



Overview

The Council of Graduate Schools (2019) contend that excellence in graduate education depends on supporting diversity and inclusion. This report also indicated that that people from diverse backgrounds bring unique perspectives and experiences that are essential to learning and fostering intellectual collegiality. In this regard, all doctoral students should have intellectual experiences in graduate school that are beneficial to their academic program as well as their overall well-being. While all Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) have efforts in place to build inclusive graduate communities, many struggles with recruiting and retaining women of color to their doctoral programs and conferring doctoral degrees for women of color, especially in STEM. Currently, 10.3% of doctoral degrees were awarded to African American women and 7.3% to Hispanic women as compared to 66% for white women (Blackwell, 2017). There is limited research examining the experiences of women of color doctoral students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's). Intrinsic and extrinsic barriers are related to the advancement for women of color and are most times associated with the imbalances of society. Outside of sexism, women of color face racism, isolation, exclusion and marginality (AAUW, 2017; Shaver & Moore, 2014). In spite of these obstacles, women of color continue to persist professionally due to resiliency. However, with this persistence women of color still lag behind their male counterparts in obtaining tenure, achieving promotion from associate to full professor, and obtaining administration positions in higher education (Malcolm, Hall, & Brown, 1976; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In light of the numerous challenges for professional advancement, what remains to be answered is, how do women of color move beyond the deficit models and challenges toward achieving a more holistic experience during their graduate education? This research is intended to frame the educational experiences of women of color during their doctoral program. To achieve the aforementioned goals, objectives, and outcomes of this research investigation, a qualitative research method was utilized. This research method allows the participant to answer open ended questions for more detail and depth of their experiences.

Methodological Framework

Round 1: Line by Line

Round 2: Theming

Round 3: Categorizing

- Two of the authors individually wrote down codes (open codes, axial codes, etc.)
- Combined line-by-line code list into one list
- Two authors each went through all transcripts with combined code list
- Pulled quotes that fit second round codes
- Noted themes common amongst racial identities and graduate programs
- Identified themes prominent across all transcripts
- Re-named or re-coded vague codes
- Decided on two overarching categories for the codes: Support and Systematic Whiteness
- Identified patterns amongst codes
- Identified distinctions regarding both the strength of certain code categories, and a distinction between graduate program themes

Themes

Systematic Whiteness

"Women of color, particularly Black women and Latino women - Latinas - are not perceived to need help. Like the perception is that you're the strongest among us. So if anyone is going to do - so the resources don't come your way because the people around you assume that you don't need help." **-Ebony**

"But we have noticed that there is one Latino man - two Latino men above us, and in sharing our experiences, the way that they navigate the program, they make it seem so seamless, like there's no barriers for them. But yet when my - the Latinas and I talk as when we - to try to talk about our experiences, it's like why is it that we're struggling so much? How did they get to that point and so quickly, or how did they manage to get approval for that independent study, yet my advisor won't let me do any independent studies." **-Taylor**

Support

"In addition to that, outside of my program, and if you can find this, that's great, the black grad student association has been everything to me. Just finding a community of black people is so important to my identity and it makes me feel like we love each other so much. And if I did not have them, and I think I'm the only one in school psychology who's in that community right now, but like it just doesn't matter. I am nothing without finding a black community at Indiana University." **-Shanice**

"My mentors growing up were White mentors, White women. And then it was after my master's that I started realizing I need to find some people of color. And then I started leaning on men of color. And I was like I need women of color. And my PhD was the first time that I got women of color that I can seek Latinas that I can seek out. But my previous position is where I did have a Latina mentor - Latina who invited herself to be my mentor, and I was like all right. I'm going to take you on as my mentor." **-Gabrielle**

Validation and Belonging

"And as far as validation, I think within my identities, because I'm being mentored and guided and advised by a Black woman, that's really helped strengthen my validation within my program." **-Kayla**

"Working on book chapters and publications, working with focus groups. I may be a student editor this summer, so all those opportunities that my other cohort members aren't getting validates me to keep pushing and knowing that I'm doing something and I'm here for a reason." **-Lashay**

Poor Retention for Faculty of Color

"When I interviewed for my program, one of my interviews, because we did individual and we did group, my individual was with a professor who's no longer there, and she was very welcoming, and she was like, "I want you there," or "I want you here." And she's no longer there, and I felt a real connection. She's a woman of color. We went to the same high school in New Orleans, so it was... I hear it. I hear it. So, I was very disappointed when I got to school this fall and she wasn't there." **-Jada**

"We got recruited and the faculty that I only work with are like we're still there, but we did walk into a department that lost one faculty of color, and then someone else was hired. And so, a faculty of color was asked to lead the search I think for both positions. I think for both. And they were able to recruit a Black woman and a Latino man and I was like oh, wow. Another - more people of color coming to the department. But shortly thereafter, they're both gone, and within a year, right?" **-Arianna**

Major Themes & Sub-Themes

Systematic Whiteness

Diversity
Discrimination
Expectation to Tough It Out
Environmental Diversity
Imposter Syndrome
Physically Feeling Secluded
Aggressions
Racial and Cultural Issues
Silencing and Policing
University and Program Reputation
Systematic Whiteness

Support

Creating Community and Support for Self
Formal Support/Feeling Supported or Not Supported
Asking for Help
Communication Issues
Funding/Financial Support
Helping and Mentoring Others

Sub-Themes that Apply to Both Systematic Whiteness and Support

Validation and Belonging
Poor Retention of Faculty of Color

Findings and Implications

Top Three Most Common Themes Overall

1. Environmental Diversity
2. Creating Community and Support for Self
3. Validation and Belonging

It should be noted that these three themes were not only the most common themes overall, but also the most common for School Psychology students and Higher Education students. There were some differentiation between themes that were more common for one program over the other. For example, "Having to Work Harder" (later renamed Discrimination), "Asking for Help", and "Imposter Syndrome" were prominent themes more commonly mentioned amongst Higher Education students. "Funding/Financial Support" and "Micro-Aggressions" (later re-coded as White Normalcy) were more prominent themes for School Psychology students. Regarding race, there were no definitive thematic differences between students based on racial identity.

Future Directions

This literature could be used to further the understanding of how to support and retain female doctoral students of color in their PhD programs. The students discussed extensively what type of support was helpful for them: familial support, formal support by the department and faculty, community support, and financial support. In that regard, for literature on doctoral student preparation, this could provide insight into how to help doctoral female students of color navigate the high pressure and overwhelmingly White environment of academia at PWI's.

Additionally, this literature could be used to understand the experiences of female doctoral students of color in various PhD programs. The doctoral students also shared various forms of adversity they had to overcome while in their program such as discrimination, stereotyping, imposter syndrome, being expected to "tough it out", and having to work harder than white or male peers. In this regard, research on doctoral students experiences could provide insight into the adversity that doctoral female students of color have to navigate during their studies.

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