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Melanie Acosta
University of Alabama

Shaunte Duggins
University of Florida

Thomas E. Moore
University of Florida

Thomasenia Adams
University of Florida

Bridgette Johnson
University of Florida

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“From Whence Cometh My Help?” Exploring Black Doctoral Student Persistence

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“From Whence Cometh My Help?” Exploring Black Doctoral Student Persistence

Melanie M. Acosta, University of Alabama
Shaunté Duggins, University of Florida
Thomas E. Moore, University of Florida
Thomasenia Lott Adams, University of Florida
Bridgette Johnson, University of Florida

Abstract

In previous decades, the bulk of research focused on Black students in doctoral programs highlight issues of recruitment and access with little attention given to the racialized experiences or perspectives of African descent scholars-in-training. More recently, a growing body of research has used qualitative methods to dismantle the myth of a colorblind doctoral student experience. Instead these scholars illuminate the ways in which race and racism create challenges for Black doctoral students. The present study adds to this literature by revealing the ways that Black doctoral students persist amid this highly racialized context. Researchers employ critical race theory and qualitative focus group methods to describe the factors that contribute to Black doctoral student persistence. Findings expand the existing literature on Black doctoral student persistence in ways that further delineate the nature of support factors, which have implications for faculty and administrators.

Keywords

doctoral education, Black students, persistence, critical race theory

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Despite calls for building racially and culturally diverse educational institutions, the limited presence of Black graduate students and faculty lingers (Danley, Land, & Lomotey, 2009; Jett, 2011). Research reflects this trend by exploring issues related to the recruitment and retention of Black students pursuing advanced degrees. Reports show that Black¹ students take a longer time to obtain a degree than their White and Asian counterparts (7.7 years and 9.5 years, respectively) and have fewer opportunities for professional support and mentorship (Clewell, 1987; National Science Foundation, 2014). These tendencies often limit Black doctoral students' (BDS) degree attainment. The length of time to degree and fewer opportunities for support and mentorship negatively affect enrollment as well as recruitment for Black students. Consequently, addressing enrollment and recruitment remains necessary in order to expand the pool of Black faculty at research-intensive institutions. Though issues of enrollment are integral to diversifying the professoriate, few studies have explored an equally important aspect, the persistence of BDS.

As Duncan (1976) explained more than three decades ago, focusing exclusively on issues of enrollment and recruitment is problematic. More recently, Squire (2015) argued that the visible underrepresentation of faculty of color in higher education is reflective of the lack of socialization on how to survive in a doctoral education system not built to support prospective and existing scholars of color. Thus, encapsulating studies of Black students seeking doctoral degrees within an analysis of recruitment and enrollment circumvents questions about the kinds of experiences they have that either increase their chances for success or create challenges to their professional development. The focus is predicated on the assumption that once admitted to a

doctoral program, all students share the same experience (Taylor & Antony, 2000). Higher education administrators, though well meaning, may implement policies and programs that do not address some of the critical factors that influence BDS success, thus creating an illusion of institutional support.

In order to restructure colleges and universities in ways that acknowledge and value the benefits of racial and ethnic diversity, the higher education community must do a better job of understanding the academic socialization experiences of BDS. This includes careful analysis of those experiences that might contribute to students' persistence and degree attainment. Such a focus calls for more situated, qualitative studies of BDS experiences (Duncan, 1976; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2012). This article takes a critical look at how to support Black students at the doctoral level against a backdrop of research into the experiences of prospective Black scholars. The goal of this article is to explore the framework of BDS persistence in ways that recognize the power of culture (defined here as socially transmitted ways of thinking, behavior patterns, perceptions, and beliefs) to help Black students demonstrate educational excellence. Though other factors are relevant, specifically exploring culture is significant in that it influences an individual's way of being in numerous ways, one of which is an influence on internal factors or cultural characteristics that affect actions and behaviors.

According to King and Chepyator-Thompson (1996), persistence at the doctoral level for Black students includes institutional, environmental, and interpersonal factors. King and Chepyator-Thompson developed a framework for understanding the external aspects that shape BDS resolve. This study adds to the existing literature in that it highlights internal

factors that influence BDS persistence. In order to execute this systematic investigation, we first explored relevant research on experiences of BDS and their persistence, framing the latter's relevance as a promising heuristic for understanding how to meet the needs of emerging Black scholars. We discuss the use of critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical guide. Scholars have used CRT to acknowledge the role of race and racism in higher education. For the current study, participants shared their own lived experiences as a way to legitimize and distinguish the experiences of BDS. With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore experiences related to the persistence of BDS in a college of education at a research-intensive university. One question guided this exploration: What are the collective perspectives on the persistence of three BDS attending a predominantly White, research-intensive institution? In order to address our stated study purpose and research question, we share qualitative data collected from a yearlong study of the perspectives of three BDS who were in different stages of their academic programs across three schools within a college of education at a research-intensive institution. The participants stated that a distinctive Afrocultural consciousness was a source of support that higher education administrators and faculty should leverage in their attempts to increase the number of Black graduate students and Black faculty. The article concludes with an expanded framework of BDS persistence and recommendations for action.

Black Doctoral Student Experiences in Higher Education

BDS have distinctive experiences in higher education; however, this varies because Blacks as a racial group do not exist as a monolith. Scholars have revealed that Black students' experiences are more complex due to the definition and embeddedness of race, culture,

and racism in American society (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Solórzano, 1998). These findings disrupt the notion of a universal graduate school experience, which fails to acknowledge the racial and cultural context of higher education and how it shapes the experience of BDS.

In a previous study regarding BDS's experiences, Shealey (2009) interviewed six African American² doctoral students enrolled in special education programs at a predominantly White institution. Using CRT as an analytical framework, Shealey (2009) reported that the educational experiences of participants were shaped by difficulty in establishing mentoring relationships, securing adequate funding to support doctoral studies, frustrations with faculty who provided a lack of academic support related to research and academic writing, and feeling like an "outsider within." In essence, the researcher found that African American graduate students face systematic and attitudinal challenges that are a part of the dominant culture in teacher education programs.

Similarly, Lewis et al. (2004) used Beeler's (1991) four-stage graduate student academic adjustment framework to explore the experiences of eight African American doctoral students at a nationally ranked research institution across disciplines. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with four recent and four current doctoral students, the researchers reported that in addition to the possible issues faced by most doctoral students, African American students dealt with perceived individual and institutional racism such as cultural isolation and tokenism. This manifested in experiences such as the expectation that participants represent one's racial and/or ethnic group, being the lone person of color in class, lack of mentoring, and lack of diverse epistemological perspectives in the curriculum.

² This term is used to describe persons of African ancestry and we use it interchangeably with the term Black.

Taylor and Antony (2000) interviewed 12 African American doctoral students who had completed two or more years in one research-intensive school of education. Likewise, the researchers adapted Steele's (1997) stereotype threat and "wise schooling" framework to reveal racial inequities and practices in doctoral education that may hinder African American students. According to the researchers, wise schooling represented ways of interacting with students that foster a sense of belonging, which are intended to mitigate stereotype threat. Using this framework, the researchers suggested plausible alternatives to minimize stereotype threat and increase BDS persistence. According to the authors of this study, wise schooling in doctoral education advocates such practices as strong student-teacher relationships, challenging courses of study, and a move away from normative and deficit assumptions to thinking that affirms intellectual and personal identities and stresses "the expandability of intelligence" (Taylor & Antony, 2000, p. 187).

Black Doctoral Student Persistence

BDS persistence, or the ways BDS successfully navigate doctoral programs, emerges from research on BDS socialization (King & Thompson, 1996; Lewis et al., 2004; Shealey, 2009; Taylor & Antony, 2000; Tuit, 2011). In contrast to the above-mentioned studies which reveal the experiences of graduate students of color that may hinder success in higher education; Clewell's (1987) study reported on student and institutional factors that contributed to the persistence and degree attainment of former African American and Hispanic doctoral students. Clewell (1987) reported that minority students attributed their ability to persist in their programs to highly supportive advisors, minority allies or mentors, participation in professional activities (publishing articles, conference presentations, or both), and an

intrinsic motivation to succeed against all odds.

King and Chepyator-Thompson (1996) reported on a survey of 106 African American doctoral degree recipients in sports and exercise disciplines. The researchers found that institutional supports such as funding assistance and the provision of educational tools such as technology, research assistance, and library instruction all served as persistence factors. Environmental supports such as positive relationships with professors, peers, and department personnel were also of importance to students as well as the importance of African American mentors for Black students. As with Clewell (1987), the researchers addressed factors outside of the students themselves that contributed to persistence.

For centuries, Black people in America have diligently pursued literacy and education within the confines of an explicitly racist regime (Anderson, 1988; Perry, 2003). Many were successful in spite of the sociopolitical climate; and understanding the nature of this success from an African American purview can inspire hope and change for the future of prospective Black scholars. It was in this spirit that we pursued the current study to explore factors related to BDS persistence based on the collective thinking of a trio of Black students currently pursuing doctoral degrees. In this way, we sought to highlight and understand BDS success, rather than failure, as a mechanism for prompting change in higher education policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Our conceptualization of BDS persistence has, at its core, a critical race theoretical perspective as it relates to the field of education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Cornell West (1995) wrote, "Critical race theory is a grasp

of emancipatory hope that law can serve liberation rather than domination” (p. xiv). This statement highlights the situation of CRT as an ethical commitment to the liberation of people of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Pellar, & Thomas, 1995). Two common interests reflect this commitment. The first is an obligation to understand how racism has subordinated people of color in various institutions within American society. The second is a desire to understand the systemic nature of racism, and more importantly, to counteract it. Five underlying assumptions of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) guide these two overarching interests:

- (a) the understanding that racism is a permanent fixture endemic in the structure of society (Bell, 2002),
- (b) the dissatisfaction with the incremental approach to change the characteristic of liberalism,
- (c) the centrality of voice in naming one’s own reality,
- (d) the consideration of Whiteness as property, which is the belief that Whiteness functions as an intangible property interest giving political, economic, and social authority to members of that racial classification (Harris, 1995), and
- (e) the theorization of the principle of interest convergence, which posits that any changes for the betterment of people of color will occur only when such action will benefit and is of interest to Whites (Bell 2004).

Critical race theorists advocate for immediate action and the sweeping reformation of institutions, policies, and practices (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Furthermore, CRT’s emphasis on the ability to share one’s own lived experiences as a basis for knowledge claims contributes to the reclamation of one’s humanity which is an overarching objective of self-determination and “psychic preservation” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In this regard, the researchers found CRT to be appropriate for

the framing of the study because it served to challenge implicitly racist policies and practices in higher education, de-center whiteness as a universal conception of doctoral student socialization, and lead in the development of support structures that are consistent with the values and worldviews of BDS.

Methodology

Critical race theory’s emphasis on exposing and eradicating racism by foregrounding perspectives and lived experiences of oppressed groups provided the rationale for our qualitative approach. Qualitative research is concerned with an “emic, ideographic, case-based position” that emphasizes the nuances of a particular case (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 12). We utilized a descriptive case study as the organizing methodological approach to this study (Yin, 1984). Researchers use descriptive case studies when the intent is to describe a phenomenon with full regard for the real-life context in which it occurred. Case study was appropriate for this investigation because it allowed us to closely explore participants’ lived experiences and perspectives related to their racialized identity, which adequately addressed our research question and purpose. Moreover, we took an interpretivist stance towards the interpretation of the data. Researchers use interpretive methods to unearth individual and group experiences within a specific context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Tillman (2002) wrote that interpretivist paradigms offer greater possibilities to utilize unconventional frameworks, coconstruction of multiple realities, and knowledge that can advance educational opportunities for African Americans. Therefore, CRT can align with an interpretivist perspective because it prompts the use of counternarratives to uncover discourses from members of marginalized groups.

As four Black scholars, four emerging and one one seasoned scholar, we are each

committed to improvement and change. We intentionally sought to foreground the “racialized discourses and cultural epistemologies” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 261) of one cultural group in ways that can stimulate positive changes in BDS experiences. Each researcher is of African descent and is presently or has been a doctoral student in a college of education. In this way, we conducted this research as insiders because we were acutely familiar with the racialized nuances of doctoral education. Our explicit ideological intentions make this design an appropriate empirical methodology given its assumptions about knowledge, centrality of participant voice, and dependence on the social context that shape the phenomenon.

Participants and Context

We purposefully selected three BDS to participate in the study: one Black male and two Black females. Purposeful selection or sampling seeks information-rich cases that researchers can study in depth to learn about issues of central importance (Patton, 1990). We specifically sought students who (a) identified as Black under the Census categorization, and (b) were actively enrolled (i.e., currently taking courses, doing research, taking their comprehensive exams, or writing their dissertations) in a doctoral program in a college of education at a research-intensive, predominately White university in the south-east region of the United States. Participants were enrolled across three schools within the college. Participants represented differences in sex, age, and prior educational experience. We obtained consent from each participant in accordance with the institution’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Below is a brief profile of each participant gathered from the demographic interview questions and life history narratives.

Naomi³ identified herself as an African

American female, born and raised in the South. At the time of the study, Naomi was enrolled as a full-time doctoral candidate in curriculum and instruction. She stated that she focused her scholarship on teacher education and African American educational studies. Naomi shared that she had completed her doctoral coursework, passed her comprehensive exams, and was in the dissertation proposal writing stage. She indicated that she was funding her doctoral degree with a small departmental fellowship and two graduate assistantships. Naomi stated that she always strived for academic excellence to make her race proud.

Shabazz was a third-year doctoral student. He self-identified as an African American man from a densely populated area in the mid-eastern-Atlantic region of the United States. Shabazz was pursuing a doctoral degree in higher education administration and educational leadership, and his interests focused on academic socialization experiences of students of color, including mentoring, advising, and peer interactions. At the time of the study, Shabazz indicated that he was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student and was in his last year of doctoral coursework. He indicated that he was funding his degree with a fellowship from a private philanthropic organization along with a research assistantship. Shabazz shared that he wanted to use his education to reject negative perceptions about African American males and help other students of color attain college degrees.

Renee identified herself as a Black female raised in both the Northern and Southern parts of the United States. She was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in special education. Her interests focused on supporting the language and literacy development of young children. At the time of the study, Renee indicated that she was completing her first year of doctoral coursework and was

funding her doctoral degree with a fellowship from her department. Renee indicated that she aspired to high academic achievement in order to represent Black people in a positive light. We chose to include participants at different points in their doctoral program (i.e., first year, second year, third year, fourth year) in order to highlight a collection of experiences shared among students of the same racial background, regardless of time in the program.

Data Collection

Four focus group interviews were the primary data sources for the study. Interviews were approximately 90 minutes in length and semi-structured in nature. As Liamputtong (2010) stated, “Focus groups provide an opportunity for researchers to listen to local voices ... [It] gives a ‘voice’ to the research participant by giving him or her an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand his or her experience” (p. 4). Focus groups provide opportunities for shared meaning making through collective dialogue, negotiation, and consensus regarding knowledge claims. Researchers have documented these three features as central to the ways of knowing and theorizing of people of African descent (Hill-Collins, 2000; Woods, 1999). Therefore, we used focus groups to contribute towards the construction of a culturally sensitive research context (Tillman, 2002). We designed the first two focus groups to learn about the early educational experiences of each participant specifically in regards to how race and culture shaped their experiences (kindergarten through their master’s degree). Learning about participants’ educational histories prior to their doctoral pursuits was an important step towards exploring their persistence factors in their current programs. This was an intentional attempt to shift the power dynamic in the research setting in that participants were situated as subjective experts on their own lives

capable of telling their own stories in their own voices (Smith, 1999).

In order to listen to the voices of each participant, we asked them to write a brief narrative in which they traced their educational journey from elementary through postsecondary school (master’s degree). Participants brought their narratives to the first focus group interview and read them aloud. Two participants (Shabazz and Renee) shared their stories in the first interview and the last participant (Naomi) shared her story in the second interview. After each participant shared his or her narrative, group members spent approximately thirty minutes talking about the narratives (making connections, asking follow-up questions, elaborating further on ideas). Conducting the first two focus group sessions in this way was critical to increasing the authenticity and validity in at least two ways. First, sharing the educational testimonies encumbered a sense of empowerment among the participants to share perspectives on their doctoral experiences in ways that authentically accounted for the complexities of their lives. Second, sharing experiences created a unifying experience among participants and researchers that fostered a sense of connectedness in the research space and investment in the research project (Tillman, 2002). Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker (2003) posited that building relationships with participants was a critical part of interviewing because it helped to mitigate barriers that create challenges to meaningful dialogue. The purpose of the third and fourth focus group interviews was to explore the collective perspectives of BDS on their experiences as doctoral students in a research-intensive, predominantly White college of education. We took turns facilitating interviews and taking field notes, though all researchers were present and involved in the dialogue. We audio recorded and transcribed each focus group.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data utilized an inductive approach to uncover specific categories and then more general categories. Inductive analysis is grounded in the data; therefore, themes emerge out of the data (Patton, 1990). This analytical approach was appropriate because it ensured that we as researchers effectively linked the themes we developed to participant voices. The process of domain analysis (Spradley, 1980), which is intended to “develop a set of categories of meaning ... that reflects relationships represented in the data” (Hatch, 2002, p. 104), guided the coding of data. Spradley’s (1980) domain analysis is useful because it prompts the researcher to identify “ways to do things,” “reasons for things,” “steps in a process,” and similar categories of constructed reality. We read transcripts independently, and then each of us reflected on our observations and noted questions to be included in subsequent interviews.

Through iterative reading of the data, each researcher created an initial list of codes based on emerging patterns and themes from the first focus group. In addition to identifying codes, we included quotes from the transcript and any comments related to specific codes. We then discussed the initial codes to ensure we all agreed on the phrasing of each code, and additional codes were included as needed. Next, we created a comprehensive, common set of codes to analyze all data. Examples of these codes included *distinctive feelings of BDS*, *reasons for mentoring BDS*, *kinds of relationships with faculty/mentors/advisors*, and *ways cultural socialization shapes doctoral experiences*. Through careful reading and rereading of the data, we coded the new data with the existing codes. We worked collaboratively to add, delete, modify, and refine the list of codes. Finally, we discussed larger categories and themes. We presented each participant with a copy of the findings

as a form of member checking and agreeing with the way we as researchers had captured their stories.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

We used research standards that recognize ethical and moral objectives of responsible research to appraise the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. This first entailed a commitment to community well-being (King, 2008; Tillman, 2002). We used member checking to increase the rigor of the research in ways that honored community interests. Additionally, Koro-Ljungberg (2010) stated that trustworthiness involves knowers constructing knowledge guided by their individual and collective experiences and the ways they engage in dialogue about their knowledge claims. Our intentional use of focus groups and CRT enabled us to construct a research experience that centered our participants as knowers given their experience with the phenomenon and allowed participants to use dialogue to collectively construct knowledge relevant to the topic of study.

Findings

The purpose of this article was to share how three BDS attending a research-intensive college of education think about the factors that influence their ability to persist in their doctoral programs. Additionally, we explored a cultural layer of BDS persistence as it contributes to these students’ perceptions of their success in academia. We present three major themes that highlight factors participants believed contributed to their persistence: *authenticity in student–faculty relationships*, *systemic institutional support*, and *psychocultural tools*.

Authenticity in Student–Faculty Relationships

One factor that consistently emerged was how much the participants valued the supportive

relationships they had developed with some faculty members. They perceived that the kind of mentoring relationships that contributed to their persistence were those based on authenticity. Authenticity here refers to the ability of doctoral students to bring their true selves as racialized beings to the mentoring relationship and for this self to be legitimated and understood by advisors. The need for authenticity in relationships was not a new concept for participants. Shabazz shared the connection he had at a young age with a teacher, a young African American woman with a warm smile and lively personality whom he was very fond of, compared to a cold teacher who ignored him while he was bullied by classmates. As doctoral students, participants agreed that the kind of authenticity in relationships with professors that was a positive contributor to their persistence was one in which faculty had a critical understanding of the racialized context of the “ivory tower” as well as how Blacks were positioned therein. This can be characterized as *sociopolitical authenticity* in the mentorship. This means that the mentoring relationship thrives on a racialized discourse and cultural epistemology (Ladson-Billings, 2000) that recognizes race and culture as powerful influences in the experiences of Blacks in the academy. The dialogue below illustrates this idea:

Shabazz: I have an advisor–mentor. She serves in both capacities because I feel that she has a heightened consciousness ... an understanding of where I come from as an African American male.

Naomi: So, she doesn't have a distorted view of Black people.

Shabazz: Correct. She doesn't, she doesn't pamper me with...

Naomi: ... Pity?

Shabazz: She's more so concerned about the situation and offers recommendations and solutions to help me.

As noted above, Shabazz conveyed a belief that his mentor's racial consciousness provides a context where he could be honest with her without a fear of racial judgment. As

he elaborated, this level of authenticity seems to strengthen their mentor–mentee relationships. He shared:

I actually connected with two faculty members, one of European descent and another of African American descent, who have really enhanced my experience emotionally, psychologically, and educationally by being honest with me about the institutional climate, for one. Informing me that the climate was not supportive of my interests and that in order for me to conduct the type of research that I was interested in, that I needed to collaborate with other individuals throughout the college.

In a similar manner, Naomi perceived that authenticity was an important factor that contributed to her persistence in her doctoral program. As a third-year candidate in the midst of dissertation writing, Naomi's perspective on the value of honesty was academically focused. That is, she believed her positive experiences were partially attributed to professional relationships in which faculty mentors were forthright in their assessment and feedback about her scholarly performance. This is revealed in her expressed frustration at the lack of honest feedback she received earlier in her program:

I couldn't get any of my professors to give me critical feedback to tell me how to make my stuff better. Everything was oh, it's great, and I'm sitting here [thinking] I know there's something I can do. I know it can be better. Tell me how to make it better.... So for me it was like [I'm] not important enough for them to invest time and energy into making me better. [It's like] stop patting me on the head.... Stop patronizing me, you know ... I've obviously got some brain cells or else I wouldn't be here. That's a nonissue. What can I do to be better?

She elaborated on the professional consequences of such intellectual neglect, stating that, “Not having that critical feedback about my writing from the beginning, it's problematic now.” The definition of authenticity

in this context can be described as a critical assessment of her skills in terms of what she can do to improve, or academic authenticity. More importantly, she perceived that when mentors or advisors did not provide her with ways to continuously improve, they were implicitly communicating a lack of belief in her capacity for excellence. In other words, they were conveying low expectations for her as a student and potential scholar. At one point in the conversation, she reflected on a time she did receive the kind of feedback she desired, from the one African American professor on her doctoral committee who told her privately, “I know you can do better in your writing.” Naomi shared that in saying this, the African American professor on her committee conveyed the message, “I believe in you,” which helped her learn ways to improve her academic writing skills. A critical race theoretical lens highlighted how academic support at the advanced graduate level can be appropriated as treasured White property and exclude BDS. As our participants shared, their persistence was connected to having faculty advisors and mentors who rejected myths about Black intellectual inferiority by first acknowledging the influence of race on their educational experiences, then by helping them cultivate the tools they needed to produce exemplary work.

Systemic Institutional Support

Although participants conveyed a desire to be systemically integrated into their institution, the lack of such integration in their respective departments played a major role in their ability to persist in their programs. Their conversation on this topic conveyed the sense that, as Black students, they desired to be systemically integrated into the institution. According to participants, systemic integration meant that the particular needs and interests of BDS were “woven into the missions, goals, and values” or rather, institutionalizing a Black presence in the academy

to prevent their existence on campus from being an “afterthought.” It must be noted that none of the participants indicated they felt integrated at this level. However, participants’ discussion about the lack of systemic integration they experienced will be highlighted as an indicator of their perspectives on the level of social integration they believed would add to their ability to persist in their programs. Even before enrolling in a research-intensive institution, participants experienced feelings of isolation in school. In high school, Naomi was one of the few Black students in the International Baccalaureate program. As a student, she earned A’s and was not afraid to engage in insightful discussions with her teachers and classmates about assignments. However, her teachers felt that she intimidated other students and wanted to kick her out of the program. Naomi shared that the experience “definitely added to my perspective advantage in that I came to understand that as the other they would allow me to be good—great even—but that they expected me to stay in my place and if I didn’t there would be conflict.” The conversation below highlights this finding at the graduate level:

Shabazz: In trying to bring together minority students, I think the problem is the way administrators go about it. They send out a mass email to all minority students saying “Hey, come to this event—it’s for minority students and we’re going to offer support” ... I think it raises red flags with people. Once you read an email that says oh, “This is a minority event,” it’s like why can’t it just be an event that I’m invited to because I don’t remember getting any invitations to anything in the college except that minority event. So in my mind I’m asking myself “Are these the only events that I’m invited to, minority events?” And it makes me feel a certain way ...

Researcher: Why?

Shabazz: It makes me feel isolated that I can only interact with minorities—that I can only be invited to some type of event

that's for minority students.

Renee: I have a problem with only being invited to minority events because it makes me feel more of a minority. It doesn't, it doesn't make me feel included, you know. You're excluded ...

The three participants conveyed a desire to be members of the educational community and believed this would support their professional growth and development. However, they agreed that their institutions' approach was a major hindrance. Naomi shared that "hosting sporadic events for minorities does not create an inclusive environment within the college because [these initiatives] are still disconnected and off to the side." The following dialogue between the participants represents their perspective:

Shabazz: Supports for BDS haven't risen to a level of systemic integration into the college's missions, goals, and values. It's still out on the side ... it's not built in [the] system.

Renee: Right. It's not a part of the grand scheme of things. There's no systemic support and so we can feel that. But for me, that makes me hesitant and makes me reserved, like—this is not a safe space ...

Shabazz: Exactly. It does not feel like a safe space. And then the question that it raises, in my mind, [is], and then what?

The BDS in our study conveyed that they wanted to be taken seriously as prospective scholars, which to them meant that administrators and faculty needed to be proactive and thoughtful in providing them with support.

Psychocultural Tools

Most interestingly, the data showed that the existence and prominence of an emancipatory consciousness within the participants themselves greatly contributed to their persistence. Emancipatory consciousness is reminiscent of the theorizing of 18th- and 19th-century African Americans who

understood the liberatory consequences of education and held constant the belief that education was necessary for the freedom, uplift, and full citizenship of the African American race (Anderson, 1988; Perry, 2003). An emancipatory ideology seemed to provide the mental fortitude to survive on a daily basis, and it fueled their persistence. As a senior in high school, Renee found out after the fact that because she was ranked the top performing Black senior, she was invited to a prominent state university for a summer program. However, she was notified after the deadline that the opportunity had passed. Though irate, she was determined to use the opportunity as more motivation to continue to work hard in spite of challenges she faced. This sentiment was most strongly noted in the way participants described their purposes and goals for pursuing a doctorate degree. Renee's stated goal below was indicative of the group's shared perspective on their graduate school purposes:

My goal is to have an impact on a broader range of teachers thereby impacting more students and their families. [I want to have an impact on] all children really, but students who are poor, immigrant families, Hispanic students, Black students ... [is my focus].

Participants' intrinsic motivation to commit to completing their doctoral degrees was connected to their cultural identity. As Naomi mentioned, "[our] purposes are connected to a deeper and more historic struggle." Students recognized a need to uplift communities and populations that they identified with. It was this perspective that contributed to their ability to "put up with" the often racially alienating atmosphere they endured on a constant basis. The Black doctoral scholars indicated that they felt they were helping to create positive trends for future Black scholars. Again, Renee's comments best convey the thinking of the group:

I think that going through these experiences now will help you to maneuver

and to deal with these situations in the near future. Now it could also break you. You could allow every challenge to stress you out or to get you to the point of quitting, but it won't help anyone. It won't help you and it won't help the generations to come.

Along with their culturally defined purposes for earning doctorate degrees, the group of BDS described collective mobilization as a critical factor in their persistence, whether they had experienced it at the time of the interviews or not. As participants described, this collective mobilization took the form of their self-initiation of professional and social networks, as evidenced in this exchange below:

Naomi: I think as Black scholars we need to develop the mentality that we are all brothers and sisters. We definitely need to form our own literature circles and our own support groups amongst each other to talk about our experiences, to talk about courses, to talk about things that we read, to talk about our writing.... to learn as a community. In starting this informal support group, the topics can vary because not everyone is going to have the same advisor.

Researcher: What would you say would be the purpose or objective of these support groups?

Shabazz: Again, to support each other in developing their research, their research ideas, especially the dissertation. And, helping each other with scholarly writing and to provide a social network.

Renee: I think we need to have things that are specifically designed for Black students, as exclusive as it might sound, because it gives us the opportunity to network with each other [and] take our social groups to other places and do other things.

Naomi: Hopefully it becomes a part of just the way things are. This is how we make things systematic for Black students. It's exciting for me to think that I can contribute and leave behind

something for new students coming behind me.

The group conveyed a desire for solidarity and community as part of their doctoral education experience. They believed that working together, whether through a focus on professional development or social support, would create a sense of intergroup unity that could be leveraged in advocating for improvements in support and treatment of prospective Black students. Listening to the voices of three BDS revealed distinctive cultural consciousness connected to the students' ethnic origins and shaped by the students' racialized identities that supported the students' persistence.

Discussion

This study highlighted the perspectives of three Black students currently pursuing doctoral degrees in one predominantly White, research-intensive university in the United States. The researchers used focus group interviews to explore what BDS perceive as factors that contribute to their persistence. This is important because it can inform the design and implementation of support initiatives intended to retain more Black professors and doctoral students in higher education.

Through the voices of three BDS, this study first renders visible the way race and racism shape advising and mentoring relationships. Participants in the study shared that having faculty who shared their racialized understandings about society generated greater authenticity in the relationship. Perhaps this is so because they perceived that their voices could be heard in a space where their views were acknowledged and validated. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that voicing one's own reality is the first step towards justice and without authentic voices speaking about their own educational experiences "it is doubtful that we can say or know

anything useful about education in their communities” (p. 58). As the present study highlights, mentorships based on academic and sociopolitical honesty offered a kind of interpersonal support that participants believed was important to their ability to persist in their doctoral programs. Participants agreed that “good” mentors were those that were conscious of the racial and cultural dynamics embedded in academia and society at large. The group’s shared thinking on the topic of mentoring seemed to suggest that colorblindness in the design and implementation of mentoring programs for BDS may not provide the kind of support they need to persist. Instead, the findings in this study seem to suggest that supporting BDS through mentorship may require acknowledgment of the racialized context of doctoral education (Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2012) and validation of the racialized experiences of BDS. Creating mentoring programs for BDS based on these crucial components can better support them through their programs.

The present study also highlights the way racialized perspectives influence BDS motivation. Shabazz, Naomi, and Renee revealed that one of the factors that contributed to their persistence is a cultural consciousness nuanced by their racialized positionality within the institution and society. The drive to make it through their doctoral programs did not exist in a vacuum. That is, their drive was cultivated by the knowledge gained from their experiences as the other in academic spaces and from their racial-justice oriented professional mission.

Students shared that their consciousness of the historical legacies and contemporary challenges of institutional racism influenced them to strive for academic excellence. This knowledge also foregrounded their aspiration to lead future generations of Black students to achieve success in both secondary and postsecondary education. The students’ per-

spectives offer clarity to the factor of “intrinsic motivation” noted in previous research as a factor in BDS persistence (Clewell, 1987, p. 18). In order to better meet the needs of Black students pursuing doctoral degrees, a heightened degree of racial realism (Bell, 1992) is foundational to their mentoring and advising relationships, social integration activities, and research and teaching opportunities. As Bell (1992) explained, “The racial realism that we must seek is simply a hard-eyed view of racism as it is and our [Black people] subordinate role in it” (p. 378). From this realization, meaningful and sustainable remedies can be developed to mitigate racism. A mentoring relationship with a foundation in racial realism might include advising BDS to take courses that will expand their understanding of the social workings of American society from a critical race and culture-centered perspective. It might also include creating research opportunities for BDS to learn to use research approaches that reflect indigenous ways of knowing that alleviate, not aggravate, inequitable social conditions.

To be sure, research has documented the necessity of mentoring and motivation in the ability of BDS to earn their doctoral degrees in PWIs (Danley et al., 2009; Gay, 2004). That BDS continue to report that they do not receive the kind of support mechanisms they need, despite resounding institutional celebration of and desire for racial diversity on campus, is worth noting because it highlights the CRT principle of interest convergence. Milner (2008) stated that interest convergence stresses that racial equity will only be advanced when this idea converges with the interests and needs of White people. Recent institutional appeal for increased racial diversity on college campuses ushered in a host of initiatives designed to support BDS, yet many of these programs are designed based on a Eurocentric perception of BDS needs that emphasize race neutrality. Milner

(2008) argued that institutional change, when guided by the principle of interest convergence, is often at the will and design of those in power, which makes it more difficult to obtain racial equity. The principle of interest convergence is helpful here because it can explain why Black student perceptions of the level of support received may differ from the espoused supports offered by higher education institutions. Naomi, Renee, and Shabazz remained critical of the kinds of support offered because they perceived such efforts as disingenuous and structured out of necessity rather than sincerity. Weak institutional structures that bring BDS together without a focused agenda absolves institutions of further responsibility to ensure the persistence of BDS and leaves students on their own to figure out how to succeed. In these instances, BDS remain unsupported within a supposedly supportive environment. Leaving Black people to solve problems that they did not create (i.e., racism in education) has a long history in the United States with little evidence of success in achieving systemic racial parity (Bell, 1996). Critical race theory and the principle of interest convergence reveals that predominantly White institutions clamoring to increase racial diversity must rethink their approaches and engage BDS in collaborative discussions to develop support programs rather than move hastily on their often distorted perceptions of Black student needs in order to forge their own institutional agenda.

Implications

Faculty and administrators in schools and colleges of education should create space and opportunities for race work within the department. This includes ongoing intellectual dialogue about race, racism and social inequality, and research focused on race and culture towards non-alienating and non-exploitative ends. Findings revealed that participants' Afrocentric emancipatory

ideology was a significant persistence factor. Afro-influenced emancipatory perspectives on education include critical understandings of oppression and inequality, and more importantly, foster a self-determining spirit through which resistance to oppression is mounted (Frazier, 1984; Gordon, 1992). This ideology functioned tacitly and helped participants manage the psychological stresses of their highly racialized academic contexts and develop real-world strategies to support their successful navigation through their doctoral programs. Furthermore, this ideology shaped their career aspirations and research interests. This suggests that explicit attention to racial issues on the part of the institution can be a significant support mechanism for BDS. This also implies that more research is needed to better understand how culture-specific factors contribute to persistence among students of shared ethnic groups.

In addition, faculty and higher education administrators should seek to understand how racial domination in higher education (i.e., prevalence of an ethnocentric curriculum, limited presence of faculty of color, allocation of funds for research and programs, etc.) impacts programs designed to support BDS. Through our critical race analysis, the diversity double bind was illuminated. A concept connected to the tenant of interest convergence, we conceptualize the diversity double bind as a conflicting definition of diversity, which attempts to celebrate the benefits of diversity in higher education but simultaneously uses the term to situate cultural groups as perpetual others, which does more to alienate rather than integrate students. In this regard, it becomes clear that social integration into the existing structure of the academy may be an aspect of BDS socialization where college administrator interests (e.g., the need to incorporate diversity-focused initiatives into the program for accreditation) and the interests of BDS (e.g., the need for safe spaces to learn and grow as Black intellectuals) are

at odds. Top-down social integration efforts may be less of a support factor towards BDS persistence. Researchers investigating recruitment and retention of BDS must pursue studies that interrogate existing programs by listening to student voices to ensure that the “good intentions” underlying existing efforts are actually perceived by BDS as such.

Finally, administrators should rethink the interpersonal supports they offer BDS. Academic mentoring is paramount to a student’s educational successes, especially at the doctoral level (e.g., publication, research, funding, graduation) (Felder & Baker, 2013). BDS are highly dependent on mentors to help them navigate the visible and invisible demands of graduate school (Felder & Barker, 2013). Findings indicate that sociopolitical authenticity was a key factor that contributed to their persistence. Participants perceived that the most productive interactions and relationships with faculty were those guided by faculty’s conscious understanding of the academic, social, and political climate from a critical race purview; and their willingness to use this understanding as the platform for helping BDS have successful experiences in their programs. Gay (2004) argued that when BDS do not have the opportunity to engage in productive intellectual discourse with faculty that includes their own knowledge and perspectives, their professional development is significantly disadvantaged. Faculty and administrators should create college-wide initiatives and incentives to promote faculty mentoring for BDS, and professional development activities should be created to help faculty develop mentoring expertise. Future research should critically examine Black student mentoring experiences in ways that will illuminate their particular mentoring needs.

Conclusion

A success orientation for students in higher education is critical to the mission of the

institution. Specifically, for BDS, persistence is a key element that supports these students to excel in higher education. These themes of persistence can enable BDS to matriculate successfully at their institutions of higher education, particularly if faculty and mentors of these students are aware of the potential of these persistence constructs to support students.

As such, this study matters to all involved in higher education, particularly those educating at predominantly White institutions who face challenges in maintaining a strong presence of BDS. Recruitment is not completely successful until retention leads to graduation, and students who lack persistence often fail to reach the point of graduation. Additionally, it matters not only for the BDS who persist toward success but also for those BDS who do not enact measures to persist in the doctoral program. For these students, redemption might lie in having opportunities to be guided by faculty and administrators who recognize the value of persistence strategies that will help these students be successful in institutions of higher education. The study provides a backdrop for policies and practices related to the engagement of BDS to be attentive to those factors that either support or hinder the persistence of BDS to succeed.

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