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RACIAL REALITIES: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALE DOCTORAL CANDIDATES IN "ALL BUT DISSERTATION" STATUS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This qualitative study investigated the educational experiences of Black male doctoral students that contributed to prolonged "All But Dissertation" (ABD) status.
Background	Explorations of the enrollment and persistent patterns among Black/African American students has shed light on the disparate rates of graduate school completion. While previous scholarship has focused on Black men in doctoral programs, there has been less focus on the experiences of Black male doctoral students who, after successfully completing coursework, comprehensive examinations, and a dissertation proposal hearing, find themselves mired in "All But Dissertation" (ABD) status. The purpose of this research was to explore the intersections of race and gender in the educational experiences of Black male doctoral students that contribute to delayed terminal degree completion.
Methodology	Utilizing Self-Efficacy Theory and Critical Race Theory, this phenomenological investigation examines the racialized experiences of three Black male doctoral candidates enrolled in diverse graduate programs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify how race and gender intersects with faculty advising, mentoring, student behaviors, and the ways faculty members support or impede doctoral student progression during the dissertation phase.
Contribution	This study contributes to research in three critical ways: (1) it expands our understanding of the experiences of doctoral students specifically between completing coursework and defending a dissertation; (2) it illustrates the types of ra-

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cialized encounters experienced during graduate study that contribute to prolonged ABD status and program attrition; and (3) it offers strategies for campus administrators and faculty to consider to extend structures of support to promote degree attainment among Black male doctoral students.

Findings — This study's findings indicate that racialized dynamics during doctoral education create environments that negatively impact doctoral student self-esteem and diminish motivation to complete doctoral studies. Through the narratives of Rico, Jeremy, and Kevin, three core themes emerged that illustrate the salience of race in the doctoral program experiences of Black males: (1) Underrepresented & Undervalued, (2) Challenging Transitions, and (3) Gendered Racism. First, each participant attended doctoral programs at predominantly White institutions, and all shared the commonality of being the only or one of a few Black male doctoral students in their program. Being underrepresented in the program led to challenges finding faculty members who valued their burgeoning research interests and were willing to support them through the dissertation process. Additionally, participants described challenging transitions at each stage of their doctoral program, which ultimately contributed to extending their time as students. Not only did they describe having different levels of preparedness to begin doctoral study, limited feedback from faculty through coursework and on dissertation proposal drafts prolonging their time as doctoral candidates. Finally, participants described their experiences navigating gendered racism, or racism that was attributed to their identity as Black men. Exasperated by their underrepresentation in the academy, participants talked about being surveilled on campus, having their intellect questioned, and the struggles associated with getting approval for their research.

Recommendations for Practitioners — The experiences highlighted by participants offer insights into the institutional policies and procedures that can be implemented to support Black men. Specifically, findings speak to the importance of diversity. Campuses should work to ensure there is structural diversity within programs, and that faculty can guide students through a diverse array of research interests and topics as well. Faculty should offer clear and consistent feedback on student writing at all stages of graduate education to better prepare students for the transition to writing a dissertation independently. Finally, as racism is endemic to education, administration should promote spaces where students of color can talk about their racially charged experiences navigating the academy.

Recommendations for Researchers — This work would benefit from additional research exploring the experiences of doctoral candidates across diverse institutional contexts. This includes intentional exploration of experiences of students enrolled in online doctoral programs, executive doctoral programs, and other types of programs that have emerged.

Keywords — All But Dissertation, doctoral candidates, African American Male

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, as efforts to promote access to higher education among racial/ethnic minority students have garnered national attention, researchers have taken keen interest in the experiences of Black/African American doctoral students. Attrition from doctoral programs have been staggering - averaging between 40% to 70% for decades (Ames et al., 2018). These attrition patterns lead to fewer students, including Black/African American students, earning degrees in areas critical for our nation's

success. In 2019, only 7.1 % of students who received research doctorates identified as Black/African American (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics [NCSES], 2018). The enrollment and persistent patterns of Black/African American students has shed light on the disparate rates of graduate school completion by gender. Despite increases in the absolute number of Black men pursuing graduate education across programs, only 34.1% of the doctoral degrees conferred to Black students were awarded to Black men (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). As McGaskey et al. (2016) posits, "with the falling percentage of Black males attaining doctoral degrees, research on their experience and the challenges they face becomes imperative" (p. 141). The available literature has consistently revealed that Black graduate students often experience marginalization, isolation, and discrimination from both peers and institutional agents while pursuing degrees (e.g., Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2016, Williams et al., 2018). While this generalization is helpful, data analyses often do not differentiate the experiences of students across different components of the graduate school process. Specifically, there is less focus on the experiences of Black male doctoral students who, after successfully completing coursework, comprehensive examinations, and a dissertation proposal hearing, find themselves mired in "All But Dissertation" (ABD) status. If we seek to improve the persistence of Black male doctoral students, it is also imperative that we identify the factors contributing to high attrition rates at all stages of doctoral study, and especially during the final stage of ABD.

The purpose of this research is to explore the intersections of race and gender in the educational experiences of Black male ABD students and its possible link to extended time in ABD status and delayed doctoral degree completion. Through this analysis, we interrogate the relationships between race, gender, and graduate program outcomes specifically at this stage of graduate education. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What are the experiences of Black male doctoral students as they advance to candidacy? And (2) What is the role of race in doctoral study? Findings reveal that encountering racialized incidents over time contributes to the ABD phenomenon. Strategies are offered to inform students, faculty, and higher education administrators of the salient role of race in doctoral study. This work adds to the scant literature base that centers the experiences of Black male doctoral students and offers insights into the policies and practices that promote degree attainment. Increasing the number of Black males transitioning out of ABD status will undoubtedly present more Black male representation in areas of campus diversity, leadership, and faculty positions in higher education across disciplines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational experiences of Black students have been explored extensively by scholars. Most of this work has informed our understanding of the pre-college and undergraduate experiences of Black students (Harper, 2007; Woods et al., 2015). Increasingly, scholars are focusing on Black males specifically, with an emphasis on graduate education (Lewis et al., 2004; McGaskey, et al., 2016; Patterson-Stewart et al., 1997). This literature review is informed by the literary base that explores the educational pipeline for Black males and their experiences as doctoral candidates on their journey to terminal degree completion.

In his study on the success of Black and White doctorate students, Nettles (1990) asserts, "we know very little about the background, performances, and experiences of Black doctoral students and almost nothing about racial/ethnic group differences in doctoral programs" (p. 494). Since that time, scholarship investigating Black/African American students pursuing graduate education has expanded considerably (Ballard & Cintron, 2010; McGaskey et al., 2016; Turner & Thompson, 1993). Lewis et al. (2004) report, "research studies conducted in the area focus on students in a variety of disciplines utilizing survey-type research, generally examining issues like enrollment patterns, factors related to persistence, faculty support, and a variety of other variables associated with academic achievement" (p. 232). There is an emerging body of research on Black doctoral students on topics ranging from socialization to the psychology of doctoral education (Blum, 2010; Felder et al., 2014).

Several of these studies, often crafted from a critical perspective, explore the ways race and racism shape the educational experiences of Black students (Ballard & Cintron, 2010; Felder & Barker, 2013; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). These studies, as highlighted below, can be used to inform our understanding of experiences during the final stage of doctoral study - candidacy.

The Educational Pipeline for Black Males

Historically, Black males have been characterized as "academically underperforming" in American education when compared to their White male counterparts. Not only is this characterization troubling, it serves to perpetuate a deficit-laden focus on Black males pursuing educational opportunities. There are numerous societal forces that shape the trends in academic performance of African American male students. Harper (2007) informs, "the social reinforcement of racially oppressive assumptions eventually works its way into the psyche of African Americans and negatively shapes the way they see themselves and others within their race" (p. 337). While it is true that Black males have had to overcome centuries of institutionalized domination and oppression, many have nonetheless been motivated to excel in a host of arenas, including graduate school. Despite, or perhaps in spite of these low expectations, Black men who pursue advanced degrees envision success for themselves and their families (Snyder et al., 2002).

Goals notwithstanding, in doctoral programs, Black male doctoral candidates who find themselves in prolonged ABD status often face unforeseen challenges, including racism, racialized experiences, and microaggressions that may negatively influence their motivation to continue to degree attainment. Doctoral candidates understand the need to "work hard" and are often very proud of their prior academic accomplishments (Williams et al., 2018). These same hard-working and academically successful candidates, however, may not ever complete their dissertation. These patterns of non-completion raise questions at all levels of higher education. Should degree non-completion be attributed to some failings of the individual student, or are there larger systemic or institutional barriers at play? Scholars suggest that each perspective warrants study. For instance, in their four-year qualitative study of 76 graduate students, Gildersleeve et al. (2011) report, "the pushing out of Black and Latina/o doctoral students may be more directly related to who these students are as raced individuals as opposed to what they are capable of academically" (p. 96). Being 'raced' and consequently viewed as incompetent, or worse, unfit for doctorate studies, may further exasperate feelings of inadequacy and lack of motivation among minority doctoral candidates – all of which may result in prolonged ABD status and, in some cases, indefinitely.

All But Dissertation

The "All But Dissertation" status in doctoral education refers to doctoral candidates who have completed all other program requirements except the dissertation. Successfully completing the terminal degree requires proposing a study, conducting original research, writing up findings, and defending a formal dissertation manuscript. While most doctoral programs supply students with outlines and requirements for the dissertation aligned with institutional and program expectations, the actual process of conceptualizing, writing, and defending a dissertation may be mired in uncertainty. In other words, the transition from coursework to independent scholar is, for some, an ambiguous process (Lovitts, 2005). It is this uncertainty that creates conditions where students linger in the dissertation stage of doctoral study and are considered "All But Dissertation" or ABD.

While some scholars attribute prolonged ABD status to a lack of self-regulation on the part of the student (Locke & Boyle, 2016), or lack of consistent feedback from faculty (Johnson & Scott, 2020), other scholars argue that experiences of stress and isolation during this stage of the doctoral process could be prime contributors to prolonged ABD status and premature program departure (Ames et al., 2018; Jones, 2013). These stresses and experiences of isolation may be confounded by an individual's race and gender, particularly when students are navigating expectations where they are one of few, if not the only Black student in their program (McGaskey et al., 2016). Contemporarily, what is

known about race in graduate school and doctoral studies in particular, mostly pertains to demographic information, student preparedness, faculty-student interactions, socialization, and educational background (Felder et al., 2014). Explicitly, the current literature base does not fully explore the ways in which Black male doctoral students may be impacted by racialized experiences and its connection to the ABD phenomenon. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the dual influences of race and gender and how this may contribute to the ABD status of Black male doctoral candidates.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by two theories: Self-Efficacy Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Self-Efficacy Theory is utilized to understand patterns of persistence and draw connections to students' motivation to earn their doctoral degree. Critical Race Theory is used to explore the relationship between race, gender, and the educational experiences of Black male doctoral students during the dissertation phase of their program.

SELF-EFFICACY THEORY

To interrogate how ABD Black males come to feel about themselves and how these feelings and attitudes contribute to behaviors, Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory presents as a useful framework for this research project. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence or personal belief in his or her own ability to effectively perform a given task. Educational researchers have used this theory to explain the function of self in school contexts (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). The greater one's self-efficacy, the more likely they are to engage in behaviors linked to achievement. Woods et al. (2015) found that self-efficacy is significantly predictive of several academic integration measures on the undergraduate level among Black males - including talking with faculty, meeting with advisors, and accessing library resources. Similar behaviors must be enacted in order to successfully complete a doctoral degree. However, studies consistently report lower rates of self-efficacy among racial minority students in general, and Black males in particular (Laar, 2000; Reid, 2013). The self-efficacy of Black doctoral students may be compromised since evidence suggests that college students of color encounter explicit and implicit forms of racial discrimination (Karabel, 2005). For instance, some Black doctoral students enter graduate programs where others may not view them as having the academic abilities and intellectual capacity to perform at this level. This may lead students to begin to doubt themselves and their own capabilities (Laar, 2000). These direct and indirect encounters with racism can shape Black doctoral students' self-efficacy as it relates to performing the tasks associated with completing a doctoral degree.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical Race Theory is an analytical frame with roots in law and policy. López (2003) explains "CRT's premise is to critically interrogate how the law reproduces, reifies, and normalizes racism in society in particular for individuals of lower social classes and persons of color" (p. 83). From this, "critical race scholars continue to rely upon CRT to capture the unique and continuously, overlooked and/or dismissed, experiences of those historically marginalized in higher education spaces" (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 217). As such, CRT is a useful framework for investigating and centering the voices of populations traditionally rendered to the margins in education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

This research project draws upon two of the core features of CRT, ordinariness and counter-storytelling. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) holds the position that the ordinariness tenet of CRT means that "racism is difficult to address or cure since it is not acknowledged" (p. 8). Much of modern-day racism is implicit in context and delivery. As it relates to doctoral education, the concept of "ordinariness" can be used to explore racist practices embedded in interactions between Black male doctoral students and members of the campus community as they navigate the dissertation portion of doctoral education.

The second feature of CRT used in this research is counter-storytelling. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) assert:

> Counter-story is a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told – those on the margins of society. The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (p. 32).

As there are limited investigations of the ways Black males navigate the doctoral process, particularly during the dissertation stage, this study offers a counter-story to the dominant narrative about the scarcity of Black males pursuing advanced degrees. Together, the tenets of ordinariness and counter-storytelling support the purpose of the study to recognize the experiences of Black male doctoral students at the ABD stage of doctoral education.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the racialized experiences of Black male doctoral students who reached the ABD stage of graduate education. In order to place emphasis on the meaning-making process and the ways these participants made-sense of their graduate school experiences, a phenomenological approach was adopted (Merriam, 2016). Consistent with qualitative inquiry, semi-structured interviews with three Black/African American men were conducted to explore the ways race and gender intersects with student behaviors as well as interactions with faculty through advising and mentoring during the dissertation phase. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What are the experiences of Black male doctoral students as they advance to candidacy?
- RQ 2: What is the role of race in doctoral study?

DATA COLLECTION

Participants in the study were identified through purposeful sampling to secure information-rich cases suitable for exploring the research questions of interest. The individuals in this study identified as Black/African American and spent more than six months in ABD status. Given the differences of policies of institutions in the study, we broadly defined "ABD" as the time period after completion of coursework and the comprehensive examination (comps).

After each participant provided consent, he was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire with background information about institutions attended, doctoral program of study, and employment status. Subsequently, each participant engaged in one semi-structured telephone interview with one of the co-authors, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by hand for data analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym to represent them in the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis strategy was informed by the review of the literature and the theoretical framework. Initial themes were identified in the transcripts by engaging in selective coding, chunking segments of the narrative as it related to broad concepts of gender, race, motivation, and interactions with faculty and peers in graduate school (Merriam, 2016). Subsequently, the researchers engaged in open coding, reviewing the transcripts to select segments of texts that were related to the theoretical framework, but were more specific to the individualized processes of graduate study as followed by each participant in the study. Throughout this process, we read the transcripts and created analytic memos to document perceptions of the emergent patterns, categories, and concepts embedded

within the data (Merriam, 2016; Saldaña, 2012). The researchers utilized Dedoose® as the collaborative qualitative research software to organize data and document each step of the data analysis process.

FINDINGS

This research was designed to capture the racialized experiences of Black male doctoral students while ABD. We first offer demographic and programmatic information about the participants in this study as a way to understand how participants differ, yet possess salient similarities in their doctoral education experiences.

Rico, age 29, began doctoral studies in 2016 at the same institution where he earned a bachelor's degree. Driven by interests in expanding educational equity through research, Rico enrolled in the Public Administration PhD program at a large, research-intensive university located in the Southern region of the United States. At the time of the interview, he was a full-time doctoral student with a teaching assistantship. Rico had been ABD for one year.

Jeremy, age 36, was an undergraduate student athlete. An experienced middle-school educator, he decided to enroll in the Higher Education EdD program at a large public research-intensive university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States in 2009. In 2019, Jeremy had been ABD for two years and was given notice he had one more year to complete the degree before timing-out of the program. He officially completed his degree program in 2020.

Kevin, age 38, inspired by his experience as a McNair Scholar as an undergraduate, began his PhD program in Human Development in 2007 at a large, private research-intensive university in the Northeast. He concurrently is employed with a national non-profit organization specializing in educational consulting and training. He officially advanced to doctoral candidacy status in 2018.

Through the narratives of Rico, Jeremy, and Kevin, three core themes emerged that illustrate the salience of race in the doctoral program experiences of Black males. These themes are: (1) Underrepresented & Undervalued, (2) Challenging Transitions, and (3) Gendered Racism. These themes pertain to how the Black male ABD participants reported being underrepresented, undervalued, and challenged during the doctoral program, largely as a consequence of their race and gender.

UNDERREPRESENTED & UNDERVALUED

One of the common experiences shared across participants in this study was related to the underrepresentation of Black males in their programs. Gay (2004) asserts:

> Graduates students of color in colleges of education at PWIs are few in number, and generally spread out across different programs of study. They have the dubious distinction of being 'the only one,' or 'one of the very few' in both general courses and their areas of specialization (p. 267).

Each participant attended doctoral programs at predominantly White institutions, and all share the commonality of being the only or one of a few Black male doctoral students in their program. Jeremy, an EdD candidate in the Mid-Atlantic shared, "I am the only Black male in my program." Similarly, Kevin, a PhD candidate in Human Development in the Northeast revealed:

> I was the only Black male during my coursework. The next Black male came into the educational counseling PhD program. Most of the students are either White or Asian (of Asian descent with International Student status). There are limited [numbers of] African Americans and Latinos in the program.

Rico, enrolled in a Public Administration PhD program in the South, also reported that there were few men and men of color in his program, but about half of the students identified as Black or African American. Overall, participants described a common experience in graduate school for Black

males. Few Black males in the graduate programs led to few opportunities to engage with Black male students. The lack of representation of Black male graduate students shaped participants' daily interactions with peers. Yet, the dearth of Black males in their respective programs served as a source of motivation to both enter and complete doctoral education.

With so few Black males enrolled in doctoral programs, it became important to garner insight about why the few who are in doctoral study chose to pursue the terminal degree. These motivations reflected a desire to address the limited acknowledgments of the critical issues and concerns faced by members of the Black community. For Jeremy, years of teaching in public schools in urban, high-poverty areas influenced his decision to pursue the doctorate. Jeremy explained:

> While I was teaching at public schools, I realized that I needed to understand more about urban education. I was at a failing school that was predominantly African American. I needed to increase my competency to understand the problems in urban schools in practical ways.

Jeremy decided to enroll in an EdD program in order to take the knowledge gained through the program back to roles in school leadership in middle-school and high school settings. Similarly, for Kevin and Rico, desires to pursue the doctorate stemmed from research-based questions they wanted to explore. For example, Kevin reported that his undergraduate experience as a Ronald McNair scholar sparked his interest in research. Kevin shared, "From that point, I was interested in the ways in which research could make change."

Exposure to various issues and ideas through masters' programs also deepened participants' commitment to focus on these issues specifically as dissertation topics. When asked his reason for pursuing the doctorate, Rico shared:

> I saw that a lot of issues regarding equity were not being addressed in the research. I thought that I could produce knowledge that would be more holistic and include populations and perspectives that were not being addressed at very prominent conferences.

Participants' desired to pursue doctoral education as a way to 'make change' and address critical issues and concerns within the Black community. They were motivated to seek out doctoral programs that would allow their voices to be heard while empirically exploring concerns in Black America. With this, came the belief that the changes they wanted to make required a terminal degree as a gateway to leadership positions.

Challenging Transitions

One of the most commonly contested narratives about Black doctoral students is that they are underprepared for the rigor of doctoral education. Those underprepared are more likely to struggle with meeting the expectations of coursework and earning the grades needed to advance to doctoral candidacy. The level of preparation, however, is often related to the types of academic expectations set forth by faculty in undergraduate and masters programs. It became apparent from the narratives of these candidates, that level of "preparedness" had less to do with academic foundation, but more with the differences in approaches between coursework at the master's level with the expectations for programs. When asked if he felt prepared for his PhD program, Rico reflected on his experiences as a master's student:

> I was not prepared at all. The reason why I say that is because my master's was a terminal degree and we did very little when it came to research. Although I came to doctoral study with an interest, I didn't really have a research interest and so I didn't feel prepared. Especially compared to members of my cohort who had completed a thesis versus me only completing a comprehensive exam in my master's program.

Comparatively, Kevin, did feel prepared for doctoral study. He participated in the McNair Scholars Program, a program designed to expose undergraduate students who are first-generation college students and/or from low-income families to opportunities in academic careers. Kevin shared that from this experience, he felt prepared to engage in the research aspect of the doctoral program, yet he was not as prepared as he thought he was in other salient ways. Kevin shared:

> I was prepared in the sense of what research looked like. I was not prepared culturally, however. There were structural and environmental differences. [Undergraduate School] is a state university that is very diverse. In contrast, the [Graduate School] is a (private) PWI and it took some adjusting to. The interactions I had at [Undergraduate School] was very different than the interactions I have with the faculty at [Graduate School]. The faculty at both universities that I interacted with were White. There were no Black or Hispanic faculty at [Undergraduate School] which is similar in demographic make-up of the faculty at [Graduate School], yet there was a cultural shift in terms of cultural engagement.

Although Betz and Hackett (2006) argue that most people have some areas where they lack confidence in their abilities (self-efficacy), the differences in experiences as reported by the participants in this research provide some nuance to the meaning of "preparedness" when it comes to doctoral study. For some, curricular differences between master's-level and doctoral-level education may lead to differences in levels of preparedness for empirical inquiry and academic research. This is likely to lead to challenges for students as they move across programs with different approaches. The second area of "preparedness", however, is more cultural in nature. This seems to reflect the differences in the nature of interactions, both with fellow students and with faculty members, that happens when students move into doctoral programs.

Most assume that those entering doctoral programs do so with the intent to finish. While this may be true, navigating doctoral education presents itself with several challenges. As Moore (1985, p. 127, as cited in Monsour & Corman, 1991, p. 180) asserts, "that the dissertation process should be a long, ego-threatening, gut-wrenching experience goes without saying." When participants were asked if they entered their programs with any concerns about whether they would finish the program in a timely manner Kevin shared, "No. I thought there was a timeline. At the orientation it was stated that I'd be finished in about four years." Startlingly, having started his program in 2007, Kevin has completed his coursework and remains in ABD status eleven years later. In Rico's experience, he revealed that he had concerns about the time it would take to finish his program right from the beginning. Rico recalled:

> I did because during orientation they informed us that the program was going through a revision and that the revisions was in the process of being submitted to the state accrediting body. None of us were clear about which curriculum we would fall under. Under our traditional program, you could complete it in about four to five years. With the new curriculum it could be completed in as little as three, with a maximum of four years. We were a bit in limbo about which curriculum we would fall under based on our funding … I was not too sure how any of this would look moving forward.

At the time of the interview, Rico had been in his doctoral program for 2 years and in ABD status for approximately 6 months. While he was "on track" with the three-year curriculum set by his department, he was still concerned that he was unclear about the final steps in the dissertation process.

Also illustrated in participants' narratives was the differences in policies related to how to become a doctoral "candidate." For Rico, "after the completion of coursework, I reached candidacy. There are no comps in my program." When asked about his experience of achieving candidacy Rico elaborated, "most of us are in limbo because we didn't have a lot of contact with faculty because they were out of the country or unavailable. We spend a lot of time 'winging' it with a lot of uncertainty." When asked what he was told about completing his dissertation, Jeremy reported, "I was told to

write." Kevin's experience reaching candidacy reverberates with Rico and Jeremy, as Kevin explained:

> Advancing to candidacy was a very unclear process. I was under the impression that I would be able to propose my dissertation two or three times. At the start of each year, my advisor/chair would tell me that I could propose and be finished this year. There was no formal process. My advisor, department, etc., were treating my experience as though they thought I would disappear. It was as though I was no longer a student although I was paying continued enrollment fees and I was submitting drafts. The faculty would speak about me in conversation as though I was away or out of the loop of the university or unaffiliated. They were acting like they were trying to pull me back in, but it wasn't that way. I was paying every semester. I did semester drafts every semester and I was not receiving feedback.

Rico's and Kevin's experience speaks to the unclear expectations about program progression that some Black doctoral students encounter. Rico's and Kevin's experience resonates with Locke and Boyle's (2016) assertion that, "going from a structured experience while in coursework, to an unstructured experience in the dissertation phase, along with a lack of guidance, seemed to not only confuse and frustrate students, but also significantly stifle their momentum and progress" (p. 1580). When asked to elaborate further Kevin revealed:

> Until I had a pressing conversation with my advisor, I was not even considered to propose my dissertation. I had a heart to heart with my advisor, the underlying theme that I gathered was that there were struggles for my advisor who was contemplating staying in the university system…I wasn't getting feedback. I had to start showing up in various classes that my advisor was instructing just to get that face time. A typical semester would be me registering and paying my bill and submitting a draft along with a repetitive email awaiting a response. Gmail would send me a notification nudge if you don't get a response within a certain amount of days, so I would copy the email along with my draft and re-sent it again to my advisor. I still did not get any feedback. Maybe by the end of the semester, I would have made contact with my advisor once. Going into the next semester, I'd make edits, resubmit and the cycle of little to no feedback would repeat itself. This went on for two and a half years of this! Every year they would tell me that I'm in good shape to finish my doctorate.

Kevin's experience mirrors other Black doctoral students who feel as if they are being strung along rather than progressing through their program.

Burt et al., (2018) maintain that, "institutional and social barriers create environments that are counterproductive to successful outcomes for Black males specifically and students of color more generally" (p. 994). To obtain a sense of what institutional and social barriers contributed to their ABD status, we asked participants to share factors that they perceived as hindering their doctoral progressions. One area brought up was inadequate transition to the dissertation stage. Kevin explained:

> There isn't a lot of support in our program as far as transitioning from coursework to the dissertation. Although we do take courses related to research design, it's not to the magnitude of doing a dissertation. There was very little support available and trying to navigate that with little resources was very difficult.

This lack of support was often linked to the types of feedback received by advisors. In the absence of institutional support, participants talked about having to rely on their own sense of self-efficacy. Kevin when on to say:

> I'm ABD because I haven't decided to give up. There clearly is work to be done. I would love more clarity in this regard. I'm willing to do the work that's necessary. I just don't feel like I've always received communication that fits my style of learning and adapting.

Building up on this theme, in order to obtain a better understanding of their doctoral program experience relating to their ABD status, participants were asked to share in what ways their academic department or program hindered or facilitated their dissertation completion. For Rico, failure to inform faculty members of program changes impacted his progress. He commented:

> When the new curriculum was approved, it was not all circulated to the faculty in the same way. All the faculty received different information about what the new curriculum would be and what the required would be for us moving forward.

Similar to Rico, but more extreme, Kevin recalled:

> They have hurt me in reference to the time it has taken to complete my doctorate. I don't think that many students in my actual program finished. A lot of students have gone on to do other things. We did not have a cohort model, but of the students that started when I started, I can probably count on my hand the students who have actually completed their PhD. Our program started out with about 20 to 25 students and there have only been about two or three who have graduated. I was the only Black man in the PhD program in my department. There have been several students of color who left the program because they were not impressed with how things were being conducted and because of the way that students of color feel like they've been mistreated. Like myself, many students feel that their time is being wasted.

The environment in which doctoral students find themselves impacts how they came to feel about themselves and their ability to complete doctoral study. De Valero (2001) suggests, "in relation to departmental climate, research has indicated that the kind of environment (cooperative or contentious) in departments determines, in part, the rate of completion and the time students spend in completing a doctoral program" (p. 345).

Direct communication with faculty came up several times when participants were asked to describe what they believed was preventing them from finishing the doctorate. Rico revealed:

> One reason that can prevent me from finishing the doctorate is being able to get timely feedback from my committee. I have one committee member and we met to talk about timelines and expectations moving forward, and he expressed that he needs at least a month to look at a draft of anything. Although I expressed that I thought that would be too much time if I'm looking to graduate at least by the summer, no one on the committee disagreed. So, he's still on the committee. I sent a draft a couple of weeks ago and I still have not gotten a response just yet from him.

When asked the same question, Kevin replied:

> I'm not 100% sure of what I need to finish. I don't think I ever fully understood from my first draft to my current draft, the premise of what is needed to finish my doctorate. You need to change this or move or restructure this? … I don't feel like I've had that type of information or guidance. These issues have not been addressed.

Sharing further about the process, Kevin added:

> Information is not readily available. I feel like I've asked direct questions, but I have not gotten direct answers. If there is an underlying jargon or way to express things, I'm not clear on that because I asked directly what are the things I need to do. I've expressed this to the proper channels and I don't feel like I've gotten a clear determination on what I could or should be doing. At times I feel lost. I don't feel like effort is an issue for me. I'm willing to put the effort in but there are things I just don't know. I don't have the access to whatever this is that is preventing me from making this happen. If I understood, I feel like the work would be done to rectify it, but I haven't been in place in that situation where information is made available to me.

Okech and Harrington (2002) posit, "researchers have shown that academic self-efficacy is predictive of ability to succeed at various academic achievements" (p. 218). As reported above, participants' self-efficacy to complete doctoral education was impacted by a series of factors including unclear guidance and consistent ambiguity prior to and during doctoral candidacy. Without the proper tools and instructions to succeed, ABD status is likely inevitable and the pipeline for Black male terminal degree holders is halted.

Gendered Racism

The experiences of Black students are complicated by race (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Moreover, in the realm of Black male education, Burt et al. (2018) assert that Black males, "may have equally tumultuous academic experiences due to gendered racism throughout the educational environment" (p. 966). To explore the possible connection with doctoral programs and racialized experiences that may contribute to the ABD status of the participants in this study, we asked, 'What role has your race played in your ABD status'? Rico recalled:

> One of my initial challenges was not finding a lot of support from the faculty. For example, in my first semester in my research design class, after we submitted our first assignment, the professor gave a threatening remark…because we didn't "write like scholars." It didn't help to build confidence. Most of us were really hesitant to speak in class after that, or we were hesitant to turn in assignments. We realized that we were asking for extensions on assignments because there was a lot of anxiety around it. Trying to find your place in academia, and then to be invalidated by a White man when most of us are Black, gave most of us a bitter taste. [Fortunately], we were able to bounce back and finish the course.

Rico's challenge to find faculty and faculty of color particularly to support his navigation through doctoral education is problematic across doctoral programs. Twale et al. (2016) assert that although diversity on college campuses has increased over the years, diversity at the faculty level has not.

Similar to Rico, Kevin revealed his experience with program racism in relationship to his ABD Status. Kevin mused:

> I think my race has played a significant role in my ABD status. I saw how other students were making relationships with faculty and having opportunities for publication, for teacher experience, etc. I think this is one of the most frustrating things that the faculty were not talking to me or others like me. There are limited faculty of color and limited students of color.

Kevin further revealed:

> During my residency year I was on campus the most that I've ever been. I was on a research project, so 20 hours a week I'm on campus. I would be followed out of the computer lab. I would be watched as I was walking around. I've had my I.D. card checked several times, even though I'm walking around frequently. I have a locker, I'm not carrying any bags, my things are in the lab, and I'm still getting I.D. checks often. Coming to the university on the weekends when there are several other students, they would call Campus Safety to check my I.D. Things like this are very uncomfortable for someone who is supposed to be welcomed to the university and contributing to the university as a member of the research team. Just things that I wasn't used to. All of this was very challenging for me.

Harper et al. (2018) found that although several studies have focused on racial identity development and minority student college experiences, few have been directly focused on issues of racism and racist practices and policies. Here, the CRT tenet of ordinariness – race and racism exist as an ordinary part of academic life becomes salient. This project's first research question, "What are the experiences of Black male doctoral students as they advance to candidacy?" was answered as participants'

reported lack of faculty guidance and little to no support or effective program communication necessary to navigate the transition from doctoral candidacy to the dissertation phase and beyond. Additionally, the second research question, "What is the role of race in doctoral education?" was saliently captured by participants. Incessant racial profiling and excessive I.D. checks as reported by Kevin not only illuminate the ordinariness of racism on some college campuses, it also highlights the reality that racialized incidents have the potential to prolong the doctoral journey or deter Black male doctoral candidates from completing their degree program. Burt et al. (2018) explain, "racialized experiences have deleterious effects on students' health and overall wellness and negatively influence students' sense of belonging on campus and their persistence" (p. 270). Felder et al. (2014) add that single occurrences of racism have the potential to be amplified impacting academic success. Given the reality that doctoral study is challenging in and of itself, participants' racialized experiences only add to the challenges associated with doctoral education.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

While examining the data from this qualitative study on the experiences of Black "All But Dissertation" (ABD) doctoral candidates, the salience of racialized experiences among Black male participants became conspicuously clear. This study's findings indicate that racialized dynamics during doctoral education create environments that both negatively impact doctoral students' self-efficacy and diminish motivation to complete doctoral studies. All participants found themselves as the sole or one of a few Black male doctoral students in their program. Two of the three participant experienced salient racialized incidents including campus racial profiling and racial stereotyping. Participants also reported feeling mistreated in their program and a salient lack of inspiration and motivation after witnessing the departure of fellow Black students who were "fed up" with doctoral study due to racism and ambiguity while navigating the process. They shared feelings of marginalization relating to their inability to obtain needed support and advisement, particularly when attempting to interact with White faculty members, and most especially when seeking out support and feedback on their dissertation from faculty members.

As described in this study, the racial realities of the participants also contributed to their prolonged ABD status. CRT provided a useful lens for a deeper critical analysis of Black college student experiences. Kevin's salient statement, "I think my race has played a significant role in my ABD status" emphasizes that race indeed has a seat in doctoral education. "I saw how other students were making relationships with faculty and having opportunities for publication, for teacher experience, etc. … They have hurt me in reference to the time it has taken to complete my doctorate," Kevin lamented. These experiences speak to the level of implicit racism that exists in higher education and the urgent need and importance of counter-storytelling to articulate what is happening in doctoral education. If we are to increase minority enrollment in doctoral programs, we must decrease and ultimately eliminate racism in higher education, and doctoral programs in particular. Doing so will buttress efforts to not only increase the pipeline to the professoriate for Black males, it will also serve to combat the alarming ABD phenomenon in higher education.

Unpacking the racialized experiences of Black males on American college campuses has implications not only for campus diversity and inclusion, but for understanding the lived experiences of students in graduate education. This study revealed the ways encounters with peers and faculty lead to feelings of low self-efficacy among Black male students. This is a problematic revelation, as we know that it takes years of academic success to gain admission to doctoral programs in the first place. This finding helps contextualize findings from previous research. Scholars have found that African American students often perceive themselves as incapable of being academically competitive with White students (Patterson-Stewart et al., 1997). Moreover, Seltzer and Johnson (2009) in their work that explores discrimination through the eyes of college students argue that racist attitudes toward Blacks are actually more prevalent than what has been revealed in survey data. While the salience of racial

identity may vary for students entering doctoral programs, the findings from this study support previous studies that highlight the relationship between racial identity and educational experiences navigating graduate programs.

When participants were asked for recommendations for higher education officials to support doctoral completion of Black graduate students, Rico reported, "it's important to have diversity in the faculty. People need to have folks that look like them … even if their research interests don't align. They need someone who can advocate and help provide some directions." Resonating with Rico, Kevin explained, "I think it is important to have faculty of color because they bring levels of understanding and modeling. I think that a welcoming culture as a whole contributes to the success of students of color." Building on Rico's and Kevin's recommendation of more faculty of color, Lewis et al. (2004) assert that, "faculty and university administrators need to become more sensitive to the specific needs of the African Americans brought into graduate study on a predominately White campus" (p. 243).

Given the numerous racial realities as reported by participants in this study, having available faculty to talk to about those realities becomes critical if we seek to address the alarmingly high rates of Black male ABDs. Too often, students like Rico, Jeremey, and Kevin experience racialized incidents on a regular basis, yet, "because there were no Black faculty, it was hard to reach out to anyone." Participating in this study was one way their stories can be shared. As Kevin explained, Black students need to know "who I could go to, when and why, what I should do with any challenges I'm facing, who I could even talk to in those situations." Gardner (2009) found that faculty are likely unaware of the reasons doctoral students leave programs, and they do not view themselves as contributing factors to students' departure. "Faculty advisors must consider the dynamics, complexities, and importance of race in advising, doctoral education, and doctoral socialization" (Barker, 2016, p. 136). Having more Black doctoral students earn degrees and continue careers in the academy can positively impact campus diversity, addressing many of the concerns highlighted in this study.

Conclusion

This research explored the intersections of race and gender in the educational experiences of Black male doctoral students that contribute to delayed terminal degree completion. Findings revealed that racialized and gendered experiences adversely impacted the self-efficacy and motivation of the Black men in this study as they sought to complete a doctoral degree. This study contributes to research in three critical ways: (1) it expands our understanding of the experiences of doctoral students specifically between completing coursework and defending a dissertation; (2) it illustrates the types of racialized encounters experienced during graduate study that contribute to prolonged ABD status and program attrition; and (3) it offers strategies for campus administrators and faculty to consider to extend structures of support to promote terminal degree attainment among Black male doctoral students.

The experiences highlighted by participants offer insights into the institutional policies and procedures that can be implemented to support Black men. Specifically, findings speak to the importance of diversity. Campuses should work to ensure there is structural diversity within programs, and that faculty can guide students through a diverse array of research interests and topics as well. Faculty should offer clear and consistent feedback on student writing at all stages of graduate education to better prepare students for the transition to writing a dissertation independently. Finally, as racism is endemic to education, higher education officials must implement campus-wide faculty racial sensitivity training and racial incident reporting procedures. Administration should promote spaces where students of color can talk about their racially charged experiences navigating the academy.

This work would benefit from additional research exploring the experiences of doctoral candidates across diverse institutional contexts. This includes intentional exploration of experiences of students enrolled in online doctoral programs, executive doctoral programs, or other types of programs that

have emerged. Future studies at online universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other distinct institutional contexts would also be helpful in understanding the experiences of Black males in ABD status.

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