MY NARRATIVE IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK IT IS: EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN A DOCTOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This paper examines the experiences of African American students in a doctor of education program at a comprehensive university in Southern California.
Background	Qualitative case study methodology and critical race theory is used to highlight asset rather than deficit narratives of the participants, illuminating another aspect of commonly understood experiences for underrepresented students in education.
Methodology	Qualitative case study methodology was used for a sample of 14 African American doctoral students in the Southern California area. Critical race theory provided a framework through which to support data analysis and subsequent findings.
Contribution	The original contribution of this paper is the asset-narrative of African American doctoral students at an institution that is not research-driven.
Findings	Findings assert that (1) asset narratives of African American students need to be highlighted, (2) action-research as an option for dissertation completion is important for Ed.D. programs, and (3) racial identity of African Americans is complex, therefore broader understandings of black identity are needed, and must be coupled with anti-deficit ideology.

Recommendations for Practitioners	Recommendations for practitioners include expanding understandings of African American identity coupled with anti-deficit ideology to enhance student interactions with both faculty and peers throughout doctoral education.
Recommendations for Researchers	It is suggested that future research continue to focus on doctoral student experiences in institutions that are not research intensive.
Impact on Society	This research provides an original contribution by furthering understandings of the complexity of the African American experience with identity, research, and doctoral education experiences.
Future Research	Future research should focus on other underrepresented populations in doctoral education at universities that are not research-intensive.
Keywords	African Americans, critical race theory, doctoral education

INTRODUCTION

In a recent commencement speech at Howard University, President Obama issued a call to graduates to act to "shape our collective future -- bend it in the direction of justice and equality and freedom" (Politico Staff, 2016). Acknowledging advancements over the decades, the president underscored current realities stating, "Racism persists. Inequality persists." In the educational system, we see persisting gaps between the academic achievement of students of color and white students at the elementary and secondary levels. It can be said that "the postsecondary system mimics and magnifies the racial and ethnic inequality in educational preparation it inherits from the K-12 system and then projects this inequality into the labor market" (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013, p. 7). Not only are white students more likely to attain a bachelor's degree or higher degree than are African American students (57% compared with 37%), they are also more likely to attend top-tier, four-year colleges, leading Carnevale and Strohl to describe the American higher education system as "a dual system of racially separate and unequal institutions despite the growing access of minorities to the postsecondary system" (p. 7). For students of color in higher educational contexts, experiences with racism, sexism, and microaggressions are common (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Linder et al., 2015).

Despite these pervasive inequities, the number of students of color in higher education is increasing (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.). Although the types of educational environments in which doctoral education is offered vary, most of the research on the experiences of students of color to date explores aspects of doctoral education in high-research activity institutions (Burt et al., 2018; Gasman et al., 2008; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2016). This tendency continues to be the case, despite a number of scholars pointing to the importance of understanding doctoral education in institutional contexts that are not research driven (Gardner, 2010b; Gopaul, 2011; Rhoades et. al, 2008;). We address this gap by presenting findings centered on experiences of African American students enrolled in a doctor of education program at an urban, comprehensive institution with a regional-serving mission, in one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the country. The reason we chose to focus on African American students is twofold; one being that extant research mostly highlights the difficulties (e.g., microaggressions, isolation, lack of sense of belonging) of doctoral education for African American students, and we wondered if there were positive aspects experienced in a setting with more diversity both in the program and surrounding community. Secondly, studies on doctoral students of color are significantly more common than those looking specifically at the African American experience. The aspects comprising the original contribution of this paper thus include the African American doctoral student focus at an institution that is not research-driven.

DOCTORAL EDUCATION SOCIALIZATION

A common lens used to understand doctoral education experiences is that of socialization, a process during which "an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge needed for membership in a given society" (Gardner & Barnes, 2007, p. 371). The importance of adopting these norms not only in practice, but also internally from an identity standpoint, is well documented (Espino et al., 2010; Gonzalez, 2006). Some of these norms include using academic language not always relevant to the communities being researched and embracing behaviors largely influenced by an individualist lens, in which one does what one can to "get ahead" regardless of the community to which they belong. Such norms are based on meritocratic assumptions, such as that through hard work one can achieve the same level of success as anyone else, regardless of social identities and positioning.

Regardless of the type of graduate level program or university that they select, students of color enter and compete in institutional settings that have long been bastions of white privilege. The process of socialization in these settings has been contested, particularly for graduate students of color who may struggle to develop an authentic identity if doing so means they must "lose" their prior self after adopting traditional academic norms (Espino et al., 2010). Gonzalez (2006) argued that "academic socialization also hinders Latina agency through a systematic and covert acculturation process" (p. 348). Viewing the traditional, yet broadly accepted and used, definition of socialization through a critical lens suggests that both the term itself and accompanying process should be problematized to incorporate, rather than exclude, the cultural values students of color bring to doctoral education.

Gopaul (2011) uses Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to critically interrogate the reproduced systems of stratification and structural inequities inextricably linked to processes of socialization in education systems. The critique of traditional notions of socialization is of particular importance since the process is connected to "the issue of attrition in doctoral education, with researchers often attributing poor or inappropriate socialization to a student's decision to depart the program" (Gardner, 2010b, p. 61). This relationship between persistence and socialization is important, as the process of socialization is likely to be more or less difficult for some students, depending in part on the culture of the department. It is thus imperative to recognize the interrelated nature of both institutional culture and socialization in doctoral education.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Though both are distinct, culture and socialization are "intricately intertwined but generally understudied in the existing literature as related to striving institutions" (Gardner, 2010b, p. 662). In a study examining the effect of an institutional culture striving to achieve a higher reputation of prestige, Gardner found that the emphasis placed on institutional image and rankings had negative effects on doctoral student socialization. Students reported feelings of inadequacy and competition that impeded a sense of belonging in the program. Understanding the effects of prestige on doctoral student socialization and institutional culture is essential, considering the connections between prestige and economic resources available for and allotted to colleges and universities (Gardner, 2010a). Further demonstrating the importance of the relationship between institutional culture and socialization is the "trickle-down effect" that competitive institutional climates have on doctoral students. The institutional culture of striving to reach a higher rung on the academic prestige ladder filters down into departments by creating a pervasive competition among faculty members to pursue high stakes research that will bring national attention to the university. This competition and subsequent increased demands on faculty members leaves little time for the development of healthy student mentoring relationships. Student-to-student interactions in such contexts are often highly competitive and include racial microaggressions in the classroom and beyond.

For students of color, these highly competitive climates often manifest in students internalizing an imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) or the feeling that they are not "good enough" to pursue

doctoral education and constantly fear being exposed as a "fraud." These feelings may develop further and even result in fostering stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Taylor & Antony, 2000), a fear associated with confirming pervasively held low expectations for certain groups that itself acts to depress performance. Women and students of color navigating both imposter syndrome and stereotype threat in doctoral programs is well documented (Gasman et al., 2008; Taylor & Antony, 2000).

While doctoral student attrition is attributed to a number of causes, a lack of sense of belonging is considered tantamount for underrepresented students, what Gardner (2008) calls "lack of fitting the mold" (p. 126). Scholars critique doctoral student attrition as a result of socialization processes that can be "dehumanizing and marginalizing" for Black and Latino students (Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011, p. 94; Rhoades et al., 2008), sexist for women, and structurally inequitable for students who are nontraditionally aged and/or have children (Gardner, 2008). Doctoral education has also been described as heavily gendered due to the tendency to socialize women to teach and men to conduct research (Sallee, 2011). As previously mentioned, these critiques mostly stem from studies situated in a competitive, research-driven institution. Understanding these experiences in other institutional contexts is worthy of further study. It may be that some of the aspects associated with doctoral student persistence are more readily available in less competitive institutional environments.

PERSISTENCE FACTORS IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION

Faculty mentorship is crucial to the success of doctoral students, particularly as students navigate their changing roles and understanding of future work in the academy (Anderson & Anderson, 2012; Felder et al., 2014). Gardner (2010a) builds on the significance of faculty support in a study that found doctoral programs with higher completion rates provided an abundance of faculty mentoring support. These higher-completing programs also provided "clear expectations for students [and] social and academic integration for students" (p. 75). The availability of faculty members to engage in healthy student mentoring may be a function of the department and institutional culture, and whether it is focused on high research activity and production. For students of color, faculty connection and cultural competency from a pedagogical perspective are particularly important in fostering feelings of inclusion and sense of belonging as students navigate microaggressive environments in the classroom (Linder et al., 2015; Perez, 2016).

Satisfaction with the curriculum and learning environment can be associated with doctor of education programs employing a cohort model (Bista & Cox, 2014). Defined as "a group of 10-25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed together through a series of developmental experiences in the context of that study, and end the program at approximately the same time" (Maher, 2005, p. 195), cohorts are increasingly a significant factor in doctoral programs and cultures. While cohorts may be splintered into cliques and will certainly experience social tensions throughout the duration of a program, the effects of the cohort model are generally positive, as students often develop a supportive community and even a sense of "cohort agency" fostered through relationships that are affirming and strong (Maher, 2004).

Doctoral persistence and attrition factors are inevitably racialized experiences for students of color, including experiences generally found to be associated with persistence such as faculty mentoring and cohort interactions. Students of color are less likely to encounter and be mentored by faculty of color than they are by White faculty and cohort experiences that are generally positive may be isolating or marginalizing for students of color (Linder et al., 2015).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study analyzes student experiences in a doctor of education program through use of critical race theory (CRT), a framework that problematizes experiences, contexts, and outcomes through a racial lens. CRT originated in the 1970s in the legal field with a challenge to the idea that everyone

experiences the law in similar ways. It is critical to highlight differential experiences with regard to the law, education, and other social institutions to demonstrate the systemic nature of discrimination. One of many applications of CRT in education is to understand disparate outcomes for students of color. CRT identifies several tenets through which to understand racialized experiences in education. The specific tenets used to guide inquiry in this study include the foundational understanding of racism as endemic in American society and institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004), counter-storytelling as a way of resisting dominant narratives of deficit and underperformance (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and interest convergence as an explanation of institutional supports for students and communities of color (Bell, 1980).

RACISM AS ENDEMIC

Due to the United States being founded and built on actions of racism, among other forms of violence and oppression, CRT posits that racism is normal and not aberrant in society (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Racism has shifted from overt forms such as slavery and Jim Crow laws to more subtle practices that are systemic in nature and consequently more difficult "see." One example of a more covert form of racism is now widely known as the concept of microaggressions, or seemingly innocuous interactions with people or an environment that are painful for people of color to experience over time (Pierce, 1974). Microaggressions come in many forms and are often expressed as well-intended compliments, such as proclaiming that an Asian American born in the U.S. speaks "good" English or asking the lone African American student in class to represent the viewpoint of her entire racial group. Microaggressions can also occur at multiple levels. While the most commonly discussed are those occurring between and among individuals, organizations can also commit what Yosso et al. (2009) term institutional microaggressions, whereby policies and subsequent practices are enacted that disadvantage students of color and others in marginalized positions. Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) discuss microaggressions as a consequence of a culture rooted in white supremacy. The scope of microaggressions is thus broad from culture and organizational standpoints, yet also pervasive in classroom and faculty-student interactions, which are most pertinent for this study.

In applications of CRT to educational settings, Solorzano and his colleagues identify additional tenets that include the need to challenge the dominant ideology around school failure, a commitment to social justice, and recognition of the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano et al., 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009). In countering traditional explanations of underachievement of students of color in American schools that tend to place the blame on the students themselves, a CRT framework "challenges dominant liberal ideas such as colorblindness and meritocracy" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 108).

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

A dominant ideology that assumes a universal experience bereft of differences based on race, class, gender, and other social identities is heavily critiqued through a CRT lens. The dominant ideology, or master narrative, is built upon typically unexamined assumptions of the normality of mainstream white experiences, practices, and values. Within this narrative, experiences outside of the "norm" are viewed in terms of deficit, disadvantage, and dysfunction. Counter-narratives, or the elicitation of experiences of people of color, is a central tenet of CRT that emphasizes the importance of truth being understood as a result of experience and poses a counter-narrative to that of the dominant ideology. Counter-storytelling serves as a powerful method to centralize the experiences of people of color, qualitatively described and understood in structural and personal contexts. Several studies in higher education have used counter-storytelling to supplement and sometimes contradict extant literature on students of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Hubain et al., 2016; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998). These efforts underscore the foundation of CRT to pursue social justice for minoritized populations in ways that result in concrete improvements to access and equity in education (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004).

INTEREST CONVERGENCE

Efforts to address inequities resulting from racism in society happen in many ways including through grassroots activism and policies at local, state, and federal levels. Some of these efforts were critiqued by Bell (1980), an influential legal scholar associated with the origins of critical race theory, for happening as a result of interest convergence, or the notion that actions to address inequities for marginalized populations occur if and only when dominant populations stand to benefit from doing so. For example, Bell posited that the result of *Brown v. Board of Education* occurred during a time that the U.S. needed to create a better international reputation in its treatment of people of color returning from military service following World War II. I Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1998) provided the example of Arizona finally agreeing to recognize Martin Luther King's birthday as a national holiday when national sports enterprises threatened to leave the state. In relation to contemporary higher education, interest convergence likely plays a role in the increased attention to the experiences of students of color, given their continually increasing enrollment and performance-based funding and other initiatives. For the present study, the interest convergence tenet guides us to examine factors in the institutional setting and its policies that may be associated with student experiences and success.

This paper aims to document the counter-narratives of African American students in a Doctor of Education program at a regional comprehensive university. We examine the racialized environment in which students and faculty interact and examine the ways in which interest convergence may be at work as institutional goals are communicated and addressed. The research questions guiding the present study were (a) what are the experiences of African American students in the Doctor of Education program, and (b) in what ways does race impact those experiences?

METHOD

Qualitative research methods appropriately guided this study, given the "how" and "why" aspects of the research questions. Constructivism (Creswell, 2007) provided the foundation for the methodology, as the purpose was to understand how African American students made meaning of their experiences in a Doctor of Education program. Constructivism as a methodological lens works well with critical race theory since the participants' qualitative experiences are centralized and the findings are rooted in their narratives. General qualitative methodology assumes an interaction between individual experiences with structural components of a social context.

The study uses a case study design, defined as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). For this study, the experiences of African American students were situated in the bounded system of a doctoral program in a College of Education at a large, comprehensive institution with a regional-serving mission in a diverse, urban setting. The case study method was most effective for this research, as the centrality of context from state, regional, and institutional standpoints proved essential to the findings and themes of the study.

SETTING

This study was conducted at an urban, Hispanic serving institution in Southern California. The institution is classified as a regional, comprehensive university that is teaching intensive and research driven. The racial diversity among just over 35,000 students is 40% Hispanic/Latina/o, 23% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 19% White, 4% African American, and 1% Native American; graduate students form close to 6,000 of the total. The university and surrounding city are both culturally and ethnically diverse, and that diversity is also mirrored in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Currently in its tenth year of operation, the doctoral program in which participants are enrolled is in the applied field of educational leadership. Program documents, including the mission statement and standard course outlines with student learning outcomes and related activities, reinforce an explicit focus on social justice and advocacy throughout the program.

As specified in state guidelines, it is a three-year program designed for working professionals in a variety of PK-16 settings. The program includes Higher Education and PK-12 specialization groups; students take some of their core classes in mixed groups and others solely within their specialization. The programmatic emphasis focuses on developing leaders in schools, nonprofits, and the community, though a small number of alumni do pursue faculty roles as well. Core faculty are diverse, with nearly equal numbers of faculty of color and white faculty. African American student representation, at 21%, is disproportionately higher than the rest of the university and the surrounding community.

The program operates using a cohort system, with 12-15 students in the Higher Education specialization and 12-15 students in PK-12 specialization accepted each year. A number of supports are provided for the students on a systematic basis, including regular large and small group meetings throughout the dissertation process, access to data analysis software and technical assistance, and writing support. These supports contribute to a program retention rate of 85% and a 91% graduation rate for retained students.

PARTICIPANTS

In order to represent all aspects of the doctoral program experience, from program selection and recruitment through coursework and dissertation research, stratified purposive sampling was used (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Table 1 shows the racial breakdown (self-reported) of the participating cohorts, according to program records.

Table 1. Racial demographics of participants

Race/Ethnicity	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Recent Grads	Total	
African American	5	3	8	7	23	21%
Latina/o	5	12	13	7	37	33%
Asian American	2	4	3	3	12	11%
White	8	8	7	6	29	26%
Other*	4	1	4	1	10	9%

*Includes categories of Native American, Two or more races, & Declines to state

All African American students in the current program cohorts (Years 1-3) as well as those in the recently graduating cohort were recruited for participation in the study, with an 82.35% acceptance rate. A stratified sample was created to ensure representation from each cohort (4) and equal participation by specialization (2), for a total of 16 participants. Year 1 students were expected to provide the most detailed descriptions of their recent experiences and expectations regarding program selection, recruitment, interviewing, and initial cohort socialization activities. Year 2 and 3 students had current experience with classroom interactions in a variety of courses, faculty advising, and utilization of support services. The graduates had recently completed the program and could provide a retrospective view of program experiences. Although all 16 students had initially agreed to participate, interviews proved impossible to schedule for two of the students. The final sample included 14 participants, 12 of whom identified as women and two who identified as male. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants and are used in an effort to protect confidentiality of the research participants.

DATA COLLECTION

Participant interviews lasted from one to two hours and were semi-structured in nature, following an interview protocol with probing questions designed to elicit participants' perspectives, interpretations, and stories. Topics included in the protocol included a description of the participant's "educational journey," initial experiences in the program, explicit expectations and "unwritten messages," cohort and faculty interactions, racialized experiences and coping mechanisms, and affirmation (or

lack) of racial identity. Interviews were conducted by an African American adjunct faculty member in the college (third author) who was not part of the doctoral program faculty. The interviews also occurred in a private and neutral space for further protection of confidentiality.

In addition to interviews, classroom observations were also conducted by all three investigators (authors). Six courses in the first and second year curriculum were selected for observation during an entire class session (1.5 to 2.5 hours each) and included both core and specialization (smaller group) classes. Open-ended observational field notes described patterns of faculty-student interaction, peer interactions, and student response to content. Observations were used to contextualize interview data and for triangulation purposes. After an initial review of data, however, it was found that the interviews provided the most relevant information for the research questions and thus served as the priority data source for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis, the approach most widely used in ethnographic work (Glesne, 2011) was used for this study. Data analysis began with a pre-coding process consisting of open-ended review of transcribed interviews and observational field notes making preliminary jottings (Saldaña, 2016, p. 20) and highlighting to develop a sense of the data. An initial set of a priori or provisional (Saldaña, 2016) codes was developed by the research team prior to first cycle coding. The provisional codes, informed by the critical race theoretical framework as well as doctoral student socialization extant literature, included racial climate, microaggressions, master narrative, counternarrative, and imposter syndrome. Once this first list of codes was developed, the researchers individually coded one transcript before meeting to compare and contrast use of the codes. During this process researchers simultaneously used open coding to identify emergent codes. Codes that emerged through iterative review of narrative data included social justice, support, role of family, and expectations.

First cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016) using Nvivo qualitative analysis software was completed both individually and as a team. Team meetings served as a method to ensure passages of data were being coded similarly, to add any new codes to the existing codebook, and to ensure high inter-rater reliability throughout the entire coding process. Themes were constructed through second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016), as researchers looked for patterns and linkages among the codes. For example, "making an impact" theme drew upon material coded for social justice, role of family, and program selection.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHERS

Acknowledgment of researcher positionality is particularly important for this study, since it is what Glesne (2011) refers to as "backyard research." Two out of the three researchers are faculty in the program in which the research participants study. Racially, two of three researchers identify as African American women and one identifies as a white woman. All three researchers have also completed doctoral programs, making for a number of commonalities with the research participants. However, as qualitative researchers, we believe this can also serve as an asset because of the depth of understanding of the context, from surrounding city, university, department, and program standpoints. The researchers employed multiple efforts to strike a balance of using this deep understanding without imposing assumptions and understandings of the participants' shared experiences, particularly from racial and gendered perspectives.

LIMITATIONS

The possibility of researcher bias was high given that two out of the three researchers teach in the program in which research participants study. In addition to the study being approved through the institutional review process, several measures were taken to account for this, chief being that the third researcher, unaffiliated with the program, conducted the recruitment and interviewing for the

study. Purposeful planning to enhance trustworthiness included triangulation (multiple data sources and multiple investigators) and use of research memos and bracketing (Moustakas, 1994) to ensure that the findings truly generated from the data itself and to clarify researcher subjectivity (Glesne, 2016). The aforementioned methods used to ensure high inter-rater reliability in the data analysis process also mitigated researcher bias. Lastly, member checking the final findings with research participants in a focus group setting enhanced the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study.

FINDINGS

The themes organizing the findings are reflective of the participants' racialized, gendered, academic, and professional experiences in the program. The specific tenets of CRT (commitment to social justice, racism as endemic, and counter-narratives) are present within and throughout the four themes of (1) making an impact; (2) cohort diversity; (3) racialized experiences and microaggressions; and (4) "my narrative is not what you think it is." The commitment to social justice tenet of CRT was so prevalent that it manifested in two different themes, the first of which was the unwavering desire to use research to make an impact on access and equity in the respective workplace and surrounding community.

MAKING AN IMPACT

As described above, the program has a practitioner focus that is driven by social justice values through a critical/equity lens. Participants spoke extensively about these aspects of the program shaping their experiences at multiple levels, from their decisions to apply, to their engagement with the curriculum, and to their potential career decisions post-graduation. As Marian Smith explained, "So I looked around and this program to me seemed to have some of the most phenomenal content compared to other programs. In addition to that the diversity that I can see on campus…the diversity of subject matter and the diversity in the actual faculty…that really attracted me." Several of the participants described weighing among options for doctoral study, ultimately choosing the more applied Doctorate of Education degree.

The practitioner focus emphasized in the program allows students to conduct original research related to issues in their institutional settings. Participants expressed the desire to make concrete differences in the communities they serve through research that fosters expansive changes that increase equity. For some students, social justice motivation was grounded in their personal stories. First-year student Sarah Mae shared: "Three of my four kids are young men and it's a very personal passion for me to make a difference because I have seen personally how they have been misidentified, misevaluated, and how that's impacted their motivation." The social justice aspect of the program is foundational in the sense that it is infused in the curriculum, and the students use their personal understandings of it to guide their dissertation research and professional commitments. This commitment to social justice emphasizes a central tenet of CRT, and its relevance to the students' experiences in the program.

COHORT DIVERSITY

The diversity within the cohorts and sizable percentage of African American students and other students of color at this institution stands in contrast to other studies in the extant literature that describe experiences of isolation and marginalization for African American students (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015). The diversity of the peer group was observed by Mary Lou to affect her confidence in bringing her perspectives and experiences to class discussions. For example, as she debated whether to include the topic of white privilege in an upcoming class participation, she concluded,

> I'm leaning more towards doing it because the truth is, there is more people of color in the cohort than there are white people. So I feel like just in terms of people understanding where

I'm coming from, the numbers are in my favor which isn't always the case. Sometimes you're the minority.

Imani, a recent graduate, concurred, stating that "there were quite a few of us African-Americans and Black in the cohort so when things came up, we could talk about it or discuss, put in that discussion from our perspective." Observational data in all classes reinforced interview descriptions of participation of students in racially diverse small and large group discussions and of open sharing of personal and professional experiences in class activities.

At the same time, it should be noted that perceptions of the cohort's openness to and respect for the contributions of African American students varied with different cohorts. Patricia's cohort included disproportionately fewer students of color, and she described a racialized divide between the higher education and PK-12 specialization groups: "Almost all of the higher ed people were minorities. K-12 was, I'm going to say 90% Caucasian. So the expectations were very different." She concluded that in this context "there was no challenging of each other's thoughts. There is so much white privilege in our cohort. It's beyond me."

Overall, however, participant comments indicated satisfaction with their program, and all indicated that they would recommend the program to others (or had already done so). Indeed, the program retention rate (85%) and graduation rates (91% of retained students graduate; 83% graduate within 3.5 years) are both reflective of the support provided in the program and a draw for students to the program. Thus, we did not find much evidence for the "Am I going crazy?!" narrative described by Gildersleeve et al. (2011) in their study of doctoral students of color in residential, high research activity institutions. The authors claimed that this narrative, characterized by projections of tentativeness, insecurity, and doubt, constitutes a "dehumanizing social artifact that ubiquitously shapes the experience of doctoral students of color" (p. 100).

RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

In recognition of the "racism as endemic to society" tenet of CRT, all participants described experiences related to the racial climate of the program courses and interactions. However, several shared that their initial reservations as African Americans in the doctoral program did not come to fruition. A first-year student, Sarah Mae shared that she had come into the program prepared to be disrespected because it had "happened to me so blatantly in the last program that it brought tears to my eyes. I expected it to happen in this one because it was even higher up, but so far the vibe is completely different in this group." Beyonce related how her mother-in-law cautioned her before coming into the program, "'Now you know it's not gonna be a lot of us in there.' And I said, 'Oh, okay.'"

Despite expectations of potential disrespect or isolation, participants drew upon inner resources in meeting these challenges. Beyonce described her approach:

> I don't know why, but I've always had high self esteem, and, um, I didn't go through what my dad went through in the '50s and '60s. And my dad has always taught us, hold your head up, stick your chest out, you know, hold your shoulders back. When I walk in, I feel like I'm setting the bar, and I feel that individuals are looking to me for advice, or for encouragement.

This sense of self efficacy may be related to the fact that the majority of participants in the program are professionals in leadership positions (or aspiring to be in leadership positions) in their work sites and can draw upon their success in meeting workplace challenges when approaching and navigating doctoral program challenges. Most are older than the average age of doctoral students in research-driven institutions who have come directly to doctoral study after earning undergraduate and master's degrees.

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe racial microaggressions that they had experienced or observed in interactions with peers and faculty in the program. Although most students

described their peer interactions inside and outside of class in positive terms, describing ways in which the cohort members socialized, connected by social media, collaborated on group projects, and checked in with each other, these same peer interactions were the sites of several of the racial microaggressions that participants described. For example, Sara Mae described an incident that had taken place during work on a group project, when her contribution had been critiqued by a fellow group member:

> The one time I felt challenged, and it was pretty blatant when this first started…one guy, and as I stated, he's black. So I went home and talked it out and I'm thinking maybe it was sexism. And we talked about that. It couldn't be racism, but then I met some people that have racism against their own people so you never know.

A similar instance of intersectionality of gender and race was experienced by Patricia (from a different cohort) who described "one classmate who, he's a faculty member, he would speak to us – specifically the females – the minority females – like we were his students." Another participant described fellow students not choosing to work with her on a statistics class project because of the assumption that she would be weak in this area. Other racial microaggressions were more indirect in nature. Dr. P, a recent graduate described a comment during a classroom discussion: "There's one guy that, you know, white guy, teaches an AP, and the thing that stands out in that particular class, when he said, 'Those kids don't belong in my class.' All right, dude, who's 'those kids?'"

Although, for the most part, participants did not describe racial microaggressions that they had experienced in interactions with faculty, one such incident involved a faculty member who did not remember students' names:

> He would always switch us. And I'm like, "No, it's the other one." My name is more commonly African American than her name is, so he would use my name on her and switch us. And I'm like, no. At some point, I mean, it was funny at the time, but it was not funny now that I think about it.

Observational data bore out the occasional use of humor in classes, which served to deflect potentially uncomfortable comments, but which also may have served to keep discussion of racially charged and/or gendered issues at bay and unaddressed.

Several participants spoke heatedly not about microaggressions that they had experienced but rather that they had observed being perpetrated against faculty of color, primarily those in non-core or adjunct status. These microaggressions consisted of not accepting the professor's viewpoint as accurate or contesting grades. Beyonce reported being offended by this questioning of a professor of color, noting "it's only been done to the faculty members who are not white." She concluded that "we're preaching to be a social justice program, but we have social justice issues within the program we're not addressing, yeah."

At the same time, others viewed the experience of working with faculty of color differently. Imani shared the impact of participating in class taught by two African American professors: "I think I had one class between the two of them. They were so impressive to me, I was just so proud of them." This theme demonstrates the fluidity of racialized experiences in the program, and that while overt instances of racism did not occur, the more subtle difficulties, including racial microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015) did. Overall, the racial diversity in the program, from student and faculty standpoints, positively assisted in the navigation of racialized experiences.

MY NARRATIVE IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK IT IS

The counter-narratives of participants in this study represented a breadth of Blackness that some peers in their cohort were not privy to. Many were third or fourth generation college-graduates and came from middle class backgrounds. CRT problematizes the deficit ideology often imposed on students of color, and research participants pushed back against this imposition in the program as well.

Patricia discussed her experiences with realizing that most of the African Americans had a very different background than what many peers thought:

> So interestingly enough, the African Americans that were in the program were not first generation, were not low income, weren't what they expected. They expected us to be the low income, the first generation. We were all middle class. We all came from educated backgrounds. … So they had different expectations of who we were, which we – I would always sit back and laugh to think most of the, or some of the Caucasian people in our class, were just that. They were the first generation. They were the low income. And I said, 'We're the opposite of what you think we're supposed to be.'

Levi expressed a similar critique of the expectations based on the dominant, media-supported ideology:

> The conception you have of what defines an African-American male, it may be something that either is portrayed in the media or something that you have seen, but understand that there's different aspects of it. I'm every bit the African-American male that anybody else is, just understand this is normal. This is not an act. This is not anything that I have to work on. It's just who I am.

Participants felt that, by their presence in the program and their participation in class discussions and activities, they were contributing to their classmates' understanding of a broader spectrum and nuance in Black experience than is typically portrayed in the media and that is often perpetuated in problem-centered academic work. Marian Smith felt that

> I've been accepted as I am. I don't have to change my language, my tone and again it's professional. I can be black and be professional. I can be black and I can be educated. I can be black and articulate. I can be black and have a critical or controversial conversation. I can have a difficult discussion and still be black and not be aggressive but still assertive. Does that come with my blackness? I don't know.

These perspectives were also gendered, as women in particular reported feeling the burden of having to balance multiple parts of their lives. One participant stated, "Especially I would say women of color…we have this super hero, super women syndrome where we can do it all, and I want to rest my cape."

DISCUSSION

TWO-WAY SOCIALIZATION

Although some of the graduates of this doctoral program develop an interest in pursuing faculty positions in higher education, most are motivated to pursue leadership positions where they can apply what they have learned to the solution of educational issues in the urban environments in which most work. They make use of not only the academic and research skills developed in the formal doctoral program but also of the supports and insights developed through participation with diverse peers in a social justice oriented program to address equity issues in the workplace. From a CRT standpoint, two-way socialization points to the importance of expansive versus restrictive (Crenshaw, 1988) outcomes for equity. Restrictive notions of equity tend to focus on the process or the problem; however, Crenshaw (1988) argues that a process focus does not often materialize into concrete improvements for equitable outcomes for people of color (an expansive notion of equity). A defining concept emerged in interpreting the data poses the socialization process in the program as bidirectional, or two-way. As opposed to doctoral student socialization being framed and experienced as a series of steps to be taken, enacted, and internalized, socialization for research participants was partially defined by their own sense of what was professionally and subsequently academically important. Participants enroll in this program with the intention of making a difference in the community and

organizations in which they live and for which they work. These experiences differ significantly from extant literature which mostly poses socialization as process of imposition on behalf of the faculty in a graduate program (Gardner, 2008, 2010a). For this study, the process of socialization is only part of the equation, as students are also focused on the outcomes of using their newly developed research skills to focus on applied studies that will make community impacts that are directly meaningful and more immediate.

RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES IN A DIVERSE SETTING

Another way in which findings from this study are differentiated resides in the counter-narratives for African American students who identified multiple areas of support from both faculty and peers in the program. Contrary to feelings of isolation, exclusion, and sometimes overt racism (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015) students in this study attributed their persistence to sources of support present from the time of applying to graduation. Somewhat consistent with current literature are the feelings of doubt, or imposter syndrome, as reported by participants. However, there are subtle differences in how the imposter syndrome is experienced, as students in this study described it as manifesting due to multiple obligations as full-time working students balancing the demands of work, family, and school. Other studies (Gay, 2004; Taylor & Antony, 2000) describe feelings of imposter syndrome and marginalization as a result of feeling unqualified and questioning admission due to being one of very few students of color. It is thus important to recognize that student and faculty diversity in graduate programs can significantly reshape commonly understood racialized experiences for students of color.

ASSET-BASED NARRATIVES

While participants provided narratives that highlighted difficulties including microaggressions and wavering confidence in ability, there was also significant attention given to their success as leaders in their workplace and home communities. Many students identified as middle-class and third or fourth generation college graduates, a background often unexpected from their peers. Counter-narratives in extant literature typically highlight negative and difficult experiences for students of color in graduate programs, while the counter-narrative in our study is defined by an asset background that fuels student confidence and agency. The combination of being in a graduate program with diversity among the faculty and students and coming from what was described as asset-backgrounds situated participants in a position to experience the program from a lens not commonly attributed to students of color.

INTEREST CONVERGENCE

Equally important to illuminating the positive experiences of students of color in this study is giving attention to the structural aspects of the institution that contribute to these experiences. The location of the program is in Southern California, where a need to develop educational leaders emerged to address issues of inequity such as opportunity gaps between students of color and white students in local schools at both PK-12 and higher education levels. The California State University (CSU) system became responsible for providing the Doctor of Education degree in an effort to establish more social-justice minded leaders who could confront some of the disparate educational outcomes experienced among the diverse populations in Southern California. The interests of the dominant population (e.g., chancellors, government, constituents) thus converged with people of color, as school leaders needed to reflect the diverse populations being served in this geographic area. The work completed on behalf of the faculty and students with regard to diversity, equity, and social justice initiatives is authentic and simultaneously supported with larger goals envisioned by stakeholders at the system level. Placing the charge in the CSU system was strategic in that the degree is more applied in nature and not as well-suited for the University of California institutions which are more research based. Lastly, diversity among the students and faculty, while rare, is necessary in order to satisfy the

mission to "prepare students for an international, multi-cultural society" (CSU, n.d.) While it is acknowledged that there are numerous positive experiences associated with perceived institutional and faculty support, structural diversity, and applied research, these experiences are consistent with interest convergence from a CRT perspective.

IMPLICATIONS

CONTEXT MATTERS

This study provides a nuanced perspective of graduate student socialization by discussing experiences outside of a research-intensive environment. Context clearly matters in studies of students in graduate programs because perceptions of and experiences with support and faculty and peer interactions differ significantly based on the priorities of faculty workloads, institutional mission and goals, and peer and faculty diversity. Students in comprehensive universities where faculty are more heavily evaluated on teaching and supervising doctoral student research may have a different perspective to share with regard to the importance of socialization and other racialized experiences, as did the participants in this study. It is not the authors' intention to assume that faculty in research intensive institutions do not provide adequate support to doctoral students; rather increasing focus on the ways in which the institutional context may be influencing student and faculty experiences is recommended. Allowing for more middle-ground research for dissertation investigations is also recommended as a result of this study. Conducting applied studies that directly impact the communities served by students in educational leadership programs provides a true theory-to-practice application of research. It also fosters a sense of ownership, agency, and purpose for students, because they continue using the research to further inform and develop interventions in their worksites and communities. Lastly, applied research combined with significant faculty support helps to shape the process of socialization as bidirectional, in that students take an active role in becoming researchers and leaders in their respective communities.

RACIAL DIVERSITY AND STRUCTURAL SUPPORT RESHAPES RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES

One concrete implication of this study is the importance of diversity among students and faculty in graduate programs. Diversity on multiple levels is widely attributed as a foundational reason that participants felt supported by peers and faculty, experienced truth to the social justice focus, and ultimately persisted to degree completion. Because enrollments of students of color in graduate programs are continually increasing, it is recommended that deeper understandings of racial diversity and identity be cultivated through dialogue between and amongst faculty and students alike. Although it is widely presumed to be understood that African Americans are not monolithic, participants still reported many of their peers being surprised to learn that they were not the first in their family to attend college, nor did they identify as low income. To be clear, identifying as first generation and/or low income is not in and of itself a deficit, it is rather the biased interpretation of such identities that often leads to a deficit-based view and treatment that can be harmful. Resisting assumptions of an anti-asset narrative for African American students (and students of color generally) is imperative to fostering broader understandings of blackness and racial identity development in highly diverse settings. It is also important to note that increasing numerical student diversity without the underpinning support of an inclusive culture with diverse faculty may result in the commonly understood experiences of isolation and exclusion for students of color. The culture and socialization processes associated with graduate programs are thus important to consider at the university, college, department, and program levels.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study provide an original contribution by furthering understandings of doctoral student socialization in contexts beyond research-intensive institutions for African American students. Counter-narratives in the diverse setting of this study (department, program, and surrounding city) highlighted asset perspectives and abilities of African American students. We thus suggest that broader understandings of African American identity coupled with anti-deficit ideology will enhance student interactions with both faculty and peers throughout doctoral education. Socialization is a two-way process for our participants that is defined in their specific professional and communal contexts. This community focus points to the importance of grounded research that focuses on the immediate impact and change experienced by personal and professional communities. Doctoral institutions may be missing an opportunity to allow action-research projects to serve as the foundation for the dissertation. Lastly, because this research is not generalizable to other institutional settings or student populations, future research should focus on other underrepresented doctoral student socialization experiences in contexts that are not research-intensive.

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