, a video- and audio-conferencing platform. Participants received a pre-interview email (see Appendix B) with the informed consent (see Appendix C) and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D).

The principal investigator conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E) with each participant. At the beginning of each interview, informed consent was reviewed, and participants verbally consented to audio recording. The interview was designed following recommendations for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), which emphasizes questions that are open-ended, exploratory, and focused on meaning. Each interview began with questions about how participants describe and feel about themselves and what “bisexual” means to them. The remainder of the interview focused on challenges participants faced as Black bisexual women, and changes and growth following the identified challenges. Finally, participants were asked to share anything else that felt important to them regarding the interview content and process.
At the close of the interview, participants indicated if they wanted (a) to review their transcript for accuracy and (b) to review the preliminary analytic themes. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes. Following the interview, participants received a list of resources (see Appendix F) via email with information about organizations for LGBTQ POC, as well as counseling resources for processing any distressing content about identity-based discrimination that may have come up during the interview process. A $25 e-gift card was provided to participants after completion of the interviews.

Researcher subjectivities. Bracketing, a statement of researcher background, subjectivity, and point of view helps make researcher biases transparent and evident throughout the qualitative research process (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yeh & Inman, 2007). The research team consisted of two Counseling Psychology doctoral students and one Mental Health Counseling master’s student. The three team members identified as a Black Trinidadian and Nigerian cisgender woman, a white cisgender woman whose ethnic heritage is mostly Czechoslovakian, and a white cisgender woman. Team members identified as bisexual; heteroflexible, attracted to both men and women; and heterosexual. Before beginning data collection and analysis, the research team discussed their multiple and intersectional identities, and how they might inform the team’s approach to the research process. Team members considered their personal and professional backgrounds, interest in and motivation for involvement in the research topic, previous experience with qualitative research, and similarities and differences with potential participants. These discussions continued throughout the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996, Smith 2018) is most concerned with experiential significance and making meaning “of a particular thing, for a
particular person, within a particular context” (Smith, 2018, p. 4). This analytical method views participants as self-reflexive and able to make sense of their engagement with the world. IPA has three primary theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2017). Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study and understanding of lived experience of one’s perspective, meaning making, and relationship to the world without theorizing by the researcher (Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation whereby the researcher makes meaning (latent) of the participants’ meaning making (manifest), also known as the double hermeneutic (Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Idiography is attention to detail and depth of analysis, accomplished by first examining single cases, and then identifying patterns across cases (Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

The research team was trained in IPA, guided by the IPA manual (Smith et al., 2009). Training consisted of ten 90-minute weekly meetings; instructional videos; and, outside of the meetings, assignments included reading chapters from the IPA manual, IPA articles, and articles on other topics relevant to the research. Broadly, content of the ten meetings, instructional videos, and articles included an introduction to the study, intersectionality, IPA and its theoretical underpinnings, data collection and semi-structured interviews, online interviewing, transcribing, data analysis and coding, analytical trustworthiness, and member checks. In addition to training, team members developed competence in IPA by using the first interview and resulting transcript as a pilot to practice the data analysis process. Weekly 90-minute meetings continued throughout the analysis and interpretation of the remaining transcripts. Team members were also instructed to keep a memo, or written record, of their thoughts, ideas, and reactions to the transcripts and significant statements during the analysis process, thereby
facilitating ongoing consideration and discussion of biases and assumptions in the research process that were identified at the initial bracketing discussion.

There are common multi-step and iterative processes involved in conducting IPA; however, they can be flexibly applied and there is no single way in which to use this methodology (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, it is important to detail how IPA was used in this study. Step 1 was data immersion, where the principal investigator listened to audio recorded interviews multiple times and transcribed the contents of each interview using Microsoft Word. The interviews were transcribed verbatim with edits to remove participant-identifying information. Research team members also listened to the interview audio and read the transcripts. For each research team meeting that introduced a new transcript, each member of the research team provided their reactions to listening to the audio, and the principal investigator shared experiences of conducting the interview. Step 2 was initial noting, which involved writing comprehensive, detailed comments about the data. Research team members took turns sharing and discussing the initial noting of the data line-by-line, including notes that they had in common and those that differed from one another. At this step, all information was retained.

Step 3 was to develop emergent themes in the data. Team members independently developed the emergent themes and gems. Gems are statements or phrases from a transcript that facilitate analysis, interpretation, and understanding of a participant’s experience and worldview, a transcript, or all of the data (Smith, 2011). Themes reflected both the participants’ words and interpretations by the research team, consistent with the double hermeneutic. Identified themes attempted to capture and reflect the range of understandings of the phenomena under study. Many themes emerged within individual transcripts and some of the same themes appeared in multiple transcripts. However, frequency was not the only metric used to identify themes.
Themes were also developed by identifying important statements in each transcript, as evidenced by depth of experience or evocative emotions expressed. Team members compared emergent themes.

Step 4 involved searching for connections across themes. At this step, emergent themes that were inconsistent with the guiding research questions were discarded. Step 5 was to repeat this process of data immersion, initial noting, developing emergent themes, and searching for connections for all transcripts included in analysis. Each case was analyzed on its own without consideration of the previous transcript, thereby maintaining the idiographic process. The sixth and final step of the hermeneutic process of analysis was for the research team to look for patterns across cases, then make interpretations informed by the findings, resulting in the final themes and subthemes.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the evaluation of integrity and credibility of the qualitative research process (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Following qualitative research best practices (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Yeh & Inman, 2007), several steps were used to enhance trustworthiness. The present study addressed credibility through research team member bracketing, in-depth interviews, thick description of data, use of a research team for analysis, and member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Morrow, 2007; Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Confirmability, the assertion that research findings are grounded in the data and analysis rather than researcher bias (Morrow, 2005), contributed to credibility. In-depth semi-structured interviews produced rich data because participants shared their stories, thoughts, and feelings (Larkin et al., 2006). As a result, the data herein contains thick description, which is a detailed
account of participants’ experience and meaning, including quotations from interviews (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005). Data analysis was completed by the research team.

Member checking was utilized by requesting optional feedback from participants on their transcripts and the preliminary analytic themes. Eight participants opted to review their transcript, and nine reviewed the preliminary analytic themes. After sending emails with the preliminary analytic themes and/or password-protected transcript, three participants replied. One participant expressed thanks and sought help opening the password-protected transcript; another stated that the transcript “grounded” her and that she was “struck by” the themes, and she identified a typo related to her field of study; and the third expressed thanks and well-wishes for the remainder of the research process.

Finally, coherence and transparency enhance trustworthiness. Coherence is the logical fit between research and theory, the final write-up, and identified themes (Levit et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Given the aforementioned support for use of IPA as a method to study growth and related constructs (Adams et al., 2014; Benites, 2014; Hinds, 2011) with LGBTQ people (Chan & Farmer, 2017) toward understanding lived experience, the current study’s use of IPA is highly appropriate for the present research. Transparency, or dependability, is how clearly stages of the research are described in the final write-up (Levit et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Stages of the research process were documented through memos and the stages are accurately described herein.

Results

Two themes were identified from the data, (a) Descriptions of Discrimination at the Intersections, and (b) Pride in the “B”; subthemes were organized under each theme.

Descriptions of Discrimination at the Intersections
Participants’ descriptions of their experiences of biphobia and gendered racism included (a) Internalized Biphobia, (b) Biphobia from Others, (c) Heterosexual Presentation, (d) Erasure, (e) Navigating Religion, (f) Stereotypes of Black Womanhood, and (g) Systemic Racism.

**Internalized Biphobia.** Participants recalled experiences of internalized biphobia in their youth and throughout adulthood. They described internalized biphobia as comparisons between themselves and monosexual peers, reluctance to call themselves bisexual, pressure to qualify bisexuality by having (or not having) an arbitrary number of partners of different genders, creation of and adherence to rules for themselves about when it was acceptable to be intimate with same gender people, and desire to prove to others that they were not bisexual. For example, Grace described that she thought bisexuality had specific defined parameters that she did not meet:

I used to really, really get down on myself because the majority of my relationships have been with men…but what I’ve been realizing over the years is that, you know, I’m definitely attracted to more than one gender…that certainly doesn’t make me heterosexual, you know, the fact that I’ve been mostly in relationships with men…I just felt that being bisexual had to look a certain way…If I was mostly in relationships with men, then, you know, I figured that I was probably just mostly straight…Or, that’s the idea that I get from society.

**Biphobia from Others.** All participants described a range of experiences of biphobia from other people, including denial of their sexuality; exclusionary behavior from others; “jokes” about bisexual people; expectations of what bisexual people should look like; and derogatory comments by family members, friends, coworkers, mental health providers, and strangers in public places. Experiences of biphobia from others ranged from microaggressive comments to
perceived disgust, feeling unsafe or ignored, and threats of violence. For example, Shreya described biphobic statements made by a friend and the impact of biphobia from friends within the queer community:

I was talking about my current partner, and [my queer friend] said, ‘Oh god, bisexual women, like I just don’t understand. It just feels like I could never date a bisexual woman. I'm sorry, you’re my friend and everything like that…I just don’t trust them.’…That was not the first time I heard that. Like, I heard that from other people…like that kind of language…it feels really upsetting to hear from, not just my friends, but other people in the queer community.

Several participants detailed being subjected to sexual objectification and stereotypes that bisexual people are hypersexual, that bisexuality is a phase and/or due to confusion about identity, that bisexual people are disloyal and/or promiscuous, and that bisexual people are attention-seeking. Dominique highlighted that her identity as a Black bisexual woman is inextricably linked to the hypersexual stereotype, highlighting the intersections of biphobia and gendered racism:

On the first date, having the initial conversation and talking with this person, a man, and when the conversation around my bisexuality was framed, it was seen as like a deviant, but then deviant in a way that is, like, acceptable because of my Blackness…This person kind of started going on this road where they were sounding like bisexuality is this excess, right, it’s excess of sexual appetite, but then it makes sense because I’m Black. There were these anti-Black notions around, you know, his kind of equating sexual excess with Blackness…[he] was, like, ‘Well, but it makes sense that you, as a Black person, who might be sexually, you know, promiscuous or whatever, like it makes sense
that you’d be bisexual.’ And, you know, there is that stereotype, too, of bisexual people being promiscuous and, you know, not being able to choose.

**Heterosexual Presentation.** Participants’ heterosexual presentation included being selective about when or with whom to disclose their bisexuality. The reasons for heterosexual presentation ranged from comfort for themselves, negotiation of readiness to disclose sexuality, protection for physical or social safety, and stigma unique to bisexual people in the LGBTQ community. Amara described the benefit of heterosexual presentation as a way to enhance intrapersonal safety and comfort, such that appearing heterosexual allowed her to explore and disclose her sexuality when she was ready to do so, on her own terms:

[In my academic department and social spaces], the politic is not a politic of outing people…it’s one that’s oftentimes based on like, if you are here [in an LGBQ setting or event], it's because you belong here, and however you qualify that for yourself is how you qualify that…I could show up to these types of commemorative events because I've already been here, right, like people might just see me as an ally, and maybe, maybe it’s fine. I get to keep a little bit of my straight privilege until I’m ready to let it go.

Other participants focused on the stigma and assumed privilege of a heterosexual presentation. Dominique explained the sense of safety of being in a heterosexual presenting relationship, as well as the stigma and exclusion she has experienced:

If I’m dating a man and people assume that I’m straight or that I have a privilege…it’s different if I’m walking down the street with a woman versus if I’m walking down the street with a man. The level of safety I feel is different…Sometimes I have to fight to be in LGBTQ spaces, right, when it’s seen as its only for gay people, people who identify, you know, as gay or a lesbian.
Erasure. Some participants described how, as Black bisexual women, they did not see their experiences reflected in society because they had little or no representation in social spaces or in popular media. Dominique highlighted how depictions of monosexual gay and lesbian people are common in media, likening the lack of Black bisexual women in media representation to annihilation and death:

It’s really rare to find a Black woman who’s also bisexual, you don’t see it often. Or a Black woman who is bisexual and is the protagonist and is not a side character and is not being used in service of someone else’s story…This idea of not seeing yourself, it’s a form of death. It’s a form of annihilation.

Still other participants described concerns about being out in certain contexts and with certain people, leading to erasure whether intentionally or not. Notably, Kiara was adamant about the fact that her identities as Black, bisexual, and woman were all separate and that she maintained strict boundaries regarding her sexuality by saying, “I don't have the struggle as much in my professional life, with the issue. But in my personal life it is definitely a struggle. My professional life, all of it – the Black, the woman, and the queer – is very much protected.” Kiara highlighted how her openness about her identity varies based on the context and people – at work with coworkers versus family and friends – and the “struggle” of experiencing her identity as an “issue.”

Navigating Religion. Participants described having varied relationships with spirituality and religion. As detailed in the demographic information, some participants had no religious or spiritual affiliation. However, some participants were actively figuring out where religion fits into their lives. Ijeoma described a mix of positive and challenging interactions with religion and churches, highlighting that she attended a Christian university where there was openness to
diverse sexual orientations and that she had pastors who encouraged her to find a church community with which she is comfortable. Ijeoma wondered what kind of church community might be a good fit for her in the future:

I still go to my family church, but I’m also very mindful of the things that I tell them. I think as I progress in my relationship…if I do end up marrying a woman and I do end up having a family, my church seems…less and less like an option because I’m not going to walk my family into a space that tells them their family is wrong.

**Stereotypes of Black Womanhood.** Participants identified stereotypes of Black womanhood that dictate limiting and restrictive expectations of Black women, such as putting others’ needs before their own and being hypervigilant about how they are perceived in different spaces. Cora described how she has had to navigate the “scary, intimidating” Black woman stereotype and be aware of how people may perceive her:

I know that people experience me through the lens of my identities, so I also am very aware of how those things inform what me caring and me being passionate, how people experience it. It’s not hard for my passion to be perceived as anger...so, I know that there are certain things about my identity that are the same to me, but are perceived differently based on who I’m walking down the street with, what spaces I’m in, how educated people experience me as being, how many other Black people there are in the space that I’m in, and how many of them have power in that space because all those things kind of impact how people are going to experience me saying I’m ‘passionate.’ I care about people, and I’m really persistent and aggressive about getting things that I want done. In certain spaces that’s scary and intimidating. In other spaces that’s celebrated and supported.
**Systemic Racism.** Participants recounted experiences of systemic racism in school settings, in the workplace, and even when seeking therapy. Systemic racism was evident in participants being denied access – whether explicitly or implicitly – to a class or resource, career advancement opportunity, or Black therapists or competent and multiculturally oriented case managers or mental health providers. Kiara explained her unhelpful experiences in the therapy process:

I find it very difficult to…find counselors, therapists, psychologists, who I can relate to. It’s very difficult to find somebody that looks like you, who you can speak with that the help is actually gonna be effective. You know, Karen and Brad, and I've seen quite a few of them, you know, I haven't just cut off the counseling and the therapy just altogether…it wasn't effective, they just do not relate.

Shreya explained her experiences of being invalidated in the help-seeking process and desire to not have to explain her intersectional identities and argue her humanity:

Finding therapists who understand what it means to be a Black bisexual woman, like having the therapist essentially invalidate my experience was a really frustrating moment, and also made me realize that it’s also important to find therapists who can get me, like I don’t have to do the work to explain what my identity is.

**Pride in the “B”**

Participants described experiences of growth, some of which were particularly related to adverse events linked to their bisexual identity. Growth experiences for the participants included changes in themselves, in interpersonal relationships, and in how they engage with the world around them, all of which contributed to their development that surpassed their functioning before the identified stressors. Subthemes of Pride in the “B” included (a) Living as
Living as Authentic Self. Several participants discussed how, at some points in their lives, they felt that they had to conceal aspects of their bisexual identity from many, or all, people around them. Some participants even highlighted the struggle with owning or accepting their own selves as bisexual. Participants described how they came to accept and claim their bisexuality over time, as a type of developmental process. Living as authentic self included growing by moving from reluctance to identify as bisexual and internalization of some biphobic stereotypes, to outright rejecting biphobia (internalized and from others) and proudly declaring bisexual identity as a core part of themselves. Participants detailed how living as authentic self necessitated bringing one’s whole self into a space, as well as staking claim in LGBTQ spaces.

Over the course of their lives and as a result of some of the challenges they faced, many participants described this authenticity as having an integrated sense of self, refusal to hide themselves, and less fear about their identities. Ijeoma asserted, “Those are identities that I feel like I can’t hide, not that I want to hide it…I can’t hide that I am a Black woman, I can’t hide, I refuse to hide that I am bisexual…I’m not afraid anymore of my identity.” Dominique explained how identifying herself as bisexual is a way to reclaim identity and take up space, literally and figuratively:

Especially, with the history of bisexuals within the LGBTQ movement, you know, the ways that they’re oftentimes sidelined…so not being gay enough, but not also being straight enough, and this weird space where it’s like bisexual is part of the acronym, right, it’s LGBTQ, and so for me it’s been a way to kind of reclaim that and have pride in the B and kind of proclaim that…this is a space that I do deserve to be in.
Shreya similarly asserted the importance of her bisexual identity despite biphobia:

I realize it’s an identity I’m proud of. Even though I’ve gotten pushback from my family, like gotten some outwardly homophobic stuff, and I had grown to realize this is something that is really important to me. I don't wanna hide it from anyone – friends, partners, anyone. This is how I navigate through the world.

Participants detailed how they came to accept and celebrate themselves and set personal boundaries, all in service to living as their authentic selves. Lilian explained how she showed up as her authentic self and was done pretending to be anyone else: “Regardless of wherever I come to, I’m going to be myself…Even if I tried to be someone else, parts and bits of me would still, like, bleed into whatever persona I was trying to pretend to be. But I don't do that anymore, that sh-t’s exhausting.” For Cora, previous experience in an unsupportive and harmful academic environment helped her choose to change how she lived and how she has continued to commit to living more authentically:

I was very intentional about picking a place where I felt like I could be my whole self, and bring my whole self, and I promised myself that I would never not bring my whole self to a place that I had to live and work again...and I’ve kept that promise. So, when I got to [the doctoral program], I was just like, if you wanna date, date. If you wanna be out, you’re gonna have to be out, and you’re gonna have to live that and walk that, do that. And that’s what I did…It was like a light switch went off.

**Self-Confidence.** Participants stated that developing self-confidence was a key part of their growth experiences as Black bisexual women. Self-confidence was characterized by participants’ refusal to be silenced, to shrink themselves to make other people comfortable, to try to “fit” into whatever stereotype was expected of Black bisexual women. Notably, living as
authentic self and self-confidence may be related in that self-confidence may be viewed as an outgrowth of living as authentic self.

Some participants described self-confidence as how they asserted themselves, how they engaged in interpersonal and romantic relationships, and how self-confidence extended into other areas of their lives. For Ijeoma, self-confidence was as a certainty about bisexuality that allowed her to stand up for herself and refuse to engage in debates about her identity:

I’ve had moments where I’ve had to educate, or try to educate, someone who is a bigot, who’s never gonna understand or never gonna accept. And it’s like, I don’t need acceptance from you. So, if you’re open to learning more, if you’re open to being educated, then I’m welcome, I’m happy to do that. But what I’m not going to do is I’m not going to debate you…I’m not going to have a debate about something that I know is me and is me to my core. So that’s really been helpful. It’s just really standing up for my beliefs, standing up for myself.

For Lilian, self-confidence was about using her voice and taking up space; she avowed, “I’m not going to be silenced. I’m not going to shrink myself for other people’s comfort, especially if shrinking myself is going to be detrimental to how I interact or how I exist.”

**Self-Preservation.** Some participants noted how they engaged in self-preservation by being selective about who they share their bisexuality with and by managing their expectations of the world around them. When describing her low expectations of media representation for Black bisexual women, Dominique explained, “I’ve become a little jaded. I don’t expect better, and so when I do see something, I’m shocked. I’m pleasantly surprised. I think that has been a way I’m learning to cope, to not expect anything so that I’m not disappointed.”
In detailing her selective disclosure of bisexuality, Amara stated, “I'm not out to my family and I'm not necessarily out to all of my friends, but I am out to like select people that I feel close to.” Shreya shared a similar sentiment, explaining that she did not feel the need to disclose her bisexuality to people who may not be accepting of her or may risk her professional livelihood. For other participants, self-preservation included practicing self-care and speaking up for themselves. Lilian detailed how speaking up for herself and prioritizing herself over others has helped her recognize the importance of her own needs and well-being:

I am vocal. I used to be very passive aggressive, and it took like one bad relationship for me to be like, ‘You know what, that's not working, we can’t do that anymore, no.’ And especially being so intimate with the person and watching them just like squander your trust, it's like ‘…I have to hold my own regardless, like no matter what’s going on, no matter who I am in communion with, there still has to be prioritization for myself first and foremost.’ Like acknowledging that, seeing that, you know, my feelings and my presence hold weight, mean something.

**Therapy.** Some participants noted how therapy has been a part of their growth journey that enabled them to explore and process life events in an open, nonjudgmental manner. Kiara declared her belief in therapy by saying, “My Black queer sisters, we believe in therapy, we believe in counseling. We believe in going to speak to someone when we need to.” When reflecting on what has helped her process and grow from challenges, Amara acknowledged the importance of therapy as a place where she can gain insight on herself, her bisexuality, and interpersonal relationships:

Therapy is the first thing that comes to mind. I think having a therapist and being able to have someone who I can kind of unfiltered dialogue with and say, ‘This is what I'm
struggling with,’ or ‘I know this sounds f-cked up, but like help me practice this so that it can make sense to other people,’ or at least I can feel like I know why it makes sense.

**Recognizing Growth as Non-Linear.** Several participants explained that their experiences of growth have been non-linear, acknowledging that there are ups and downs in their relationships with themselves, their bisexuality, and other aspects of their understanding of their identities. Participants Amara and Lilian observed that when they did experience ups and downs, they are able to be honest with themselves and reconnect with what was important to them. Amara reflected that she had “struggle days,” explaining that those are “days where it’s just difficult, right, to like sit with yourself and be with yourself, but I think on the most part I’ve had really high self-confidence and been able to be honest and humble about them.” Dominique remarked that the “downs” along her growth journey were not as severe as they used to be, noting that the growth she has experienced is cumulative and cannot be diminished:

It hasn’t been linear, you know. There are moments where…the growth, you know, there’s always moments of, what’s the opposite of growth? Um not growth…I’m never going back down to the place before that realization of ‘I deserve better.’ So, there’s disappointment and microaggressions along the way, even now. But it’s never, I’m never going back to the worst of the time, which is prior to allowing myself to feel that I deserve better. There’s ups and downs, but the downs these days are not as devastating.

**Connecting with Community.** Participants described the importance of surrounding themselves with a community of family (both family of origin and chosen family), friends, and partners who are supportive of them and their experiences as Black bisexual women. Participants connected community to growth by describing their selectivity in choosing the people with whom to surround themselves, their intentionality about building connections with people who
are affirming, and, at times, their creation of community that did not previously exist. Lilian noted how community helped her explore her own identity by saying that it took her “until high school to see other Black people who exist like me, particularly Black femmes make space for me to explore my Blackness…to claim my Blackness and whatever else I was into.”

For some participants, community was cultivated both in person and online, even before the global pandemic. Dominique described the variety of supports that were available online and the comforts they brought her, noting: “There’s a wonderful network of bisexual affinity groups and spaces, you know, there’s a newsletter, there’s books, online community, and so you join those spaces. They’ve all been great comforts.” For some participants, finding and building community involved looking beyond established LGBTQ organizations and connecting with peers or teammates. For other participants, cultivating community meant being selective about interpersonal relationships and opting for those that celebrate their identities. Cora described how the community around her helped her share more of herself:

I’m proud to be a Black woman, a queer woman, a bisexual woman, and having people who care about me and can celebrate my identities, not just tolerate them, but celebrate them…I feel like I have a really solid foundation that I didn’t have at [my previous academic institution] that has really helped me feel like I can conquer anything and I’ll have a base to come back to, full of family and friends and my partner who love me. That’s not gonna go away, and that has made me feel much more comfortable sharing parts of myself that I never would have before.

**Activism and Advocacy.** Some participants stated that part of their growth is ongoing commitment to activism and advocacy for people in the LGBTQ community. Participants explained that they engage in activism and advocacy through community outreach, offering and
participating in online programming for LGBTQ people, modeling for others what it can look like to live openly as a Black bisexual woman, mentoring students, and making spaces accessible and welcoming for queer peers. Ijeoma explained how her own openness about her sexuality helps build connections with her students, many of whom are first-year undergraduates who are newly able to explore their sexual identities. She stated that her own openness with the students she serves allows her to be an out and proud role model, which she lacked growing up. Cora also made connections between her personal and professional identities that influenced her drive and commitment to activism and advocacy:

The work I’ve chosen to do means that me being queer is going to have to be a part of my professional identity, as well, to make sure that I’m making the spaces I’m in inclusive for people who look like me….as a social justice advocate, making sure I’m making space for queer people, that I make sure that my trauma caseload looks brown and queer and gay as can be, and not just full of, you know, white women. And making sure that I’m on top of having a seat at the table for conversations about how resources are allocated, applying for positions that allow me to do outreach and coordination and programming, in a way that elevates the experiences of Black women, bi women, and trans women who are not necessarily included, even in LGBTQ programming.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the growth experiences of Black bisexual women who have experienced gendered racism and biphobia. Nine interviews were completed, including one pilot interview that was not used in data analysis. Data was obtained from the remaining eight semi-structured interviews and analyzed using IPA, resulting in two themes, (a) Descriptions of Discrimination at the Intersections, and (b) Pride in the “B,” each
with subthemes. One of the aims of this research was to apply an intersectional framework. For some participants, intersectionality was most evident in their experiences of discrimination.

**Biphobia, Gendered Racism, and Minority Stress**

Participants detailed a variety of discriminatory events and experiences based on their race, sexuality, and gender identities. Most participants in this study endorsed being subjected to biphobic stereotypes and bi-erasure, which have been noted in previous literature. Some stereotypes of bisexuality identified in previous research include that bisexual people reject monogamy, are hypersexual, and are uncertain of their sexual orientation (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Robinson, 2009; Serpe et al., 2020). Additionally, past literature suggests that monosexual individuals have negative or neutral attitudes towards bisexual people (Dodge et al., 2016; Herek, 2002). All participants endorsed having experienced at least one aspect of these bisexual stereotypes in their lifetime. Different from past research findings, participants in the current study did not describe any stereotypes related to assumption of disease status (Israel & Mohr, 2004), suggesting that not all bisexual people are subjected to this prejudicial assumption.

Previous research supports the results of the subtheme of Stereotypes of Black Womanhood. Cora described her awareness that people may perceive her as scary and intimidating because of her race and gender, as well as how she has to be vigilant about how her passion comes across to other people. This experience strongly alludes to the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman who is perceived as loud, hostile, and aggressive (Lewis et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2004). Additionally, Kiara voiced her experience of and frustration with the expectation that Black women care for everything and everyone around them, at the potential detriment of Black women’s own well-being. This experience is reflective of the stereotypes of
the Strong Black Woman (Nelson et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2004) and Mammy, the selfless and devoted caretaker (Collins, 2000; Thomas et al., 2004). People who internalize or strongly associate with the Strong Black Woman stereotype may experience increased psychological distress and struggle with help-seeking for their own needs (Collins, 2000; Donovan & West, 2015; Thomas et al., 2004; Watson-Singleton, 2017; West et al., 2016). Consequently, it is notable that Kiara asserted that bisexuality and queer identity have helped “free” her from the limitations of stereotypes of Black women, particularly around help-seeking, noting that “my Black queer sisters, we believe in therapy, we believe in counseling.”

For some participants, the stereotypes of their intersecting identities as Black bisexual women most clearly converged with regard to stereotypes of sexual availability and sexual promiscuity. The stereotype of the Jezebel, which portrays Black women as hypersexual (Collins, 2000; Thomas et al., 2004), and the stereotype that bisexual people are promiscuous (Israel & Mohr, 2004, Serpe et al., 2020) meet, thereby exacerbating stereotypical expectations imposed upon Black bisexual women as being sexually insatiable. As Grace described of people’s reactions on dating apps to matching with a bisexual person, “It was like they hit the jackpot.” She explained that people expected that bisexual women would desire threesomes and people endorsed the stereotypical belief that “Black women are just more sexual.”

Similarly, Dominique was subjected to “anti-Black notions around…equating sexual excess with Blackness” and the stereotype that bisexual people are “promiscuous and…not being able to choose.” Previous literature outlined the challenges of identity development for bisexual youth of color (Chun & Singh, 2010) and the sexual objectification of lesbian and bisexual young women of color (Chmielewski, 2017). However, as the current research is solely focused
on Black bisexual women, this current study finding increases understanding of the gendered, racialized, and sexualized stereotypes that uniquely impact Black bisexual women.

Meyer’s minority stress theory (2003), focused on LGB people, theorized that the stress of a negative social environment causes mental health problems among LGB individuals. Accordingly, Black bisexual women may experience increased stress due to their intersecting racial, gender, and sexual identities, which has been termed “triple jeopardy” (Bowleg et al., 2003). Experiences of heterosexism are linked with increased psychological distress and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Szymanksi & Balsam, 2011). Experiences of racism similarly contribute to increased psychological distress (Pieterse et al., 2012). Additionally, Black women’s experiences of gendered racism may increase their report of depressive symptoms (Carr et al., 2014). This multiple minority stress (Balsam et al., 2011) can negatively impact health and well-being (Calabrese et al., 2014; Mereish & Bradford, 2014). The results of the current research support the understanding of multiple minority stress through its qualitative application to Black bisexual women’s unique lived experiences. While it is essential to identify and examine negative impacts, the aim if the current study is to go beyond risk and deficit, thereby creating space for growth in the literature.

**Experiences of Growth**

Participants shared a variety of growth experiences related to their identities as Black bisexual women. In order to ascertain potential growth experiences, it is necessary to identify the range of stressors for participants, as was done in the current study. Over the course of the qualitative interviews, participants reflected on their adverse, discriminatory experiences and identified opportunities for growth through those experiences. The results of the qualitative inquiry underscored the intersectional systems of privilege and oppression that have the potential
to contribute to both adverse and growth experiences. Importantly, the focus on growth related to potentially ongoing discrimination for these participants is unique compared to most existing growth literature, which is often about one major event.

Growth includes the perceived positive psychological change resulting from adverse events that surpasses previous functioning before a stressor (Park et al., 1996; Sumalla et al., 2009; Tedeschi et al., 2018) and may occur as a result of emotional, cognitive, or behavioral changes following a stressful event or experience (Park, 1998). Changes related to growth are different than those associated with personal development over the lifespan because growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018), as operationalized in the current research, is related to the stress of discrimination and oppression associated with intersectional identities as a Black bisexual woman.

Several participants discussed how their experiences of growth developed. Notably, Amara highlighted the “transformative point of accepting [her] bisexuality” that included self-acceptance, allowing herself to be less afraid of her sexuality, and suspending arbitrary rules she created about how to engage with her sexuality. Similarly, Dominique asserted, “I’m never going back down to the place before that realization of ‘I deserve better’...There’s ups and downs, but the downs these days are not as devastating.” These descriptive gems are exemplary of growth experiences, highlighting how participants surpassed their previous self-understanding and self-acceptance following discrimination, whether internalized or from others, based on their intersectional identities of race, gender, and sexuality. These participants’ assertions are consistent with the understanding of growth as transformative (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Several themes and subthemes are supported by results of extant literature on growth (Brownfield et al., 2018; Park et al., 1996, Sumalla et al., 2009; Tedeschi et al., 2018). Most
participants endorsed both intrapersonal and interpersonal growth. Previous research indicated that growth can include changes in oneself, changes in relationships with other people, changes in one’s worldview (Sumalla et al., 2009), greater appreciation of life, new opportunities, and spiritual change (Tedeschi et al., 2018). For participants in the current research, personal growth and changes in oneself that came out of gendered racism and biphobia were related to living as authentic self by claiming and asserting their bisexual identity, realizing the importance of their personal experiences, and changes in self-confidence. Interestingly, it seemed that when considering growth, participants focused mostly on their bisexual identity. For example, Dominique viewed identifying herself as bisexual as a way to “reclaim” that identity, assert her belonging in the LGBTQ community, and reject pressure to conform to a stereotype of Black bisexual women. Similarly, Ijeoma stated her refusal to hide that she is bisexual as she was no longer afraid of her identity, and Shreya avowed that her bisexuality is “really important” to her and something she does not want to hide from anyone.

Regarding changes in relationships with other people, in the subtheme of Connecting with Community, participants shared that they endured biphobic behavior from people around them, and, as a result of working through these discriminatory experiences, they were now more intentional about building strong and supportive interpersonal relationships. For example, Lilian related that a friendship may have ended due to her challenging the person’s policing of her sexuality. Comparably, Cora said that she now surrounds herself with “people who care about [her] and can celebrate [her] identities, not just tolerate them.”

Within the theme of Pride in the “B,” aspects of the subthemes of Connecting with Community, Self-Confidence, Therapy, and Activism and Advocacy were consistent with previous literature. In a qualitative study of growth related to the coming out process for white
and Latina bisexual individuals, some subthemes included living authentically, advocacy on behalf of self, advocacy in a community setting, mental health resources, queer community, and higher education (Brownfield et al., 2018). Relatedly, the findings that Black bisexual women in this study demonstrated growth by developing a strong sense of pride, confidence in their identity, and forming supportive community connections with others contributes to knowledge of how Black bisexual women navigate and overcome raced, gendered, and sexualized stressors.

Black bisexual women’s voices and experiences are at the forefront of this research. As a result, this work offers a unique and substantial contribution to the growth literature in psychology. Through the qualitative interview process and subsequent data analysis, results indicated that Black bisexual women can and do experience growth following discrimination based on their intersectional identities. The results indicated growth following consistent and cumulative discriminatory experiences of gendered racism and biphobia. This finding is different from much of the extant posttraumatic and stress-related growth literature, which is often framed around a single, major traumatic event (LoSavio et al., 2011; Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Previous research suggests that continuous discrimination-related trauma has an indirect negative impact on posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018). However, other research findings indicate that people do experience growth from daily negative events (LoSavio et al., 2011), similar to those detailed by the current participants. Participants in the current study described stressors associated with their identities as Black bisexual women, highlighting that the intersecting aspects of oppression related to race, gender, and sexuality can facilitate growth. Focusing on the growth experiences of Black bisexual women revealed new understanding to advance the growth literature. Specifically, the present findings indicated that the discrimination
and associated stress encountered by Black bisexual women can be worked through and can be a catalyst for growth in various life domains.

**Interrogating Intersectionality**

Some participants considered their race, gender, and sexuality in interconnected ways, and others did not. Differences in the field’s understanding of intersectionality compared to some participants’ description of their lived experience highlights a tension that questions whether the intersectional framework is being imposed on participants. The discrepancy between participant and researcher application of an intersectional framework is important to make note of because it cautions researchers to refrain from imposing frameworks that the participants themselves may not accept or utilize.

When discussing experiences of biphobia and gendered racism, participants often talked about race, gender, and sexuality in interconnected ways. However, there were instances throughout the interviews where participants seemed to specifically focus in on their bisexuality, such as in their experiences of growth. Notably, one participant, Kiara, was adamant about the fact that her identities as Black, bisexual, and woman are all separate. Kiara’s perspective and assertion directly challenge the field’s understanding of the intersectionality framework.

The different levels of engagement with intersectionality could be explained by how much or how little participants may have explored these questions and concepts before the qualitative interview. For example, some participants shared that they journaled regularly and/or attended therapy and, over the course of the qualitative interview, discussed how reflecting on their experiences through journaling or therapy helped them understand aspects of their identity as Black bisexual women and how it has evolved over time. Not all participants may have considered these aspects in the same way, and perhaps, as a result of that, were not thinking
about and responding to interview items and exploratory questions about identity in an interconnected manner. Alternatively, the strict boundaries that Kiara described could be explained by the importance of context and safety when determining whether and with whom to disclose her identity. This potential focus on context and the stress of navigating a negative social environment may be related to minority stress, as described above.

**Implications for Clinical Practice**

These current findings on Black bisexual women’s experiences of growth have important implications for mental health practitioners. Due to the nature of qualitative research, clinical practice implications from the current study should be considered on an individual basis for each client, rather than broadly generalized. As participants detailed microaggressive and growth experiences in therapy, the following implications address both.

Psychologists and other mental health practitioners must develop self-awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with Black bisexual women in an affirming, competent manner. Practitioners can educate themselves about the stigmatization of this population, so as not to espouse beliefs and reproduce behaviors that are biphobic and gendered-racist. Development of awareness, knowledge, and skills can be further supported by improved training of practitioners working with this population, and thoughtful, skillful, and culturally responsive integration of the guidelines for working with bisexual clients; guidelines on responsiveness and equity with race; and guidelines on best practices for working with women and girls (APA, 2012, 2018, 2019). With this foundation, practitioners can better understand how multiple identities develop; the intersectional frameworks of oppression and privilege that act on those identities; and identify, examine, and uproot their own biases regarding biphobia and gendered racism. Practitioners can also provide therapy that affirms Black bisexual women’s intersectional identities by utilizing
bisexual-affirming (Astramovich & Scott, 2020; Feinstein et al., 2019; Flanders et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2019; Moradi & Budge, 2018) and Black feminist therapeutic practices (Jones & Harris, 2019). In addition to attending to these implications, practitioners can also incorporate interventions to facilitate growth.

Psychologists and mental health practitioners can include the growth opportunities related to gendered racism and biphobia in their clinical work, as opposed to only focusing on the stress and deficit models of these discriminatory experiences. This clinical focus can be addressed by intentionally assessing and exploring client’s experiences of growth related to their intersectional identities. Some interventions for client’s intersectional identity-based growth can include reflecting on clients’ unique lived experiences, intrapersonal insights, interpersonal relationships, lessons learned, changed behaviors, engagement in advocacy, and viewing growth as ongoing (Ghabrial & Anderson, 2020; LoSavio et al., 2011; Park & Fenster, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Notably, it is important to incorporate growth interventions, as well as address the impact of identity-based discriminatory experiences. Clinicians’ failures to adequately address the impact of identity-based discrimination on clients may result in invalidating clients’ experiences, inappropriately minimizing harmful impacts, and upholding and reinforcing microaggressions.

**Strength and Limitations**

The primary strength of this work is that Black bisexual women, underrepresented in research, are at the center of this study. By providing more visibility to and understanding of Black bisexual women’s experiences, this study starts to close the gap regarding extant literature. The themes resulting from the qualitative data provide new knowledge about Black bisexual women’s unique growth experiences, as well as points for mental health practitioners to consider in order to facilitate growth when working with this population. This study adds to the
psychology literature by exploring Black bisexual women’s experiences of growth related to
gendered racism and biphobia, rather than only focusing on the stress and deficit models of
discriminatory experiences. To the author’s knowledge, this study is the first to apply IPA to the
study of Black bisexual women’s experiences. IPA can continue to be a useful methodology for
inquiry into the experience of Black bisexual women. Finally, this study incorporated best
practices for qualitative research, thereby enhancing trustworthiness through bracketing,
confirmability, transparency, and coherence. Though there are many strengths of this study, there
are also some important limitations.

The most notable limitations were the national and global events of the murders of
Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd; and the COVID-19 global pandemic. The
untimely deaths were national news at the time of the participant interviews (Alcindor & Nawaz,
2020; Gajana, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2020) and participants’ knowledge of and engagement with
this news coverage may have contributed to their experience of race-based traumatic stress
(Carter, 2007). Research findings indicate that the pandemic has negatively affected mental
health (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020) and that Black people (Millet et al.,
2020; Sneed et al., 2020) and LGBTQ people (Salerno et al., 2020; Suen et al., 2020) have been
disproportionately impacted by and at increased risk for negative health outcomes related to
COVID-19. Though the pandemic and killings of numerous Black people were only a minor
feature in some of the interviews, the potential psychological, emotional, and physical effects of
these national and global events on participants should not be overlooked. Additionally, as a
result of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted via videoconference, which has
documented limitations (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Digital literacy was a limitation, as
videoconferencing platforms were new to some participants, and the principal investigator had
not used videoconferencing in prior research. There were technical difficulties (i.e., poor internet connection, choppy audio, and video lag) that may have negatively impacted the interview process at times.

Future research may endeavor to explore other aspects of Black bisexual women’s identities, such as the intersections of disability status. Of note, two participants mentioned having diagnosed disabilities. This sample also included a wide range of participant ages, and this research did not account for age cohort differences that might inform participant experiences of growth, such as sociopolitical context regarding sexuality during participants’ formative developmental years. All but two participants in this study completed at least a master’s degree, meaning that this sample was highly educated, and the growth experiences of highly educated Black bisexual women likely differ from those who have had fewer years of formal education.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several recommendations for future research that come from the themes and subthemes of this study. Future research can expand on each of the current subthemes for further exploration. For example, the subtheme of Erasure may be particularly poignant for Black bisexual women because bisexual identity may be invisible due to bi-erasure, and Black bisexual women may be rendered particularly invisible because of gendered racism. Exploring if and how Black bisexual women challenge invisibility and assessing potential for growth from experiences of invisibility could be a rich research area. Additionally, the subtheme Navigating Religion had divergent participant experiences, some supportive and some discouraging, that could be better understood with future research focused on this aspect of growth experiences for Black bisexual women.
Future research on growth experiences for Black bisexual women may also include other aspects of their identity. Specific identities of interest may include ability status, age cohort, level of formal education, and generational status in the United States. These identities may all influence Black bisexual women’s conceptions of their race, gender, sexuality, and experiences of discrimination and growth, thereby adding to more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Regarding experiences with therapy, future research can focus on what specifically constitutes affirmative therapy for Black bisexual women. Understanding experiences that Black bisexual women have even before entering the therapy room, such as potential challenges with locating a therapist in their area, as well as what actually happens with the therapist over the course of treatment, can provide information on how Black bisexual women can utilize therapy to foster growth.

Conclusion

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for semi-structured qualitative interviews with Black bisexual women. Analysis and interpretation explored and made meaning of participants’ understanding of growth experiences following biphobia and gendered racism. Findings indicate that the discrimination Black bisexual women encounter can spark growth in various life domains. This research is a novel and notable contribution to the growth literature because the results from data analysis describe consistent, even cumulative, prejudicial and discriminatory experiences related to gendered racism and biphobia, which is different from single, major events that are typically studied with respect to growth. Implications for clinical practice are that psychologists and other mental health practitioners must develop self-awareness,
knowledge, and skills to work with Black bisexual women in an affirming, competent manner, as well as incorporate interventions to facilitate growth in their work with this population.
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Table 1

Participants’ Self-Described Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celeste(^2)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ijeoma</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Cis-Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiara</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>African American (descent of African slaves in USA)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Cis woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shreya</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African/Black</td>
<td>Liberian</td>
<td>Womxn/Folk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Religious or Spiritual Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Agnostic and practice Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Polyamorous/Non-Monogamous</td>
<td>Unitarian-Universalist (and Atheist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Not religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Dating/In a relationship</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ijeoma</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>Baptist/Jesuit Catholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) All names herein are pseudonyms.
\(^2\) Celeste’s interview and transcript served as a pilot and, therefore, was not included in the analysis or results.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Highest Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Income Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$20,000 - $40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed Full Time</td>
<td>$20,000 - $40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>$20,000 - $40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ijeoma</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>$40,000 - $60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiara</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>$40,000 - $60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>$60,000 - $80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shreya</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Currently graduate assistant, soon to be postdoc</td>
<td>$20,000 - $40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilian</td>
<td>Junior year of College</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>$10,000 - $20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Sample of Participant Definitions and Descriptions of Bisexual and Queer*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Definitions and Descriptions of Bisexual and Queer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>“[Bisexual] means that I am attracted to more than one gender… I’m attracted to people of my gender and attracted to people of other genders…that’s where the ‘bi’ comes in.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>“[Bisexual] is a simple attraction to both men and women…it’s also an attraction to people who are my gender and people who are not, and whatever that means… I tend to use bisexual and queer interchangeably sometimes… My sexual orientation is bisexual and I have queer politics.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>“I identify as bisexual because I am attracted to people who are both male and female and who identify on that spectrum…I love the word queer in the sense that I think it’s political, I think it’s everything that’s not heteronormative. It’s a big part of how I think about walking through the world…making sure that I’m doing it, living it, and being it. It’s just more than just a word for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ijeoma</td>
<td>“Bisexual means that I am attracted to both men and women. It means being able to love, like intimately love and have, possible relationships or sexual relationships with both male and female.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiara</td>
<td>“Bisexual means that you can be attracted to both women and men. Doesn't mean you necessarily have to have them both at the same time…I think bisexual fits better. I use [bisexual and queer] interchangeably though because…I think the word queer just leaves a little bit more freedom.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>“I’m attracted to both men and women.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shreya “I see bisexual as a term that encompass like sexual and romantic attraction to any gender…I shift between queer and bisexual…[Queer encompasses] the wide spectrum of attraction, but also there's something more political about it than bisexual.”

Lilian “[Bisexual means] I do both, I do it all. I'm versatile…Queer is just like, I’m not straight, I'm not heterosexual, and I don't subscribe to heteronormative things…I usually use [bisexual and queer] interchangeably…but usually I use the word queer as like an umbrella term to what I'm referring to.”
Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Flyer

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Please consider participating in my study of Black bisexual women and their experiences of discrimination based on these identities. Participation consists of one individual interview of approximately 60 minutes. You may be eligible to participate if you:

- Identify as a Black bisexual woman
- Have experienced discrimination based on your identities
- Have experienced growth as a result of that discrimination
- Are 18 years old or older

A $25 Gift Card will be provided to each interviewee to thank you for your time.

My name is Alex Agiliga, my pronouns are she/her. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology. This research is being conducted for my dissertation (University at Albany, SUNY IRB approved #20E066) under the faculty supervision of Dr. Alex Pieterse, Associate Professor, Division of Counseling Psychology.

Please contact me for more information: Alex Agiliga aagiliga@albany.edu

Alex Agiliga, B.A. aagiliga@albany.edu
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling Psychology PhD Program
Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology
University at Albany, SUNY
Pronouns: She/her

Alex L. Pieterse, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor apieterse@albany.edu, (518) 437-4423
Associate Professor
Counseling Psychology PhD Program
Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology
University at Albany, SUNY
Pronouns: He/Him/His
Appendix B
Pre-Interview Email

Hi ___,

I’m emailing you with more information about participation. [This link will take you to the informed consent page] - please take a few minutes to read it. If after reading the informed consent, you would like to continue participating, please click “continue.” You will then complete a confidential screening and demographic questionnaire. That is the end of that portion; it takes about 5 minutes. Please do these steps before our scheduled meeting time.

I am eager to hear what you have to share and learn about your experiences. With that in mind, I ask that you be in a space with limited distractions during the meeting time. Before starting the interview, we will have time to review the informed consent and I can answer any questions you have about informed consent. I can also answer questions before or after the interview process via email. You will receive the $25 Amazon gift card via email at the completion of the interview.

Here is the Zoom link for our interview: ___

I look forward to meeting and talking with you!

Thank you,
Alex

Zoom tips:
- If you have not previously used Zoom, here is a brief video on [how to sign up for Zoom and download the application].
- The following link is a brief video on [how to join a Zoom meeting] using an email link or from the Zoom app.
Appendix C
Informed Consent

IRB Study Number University at Albany, SUNY IRB #20E066

Introduction
Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study. I am a doctoral student at the University at Albany, in the Department of Counseling Psychology. This research is being conducted for my dissertation and is supervised by Dr. Alex Pieterse, Associate Professor, Division of Counseling Psychology. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the growth experiences of Black bisexual women who have experienced discrimination related to their race, sexuality, and gender.

Procedures
Participation in this study includes completing a brief screening questionnaire to determine study eligibility and demographic questionnaire. If eligibility criteria are met, you will be contacted by email to schedule an interview. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and be held online, or in a private room at the University at Albany campus or similarly private setting in downtown Albany, NY.

The interview will be audio-recorded so that I can later transcribe it for the data analysis. Audio recording is required for participation and is not optional. I will keep the recordings in an encrypted, password protected location and only I will have access to the audio. The audio recording will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

The transcribed interview will not contain any identifying information about you. Members of the research team will have access to the transcript. I may quote your remarks in presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name. The transcript of the interview will be encrypted, password protected, and archived for seven years.
Please refrain from using any names or identifying information of third parties during the interview to protect your identity and the identity of others whom you discuss in the interview. Finally, you may choose to be contacted after the data analysis has been completed to review the preliminary results from all of the interviews with the whole group of women who participate in this study.

To thank you for participating in this study, if you complete the interview, you will receive a Visa gift card worth $25. No payment will be offered if you withdraw from the study.

**Possible risks and/or benefits**
A risk of this study is that you may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. Tell the interviewer at any time if you wish to take a break or stop the interview. You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics you will be asked about. If you are uncomfortable, you are free to not answer or to skip to the next question.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality of the information we collect from you could be breached – we will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

You may find it beneficial to tell the story of your experience as a Black bisexual woman. What you share as part of this research process has the potential to benefit society because we may learn more about the experiences of Black bisexual women. Through your interview and those of other participants, I hope that the findings of this study will also inform clinicians who provide counseling services.

**Confidentiality**
Your participation in this study is voluntary and information you provide is confidential. To minimize the risks of a breach of confidentiality, your name will not appear on the demographic questionnaire or on any of the interview documents. Instead, a code number will be assigned so that I can match your demographic questionnaire with the transcribed interview.
Audio recordings will be encrypted and password protected and stored on an encrypted and password protected device. Only I, the principal investigator, will have access to the audio files. The audio recording will be destroyed at the completion of the study. The transcribed interview will not contain any identifying information about you. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name. The transcript of the interview will be encrypted, password protected, and archived for seven years. The research team of 4-5 people will have access to the de-identified transcript.

Results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

I may share the data collected from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers – if data is shared, any information that could identify you will be removed.

If I think that you intend to harm yourself or others, I will notify the appropriate people with this information.

**Participant research rights**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to take a break, please tell the interviewer. You may withdraw from this study at any time. No payment will be offered if you withdraw from the study. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researcher will ask you if the information already collected can be used.

If you are a University at Albany student or employee, you may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. Withdrawal from the study will not affect your class standing, grades, employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with the University at Albany.
Additional information
If you have questions, you are free to ask them now, via email, or at the time of online interview. If you have questions later or a research-related problem, you may contact me, Alex Agiliga, at aagiliga@albany.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Alex Pieterse, in the Department of Education and Counseling Psychology at the University at Albany at (518) 437-4423 or apieterse@albany.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at the University at Albany:

Institutional Review Board
University at Albany
Office of Regulatory and Research Compliance
1400 Washington Ave, MSC 100E
Albany, NY 12222
Phone: 1-866-857-5459
Email: rco@albany.edu

Consent
I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

If you agree to participate in this project, please click “continue” below, indicating that you have read this consent form and understand its content.
Appendix D
Demographic Questionnaire

1. Are you 18 or older?
   (0) No
   (1) Yes

2. Are you a Black bisexual woman?
   (0) No
   (1) Yes

3. Have you experienced discrimination based on your identity?
   (0) No
   (1) Yes

4. Have you experienced growth as a result of that discrimination?
   (0) No
   (1) Yes

5. What is your age? __________

6. What is your race? __________

7. What is your ethnicity? __________

8. What is your gender? __________

9. What is your relationship status? __________

10. What is your religious or spiritual affiliation? __________

11. What is your highest level of completed education? __________

12. What is your employment status? __________

13. What is your income level?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Amount Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$10,000 - $20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$20,000 - $40,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$40,000 - $60,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$60,000 - $80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$80,000 - $100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>More than $100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Name: _______ Date: _______ Location: ________ Start Time: ________ End Time: _______

1. How do you describe yourself as a person?
   Prompt(s): What are your defining features or characteristics? Is any one attribute
   more salient than others?

2. How do you feel about yourself?

3. What does the word “bisexual” mean to you?
   Prompt(s): How do you describe or define your sexuality?

4. Tell me about how open and out you are about your identity as a Black bisexual woman.
   Prompt(s): Who are you out to? How long have you been out?

5. Tell me about any challenges that you face as a Black bisexual woman.
   Prompt(s): When did you first become aware of these challenges? Are these daily
   challenges? Is there a specific incident that stands out to you?

6. In what ways were you affected by these challenges?

7. Tell me about any changes as a result of these challenges (or that incident).
   Prompt(s): Can you tell me about ways in which you are different now than how
   you were before?

8. Tell me of any ways you have grown as a result of these challenges (or that incident).
   Prompt(s): Changes in yourself? Self-understanding? How you relate to others?
   Identified any strengths or areas of improvement? Identified any new
   possibilities? Change in your priorities?
9. When did you notice the growth?

Prompt(s): When did it start? When did it become clear to you?

10. Tell me about any other ways these experiences have impacted you.

11. What else feels important for you to share?

12. Would you like to review your transcript for accuracy? YES/NO

13. Would you like to review the preliminary analytic themes? YES/NO
Appendix F

Post-Interview Resources

Below is a list of services and organizations for bisexual, lesbian, gay, and transgender people, as well as agencies that provide general counseling. These resources are provided to inform you about community organizations for bisexual, lesbian, gay, trans, and queer people of Color. The counseling resources are provided in the event that distressing content (regarding identity-based discrimination) comes up during the interview process. During the interview process, there will not be an opportunity to process and work through potentially distressing content.

LGBT National Hotline [www.glbthotline.org/national-hotline.html](http://www.glbthotline.org/national-hotline.html)

Phone: 888-843-4564 | Email: help@LGBThotline.org

Hours:
- Mondays-Fridays, 1pm to 9pm, pacific time; Saturdays, 9am to 2pm, pacific time
- Mondays-Fridays, 4pm to midnight, eastern time; Saturdays, noon to 5pm, eastern time

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) National Hotline provides telephone an online chat and email peer-support, as well as factual information and local resources for cities and towns across the United States. All services are free and confidential. Callers can talk about issues and concerns including, but not limited to, coming out, gender and/or sexuality identities, relationship concerns, bullying, workplace issues, HIV/AIDS anxiety, safer sex information, suicide, and much more.

In Our Own Voices 245 Lark Street Albany, NY 12210

Phone: 518-432-4188 | Email: info@inourownvoices.org
In Our Own Voices serves the needs of, promotes the wellbeing of, and advances the success of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender People of Color in upstate New York. This organization engages in advocacy and education, community organizing and event planning, and offers programs for LGBT POC of all ages.

**Choices Counseling and Consulting** 10 Colvin Avenue, Suite 102 Albany, NY 12206
Phone: 518-438-2222 | Email: info@ChoicesConsulting.com

Choices serves the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities of the Capital Region. Choices specializes in and does advocacy work pertaining to sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. Their clinicians provide individual, couple, family, and group therapy.

**Psychological Services Center** 299 Washington Avenue Albany, NY 12206
Phone: 518-442-4900

The Psychological Services Center is a community mental health clinic. Clinicians there are doctoral trainees in counseling and clinical psychology from the University at Albany, SUNY. Clinicians offer psychological services to children, adolescents, and adults and operate on a sliding scale fee.