Spaces Matter: Examining the Intrinsic and Extrinsic Implications of Social Spaces, Physical and Ideological, on Women of Color Navigating Law School and Post-Graduate Endeavors

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which physical and ideological spaces influence the experiences of women of color in law school and their subsequent perception of those spaces. Participants were interviewed and asked questions about their holistic experience in law school. The researcher applied Oyserman's racial-ethnic self-schemas theory and Crenshaw's intersectionality approach to analyze and interpret the findings of the data. Ultimately, it was concluded that women of color recognized their law school's ability to prepare them to be lawyers but felt less so about their ability to navigate the professional legal industry as a woman of color. In addition, the thesis argues that the negative experiences of women of color go beyond imposter syndrome and other identity-based elements. Instead, it is more directly rooted in the spaces in law school, specifically related to the pedagogical model of the institution that clashes with identity-based experiences. Thus, the thesis suggests ways that law schools can better support women of color and a direction for future areas of study.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"I've written 11 books but each time I think 'Uh-oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out'" (Angelou, as cited in Richards, 2015). Maya Angelou's quote perfectly sums up the terrible irony of imposter syndrome. It conveys the ways that even the most accomplished of individuals doubt themselves. To make matters worse, those feelings of self-doubt can be exacerbated in instances where the person is both 1) a woman and 2) a person of color. In addition, the term "intersectionality" has continued to make its rounds across all areas of academia. Thus, we have seen a plethora of research regarding the ways the imposter phenomenon and intersectionality jointly affect the ability for people to excel within certain spaces. While the imposter phenomenon and intersectionality are very real occurrences, are there other factors that need to be accounted for? This research will explore a "niche" group of individuals: women of color in law school.

Women of color in law school have been the subject of slow budding research. According to the American Bar Association's (ABA) Initiative on Achieving Long-Term Careers for Women in Law, the study showed that women of color comprised 15% of all law firm associates (Lewis, 2021). Yet, only 3% of women of color are law firm partners (Lewis, 2021). In addition, attrition rates are the highest for women of color, among all the other demographics examined. Over the past few decades (1987-2019), there has been a 19% increase in the percentage of students of color in law school (Lewis, 2021)). These numbers indicate a need to better understand the personal experiences that women of color may go through in law school. Furthermore, ABA data shows that "people of color make up less than 15% of the nation's lawyers, and many identify law schools as a major

part of the minority lawyer pipeline program" (Sloan, 2021). In order to understand the implications of the lack of female of color representation within firms, it all starts with examining law school. My research seeks to understand how social interactions and spaces within law school can affect a woman of color's potential time at their institution.

In considering the topic's significance, I aim to further the research on how women of color are affected by the different dimensions of law school. This could manifest in various "spaces," either ideological, interactional, and pedagogical. While we have seen an increase in underrepresented groups of people attending law school, it is important to consider how prevalent disparities in enrollment remain. Despite the number of women of color in law school continuing to increase (with a little variation over the years), there are far more women of color attending unaccredited law schools compared to their enrollment in accredited law schools (Kuris, 2020). This presents a challenge for women of color navigating these law schools as, "Graduates of low-ranked or unranked law schools may have trouble passing the bar, finding legal work and paying off tuition debt" (Kuris, 2020). These are disparities not readily confronted in the legal sphere.

With this in mind, this topic needs to be studied more because of the ever-changing and evolving data. Only recently has a robust set of data come out about the experiences of women of color in law school. The majority of this data was developed between 2019 and 2020 (Enjuris, 2019). Given the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, continued research is important to consider the "post-pandemic" reality for law students. The responses given within the studies, though important and foundational, may not necessarily reflect the sentiments of women of color in the present. 2022 has presented many opportunities for growth within the country, and the increase of resources and DEI

initiatives within law schools may change the experiences that women of color have: "As of early August 2020, nearly 90% of law schools had implemented new anti-racism and/or DEI efforts and initiatives since the murder of George Floyd" (NALP, 2020). While there is statistical research surrounding the experiences of women of color in law school, less has been done to deeply understand how spaces in law school can influence or change their perception of these experiences. Furthermore, less research has been done to understand how spaces, if at all, cause these positive and negative feelings for women of color. By having women of color speak on their recent experiences in law school, the research may pose new implications for this area of study.

My goals for this research are to develop a better understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that shape how women of color perceive their legal education. Additionally, I hope to build a better understanding of why and how social interactions affect their experiences, if at all. With that in mind, I have two questions that I aim to answer in this thesis. 1) How do physical spaces impact women of color's perceptions of their ability to navigate law school and subsequent legal institutions? and 2) How do ideological spaces impact women of color's perceptions of their ability to navigate law school and subsequent legal institutions?

In this paper, each chapter will examine the process of my research. Through data analysis and interpretation, my study will reveal key takeaways from the physical and ideological spaces that frame the experiences of women of color in law school. The main finding will call into question the holistic preparedness that women of color leave law school with, as well as practical implications for this area of research and the legal education system as a whole. Finally, it will suggest ways to mitigate any negative

experiences that occur and ways to continue to develop this area of study to improve law schools for the better. Interestingly enough, this paper will go beyond the argument of imposter syndrome being the core struggle that women of color in law experience. Instead, my study seeks to illustrate that the primary obstacles that women of color experience exist in the spaces and ideologies of law school, as opposed to within the students themselves. It transfers the obligation from women of color to law schools to create an environment that adheres to the collective and diverse paths taken by the underrepresented students in their community.

Chapter Two: Context and Literature Review

Context and Description of Study

An area that shows potential for greater research no doubt centers around the experiences of women of color in law school. From 1978-2019, there has been a 19% increase in the percentage of students of color in law school (American Bar Association, 2019). In addition, research on the experiences of women of color in law have shown that they comprise approximately 15% of all law firm associates, but only 3% are law firm partners (American Bar Association, 2019). Furthermore, attrition rates are the highest for women of color, among all other demographics. These numbers indicate a need to understand the holistic experience of women of color, starting with the beginning of their legal journey: law school.

Law schools are the finishing institutions that shape future lawyers and legal professionals to work across the globe. The education, relationships, and professional competency that law schools instill help to shape 1L-3L students into partners at the biggest law firms in the nation. While it may be easy to see a statistic on lack of representation in firms and focus on improving this gap from a recruitment standpoint, research demonstrates this solution is not enough. To address these systemic issues of inequality, research needs to go further back—*before* law firm associate roles. My research will model this, focusing on how social interactions inherent within law schools (study groups, classrooms, etc.) can affect women of color in various ways (confidence, leadership, and transition to postgraduate careers).

My research aims to understand how law schools can nurture or hurt the capabilities of high-achieving individuals of marginalized backgrounds. In particular, I

will be examining the perspectives of female law students of color who have navigated law school spaces. From these perspectives, I seek to analyze how legal institutions can cultivate experiences that ultimately shape students' eventual transition into professional work environments.

This study will focus on social spaces, academic spaces, and ideological spaces that current or former female law students of color occupy. For the purpose of this research study, social spaces will refer to any space in law school that has social interactions and collaboration at its core. This can include student-run organizations, study groups, law school events, and any interactions with peers that are outside the classroom but within the confines of the law school. Academic spaces refer to any interactions or settings in which academics is at the forefront, such as classrooms, office hours with professors, and study groups as well. This overlap between academic and social spaces shows the interconnectedness of these spheres. The final space is ideological, which will be specifically focused on the mindset and personal perspectives that women of color carried with them throughout law school—potentially influenced by the social and academic spheres, as well as other causal factors that will be examined in this paper. This focus will help to bridge the gap between the data that shows lack of representation in law schools and law firms and the "why" of where it all traces back to.

Literature Review

In exploring the scholarly research that encompasses the subject matter at hand, the following articles provide an in-depth understanding of the available research related to the topic. This review will be organized into key themes, focusing on different areas of research that affect issues relating to women of color in both an educational and professional setting. The research will provide a contextual

framework in understanding the experiences of related identity groups in respective

backgrounds, focused primarily on the study of intersectionality (the theory to be

discussed in Chapter 3). It will begin by exploring the research covering the adversity

women of color face. Then, it will examine the impact of undergraduate institutions on

the same demographic. After, the research will explore the role that the imposter

phenomenon plays in different contexts. Lastly, the review will analyze the research

surrounding legal institutions, such as law schools and law firms. This will focus on

law school operations— school environment, bias-related experiences within both

settings, and the DEI sustainability of legal work environments.

Eurocentric Standards

With a solid understanding of the intersection of gender and sexism, a prime

obstacle that women of color face is discrimination based on beauty standards, as seen

in various research. This discrimination is seen within both in-group and out-group

dynamics. A study found that the lighter skin a woman had, the more likely they were

to be associated with femininity (Hill, 2002). Most relevantly, this was not found in

the study that focused on the attractiveness of men of color participants, showing that

this is a unique obstacle that women of color face when it comes to being seen as

desirable in the status quo. Furthermore, lighter skin is generally associated with

Eurocentric beauty features, while darker skin is associated with Afrocentric features,

even within racially homogeneous communities (Hochschild, 2006). This association

between skin color and beauty standards is also seen in research which suggests that

women with lighter skin have a better chance at having higher educational attainment

and high personal earnings (Hunter, 2002).

Discrimination through Media Representations and Advertisements

While Eurocentric beauty standards is damaging for women of color, media representation is an example of these standards in action—an environment in which discrimination towards women of color is prevalent. Research in the media points towards the following areas: exploitation of Black people for White entertainment, negative representations of women of color, and ads encouraging the erasure of dark-skinned/textured hair features. Representation within the media is an area worth examining, as these representations can shape perceptions of the groups at target. One prime example focuses specifically on Black people. For approximately 150 years, Black people were represented by White actors who used Blackface; they presented Black people as inferior, with their primary role being to serve White people (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014). In our current decade, we have seen less direct forms of racism being exchanged for subtler forms. This is seen through the upkeep of older shows that perpetuate stereotypes: "the media racial socialization of negative Black stereotypes persists across generations as older shows are retained, longstanding stereotypical characters are not modified despite contemporary contexts and frames" (Adams-Bass et al., 2014, 372). This has a negative effect on younger generations of Black children. In a study, it was found that the African American youth viewed media images of Black women as inaccurate, negative, and offensive (Adams-Bass et al., 2014). This shows the negative impacts it has on Black youth and confirms that some representations of people of color on the media are not necessarily accurate. In addition, the representation of Latina women is another thing worth noting. A recurring motif within television shows and movies is the "Latina maid."

One type of research touches upon the way the intersectional background (being both Latina and a woman) influences the type of negative media representation. The stereotypical nature of a Latina maid is "also complicated by her identification not just on the basis of her ethnicity and assumed subservient nature . . . but also by the fact that she is part of an immigrant labor force" (Padilla, 2009, 45). The media representation reinforces outdated and offensive stereotypes of women that further perpetuate discriminatory practices and thoughts. This is particularly relevant for this topic because media can implicitly affect how people are treated in society, and women of color are often some of the least represented identities at their law firms. This places a burden on women of color to "debunk" stereotypes that are constantly perpetuated by the media.

Another important example to illustrate would be advertisements meant to encourage women of color to partake in transformative beauty processes, such as altering the texture of their hair. Women of color bring different experiences and identities to law school and their post-graduate endeavors, and this research highlights the nuanced factors that may cause internalized insecurities that add a new layer of difficulty to their world. One example of this is an American ad in the 1990s, which implied that African American women needed to get their hair "done" because it was damaged, unmanageable, and unattractive (Mayes, 1997). These advertisements work to convince women of color who may feel uncomfortable with their unique features to change them. In addition, skin bleaching remains a large market in many countries, powered by advertisements. While the majority of skin bleaching advertisements are not directly from the United States, the amount of people who immigrate to the United

States and internalize these skin expectations could be considerable (Picton, 2013).

Research shows that fairness creams and soaps in India have a growing market of over

$150 million, reflecting a pressure for women of color to look lighter in order to be

more desirable (Picton, 2013). In addition, Garnie, a company that sells millions of

products in the United States, creates a plethora of advertisements in different countries

that boast their cream's ability to make skin tones "two shades lighter" (Picton, 2013).

With women of color constantly being bombarded with advertisements regarding how

they should change their natural features, it is imperative to examine the root of this

issue and how it affects other dimensions of their lives. All of these areas show a dire

need for women of color to be at the centerpoint of this research topic—as external

factors such as the media play a role in how these women could and would be treated

in the work environment.

Discrimination in Workplace

Substantial research has been done that points towards discriminatory treatment

in the labor market being a significant factor in the racial and gender disparity seen in

the American economy (Darity & Mason, 1998). With a brief reference to the initial

research regarding intersectionality, other factors such as class often overlap with race

and gender to explain these discriminatory practices. A vital term to examine from the

research done on economic inequality within the labor market is social stratification.

This term refers to the "institutionalization or intensification of inequality through a

system of social relationships which determines who has what, and for what reason"

(Savas, 2010, p. 315). This system of social relationships and inequality is traced back

to institutionalized slavery—with both racism and sexism at the crux. The research

done on systemic inequality suggests that women of color face distinctive obstacles, due to their overlapping identities. This is rooted in U.S. history where slaves of color were exploited in order to build the foundation of the colonial economy, which has resulted in domestic work still socially remaining "non Whites work" (Savas, 2010) as well as gender inequality in the United States as a result of the persisting beliefs regarding women as subordinate to men (Savas, 2010).

In exploring research specifically related to workplace discrimination, data found that women of color had a more difficult time achieving workplace power, in relation to White men who had more opportunities to attain power through "homosocial reproduction," the ability to engage in networking with those of similar identities who are higher up (Elliot & Smith, 2004). This research supports the notion that women of color may have more difficulties earning the social capital needed to rise in positions due to less access to connections within their workplace. A potential reasoning for this lack of access is found in a study that attributes the persistence of racial and gender discrimination in the workplace due to the race and gender demographics of the workplace, as well as the tendency for those in higher leadership positions to "reproduce themselves through both exclusionary and inclusionary practices" (Smith, 2002, p. 509).

Evidence suggests that those in higher leadership positions may consciously or unconsciously favor those who carry similar physical characteristics as them, putting women of color at a dual disadvantage in the workplace. Social cognition theoryasserts that because people categorize others into in-groups and out-groups, sex and race become more visible bases of stratification, increasing the likelihood for

others to partake in evaluation and attribution bias (Reskin, 2000).

Another viable set of research to explore regarding workplace discrimination is the study of gendered racism. In closely examining the concept of gendered racism, one set of research invokes W.E.B. Du Bois' "double consciousness" concept to consider gender. to fully understand the unique obstacles that women of color face (Falcon, 2008). One example of the way gendered racism impacts the experiences of women of color in the workplace is the use of political rhetoric (e.g., "welfare queen") to create negative connotations towards this group (Foster, 2017). This use of gendered racism within political communication suggests how ingrained these forms of discrimination are. Studies have looked at the negative implications of gendered racism, showing the costly mental health effects of mistreatment of women of color (Perry, Pullen, & Oser, 2012). While women with moderate levels of self-esteem, coping mechanisms, and general well-being do not face increased levels of suicidal ideation, there is a much larger impact for those who have little access to mental health resources (Perry, Pullen, & Oser, 2012).

There are three significant findings regarding the experiences for women of color. First, Wingfield (2007) found that Black female professionals were expected to conform to specific images and ideas that their bosses had of them. They were expected to follow the "modern Mammy" stereotype, which implies that Black Women should make huge sacrifices at the expense of their own family and personal needs in order to fulfill the needs of their higher-ranked boss (Wingfield, 2007). In addition, research has found that there are stressors associated with the experiences of women of color in the workplace. Women of color are likely to experience stress from isolation,

exclusion, and code-switching to overcome obstacles at work; they also face stress related to being hired and promoted within their workplace, as well as the need to defend their lack of mentorship or race (Hall, Everett, & Hamilton-Mason, 2021). These issues present challenges for women of color to overcome if they are to succeed in workplaces.

Lastly, gendered racism has a clear connection to the Eurocentric beauty standards, as "racialized gender strategies targeting Black women have predominantly focused on the body" (Gentles-Peart, 2018, 202). The different forms of oppression that women of color face are interconnected; gendered racist tactics such as political rhetoric and media representation, Eurocentric beauty standards, and discrimination within the workplace.

These findings all suggest that women of color face experiences that warrant a continued study relating to their ability to navigate professional spaces, as well as the effects these experiences may have on their ability to succeed and believe in themselves. Further research later in this review will articulate the more specific experiences of women in various career fields.

Navigation of Intersectional Identities Within Undergraduate Institutions

When delving into the nuanced experiences of women of color in educational and work-related settings, a focus on specific phases in which these experiences occur reveals a gap in the research done in this area. Understanding what types of obstacles women of color encounter in different phases of their career illustrates a greater need for continued research efforts. The current body of literature focuses on the *undergraduate* experience of students of color, all gender-identifying (cite). In

addition, there is research that looks at the specific experiences of female students of color. This research has shown how these experiences alter the social and academic involvement of minoritized groups. For instance, focus groups composed of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino/a students generated data that found the behavior of White peers to have a negative impact on these interviewed students (Lewis, 2000). These focus groups were free-flowing, enabling the students to choose what experiences they shared throughout the process. The major themes that came as a result of this study were as follows: 1) racial stereotyping, 2) pressures or expectations to assimilate, 3) exclusion and marginality, 4) White resentment and hostility about affirmative action, 5) the focus on "Black and White," and 6) college curriculum and faculty (Lewis, 2000). These numerous struggles give way to racially-centric and emotional obstacles: "they also carry an extra burden of mental and emotional stress and typically must struggle, to a greater extent than their White peers, to figure out what is real about themselves and their campus environment" (Lewis, 2000, p.86). Students of color at predominantly White institutions also experience microaggressions, which can further hurt their experience in college and exacerbate feelings of self-doubt and frustration (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Additionally, students who identify with these racial groups are more likely to be first-generation college students, facing pressure to succeed and be the first in their families to attend college (Hunn, 2014). Research points towards the work needed to be done in order to ensure that minority groups of students are receiving racial justice in all facets of their college experience. This includes the improvement of retention programs at 4-year universities and avoiding the use of a "color-blind rationale" that

can create animosity between different racial groups of students (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). One particular solution emphasizes the need to solve retention issues in underrepresented groups in college—as they remain even more underrepresented in STEM education; this also includes a goal to improve the United States' sense of equity in supporting disadvantaged students (Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, 2011).

Women of Color's Undergraduate Experiences

With the understanding that people of color have experienced levels of academic and communal disconnect from their peers and institutions, closely examining women of color will provide a sharper understanding of these issues. Interview data and the use of critical race theory reveal that two types of microaggressions directly affect women of color. At predominantly White institutions, Latinas were viewed as more exotic and "sexually available" (McCabe, 2009, 140), and Black women experienced notably high rates of microaggressions within classroom settings compared to other racial identities (McCabe, 2009, 141). Specifically, Black women in the study felt that they were expected to be the spokesperson for their race, feeling both isolation and anxiety as a result of it (McCabe, 2009). While all women of color have experienced varying levels of microaggression, a substantial amount of research hones in on the experiences of Black women, specifically related to standards of beauty.

The media's use of Eurocentric beauty standards play a role in Black college women's experiences. A study found that Black college women were acutely aware of the Eurocentric beauty standard being the default standard of beauty in the United

States, clashing with their own cultural standards of beauty (Sekayi, 2003). The author proposes "aesthetic resistance" through educational settings as a way to tackle suffocating pressures for Black women to try and look skinnier, have softer textured hair, and soften their features (Sekayi, 2003). Either lack of assimilation or attempts to conform can result in Black women being singled out and viewed as different:

> Black girls feel the effects of what Du Bois (1903) called 'double consciousness . . . mainstream research rarely considers these intersections and therefore research on young Black girls is often conducted through a deficit lens (Joseph, Viesca, & Bianco, 2016, 8).

This concept of assimilation in an educational setting hits at the core of this research topic: the clash of identity in institutions with few underrepresented students. The struggle for women of color to place their identity in a space that has little experience with them can affect their ability to feel seen. As established in the research based on an intersectional framework, the experiences of both racism and sexism can hinder Black women's ability to be and feel authentically Black. For instance, Black female students in STEM were more likely to have a decrease in both academic motivation and pursuit of ambitious career paths when they were faced with discrimination or feared that a new competitive path could result in these issues coming about (Leath & Chavous, 2018).

Other racial groups of women, such as Latinas, also have experienced considerable instances of discomfort due to intolerance. Nunez-Janes & Robledo (2009) used Latina Critical Race Theory to carefully examine an event sponsored in a Texas public university called "Catch an Illegal Immigrant Day." This event was held

by a conservative on-campus organization which involved the"catching" students who wore shirts saying "illegal immigrant" on them (Nunez-Janes & Robledo, 2009). In analyzing the aftermath of the event, researchers used "testimonio" of a professor and female student to show the negative impact the event had on the Latinx community, such as how they felt racially-targeted and—at the same time—burdened by the obligation to teach others how to identify and acknowledge clear examples of racism on campus (Nunez-Janes & Robledo, 2009). While this focused on the greater Latinx community and not just Latinas, it highlights an added dimension of struggle for Latina women of color—the battle to feel accepted at their institutions based on race as well as their gender. While women of color have to deal with the challenges that every law student has, they must also gripe with the challenge of being one of few in their ethnic/racial communities—even smaller when gender is added to the table. This makes them more susceptible to examples like above and may feel more burden placed on them to call out instances of injustice.

Imposter Phenomenon and Its Presence in Women of Color: Undergraduate and Beyond

The research presented on the experiences of undergraduate female students of color can shed light on difficulties encountered, such as lack of academic motivation, isolation from peers, and difficulty adjusting to the campus. Furthermore, it is important to examine research on the imposter phenomenon in order to take these difficulties further and understand their implications for future research on women of color. The imposter phenomenon, also referred to as "imposter syndrome," is "used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent

and intense among a select sample of high achieving women" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 241). While it was initially believed to affect women in their professional careers, Sakulku (2011) recognized the various research that supports imposter syndrome having the likelihood to affect any and all identities of people. Research on the Imposter Cycle sheds light on how this affects students and/or professionals. It starts with an achievement-related task, in which a person then reacts with stress and anxiety at the thought of getting it done; upon completing the task, the person generally attributes the completion of this task to luck or hard work being the main influences, as opposed to their own merits (Sakulku, 2011). These self-doubts continue on in a cycle, affecting their sense of self-efficacy and confidence (Sakulku, 2011). More recent studies have proposed the contextualization of the imposter phenomenon, arguing that the best way to address this issue and offer structural and effective solutions is to understand the role the environment plays in exacerbating these feelings (Feenstra, Begeny, Ryan, Rink, Stoker, & Jordan, 2020). Bravata, Watts, Keefer, Madhusudhan, Taylor, Clark, Nelson, Cokely, & Hagg (2020) found comorbid conditions arising from the imposter phenomenon, including depression, anxiety, and social dysfunctions. The research urges employers and professors to be more cognizant of these issues, especially for ethnic groups of people (Bravata et al., 2020, 1271). High levels of social support within professional settings can help decrease "imposter tendencies," improving the phenomenon to an extent (Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015, 578).

A closer dive into the experiences of people of color who face imposter phenomenon yields telling results. A study examining the imposter phenomenon among Black doctoral and postdoctoral scholars found that the intersecting identities of race

and gender greatly contributed to feelings of self-doubt due to being one of few in their area of study (Chakraverty, 2020). Research focused on minority status stress versus imposter feelings found that imposter feelings were stronger predictors of the mental health that minority college students face, as it focuses more on "individualistic constructs," directly causing ideological distress (Bravata, Watts, Keefer, Madhusudhan, Taylor, Clark, Nelson, Cokely, & Hagg, 2020, p. 1256). This shows the impact the imposter phenomenon has on students of color in both undergraduate institutions, as well as its potential impact in the future. In addition, students of color who identify as first-generation or carry a strong ethnic identity were more likely to experience imposter syndrome (Peteet, 2015). Clance & Imes (1978) suggest utilizing a multi-model form of therapy, in which high achieving women can come together and have more conversations regarding their feelings of self-doubt. This was proven to be beneficial, as "a group setting is also valuable because one woman can see the dynamics in another woman and recognize the lack of reality involved" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 245). This research could benefit from narrowing in on women of color in law school, as the majority of the research focused on this phenomenon is more general, with brief mentions to how it affects marginalized identities.

Law School: Navigating Educational, Social, and Inclusive Facets

Another area that is worth exploration is the research done on law schools relating to bias, affirmative action, and the general experience. From the bare bones of the law school curriculum, research has looked at the gender bias surrounding women's rights education. The Women and the Law Project at the Washington College of Law conducted a workshop which emphasized the importance of bringing a feminist

perspective to classes by diversifying the means of classroom discussions and acknowledging the importance of power relationships in law (Shalleck, 1988). Furthermore, Erickson (1988) found that courses also did not include many topics of concern within criminal law casebooks, such as spousal battery. This research, though grounded in gender dynamics from approximately 30 years ago, reflects an interest in examining inequity within law schools—from an institutional perspective.

Along the topic of identity, continued conversation in this area of scholarly work displays a need to consider students' personal identities and goals when improving law schools as an institution. For instance, Hess (2022) suggests the need to ensure class environments enable law students to build upon their motivations and dreams when it comes to what they wanna accomplish in the legal world. A special focus on identity is seen in this area of research as a way to bring out students' dreams and ensure their success in the future.

In thinking of this concept of identity influencing goals and experiences, data from a panel study of students in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law looked at the experiences of law school students and how their perceptions change over time. This is relevant to the research topic at hand because it shows the data surrounding law students' experiences in general. The data displayed different observations when looking at how law students experience being within their institutions. They described that the biggest changes they had was: "learning to 'think like a lawyer,' i.e., to distinguish a legal from a nonlegal issue, to see the various sides of a problem, to reason formally and logically, and to express themselves clearly, concisely, and unemotionally" (Erlanger & Klegon, 1978, 230). Additionally, it was found that the attitudes that the

law students have when they are currently in law school do not necessarily predict how they will behave upon graduating in the future (Erlanger & Klegon, 1978). This suggests that the experiences of students in law school may or may not necessarily affect their behavior post-grad, but this research paper seeks to closely examine experiences of marginalized identities to see if this data still stands from a post-graduate lens. It also reflects a gap in the research done on the experiences of law students because it solely focuses on their change in thinking about legal-specific processes, as opposed to how any of this intersects with aspects of their own identity.

Financial Risks and Public Interest Debate

Another area of research within the scholarly work done on law schools focuses on the financial aspect: the influence of debt on legal career choices. Field (2009) examines the ideological responses that students have when it comes to job placement, asserting that individuals who are debt averse may opt for careers with high monetary value compared to high social return—given their fear of not being able to fully pay off their debt. A close look into the NYU Financial Aid Study showed an average law school debt of $100,000. The wages of those in the public and private sector have become increasingly distinct, while tuition continues to increase at a steady rate (Field, 2009). This study ultimately found that if law schools focused on distributing career contingent scholarships earlier—before admission as opposed to post-graduation—their public interest enrollment would increase. More studies have looked at law schools as lucrative businesses, as they utilize the supply and demand aspect of the market economy, yielding the power to increase tuition costs and expand at their own will (Segal, 2012).

Financial issues represent a growing debate regarding the value of law school. While some argue that a legal education brings many non-monetary benefits, there is no clear cut answer when it comes to its value. Tamanaha (2013) finds that it can be seen as worth it at top law schools where most students land top corporate and public service jobs, or if the students get enough financial aid and/or scholarships that significantly offset the price. In more recent years, the ABA Task Force on Financing Legal Education found that law schools were administering more aid to students than past years (Whitford, 2017). This report suggests that the ABA Task Force fulfill the two following recommendations: 1) continue to collect data that distinguishes between the need-based and merit-based financial aid given out to students 2) mandate the increase of law school debt counseling to students and graduates so that they can figure out the best way to handle loan debt over the years. Whitford (2017) additionally asserts that law schools that focus mainly on merit-based does not take into account students with a lower socioeconomic status who may benefit greatly from an increase in scholarship money. Promisingly, a closer look into the economic value of a law degree found that "for most law school graduates, the present value of a law degree typically exceeds its costs by hundreds of thousands of dollars" (Simkovic & McIntyre, 2014). Though Simkovic and McIntyre were unable to control selection or omitted-variable bias—they found an 84% increase in expected mean monthly earnings, with these differences varying between men and women due to numbers of hours worked. This reflected a continued benefit in students who wish to pursue a postgraduate degree in law, as opposed to those who finished their education after their bachelor's degree.

Affirmative Action: For and Against Measures

While the multiple decade-long debates of affirmative action is not limited to law school, it's pertinent in understanding the nuances of more underrepresented demographics in law school. Sander (2004) focuses on whether or not the benefits of increased admission of Black incoming law students results in a net benefit that replaces the tuition costs associated with this admission. The research shows that the popular law school admissions exam, the LSAT, is unfair to Black students, as the exams "test knowledge of culture-specific vocabularies" (Sander, 2004, p. 419). Sanders asserts that there should be more of an emphasis on GPA than an exam taken within a few hours. However, he also contends that Black students should be aware of the academic risks of attending a school in which their academic credentials can place them at a severe disadvantage, given that students who are the lowest academic ranking are at a higher risk of dropping out of their law school (Sander, 2004). In addition, corresponding studies have found that Black students with low entering credentials are more likely to underperform during their first semester (Rothstein, 2008).

Pearsall (2015) suggests that law schools can improve retention rates of their minority law students by creating mentor-mentee relationships, hosting mock trials and other recruitment events, and creating media that presents the school to be more welcoming and supportive of their students. Minority law students could also benefit from increased mentorship and academic support when it comes to mitigating those initial rank disparities. Research found that an Oregon academic support program at a law school significantly improved the academic performance of the students who took

part in it (Finke, 1989). In addition, these same students who face academic pressures and suffer from mental health issues could be better supported if given access to ideological counseling, as "the nature of formal law school education allows little room for personal disclosure or the expression of emotional vulnerability, and so underscores a need for a sanctioned outlet for emotional distress" (Dickerson, 1987, p#). In looking at how other parts of identities can affect success (socioeconomic status), the students who are able to succeed above others are the ones who can put most, if not all, of their focus on their academics (Clydesdale, 2004). Having the time to devote to the necessary academic preparation needed to excel in exams is a prerequisite for succeeding in law school. This can become a significant barrier for minority students who may have to work other jobs, take care of family members, or have competing priorities. This combination of both race and class can affect predictors of success in law schools, such as LSAT scores and general class grades. The research also asserts that law schools should focus on other forms of identity, apart from race and gender: "law schools should not, in their concern for issues of gender and race, pay less attention to other forms of diversity: namely, age, physical and learning impairments, and socioeconomic differences" (Clydesdale, 2004, p. 762). With this research in mind, it is clear that many factors influence the navigation of minority students in law schools.

Experiences of Women of Color in Legal Institutions

Rigorous research from the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) Foundation & The Center for Women in Law (2020) explored the challenges that women of color had while in law school. The research consists of many studies that

focused on dozens of dimensions, providing deep insight into the improvements

needed to be made. With women of color being incredibly underrepresented in the

legal sphere, the study narrowed in on those obstacles. The data comes from over 700

women of color in 46 U.S. states, which equaled over 4,084 responses. Most

significantly, the research focused on intrinsic, interpersonal, and

professional/academic insights.

First, the data looked at the satisfaction levels of women of color with their law

school experience. The research demonstrated that most women of color were satisfied

with their experience (82%), even compared to other groups of identities (p.28).

However, their level of satisfaction was found to be much lower than other gender and

racial groups. On another note, the experiences of women of color varied across ethnic

groups. Latina women were found to be the most satisfied, with Black/African

American and Asian/Pacific Islander being approximately ten percent less satisfied. In

relating levels of satisfaction with drop-out contemplation, the research tended to be

similar among racial and ethnic groups. At 31%, women of color were the most likely

to consider leaving law school, with men of color trailing second at 26% (p. 29). The

study found that the reasoning differed, but the main three reasons included social and

academic environment, pressure, and fear of employment prospects. Of the women of

color that were seriously considering leaving, the reasons included financial debt and

not enjoying law school in many facets. This area of the study illustrated that out of all

ethnicities and genders, women of color had experienced the most self-doubt

surrounding their satisfaction and confidence in remaining in law school.

Furthermore, one of the studies examined perceptions of race and gender

relations (NALP, 2020). With women of color being susceptible to experience both racism and sexism, the study aimed to identify the different areas of improvement. Forty percent of women of color believed that the race relations at their law schools were positive. Hispanic women rated the state of race relations positively at 55%, with Asian/Pacific Island women and Black/African American women rating it at 42% and 30% respectively. Furthermore, half of the female of color respondents noted they never experienced racial discrimination while in law school—a few percent more than the amount which never experienced racial discrimination (NALP, 2020). In addition, of those women of color who were satisfied with their experience, 96% of them were satisfied with their educational experience. In addition, the study also asked about gender relations, finding that White women viewed gender relations more positively than women of color. Out of all gender and racial groups, White men rated gender relations the highest. However, most women of color were satisfied to an extent, be it "extremely" or "somewhat" (NALP, 2020).

Another part of the study looked at adverse reactions—that being the impacts that comments or interactions had on their experience or their social relationships outside of class (Hornblower, 2020). Approximately 52% of women of color experienced comments made by their peers or professors that negatively affected their academic performance (Hornblower, 2020). This was a significantly larger number, compared to White men who were 31% lower. In addition, women of color and White women both collectively had experienced a similar number of unwanted sexual advances that negatively affected their ability to form relationships with recruiters and potential employers. These negative interactions suggest that women of color have

faced multiple extrinsic factors that have affected their capacity to succeed in crucial aspects of their law school career. More surprisingly, two-thirds of women of color felt underestimated by their peers, when it came to their ability to succeed academically. This did not necessarily affect social involvement when it came to study groups, as women of color were more likely than any other race/ethnic group and gender to be involved in a study group with their peers. In fact, they chiefly formed the study groups that they were involved in, or invited by others. If women of color were to leave study groups, the reasons were as follows: "not productive, lack of group chemistry, and no longer having common classes" (p.79).

Finally, one of the studies in the research report focused on interactions with law faculty (Hornblower, 2020). The study found that while women of color had the lowest attendance rate at events run by faculty, Black/African American women were the highest racial group of women to attend these events, with 64% being present (106). Interestingly enough, women of color were more likely to meet one-on-one with their professors to discuss coursework and other relevant topics. Relating to future employment, most students—regardless of gender and race—planned to practice law after law school and were less likely to consider a career at a large firm as opposed to a small/medium-sized firm (p.125). This varied when looking at different groups of women of color at their respective ranked institutions. For example:

> a higher percentage of women of color from the top 20 law schools report they are considering work in a large law firm of 500 or more lawyers and/or as a judicial clerkship, while a higher percentage of women of color attending a law school ranked outside the top 100 report they are considering work as a solo

practitioner" (p.125)

Looking back at other factors that can affect experiences of marginalized gender and race identities—such as socioeconomic status—many women of color in law school face the pressure of bearing the full costs of their tuition on their own. About 72% of women of color who worked during law school explained that they were financially responsible for themselves in law school was the main reason they were.

Out of all other studies done and explored in this review, NALP & The Center for Women in Law (2020)'s Women of Color: A Study of Law School Experiences was the most closely similar form of research needed to understand how to navigate this current research being done. It serves as a foundation for my research, as it establishes a solid understanding of the different sentiments women of color have pertaining to their law school experience. This deeper understanding of the various findings focused on women of color is incredibly important for the advancement of research in this area. Though rich in data and results, the research report can benefit from being taken a step further. The studies do not fully consider the future implications of these experiences in terms of their effects on women of color's internal fears of fraudulence. This area of study could benefit from research focused on what these sentiments and experiences mean in the long run for women of color navigating these institutions in the future.

Furthermore, research from the American Bar Association (ABA) found that women of color leave law firms at higher rates because they do not feel valued and seen within their firms (Chanen, 2006). This was a result of a few factors: perceived discrimination, racism, and unwanted critical attention. The report states that these women have left law firm practices because "they are victims of an uninterrupted

cycle of institutional discrimination (Chanen, 2006, p. 33). With that being said, there appears to be a gap between women of color's experiences in law school and the understanding of how and if these factors affect their experiences in professional spheres.

Lastly, a look into the experiences of women of color who teach at law schools has also yielded interesting results. Vaughns (2003) recognizes the resilience that women of color face to join the other side of the table at law schools, becoming the "educated" to the educator: "the odds of success in the legal academy are stacked against women of color from the start . . . in the professional overall, in fact, women of color continue to be underrepresented" (p. 499). This partially is rooted in how law school is perceived, as it is noted to be "hostile" to people who come from more marginalized identities and backgrounds (Vaughns, 2003, p. 499). There is also a stigma that women of color who are teaching law are not as qualified to teach as their counterparts who have different identities. The study connects with the affirmative action scholarly review, as the author notes that "society tends to equate affirmative-action hiring with being less well qualified" (Vaughns, 2003, p. 500).

Conclusion

Overall, the literature provides a deeper understanding of how different components of identity can affect this area of research. The scholarly work focused on experiences of women of color, intersectionality, and the imposter phenomenon provide a solid foundation for the developments that can shape identity-based experiences. These facets of identity can affect how students and adults navigate post-undergraduate life.

The work on undergraduate experiences and workplace environment illustrates research done on similar but different areas worth examining before delving into legal institutions. They emphasized the feelings of exclusion and isolation that can occur for minoritized identities under certain circumstances. Lastly, the research on law schools shed light on how legal institutions can improve their functions, as well as its specific effects on women of color during the three-year period they're enrolled. While this literature review provides a conceptual understanding of the area of research, the ultimate goal of this research paper is to fill in the gap presented in this literature review, with a closer examination of the connection between perceived fraudulence (imposter syndrome), gender and racial identity (women of color), and law school experience. This understanding of the potential connections between all these factors illustrates the research needed to be done on how legal institutions, both law schools and law firms, can improve to better serve all the students and employees that come through their organization. With these identified gaps presented, this study aims to answer the following question:

RQ 1: How do physical spaces impact women of color's perceptions of their ability to navigate law school and subsequent legal institutions?

RQ 2: How do ideological spaces impact women of color's perceptions of their ability to navigate law school and subsequent legal institutions?

Chapter Three: Description of Theory

Considering the nature of this topic, a multi-faceted approach is needed to inform my interpretation of the data. At the base of this research are facets of nuance: elements of identity, construction of identity in spaces, and intersectionality (the overlapping of identities to form experiences). Thus, I will be using Oyserman's (2003) racial-ethnic self-schemas approach and Crenshaw's (2013) intersectionality framework.

Overview of General Schema Theory & Racial-Ethnic Self-Schemas

Lee (2003) describes the concept of schema as one that "helps to explain how people construct representations in memory, how they process, interpret and understand streams of information . . . the schema is inferred from the observation that perceivers actively construct their own reality" (pg. 29). The term "schema" was first used by Bartlett (1932) in the field of psychology to describe "an active organization of past reactions or experiences" (pg. 201) but was later reintroduced by Rumelhalt (1980), Carrell (1981), and Hudson (1982) to be discussed in more of a literary sense (An, 2013). The historical understanding of the schema theory rests on the idea that previously acquired knowledge from a person's background is what meaningfully shapes the interpretation of text and other sources of information (An, 2013). Initially, researchers used an interactive process to understand the schema theory in action: "interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing, that between lower-level and high-level skills, and between reader's background knowledge and the background knowledge presupposed in the text" (pg. 134). In the present sense of the term, schema refers to cognitive structures that help describe categories of knowledge about the world (Cherry, 2022). This term has branched out to encompass different types of schemas, including

"self-schemas." Self-schema refers to cognitive generalizations about the self. Fong &

Markus (1982) present a study that examines the effects of self-schemas on processing

information about *other* people. The research discovers:

> An individual will evaluate others on features that are important to his or her own
>
> personality, and indicates that the self may have a *further* simple but potentially
>
> powerful influence on the perception of others. In the course of social interaction,
>
> self-schemas influence person perception by guiding and constraining the
>
> information-gathering process in such a manner that self-confidence in
>
> judgements and inferences about others that are based on self-relevant
>
> information (Fong & Markus, pg. 203).

In delving further into the concept of self-schemas, Oyserman et al. (2003) introduces a

multidimensional perspective: racial-ethnic self-schemas. Oyserman et al. (2003) found

that racial-ethnic minorities are at risk of academic disengagement. Oyserman (2008)

argued that while much research has been done on the positive effects of self-schemas,

not enough research has explored the potential negative effects. Her research examines

both positive and negative associations between racial-ethnic identity and academic

outcomes. Oyersman (2008) cites theories that posit similar results, such as following

status characteristics theory, segmented assimilation theory, and the social identity

framework. For instance, the segmented assimilation theory suggests that "strong

identification with the culture of origin to the exclusion of connection to broader society

is posited to be a response to discrimination that acts as a risk factor by keeping youth

from engaging with school as a broader societal institution" (pg. 3). She presents the

hypothesis that racial-ethnic self-schemas predict that a strong sense of connection to larger society and in-group can be associated with great academic achievement.

While she does acknowledge a gap in racial-ethnic self-schema research—that being its primary focus on academic outcomes and less on engagement in educational spaces—the theory conveys the way that multiple dimensions of identities can impact people's ability to succeed in academic settings. She describes two studies with African American and Latina/o youth that support predictions about the impacts of racial-ethnic self-schema dimensions. One central dimensional axis that she examines in her study is how racial-ethnic self-schema affects how the individuals perceive their relationship to broader society. Oyersman (2008) ultimately found that, "a positive connection to in-group alone will not have positive effects on school outcomes and well-being; connection to in-group needs to be accompanied by conceptualization of connection between in-group and broader society" (pg. 13). The theory contributes greatly to literature on self-schemas and racial-ethnic identity by demonstrating the importance of examining the "motivational impact of differing racial-ethnic self-schema dimensions that promote different ways of perceiving connections between racial in-group and broader society" (pg. 14). Furthermore, Oyserman et al. (2003) found that their model displayed a potential for individuals to take on a "minority identity," becoming members of an in-group that has to fight to have access to "larger societal resources" (pg. 333).

Relevance to Study

The racial-ethnic self-schemas approach is applicable to this research study. The theory is grounded in the idea that those with marginalized identities have a unique way of perceiving their presence both in-group and in broader society. My research engages in

both aspects of this idea, as participants were asked questions pertaining to their identity, sense of belonging, and relationship to their educational institution. More specifically, this approach will increase understanding of this topic by paying special focus to the participants' experiences with engagement and belonging at their school. Oyserman et al. (2003) found that the research shed light on the need to pay attention to how racial-ethnic self-schemas can affect engagement, not just the ways it can impact academic achievement. From a broad level, it creates a lens to look at the *why* of participants' data. By analyzing the responses through this lens, the ultimate focus will be on the participants' relationship to their law school. My thesis question explores participants' spatial relationships with different parts of law school: ideological stressors, classrooms, organizations, and informal spaces. All of these spaces and their associated relationship go towards better understanding areas of growth and strength, which is integral to identifying what spaces best allow women of color to succeed in and after law school. Thus, their study will take into account the considerations of a racial-ethnic self-schematic approach, while going another step further to also pay attention to participant's engagement and connection to their school in a non-academic sense—though social and academic factors are indubitably connected. While this theory does not account for the gender aspect of the participants' identities, the following theory will account for the interaction of gender and how it interacts with Oyserman's racial-ethnic self-schema approach.

Overview of Intersectionality Framework

A plethora of research has been done to understand how intersecting identities can affect one's ability to navigate social and professional situations. The term

intersectionality aims to:

> Focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics. It exposed how single-exist thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge, production, and struggles for social justice (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 787).

This concept emphasizes interpretations of multi-layered forms of inclusion and exclusion within differing identities. Intersectionality can be viewed as a collective force, used to mobilize identities and create a sense of uniformity amidst shared struggles (Carasthasis, 2016). This analytical framework has not remained static in the identities it uses to shape understanding. In fact, research has noted that traditional dimensions such as race, gender, and ethnicity have extended to include areas such as citizenship, sexuality, and age (Bose, 2012). Its foundation has grounded—in part—the work done within other areas of academia. This can be seen in the rise of scholarly work centered around intersectionality shaping disciplines of study, such as women's studies (McCall, 2005).

Despite its steadily increasing usage, intersectionality faces many standard criticisms, such as its identitarian framework and its focus mainly on Black women and the comparative race and gender dynamics (Carbado, 2013). These criticisms are rooted in the notion that the more intersecting identities one has that constitute as marginalized, the more likely they are to be disadvantaged. However, intersectionality does not assert that in every given context, a specific group of hierarchical identities are the most disadvantaged ones, as identity experiences can vary between situations.

Intersectionality is not formulaic and does not imply that certain identities will always suffer more than others (Carbado, 2013). In initial research that focused on Black women's experiences through an intersectional framework, the main objective stemmed from the realization that the intersected elements of both racism and sexism could not fully be illustrated when looked at separately (Crenshaw, 1991).

This comprehensive review of intersectionality is invaluable in understanding the specific need to examine the experiences of female pre-legal and legal professionals of color. Intersectionality also plays a role in understanding how identities can give way to and explain systemic inequality across multiple contexts. One scholar expands upon the concept of intersectionality, stating that beyond exploring overlapping identities, intersectionality refers to the "interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression" (Gopaldas, 2013, 90). The focus on identities that have often been marginalized within specific historical contexts is necessary for understanding research that needs to be looked at pertaining to present inequities. With that being said, it's crucial to examine the specific forms of discrimination that women of color experience in many situations, be they social, personal, or professional.

Relevance to Study

Used in tandem with the racial-ethnic self-schemas approach, the theory of intersectionality is vital for increasing our understanding of the topic. The participants in this project are women of color. Women of color lay at the intersection of two separate identities, along with other dimensions that will be explored (cultural identity,

socioeconomic status, first-generation background, disability, etc). In order to understand the nuances of this topic, one must recognize the complexities of law school as a student with a specific set of identities and struggles. This project aims to create a level of understanding and sensitivity to a dual-layered topic.

Throughout our country, debates have taken over regarding the "necessity" to use identitarian and/or intersectional frameworks (Williams, 2014). I argue that the relevance of people's identities is not up for debate. Studies of identity experiences are educational paths—a way to figure out how to bridge differences. In identifying areas of growth or strength for law schools through the perspectives of women of color, a solid framework for improvement can be developed. In other words, embracing differences in identity is a collaborative process that can make law school an inclusive place for everyone. The use of intersectionality helps to explain *how* differences in identities elicit perceptions. Used in conjunction with the racial-ethnic self-schemas approach, the data will hopefully reveal tangible solutions for change that account for the racial, ethnic, and gender considerations of this study.

Chapter Four: Methods

IRB Procedure

This research topic rests on the experiences of women of color, and speaking with participants of this demographic allowed me to acquire a rich amount of information. Given the scope and aims of my senior thesis, I opted to look at participants with recent experience in law school. Through conversations with my faculty advisor and experience conducting a smaller-scale research project at the start of my undergraduate years, I made the decision to conduct interviews, and I began with the IRB process. During the summer of 2022, I submitted my senior thesis proposal to the Boston College Institutional Review Board. After submitting the proposal, the research was officially approved on August 23rd, 2022. Additionally, I received approval from Boston College's Informational Technology Services to utilize OtterAi, a voice-to-text app to be used after recording a participant's interview.

Data Collection Procedure

With approval to interview participants for my research study, I sought to find participants in multiple ways. I utilized networking websites like EagleExchange to connect with alumni of my university who may fit my criteria. My criteria had three main components: identify as a woman, belong to an ethnic or racial identity that would constitute being a "woman of color," and have been to law school in the last seven years. The exclusion of White Caucasian identities in this research is articulated in my literature review, due to the unique statistical and anecdotal experiences that women of color encounter—or have encountered—in law school. However, Latin(x) women who may racially check the box as "White" were still allowed to participate due to their cultural and ethnic experiences. In addition, women of mixed race identities who may have

visibly been perceived as White were also welcome and encouraged to participate in the study—as there are still significant cultural, racial, and social experiences that any self-identifying woman of color may encounter, despite how they are perceived in society.

Participants who met the criteria had first-hand knowledge of the spaces within law schools and their experiences navigating them. While the last few years amidst a pandemic resulted in a change of format for multiple class years of law students, these participants could still speak about physical and ideological "spaces" in law school. I reached out to my undergraduate university's law school due to their wide range of affinity groups led by law students. In addition, I leveraged my network to reach out to individuals who possessed an interest in being a participant based on their identity or could connect me with those who would be interested. The recruitment flier can be found in Appendix A. I mitigated the risk of people within my network feeling pressured to participate by only reaching out to people I know in a professional or educational capacity and explaining the consent process. All of these methods included the caveat that there was no expectation, pressure, or obligation to participate in the study.

All around, the demographics of the participants were diverse in nature. Though similar in the criteria qualities, each participant had a diverse perspective to offer about their legal and post-graduate journey. There were 15 participants who opted to take part in the interview process. Of the people that were willing to be interviewed, 12 of participants were active law students, with the remaining participants actively employed. All participants identified as women of color, currently or recently attended a U.S law school, and were willing to share their experiences navigating law school. Eight of the

participants were currently attending a law school in the Northeast Region, while the remaining participants were scattered amongst different regions in the United States. All participants attended a law school in the United States, and they also went to an American undergraduate university. While the specific law schools will not be mentioned in this paper for the purpose of anonymity, there was an equal variety in terms of rank, program, and size. All of the law schools were ABA-approved. In addition, every participant was actively involved on campus in both informal and formal organizations. There were five Black participants, three Hispanic and/or Latin(x) identifying participants, three Asian participants, and four participants who identified as Mixed-Race. With these numbers in mind, two of the participants who identified as Mixed Race also identified as Native American, and two identified as half-White. Furthermore, the Asian-identifying participants represented a wide-range of countries and identities, including the South and East Asian Diaspora. Two of the Black participants identified as African-American, while the three other participants were of Caribbean descent.

Informed Consent

Every participant that completed an interview was required to read and respond to an informed consent form. The consent form stipulated all the necessary ethical and personal entitlements that the participants were given, such as being able to drop the study at any time and any minor risks associated with the research proposal (see attached consent form in Appendix B). Because all participants were interviewed on the Zoom platform, participants were expected to read through and sign the consent form prior to the start of the virtual interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any

questions or express any concerns, prior to the day of the interview. The participants were emailed the consent form in advance to be read over, and they were encouraged to ask questions throughout the informed consent process. After signing the consent form, participants had the option to approve the recording of the interview. If approved, a digital recorder was used to record the interview from the computer. This recording would then be uploaded onto OtterAi to create a transcript of the interview, with unidentifiable labels for each interview. Every participant approved of being recorded for the interview. All participants obtained informed consent and could end the interview at any point. Before the interview officially began, participants were reminded that there are no wrong or right answers pertaining to their experiences, and they were encouraged to respond as authentically as possible. The participants were also told that every positive and/or negative experience was pertinent to the project and that despite the nature of the study, they should feel comfortable speaking of any experience that defined their journey through law school.

Confidentiality

After the completion of each interview with a participant, the interview transcripts were stored on a BC-controlled, departmental server from the Department of Communication. The participants' identities were not maintained—as I kept all of the data anonymous outside of the consent form. Their identities were completely confidential, and the electronic consent forms were put in a secure location. The forms will be downloaded into a server, and the emails will be deleted. During the research analysis portion of my thesis, the participants were labeled with pseudonyms to maintain their privacy amidst the research data analysis.

Interview Process

Participants were asked 12 questions. The first few questions explored their racial, ethnic, and educational background. These questions provided a basis to understanding the pertinence of their identity in their lives and why they ultimately chose to attend law school. Furthermore, the next set of questions narrowed in on their experiences in various spaces in law school. This included study groups, organizations, relationships, and academic spaces. These questions contextualized the experiences of the participants and segwayed into the final set of questions which looked at their feelings about law school and their personal thoughts of ways law school could better support/prepare future female students of color. The questions also allowed participants to identify the positive ways their law school has supported them. These questions seek to encourage participants to critically analyze their experiences and their law school. All participants had the option to not answer any of the above questions. The participants' responses—which will be discussed more in-depthly in following chapters—varied in length. Interviews generally took no longer than thirty minutes to complete. The complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C. All 15 transcribed interviews totaled to 88 pages of data.

Analytical Procedures

Qualitative coding was performed on all data collected from interviews. I used qualitative coding for my research because of the critical need to focus on subjective experiences and diversity, two key pieces of information that benefit from being analyzed through a qualitative lens (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Qualitative research is incredibly pertinent for this research topic:

"Good qualitative research helps people to understand the world, their culture,

and its institutions. . . . Qualitative methodology can provide knowledge that

targets societal issues, questions, or problems and therefore serves humankind"

(Taylor, 2019, pg.7).

Given the topic relies on understanding experiences in the lens of specific identities,

qualitative research is especially useful for focusing on the lived experience and

interpreting participant viewpoints and stories (Taylor, 2019). While there are many ways

to gather qualitative data, I argue the importance of using interviews as the best method

to acquire data for this topic. Majid, Mihhidin, Othman, Mohamed, Lim, & Yusof (2017)

stated that qualitative interviews can be useful in that they provide rich and detailed

information that can help the researcher understand the experiences of their participants.

After each interview, I exported the transcribed interviews into a document in the

secure, departmental server. After interviewing all participants, there were approximately

88 pages of data that needed to be qualitatively coded. I read through each transcript

carefully, before using any codes. The codes I ended up using were primary codes, such

as *a priori*, descriptive, and interpretive codes. Some quotes that will be explored in

Chapter 5 may be lightly edited for readability and cohesion; specifically, certain speech

tics such as "like " or "um" were removed, not changing the meaning of the participant's

statement. I focused on primary and secondary cycle coding, using a phronetic-iterative

approach (Tracy, 2018). This encourages continued reflection based on the emergence of

the data that is compiled throughout the process (Tracy, 2018). Descriptive coding was

used to categorize specific statements made by participants into general themes.

Interpretive codes went a step further, taking statements based on the participants'

personal sentiment/experiences and placing them into inferential categories. Lastly, *a priori* codes were predetermined categories that I hoped to analyze, based on the research gathered from the literature review. There were initially 40 codes used at the beginning of the qualitative coding process, ending with eleven key codes that will serve as the basis of the analysis and interpretation section of this paper—to be further discussed in Chapter 5.

In examining the methods used in this paper, I argue the importance of using interviews to collect data. Current research, as seen in my literature review, mainly uses surveys as a way to gather data. The most in-depth research done on female law students of color—which is also detailed in Chapter 2—was conducted by the Center for Women in Law and the NALP Foundation. The study, *Women of Color: A Study of Law School Experiences,* is "a groundbreaking examination of the challenges different law students encounter as they navigate various academic and professional obstacles early in their legal career" (Hornblower, 2020, pg.4). The research consists of a 150+ document that details statistics surrounding students at 46 law schools nationwide (Hornblower, 2020). This research, though incredibly useful and explored in the literature review, comes with multiple gaps in this paper topic. For instance, the research study focuses on all law students as opposed to just female-identifying participants. While some of the statistics were focused on women of color, the statistics looked at a broad spectrum of gender and racial identities with quantitative results derived from them. While it provided useful data for this project, the interview approach generated personal and anecdotal data surrounding the experience of women of color in law school. Legard, Keegan, & Ward (2003) state as follows:

"There are a number of different theoretical perspectives on in-depth
interviewing, and different types of interviews. But the features which are broadly
consistent across research models are their flexible and interactive nature, their
ability to achieve depth, the generative nature of the data and the fact that it is
captured in its natural form" (pg.168)."

My research paper seeks to hone in on a lesser number of participants with a more
in-depth look into each experience they share. Given few studies have focused solely on
women of color in law school, there is no "set" standard of practice when it comes to
research data collection. Thus, I assert that the use of interviews will positively contribute
to this area of research and possess a greater opportunity for meaningful data to be
examined in this area of study.

Chapter Five: Analysis & Interpretation

Analysis & Interpretation Approach

At the basis of the phronetic-iterative approach is the grounding concept of "phronēsis," which focuses on the way "data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted, analyzed, and communicated so that it illuminates significant problems and can contribute to transformation and improvement in relationships, organizations, and societies" (Tracy, 2018). Thus, an intentional way of organizing my codes starts with pinpointing the specific issues and concerns of interest—that being the physical and ideological spaces present in law school for women of color. This approach begins with descriptive primary cycle coding. I started with a cursory round of basic first-level codes that would capture the "simple descriptions of 'who, what, when, where'" (Tracy, 2013).

Descriptive Primary Cycle Coding

To start this process, I began with a method called "open coding," focusing on the 88 pages of empirical materials that were gathered through participants' interviews to look for any descriptive and interpretive codes, in addition to the *a priori* codes that are rooted in my predetermined topic and scholarly research. This provided a space to see any prevailing or common codes that came about in the data. In total, there were a total of sixty-seven codes that were highlighted in the initial stage. Some of these codes related to the emotional experiences of the participants. Among these include feelings of inclusion, isolation, invisibility, disregardment, community, belonging, uncomfort, vulnerability, frustration, stress, and self-doubt. Other codes related to feelings present in physical spaces, such as networking events, classrooms, and organizations. These included codes such as traditional, doctrinal, conservative, lack of diversity, White, male, gunners,

support, and curriculum. Some codes focused on the participants' "why" of attending law school, as seen as follows: helping people, advocate, always knew, communities, family, legal knowledge, change, improvement, and interest. There were also general codes that spoke to the positive and negative experiences that the participants' experienced. Among them include imposter syndrome, anxiety, representation, burnout, anger, system, competition, mentorship, pressures, comparison, and balance. Lastly, a plethora of codes spoke to the ways the participants' spoke and thought about their law school: improvement, diversity, mental health, purposefulness, preparation, environment, safe, legal education system, and opportunity. While this is not an exhaustive list, the descriptive codes above speak to the general areas of codes that came out from this topic. The two *a priori* codes were simply "physical" and "ideological."

Secondary Coding & Themes

During the secondary cycle of coding, there were multiple themes and categories that came about. The multitude of codes were broadly placed within core themes that serve as the basis of this analysis. There are approximately four different themes that emerged from the 67 codes: interactional spaces, ideological capacity, lack of diversity, and the duality of good and bad experiences. Each theme was broken into further sub themes that encapsulated the various groupings of codes that came from the initial analysis stage. There were *a priori*, descriptive, and interpretive codes. This cycle of coding was no doubt an integral part of this process, as "secondary cycle coding benefits from interpretive creativity and theoretical knowledge" (Tracy, 2018). Therefore, these codes will illustrate an idea of the conceptual findings that came about in this research project. After delving into each of these categories, an interpretation of each of the

code-based themes and findings will be explored. Each of the five themes will be interpreted at the end of their respective paragraphs/sub themes, using Oyserman's racial-ethnic self-schemas approach and Crenshaw's intersectionality framework.

Analysis of Interactional Spaces

Physical spaces were one of the two *a priori* codes developed for this thesis, developing into a general theme of interactional spaces. The term "interactional" refers to the ability for a space to influence someone's experience and vice versa. A communications lens was pertinent for this theme, and exploring tangible spaces in law school resulted in three subset categories that were found in the interviews: interactions with classmates in academic and social settings, professors in classrooms and office hours/informal capacities, and within affinity spaces. From a general standpoint, participants' experiences in law school were in-person, with the exception of one participant having a mostly virtual experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common physical spaces that were mentioned include classrooms, various administrative offices, social events, networking endeavors, competitions, study groups, and organization-wide programs and retreats.

Some general experiences that were mentioned include areas of improvement for physical spaces, specifically in making them more accessible and inclusive. Participant #2 cited that she wished there were more spaces on campus for law students to study in-between classes. She explained that having limited space for studying made it difficult to study and feel integrated among the student body, as being a woman of color was already an isolating experience. Furthermore, Participant #8 articulated that her campus's decor implicitly makes people of diverse identities feel less included. Correspondingly,

she mentions that there are few, if it all, diverse legal figures on the walls of the institution—with mainly White leaders and very "Confederate" styled decor. She said, "The decor is very confederate. It's literally one of the reasons why me and my friends don't always study in the library because of the setup . . . you have George Washington's wig on display, and like a Texas flag or something. There's probably not one Black face." The participant suggested that creating more awareness of people of color who made strides in the law can create a more welcoming environment for those from underrepresented or cultural backgrounds. The remaining findings from the data focused on the below three categories.

  Classmate interactions. Participants had both positive and negative experiences with classmates in their time at law school. On one hand, Participant #3 found that the specific law school she attends is known for its emphasis on community among its students. She mentions that the environment enables students to be open in their communication with other students. They are able to ask for notes if they missed class, share outlines with one another, and study together without worrying whether or not people's intentions are bad. This helped to create a less cutthroat environment and became more of a non-factor among the other stressors of law school. Participant #14 also had a similar experience, stating that having a non-traditional grading system takes so much pressure off of the relationships they are building with others: "I have a couple of friends who go to other schools, and they are struggling because you never know if someone is trying to be your friend because they think you're going to them help get further or because they truly want to be your friend." Participant #8 described her role as a mentor to 1L students and how it has created a community bonding experience for her

and rising class years of students. Participant #12 found that 2 and 3L student advisors at her law school are also very willing to be a resource and support mechanism to 1L students.

On the other hand, some people found that their law schools had "gunners," otherwise known as people who always appear prepared for class, take advantage of every resource, and can make other students feel inadequate. Participant #4 described a negative experience where a male classmate spoke over her and insisted that her contributions to an assignment would not be liked by the professor. Furthermore, Participant #1 mentioned feeling like law school sometimes resembled high school. She cited an incident where one of her classmates claimed she was going home, but she later found out the classmate was studying with one of her other friends. She states below:

> "I think those are the only memories that kind of make me feel like I don't know. I guess kind of gross? Like, being left out definitely feels kind of like high school or middle school. Unsurprisingly, both of those people are White."

She states this left her with a feeling of bitterness. Furthermore, Participant #1 explained another complex dynamic. She suggested there is a dichotomy between the need to make friends and the realization that fellow classmates are future colleagues. This was further supported by Participant #12:

> "I think there is a general obstacle to being able to connect with other students on a level that is not academic. It can be a little difficult because there is so much built anxiety for different reasons among different students. So I would say it has been more of an effort to try and get to know individuals outside of the student context."

Participant #12 shared that a personal tragedy that occurred in her cohort was also a catalyst for creating a more cooperative environment—one less combative than other sections. She explains that it resulted in members of faculty stepping up and reminding students how important it was to take care of themselves first and that health was paramount. This importance of mental health was a common denominator in most of the experiences mentioned by participants. With all of this being said, there were comments about the need to find classmates/people who had similar values. Participant #14 found that having a growth mindset was crucial to law school, emphasizing the importance of surrounding yourself with people who have the same goals as you.

Professor interactions. In all of the different themes examined in the interview process, opinions of professors yielded different responses. Participant #4 and #3 suggested that experiences with professors largely varied from person to person. Participant #4 cited a professor that comes off as unapproachable because he did not let students ask questions in class. Similarly, she described another professor below:

> "There's this one professor, I would say she's a lot like the professor at the beginning of Legally Blonde, like really intense energy. She has great intentions, but she makes me feel so dumb every day. I go after class, and I apologize to her for bombing my cold calls. And she's like, 'it's okay.' I'm like, well, you didn't make me feel okay, in that moment you made me feel really stupid. I don't say that, but that's how it feels."

On the other hand, Participant #5 stated that she had strong personal relationships with her law school professors. She found that they were transparent, available outside of office hours, and open. Participant #5 added a caveat that she felt her school had unfair

expectations of the students. She said, "I felt like they held us to a higher regard. But we didn't necessarily have the same resources and materials that the other schools did. And it wasn't an equal playing field."

Other participants described a dynamic that made them feel like they needed to apologize for prioritizing their health. Participant #2 mentioned feeling like she almost had to "plead" for them to forgive her if she missed class due to mental or physical health. Specifically, she said, "The professors I've had have been really nice. But I always feel like if I ever have to miss out for mental health or physical health, it's like I'm pleading for them to forgive me. And that feels really bad."

In contrast, she suggested that professors of color more often recognized the effect of legal issues on minority groups than White professors. She cited an example of a Latina professor who had her students write a paper about how a rule of evidence impacted minorities. She explained this experience made her feel like at least one of her professors understood how identity played a role in the study of law. She stated, "It was a wonderful experience, even though the work was difficult . . . the stories and cases I had to read were difficult, but I appreciated that we were at least covering these topics." However, some participants found that having a professor of color did not guarantee a connection with them. Participant #13 cited having a Black professor her first year and being disappointed after not connecting on a deeper level. She said, "I had one Black professor during my first year who was very boring. So, huge disappointment, but I actually found more connection and camaraderie with people that I didn't think I'd be able to connect with."

Participant #3 explained that professors who made the effort to check in throughout the semester were helpful. She said, "The amount of emails that we get every week of people just checking in is kind of wild. I would have never even expected that . . . You're like, okay, there's people out there that I actually can go to if need be." However, the participant mentioned that it is hard to find diversity among faculty members in her law school unless you are intentional about it. She stated, "I chose my professors. So I have a black woman professor, but if you aren't intentional about it, or not trying to seek out those classes, then you won't have a professor that looks like you, which is frustrating." In other words, the participant suggested that unless students seek out having a diverse professor, students would not likely be able to take a class with one.

However, Participant #8 suggested that professors are open to conversations if you take the initiative and reach out. She explained that they can even explain course material in different and more comprehensible ways. A resource she highlighted in her interview was the Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion who taught at her law school and was always available to students. Participant #8 also found herself being more comfortable with an advisor who came from a similar racial background, as she felt like she would be best supported in that way. Other participants had similar sentiments, finding that professors of color appeared more willing to support Black law students. Participant #10 used her transactions professor as an example:

> I went to office hours of my senior transactions professors that had specific office hours just for the Black Law students in her class. She was the Black Law Student faculty mentor. Knowing that Black Law Students are likely not as versed in code

interpretation, she set aside specific one-on-one time to work through those kinds of foundational skills.

Participants described the best qualities in professors to be those who did not make people feel embarrassed for getting an answer wrong, were open to questions outside of the classroom, and were intentional and sensitive about how class material could affect students of different identities. Participant #7 found it very helpful that her professors were available to help with anything she needed over her three years, even resulting in great mentorship relationships.

Other participants found that professors could make an environment feel more intense and, at times, inequitable. Participant #1 shared an experience where she felt a professor would push back more on the responses of her and similar law students than with her White peers:

My professor would say no one is ever right in that class. But if a White guy answers he's like, huh, yeah, maybe. And if a woman, woman of color, or a man of color answers, sometimes he'll really follow up . . . . It's definitely a cold call type of feeling, but it's almost like an interrogation sometimes.

She said this was a sentiment that some of her classmates felt as well. Furthermore, there were factors that mitigated or exacerbated how well a professor was perceived in classroom interactions. Participant #12 suggests that the environment can be more or less stressful depending on their cold call strategy or pedagogical approach. Participant #15 described a professor of hers whom she personally liked but felt he often used the Socratic method in a way that embarrassed/humiliated students who were unprepared.

By and large, participants felt like certain professors were less willing to talk about issues centered around identity and its intersection in the curriculum. Participant #12 is involved on the DEI committee at her institution and noticed a trend with women of color, feeling disconnected from professors. Thus, Participant #12 suggested a need for initiatives to have faculty connect with students of color in a way that is not just "doctrinal questions about the law" but more about "creating a sense of comfort, safety, and belonging." She believed this would make professors more approachable and bring down the barrier among students, particularly first-generation students and/or people of color.

Furthermore, one participant suggested that while professors may try to support certain students of color, they may not do that for all racial-ethnic groups. Participant #14 recounted an experience with a professor who constantly mixes her up with other South Asian students, despite there being name cards sitting in front of them, as well as photos included on the roster. This also contrasted with the fact the participant found that the professor never mixed up the Black students, suggesting that certain identities were not treated with the same intentionality. She stated that this created a struggle of whether she should address the issue at the risk of it negatively affecting how she was evaluated in the classroom. Lastly, participants of Mixed-raced identities faced an internal conflict between their experiences of being a woman of color versus how they were treated/perceived on campus based on racial identity. Participant #1 found that her school's administration office was not equipped to help students of Mixed-race backgrounds make use of the diversity opportunities and resources. She gave an example of people telling her about a negative experience they had with career counseling: "She's

not gonna help you. She's gonna make you feel bad about yourself, like you are someone who's trying to go for a diversity position. Or just like in general, for you existing here in this space." This created a sense of conflict of whether or not she should consider applying for certain scholarships and opportunities based on how she presents phenotypically.

Affinity spaces. For the purpose of this study, affinity spaces will refer to any space that is based on a specific identity. The most pertinent identities that are examined in the data focus on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and first-generation identity. Affinity will *not* refer to legal and professional interest organizations, though participants were asked for all of their involvements. A majority of the participants were involved in at least one racial affinity group, including organizations such as Black Law Students Association, South Asian Law Students Association, Latin American Law Student Association, the Women of Color Collective, First Generation Lawyers Organization, etc.

In general, the experiences in affinity spaces proved to be mainly positive, with a few exceptions for participants. Participant #12 said that affinity groups have been a good way to contextualize the communities available to students, as well as the different points of identity and belonging that those groups can offer. Participant #1 suggested that affinity groups can make people feel more welcome, and those spaces provided a place to meet others and attend fun events. Participant #7 had similar sentiments, saying that the organization helped her move beyond her assigned cohort and take advantage of the study resources they offer. In addition, Participant #11 felt like the affinity groups gave her more community than she had at her undergraduate university, explaining as follows, "I

have actually had more Hispanic friends here than I have ever had in any institution/job I have been in. I think I am actually making a conscious effort to find other people in my community." Other participants found that being involved in these affinity spaces can also open up different resources. Participant #10 recalls being president of an affinity space for first-generation law students, which helped expose law students to connections in the legal world that they may have otherwise not have known. These connections—along with resume reviews—helped to create more opportunities for students. Furthermore, one participant found that being a leader in an affinity space allowed her to create a set of strong friends that allowed her to have a safe space in a predominantly white institution. Overall, 13 out of 15 participants had very positive associations with their experiences in affinity spaces and felt they were able to find community.

Be that as it may, some participants felt like affinity groups were not always what they hoped they would be. Participant #14 suggested that some specific affinity groups on campus were better than others. She noted that the Black Law Students Association was an amazing resource at her law school, but she found that her affinity organization on campus did less to create a community and provide resources. She proposed that it might have to do with the fact that at her law school, a majority of the "people of color" identify as Black. As such, law students from other backgrounds did not necessarily have as robust of a support program to provide an equitable experience. She found that this rolled over to academic spaces as well, saying that it was great how cognizant professors were of treating Black students appropriately in class, but she wished this same mentality was extended to Brown students in class who were routinely mixed up with other students.

Furthermore, Participant #13 mentioned that the affinity organization on her campus has a lot of in-group fighting. She cited feeling like there was a lot of unnecessary drama:

> BLSA (Black Law Students Association) internal fighting is not cool. So unnecessary. It's privileged. Sometimes I get the sense that it is a little catty. Hard to tell, but I have tried to stay away from the fact that there was some drama last year, and I have occasionally felt like I am being roped into it.

On a different note, participants at other universities wanted more funding for all the organizations. Participant #8 felt that her law school could have provided more funding space for certain affinity groups, as well as prioritized those types of organizations as much as they prioritized other clubs on campus. She said, "I wish there was more support, and that includes more funding for the affinity organizations. And I'll say all of them, but specifically for the Black Law Students Association . . . I feel like they could be doing so much more."

Interpretation of Interactional Spaces

Based on the participants' classroom interactions, spaces with classmates can affect the overall satisfaction participants have in the classroom and law school as a whole. Participants found that environments of less intensity enabled them to develop a stronger connection to their classmates and the broader law school community. Participants found negative experiences with classmates created feelings of bitterness, as well as a general obstacle to how their relationship would look with their peers from a professional and social standpoint. It all reflected a need to connect with classmates on a non-academic level, focusing on preserving individual mental health and mitigating any risks of drama/negative interactions. This finding falls in line with the idea of

racial-ethnic self-schemas, as Oyserman (2003) posits a need for minority individuals to take both in-group and larger society into account if they hope to excel in academic spaces. The pattern of participants' data of positive and negative emotions suggests correspondence with Oyserman's approach—that intentionality in how one interacts with broader society (aka classmates) in these niche spaces can affect the overall experience.

From the analysis, participants experienced a disconnect between themselves and their professors. From an intersectional framework, Crenshaw (1991) utilizes a dimensional way of understanding this disconnect. According to a recent study by Zippia, approximately 69% of professors in law school identify as White, with racial minorities making less than 31% of the faculty demographics. Crenshaw's approach suggests that the disconnect stems only partially from the participants' overlapping identities. Participants had a unique way of perceiving the world, in line with Bartlett's (1932) schema theory. This could explain why participants did not always feel like their identities were properly considered in the classroom discussions.

Furthermore, Crenshaw's theory could also suggest that White professors may benefit from implementing more inclusive practices to teaching. In the same way that the participants carry unique identities, White professors taught material based on the way they perceived the world. The common codes that pertained to this disconnect included words such as "belonging," "safety," and "comfortability." The overall finding for this sub theme suggests professors need to embrace a more inclusive and holistic approach to teaching material and evaluating the comprehension of their students, as well as appearing more accessible. Budding research has conveyed the importance of incorporating intersectionality into law and legal concepts (Ajele & McGill, 2020),

suggesting that those teaching the law could benefit from using an intersectional approach.

In either case, the majority of participants considered their time in affinity spaces to be positive. While there was room for improvement for some affinity organizations, participants found they at least had potential to create meaningful connections if they joined one—if they had not *already* created connections in those spaces. Oyserman (2003) would describe these experiences as "in-group" interactions, moments that may not necessarily relate to their broader experience in law school but yields positive outcomes for the participants. This finding provides fewer implications on this thesis but suggests affinity spaces to be a way to strengthen in-group relations if they have significant resources and are equal among other affinity spaces on campus. Otherwise, they can create feelings that participants are less cared for if resources are not equitable.

Analysis of Ideological Capacity

"Ideological" was the second a priori code that developed into the broader theme of "ideological capacity," which encompasses the participants' mental, emotional, and psychological feelings/thoughts. For the purpose of this analysis, "ideological" spaces refer to the mental and emotional state of experiences that participants encountered throughout their time in law school. These spaces may not be tangible—like a classroom, for instance—but are more likely to be intrinsic feelings that arise in various contexts in and because of law school. There were a plethora of experiences that hit on this specific theme. The participants experienced a variety of emotions throughout their time in law school, based on encounters in classroom, social, and professional spaces. In general, the majority of participants used words such as stressed, overwhelmed, and anxious to define

their experience managing their workload and responsibilities. An interpretation of all the sub themes will be explored at the *end* of this section.

Negative feelings. Within law school, many participants' experienced a drop in their self-efficacy. Participant #4 explains that she may have imposter syndrome, often second-guessing why she is in law school. She also mentions feeling guilt for not studying for exams at every point she has free time. Another participant—Participant #8—struggled with the idea of even labeling her feelings of self-doubt as imposter syndrome, saying that whenever she starts to doubt herself, she remembers she is so much more than a law student and her GPA. By the same token, Participant #6 described having imposter syndrome which she referred to as "corny," saying that she had to work very hard to not compare herself to other people and feel like she was up to par with everyone else at the law school. Participant #9 labeled her feelings as imposter syndrome, saying it was an ideological battle that required an adjustment. She said it was difficult going from a straight A student to being truly challenged academically. Participant #12 suggested that first-generation students may be more susceptible to imposter syndrome, as she noticed that first-generation students of color are less likely to share their opinions in her classes. She said, "being the first in your family to attend law school and dealing with the cold call environment in class, it can be really intimidating to try and talk to professors outside of school."

Participant #5 learned early on in law school that she had developed test anxiety which caused her to freeze up when she was in class. She said that grades became a source of insecurity and uncertainty leading up to final exams, causing a lot of nervousness. From a classroom perspective, Participant #9 found that the Socratic

Method—a method in which professors will randomly call on law students to answer questions—became a source of anxiety for her. The participant said that it was even worse to be called on when you were in a space of not feeling your best, making things worse and causing her to feel paralyzed with fear. Similarly, Participant #2 shared that she also had anxiety, which has made it difficult to handle various classes. She suggested that it can be particularly difficult when the class materials intersect with specific identities. She recalls a time where they were going over the case of *Loving v. Virginia:*

> And during that semester, I was preparing for my wedding. We got married on April 1st of this year. And it was a lot. But we were going over *Loving v. Virginia,* which just like, you know, interracial marriage. Yeah. So I married a White man. And so it was like a really important case to me . . . It's hard to hear people's opinions that directly affect or directly comment on my identity.

Adding onto that, Participant #8 found that course material that intersects with identity can make her feel obligated to speak up. She suggested that there is not enough attention paid to the nuances of conversations around inequality and systemic barriers. She recalled having conversations with friends after class to "debrief" how they felt after those discussions. She said it made her feel a lot of anger, and debriefing with friends helped her vent. In a different way, participants found that they also doubted whether or not they truly belonged in certain affinity spaces. Participant #1 struggled with her own identity as a first-generation student and worried whether or not she was taking a resource away from someone who was "really first-generation." She suggested that there are certain identities and people that may feel more or less welcome to take advantage of on-campus resources. The participant had an internal conflict of whether or not her privilege offset

the ways in which she still carried marginalized identities. On a different note, Participant #13 also felt an internal conflict upon navigating networking events. She felt like the people at the events did not want her there which juxtaposed with her own feelings that she did not know *how* to be there. Participant #6 similarly felt overwhelmed and stressed at the prospect of networking and finding a job. In brief, participants carried at least one sense of intrinsic stress and self-doubt pertaining to their navigation of law school as a woman of color.

Pressure. Some participants found that they place a lot of pressure on themselves to succeed. Participant #11 noted that in coming to law school, she carried a pressure to become an example for others—being a good representation for their community. Participant #7 had a similar experience, citing her group of friends who were LatinX and really helped to support one another under the weight of the pressures they carried. In various spaces, participants felt feelings of isolation from being a woman of color in predominantly White spaces. Participant #11 found that she has become hyper aware of her identity in the space, placing a future responsibility on herself to bring up her community. One participant suggested that it can also be hard to balance the social pressures of connecting with people while maintaining personal wellness. Participant #12 describes the law school environment to be immersive. She proposes that the environment can be difficult because it is so unfamiliar to many people, which can make it difficult to connect with students who are very hyper focused. Participant #13 felt a pressure to "fit" in at networking events and find connections, feeling like her worth was often measured based on how high she ranked in her class:

So, they kind of split the odds in the sense that they're like 'Okay, we are

only going to try to get our top 20% into Biglaw jobs.' And then everybody else

they kind of ignore, which is a lot of pressure for me. In terms of like, if my rank

falls, I go back to not existing.

Thus, some participants' battled to feel visible within spaces in law school, knowing that

they carried a fear of becoming less "seen" if their grades fluctuated enough to place

them below the top percent of their class. Participant #14 leaned into this pressure, saying

that she learned to prioritize her wellness because she does not want to come out of law

school in a bad or unhealthy state of mind. Altogether, participants found their success in

law school correlated to their visibility on campus and consequential treatment from

others.

Hope. While the data from the participants yielded a significant number of

negative ideological experiences, a common sub-theme emerged from the research: hope

to create a better world for others. A large intrinsic driver for many participants involved

a simple phrase: helping people. Participant #14 shared she has a focus on public interest,

expressing that her law school has made her think a lot about what she wants to

accomplish within the legal system. Participant #6 suggested that her experiences

working at a special education rights law firm made her passionate about doing

something that would have a direct impact on people's lives:

But I am really interested in using my law degree to help people who maybe are

not familiar with the system or cannot navigate it for whatever

reason—underrepresented communities, I think. It might change, but I want to use

my law degree to help those populations.

Participant #12 came from a scientific background but became more interested in the legal aspects:

> I was originally interested in medicine and my educational background for the most part was, studying biomedical research. And for me, I got interested in the policy implications of the research I was doing more than the actual research itself. I thought it was a really interesting area to focus on, especially with the development of new bio technologies and new advances in medicine. I thought the legal and ethical implications of those advancements were more interesting for me as a career and so that's why I'm in law school."

Participant #15 sought to combine her subject matter interest of healthcare with her driving force to create change in the world. Participant #1 also expressed interest in working with kids from difficult backgrounds and figuring out ways to help society from a familial standpoint. In a different way, Participant #2 described wanting to help people without getting too emotionally involved. Thus, Participant #2 found an interest in real estate planning, something that served as a potential avenue for helping people—without the emotional implications. From a post-graduation standpoint, Participant #9 used her law degree to work with children who have troubled pasts—a path that has enabled her to better the future in both a personal and systematic way. She stated that her law school prepared her to navigate this role, allowing her to focus on ways to both "fight" the system and better it.

In other ways, participants wanted to give back to their communities by becoming a lawyer. Participant #11 stated she has hopes to bring others with her and uplift her community so that they are well-represented in legal spaces. This sparked her interest in

being some sort of advocate for others, whether it be individuals, corporations, or nonprofit organizations. In a different way, Participant #8 believed that helping and uplifting those from your community can look different and be executed in many ways. For example, she stated an interest in helping her community by helping other Black women get into law school to create futures for themselves. Participant #3 also suggested that her primary motivation for attending law school was seeing the disparities between different racial groups and how they are legally represented:

"Seeing the disparities between different racial groups economically but also just in how they're represented in different communities has kind of led me to get to this point. Seeing my mom and how she was a single mom—and also a Black woman—seeing those identities intersect. You know, she couldn't afford to have the best representation. And then the representation that she could afford wasn't necessarily an accurate representation of who she was as a Black woman. So seeing that kind of pushed me towards where I'm at right now."

In addition, Participant #5 witnessed people getting taken advantage of through property rights and wanted to do juvenile justice policy work, along the lines of creating rehabilitation programs that give them alternative options to prisons for those who directly suffered and then made mistakes as a result of inequitable treatment. Lastly, Participant #4 expressed a similar sentiment, wanting to help mitigate the amount of people who get taken advantage of in the legal system.

Interpretation of Ideological Capacity

All things considered, participants found as much intensity from ideological spaces as they did from interactional/physical ones. At the root of participants' "why" for

attending law school was hope. Participants entered law school with the hope to create a better world and utilize their interests. These interests were partially rooted in their identities, such as socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and gender. Though not as visibly tangible to others as an interaction in a classroom, participants battled with intrinsic stressors. Participants experienced imposter syndrome, test anxiety, and increased sensitivity during conversations centered around subject matter material that targeted their identities. Combined with the pressure to excel and help their communities, my analysis found an overwhelming sense of pressure that stemmed from their identities. These overlapping identities magnified the typical law school stressors and provided an undue sense of obligation and dissatisfaction. This finding supports research on the impacts of intersectional experiences on magnifying already prevalent struggles. Jackson et al. (2020) found that daily events related to race and other intersectional identities can be associated with day-to-day changes in ideological well-being. The above findings are supported by Remedios & Snyder (2015) who use stigma research to understand how women of color react to barriers and other forms of stigmatization. For one, they note that stigmatized individuals experience "chronic uncertainty about others' motives during interactions, and group identification, rejection sensitivity and environmental cues may shape how women of color perceive ambiguous situations" (Crocker et al., as cited in Remedios & Snyder, 2015, pg. 380). This supports the findings that participants did not always feel certain about the intentions of classmates, professors, and legal professionals who made them feel uncomfortable or alienated. While many participants referenced imposter syndrome, some felt uncomfortable at even using the term. Tulshyan & Burey (2021) argue that the use of "imposter syndrome" puts the burden on "fixing" women of

color instead of improving the places where women of color feel self-doubt. Interactional and ideological spaces notably impacted participants' sense of comfort, belonging, and security which worsened feelings of doubt. This developed an overall takeaway for this section: law schools should look closely at the spatial factors in law school that exacerbate women of color's sense of imposter syndrome. These findings strongly suggest that while participants may carry feelings of uncertainty into law school, it is ultimately the spaces in law school that confirm or disconfirm whether these feelings of doubt are accurate. Thus, law school administrations should ensure that there are inclusive approaches and resources available to female students of color.

Analysis of Lack of Diversity

Another common theme that was present in the participants' interviews was the role that lack of diversity played in the physical and ideological spaces in law school. These experiences skewed towards the negative side in terms of how it affected the participants' experiences, but they displayed two different sub-themes: tradition/conservatism and isolation/difference. On one hand, participants saw their negative experiences to be a reflection of "traditional" aspects of law school, including the curriculum and general law school practices. An interconnected theme would be the isolation/difference that resulted from participants' identities clashing with what it meant for them to "belong" and fit in at their law school.

Tradition and Conservatism. A couple of participants generally associate law school to be a White and conservative space. Within interactions with classmates at law school, Participant #4 was surprised to discover how many students carried conservative views that drew upon in class and social settings. Furthermore, Participant #13 shared her

experience deciding to transfer to a more diverse school: "I've been in White institutions my whole life, but I have never felt as non-White as I did at my first law school . . . a lot of people are White so there's like a culture of Whiteness." Furthermore, career trajectories of law students are often geared towards roles in corporate firms, known as "Big Law" firms. Participant #4 suggested that her law school traditionally supports students who are hoping to work at a Big Law firm, making it more difficult to receive professional support for public interest and other legal industries:

> We do have a lot of excellent workshops. But it's definitely like all our events are for Big Law. Statistically, most people go into Big Law. So they do help us cater to a professional space. But that is a very specific, professional space.

From a wider perspective of traditional law school elements, some participants found it hard to navigate expectations of key tools for securing a job: resumes, networking, and job searching. Participant #3 described her biggest barrier to law school being the nuances of how to create the "ideal" resume needed to succeed. The participant stated, "You're supposed to do your resume a certain way for law, internships and legal jobs, and I had no idea. The formalities were kind of an obstacle I had to get over." These formalities caused her to realize she needed support. She stated, "That required me to really reach out to help and admit that I don't know . . . And that's when the connections with the professors come in handy." Furthermore, Participant #8 found that in addition to her identity as an underrepresented minority (URM) student, she felt like her non-traditional path to law school was a contrast to the typical "K-JD" student—otherwise known as students who go straight to law school without taking a gap year. She noted as follows:

I have classes with people who are like a fifth generation law student, whose

great, great grandfather went to law school here, and I am a first generation law

student. So the learning curve of just law school, yes, but the dynamics of the

legal profession that I am learning on the fly is definitely a barrier . . . there's

people who have generations of understanding built into them.

Along similar lines, participants spoke to the expectations placed on law students.

Participant #10 suggested that law school professors infer a certain level of preparation

from students coming into 1L (first) year, stating, "They just kind of infer that you are as

prepared as your peers and that you had a similar background before law school."

Furthermore, Participant #10 confirmed she did not have a similar background as her

peers and said, "Law school operates on the presumption that you do." The reality is that

not everyone has the same level of experience, with Participant #1 noting that she did not

have any connections to people in law or law school before starting her first semester. In

addition to preparational and classroom aspects of law school, participants found that

they were judged based on the metric of what "traditional" lawyers looked and sounded

like. Participant #13 shared a time where she competed in a Moot Competition. The

Participant #13 suggested that implicit bias played a role in the outcome of the

competition, saying that a Black competition judge mentioned that the other judges felt

that she did not fit with "the style." She described the encounter below:

So I met with a Black woman that was telling me she thinks it was an implicit

bias issue. And she was saying like, essentially that you work twice as hard to get

half as much, but the solution is to be like, oh really accommodating and smiling,

you know, like soften yourself . . . I am trying to find a line on what I am willing to compromise.

Curriculum/pedagogical aspects. Out of all the traditional components of law school, the research for this thesis displayed an unforeseen trend: negative sentiment towards the perception and pedagogy of law. Participant #10 suggested that the competitive nature of law school makes it intimidating to apply to. She said, "I think it has developed a sort of separation from other professional fields that comes off as cliquey and serves as a barrier to entry for people who are not a part of these worlds. In addition, Participant #10 said, "The Socratic seminar, as well, I feel puts undue pressure on students." Furthermore, Participant #14 recognized how case-based the law can be and felt that professors should be intentional about how they teach legal material that affects marginalized communities. She described her class and said, "We are just reading cases over and over and trying to derive all the rules from them." Additionally, she noted that this way of learning has drawbacks: "Sometimes we focus so much on the rules that we are not focusing on the actual people that are affected by each and every case." On a similar level, Participant #8 suggested that the system of law school as a whole was not meant for women of color:

> I have felt a lot of anger at how the legal system and law school curriculum is. I literally say this all the time: this place was not made for me to succeed. This system was not designed with me in mind. So sometimes I use that as a backup if I do not do well in a class. I made it through, but it was not meant for me, and it was not designed for me to succeed in it.

Many participants considered and internalized the material taught in the classroom, which affected how they perceived the space. Participant #13 felt like she "fought to exist in some of her major classes. Moreover, Participant #15 believed that some of her White law professors used "antiquated" language that made students uncomfortable. She said, "Reading these old cases that have very antiquated language with, you know, racially motivated sort of connotations and listening to White professors just kind of use these phrases willy-nilly, you know, it's been weird." She identified words such as "colored" that were used by her professor in Constitutional Law.

Furthermore, Participant #2 said that professors and faculty are not always supportive when a student is uncomfortable with the material. She described a time when she discussed this with the Disabilities Office: "They just acknowledged that it was difficult but they were a little condescending, like 'Hey, you have to read this. It is part of the whole package.'" Participant #4 similarly felt like course material related to sexual assault and gendered discrimination was hard to read. She said, "If you have had the experience of being assaulted, reading the cases can be really difficult." Furthermore, she described this as a challenge. She said, "I think that is an unanticipated challenge, because you have to do your readings, and then sometimes I feel like I need to process. But sometimes it feels like you don't have time to process."

Participant #8 believed that law school professors should be more open to discussing issues of identity in the course material. Primarily, Participant #8 felt that her classmates' attempts to bring up topics of race and ethnicity were often discouraged by professors. Participant #8 described this feeling, saying, "We are not taking into account the race of the person, socioeconomic status, or citizenship status, and how they influence

a case." Furthermore, she said, "If you try to bring that up in class, like sometimes it is fostered, but probably not. Most of the time it is shut down. Like, that is not what we are 'supposed' to be taking our time on." When professors do discuss legal material related to identity, Participants #2 and #8 felt that their existence and identities were frequently put up for debate in topics such as affirmative action, interracial marriage, and marginalization. For instance, Participant #2 stated that it was difficult to hear her classmates debate about legal issues that directly impact certain racial and ethnic groups. She said, "It is hard to hear people's opinions that directly affect or comment on your identity. And that is what it felt like." Furthermore, Participant #8 described as follows:

> It happens a lot in Constitutional Law, which most students of color dread. This is because you are talking about topics that really hit close to home. And the law school classroom is about generating thought and perspective. And I just come from the mindset of like, my existence is not to be debated at this law school.

In a beneficial manner, participants found that they appreciated perspectives from other female law students of color in the classroom. Participant #6 said that a class can often have over 100 people with similar approaches to the topic, but it can be exciting to hear new perspectives and consider the context in which legal matters surface. Furthermore, participants possessed an interest in being able to use their diverse perspective in the classroom. Participant #12 shared a multi-dimensional way of examining the role of her identity. She said, "I think my racial, ethnic, and gender identity all come together to shape the way I view certain issues." Furthermore, Participant #12 shared the implications of those identities coming together, saying, "I think those play out,

especially when learning about these issues in doctrinal courses, so in that sense, my interaction with the material is just fundamentally different because of my identity."

Some participants appreciated the unique pedagogical opportunities offered at their law school. Participant #13 got a lot out of "practical" classes that encouraged trial simulations. She said, "My law school is all about practical experience. I had a lot of classes where they simulate a trial, and you interact with fake clients, so they will have actors come in." Moreover, Participant #11 recalled taking a criminal law class and taking away personal lessons from the material:

> Being in the classroom of criminal law, you know, learning about mass
>
> incarceration and very simple things like misdemeanors . . . I'm not just learning
>
> it, like I truly understand it in a way. If my aunt was out on a misdemeanor and
>
> had to be taken to the police station, she would not know how to defend herself
>
> because she didn't know English.

In addition, Participant #11 appreciated that law school offered a professional development course that helped to bridge the gap of knowledge for people who came from different backgrounds.

Isolation/difference. The feeling of distinctiveness within spaces on campus was a common sub-theme in the interviews. Participant #4 felt uncomfortable being the only woman of color in some of the organizations on campus. In addition, Participant #14 suggested that it can be difficult to carry diverse identities in a classroom setting. She said that she often has to compartmentalize her experiences because her professors channeled discussions toward more case-based material: "We are reading cases over and over, trying to derive all the rules from them that we can. Sometimes we focus so much on the rules

that we are not considering the actual people affected by each and every case."

Participant #5 felt like her first-generation identity further contributed to feelings of

isolation. She suggested that law school requires you to be self-disciplined. She said,

"When you do not know anyone going in, there is no one there to coddle you." Another

visible identity was that of Participant #6. The participant stated that her race is not as

visible as the way she experiences her ethnicity and culture—both more salient to her

experiences in law school. Similarly, Participant #1 grew up feeling like she was not

really a person of color, as her family would tell her that she is White and only White,

despite being multiracial. This affected her ability to discern what resources and

opportunities were "meant" for her.

In other ways, participants felt isolated from people, both spatially and in certain

scenarios. Participant #2 shared that she opted to take classes from home as a result of the

pandemic, which made it hard to connect with people. In addition, Participant #13

struggled to socially connect on a deeper level with women of color in the legal

profession. Participant #13 described her encounters with women of color at networking

events to be similar to encounters with White lawyers. She said, "A lot of them were

women of color but were still affluent women of color who grew up with a lot of money

and talk about their experiences in the same way that White people offhandedly do."

Furthermore, Participant #11 acknowledged the obstacle of interacting with classmates

who have a more conservative background:

> I think making that adjustment has been tough. There are also people from
>
> different backgrounds, institutions, and life experiences that maybe weren't so
>
> welcoming . . . And also being, you know, in a state like Pennsylvania where

people believe the election was stolen and it had a lot to do with last year's

election, especially when you're in law school, like people are deciding on cases

like that. So that has been a bit of a tough adjustment.

She also found that law students weren't as welcoming as her undergraduate peers, noting

she was in a more conservative area. Lastly, Participant #10 described how jarring it was

to be the only Black woman in a room, specifically thinking of how this will look like in

the legal profession (post-graduation). She described the feeling as "foreign" to navigate

the job market and talk to lawyers, creating pressure for her. Participant #10 did not feel

like her law school prepared her holistically: "My law school did not prepare me for the

realities of the legal profession as a Black woman, but as a lawyer? Yes." On the other

hand, Participant #8 did not think that the issues she saw could truly be fixed: "I do not

know if I would have a concrete suggestion on how they could prepare us because I think

it would really call for an entire overhaul of the legal education system."

Interpretation of Lack of Diversity

Of all the themes explored in this chapter, "lack of diversity" revealed some of the

most salient findings. Chiefly, participants found that their own identities clashed with the

traditional/conservative aspects of their law school. These findings were in line with

Oyserman's racial-ethnic self-schemas approach, particularly in the contrast between

in-group relationships and interactions among broader society (2008). While the

"interactional spaces" theme revealed true meaning found in relationships with professors

of color and fellow law students of color, the most trying aspects of law school were

rooted in difference. Altschul, Osyerman, & Bybee (2006) hypothesized that there are

three aspects of racial-ethnic identity (REI): "feeling connected to one's racial-ethnic

group (Connectedness), being aware that others may not value the in-group (Awareness

of Racism), and feeling that one's in-group is characterized by academic attainment

(Embedded Achievement)" (pg. 1155). Through my findings, participants had a high

sense of "Connectedness" with their racial-ethnic group, specifically in how prevalent

their race and ethnicity impacted the way they thought about course content and the

pedagogical style of their professors. The findings also suggested that participants did not

always feel like their thoughts and experiences were valued in academic and professional

settings; once again, specifically related to their racial and ethnic identities. Thus, there

was a strong connection to the participants' racial and ethnic identities, which clashed

with their perceived mistreatment in spaces on campus. Furthermore, the educational and

pedagogical findings from participants imply that the traditional style and usage of

racially-charged language in lectures negatively impacted the experience of students. This

primarily involved language that was "antiquated," such as the terms "colored," "negro",

or "Blacks." More recently, Columbia Law School's Black Law Students Association

(see Appendix D) shared a similar sentiment, stating as follows:

> "That said, the use of the word 'negro' concerns us most when it is repeatedly
>
> used outside of verbatim readings of aging texts. The term should never be used
>
> in creating hypotheticals or while posing questions to a class. It creates an
>
> uncomfortable and alienating experience for Black students" (BLSA, 2022).

This statement shared similarities to the experiences of the participants. Thus, the nature

of the language used in academic spaces can invoke feelings of discomfort and isolation.

This is not unfounded in the current research today. Martz (2007) states that students of

color reported the use of racially intimidating language in classrooms. Martz (2007) also

found that students of color were more likely to speak up in classes being taught by faculty of color.

Though not solely a gendered issue, participants suggested that case law that centered around sexual violence could be difficult to read. This made multiple participants wish their professor provided warnings when they were going to discuss difficult and more graphic topics. Research on female law students of color found that they felt less intelligent and articulate than they were when they entered law school (Fontaine, 1995), which may support the finding that participants routinely felt feelings of self-doubt and negativity. Both gender and racial elements are necessary for the intersectional approach. While studies on law school and students have focused on both elements separately, these findings may suggest a less obvious reason for the pattern of negative experiences. Pestko (2020) uses the intersectional categorization theory to suggest that "people perception may be a compartmentalized process" (pg. 128). Instead of people considering all the identities of an individual—a law student, Asian-identifying, and woman, for instance—they focus their attention on one social identity at a time. Thus, they "sharpen" their focus on some social identities at the expense of others (Petsko, 2020).

In this instance, peers, colleagues, and professors could be intuitively focusing on their identity as a law student without considering the way their intersecting identities affect their interactions. With these findings in mind, participants were *not* able to bring their full selves to the classroom because key parts of their identity were suppressed through the traditional aspects of the classroom. The suppression mainly existed from the inability to raise issues related to their identity, the introduction of racial and gender

focused case law without acknowledgement of its impact on those groups, and the lack of

diversity that exacerbated feelings of isolation and difference.

Analysis of Duality: Positive and Negative Experiences

While the above themes encapsulated the majority of the experiences of

participants, the "pros" and "cons" of law school were weighed as well. Some of the

positive experiences explored ideas of mentorship, inclusive spaces, and opportunities.

Some of the negative experiences focused on feelings of mistreatment and other

miscellaneous events that occurred.

Positive. Positive experiences varied across participants. For some, participants

expressed feelings of appreciation and inspiration at their law school's incorporation of

diverse faculty members. Participant #10 felt her law school took the right step in hiring

more Black professors, as it felt nice to see people who looked like her teaching courses.

On a different note, Participant #11 suggested her own law school was intentional about

fostering a warm and non-competitive environment which improved her holistic

experience. She also appreciated the physical spaces on campus, expressing that the

beautiful campus fostered a desire for her to learn. Participant #7 noted that the academic

spaces aided her ability to succeed on the CA bar exam because the teaching style

emphasized closed-book exams. She said, "law school taught me how to adapt and use

the resources available at my disposal." Another participant recognized that her law

school was resourceful and able to cater to the demographics of their student body.

Participant #1 said, "my law school knows the general areas for students tend to be public

interest and mid-sized firms, so they have a well-developed system of externships with

judges." Lastly, Participant #12 felt that her law school was really good at handling the nuts and bolts of the career search process, making things less confusing for students.

Many participants' positive experiences were derived from their on-campus organizations. Participant #1 enjoyed the opportunity to attend events on campus. It helped her feel accepted and welcomed in the community. From an affinity standpoint, Participant #6 felt that students with diverse perspectives offered a lot more perspective to topics with legal issues. Participants also have enjoyed the informal social spaces in law school, particularly stemming from the friendships they have created. Participant #14 shared her appreciation for finding friends in law school with similar values and goals. She said, "I'm just grateful that I'm at the place where I am and have found the people that I have found for sure." Participant #11 was similarly grateful for having a solid core group of friends. Similarly, Participant #8 made some of her closest friends in law school, and she bonded the most with other women of color: "They really are my support system. We really uplift each other, and I am so appreciative of them in the midst of dealing with other things." Lastly, Participant #15 recognized areas of improvement for her law school but described her experience as generally positive. She shared that one of her most positive moments was when everything "clicked," and she started to get a lot out of the course materials.

Negative. Among the negative experiences that participants encountered, mistreatment was an interpreted catalyst for these feelings. Participant #8 experienced a feeling of dread in her constitutional law class. She found that the discussions in class tend to elicit microaggressions that can feel like personal attacks masked by "devil's advocate" comments. In addition, Participant #15 suggested that relationships with

classmates can be difficult during final season because the environment becomes a lot more competitive, with students being graded against their peers. On a separate note, Participant #8 spoke to the feeling that her affinity spaces were often pushed on the backburner, while other organizations received more attention/funding. Lastly, she recalled a time where she and her Black friend were mixed up by an attorney at a networking event: "She got us confused, but it is also the fact that we look nothing alike. Our hair is different. We were wearing completely different outfits. So in instances like that, I am reminded of how much diversity is lacking in the legal profession." On the other hand, Participant #1's exposure to legal spaces created a dichotomy between her familial experiences with law and her moments in the classroom. She described that seeing her family get taken advantage of over lack of legal knowledge really spurred her decision to help in society through acquiring a J.D. In sum, the negative experiences of the participants were significant, as expressed in this section and integrated throughout the aforementioned findings of this chapter.

Interpretation of Duality: Positive and Negative Experiences

The findings from the duality theme present an undeniable fact: women of color have an experience in law school that is both similar and different from the typical law student. They desire the opportunity to learn, take advantage of resources, and find a support system. They have dreams to use their law degree to make a difference, using their law school as an instrument to do so. Their negative experiences can be similar to other classmates—stressing over assignments, professors, and the competitive atmosphere. However, identity-based facets of their journey *magnify* their experiences and add layers to their time in and out of law school. An intersectional approach finds

that those differences create a sociopolitical need to remedy the added components of stress that produce negative experiences. Gentile & Salerno (2019) treat the idea of intersectionality as political, calling for "the interrogation of intragroup differences and demands that experiences of inequality cannot be neatly compartmentalized and attributed to one status" (pg.. 208). Nadal et al. (2015) argued the importance of a qualitative approach to intersectional microaggressions, emphasizing the need to talk to women of color about the types of microaggressions they experience, as well as how those encounters affect their well-being, sense of identity, and mental health.

This data—used in conjunction with an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 2013)—suggests that while experiences of women of color in law may be similar to other law students, understanding the *discrepancies* of difference among law students of varying identities is key. Primarily, there is a need to understand how the differences in experience among women of color affect their ability to fully bring themselves to law school and subsequent legal institutions. Oyserman's (2003) theory of racial-ethnic self-schemas encourages the study of identity-based distinctiveness for the purpose of improving the success of intersectional identities within the broader education system. By learning these differences, this research potentially makes way for additional studies that can focus on mitigants for the primary areas of concerns that were proposed by participants. Furthermore, these conversations have the potential to produce solutions to improve areas, as needed, within respective law schools. It also encourages the identification of restorative ways to support future female law students of color, as the need has been clearly identified in the above experiences detailed.

Overall: Interpretation Results

Primarily, the data analysis explored four different themes: interactional spaces, ideological capacity, lack of diversity, and the duality of positive and negative experiences. Within interactional spaces, participants shared information regarding their interactions with classmates, professors, and affinity spaces. The findings were three-fold. For one, interactions with professors and classmates could affect the overall satisfaction participants had in the classroom and law school as a whole. Secondly, participants did not always feel like their identities were properly considered in the classroom, desiring a curriculum that encouraged them to consider how their identities intersect with the material. Thirdly, affinity spaces proved to be a positive experience for many participants, with the caveat of providing more resources to some spaces to make them more equitable.

Furthermore, there were three sub-themes that emerged from ideological capacity: negative feelings, pressure, and hope. Ideological capacity encompassed the participants' mental, emotional, and psychological feelings/thoughts. Participants found equal intensity from ideological spaces as they did from interactional/physical ones. At the root of participants' "why" for attending law school was a hope to improve the world. The ultimate finding was the discovery that while participants may carry feelings of uncertainty into law school, it is chiefly spaces in law school that confirm or disconfirm whether these feelings of doubt are accurate.

Lack of diversity explored the following areas: tradition and conservatism, curriculum/pedagogical aspects, and isolation/difference. Overall, participants found that their identities clashed with the traditional/conservative aspects of their law school.

Participants were unable to bring their full selves to the classroom because key parts of their identity were suppressed through the traditional aspects of the classroom. This suppression occurred on multiple levels, such as lack of sensitivity regarding introduction of racial and gender-based course material, lack of diversity, and minimal discussion of the connection between course material and marginalized identities. Lastly, duality of positive and negative experiences acknowledged the baseline similarities between women of color in law school with experiences of general, more represented law students. However, the findings suggest that identity-based facets can magnify experiences and add layers to their time in law school.

The main gap lies in the difficulty for women of color to bring their full selves to the classroom, as a result of the physical and ideological spaces in law school. The pedagogical aspect of law school often hindered the ability for women of color to consider the racial and ethnic implications of course material, feel comfortable sharing their perspective and drawing upon their experiences, and engage in meaningful conversations with faculty and alumni members of the institution who come from different backgrounds.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Summary of Findings

With this thesis, I sought to respond to two research questions: 1) How do physical spaces impact women of color's perceptions of their ability to navigate law school and subsequent legal institutions? and 2) How do ideological spaces impact women of color's perceptions of their ability to navigate law school and subsequent legal institutions?

In regards to these initial questions, my research ultimately led me to discover that law schools play a role in fostering the holistic preparedness of women of color. At the core of this examination, participants were asked to think deeply about the physical and ideological spaces they experienced in their respective institutions. With 15 experiences to draw upon, the research discovered a gap in the level of preparedness that women of color could potentially leave their institution with. Primarily, law schools do an excellent job of preparing students to succeed from a technical and professional standpoint. On the other hand, law schools need to take a closer look at how they can prepare students to not only succeed as a lawyer but as a female lawyer of color.

Overall, there was a desire for more equitable support across physical and ideological spaces on campus. First, participants wanted affinity groups to receive equal and fair resource allocation, so that every law student of color had an affinity space that supported them to its fullest potential. From a career standpoint, equal support for public interest and corporate jobs was desired so that students could make objective choices about their future career. Moreover, participants wanted an increase in mental health support to be provided to the law school community. There was also a desire for stringent

reporting mechanisms for bias-related incidents and sexual assault. From a preparational and ideological standpoint, participants experienced a dichotomy between two concepts: feeling prepared to pursue a career as a future lawyer but feeling unprepared to navigate a legal career as a woman of color.

In many cases, participants found that the legal education system left little space to share their perspectives in the classroom. This specifically revolved around the interconnectedness between participants' identities and the course material. As stated, they found professors to be—at times—unapproachable, which made it more difficult to speak up in class. This unapproachability and disconnect in classroom spaces limited the ability for participants to truly immerse themselves in the discussion, as they had to "leave" part of their identity and experience out of the conversation. This created a set of disadvantages for students who were hesitant to speak up, further increasing their feelings of being devalued and unseen.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study have major implications on this area of research. Traditional research on this topic examined ideas related to the imposter phenomenon, gender, and race in a separate capacity. This research paper explored the interconnectedness of all three areas, arguing that these elements are facets of identity that students bring with them to law school. Additionally, the study found that spaces in law school were the largest contributing factor to the negative feelings associated with experiences at these institutions. It transfers responsibility from women of color to law schools to create spaces that embrace the overlapping identities that students bring with them. This research also directly challenges the pedagogical model used in law school to

prepare students for success. The findings suggest a clear need to foster discussion that is sensitive to the marginalized identities that are often impacted by legal course material.

Furthermore, it encourages professors of law to consider the use of more inclusive practices. To increase belonging, many participants wanted more engagement from faculty. In particular, they believed faculty should provide direct guidance to students, making them appear more approachable. Additionally, participants wanted their professors to give warnings for sensitive topics/materials that pertain to mental health, race, gender, and other vulnerable identities. Similarly, there was a collective need for professors to be mindful of the language they used and the debates they fostered, particularly when either two impacted racial, ethnic, and gender identities.

Limitations

While the research study yielded various findings, there are limitations that should be addressed. First and foremost, the research focused on the experiences of 15 participants. While this generated a robust set of data, it is important to recognize that there were likely many experiences and perspectives of women of color that were not encapsulated in this study. Moreover, while there was a fairly even distribution among the racial identification of the participants, it is crucial to make clear that women of color are not a monolith. The experiences of participants are not in any way representative of an entire racial and/or ethnic group, though the data identified some trends among all racial and ethnic groups.

It is also important to recognize that none of the participants attended unaccredited law schools. This is important to recognize because Chapter One noted that women of color from unaccredited law schools were likely to have increased difficulty

navigating law school and after graduation. Thus, having participants from some of these schools may have added another dimension to the findings of this study.

Conclusion and Direction For Future Study

While my research sought to understand the ways that physical and ideological spaces can affect the ability for women of color to succeed in law school and post-grad, I did not expect to see a common theme among participants: altering the law school curriculum for future generations of legal graduates. The data suggests a direct need to address the ideological and physical impacts of the pedagogical/curricular model in law school. There were also conflicting views over whether this issue could truly be solved, without the reworking of the entire legal education system. Ultimately, all of my findings have led me to a core finding: women of color in law school may be prepared to graduate law school and enact positive change in the world, but they may be left unequipped to handle the very real implications of being a woman of color in the legal profession.

To take this research a step further, a new study could specifically look at the course materials and syllabi that are utilized across law schools. The study could also look deeper into the pedagogical aspects of law school, as this was a core finding of this study. Lastly, research in this area could benefit from combining both qualitative and quantitative data to strengthen the findings and show the need for this topic. Furthermore, we are still left with the following question: If law schools are not holistically preparing women of color to navigate the legal profession as a diverse employee, how can they work to do that? If research begins to more closely examine the spatial barriers that hinder women of color from bringing their full selves to law school, I have no doubt that law schools are up to the task of continuing to improve their institutions for the better.

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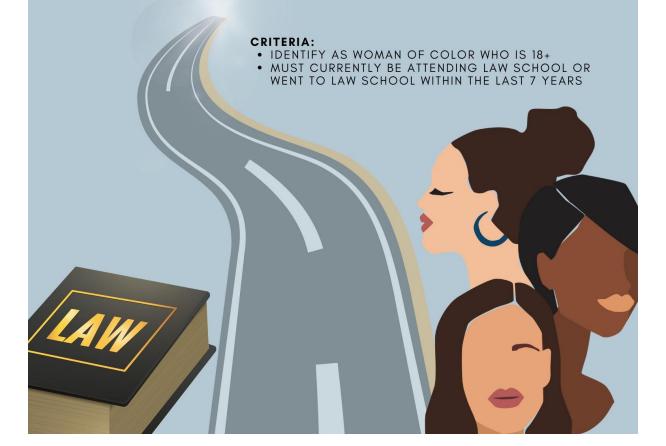
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Appendix A

Appendix B

<u>CONSENT FORM</u>

You are being asked to participate in a senior thesis research study titled "Spaces Matter: Examining the Implications of Social Spaces Both Physical and Ideological—on Women of Color Navigating Law School and Post-Graduate Endeavors." You were selected to participate in this project because you identify as an individual who is (A) a woman of color B) either currently attending law school or has attended in the past seven years. The purpose of this study is to better understand the way that spaces can impact the ability for women of color to navigate law school and post-graduate endeavors. The aim is to develop tangible ways to improve law school spaces for women of color.

Participation in this research would entail taking part in one interview lasting between approximately 20 and 35 minutes. The interview will be either in-person or virtual, depending on your preference. You will be asked approximately 10-12 questions, which you are free to answer in any manner you choose.

There are no direct benefits to you, but you may feel gratified knowing that you helped further the scholarly work in this research area. You will not be compensated for the time you take to complete this survey. There are no costs to you associated with your participation.

The student researcher will exert all reasonable efforts to keep your responses and your identity confidential. The researcher will seek to protect your privacy by, among other things, labeling your interview recording and transcript not with your name but with a pseudonym or other coded identifier.

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your relations with the student researcher or any part of Boston College. You are free to withdraw or skip questions for any reason. There are no penalties for withdrawing or skipping questions. Risks are unlikely in completing this survey, but there may be unknown risks. With permission, the interview will be recorded for scribing purposes, but you are free to reject this request at any time before or during the interview. The Institutional Review Board and Internal Boston College auditors may review the research records. State or federal laws or court orders may also require that information from your research study records be released. Otherwise, the researchers will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless we are legally required to do so.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this research, you may contact the student researcher's faculty advisor 617-552-1194 and <u>celeste.wells@bc.edu</u>. If you have any concerns about your treatment and rights as a person in this research study, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or <u>irb@bc.edu</u>.

☐ **I, the participant, have read and agreed to the terms above. I have a copy of the informed consent document to refer to at any time.**

_____   _____

Print Name   **Date**

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**

I agree to be audio recorded.

Yes_____   No_____

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**

Appendix C

Devianna Smith ——------------------- Interview Questions—-----------------------FALL
2022

<u>SPACES MATTER: EXAMINING THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL SPACES—BOTH PHYSICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL—ON WOMEN OF COLOR NAVIGATING LAW SCHOOL AND POST-GRADUATE ENDEAVORS</u>

1. Please describe your racial and ethnic background.

2. Explain your educational background in both undergraduate school and law school (including your majors and areas of focus).

3. What were your motivations for attending law school?

4. Describe the law school you attended and your overall thoughts on your time attending.

5. Were you involved in any social organizations (study groups, affinity spaces, organizations); if so, describe your experiences in those groups.

6. Describe your relationship with your professors in academic settings, such as office hours, classes, and/or clinics.

7. What were some obstacles, if any, that you encountered during your time in law school?

8. In considering your identity as a woman of color, please share how your personal identity affected, if at all, your experience in law school.

9. What were some feelings—both positive and negative—that you experienced (or experience) while attending law school? Are there any positive or negative experiences that have stuck out to you so far?

10. If you could go back to the beginning of law school, is there anything you wished you would have known? If so, please share.

11. Please share some ways that your law school could have better supported you (or could support you currently). If non-applicable, please say skip.

12. Please describe your professional experiences currently; do you feel like law school prepared/is preparing you to navigate these spaces? If so, how?

Appendix D

Dear Columbia Law School Community,

The Black Law Students Association of Columbia Law School writes to inform the Columbia Law Community, particularly its faculty, of concerns regarding the use of the term "negro" in any setting because of its repercussions on the well-being and inclusion of our members. **The word "negro" is unacceptable**. It is a common social understanding that "negro" is a derogatory term with no place in ordinary conversation and, least of all, when spoken by a non-Black individual.

The word, like similarly offensive terms, appears in legal texts. However, that does not create an excuse to use the term repeatedly. It is not a strenuous intellectual exercise to skip a word when reading text aloud or to replace it orally with Black or African American. That said, the use of the word "negro" concerns us most when it is repeatedly used outside of verbatim readings of aging texts. The term should never be used in creating hypotheticals or while posing questions to a class. **It creates an uncomfortable and alienating experience for Black students.**

Black law students are constantly engaging with course material that is fundamentally racist. There is no need to complicate this experience further by using outdated, offensive, and unacceptable language.

To our faculty - please take this as a learning opportunity and make all efforts to cease using the term in your lectures and seminars. There is no compelling reason to speak the word aloud. Please also hold each other accountable, as this particular issue is part of a much larger problem of racial insensitivity and anti-Blackness in Columbia Law School classrooms.

The Black Law Students Association is committed to creating a safe and productive learning environment for Black students. We are further committed to advocating in solidarity with all BIPOC students and our allies. **We will continue to request further action as the need arises.**

In Solidarity,

BLSA Board 2022-23