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## Black Doctoral Women: Exploring Barriers and Facilitators of Success in Graduate Education

Shawna M. Patterson-Stephens  
*Williams College*

Tonisha B. Lane  
*University of South Florida*

Louise Michelle Vital  
*Boston College*

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# Black Doctoral Women: Exploring Barriers and Facilitators of Success in Graduate Education

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to expand upon extant research and uncover trends observed among Black women who are in pursuit of – or have recently attained – their doctoral degrees within the United States. Exploring the voices of seven women, findings revealed three primary themes: (1) socialization experiences, (2) student success, and (3) challenges. Implications for students, administrators, and faculty are provided.

*Keywords: Black women, doctoral education, student success*

A growing body of literature states Black women encounter a number of challenges while working to pursue their doctoral degrees. Though graduate education can be difficult for any individual, Black women feel especially challenged to prove themselves and combat negative stereotypes (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Dortch, 2016; Robinson, 2013). Other studies report that Black women balance a number of roles and responsibilities while pursuing their doctoral degrees such as taking care of family members and working full-time while in school (Thomas, 2001). Black women often have to employ a variety of coping mechanisms and strategies to overcome racial and gendered oppression. These behaviors range from silence to active resistance (Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Robinson, 2013). Previous research also notes that Black women may be more likely to encounter difficulties with financing their education, obtaining respect from their professors and peers, networking, gaining recognition in the department, and receiving faculty mentoring support (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Patton, 2009). Despite these challenges, Black women have steadily increased their doctoral degree attainment. To this end, the proportion of Black women who earned doctoral degrees from 1997 to 2007 increased from 60% to 66% (Survey of Earned Doctorates Fact Sheet, 2008).

Although research focusing on the experiences of Black doctoral women has increased (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Dortch, 2016; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Patton, 2009), a gap continues to exist in literature investigating elements that influence their persistence, retention, and degree attainment. Furthermore, as doctoral programs seek to diversify their student populations and develop initiatives to support their access, persistence, and success, limited empirical research exists that points to the factors that support and hinder success of Black women in U.S. doctoral programs. Thus, the purpose of this study is to expand upon extant

research and uncover trends observed among contemporary Black women who are in pursuit of – or have recently attained – doctoral degrees. This paper centers on the stories of seven Black women pursuing doctoral degrees in the United States and the challenges and supports they identified as factors contributing to their success and those that served as barriers. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What are the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs? (2) What elements impede or facilitate their success in doctoral programs?

We begin with a literature review on program admissions, student socialization, and barriers and facilitators of doctoral student success. We then describe the theoretical framework and methods of data collection and analysis. We follow with the voices from our participants in our findings section and discuss their implications for doctoral preparation programs. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for departments interested in supporting Black doctoral women.

## **Literature Review**

### **Program Admissions Decisions and Applicant “Fit”**

Researchers have emphasized the importance of recruiting and selecting diverse students in graduate education (McKinney & Capper, 2010); however, the research on program admissions decisions is scant (Karaxha, Agosto, & Bellara, 2014). As such, motivated by their own departmental practices, Agosto, Karaxha, and Bellara (2015) engaged in a reflective self-case study to discern why Black women were less likely than White women to be admitted into their educational leadership Ph.D. program. To their surprise, this seemingly race-neutral admissions process revealed racialized and gendered undertones with regards to perceived program fit and likelihood of career outcomes. Ironically, many of the Black women who were denied admissions had better academic metrics (e.g., GPA) than their White counterparts, even

when program requirements indicated established minimal criteria (Z. Karanxha, personal communication, October 25, 2016). In another case study, Felder (2010) found that Black students were being encouraged to pursue an Ed.D. rather than a Ph.D. even when both degrees were available within the department. As such, Felder (2010) posed a philosophical question of whether students chose one degree over the other due to personal choice or political dynamics. Further, these findings highlight how faculty can serve as gatekeepers to doctoral programs and limit access to research-oriented terminal degrees among diverse students.

### **Student Socialization**

Taylor and Antony (2000) defined socialization as “the process by which newcomers learn the encoded system of behavior specific to their area of expertise and the system of meanings and values attached to these behaviors” (p. 186). This process translates to graduate students having to navigate complex and nuanced environments and interactions to ascertain place and space, and adhere to norms and practices that they may be unfamiliar (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). However, multiple and intersecting marginalized identities may complicate the socialization process for Black women (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Though all doctoral students encounter challenges as they progress from student to scholar, the doctoral socialization process is distinctively burdensome for Black female students. The academy is not situated to support their racialized and gendered identities. Some scholars have called this the double bind such that Black female students experience oppression for being a woman and a person of color (Ong, Wright, Espinosa, & Orfield, 2011). Duality of oppression may manifest when identifying advisors and mentors who have implicit biases about women and/or people of color (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). It may also make it difficult for Black women to form study groups when other Black students or women are not involved because of the exclusive nature

presented in study groups by peers (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Several factors influence the socialization experiences of doctoral students of color. In a qualitative study examining the daily experiences of students of color in doctoral programs, researchers uncovered the “dehumanizing cultural experiences” of these student populations and how they are situated in graduate socialization practices (Gildersleeve, et al., 2011, p. 93). Using critical inquiry and critical race theory, the researchers derived a definition to describe the experiences of Black and Latinx participants identified as the “Am I going crazy?!” narrative. This narrative illustrated the “tentativeness, insecurity, and doubt” some students of color in doctoral programs encounter (Gildersleeve, et al., 2011, p. 100).

Another way such feelings have been conceptualized in the literature is known as imposter phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter phenomenon represents characteristics and behaviors of individuals who do not attribute their success to their own intellectual abilities and prowess (Clance & Imes, 1978). They consider their achievements to be a result of luck or chance and surmise that others will eventually realize their perceived shortcomings (Parkman, 2016). Imposter phenomenon is problematic because it can be debilitating and cause psychological harm and distress especially among communities of color (Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013). Many graduate students can relate to feelings of intellectual inadequacies especially as they transition into and adjust to the expectations of graduate education (Austin, 2002; Parkman, 2016). However, there are several studies that show this phenomenon disproportionately affects women of color (Austin, Clarke, Ross, & Taylor, 2009; Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013; Laursen, 2008).

### **Doctoral Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators**

**Mentoring.** Because doctoral education operates from an apprenticeship model (Baker,

Pifer, & Griffin, 2014), much of the literature purports that mentoring is critical to the persistence and success of doctoral students (Baker et al., 2011; Fountaine, 2012). To that end, students learn by engaging in scholarly activities and working in concert with faculty to acquire the skills, behaviors, and dispositions of a scholar. Mentorship helps graduate students learn how to become a contributor to their academic discipline. However, Nettles and Millet's (2006) seminal study of 9,000 doctoral students indicated that 30% of students did not have their preferred mentor. In fact, research shows that students of color are more likely to experience difficulties with identifying and sustaining mentoring relationships (Patton, 2009).

Patton (2009) explored the mentoring relationships that were critical to Black doctoral women. Her research showed that Black women receive mentoring support within and outside of the academy. Black doctoral women benefited from relationships with Black faculty and staff as well as sorority and church members. Participants also noted that relationships with same-race faculty and staff provided unique opportunities to render culturally specific advice and experiential knowledge. In contrast, interactions with non-Black faculty was limited to discussions about their academic programs. Patton (2009) argued that administrators should seek to pair Black graduate students with Black faculty and staff, but also acknowledged the challenge with such demands given the limited number of faculty and administrators of color.

**Social location.** Black women also contend with the ways they represent themselves and their communities within the classroom environment and departmental settings. Robinson (2013) advanced the concept of "spoketokenism" to describe the value of Black graduate women's voices, existence in the academy, and insights about themselves and others. Some Black women struggled while others embraced the lack of critical mass in their programs and the responsibility that it carried to share non-dominant perspectives and call-out inequities.



Studies have also shown the extent to which Black women may sacrifice their well-being in order to persist in doctoral programs (Robins, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Shavers and Moore (2014) reported that Black women engaged in “suboptimal” strategies to deal with racial and gender oppression. Specifically, their enactment of self-presentation resulted in feelings of discomfort, weariness, and discontent. The researchers likened the students’ behaviors to wearing the “academic mask”. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1922) first conceptualized the notion of wearing the mask to exemplify how Blacks cope with the oppression and racism inherent within American culture. Regarding higher education, colleges and universities are a microcosm of the greater society, thus it only makes sense that Black women would need to enact similar strategies in doctoral programs.

Jones, Wilder, and Lampkin (2013) pointed out that doctoral advisors should seek to understand the intersections of racial and gender oppression in order to support Black women’s insider-outsider identities. While Black women may be contributors to knowledge production (due to their status as emerging scholars) they are sometimes framed as the problem in the literature, if discussed at all (Collin, 2004; Jones, Wilder, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). This dissonance within and outside of the classroom may also force Black women to suppress their multiple social identities in order to co-exist in these spaces.

**Faculty advising.** Jones, Wilder, and Osborne-Lampkin (2013) used Black feminist thought to unpack some of the approaches doctoral advisors should apply to aid Black women in navigating doctoral education. Their multi-prong approach advances upon Barnes and Austin’s (2009) study on doctoral advisors noting that advisors should “help students decode the hidden curriculum” while aiding them to become researchers and professionals in the field. Jones et al. (2013) strategies included demonstrating an ethic of “community, empowerment, caring,

accountability, and diverse knowledge [in addition to] validating, advocating [for], and educating [Black women on organizational norms and practices]” (p. 331). Further, having a supportive advisor may mitigate the challenges and pitfalls within the doctoral process and facilitate better adjustment and completion of program milestones (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Jones et al, 2013).

**Lack of diverse faculty.** The lack of diverse faculty has also been noted in the literature as a deterrent for Black doctoral students. Croom and Patton (2011) drew attention to the dearth of Black female full-professors in their conceptual essay. They argued that organizational transformation must occur in order to advance Black women in the pipeline. Further, the absence of diverse faculty affects many aspects of the graduate experience for Black students including socialization practices and the culture graduate students are being socialized within, mentoring opportunities, and occupational aspirations (Felder, 2010). The current study speaks to these issues and considers the impact a low number of diverse faculty has on Black doctoral women’s experiences within graduate school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Given the historical legacy of racism in the United States and within U.S. higher education, we situate this study in scholarship that positions Black women and their experiences at the center of the research. This study is framed by Collins’ (2000) work on Black feminist thought, which offers a framework for understanding the experiences of Black women in U.S. doctoral education. To this end, Collins (2000) allowed us to examine the complex experiences of this study’s participants from a holistic perspective.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black women have reached great heights of success in higher education in the areas of achievement and degree attainment; however, they still experience isolation, alienation, and

perceptions of intellectual inferiority (Allen, 2000). Black feminist thought (BFT) asserts that Black women have occupied marginal positions in society. Though Black women can be found at each level of higher education, they are still treated as outsiders due to their status as African American women operating in a White, male-dominated world (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) posited that BFT “aims to empower [Black] women within the context of social justice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p. 22). Consequently, the challenges that Black women encounter are not only related to their racial and gender identity, but their socioeconomic status, religious preference, sexual orientation, and a host of other social identities. These intersecting identities contribute to the marginalized spaces that Black women occupy and influence the disparities and inequities they face. Acknowledging these compounding experiences is an important tenet of BFT.

BFT also acknowledges the lived experience and empowers Black women to establish new definitions of self-identity. Black feminism is committed to social justice for Black women and other oppressed groups through critical discourse and action. This study employs the tenets of Black feminist epistemology, as identified through the work of Collins (2000): (1) validation of lived experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge and truth, (2) use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims, (3) ethics of caring with a recognition that all knowledge is intrinsically value-laden, and (4) personal accountability for knowledge claims (p. 275-284).

We used Black feminist thought as a lens to analyze the data. BFT centers race, gender, and other intersecting identities, which was the aim of this study; to center the intersecting identities of Black women as it relates to their experiences with doctoral study. It is not assumed that all the experiences of Black women are monolithic, but that all experiences help to better understand the complexities and nuances of Black womanhood. Thus, we co-constructed

knowledge with the participants concerning the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs. Through interview and in-depth analysis, we achieved a more complete picture of Black female graduate success.

### **Methods**

In studying the lived experiences of Black women in pursuit of a doctoral degree in the U.S., we elected to utilize a phenomenological research design with a heuristic focus. Researchers implementing the phenomenological approach concentrate on capturing the essence of their participants' interactions with a specific theme, issue, or encounter (Patton, 2002). Choosing to implement a phenomenological study that centers on heuristic inquiry was of particular significance for this project, as all of the researchers shared an intimate understanding with the phenomena that we examined. According to Patton (2002), heuristic inquiry "focuses on intense human experiences, intense from the point of view of the investigator and co-researchers. It is the combination of personal experience and intensity that yields an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon" (p. 107). As Black women who also completed our doctoral degrees in the U.S., our personal experience only deepened our understanding of the nuances and themes that emerged during the interview process. It was because of our background that we could pick up on context clues, tones, and inferences; information that may have evaded other researchers.

### **Participants**

This study is part of a larger phenomenological study of Black-identified women who were in the process of - or had recently completed - their pursuit towards a doctoral degree at a U.S. institution of higher education. Seven participants within this larger examination of Black doctoral women's experiences informed the current study (see Table 1). All of these participants

self-identified as Black or African American. They ranged in various stages of their doctoral programs. Black women who were within one year of completion were also eligible to participate. The participants' institutional types and programs also varied.

In seeking participants, we sent solicitation emails to association and network listservs upon IRB approval. We also created a flyer that we circulated on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, we relied on snowball sampling to recruit participants that were not exposed to our open calls for respondents.

[Insert Table 1]

### **Data Collection**

We developed an interview protocol that explored the application and doctoral completion processes. The interviews concluded with reflections on potential career opportunities and advice for up-and-coming Black women doctoral students. Semi-structured interviews allowed for probing and follow-up questions. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 3 hours with an average length of 60 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

During the consent process, the respondents were notified that they could elect to assume a pseudonym. Some chose to assume a different name, while others chose to have a pseudonym assigned to them. We also provided participants with a demographic survey to complete. Some women completed the survey prior to their interview, while others submitted demographic information after their interview had been conducted. Key demographic information that was collected included their experiences with undergraduate research programs, parental educational background, exposure to mentorship and mentoring programs, as well as participants' encounters with formal professional socialization and development (i.e., teaching or research assistantships,

research team experience, etc.).

## **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, it is typical for data analysis to start occurring during the collection process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Oftentimes, the researchers are already becoming immersed in the data as the project progresses. Salient themes begin to emerge during the project and are solidified upon completion of the collection stage. As such, we were primed to organize our findings from two reliable sources: “(1) the questions that were generated during the conceptual and design phases of the study, prior to fieldwork, and (2) analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection” (Patton, 2002, p. 437).

After the interviews were transcribed, we read and re-read the transcripts for emerging themes. We also bracketed our personal opinions and experiences from those of our participants during the collection process with the use of observational notes. As we combed through the data, we wrote our corresponding assumptions, reactions, personal opinions, and personal accounts in the margins using a dedicated space for field notes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). We used open and axial coding to arrange our findings and to connect emergent themes to those prevalent (and absent) from extant literature (Saldaña, 2012). As a research team, we reviewed the coding and field notes of our colleagues as a form of peer review. These notes assisted us in ensuring that we did not apply our own encounters and experiences with certain phenomena onto the stories of our participants.

## **Findings**

After conducting analysis of the data, we identified the following themes: (1) socialization experiences, (2) student success, and (3) challenges. Within the primary theme of student success, we also identified three sub-themes: (1) mentorship, (2) motivation, and (3)

support. Within the primary theme challenges, three sub-themes surfaced: (1) lack of mentorship, (2) imposter phenomenon, and (3) social location. The following section outlines the aforementioned themes as they emerged from the data. We later connect these themes to prominent findings identified in the literature during the discussion portion of this paper.

### **Socialization Experiences**

The women who chose to participate in this study were afforded several venues for socialization. In addition to professional development opportunities provided by the students' departments and institutions, several women were encouraged to engage their respective fields of study through membership in national and international associations. Others, like CinnamonNut, were able to engage with Black women faculty who held informal meetings where they discussed tips for success. CinnamonNut indicated that she valued these sessions because she was able to partake in authentic conversations without concern for her academic standing; the faculty were not affiliated with her program or course of study, and she determined that these conversations were easier to participate in because power dynamics were not involved.

The students discussed their socialization experiences and how having informal meetings with Black faculty helped them have authentic conversations about their experiences, presumably without the mask necessary in certain White spaces. So, although the participants did not explicitly discuss the institutional structures that often marginalize Black women, their reflections on their socialization experiences speak to factors that are perceived barriers within the structure of the programs which prevent them from being their authentic Black women selves outside of these informal meetings.

Several other women, particularly those who indicated an interest in pursuing the tenure track, shared that they also found value in receiving guidance from faculty women of color.

These interactions prepared the participants to consider the expectations, challenges, and protocols associated with the professoriate. These conversations were held with mentors, prospective advisors, faculty within one's designated program, as well as faculty from other departments.

Still others received doctoral socialization from external agencies and foundations. As a Gates Millennium Fellow, Joslaine received encouragement as early as high school. Her fellowship instituted safeguards that expedited the rate to which students attained their degrees, which influenced her decision to refrain from taking gap years and move forward in the completion of her doctorate. Finally, some of the women specializing in the sciences participated in residencies in addition to their coursework. These residencies prepared the students by strengthening their skillsets, strengthening their networks, and readying them for the workforce. For instance, Anna was required to complete a residency after her seminars, which also included structured writing teams. She quickly progressed through her residency in an effort to attain additional internships and career opportunities.

Those who were fellows or had required residencies were able to obtain additional support necessary for their success. What we know from programs such as these is that they often include specific interventions that address barriers to access/success. By virtue of being affiliated in these programs, Black women are more likely to persist because these programs help to address the institutional barriers that many students of color/Black women face, especially in predominately white institutions (PWIs).

However, not all interactions were positive. Some educators and faculty took advantage of their positions in higher education to weed out individuals whom they did not deem appropriate for doctoral studies. For example, Dr. Jay was midway through her studies when



faculty attempted to counsel her out of the doctoral degree:

Due to a large combination of crap for me, the faculty actually voted not to let me continue on even though I had over a 3.0 GPA. I had, you know, a dissertation plan they actually took a full faculty vote on. They're like, "No, we don't want you in the Ph.D. program." When I asked my advisor why, she said "Well, the faculty thinks you'll be a great teacher, but Ph.D.'s a research degree, and we don't think you have what it takes to be a researcher." And so that just rang in my ears, and I was like, "Oh, really?...watch" (Dr. Jay).

Dr. Jay continued:

I think it's just an excuse to not want Black people to continue on to the Ph.D. because a friend of mine at that university, her boyfriend was at the university too, and he was in a whole different program. He was like in biology, and after he got the masters, they suggested to him, "Oh well, we're not sure you've got what it takes to stay for the Ph.D...They said the same thing to me...I'm not just going to leave because you asked me to...but the fact that across campus through social science to hard science, they were saying "Oh, we don't think you have what it takes." That to me is like coded, and it's not so much that I really don't have the actual skills or ability to do it. I think it was just gatekeepers...I just think that they were being hateful. They were being old fashioned racist, and didn't want Black people graduated (Dr. Jay).

In another instance, Joslaine was advised to refrain from applying to a doctorate program by faculty in programs of interest and to enter the workforce first. These faculty discouraged her from applying, even though her source of funding encouraged her to consider otherwise:

I faced a barrier when I reached out to all the faculty members to meet with them and see if this would be a good fit. I remember one of the faculty members at the institution was just like, "You really should work first. You really shouldn't go straight through." She was kind of adamant about it. I know it might have come from a good place. I don't think they meant it to come off so harsh as it did, but it really came off as, "Why are you having this conversation with me?" I felt that was kind of a barrier because it kind of made me question if I should even apply to this school (Joslaine).

BFT helps us to understand that Black women are often treated as outsiders due to their status as beings who are Black and who are women. Attempts to exclude Black women from participating in Ph.D. programs support this claim, where Black women are able to work within the confines of the academy as mid-level staff and undergraduates, but are not wholly welcomed to fully engage in higher level research, faculty ranks, or executive management, all of which require engagement in doctoral study. The explicit exclusion of Black women from doctoral

study underscores the techniques used to diminish the accomplishments of Black women and limit their access within the academy.

Unfortunately, the literature has yet to determine if decelerating the application process in order to acquire more work experience is a proficient or necessary strategy in the completion of the doctoral degree. While these examples were not positive indicators, they are important to note, as pre-screening processes are a critical component of socialization into the profession. Research shows that women of color may be disproportionately denied from entering doctoral programs (Agosto et al., 2015; Karanxha et al., 2014). Those lacking resolve, mentorship, and/or a full understanding of the hidden curriculum may be led to pursue a path that directs them away from a Ph.D. program.

### **Elements that Influence Student Success**

There were a variety of program offerings of which the students were able to take advantage. From distance and online learning, to traditional in-class courses, the women sifted through several options in order to find the most appropriate fit for themselves. CinnamonNut was in the process of completing her online degree when she stated that she appreciated the flexibility online learning provided. Lucy also credited the structure of her distance learning program for enabling her to work full-time while pursuing her Ph.D. Further, with variety in program offerings came variety in the ways each program was structured.

Another positive indicator for the participants of this study was work-life balance. Several women indicated that their academics were complemented by their social lives. Many of the participants looked to their family and friends as primary sources of social and academic support; parents, children, partners, extended family, and friends were often mentioned as substantial influences in helping them to sustain balance. For instance, although she lamented

about the extended length of time it was taking her to complete her program, Tish shared that she refused to put her life on hold to complete her degree. In addition to spending time with her children and friends, Tish continued to make time for vacations and social gatherings.

CinnamonNut (and several others) made mention of the church as a source of support and a space that allowed her to balance her personal needs with her academic pursuits. In addition to their immediate social network, the students relied on social circles and community resources like hairdressers and the church to supplement their holistic needs. Further, the students pointed to social and civic associations, virtual support networks on social media, and advisors as sources of support. In particular, advisors who were responsive, active, and demonstrated a culture of care were recognized by the participants as individuals who were essential in the completion of the doctoral degree. While “support” can be defined in myriad ways, there were basic criteria highlighted in the data that positively promoted the academic success of Black women doctoral students.

Finally, as the participants discussed their needs, finances were often mentioned as a primary concern that educational institutions could better address. Anna lamented:

The financial aspect is horrible. The stipend is only \$22,000 so that’s not a lot to work off of if you don’t have any support...it’s horrible...Other universities in the Atlanta area, they pay their Ph.D. students a lot more than what we pay. So we’re not even competitive as far as stipend, and that’s disappointing (Anna).

While several women maintained assistantships or scholarships, their appointments rarely covered realistic portions of their living expenses. Though funds acquired through external agencies were helpful, stipends did not completely cover the cost of rent, utilities, and educational expenses. In total, most of the women requiring campus resources needed additional financial assistance. In turn, several students who entered their programs as full-time students eventually went back to work full-time while they completed their degrees. Some of the factors

that contributed to this movement included: (1) a need for more work experience, (2) an effort to connect in-class experiences with practical, real-world experience, and (3) another vein of established income.

**Mentorship.** The participants' experiences with mentoring varied. Several women indicated that while they had encountered individuals they could look up to, they did not consider them mentors. Some women identified individuals in their families as mentors, especially those who had gone on to attain an advanced degree. Women involved in professional associations also identified mentors – women of color in particular – who could assist them in making sense of the Ph.D. process, including the selection of a program and navigating coursework. Some mentors served as listening ears and still others served as a secondary vetting panel, reviewing works, academic goals, professional development decisions, and career plans. For Joslaine, her experiences with her mentor encouraged her to give back:

One way that mentoring has really played a role in my development is it makes me want to mentor other people. I'm still learning, but I feel like I've learned a lot. I want to share that with other people. I actually started a LLC...called the [NAME OF LLC] where I do workshops...Especially high school and college students that may not see themselves as a scholar or may not see a doctor as being something obtainable for them. It's all for low income and/or people of color (Joslaine).

For women who had not gained exposure to a mentor prior to entering their program, there was an added reliance upon advisors, peers, and program administrators to successfully complete their degrees. Further, they utilized social media, like Facebook groups, to participate in peer mentoring circles. Finally, those who had not identified peer mentors within their programs created peer mentoring relationships with co-workers. For instance, Tish developed a peer mentoring connection with a colleague at work who had recently completed her degree. This relationship was beneficial to Tish in the sense that she could acquire advice from an individual who had recently completed the process.

**Motivation.** The women shared several factors that motivated them to complete their degrees. In addition to the intrinsic value of accomplishing a worthwhile goal, the students also cited their families, dedication to their communities, and career aspirations as motivators for degree completion. Some of the women were inspired by their parents' previous accomplishments:

I think part of that [is] my mom did it so it means that it could be done. I was encouraged by my grandparents. I was encouraged by younger relatives that would inadvertently say, "You know well I look up to you. I'm proud of you." Just hearing that positive feedback from my relatives and getting support from them that's the background that I think kind of pushed me to continue (Tish).

Lucy also drew upon her family's' past accomplishments:

I think about my grandmother who had about an 8th grade education, who used to clean bathrooms at an airport so that my mom and my sisters and I could have a house. I think about how my mother went to college and she went through what she went through. She had to go the Army to get a degree, but she got a degree. Here's why I don't get the chance to quit. I [think] about my cousins who look to me to see what I'm doing next. I don't get to quit (Lucy).

Children played a dynamic role in several of the women's motivation to complete their degrees. For those who had children – particularly children who remained fully dependent on the students – the need to complete their degrees was also fueled by the desire to set a good example. Lila reflected on her experiences as a youth who observed her mother's lifestyle and paralleled her accounts with her son's vantage point:

I think now that I have a son, it's even more important to me because I do kinda feel like, you know, he's watching what I'm doing...and so I definitely didn't want to start the degree and not finish it. I think finally...I don't know, I think that watching my mother get a law degree, but then never practice because she had me right after...that was one of the things that I remember hearing a lot...it just really didn't make sense to get that close and not finish (Lila).

Another motivator for pursuing a doctorate was to improve finances. Lila noted that she was interested in making more money and building upon her skillsets, because her current position did not offer advanced training or a suitable salary. Lucy concurred, stating that the

doctorate gave her access to advanced career opportunities. Finally, some students expressed the innate desire to complete their degree was influenced by a significant level of self-determination:

My expectations was to graduate. That's it...I mean. It's survival of the fittest no matter what you do. I just have the mindset of "I'm going in. I'm taking these classes and do what I have to do to graduate." I didn't have any expectations. I just knew what I had to do, and I just did it (Anna).

In total, our findings demonstrated that Black women pursue the doctorate for a variety of reasons and their motivations for completion are just as diverse. While family was a significant indicator; self-determination, finances, and advanced career skills also motivated the participants in this study to complete their degrees.

**Support.** Support surfaced for the participants in a variety of ways. Family, peers, faculty, and supervisors offered varying degrees of support to several of the students. Some women with children received child care assistance from their parents and/or partners as supplemental modes of support. Participants also reported that emotional and financial support and child care assistance from parents positively contributed to their success. For instance, Lila mentioned the assistance she received from both family and friends:

I have had lots and lots of help from family and friends in terms of babysitting my son. I have got financial help from friends. I just tap into that network of friends and family. They have helped out a ton. It has been difficult, but I'm going to owe a lot of people when I'm done. I know that (Lila).

Dr. Jay, a second-generation college student, relied upon the expertise of her family members to make sense of the hidden curriculum often felt (but difficult to discern) among women of color:

I've always had what I called it the hidden curriculum. Because my mom and my grandma and other people would talk about academia, I knew about it, and I would know things...I knew those hidden curriculum things, that I think a lot of...first generation folks don't really know just because they haven't heard their moms talk about it on the phone...They just don't hear that from their parents. They didn't get that hidden curriculum. I think that hidden curriculum kind of helped me get through (Dr. Jay).

The participants shared conflicting experiences as it related to their relationships with

their peers. Some found true friendship with at least one member of their cohort. For instance, Joslaine indicated that while she was not particularly close to most of the students in her program, she was especially close with the other woman of color in her cohort.

Lila's experience with her entire cohort differed. She felt close with each member and believed they maintained a non-competitive community where they looked to one another for support. In contrast, Anna was not especially connected with any members of her cohort. For Lucy, connecting with her cohort was less of a challenge because she could identify with them. During her interview, Lucy shared that six African Americans shared space with her in their program:

In my program, there are six people identify as African Americans. I didn't expect to have that many in the program. That group dynamic was in itself has been interesting because I didn't really see that in my master's program because we didn't have that structure. I had friends, but I was able to go through this process with people who identified like me, who have the same interest as me. It has really been a good experience (Lucy).

In general, factors that contributed to a lack of connection between cohort members included: (1) lack of common life experiences, (2) lack of a structured cohort model, and (3) students' personal situations limited time spent outside of home and school.

## **Challenges**

Several challenges were identified in this study, which were reduced to three primary themes: (1) lack of mentorship, (2) imposter phenomenon, and (3) social location. While we do not perceive one's social location to be a barrier, some of the women indicated that they experienced difficulties navigating the academy and interacting with others because of their social identity. In other words, we will not replicate deficit models prevalent in the literature, but we also acknowledge that there are systems in place that perpetuate racist, sexist, heteronormative, class-based ideologies which impact the experiences of Black women in higher

education. When we discuss social location within this section, it is related to participants' encounters with others and structures that subscribe to stereotypes and not social identity itself.

**Lack of mentorship.** As previously stated, the participants' experiences with mentorship was mixed. While some women received guidance and support from a mentor or mentors throughout their collegiate careers, others indicated that they did not have access to a mentor. Still others clarified that while they had several mentors, few had attained a Ph.D. The absence of any mentors seemed to be most common among participants. For example, CinnamonNut shared that she would have benefitted from the guidance of a mentor early in her program:

The challenge that I had the most with is probably I would have liked to have a mentor or a partner early on. Someone that you can kind of plot out what you're doing with this like how to relate it to everyday, how this works towards your degree as a whole (CinnamonNut).

While some women overtly expressed their need for a mentor, they seemed to be unsure about their perceived benefits of mentorship or what they believed to be the advantages resulting from optimal exposure to a mentor. What began to emerge from the data, however, was the idea that women who went without mentors felt they were missing information that they could not attain from other resources, or that lessons were learned at a slower pace.

**Imposter phenomenon.** As previously noted, imposter phenomenon refers to situations where highly-skilled individuals find difficulty with internalizing their aptitude. Rather, they internalize feelings of self-doubt and are anxious that they will inevitably be identified as fraudulent (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter phenomenon can lead individuals to second-guess themselves and their abilities, although they are often capable. When imposter phenomenon is coupled with systemic bias, underrepresented populations tend to over-analyze how they show up in predominantly White spaces because they are constantly wrestling with a diminished sense



of belonging and devaluing stereotypes (Cokley et al., 2013). For example, Lucy expressed concerns about her level of achievement. At times, she had a hard time realizing that she had the potential to accomplish so much:

It has been a little bit of an imposter syndrome. I struggled before grad school with it...It has really been a struggle...It's one thing to set a goal, but then when you set a goal and you reach the goal, it's sometimes like it can scare the crap out of me. Lately, it has been scaring me that I've actually done it, I'm in it...it's just been emotional just trying to balance everything and really just getting back into the swing of being a student (Lucy).

Lucy also dealt with fears stemming from her undergraduate career, where she encountered negative interactions with faculty surrounding her advanced writing skills. Lucy was so skilled, she was accused of plagiarism:

She didn't accuse me of plagiarism because maybe I miss-cited something. She just told me that my paper was too good for me to have written it...She didn't believe that I had written my paper...I think for me that had played into my writing experiences and in a nutshell has really depleted my self-esteem as it relates to writing. I honestly was a really good writer in high school, and I love writing. When that happened, I really did start to second guess myself a lot as it relates to writing (Lucy).

Several women in this study shared stories where their efforts were discounted by professors, colleagues, and loved ones. The positionality of Black women in higher education is unique, as they are frequently admitted into colleges and universities, although these institutions rarely reframe their infrastructures to allow for more inclusivity and equity (Collins, 2000). Repetitive messaging surrounding one's lack of belonging (e.g., perceptions of Black women as Affirmative Action admits), coupled with frequent interactions with overt and covert racism (e.g., professors telling their Black women students they "are not Ph.D. material"), can cause Black women to question themselves, despite their abilities (Carter, 2004; Simmons, 2016).

**Social location.** Challenges closely related to imposter syndrome were those in proximity to the participants' social identities. Several of the women involved in this study encountered situations directly linked to their social location. Issues surrounding the

intersections of class, race, gender, and Black women stereotypes emerged throughout each interview. Tish highlighted class differentials between students of color and their White counterparts. From her perspective, White students had access to a diverse set of financial resources that were less available to underrepresented students:

As a minority student, I don't feel that minority students at this level have some of the financial support that [White] students have... We're less likely to have people that we can call or support systems that are familiar with process that can help us maneuver outside of whatever information we might get from the school. Also, being a minority, being a minority female, I'm more likely to be a single parent. A lot of the White students that are in doctoral programs are not. So very different. Very different experience. That doesn't necessarily have anything to do with race, but it's just statistical (Tish).

Lucy pointed to gender differentiation as a potential challenge for her during the doctoral attainment process, though it appears she was focusing on her overall experience in the postsecondary sector. While Lucy believed she was on par with her male counterparts, she acknowledged that male privilege provided men with advantages that were more difficult for her to access:

I think that how I compare to a male student is that in my mind I think we are equal. The reality is that we're not. I think we're very much equal when it comes to education and being on that potential level. But I do know that because men in some of these programs...they're the minorities. It kind of gives...that privilege to their advantage...They use that privilege to their advantage (Lucy).

Tish concurred, stating that her gender impacted her social status and ability to acquire cultural capital at a similar rate as men. As a mother, she also noted the impact having children had on women's success rates in comparison to her male peers:

I think the experience that I had would be totally different from a male student. As a female, as a mom, a lot of the responsibilities for the care of children even in a marriage situation, many times would fall on the female. Whereas the male can go and work and go to school if he has got that wife. The wife is generally going to be taking care of the children. As a female, even during the times that I was married, the responsibility for doing main things in my home still fell on me. So I feel a male has...a smaller number of responsibilities. Responsibilities that a male has might be larger. They might be more

financial, but just in terms in the number of responsibilities that I have I think it is totally different (Tish).

Anna also faced challenges tied to negative stereotypes often applied to Black women and the greater Black community. Her frustrations were rooted in the fact that she came from an upper-middle class family:

Well, that's the thing at [prestigious HBCU]. Everybody assumes that because we're Black, we must've grew up poor and from the ghetto. It's not. Most of the people there, they come from middle class, upper class backgrounds. That's the really insulting thing that people assume about all Black universities or even Black professionals (Anna).

Anna continued, stating that her background lent itself to the ways she thought about race, gender, and socioeconomic status:

I went to a private school. All of my friends are White. I grew up around White people. My husband is White. So I don't see a difference between myself and them, and I have other Ph.D. students that are friends, and they are White as well. So...Equal as far as I'm concerned...I think...there is more of a benefit to being a minority in science because a lot of places are looking for a Black female. It's rare...I don't think [men are] smarter than me or even more capable (Anna).

Where the students valued themselves and their identities, they were often left wondering how interactions with others were informed by their social location. They questioned whether faculty, colleagues, or students made assumptions about their background and disposition because of stereotypes perpetuated through various systems in the U.S. While the women in this study did not ascribe to negative tropes often placed on Black women, they were conscious that the world around them does and that, at times, those stereotypes can influence hiring and promotion, student receptiveness, and internship/career opportunities. Some of the women also made mention of how traditional gender roles impacted their lives. These participants indicated that it seemed men were afforded more opportunities. And while some of the women were mothers who were responsible for the day-to-day care of their children, they believed that men with children were more likely to rely on their partners to support the daily needs of the child.

Still, there were others who felt that social location was not a factor and that they held an advantage because of their identity and merits.

This portion of the paper centered on the data we acquired during the collection phase of our research project. The data was rich and robust, offering a multidimensional perspective on the experiences of Black women in pursuit of the doctorate. The following section will involve a full analysis of the data. In our discussion, we delve into the themes that emerged from our students' stories and connect the students' experiences with doctoral study to the literature.

### **Discussion**

Issues relating to the social location of Black women doctoral students, stereotype threat, and imposter syndrome have been extensively explored over the course of the last five decades (Clance & Imes, 1978; Steele, 1997; Parkman, 2016; Simmons, 2016). What is glaringly evident, however, is the fact that these concerns have been discussed at length for half a century, yet the academy has been slow to remedy the implications maintained by centuries of institutionalized bigotry, bias, and discrimination. As we have already uncovered, Black women remain excluded from the upper ranks of higher education – from tenured faculty to upper administrative positions. Some underrepresented individuals internalize structural discrimination as a personal deficit, rather than an institutional shortcoming (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Even women who are fully aware of their strengths and talents question the ways they will be perceived and treated within the postsecondary sector. For them, the aftermath of institutionalized racism, heteronormativity, classism, ageism, sizeism, and sexism are very real and negatively impact educational and career opportunities.

The process of socialization for doctoral students is defined as “the process by which newcomers learn the encoded system of behavior specific to their area of expertise and the

system of meanings and values attached to these behaviors” (Taylor & Antony, 2000, p. 186). In this regard, it appears the majority of our participants had access to a myriad of opportunities for socialization. In accordance with the literature, the students were exposed to field experience, professional networks (alumni, professional associations), and were able to attend on-campus workshops centered on the doctoral process. There were, however, inconsistencies in the women’s experiences as it related to socialization options offered by their academic programs. Examples of socialization at the departmental level include one-on-one mentorship and relationship-building, bridge-building between students (including prospective students), and structured processes centered on career exploration. While some women felt connected to their schools/departments and close to their peers, other women did not share a similar experience. Although some participants, like Anna, did not necessarily require or want a connection with their department and/or colleagues, others lamented that doctoral study may have been easier to manage if they received more direction from their departments and stronger ties to their peers.

The literature indicates it is the responsibility of doctoral programs to provide opportunities for growth and development for their students (Jones et al., 2013). Such activities often clarify expectations, prepares students for the job force, and assists in reinforcing students’ interest for their respective field of study. During our interviews, the stories we encountered drew sharp contrasts between the established expectations for the academy and reality. Oftentimes, students described feeling “alone” or being left to figure things out for themselves. They came to the conclusion that doctoral study is meant to be an independent, isolative process although other students had come to the opposite conclusion.

### **Implications**

All students require assistance with the completion of their doctoral studies. When

focusing on the holistic success of Black doctoral women, it is important to consider the needs unique to their lived experiences with the understanding that Black womanhood is not a monolithic experience. Similar to Patton (2009), we determined that Black female doctoral students would benefit from being associated with mentorship programs geared specifically towards mentoring Black women through the completion of the doctorate. As we progressed through our study, it became clear that several students lacked structured mentorship, which is problematic considering the literature clearly states that mentorship is a key component to doctoral student success (Baker et al., 2014; Fountain, 2012). Mentoring offers one-on-one exposure to a student's industry, where the hidden curriculum is often unveiled. Organizations like Sisters of the Academy (SOTA) offer comprehensive grantsmanship workshops, junior-senior scholar matching and mentorship, peer-to-peer accountability, job search tips, as well as access to a biannual, weeklong Research Writing Bootcamp © (Davis & Sutherland, 2008). For programs and institutions committed to bolstering the academic and career success of underrepresented populations, offering students opportunities to connect with associations like SOTA, in addition to developing a structured mentorship program within the department, would be fundamental in meeting the very basic of student needs.

Another item that was frequently discussed was finances. Perhaps executive leadership at the institutional level could become more creative in the ways they allocate their finances. For campuses that are fiscally under-resourced, it may be beneficial for them to construct a targeted development program that centers the financial needs of Black college women. Streamlining an ask that informs alumni, prospective donors, and grant agencies on the benefits of a diverse campus community, in addition to the unique needs of underrepresented students, could improve a university's development success rate.

Identifying the underlying reasons why students are in pursuit of the doctorate would also serve as a mechanism for success for Black doctoral women. By identifying their motivations for attaining a doctoral degree, educators will be better positioned to address areas of concern, connect students with prospective career opportunities, and distinguish incentives during moments of low morale. As indicated in our study, (1) intrinsic value and community responsibility, (2) professional and financial necessity, and (3) personal goals were just three of several reasons why Black women pursue doctoral study. It is the responsibility of a student's advisor or committee chair to determine what motivates their students so appropriate remedies are applied during moments of conflict and curricular plans are defined in a timely manner.

Finally, as noted in earlier research (Agosto et al., 2015; Karanxha et al., 2014), provosts and department chairs must be more proactive in monitoring the gatekeeping behaviors of faculty. The rate at which students of color are dissuaded from doctoral study (or pursuing the tenure track) is concerning. When making considerations for the ways students of color are discouraged or prevented from pursuing the doctorate, it is difficult to ignore the coded manner in which "fit" and perceived aptitude deficiencies continue to perpetuate White, male-dominated spaces among faculty ranks. These practices resonate throughout the academy, where the skillsets and "fit" of Black women continue to be dissected by faculty at a higher rate than their White counterparts, regardless of aptitude and professional background. It is incumbent upon department chairs and academic provosts to demonstrate their commitment to diversity and safe learning environments by addressing issues stemming from blatant and covert discrimination on-campus.

### **Future Research**

The current study provided a broad examination of the barriers and facilitators that

influenced the success of some Black women in doctoral education. Future research should investigate how student experiences vary by discipline. Specifically, what are the organizational and cultural factors that may be difficult to navigate and negotiate given these students racialized and gendered identities? Previous research shows that disciplinary-specific experiences in STEM may not reflect the experiences of students who are in education, the social sciences, or the humanities (Nettles & Millett, 2006).



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Table 1

*Study Participants*

Pseudonym	Major	Year in the Program/Doctorate Holder	Institutional Type
Lila	Curriculum and Teaching	Third	Private not-for-profit, research university, higher research activity (PWI)
CinnamonNut	Public Health	Fourth	For-profit, online institution
Joslaine	Higher Education Administration	Second	Public, research university, highest research activity (PWI)
Lucy	Higher Education Administration	First	Public, research university, moderate research activity (PWI)
Tish	Educational Administration	Fifth	Private, not-for-profit, faith-based research university (PWI)
Anna	Biomedical Sciences	Fourth	Private, not for profit (HBCU)
Dr. Jay	Business Administration	Doctorate Holder	For-profit, online institution