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Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral
Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Franklin Jajuan Garrett

Committee in charge:

University of California San Diego

Professor Theresa Ambo
Professor Sam Museus

California State University, San Marcos

Professor Sinem Siyahhan, Chair

2022

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The dissertation of Franklin Garrett is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

2022

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to family who have supported me during this doctoral journey, my wife, Jenny Garrett who provided me the love and support necessary to reach this milestone and my three sons, Joele, Franklin Jr., and Jackson who serves as my motivation to be the first in my family lineage to earn a doctorate degree. This dissertation is also dedicated to all first-generation African American college students who encounter obstacles while pursuing their personal, professional, and educational aspirations. The findings and implications presented in this dissertation would not be possible without the courageous and inspiring participants who openly shared their experiences—Adam, Alex, Cheryl, Julie, Melanie, Mia, Mike, Nick, Nicole, Renee, and Sandra.

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VITA

EDUCATION

- 2022 Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, University of California San Diego and California State University San Marco
- 2006 Master of Arts, Education, San Diego State University
- 2005 Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, San Diego State University

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2022 Director of Educational Initiatives, UC San Diego
- 2018 Student Account Services Assistant Director, UC San Diego
- 2017 Senior Contracts and Grants Officer, UC San Diego
- 2016 Student Business Services Analyst, UC San Diego
- 2014 Program Specialist, San Diego Workforce Partnership
- 2012 Student Services Coordinator, National University
- 2010 Academic Advisor, California State University San Marcos
- 2008 College Counselor, Estrella Mountain Community College

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral Students

by

Franklin Jajuan Garrett

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2022
California State University San Marcos 2022

Professor Sinem Siyahhan, Chair

Despite the growth of ethnic diversity in the United States, significant educational attainment gaps remain between minoritized students and their White counterparts. To address the issue of the lower number of doctorate degrees conferred to African American students relative to their White peers, researchers have studied the challenges students of color face in their educational journey. However, many studies analyze student attrition from a deficit

perspective instead of a holistic approach to understanding college persistence. Recent studies have attempted to identify patterns and trends of doctoral students enrolled in degree programs. However, there is little asset-based literature in academia on first-generation African American students' experiences during their doctoral journey.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“It has been noted that “students are central to the doctoral undertaking. Yet, theirs is the voice that is least heard.” (McAlpine & Norton, 2006, p. 6).

While access to higher education has increased substantially in recent years, students whose parents did not attend college continue to be at a distinct disadvantage (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). A considerable body of research indicates that students whose parents did not attend college experience significant challenges in getting into and completing higher education (Choy, 2013; Hébert, 2018; Ishitani, 2006; Roksa et al., 2018). Almost one-third of all doctoral recipients are first-generation students, meaning their parents did not finish college—yet we know little about their experiences in doctoral education (Roksa et al., 2018). First-generation college students are most commonly defined as those whose parents have only a high school degree (Inkelas et al., 2007; Warburton et al., 2001). According to the 2019 Survey of Earned Doctorates, an annual survey conducted by the National Science Foundation, doctoral students who are—American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, or Hispanic or Latino—are less likely to have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree than are Asian or White doctorate recipients. In 2015, nearly 76.2% of White and 71.7% of Asian doctorate recipients hailed from families with at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with between 49.7% of African American, 58.2% Hispanic or Latino, 50.8% American Indian or Alaska Native (National Science Foundation, 2017). Students who are the first in their family to attend college are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status, more likely to have completed at least some coursework at a community college, are more likely to be older with dependents, and report more debt following completion of their degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). It is important to emphasize that the first-generation student identity is not a monolithic construct; rather, it intersects with

various other identities and student experiences. Educators and researchers are just beginning to study the first-generation doctoral student experience, particularly the experiences of African American students. Many institutions do not have a clear understanding of this population.

First-generation college students encounter several obstacles, the most prevalent of which include lower academic standards, a lack of academic preparation while entering college, and a lack of understanding of how college works (Davis, 2012). First-generation doctoral students encounter many of the same challenges as undergraduate students, but these obstacles are more challenging in doctoral education. These students are more financially burdened than non-first-generation peers and are less likely to obtain institutional funding, such as fellowships and grants. They are also less informed of the prospects for graduate teaching positions and research assistantships (Gardner, 2013).

In addition to these challenges, literature reports negative education experiences faced by first-generation African American doctorate students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) (Barker, 2016; S. Howard, 2017). Literature often negatively associates the first-generation status with the inability of college students to persist in postsecondary education, yet many first-generation doctoral students successfully navigate their graduate education while being the first person in their family to attain a college degree (Cataldi et al., 2018; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Gardner, 2013; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Doctoral students are among the most academically qualified, academically successful, and rigorously evaluated, yet they are the least likely to complete their academic programs. Among degree levels, doctoral students are the least likely to finish their degree programs (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Less than half of doctoral students who start their degree complete their degree, and the numbers are even lower for first-generation African

American students. Studies highlighting the experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students, from the student's perspective, can shed light on the factors and conditions associated with educational persistence for graduate students from diverse backgrounds.

Statement of the Problem

The growth of ethnic diversity in the United States has magnified the critical need to support degree completion for students of color pursuing doctorate degrees. There have been efforts to diversify graduate education in America; however, significant educational attainment gaps remain between minoritized students and their White counterparts (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Singleton, 2014). Increasing the number of doctorate recipients from diverse backgrounds plays a vital role in supporting and developing a population of scholars who can address the shortage of K-12 teachers, college and university faculty members, and student affairs practitioners from diverse backgrounds who have the skills necessary to motivate and educate students from diverse backgrounds. Failure to address the lack of diversity in doctorate education has detrimental consequences for teaching, learning, and knowledge development, especially when it comes to educating and supporting students of color (Burger, 2018; Kimberly A. Griffin, 2020; Hussar & Bailey, 2014; Sowell et al., 2015). If universities do not create a diverse pool of doctoral candidates, there will continue to be a disparity in degree conferment rates between students from diverse backgrounds and White students; the critical societal need to produce more students of color with doctorate-level training will be unmet.

There is a nationwide concern regarding the low doctoral completion rates for students from all demographics—less than half of students who pursue doctorate degrees complete their degree programs (Castelló et al., 2017). Students from all ethnic backgrounds obtain their doctorates at similar rates over a ten-year period (National Science Foundation, 2019). In recent

decades, the number of students of color in doctoral education has risen, but minority students in graduate school remain vastly underrepresented (Gardner, 2013). Recent studies have attempted to identify patterns and trends of doctoral students enrolled in degree programs (Baness King, 2011; Burger, 2018; Manthei, 2016), but there has been relatively little literature published on first-generation African American students' perception of the conditions and factors that contribute to their persistence in doctoral programs. In other words, there is much to learn about the experience of first-generation African American doctoral students.

African American students are underrepresented at every degree level, especially at the graduate level (National Science Foundation, 2019). According to the Science & Engineering Indicators 2020 report, the percentage of African American students who received doctorate degrees in life sciences, physical sciences and earth sciences, mathematics and computer sciences, psychology and social sciences, engineering, education and humanities, and arts is 6.5%, 2.7%, 3.7%, 7.8%, 4.0%, 14.5%, and 4.9%, respectively. According to this report, the overall percentage of doctorate recipients in 2018 was 70.5% White, 9.3% Asian, 7.3% Hispanic, 6.9% African American, and 0.3% American Indian (National Science Foundation, 2019).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, as of 2019, there were a total of 104,953 doctoral degrees conferred since 1976. According to the same report, there are 60,180 White doctorate recipients, 10,576 Black doctorate recipients, 8,681 Hispanic doctorate recipients, 12,403 Asian doctorate recipients, 412 American Indian doctorate recipients, and 3,248 bi-racial doctorate recipients as of 2019. To address the issue of the lower number of doctorate degrees conferred to African American students relative to their White peers, researchers have studied the challenges students of color face in their educational journey. These studies equate doctoral conferment rates due to socioeconomic status, pre-college

(under)preparedness, and standardized test results. In other words, these studies analyze student attrition from a deficit perspective instead of illuminating and enhancing attributes affecting college persistence, resulting in a mischaracterization of students and difficulty unlocking their potential (Levister, 2001; Williams Sr, 2017). Fewer studies analyzed African American students' conditions and factors associated with college persistence. Even fewer studies reported on college persistence factors for first-generation African American doctoral students. Thus, educators can benefit from understanding factors and conditions associated with educational persistence for first-generation African American doctorate students (Brooks et al., 2014; Butler et al., 2011; Levister, 2001).

There is a need for research about first-generation African American students' persistence in doctorate programs that focuses on understanding their experiences and analyzing conditions and factors influencing this population's persistence using an anti-deficit achievement framework. This approach emphasizes students' strengths and positive assets. The research on the topic has been conducted predominantly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), yet most students of color earn their degrees from HWIs (Williams Sr, 2017). Educators do not clearly understand the conditions and factors African American doctorate students consider responsible for persistence in their doctoral programs, resulting in educators' inability to support persistence in their degree programs. Researchers, faculty, students, and policymakers could use this information to identify salient factors to ensure African American students complete their doctoral degree programs, increasing the number of students of color with doctorate degrees in the U.S. and addressing the critical national need for more graduates from diverse backgrounds.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

There is a scarcity of scholarship that acknowledges first-generation African American Doctorate students' educational experiences, challenges deficit-laden viewpoints, and elevates student voices. This phenomenological study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the lived experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students. This study will examine how first-generation African American doctoral students make sense of their experiences during their journey through the educational pathway, as well as the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate. Special consideration will be given to how students overcome challenges, if applicable, and students' perceptions of the role that non-cognitive and institutional factors had on their persistence.

Within the contexts outlined above, this study explores the experiences of successful first-generation African American doctoral students during their educational journey towards degree completion and the factors contributing to their success and persistence in their programs. For the purposes of this study, success is defined as the confluence of student behaviors such as overcoming challenges, demonstrating strong academic performance, maintaining high levels of engagement with their institutions both in and out of the classroom, and matriculating toward graduation on time. The following research questions guided the research study:

1. What are the life experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students before entering their doctoral program?
 - a. What barriers, if any, first-generation African American doctoral students faced throughout their life from high school to the doctoral program? How did they overcome these barriers?

Answers to these questions offer important insights into the experiences of first-generation African American students as they navigate the educational pathway to doctoral education.

2. What are the life experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students while pursuing their doctorate?
 - a. From the students' perspective, what role do non-cognitive factors, if any, play in their ability to persist in pursuing a doctoral degree?
 - b. From the students' perspective, what institutional factors (i.e., campus climate, faculty support, financial support), if any, support or hinder first-generation African American doctoral students' persistence in graduate education?

The answers to these questions provide crucial insights into the experiences of first-generation African American students during doctoral education and what factors supported or hindered their ability to persist.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT), in tandem with the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF), are appropriate methodological lenses for investigating the factors and conditions that support doctoral persistence from the perspective of first-generation African American doctorate students. Researchers have learned about the experiences of students of color in academic settings using CRT. ADAF has been used to guide strength-based inquiries on how students from diverse backgrounds successfully navigate higher education. The frameworks work together to establish research protocols that allow the researcher to understand better what it means for students to navigate the educational pathway to doctoral education. Figure 1 below illustrates the nested model of the theoretical frameworks that guide this study. The deployment of CRT as a theoretical lens provides historical context to the nuanced experiences of first-generation African

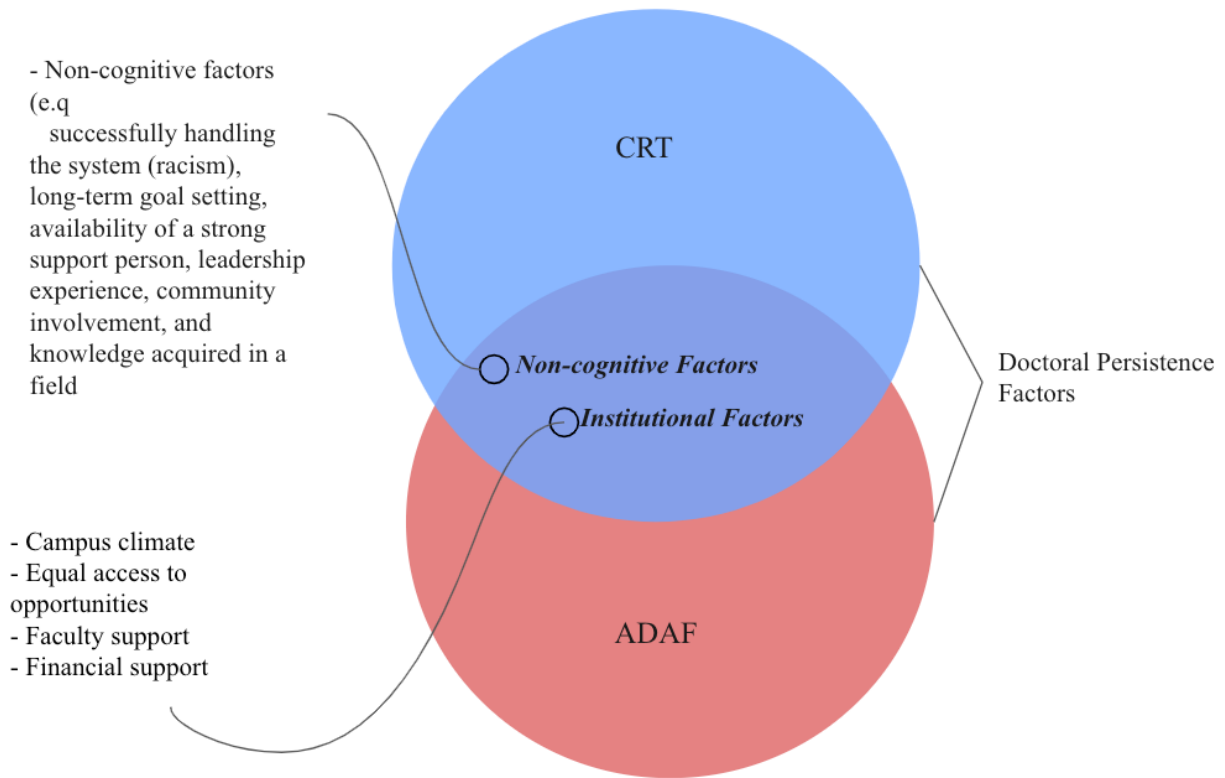


Figure 1: Represents the Nested Mode of Research Frameworks for Study

American doctorate students on college campuses. The ADAF model offers a framework for conducting an anti-deficit-based investigation into the persistence of African American scholars in overcoming educational challenges and thriving in higher education.

Research Methodology

In order to get a more profound and meaningful understanding of first-generation African American doctoral students' perspectives on the factors that contribute to their success, as well as their lived experiences in higher education, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. The researcher conducted semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews as the forms of data collection. A phenomenological study informed the above research questions and sub-questions. Understanding the essence of the meaning of a participant's experience is the goal of a phenomenological approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study focused on the lived experiences of a minimum of eleven participants in their 3rd and 4th year or final year of their doctoral programs, respectively—based on the screening criteria detailed in chapter 3. Participants responded to questions about their educational experiences during their journey through the educational pathway, the challenges they encountered along the way, and the factors that aided or hindered their persistence. The study aimed to shed light on the experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students. The study took a strengths-based approach, focusing on factors that improve participants' educational experiences and outcomes, considering the challenges they overcame. The third chapter comprehensively discusses the methodologies used in this inquiry.

Definition of Terms

- *Achievement Gap* is described by the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) as when one racial or ethnic group of students outperforms another group, and the performance

differential is statistically significant. Research suggests the achievement gap is present at all levels of education.

- *Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF)* is a framework that “inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and African American male student attrition” (Harper, 2012, p. 5). This framework moves us beyond deficit-based approaches to highlight the success stories of students and the conditions that enabled students to succeed.
- *African Americans or Blacks* are “people having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The terms Black and African American are used in this paper to describe people born in the United States and who have African ancestry. As such, the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.
- *Critical Race Theory (CRT)* within the context of education “highlights those aspects of society, institutions, schools and classrooms that tell the story of the functions, meanings, causes and consequences of racial educational equality” (Zamudio et al., 2011, pp. 2-3).
- *Educational Pipeline* is described by Yosso & Solórzano (2006) as a system of interrelated institutions through which students progress from one level to the next. Therefore, I will refer to the “educational pipeline” as “educational pathways” throughout this proposal.
- *Historically white institutions (HWIs)* are the term used to describe Institutions of higher learning in which Whites make up 50% or more of the student body.
- *Lived experience* is a term used to describe the first-hand accounts of an individual. This phenomenological concept seeks to understand participants’ lived experiences to

comprehend what it was like to experience particular phenomena (Peoples, 2020). This study will examine the experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students.

- *Success*, as defined for the purposes of this study, is the confluence of student behaviors such as overcoming challenges, demonstrating strong academic performance, maintaining high levels of engagement with their institutions both in and out of the classroom, and matriculating toward graduation on time.

Significance of the Study

Educational institutions have historically reproduced unequal power relations and have been complicit in creating racial inequality (Wood et al., 2015). The education system is a microcosm of broader society. Discrimination against African American students is taking place on college campuses. Universities not only struggle to meet the educational needs of minoritized students, but they also struggle to create an inclusive student culture, which results in discrimination, racism, and bias in learning communities (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Even well-intentioned educators inherently embrace a deficit paradigm related to students of color and find it difficult to speak about race. These educators embrace colorblind ideologies and view their interactions as race-neutral. For this reason, many educators remain unaware of the disparities in student experience, and treatment on campus continues to exist on the grounds of race and ethnicity. Understanding, defining, and identifying success factors or failure is required for institutions to create the conditions for graduate success (Bain et al., 2011). African American doctoral students are disproportionately first-generation and understanding their experience and addressing their educational needs can decrease the racial degree attainment gap (Gardner & Holley, 2011; S. Howard, 2017).

First-generation African American doctoral students have risen to the highest level of education while overcoming significant challenges during their educational journey. Educators should consult minority achievers to understand the resources, experiences, and opportunities they attribute to their success (Harper, 2010). Educators must understand how African American students transition academically and socially into graduate education, the strengths sustaining students' persistence, and the institutional factors influencing their college experience (S. Howard, 2017; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008). This information is required to establish the environments which African American graduate students consider positive. Educational administrators must not only create opportunities within the university experience to encourage faculty, staff, and administrators to reflect, understand, and address educational inequalities, they must find a way to put into practice their commitment to improving the experience of all students.

Researchers have not agreed on the conditions and factors most responsible for doctoral students' persistence. The literature's ambiguity on these factors has made it difficult for postsecondary institutions to support doctoral students effectively. Many institutions have had mixed results when integrating minority first-generation doctoral students in degree programs for the same reasons. Much of the recent literature on doctoral persistence does not incorporate the students' perspective on the phenomenon. It is imperative to understand factors supporting persistence from the student's viewpoint using qualitative research methods to understand students' experiences in doctoral education. A more systematic and theoretical analysis is required to learn about the persistence factors for doctoral degree completers, particularly those student demographics that often face additional challenges during their educational journey. The task of closing the opportunity gap between first-generation and non-first-generation students is

daunting; however, it can be accomplished by addressing the educational inequalities that create discrepancies and by emphasizing understanding the experiences of students who have persisted in the educational pathway— as well as those who did not. Hearing students’ perspectives on persistence factors may compel additional research and inspire pedagogical, policy, and procedural improvements at all levels of education.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

In phenomenological research, viewpoints on particular experiences are examined. The experiences of all first-generation African American doctoral students cannot be generalized. Although there may be parallels across the participants’ experiences, each unique narrative provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students. While it is strongly recommended that this research be replicated, it is vital to note that the conclusions cannot be generalized due to the study’s qualitative nature.

The participants’ voices, reflected in the conceptual frameworks used in this study, are one of the study’s strengths. One central tenet of critical race theory (CRT) is the importance of individuals from marginalized populations telling their own stories. Equally important is the study’s emphasis on conducting a strength-based investigation to understand better how students of color persist and succeed in higher education. By highlighting the participants’ lived experiences, the researcher stayed true to his intention of documenting the experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students during their educational journey. Another strength of this study is the use of a web-based synchronous technology called Zoom to conduct data collection. As a result, the researcher was able to interview African American doctoral students attending graduate programs across the country and pursuing their doctorates in various disciplines.

The study was limited in its focus on one racial background and did not account for students with multiple identities in addition to being African American doctoral students. For example, the study did not include significant numbers of disabled people, biracial individuals, or people who identify as non-heterosexual. As a first-generation doctoral student and a student affairs professional at a postsecondary education institution, I am deeply invested in this research topic on a personal and professional level. While my positionality is not a limitation per se, I have made every effort to minimize personal bias. Each of these techniques is discussed in Chapter 3.

The scope of this study is limited because it is difficult to extrapolate the findings to a more significant number of people. Instead, the study examined in detail the experiences of a small sample of participants gathered from multiple post-secondary educational institutions across the U.S. While small numbers of participants in quantitative research might be seen as a drawback, Rudestam & Newton (2014) asserts that the objective is not to generalize a phenomenon but rather to improve your understanding of a phenomenon.

Organization of the Dissertation

The first chapter of this proposal established the critical need for research on persistence factors for first-generation African American doctoral students. The need to document, describe and analyze the variables contributing to their persistence throughout their educational journey was highlighted. The second chapter will review the literature on African American doctoral students' experiences. Research has established that first-generation African American doctoral students encounter unique educational obstacles. Much can be learned from understanding students' lived experiences who overcame obstacles to reach the pinnacle of higher education—doctoral education. Additionally, the second chapter discusses the literature on the theoretical

frameworks used in this study. Finally, the third chapter discusses the methods for examining the educational experiences of first-generation African American doctorate students.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A growing body of literature emphasizes students' strengths and positive assets when evaluating college persistence. The purpose of this study was to add to the existing body of literature regarding the experiences and persistence factors of first-generation African American doctoral students. First, the literature review begins by examining the history of exclusionary educational practices that created educational inequality for African American students. Second, it stresses the importance of reframing the "achievement gap" to an "opportunity gap." Third, attention was paid to deficit-oriented narratives that permeate discourse about African American student persistence. Fourth, it detailed first-generation students' common characteristics and experiences. Fifth, it examined persistence at the doctoral level. Sixth, it highlighted how doctoral students of color are marginalized during the doctoral socialization process. Seventh, it examined the factors contributing to persistence for African American students. Finally, the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Frameworks (ADAF) in the literature were discussed.

Historical Educational Experiences of African Americans

Colleges and universities were created for white males. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) were—and continue to be—excluded from these spaces. While institutions have created diversity and inclusion practices and initiatives designed to improve access to higher education for BIPOC—higher education institutions are centered around a hegemony of Whiteness. Whiteness is the normalization of white racial identity, customs, cultures, and beliefs that deem nonwhite people inferior or abnormal (Cabrera et al., 2017). Whiteness is entrenched in the ethos of higher education institutions on programmatic, structural, and ideological levels. There is a preponderance of blissful ignorance regarding the role that higher education

institutions play in the institutionalization of white supremacy through the veil of colorblind and meritocratic ideologies, which are used to undermine the experiences of students of color.

For centuries, racial inequalities prevented African Americans from having college access. African Americans had no access to secondary education, let alone post-secondary education. Higher education was reserved exclusively for well-to-do white men. After the overturning of anti-literacy laws that prevented African Americans from receiving a basic education, the United States continued its long history of exclusionary policies that made it difficult for African Americans to access the socio-economic benefits associated with obtaining a college degree (Harper et al., 2009). The first Jim Crow law, mandating separate accommodations for Whites and African Americans, was passed in 1890. A few years later, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision in 1896 allowed racial segregation in public schools as long as accommodations were “equal” for all students (Center, 2004). Segregated African American schools were under-resourced and underfunded compared to white schools before the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which outlawed the operation of separate but equal public education facilities (Center, 2004). There have been efforts to provide equitable educational access to African American people (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Higher Education Act of 1965, Executive Order 11246). However, the policies have been undermined by consistent attempts to dismantle affirmative action, increasingly rigorous standards for admission to public postsecondary institutions, reports of racism and unfavorable African American student experiences, and the decline of need-based federal financial aid (Harper et al., 2009; Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). Despite creating education policies that address educational inequality for African American people, there remains a significant educational opportunity gap between African Americans and their White counterparts in higher education.

Reframing the Achievement Gap

Over the last fifty years, major social movements have led to political legislation and education policies to improve students' access and equity from non-dominant cultures. However, school reforms did not remedy educational inequities experienced by racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the U.S. public school system. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Elementary and School Education Act (ESEA) of 2015 drew more attention to the achievement gap. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) describes the achievement gap as when one racial or ethnic group of students outperforms another group, and the performance differential is statistically significant. Research suggests the achievement gap is present at all levels of education. Several authors have recognized the importance of viewing student achievement as a continuum from K-12 schooling to postsecondary education instead of as separate entities. This continuum is often referred to as the “educational pipeline”—persistence through secondary education, postsecondary education, and entry into the workforce (Ewell et al., 2003; Gándara, 2006). Student access and retention are complex issues that require an examination of the opportunities presented to students throughout their educational journey, how educators identify talent throughout the admissions process, and what resources are available to assist students in making a successful transition to college—and beyond. The phrase “education pipeline” is problematic because it inaccurately describes the system of interrelated institutions where students move from one level to another. This description assumes a clear path from each level of education to the workforce and excludes the factors that support and hinder a student's ability to persist. Notably, the United States government has desecrated and stolen Native American sacred lands and reservations to construct pipelines to drill for oil (Mengden,

2017). For these reasons, the researcher will refer to the “educational pipeline” as “educational pathways” throughout this dissertation.

Literature suggests that more underrepresented minority (URM) students (i.e., African American, Hispanic or Latino/Latina, American Indian, and Alaska Natives) are displaced from the educational pathway than White and Asian students (Estrada et al., 2016; Flores, 2007). Even though more attention has been paid to the disparities between students, there remains a significant achievement gap between minority students and their White counterparts at all levels of education (Singleton, 2014). Literature regarding educational disparities and postsecondary interventions mainly focuses on African American and Hispanic students. Except for African American students, American Indian students have the lowest college completion rate compared to any other underrepresented population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Yet, students from this demographic have been excluded from the discourse regarding opportunity disparities for students from diverse backgrounds (Stewart-Ambo, 2021).

Educational disparities between African American students and their peers must be framed as an opportunity gap rather than an achievement gap to highlight opportunities to resolve structural differences leading to the disparity in the student experience in higher education (Flores, 2007; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012). Previous studies reveal the need to examine the lack of access to resources contributing to the success of more privileged students. They contend it is essential to reflect on the root causes of challenges rather than symptoms. Many researchers argue that the opportunity gaps for BIPOC students result from institutional inequalities in an education system designed to educate the White population while limiting educational opportunities for people of color (Cabrera et al., 2007; Harper, 2012, King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). Educators must understand how African American doctoral students

surmounted hurdles in their educational journey to grasp the factors that influence their persistence.

Rejecting Deficit-Based Approaches

Researchers should highlight the student's strengths rather than dwell on the students' weaknesses (Powell, 2018). Educators must counterbalance the discussion about the educational challenges experienced by African American students with insights gathered on how African American achievers overcame the obstacles that typically disadvantage their peers (Harper, 2012). Harper (2012) stressed the importance of understanding African American achievers' experiences who report high academic and social integration levels on college campuses. The researcher contends that examination is required to learn from African American students who performed well as undergraduate students and transitioned to graduate education and obtained competitive internships and jobs after graduation.

The voices of African American collegians are missing in the literature about African American students writ large (Ingram, 2007; Levister, 2001; Nickelberry, 2012). Deficit narratives permeate academic discourse about African American student success. The narratives portray African American males as unwilling to achieve academic success while paying little attention to factors contributing to systematic inequalities in society and the educational system, making it more challenging for African American students to succeed (Manthei, 2016). The quest to determine what factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation African American students seeking doctoral degrees in higher education is a worthy endeavor. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the educational challenges African American students experience. In addition, an increasing amount of literature has been conducted on which individual characteristics influence graduate school success. However, few studies

have utilized an anti-deficit perspective to analyze first-generation African American doctoral students' persistence (Pérez et al., 2017).

The majority of literature on African American student success perpetuates deficit-oriented narratives. According to Manthei (2016), the prevailing method for addressing the challenges that some minority students experience in higher education has been to highlight their educational challenges. Most of the empirical research on the subject focuses on student deficiencies instead of achievement. The dominant discourse suggests that African American students are deficient, and their pre-college characteristics contribute to underachievement (Blockett et al., 2016; Harper & Harris, 2012; T. Howard, 2013). The researchers suggest that by placing the lion's share of blame on students, the student's voice is minimized, and less attention is paid to the attitudes and activities of the institution and degree program, which hinders students' success. Hearing the students' voices regarding the factors that helped them persist in doctoral-level degree programs can shed light on the experiences of high achieving students and quiet the deficit narratives about African American student's ability to persist.

Definition and Characteristics of First-Generation Doctoral Students

It is now widely acknowledged that first-generation college students experience significant barriers to higher education, as demonstrated by the federal government's funding allocation for support programs for low-income and first-generation college students under the Higher Education Act of 1965. Hurdles more commonly faced by first-generation college students include: receiving lowered academic expectations, starting college less academically prepared, and being less knowledgeable on how college works (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Romasanta, 2016). Several factors, including income; race/ethnicity; delayed entry; and financial support, influence their persistence in the early stages of the matriculation process in

postsecondary education. Reports tracking first-generation college students' characteristics reveal several obstacles that put students at risk of leaving postsecondary education without earning their degrees. These barriers include: delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school, working full-time while enrolled in college, and being a parent (Cataldi et al., 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). In addition to these variables, parents' education level is a significant factor in postsecondary persistence (Davis, 2012; Warburton et al., 2001).

Without an informed parental figure to guide them through the college process, first-generation students experience more challenges than their peers (S. Howard, 2017; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roksa et al., 2018). Most doctoral students are second-generation students who benefit from their parent's knowledge of college. Second-generation students are students whose parents have at least one baccalaureate degree. First-generation students do not reap the benefits of understanding how to manage postsecondary education from learning from their parents' experiences (Cataldi et al., 2018; Gardner, 2013). Students with educated parents have a distinct advantage over first-generation students in understanding higher education culture. Parents' educational experience is a valuable cultural and social capital source that helps students navigate college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Many studies that have reported educational inequality use Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu posited that cultural capital is the accumulation of varied knowledge, skills, and experiences acquired over time—mainly through intergenerational knowledge (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital is knowledge of a society's dominant culture. It is now generally accepted that traditional college success theories give insufficient attention to the role that racial and cultural factors play in student success for minoritized students (Museus,

2014). Critical race scholars have problematized the notion of viewing students with less knowledge of “dominant culture” as deficient (Gardner & Holley, 2011). First-generation college students have demonstrated the ability to draw upon various forms of capital to navigate higher education.

Yosso (2005) contends that students of color possess an array of knowledge, skills, and abilities that enables them to succeed in educational environments that are unwelcoming and often hostile. The researcher established the model of community cultural wealth to counter the deficit perspectives prevalent in research on student persistence (Yosso, 2005). The Yosso six forms of capital that comprise community cultural wealth:

1. Aspirational capital - refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived obstacles.
2. Linguistic capital - refers to the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences developed when learning more than one language.
3. Familial capital - can be interpreted as the cultural knowledge nurtured among familia that can convey a sense of the community’s historical significance.
4. Social networks can be understood as networks of people and community resources.
5. Navigational capital - means having the ability to navigate across many social structures.
6. Resistant capital - refers to the knowledge and abilities gained through the acquisition of behaviors that enable one to confront inequality.

One of the cornerstones of Yosso’s community cultural wealth model is that it rejects the notion that minoritized students arrive at an institution plagued with deficiencies. Instead, the model focuses on illuminating the unheralded strengths of minoritized students and is regarded as a strength-based framework that is appropriate for understanding the aspects that students of color pose that aid their college persistence (Blocket et al., 2016; Pérez et al., 2017; Romasanta, 2016; Shaw, 2012).

This topic can be reconceptualized to focus on the strengths and assets of students. Instead of investigating the conditions and lack of resources contributing to African American students' challenges, an anti-deficit approach can be used to explore how successful students from diverse backgrounds persist in doctoral education.

Persistence at the Doctoral Level

Student persistence in higher education starts with William Spady's study of the dropout process, which was among the first and most thorough analyses of persistence (Spady, 1970). Spady's central assertion is that the relationship between a student's academic integration within their institution impacts their persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Spady, 1970). Following Spady, several studies by Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) discussed factors that affect an individual's choice to leave college or university and how these factors lead to attrition. Tinto's Student Integration Model describes the commitment made by both students and the institution to ensure that students are academically and socially integrated into the academic environment (Tinto, 1975). Tinto asserted that low levels of commitment to the social system enhance the likelihood of students electing to drop out of college. Another vital contribution to this research area was Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement which proposed that the greater the student engagement, the greater the ability to learn, and the more likely the student would persevere.

Spady, Astin, and Tinto's research efforts continue to impact the course of persistence research today. While most student retention research is built on the notion that academic and social integration is critical to college persistence, the models apply solely to traditional students who reside on or near campus, participate in in-person learning, and come from backgrounds traditionally served in higher education (McCubbin, 2003; York et al., 2015). Traditional college success theories pay little attention to the cultural and racial realities of students of color, the role

that negative campus climates have on students' ability to persist, and institutional structures which affect persistence (Lopez, 2018; Museus, 2014). Historically, theories on college success have been mostly centered on undergraduate students. Several higher education scholars stressed the need for a rigorous analysis of factors that impact college success and persistence for graduate students from racially diverse populations (Blockett et al., 2016; Cintron, 2010). When examined within the context of higher education learning, the doctoral student experience is one-of-a-kind. Successful completion of courses, attendance at colloquia, conducting research, and writing and defending a dissertation have all been recognized as significant milestones in doctorate education (Gardner, 2008; Holley, 2010; Weidman et al., 2001). The recognized definition of persistence in higher education simply refers to continued enrollment at an institution. Baness (2011) contends that the ambiguous explanation for persistence for graduate students makes it difficult to measure student persistence.

Doctoral Socialization

A number of studies have shown that a student's academic and social integration into doctorate programs are required conditions for persistence (Bensimon, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). These studies suggest that the lack of integration into the program's culture reduces the likelihood of graduation. Researchers contend that students who participate in academic and social activities within their degree programs tend to persist more than those who do not (Bensimon, 2007; Tinto, 1987). The socialization process in graduate education is a common framework used to understand the doctoral student experience.

Socialization is how the student learns to adopt the norms, values, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to integrate into the doctoral program (Gardner, 2010; Weidman et al., 2001). This process is profoundly rooted in the foundations and shared history of universities and colleges

(Altbach, 1991). This process revolves around White male norms where minority graduate students must frequently question socialization dynamics in graduate academic programs to establish their identities as scholars (Bennett & Okinaka, 1984; Pouncil, 2009).

Doctoral students' socialization differs from other graduate and undergraduate students. Weidman et al. (2001) stated that the graduate students' socialization process occurs in four developmental stages: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. The anticipatory stage occurs as students enter a graduate program and are introduced to the program's roles, procedures, and expectations. At this stage, the student is aware of the academic expectations and behaviors. In the formal stage, the student is formally advised on participating in the program. At this point, the student has taken on normative expectations and dedicated themselves to the learning community. During the informal stage, the student discovers the informal role requirements. Students acquire behavioral cues, observe appropriate actions, and interact with their peers and professors to become immersed in the new culture. Finally, in the personal stage of the socialization process, the student becomes interconnected, interdependent, and fully integrated into the graduate program (Weidman et al., 2001).

Doctoral students of color are marginalized during the doctoral socialization process. African American students have distinct socialization experiences influencing how they navigate the education pathway (McGaskey, 2015; Nettles, 1990; Palmer et al., 2014). African American students report inequitable experiences during the doctoral socialization process (Felder, 2014). For African American doctoral students at HWIs, the conventional standards and rituals in the socialization phase of graduate education can be problematic because they are incompatible with their ethnic identification, cultural background, and research interests (Blockett et al., 2016). The same researchers claim that the culture of academic programs, departments, and institutions is

often not aligned with African American students' racial and cultural backgrounds. More recent literature on the academic socialization of minoritized students contends that traditional socialization models fall short of explaining the complexity and holistic nature of the graduate student experience, especially as it relates to the unique experiences of students of color on college campuses (Gardner, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012; Musesus, 2014). To understand African American doctoral students' experiences, educators must develop an awareness of the role race has on their experiences inside and outside the classroom. Educators who understand the institutional factors and personal characteristics that promote perseverance are better prepared to address educational challenges.

Factors Influencing Persistence for African American Doctoral Students

Non-Cognitive Factors

Kyllonen et al. (2011) explored the potential for non-cognitive factors to predict time-to-degree and persistence in graduate education. The researchers concluded that while certain aspects of graduate student success are due to cognitive variables, non-cognitive factors are also responsible for graduate student success. A growing body of research has cited the positive impact non-cognitive factors have on academic persistence. Many studies suggest non-cognitive factors are just as, and in some cases, more important than cognitive skills, such as the ability to perform mental processes involving reasoning, abstract thinking, problem-solving, and planning (Adebayo, 2008; Farrington et al., 2012; Sedlacek, 2004). Most past research on student transition through the educational pathway has focused on cognitive indicators of academic success, but interest in evaluating the influence non-cognitive factors have on academic success and persistence has recently emerged (Garcia, 2016; Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016).

Researchers have not reached a consensus on which non-cognitive factors having the most substantial impact on educational attainment, leading to the slow adoption of using the constructs as indicators for college success. Researchers broadly defined non-cognitive factors as personality traits, thought patterns, feelings, and behavior (Borghans et al., 2008). Recent studies narrowly define non-cognitive factors as social awareness, resilience, self-confidence, self-management, and motivation (Petway et al., 2016). Other studies described non-cognitive constructs as persistence, academic confidence, teamwork, organizational skills, creativity, and communication skills (Garcia, 2016). Others categorized non-cognitive factors as 21st-century skills (e.g., Laanan, 2001), social-emotional learning skills (e.g., Cohen, 2001), soft skills (e.g., Petway II et al., 2016), big five personality traits (e.g., Sedlacek, 2017) and emotional intelligence (e.g., Goleman, 2006). A better understanding of non-cognitive factors can provide a deeper understanding of the broad array of student attributes supporting college persistence (Garcia, 2016; Nelson et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2007).

Many researchers have found that non-cognitive factors predict success for African Americans at HWIs (Hood, 1992; Kyllonen et al., 2011; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Terence J. Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989). Tracey & Sedlacek (1976, 1984) developed an instrument for measuring eight non-cognitive factors relevant to African American students' academic achievement and persistence at HWIs called the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire-Revised (NCQ-R), a widely used non-cognitive assessment tool used in research and practice. The NCQ-R measures eight non-cognitive factors that predict persistence in college for minority students. The eight non-cognitive dimensions are positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, successfully negotiating the system (racism), preference for long-range goals, availability of

strong support person, leadership experience, community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field.

The NCQ-R has been widely used in several studies (Adebayo, 2008; Hood, 1992; Nasim et al., 2005) for measuring non-cognitive attributes in non-traditional students. Other investigations suggested that the study incorrectly concluded that NCQ is a valid predictor of GPA and college persistence (Arbona & Novy, 1990; Thomas et al., 2007). The researchers evaluated results from 42 students using the NCQ to measure college performance. They concluded the NCQ scores were largely unrelated to college performance measured by GPA, college persistence, and credits earned. They concluded colleges and universities should not use the NCQ for admissions decisions. Other studies have established similar inventories to assess non-cognitive predictors of student persistence. Despite some criticism from a few researchers, the NCQ-R is a unique measurement tool proven to predict college success for minority students, particularly African American students (Le et al., 2005; Oswald et al., 2004).

Previous studies on non-cognitive factors' impact on African American students' persistence almost exclusively focused on high school and undergraduate students. Non-cognitive assessment tools such as the NCQ-R were designed to assess undergraduate college students. Few studies focus on how non-cognitive factors influence doctoral student persistence (Levister, 2001; Nickelberry, 2012). Recent research suggests there are opportunities to validate which specific non-cognitive variables are predictive of persistence in graduate education, determine how institutions can encourage the development of non-cognitive skills in newly admitted students, and how these constructs can support minority student's persistence at HWIs (Kyllonen et al., 2011; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008). While non-cognitive factors are correlated with academic success and persistence in this demographic, institutional factors such as campus

environment and faculty support also contribute to the persistence of college students (K. A. Griffin & Muniz, 2015; Nelson et al., 2016). This study incorporated the eight non-cognitive factors identified in the NCQ-R in the interview protocol to understand first-generation African American doctoral students' perspectives on what factors contribute to their persistence. These factors are positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, successfully negotiating the system (racism), preference for long-term goals, availability of strong support person, leadership experience, community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field. Table 1 describes each non-cognitive dimension.

Institutional Factors

For African American students at HWIs, academic achievement partly depends on their ability to persist in an atmosphere that views them based on negative racial stereotypes. Research on the impact race-related incidents have on students' perception of campus climate has illuminated the disparities in student experiences, and treatment on college campuses continues to exist on the grounds of race and ethnicity (Ancis et al., 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Vanwright, 2017). Campus climate is characterized by attitudes, actions, and expectations of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning individual needs, skills, and abilities (Chun & Evans, 2016). Research indicates personal bias and prejudice in higher education settings occur in interactions between students, faculty, and administrators and are carried out through everyday interactions that negatively impact students.

A survey of 146 undergraduate students (73 African American and 73 White) at a large HWI found nearly half of the African American students reported mistreatment based on race. In contrast, White students reported virtually no racism and low awareness of their African American peers' mistreatment (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Continuing research shows

Table 1: Represents Each Non-Cognitive Dimensions

Non-Cognitive Factor	Definition
Positive self-Concept	Demonstrates confidence, strength of character, determination, and independence. Demonstrates the intrinsic motivation needed to succeed.
Realistic self-appraisal	Recognizes and accepts any strengths and deficiencies, especially academic, and works hard at self-development; recognizes the need to broaden their individuality.
Successfully handling the system (racism)	Exhibits a realistic view of the system based on personal experience of racism; committed to improving the existing system; takes an assertive approach to dealing with existing wrongs, but is not hostile to society and is not a “cop-out”; able to handle racist systems.
Preference for long-term goals	Able to respond to deferred gratification; plans and sets goals.
Availability of strong support person	Seeks and takes advantage of a strong support network or has someone to turn to in a crisis or for encouragement.
Leadership experience	Demonstrates strong leadership in and outside of college. Has shown the ability to organize and influence others.
Community involvement	Participates and is involved inside and outside of school. Have identified ways for communities in and out outside of the education system to assist with academic success.
Knowledge acquired in a field	Ability to use resourcefulness and creativity and other less traditional methods to navigate graduate education and compensate for the inadequate socialization of students of color.

African American students had more negative experiences on campus than their non-African American peers (Ancis et al., 2000; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Sedlacek, 2005). African American students are reportedly more prone than their peers to face stigmatizing experiences — racial discrimination, racial stereotype, or lowered faculty expectations (Burger, 2018; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Nickelberry, 2012). These studies contended that negative attitudes of faculty and colleagues hinder progress in academia for students of color. African American students are

more likely to experience racist assumptions about their academic abilities and experience difficulty interacting meaningfully with faculty members. These studies conclude that negative stereotypes often lead to burnout and decreased academic effectiveness.

Racial inequalities faced by minority students may be improved by increasing racial diversity on campus among faculty, students, and practitioners (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003) and by developing institutional processes that regularly monitor campus climate and experiences of harassment and discrimination (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), and establishing an institutional commitment to understanding the experiences of African American collegians (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Studies indicate many college campus environments struggle to build an inclusive student culture, resulting in discrimination, racism, and bias in learning communities (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Rankin & Reason, 2005). These studies recommended that universities involve students in efforts to improve students' experiences and to create welcoming and inclusive environments.

Research suggests campus climate is more closely related to persistence rates for African American students than their actual ability (Ford & Harris, 1995; Ingram, 2007). With this in mind, literature has explored how campus racial climate has affected the experiences of African American students at HWIs (Davis, 2012; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000). The researchers concluded a comprehensive examination of campus racial climate is essential to explore African American students' access and persistence in postsecondary education. While doctoral students report fewer racial biases in pursuing a doctoral degree than undergraduate and master's degree students, research on African American doctoral students shows that many deep-seated discriminatory acts occur, often overtly (Barker, 2016; Nickelberry, 2012; Pouncil, 2009). African American students frequently encounter discriminatory acts involving microaggressions

(Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Microaggressions are subtle and often unconscious racist acts and insults directed toward marginalized groups such as racial or ethnic minorities (Solorzano et al., 2000). Racial microaggressions may be considered minor and insignificant by the person committing the act, but these transgressions have a lasting impact on the receiving individual. According to Ingram (2013), racial microaggressions are an unfortunate part of African American students' academic experiences at HWIs. These racial microaggressions negatively impact students' emotional and physiological well-being. Many African American doctoral students combat alienation by cultivating support networks. These networks include student organizations, peer mentoring programs, and faculty members (Barker, 2011; Ingram, 2007; Levister, 2001). Graduate students must establish professional networks in their field of study. Faculty mentors help expand students' networks beyond the university by sharing their professional networks of industry professionals and faculty members at various universities (Thomas et al., 2007). These studies report that support networks are essential to African American students' social and academic integration and professional development.

Historically, colleges have struggled to attract and retain faculty of color. The absence of diversity among faculty members in HWIs is an obstacle to creating welcoming learning communities that feature diverse voices, expertise, and experience. Several studies have emphasized the critical role faculty members and student support staff have on the success of students of color (Bain et al., 2011; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Ingram, 2007). These studies suggested universities should recruit a diverse pool of faculty who share the lived experiences of students of color to help build environments where students feel respected and valued. Faculty engagement and commitment to increasing diversity and

improving campus climate are essential because faculty hiring and graduate student recruitment are under faculty purview (K. A. Griffin & Muniz, 2015).

Faculty encouragement and mentoring are essential to the progress of all students. These relationships are significant for ethnic minorities, who frequently lack access to the informal networks and information needed to excel in the academic and professional settings where they are under-represented (Barker, 2011; Levister, 2001; Thomas et al., 2007). Doctoral support from faculty includes counseling, motivation, empathy, and role modeling (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). There are challenges associated with minority graduate students acquiring faculty mentorship. Thomas et al. (2007) concluded that minority students were more dissatisfied with their relationship with their faculty advisors than White students. The students were less likely to find a faculty member in their department who provided adequate support. They sought alternate means of encouragement to complete their degrees by forming mentoring relationships with faculty outside their home departments and, at times, outside their universities. Barriers to quality faculty mentoring for minority students include faculty's unwillingness and under-preparedness to mentor students from diverse backgrounds (Barker, 2016; Felder, 2014; K. A. Griffin & Muniz, 2015; Nickelberry, 2012). These studies concluded that faculty members are not evaluated for their abilities to offer quality mentoring. Given the low number of minority faculty members, minority students are likely to be mentored by faculty members from different racial and cultural backgrounds, different from themselves, or not receive faculty mentorship.

As mentioned earlier in the review, diverse faculty can help improve the experiences of minority student populations. African American doctoral students expressed the importance of having mentorship from Black faculty members (Barker, 2011). This notion is supported by findings from a qualitative study of 10 African American graduate students' pedagogical

interactions with African American faculty at HWIs (Tuitt, 2012). The researcher compared the students' expectations for African American faculty to how the faculty met those expectations. Students expected to have meaningful interactions with the African American faculty because they saw them as members of the same ethnicity. Participants revealed that African American faculty (a) held them in high regard, (b) held them to higher standards, and (c) related to them in racially based ways. African American doctorate students may benefit from engaging with ethnic minority faculty, staff, or other administrators because they will better understand how to navigate the doctoral process from an ethnic minority perspective (Barker, 2016).

African American students report establishing their own social and cultural networks, given their exclusion from the broader university community (Barker, 2016; Felder, 2014). The greater the student's involvement in campus academic and social activities, the greater the production of knowledge and skills, and the more likely they will obtain their degree (Pouncil, 2009). Students who feel a sense of belonging to their peers, faculty, and degree programs persist more often than students who feel lonely and disconnected during their graduate studies (Bain et al., 2011). A positive racial campus environment that encourages ongoing cross-racial interactions between students and faculty and a diverse student population enhances educational experiences for all students (Bain et al., 2011; Rankin & Reason, 2005). The four persistence factors: Academic and Social Integration, Motivation and Coping Skills, Campus Climate & Racial Inequality, and Institutional Support emerged from the review of literature about the educational experiences of African American scholars and how their inquiring experiences influenced persistence. Table 2 depicts a synthesis of the most prevalent themes.

Table 2: Represents the Four Themes and Corresponding Literature

Theme	Data Source	Theme Synthesis
Academic and Social Integration	Bennet & Okinank, 1990; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007 Pouncil, 2009; Bensimon, 2007;	Integration into the program's cultural influences college persistence; marginalization of doctoral students of color during the socialization process.
Motivation and Coping Skills	Adebayo, 2008; Farrington et al., 2012; Garcia, 2016; Griffin & Muniz, 2015; Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016; Kyllonen et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2016; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Petway et al., 2016; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008	Non-cognitive factors on academic persistence positively affect college persistence; non-cognitive variables are predictive of success for African Americans at HWIs; non-cognitive factors are not clearly defined.
Campus Climate & Racial Inequality	Ancis et al., 2000; Barker, 2016; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Ford & Harris, 1995; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Sedlacek, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2000; Vanwright, 2017	African American students experience negative racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and discrimination; negative attitudes of faculty and colleagues hinder progress in academia for students of color
Institutional Support	Bain et al., 2011; Ingram, 2007; Griffin & Muniz, 2015; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Thomas et al., 2007; Tuitt, 2012	Considers institutional, department, and faculty support; doctoral support from faculty includes counseling, motivation, empathy, and role modeling.

Conceptual Framework

To guide this study, the researcher employed the conceptual framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) to understand the factors and conditions that influence first-generation doctoral student persistence in their doctoral programs.

Critical Race Theory

CRT is a framework for critically examining the impact of race and discriminatory actions on the lives of people of color that combines study from the domains of law and social sciences. Initiated by legal professionals in the 1970s, CRT is now widely used to investigate

how race, as a social construct, has been used to limit opportunities for individuals through institutionalized discriminatory practices (Caldwell & Crenshaw, 1996; Zamudio et al., 2011). Gloria Ladson-Billings is largely credited with introducing CRT into the realm of educational research and practice. CRT opposes the dominant ideology that promotes deficit theorizing prevalent in educational administration and policies. It serves to bring marginalized students' perspectives to the forefront of public discourse and policy (Anumba, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT aims to challenge conventional power structures and validate people of color's experiences and knowledge in society (Barker, 2016; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Harper et al., 2009).

The CRT framework has been used to investigate how students of color in university settings are impacted by educational policies that perpetuate racial inequity (Iverson, 2007). The framework provides a method for understanding the dynamics of race in doctoral education when examining the experiences of African American Doctoral students. In a study on the experiences of Latina/o and African American Doctorate students, Gildersleeve et al. (2011) utilized CRT to analyze the social practices of preparing students of color to earn doctorate degrees. The authors gathered data on the everyday experiences of twenty-two students who identify as African American or Latina/o. The findings revealed that for doctoral students of color, racial microaggression is a prominent factor in their ability to make meaningful connections with their peers and professors, their department, and their institution. In a study on Black African American Male success in doctoral education at HWIs, Ingram, 2013 found CRT as an appropriate method for understanding the experiences of African American doctorate students. The author collected data from 18 African American male participants attending HWIs and found that racial microaggressions and stereotypes influenced on-campus experiences in and out of the classroom. The participants in the study described encounters with racism while also

dealing with feelings of alienation, isolation, and self-doubt. Incidents of racism contributed to the student's perceptions of a hostile institutional climate. The author described an account from a student who experienced racial microaggression in his classroom:

This professor has been very disrespectful to me in front of everybody in the class. I'm the only African American student in the class. So I noticed early on that for some reason she called on me a lot, A lot more than she called on the other students. She was asking people in the class something and when other people said they don't know, she moved on to the next person. That was not the case for me, when I said I don't know, her comment was "Didn't you do the readings?" The way she said it and the way she looked was very disrespectful. Why is it that everyone else she called on didn't know, it was not suspected that they didn't do the readings. Why would she ask me that? I got the feeling that she thought I was free riding in the class or I didn't belong there (p.13).

To illuminate and challenge dominant ideologies, CRT has been utilized to allow those who are marginalized in education to offer counter-narratives based on their lived experiences. Several scholars have used the concepts of counter-narratives and experiential knowledge, which are central tenets of CRT, to better understand the experiences of African American doctoral students (Barker, 2016; Cintron, 2010; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Pérez Huber, 2010). In a study about the experiences of first-generation African American Doctoral students at HWIs, Wallace and Ford (2011) used experiential knowledge and counter-narratives to understand students' experiences and identify ways institutions could better serve them. The study found the participants experienced racism and isolation at HWIs. The authors concluded that students felt: (1) that they did not belong, (2) invisible on campus based on both their African American and first-generation identities, (3) under-supported by the institution as it relates to their first-generation identity, and (4) that self-made communities played a more significant role in their persistence than the institution. The premise of CRT in education is the notion that racial inequality influences students' experiences. For the purposes of this study, the following vital tenets of CRT provided both the lens for inquiry and the guide for methodological design:

- Racism is a central, salient, and practically permanent aspect of American culture, but individuals who subscribe to meritocracy and/or colorblind ideology find it difficult to acknowledge it.
- The experiential knowledge of people of color (e.g., storytelling, narratives, oral histories) is critical for exposing, analyzing, and opposing dominant, and sometimes deficit-laden, narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
- Marginalized identities should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Literature describes this concept as “intersectionality,” describing the intersecting nature of multiple forms of oppression and privileges. (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Wallace & Ford, 2021)

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

ADAF offers the National Black Male College Achievement Study (NBMCAS) as a blueprint for adopting an anti-deficit achievement framework when evaluating research on students of color in the education pathway. The researcher used data from 219 high achieving African American male undergraduate students at forty-two colleges and universities with grade point averages above 3.0, exhibited leadership characteristics and earned merit-based recognitions. The framework focuses on three pipeline points (pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success) and nine researchable dimensions of achievement (familial factors, K–12 school forces, out-of-school college preparatory experiences, classroom interactions, out-of-class engagement, experiential and external opportunities, industry careers, graduate school enrollment, and research careers). Harper based the anti-deficit achievement framework on theories from various disciplines, including education, sociology, and psychology. Table 3 illustrates the ADAF.

The framework focused on the familial support, institutional support and college preparation resources that helped African American male achievers overcome educational challenges instead of relying on existing literature that focuses on students’ deficits. The

Table 3: Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Pipeline Points	Researchable Dimensions of Achievement
Pre-College Socialization And Readiness	Familial Factors K-12 School Forces Out-of-school College Prep Resources Inside-Of-Class Experiences Outside-Of-Class Experiences Enriching Educational Experiences Graduate School Enrollment Or Career Readiness
College Achievement	
Post-College Success	

approach provides guidance on reframing deficit-oriented questions to anti-deficit questions by understanding how achievers from these backgrounds manage to overcome challenges instead of why students fail. The author encourages researchers to undergo strength-based inquiries to understand how students of color persist and successfully navigate higher education. Although the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework originated from research on African American male undergraduate students in STEM, Harper (2012) states that anti-deficit research is needed to understand how students of color navigate their way to and through higher education (Pérez et al., 2017). Emerging literature suggests the anti-deficit achievement model can be applied to other student populations (Cooper et al., 2016; Cooper & Hawkins, 2016). Other researchers also examined the characteristics and factors contributing to academic success and persistence for African American students and agree there should be more academic discourse about African American students' educational success (Brooks et al., 2014; Manthei, 2016). The methodological approach for the proposed study will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of first-generation African American doctorate students. The chapter will include the research questions and sub-questions, an overview of the phenomenological study research design, and an explanation of the process for recruiting and selecting participants. This study aimed to shed light on the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate. Specifically, it examined students' perspectives on how they overcame challenges, if applicable, and the role that non-cognitive factors and institutional factors had on their persistence. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the life experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students before entering their doctoral program?
 - a. What barriers, if any, first-generation African American doctoral students faced throughout their life from high school to the doctoral program? How did they overcome these barriers?
2. What are the life experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students while pursuing their doctorate?
 - a. From the perspective of the students, what role do non-cognitive factors, if any, play in their ability to persist in pursuing a doctoral degree?
 - b. From the perspective of the students, what institutional factors (i.e., campus climate, faculty support, financial support), if any, support or hinder first-generation African American doctoral students' persistence in graduate education?

Research Design

For this study, the researcher used phenomenological methodology because it allowed him to illuminate rich descriptions and personal meanings of lived experiences related to first-generation African American doctoral students. Rudestam & Newton (2014) define phenomenological research as a study that focuses on the individual's experiences and how they are expressed in language as authentic as possible to their experience. This method allows individuals to share their experiences about what helps and hinders their persistence. In

phenomenological research, researchers use interviews or extended conversations as the source of their data. Data is often acquired through in-depth, lengthy individual interviews that are semi-structured or unstructured, whereby the participant conducts most of the talking while the researcher listens (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Mertler, 2021). A qualitative design method was chosen to allow the voices of individuals who are frequently marginalized to be heard. With this in mind, the researcher employed a phenomenological interview study design to examine educational experiences from the participants' viewpoints and explain the world experienced by them.

The researcher conducted two interviews with each participant and viewed the contents of the interview transcripts through a critical race lens, allowing the interpretations to begin with fundamental CRT principles: racism is a central aspect of American culture, and the experiential knowledge of individuals from diverse backgrounds is critical for eradicating inequality, and marginalized identities should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. In addition, using Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework as a guiding lens for this research helped facilitate a strength-based inquiry in which participants were asked to reflect on how they effectively navigated higher education. The study's questions are designed to capture the nature of the phenomena and the context that influences the experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Institutional Context

The researcher first recruited participants to interview at the University of California, San Diego (UC San Diego), a public research institution in the University of California system where the researcher worked at the time of the study. The first recruitment cycle yielded participants primarily pursuing Ph.D.s in STEM fields. To diversify the pool of participants in the study, the researcher utilized snowball sampling to recruit additional participants outside of UC San Diego.

The researcher interviewed students majoring in numerous fields, attending private and public institutions, and pursuing both P.hDs and E.dDs. See Table 4 for a list of universities represented in the Study.

Table 4: List of Universities Represented in the Study

University	University Public/ Private	Geographic Region
University of Michigan	Public	Midwest
University of California, San Diego	Public	West
Walden University	Private	Midwest
Northcentral University	Private	West
University of Southern California	Private	West
Howard University	Private	Middle Atlantic
San Diego State University	Public	West

Participant Selection

For the purposes of this study, first-generation status is defined as a student whose parents have only a high school education and no college experience. This study focused on first-generation African American doctoral students because of their unique experiences traversing the educational pathway and their proven ability to reach the pinnacle of higher education despite racial discrimination in academia. The researcher recruited students via calls and emails to academic departments, the Student Success Coaching Program, the Black Resource Centers, and other entities that support African American students at UC San Diego. Subsequently, the researcher used the snowball sampling method to recruit additional students at other universities. In addition to snowball sampling, the researcher used criterion sampling for the selection of the participants as follows: (a) identify as first-generation in their family to attend college, (b)

identify as being African American, (c) enrollment in a doctorate program at a 4-year university in the United States. Participants in their third and fourth year or within the dissertation phase of the program, respectively—were selected based on the aforementioned screening criteria to participate in the research study. The researcher focused on third and fourth-year students because they demonstrated continued persistence in their doctoral programs. The selection process made no distinctions based on participant age, program of study, or type of Ph.D. degree.

Eleven African American first-generation doctoral students: four male, seven female, six pursuing Ph.D.s, and five pursuing Ed.D.s, participated in this study. Expanding the study to include participants from multiple sites allowed the researcher to recruit a diverse pool of first-generation African American doctoral students. Participants' ages at the time of interviews ranged from 26 to 44. According to phenomenological research best practices, a sample size of 5 to 25 people is ideal (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The decision to select the lower end of the suggested range allowed the researcher to investigate the participant's experiences in depth by modifying interview questions to suit the participant's specific experiences. In addition, the smaller sample size allowed the researcher to conduct two interviews with each participant. The participants were compensated with a \$20 gift card for each interview. This amount is above the City of San Diego's hourly minimum wage, which will be \$15 per hour beginning January 1, 2022 (*The City of San Diego*, 2021).

Data Collection

The role of making sense of experience is emphasized in a phenomenological approach to interviewing (Seidman, 2006). The primary data sources for this phenomenological study were collected through one-on-one semi-structured and unstructured interviews. All interviews were conducted using Zoom, a cloud-based video communications program that allows users to

collaborate via audio and video conferencing (Archibald et al., 2019; Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2016). Participants were given instructions on how to obtain and download the program. Key advantages of using Zoom video conferencing include (a) convenience of cost-effectiveness of online communications methods compared to in-person interviews, (b) safe alternative to face-to-face meetings amid the COVID-19 pandemic, (c) a secure method of storing video and audio recording that provides real-time encryption of data. Before each interview, participants were asked to reaffirm their agreement to audio and video recording verbally.

Data collection from participant interviews occurred over five months, from March 2022 to May 2022, aligning with the Spring 2022 quarter. The study involved sixty to ninety-minute interviews via Zoom with eleven doctoral students at various four-year institutions who identify as African American and first-generation college students to highlight the participants' lived experiences. Participants were given the opportunity to offer their perspectives on their educational experiences. In qualitative research, data may appear in the form of interview transcripts, observational notes, journal entries, transcriptions of audio-or videotapes, or as existing documents, records, or reports (Mertler, 2021). By collecting data from participant stories, the researcher could construct narratives about their experiences and investigate their meanings. All participant data were recorded, transcribed into text, and kept on a personal laptop that was password secured. In accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, all data received from the participant were collected with the explicit permission of the participants.

The first phase of data collection included semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview method uses a blend of more and less structured questions. This approach enables the researcher to direct the interview with open-ended questions while still providing

participants with the opportunity to express themselves without undue influence from the interviewer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Individual semi-structured and unstructured interview approaches align with CRT's core tenets, which promote experiential knowledge and use counter-narratives to understand a phenomenon (Comeaux et al., 2020). These tenets were used as a guide in formulating the interview protocol and creating the research questions (Appendix F). Before the study, two of the researchers' peers pilot-tested the interview protocol to ensure that the questions elicited responses to the research questions. Furthermore, the ADAF and the NCQ-R utilized by Sedlacek (2004) informed the creation of the interview questions. The NCQ-R survey questions were transformed into open-ended interview questions.

The second and final phase of the data collection involved unstructured interviews. All transcripts from the initial interview were available for participants to review and make corrections to and for them to share new experiences not previously highlighted. The second interview took place soon after the first interview was completed, and the field notes from the first interview were transcribed. The goal of the second interview was for the researcher to reconnect with the participant and gather the richest and most in-depth information on the participant's experiences during their educational journey.

The researcher kept a reflective journal and field notes to write his thoughts or "asides" (Emerson et al., 2017, p. 47) during and after each interview. Emerson et al. (2011) describe asides are short, reflective pieces of analytical writing that clarify, explain, analyze, or raise issues about a single event or process recorded in a fieldnote. The researcher wrote "asides" in brackets while taking notes during interviews and when transcribing interviews. This method

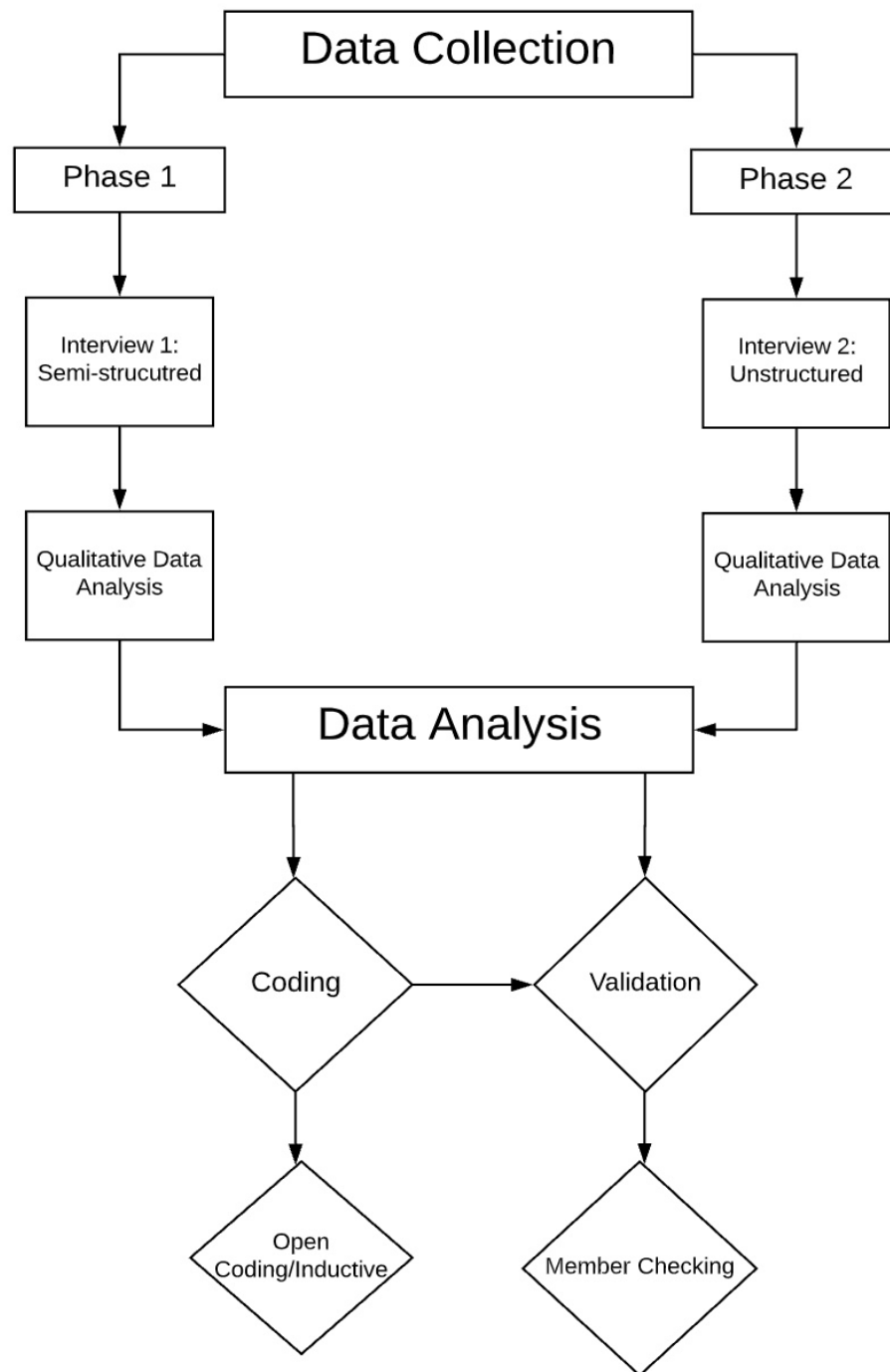


Figure 2: Represents the Methodology and Analysis Used in this Study

enabled the researcher to be more conscious of his thoughts on the information offered by the participants. Figure 2 illustrates the methodology and analysis used in this study.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), qualitative data analysis aims to make meaning out of data by identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns and themes in textual data and determining how these patterns and themes help answer the research questions at hand. The data in this study were analyzed and interpreted using an inductive data analysis approach. This process involves closely examining information from interviews, observations, and documents to combine the data sources into larger themes to address the research questions posed in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviews were transcribed manually using a knowledge management software called Roam Research to organize and analyze the data from the interviews.

The researcher developed an initial coding process to analyze the emerging themes regarding persistence factors for first-generation African American doctorate students. This process involved manually tagging each interview transcript with key phrases or ‘meaning units’ that summarize the participants’ sentiments (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). First, the researcher conducted 22 interviews, two per participant, which yielded 90 preliminary meaning units. After this step, meaning units were reviewed, and trends were identified in participant interview data. During this step, the researcher revisited the research questions and the analytical memos he took during and after each interview. The researcher then noted the meaning units that answered the research questions and resonated during his initial analysis of the data—this resulted in the number of meaning units getting reduced from 90 to 46. Next, the researcher refined the naming of the 46 meaning units to make them descriptive. After this first round of coding, the researcher

conducted a second round of coding in which he used the meaning units to create themes and subthemes. The six themes were: (a) readiness for undergraduate education, (b) being a first-generation college student, (c) importance of college preparation programs, (d) feelings of alienation and Isolation, (e) supporters as information brokers and morale boosters, and (f) unmasking the hidden curriculum.

Issues of Validity, Reliability, Trustworthiness of Data

According to Creswell (2002), validity refers to determining whether the research truly measures what it was designed to measure, while reliability refers to determining whether the measures or observations employed in the study are dependable. Although the concepts are intricately linked, the author noted that they are mutually exclusive. Both validity and reliability are essential issues in qualitative research. As such, the researcher validated the information gathered using various methods to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings. Member checking, defined by Creswell and Poth (2016) as the approach of asking participants for their thoughts on the trustworthiness of the results and interpretations, served as a validity strategy to validate the study's findings. After each one-on-one semi-structured and unstructured interview session, interview transcripts were returned to participants. The researcher sent transcribed notes to participants and asked them to validate, verify, and assess the accuracy of the data.

The researcher documented and disclosed his personal biases and preferences during each phase of the research process to assure validity. The researcher documented his positionality during the dissertation proposal, data collection, data analysis, and dissertation writing stages. A positionality statement was included in the interview protocol (Appendix F), which included a description of the philosophical, personal, and theoretical beliefs and perspectives which may

influence how the researcher perceives the phenomenon being studied and how the research might be conducted. As mentioned earlier, this process involved the researcher keeping a reflective journal to document his feelings and reactions during the research process.

Positionality

As the researcher conducting this study, I am cognizant of my position as an African American male, a first-generation doctoral student who works as a practitioner in a post-secondary education setting. With this in mind, it is imperative to illustrate my awareness of my positionality's influence on how I perceive the phenomena being studied and how the research might be affected. Positionality is the idea that one's beliefs, worldview, and geographical position all influence how one perceives and understands the world (Holmes, 2020). Given my dual position as an insider and an outsider, my ethical obligation as a researcher is to consider my relationship with the subject matter at hand and the participants observed (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Probst and Berenson (2014) define this as reflexivity—awareness of the researcher's influence on the subject being investigated and the researcher's influence on the research process. According to the authors, positionality is informed by reflexivity. Reflexivity involves challenging one's taken-for-granted assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Peshkin (1988) notes the importance of a researcher being aware of the subjective self's role in research. This entails acknowledging that subjectivity is unavoidable and systematically recognizing subjectivity throughout the research process. Because I am a first-generation African American doctoral student, there is a chance that I will share cultural values, racialized experiences, educational experiences, and societal concerns with the participants. I have experienced many of the challenges described in literature about the educational experiences of African American students. My work as a student affairs administrator in higher education has

exposed me to students of color who experience the same difficulties I did during my educational journey. My connection to the research topic was one of the factors that influenced my decision to pursue this particular research topic; I am personally and professionally invested in it. I followed the lead established by Peshkin, who advised that researchers address concerns of subjectivity and reflexivity during the study process by conducting “subjective audits,”— which involves keeping a reflective journal to document feelings and reactions during the research process.

Summary

The research design for this study aimed to provide an understanding of the factors and conditions which support persistence for first-generation African American doctorate students. This phenomenological study gives voice to a student population that has been historically marginalized. Participants included 11 first-generation African American doctoral students enrolled at a four-year university. Data was collected via one-on-one semi-structured and unstructured interviews with each participant that lasted approximately one hour. Based on the data collected from the first phase of semi-structured interviews, unstructured follow-up interviews took place, allowing the researcher to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences. The research design sufficiently answered the research questions by constructing narratives about participants’ experiences.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The first three chapters provided a general overview of the study, a review of the current relevant literature, and a description of the study's methodology. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences that African American doctoral students had during the pursuit of their doctorate and to determine the factors that aided or hindered their ability to complete a doctorate. The chapter introduces the findings that emerged from the data collection conducted to understand the perspectives and experiences of 11 first-generation African American doctoral students. As previously stated, Critical Race Theory (CRT), in tandem with the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF), was the theoretical underpinnings utilized in this research study. The application of CRT as a theoretical lens adds historical context to the diverse experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students on college campuses. The ADAF model provides a framework for undertaking an anti-deficit inquiry into the

Table 5: Study Attributes in Relation to Conceptual Framework

Study Attribute	Critical Race Theory	Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework
Qualitative/phenomenology design	X	
Research Questions	X	X
Asset-based Interview Questions	X	X
Focus on asset-based literature	X	X
Counternarratives/participant voice	X	X

experiences of African American students. Table 5 details the attributes of the study design that align with the conceptual frameworks of the study.

This study seeks to explore the experiences of successful first-generation African American doctoral students during their educational journey towards degree completion and the factors that contribute to their success. The relationship of the themes and subthemes to the research questions is outlined in table 6.

Table 6: Summary of Research Questions and Related Themes/Sub-Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Q.1 What are the life experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students before entering their doctoral program?	
Readiness for undergraduate education	
Being a first-generation college student	
Importance of college preparation programs	
Q2. What are the life experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students while pursuing their doctorate?	
Feelings of alienation and Isolation	Impacts of lack of representation Raced-based experiences
Supporters as information brokers and morale boosters	Family support Moral support Faculty mentoring
Unmasking the hidden curriculum	Institutional support Acquiring tacit knowledge & finding solutions Remaining committed to a doctoral education

Profile of Participants

There were six participants pursuing Ph.Ds. and five pursuing Ed.Ds. The participants' ages ranged from 26 to 44 and attended multiple types of institutions. A total of 11 participants were interviewed for this study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Four of the students were male, and seven were female. At the time of data collection, all were in their third and fourth year or within the dissertation phase of their program. Participants in this study were past the halfway mark in their programs since that is a significant time to demonstrate persistence. Participants had a variety of majors that included public health, educational leadership, psychology, curriculum and teaching, philosophy, biological sciences, and marine biology. Regarding family socioeconomic status, four identified as middle class, two as lower middle class, four as middle class, and one as upper-middle class. All participants were African American; thus, the participant pool was racially homogeneous. Table 7 represents an overview of the demographics of the participants.

The literature suggests that an asset-based inquiry into the educational experiences of African American students, which incorporates and amplifies the voices of students, is required to obtain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of their experiences (Barker, 2016; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Harper et al., 2009). Both CRT and ADAF theoretical lenses place an emphasis on facilitating an asset-based inquiry that focuses on the factors that enhance the participants' educational experiences rather than concentrating solely on negative experiences (Cooper & Hawkins, 2016). CRT offers a framework for students of color to share their perspectives on the world and the experiences they have had (Harper et al., 2009). This study illuminated participants' voices by providing space for them to tell their stories, in their own

Table 7: Participants' Background

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	University Public/ Private	Ph.D/Ed.D	Program of Study
Adam	Male	26	Public	Ph.D.	Public Health
Alex	Male	28	Public	Ph.D.	Biological Science
Cheryl	Female	44	Private	Ph.D.	Psychology
Julie	Female	36	Private	Ed.D.	Curriculum and Teaching
Melanie	Female	26	Public	Ph.D.	Philosophy
Mia	Female	44	Public	Ed.D.	Educational Leadership
Mike	Male	33	Private	Ed.D.	Educational Leadership
Nick	Male	26	Private	Ph.D.	Psychology
Nicole	Female	33	Public	Ed.D.	Educational Leadership
Renee	Female	29	Public	Ph.D.	Marine Biology
Sandra	Female	32	Public	Ed.D.	Educational Leadership

words. The participants in this study were provided with a rare opportunity to speak candidly about their experiences during their educational journeys. All names are pseudonyms.

Alex

Alex is a 28-year-old student who attends a public university in southern California, majoring in biological science and studying mechanistic cell biology. He identifies as an African American gay male. He grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and stated that his high school was not the finest in the area and did not effectively prepare him for college STEM majors. He describes his family's present socioeconomic level as lower middle class, but he grew up in poverty. Alex described himself as a very curious child who attended a poor high school and is unsure if he would have attended college if not for his mother's support. As a result of his

inquisitive nature, his mother fondly dubbed him a brainiac. Alex asserts that his mother's encouragement and the fact that no one in his immediate family has gone to college was why he chose to attend college. Alex explained that transitioning from high school to the academy was difficult because he had no one to talk to about applying for college or completing a financial aid application. Alex originally went to college to become a medical doctor because he didn't realize that you could get a job in science without working in the medical field. He spent three years on the pre-medical track at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill before pursuing a Ph.D. during his senior year in college.

Adam

Adam hails from Washington, DC, and is currently a student at a public institution in Michigan, pursuing a degree in behavioral health and health education. He began college at 15 and finished his bachelor's degree at 19 before entering his master's program. He then enrolled in a Ph.D. program at 23, after two years working in the federal government. Adam spoke passionately about challenging the notion of building "resilient" Black communities. He stressed the importance of addressing the systemic factors that lead to communities needing to overcome certain challenges instead of focusing solely on the individual or community's ability to endure oppressive forces.

Cheryl

Cheryl is from Howard, Georgia, and attends a private online for-profit university where she is studying educational psychology. She identifies as a Black student and a mother. She indicated that she first wanted to pursue her doctorate in high school. She described her family's present socioeconomic level as lower middle class and noted that she grew up in a single-parent household. Her mother worked multiple jobs at a time to provide for her sibling. Cheryl spoke

vividly about how she overcame her lack of support in her doctorate program by demonstrating creativity and resourcefulness to find ways to meet her needs. She created supportive networks by building relationships with peers and online Black affinity groups.

Julie

Julie attends a private university in southern California. She is from West Palm Beach, Florida, and resides in Newark, New Jersey. Her mother is Haitian American. Julie identifies as African American and Haitian American. She is pursuing her doctorate of education in curriculum and teaching. She is currently enrolled in her second doctoral program at the time of this study. She left her former program due to difficulties she had due to the dismissal of her dissertation chair. Her previous institution did not adequately support her in the process of obtaining a new chair. To maintain the progress she had already made in her dissertation writing, Julie felt it was necessary to pursue her doctorate at another institution. She transferred her coursework to a doctoral completion pathway program. The objective of doctoral completion programs is to expedite doctorate completion.

Melanie

Melanie is a native of Charlotte, North Carolina, who attends a public university in southern California, majoring in philosophy. She identifies as Black and southern. Her parent's highest level of education is high school. Melanie's degree of self-awareness and confidence astounds the researcher, who is inspired by her ability to overcome the challenges associated with dealing with educators who perceive her learning disability as a shortcoming.

Mia

Mia works in student affairs at a public university in southern California. She grew up in San Diego, California, and she identifies as Black and a Christian. She attends a private

university in southern California, majoring in higher education leadership. She believes that her bachelor's and master's degrees were sufficient levels of education for her, but was led by God to pursue her doctorate. Mia expressed a deep commitment to challenging educational institutions to define 'institutional success' as 'student success' and shift the focus from making students ready for the institutions to making institutions ready to support all students, particularly those who are traditionally underrepresented on college campuses.

Mike

Mike was born in Ventura, California. He attends a private university in southern California, where he is getting his doctorate in educational leadership, emphasizing in educational psychology. He identifies as a husband, educator, brother, and Black man. His decision to obtain a doctoral degree was motivated by a desire to increase his authority inside the organization where he currently works. The possibility of enhancing his family's legacy by earning a doctorate motivates him. Mike expressed that he embodies his ancestors and they are his role models. He expressed that he wants to continue to challenge himself academically, professionally and personally so that he can be a role model for his family and community.

Nick

Nick is a native of Upper Marlboro, Maryland. He identifies as a homosexual Black male. He attends a private HBCU in Washington, D.C, where he studies psychology. He chose to pursue a doctorate because he wants to become a professor in psychology, and earning a Ph.D. is required. He is interested in conducting a study on the stereotyping and stigmatization of gay Black men of color. Nick spoke about the impact that his multiple interlocking identities has on his educational experiences and his desire to conduct research that will contribute to social change for gay Black men of color.

Nicole

Nicole attends a public research university in Southern California, where she is pursuing her doctorate in educational leadership with a K-12 emphasis and works in student affairs. She identifies as a Black woman, wife, mother, mentor, and leader. She is a California native who grew up in Long Beach. Nicole stated that obtaining her doctorate provides access to opportunities for career advancement that better positions her to advocate for the services, support, and resources that students require to be successful.

Renee

Renee was born in San Bernardino but spent her formative years in the inland empire. She self-identifies as a bi-racial Black woman. She attends a public university in southern California, majoring in Marine Biology. She described growing up in poverty and believing that college was out of reach. Renee shared a riveting story regarding the long-lasting impacts of dealing with academic trauma in higher education. She demonstrated a strong dedication to making a positive impact in her program and university through diversity and inclusion initiatives in order to create a positive educational environment for future Black students who want to study marine science.

Sandra

Sandra works for a large nonprofit integrated healthcare consortium, is an adjunct professor at a public university in Southern California, and owns her own leadership training consulting business. Her birthplace is Fremont, California, and she grew up in Santee, California. She is pursuing her doctorate in educational leadership from a public research university in Southern California. Sandra is an introspective scholar who seeks to shed light on the counter-stories of women of color. In addition to conducting research on the unique leadership qualities

that BIPOC women possess, Sandra has a consultant business which provides leadership transition and mentorship to women.

Acknowledgment of Intersecting Identities

As mentioned in chapter 2, literature on the persistence of first-generation students of color suggests that cultural and social capital play an important role in student success for minoritized students (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004). This notion does not account for the intersectionality components of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, and other distinct identities (Chun & Evans, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). The researchers noted that multiple aspects of an individual's identity work in tandem with each other and create unique educational experiences. For instance—Nick, the participant who attended the HBCU—described educational experiences that he attributed to his identity as a Black male and a homosexual doctoral student. He noted:

I think it's understood within the Black community that, sexual identity or sexual minorities are maybe not as elevated and kind of still oppressed. So when it comes to finding friends and finding support for my gayness, I had to search for different things, search for particular groups. [Groups] in which I can celebrate [my sexual identity]. I never felt completely comfortable fully embracing myself. I kind of feel like I had to suppress [my sexual identity] in public areas, in my community, on my campus. I [have] to suppress the gay part of me, and [I can] only fully embrace my blackness [as] the salient or more dominant [part of my identity].

The two participants who identified as gay had different experiences. While Nick felt he had to suppress his gay identity, Alex did not. When asked about the impact that his sexual orientation had on his experiences, Alex stated, "I don't really think I experienced anything related to my sexual orientation during undergrad or graduate school."

When asked, please describe to me identities that are meaningful to you; other participants described the intersecting identities of being a male or female, a parent, a person with a disability, or someone who subscribes to a particular religion. For example, Sandra and

Renee identified as bi-racial and described the dichotomy of being valued as Black by non-Black people while not feeling accepted by their Black peers. Sandra discussed the irony of being a biracial woman conducting research on how Black women lead differently and feeling uncomfortable discussing her research with her Black peers because she feels judged and ostracized for being bi-racial. She explained:

[Regarding finding a] sense of community amongst black scholars, I find myself to be in what feels like a precarious situation because, for people who don't know me, I think that they're making certain assumptions about who I am because I'm half black and half white and [because of my maiden name]. [What] further complicated things for me [is] I feel like I have to do a lot more explaining myself than I have ever had to do before which is really frustrating. There have been certain conversations that I've had pertaining to my research, because [I'm researching] how black women lead differently. It feels almost ironic to me that I want to produce something that will show the world how amazing Black women are as leaders when Black women don't even want to claim me as one of them.

Renee spoke about the duality between being opposed by society for being Black and the privileges of having light skin due to being biracial. She noted, "I think that some of my light skin privileges from being biracial have probably potentially helped me to [better fit in]."

Participants in this study possessed marginalized and privileged identities, which affected their educational experiences. Intersectionality is one of the tenets of CRT. The notion is essential to investigate because being an African American doctoral student differs from being both African American and a doctoral student. The concept of intersectionality helps explain the complexities of African American identity and the doctorate student status (Crenshaw; 1991).

Inspiration for Obtaining Doctorate

The main factors that inspired participants to pursue their doctorate degrees were family encouragement, faculty encouragement, career aspirations, and the desire to impact society positively. Melanie knew from an early age that she wanted to pursue her doctorate. She explained that she recently found a letter she wrote about her career aspirations in high school.

The letter expressed her desire to obtain a medical degree. In college, she later learned that she could pursue a Ph.D. in a field related to medicine without going into patient care. Similarly, Sandra's grandmother planted the seed of her getting a doctorate at age 12. She explained:

Honestly, I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't thinking about getting a doctorate. My mom never said, if you go to college, it was always when you go to college. College never seemed optional, and so I think getting advanced degrees was my version of putting some steak into my educational choice and journeys. I've always loved learning, and so even before I really knew what it meant to be in a doctorate program, I knew that I wanted to get to that level of education because people that have their doctorate degrees in my mind were super smart and people who really love to learn and because I felt like I identified with that I've always wanted to have a doctorate degree.

Cheryl also expressed the desire to earn her doctorate at an early age. She explained, "even in high school, I have always wanted to get my doctorate." She aspired to become a medical doctor but later decided to pursue a degree in psychology instead. Cheryl, Sandra, and Melanie aspired to obtain a doctorate at a young age—before they knew what was required to earn a doctorate. As the case for most participants in this study, their families instill the importance of education at an early age. Renee and Mia were the two participants in the study who did not aspire to earn their doctoral degrees at an early age. Renee grew up in poverty and didn't learn about the prospect of graduate education until she was inspired by a professor who encouraged pursuing a Ph.D.. and a career in science. Mia expressed that God led her to pursue her doctorate to fulfill a greater purpose.

Four of the 11 students in this study indicated that they are pursuing their doctorate degrees in order to enhance their careers. Mike's decision to obtain a doctoral degree was motivated by a desire to increase his authority inside the organization where he currently works. Nick is pursuing a doctorate because he wants to become a professor in psychology, and earning a Ph.D. is required. Similarly, Adam stated that the desire to do his research and the fact that the profession he is interested in requires a Ph.D. motivated him to pursue his degree. Nicole decided

to get her doctorate because she felt that having a Ph.D. would garner respect from her colleagues and peers. Julie's passion for learning and her aspiration to work with children who have autism are the driving forces behind her decision to pursue a doctorate. Her long-term goal is to work as a researcher and scholar in special education. All participants cited being the first in their family to earn a doctorate as a significant motivation. The scholars expressed excitement regarding the prospect of enhancing their family's legacy by earning a doctorate. They noted the importance that their degree has in their family. Mike stated, "this degree is not my own."

Emergent Themes

I constructed the interview questions in a manner to allow participants to reflect deeply on their lived experiences throughout their educational journey to and through doctoral education. The intent was to have participants reflect on the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate. A set of interview questions aligned with the first research question were clustered around participants' life experiences before they entered their doctoral program. These life experiences included first-generation African American doctoral students' experiences in high school and college. Another set of interview questions aligned with the second research question was clustered around participants' experiences during their doctoral program.

When sharing their life experiences before entering their doctoral program, many participants focused on overcoming challenges in the transition from high school to college. Three themes emerged: (1) readiness for post-secondary education, (2) being a first-generation college student, and (3) the importance of college preparation programs. I discuss these themes in detail in the next section. Further, three themes emerged around participants' life experiences during their doctoral program: (1) feelings of alienation and isolation, (2) supporters as

information brokers and morale boosters, and (3) unmasking the hidden curriculum addressed the second research question. In what follows, I first share the findings of participants' experiences from high school until they entered their doctoral program. I then share the findings of participants' experiences during their doctoral program.

Experiences Before Doctoral Education

The experiences offered by the participants in the following section give answers and insight into their educational experiences transitioning from K-12 to undergraduate education, as well as from undergraduate to graduate school. As an alternative approach to deficit perspectives regarding the experiences of African American scholars, this study employed an anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF) to understand how participants successfully navigated the educational system despite significant challenges. The researcher asked asset-based questions, which allowed participants to share about multiple factors (personal attributes, institutional factors, pre-college factors) that may have contributed to their ability to persist. Participants discussed the challenges they faced in their transitions, how they overcame them, and how being a first-generation college student influenced their experiences in college.

Readiness for Undergraduate Education

Nine out of the eleven participants indicated that their high schools did not provide adequate information about how to apply to college or support their aspirations to attend college. For example, Renee shared, "I don't recall any of the teachers reaching out to me and saying to me individually, are you applying for college." She further shared, "I'm actually very angry with my high school because I feel that they had the means to support me [but didn't]. Because there were other students in programs that taught them how to take the SAT." Mike noted that his high

school only encouraged college aspirations for those already planning to attend college. He explained:

Black students know about AP courses, but those courses were designed for students who would be successful without programming, but in terms of my development as a Black student or [about] the experiences that I had lived through at my high school, [my high school] did not prepare me at all for college.

Alex believed that his high school did not adequately prepare him for college. He further shared, “ [my] high school level wasn’t good. It [only taught] us to perform well on standardized tests rather than actually helping us develop proper educational values.”

Adam and Nicole were the two participants who felt adequately prepared to attend college. Adam graduated from high school at age 15, earned his bachelor’s degree at 19, and completed his master’s degree at 21. He received a scholarship that covered all expenses related to college. Nicole expressed, “I was involved in academic programs that help underprivileged students. That’s what was the seed planted in me about college because it was never talked about in my family.” Nicole further explained:

[Even as a first-generation student] I learned how to navigate campus and where to go for help. I was privileged because I was a presidential scholar. [I] not only [had] financial assistance, but also specific advisors [that] was my point of contact for everything.

Being a First-Generation College Student

Participants expressed challenges related to being the first person in their family to attend college. Alex stated, “There’s barriers that like sort of every step, but so being the first to attend college in my family was a barrier.” Melanie cited not understanding how college works as a barrier throughout her education journey. She feels this is due to her first-generation status because her parents could not help her navigate higher education. Melanie explained, “My family had no idea how financial aid worked and didn’t realize how getting a divorce ended up

looking like we gained a lot of money which completely changed my financial packet.” She further shared, “I almost got kicked out of college because we couldn’t afford for me to go to school. I had to take a \$25,000 loan for just one semester.”

When asked to describe their experiences as African American first-generation students, Alex stated, “A huge component [of being first-generation] is not having anyone to relate to. It can make you feel isolated, you can’t talk to your family really about the experiences you’re having because they have no clue about it.” Julie noted, “Friends, especially family don’t understand the stressors that I go through.” Nick stated, “[my family doesn’t have] knowledge about the experiences I had, so I feel restricted in what I could talk about with my family.” Mia explained:

I would describe myself as your typical average African American first-generation student, not necessarily having all of the tools or the resources or understanding of what it takes [to be successful] in higher education. How you navigate it. [I didn’t receive] a whole lot of supportive and encouraging advice [from family]. It just wasn’t there and not their fault, not my fault, not anybody’s fault, but there were just a lot of things that I had to figure out on my own. It took me a little bit longer to figure out, understand, and really grasp certain concepts of why certain things are important. Even just understanding graduate school. During [undergraduate studies], I don’t even know if I had a clear understanding of that, and what that meant.

Sandra stated that family support and educational expectations compensated for the lack of support and guidance in high school. She noted that although she felt academically prepared, she was left to figure out how to navigate the education system independently. She further explained:

We didn’t have [college preparation courses] at my high school so finding out how to navigate the system was a whole different situation. There’s one thing to be academically prepared, which I think that can happen in a myriad of ways, you can have family support and [educational] expectations. You can get tutoring if that’s something that you need but navigating the system is a completely different ballgame from academic preparedness.

Importance of College Preparation Programs

Participants were asked separate questions about the institutional factors that aided their persistence before entering doctoral education and during their doctorate programs. It was revealed that college preparation programs helped college preparedness at all levels of education. Participants discussed the importance of college preparation programs that prepare students to transition from high school to college, undergraduate education to graduate education, and undergraduate or graduate education to doctoral education. Nicole was the only scholar in the study who participated in a college preparation program in high school. As noted earlier in the chapter, Nicole participated in the presidential scholars program, which taught her skills to navigate the college environment, seek financial assistance and obtain mentorship. Melanie was the only participant who indicated participation in a graduate school recruitment program during undergraduate education. Melanie stated:

When it came to applying to graduate school, I had no idea what graduate school even meant, or what was required in an application. So I didn't even know the difference between a CV resume or a regular resume. When they say revise a writing sample, I thought they meant just check for spelling mistakes. I overcame that by going through a graduate school recruitment program for minority students, where they actually broke everything down [and explained] what you need to know for applying to graduate school, this is the kind of student that people are looking for.

Melanie continued to reflect on the importance of graduate preparation programs and noted that the graduate preparation program she participated in was specific to her major. She stated, “[The program] I did was [designed] to recruit students from underrepresented backgrounds in the more mainstream area of philosophy. [The program was grounded in] critical race and feminist theories.” Melanie acknowledged that she had access to educational opportunities that some other students don't have. In concluding about her experiences participating in the graduate school preparation program, Melanie stated, “I only have the access to higher education that I

have because all the right doors were open at the right time. But any one of those doors could have been closed.”

Alex discussed how he didn’t get selected for any of the Ph.D. programs he applied for on his first attempt because he didn’t start applying to programs until his senior year of college. He explained that doing a post-baccalaureate program after finishing his undergraduate degree prepared him for pursuing his doctorate. He stated, “I did a post-baccalaureate program that sort of developed my scientific skills. There was a lot of mentorship training and professional development.” Renee also expressed the importance of doctorate school recruitment preparation programs. She said, “[I participated in a] fellowship for Ph.D. students from historically marginalized communities that were supportive. I received emotional and academic support that I never got from my primary advisor.” 4 out of the 11 participants indicated their jobs working in student affairs at post-secondary institutions equipped them with the knowledge they needed to pursue their doctorate. These participants felt prepared for graduate school because they work jobs that prepare students for post-secondary education.

Experiences During Doctoral Education

Feelings of Alienation and Isolation

The information shared by participants in the next section details the impact of racism, negative stereotypes, and underrepresentation had on their educational experiences at all levels of education. Participants spoke about the effects of racially motivated discrimination on their sense of belonging.

Impacts of Lack of Representation

A prominent theme that emerged in 8 of 11 individual narratives was the experience of being one of, if not the only Black doctoral student in their cohort or the entire program. Many

participants described experiences of feeling like they had to be the representative of their entire race or culture. For example, Melanie, a student majoring in philosophy at a public university in southern California, stated:

I was the only Black graduate student in my department. During my first year, I was the first Black female student in 50 years. The only person who was there before me was Angela Davis, and she left with her masters, and so I think a big part of [my experience] is deep isolation.

Melanie continued by stating that she had never seen another Black person pursuing her desired profession until she met one outside her institution. Adam discussed how the lack of representation impacted his sense of belonging in his program. He stated:

I just didn't find Community. It's just a lack of Community and lack of representation. I'm not quite sure about the exact number, but I think I'm like the first Black guy they've had in a few years, and it's two of us, so they got two Black people in the cohort to make up for years of not having any Black men in the program. I think [there are only] about a handful of us at the whole university, and it's isolated honestly a major challenge. It is just isolating. I don't feel connected to this place. I go to school here, and that's it.

Renee mentioned the immense pressure of being perfect and leaving a good impression. She noted:

I feel like I have to be the best whenever I'm doing anything, and that doesn't necessarily mean being better than others. But I just know that I'm a representative for Black people [in my program] and it shouldn't have to be that way, but it honestly is because there are so few of us. It's like I feel like I have to make a really good impression all the time, and I can't get anything wrong, and it's just super stressful, and so I [feel] like I need to be perfect, on top of trying to just do the science and to learn these new techniques. [I constantly have to do] these mental gymnastics to make sure I'm navigating their space correctly in a way that they like.

In Alex's case, the lack of representation made him feel like he didn't belong in his program. He shared a similar sentiment regarding the impact of lack of representation. He stated:

[I feel] an intense feeling of imposter syndrome because I'm often, more times than not, the only Black individual in a room. When I go to conferences and look at the leadership in my field, none of them are people of color. None of them are Black. [Not even other] people of color are [represented] in my field, and so I'm often

always that only one and it just brings me a huge sense of imposter syndrome, like do I belong here.

Nick is the only person in the study who attends an HBCU. As a result, his experience of feeling a sense of belonging is dramatically different from almost all the other candidates—who all attend Historically White Institutions (HWI). When discussing his experiences at his institution, Nick said:

I definitely felt support. I felt safe. I felt at home. I think our culture [at my university] is obviously very much different [than at Historically White Institutions]. [They celebrate, recognize] and acknowledge black success and black excellence. So that's kind of why I feel like I didn't stand out, there kind of was this fit. [There is a lot of] education about African American history. I came out more proud of who I am. I guess I feel more and more proud of my blackness every day.

Raced-Based Experiences

CRT asserts that racism is a permanent aspect of American culture and is endemic to our institutions, notwithstanding the institution of higher learning. Racism in doctoral education affects Black students' ability to make meaningful connections with their peers and professors, their department, and their institution (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Ingram, 2013). In the interviews, it became apparent that encounters with racism were part of everyday life in doctoral education. Despite frequent interactions with racism and stereotyping both within and outside the classroom, participants described their ability to survive and thrive academically. Students also discussed the long-term detrimental emotional and psychological effects of racism. All but one participant in the study shared experiences of dealing with racism, microaggressions, or stereotyping during their educational journeys. Several participants documented experiencing extensive discrimination from faculty. Alex explained that his principal investigator had an inaccurate and unwarranted negative perception of his performance because he is a Black student. He recalled:

In my first year, during one of my rotations, my PI was quite negative and disparaging. [He said] I didn't have motivation. I had to go to the Dean, because the Dean thought that I was not a good student just from this one experience and to me that felt a little bit racially motivated. Because there was absolutely no reason for that, and there was no formal way for me to assess the PI. [The PI expressed that he thought I was] doing bad. Let's talk this out [because] you may not belong here. I think that there were a lot of steps skipped before that discussion [was warranted].

He continued to reflect on this experience by saying, "[This was a] microaggression. I felt a lot of things were skipped before it was assumed that I was a bad student." Renee, a bi-racial student, also discussed how a professor's racial bias influenced how she was perceived and treated. She stated,

[A professor] asked what my GPA was, which was 3.5, and he asked why is it so low. And then he asked, what are you?" He was trying to figure out what my racial identities were. I felt discriminated against. Something about him really rubbed me the wrong way.

Melanie had a similar experience during her first class at the academy. She felt she was stereotyped by a professor who tried to test her for dyslexia during office hours after she performed poorly on an exam. She explained:

I've been very open about the fact that I was diagnosed with ADHD in my first class. I did bad on an exam because I didn't have my testing accommodations in time. It was such a simple mistake like it was my brain flip something and I knew it was a risk [of underperforming so I told] the professor that it was at risk. I sat in his office and I was like, let's go over this because I don't want to fail a class because of a mistake. I can show you that I can do the problems. And he instantly began to test me for dyslexia and asked me to read the test out loud to him to see if I actually knew the words. He was writing things on the board and asking me to read out loud and it definitely came up as an impression of him seeing me as not just a Black student, but the Black student from a low economic background. [As if] he was going to somehow be the one to discover [that I have] Dyslexia. I know he's never done that to any other grad student in our department.

Similarly, participants described incidents that they believed were motivated by racial discrimination. Cheryl discussed how one of her committee members discouraged her from using critical race theory as the theoretical underpinning for her dissertation. Mia shared that her

department chair discouraged her from providing a \$50 gift card to the Black student participants in her study because the incentive could be construed as coercive since the students could have housing insecurity or basic needs. Her chair noted that participants in the study may need the money. Mia stated, “My mind immediately went to, is she making this an issue because my study participants are Black?” She wondered about the assumptions her chair was making about Black students. Mike shared an experience where he felt his professor perpetuated the racial narrative of the hypersexual Black male. He shared, “I had a professor state when we were talking about positionality statements, [that my statement] sounds like a tinder profile. [It was only directed to me], definitely a racist statement.”

Melanie spoke vividly about the anti-blackness on her campus. She was shocked by the bigotry she experienced from members of other minority groups. Similar to the other participants in this study, Melanie’s experiences with racism and microaggressions caused her to feel alienated from her peers. In addition to the racially related negative experiences, African American students encounter inequities in educational opportunities and a lack of resources. The findings suggest that racism and stereotypes in higher education are forms of opportunity obstruction for African American doctoral students. Participants in this study detailed how the racism they experienced impacted their ability to receive equitable access to educational opportunities. Many participants spoke about the opportunity gaps between them and their peers. For example, Renee spoke about the challenges of getting the boating training required to conduct research in marine biology. She explained:

You need to learn how to dive and learn how to boat. [My program] is so White, and there are few Black people. I felt ignored. I wanted to get access to [boating training]. [I need to] learn how to boat, and I feel people are looking over me [and] not giving me access to these things. The people that work there, who focus on diving [are] all White men, they’re all older White men. I felt that the barrier I’ve been experiencing is trying to convince these old White men that I can do [boating].

In the interview with Renee, she discussed the lasting effects of racial discrimination.

When asked to describe what she meant by “academic trauma”, she stated:

I’ve been working through [academic trauma] in therapy and trying to kind of separate where the trauma comes from and the stress. That I feel comes from just my time in academia, and so I guess like when I say academic trauma, I’m thinking about traumatic experiences that I had specifically within academia. Be it with a professor or lab mates and just kind of overtime. How this kind of thing has worn on me. There’s a lot of academic trauma that I experienced in the lab. A lot of it came from implicit biases and excluding me from certain opportunities. Not giving me leadership positions [and] relegating me to these more menial tasks. [In the classroom] people would come up to the other TA and they would only ask her questions and not even make eye contact with me. They just thought I was like some angry person and they were very intimidated by me, but I did a lot of the community-building activities and tried to open myself up and I still feel like people thought I was aggressive and mean or they thought that I didn’t know what I was doing and I didn’t belong there.

While a few students reported racially-based experiences with their peers, the overwhelming majority reported stereotyping and racial microaggressions during faculty interactions. Melanie, Renee, Adam, and Alex shared experiences dealing with faculty members who subscribed to negative racial stereotypes about African American students. They shared that faculty members held low expectations of Black students and excluded them from research opportunities. As a result, the participants felt robbed of opportunities to demonstrate their academic prowess, which affected their ability to pursue performance-based opportunities. Melanie and Renee revealed the emotional toll of such abuse. Being perceived as inferior is psychologically taxing and causes participants to feel alienated. Most of the participants in this study appear to be victims of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat as it relates to higher education is a situational predicament in which the psychological threat of confirming negative stereotypes about an individual’s racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group occurs, which can produce a high cognitive load and diminish academic focus and performance (Steel, 1997; McGee and Martin,

2011). Some participants in this study agonized over “being perfect” to avoid confirming negative stereotypes regarding African American students.

Although almost all of the participants reported negative racially motivated experiences, only 4 of the 11 mentioned that their institution’s campus climate is hostile. Except for Nick, the participant who attended the HBCU, the other 6 participants noted that students could not comment on the campus climate at their institutions due to the low residency with the program and the impact that Covid-19 had on limiting the amount of in-person interactions on campus. Julie was the only participant who attended a program with no in-person engagement. She stated, “I don’t face the same biases other cohorts have. [My program has only] met online. [Other cohorts have] dealt with those microaggressions and things that had to do with their ethnicity, because they’re [meeting in-person].”

Supporters as Information Brokers and Morale Boosters

In the following section, participants discuss their experiences with using support from family members, peer networks, and faculty mentorship to fill in the knowledge gaps their parents could not pass down to them during college. Research questions about their educational experiences at all levels of education are answered by the information provided.

Family Support

All of the participants described their families as supportive, but because they could not relate to their pursuit of a doctorate, family support is merely moral. The participants discussed how the dynamics of their families was both a source of inspiration to continue their education and a cause of stress in their pursuit of a doctorate. Although all scholars reported family support for pursuing doctoral education, a few reported family dynamics that do not foster positive support. Melanie and Renee spoke about the conflict that arose from their families not

understanding their experiences in college. Renee stated, “[My family supports me], but what I do is sometimes lost on them.” She explained, “I didn’t know how to speak my family’s language about things I’m doing at the institution, so they weren’t as supportive at first, but I feel like they care more now.” Melanie spoke of a disagreement she had with her mother about the amount of money she was offered for a postdoctoral research fellowship. Melanie stated:

My mom and I actually got into an argument [when] I told her I had been offered a postdoc [that paid] 50 - 75K, and she’s like, I don’t understand. You have a Ph.D., and you’re not making six figures. I don’t get it. I said, mom. This is good news. It’s a postdoc at Harvard. [my mother said], but you’re going to be homeless and poor, you’ve been in school your whole life, and you’re still making less money than I do.

Melanie further stated, “[My] family doesn’t understand [my] research [and] career choices because their level of success is defined by financial gain and social status gain, while my level of success may be defined by the passion of my work.” Alex shared a similar sentiment regarding his family not being able to relate to his experience in doctoral education. He stated:

[Family] supports me in that they’re happy that [I’m pursuing a doctorate], but they don’t necessarily understand [this journey]. They have no clue what I mean about [being in school], but I don’t take classes. It basically work, but I’m still in school. They don’t grasp that, and they don’t understand what I need to do to graduate or the fact that there are no spring breaks and stuff like that. It’s difficult to bridge that gap of knowledge, and so they can’t really support me in a very useful way.

Moral Support

When questioned about their support system while pursuing a doctorate, participants highlighted peers, friends, family members, and role models as sources of guidance and moral support. For example, Alex said, “There are two [Black] postdocs in my lab that [are] my core support system.” Cheryl and Sandra stated that they used a WhatsApp chat group with students in their programs to communicate and check on each other.

In addition to receiving support from peers and friends, participants cited Black student affinity groups’ impact on their experiences. Adam spoke about the Black affinity group that was

established for current students and alum, “We have a Black group chat for the seven Black students across all five years of the program. In the beginning, the Black people used to get together and do stuff”. Mia indicated, “We have the Black Graduate and Professional Students Association, [that] I think made the biggest difference because I actually barely talked to anyone in my department.” Julie stated, “Not any faculty, but I do belong to some online groups. I have two writing groups I’m a part of. We hold each other accountable. There’s a doctoral moms group where we go online [via] zoom to work individually.”

Similarly, Renee mentioned:

There’s a Black woman group that I know [in my program] that I’m really close to and I feel like we have each other’s back in as many ways as we can. Like when it comes to someone you need to go to the doctor I’ve taken them to the doctor before and helped each other. Or if we have questions about science and what to do next we come to each other. Going to them when I have a problem, but also reciprocating and supporting them when they have a problem has been amazing. And I think [since there is a lack of representation in my program], having the group meet has been just a godsend.

Participants also spoke about receiving support from the few other Black students in their program. As Alex stated, “the pool [of Black students] is so small, you naturally I guess start to gravitate toward each other” Nicole said:

There is only one other Black person and my cohort. It’s a female as well, so I think we connect on different levels, because many times, especially in a virtual environment, white people just take up a lot of space. Having someone that gets it and that we can make those little sly comments [to each other and] can look at each other and know exactly [what we both are thinking] helps to make it a little bit more tolerable.

Participants talked about the benefit of having a close friend pursuing their doctorate simultaneously. Sandra explains:

I think, to be able to have those moments where you’re able to talk to somebody that’s not in your program [but has] a foundational level of understanding with the period of life that you’re in. Because it makes you feel a little bit less crazy in those moments where you’re like I’m about to lose my shit. When I expressed thoughts about dropping out of the program [my friend would say] you’re not going to drop

out. Why are you feeling this way? I was able to talk about my feelings [with her], instead of my family [just urging me to finish the program]. That was really helpful.

Similarly, Mike shared that he is enrolled in the same program as a friend who he dubbed “a huge supporter.” Finally, Mia spoke of the benefit of having a close friend pursuing her doctorate at the same time as she is:

I have a friend from undergrad. We have been friends since my freshman year. And 20 years later, we’re still friends, he is actually in a doctoral program. I have had the chance to talk to him about his program, about what he’s doing and we go back and forth and share our experiences. [We talk about] what we’re doing and stuff that also has been helpful. [He has been] influential and supportive.

Faculty Mentoring

The literature has extensively acknowledged the strong correlation between supportive relationships with university faculty, both same-race and different-race, and positive educational experiences for Black students (Blockett et al., 2016; Grant & Simmons; 2008). Comments regarding the importance of faculty such as, “[the faculty member] was monumental in shaping the way that I looked at the world and shaping the way that I looked at my subject, stated by Sandra, and “What really helped me transition into doctoral studies was my first-year professor” stated by Mike, illustrate how important faculty relationships are to doctoral students. When discussing the impact of faculty mentorship, Alex said, “I’ve relied heavily on mentors. And so I think that’s a big component of my success that I realized very early on that I’m not going to make it if I don’t find mentors.” Melanie echoed the importance of faculty support. She explained:

[My faculty mentor] reached out to me to do a co-authorship. She’s the reason I had my first publication. She’s the reason I got a couple of fellowships because people recognize her name on my CV. [She’s] not only [provided] personal mentorship but [also] professional mentorship. Just being associated with her opened doors at the right time for me.

While some participants noted the vital role that faculty members play as advisors and mentors, other participants spoke about the impact of caring relationships with faculty outside the classroom. Adam shared that he had several deaths during school. He shared, “faculty were very kind to me as far as sending gifts, food, and stuff like that.” Renee expressed that an empathic professor showing an interest in her as a person was one of the main reasons she decided to pursue science:

The Professor I had was incredibly supportive. [Asked] how’s your mom doing? How’s your family doing? How are you doing as an individual? What do you want to do after this class? What are your future aspirations? It’s like he cared about [me] more than any of my other science professors, and when I was worried about something [or] I needed help, he was always there to just kind of fill in the gaps and help me. I ended up doing really well in this class. That was my first really positive experience [with a faculty member]. Somebody took the time to get to know me, to care about how I was doing personally. He encouraged me to pursue things that I didn’t think I was smart enough or good enough to do. That was a really amazing experience I had that really pushed me towards wanting to pursue science. He taught me about graduate school.

Similar to sentiments echoed by Alex, Melanie stressed the importance of faculty mentorship. She further explained a situation when a faculty member went above and beyond mentorship:

I think mentorship for me is the biggest thing. Where I know I would not be as successful as I am if it wasn’t for mentors at every stage in my life. And so, going into a Ph.D. program, I specifically chose a program with great faculty who could be great mentors. I have wonderful relationships with some of my faculty. When George Floyd was killed, one of my faculty who knows how heavily involved in activist work I am, drove to my apartment and left food outside. I really appreciated it. Faculty who were able to be a mentor not just professionally but also see me as a human. See me for all my identities and not just as a philosopher. The fact that I’m a woman, I’m a Black woman, and all that comes with that. So, in essence, I have had very great experiences with faculty.

Alex recanted an incident that occurred while he struggled with anxiety and depression and received help from his White male undergraduate adviser, who offered a safe environment for him to express his concerns and information about moving from undergraduate to doctoral studies. He stated:

My advisor in undergrad helped me a lot. I would always be in his office [because] I struggle with anxiety and depression. I was always in his office freaking out about everything. He explained to me that [I would be] okay and I don't need to have a 100% on [every assignment]. [I can] be an expert in a field in different ways and I'm still very bright. He sort of explained to me his process [for going] through undergrad and how he became a Ph.D. holder. [I related to him] and saw similarities. [I thought] this is possible because he failed too, so I think that I can do this. So yeah I think that mentors really helped me through getting to this point.

While Alex was able to receive support from his White undergraduate advisor, there were times when he had to seek counseling off campus because the campus didn't provide resources for assisting Black students with mental health issues. He noted, "[White campus counselors] wouldn't be able to help me." He explained, "[after] two [academic years], I finally decided to go to therapy, and my therapist is a Black woman. And it has been the best thing I have done in my adult life."

Unmasking the Hidden Curriculum

In this next section, participants expressed the impact of being unaware of the "unwritten rules of academia" on their educational experiences and how they acquired the tacit knowledge required to succeed in doctoral education. Finally, participants noted the lack of institutional support for first-generation students and how they were able to continue to persist.

Institutional Support

When asked about experiences in their doctorate program and the impact their programs have on educational experiences, participants provided a variety of responses. While some participants acknowledged that institutional resources such as designated librarians, program coordinators, and writing centers improved their educational experiences, all participants expressed a lack of overall support from their departments and institutions. For example, Alex expressed that he did not receive adequate support from his department. Alex stated:

The program in itself just doesn't have a culture, and so it seems that we've just been left to our own devices. I think that is hindering [my] ability to complete

everything because there's no sense of community. There's no centralized place to look for information. I think that's the downfall of the program.

He continued reflecting on the lack of support from his department and provided an example of the process of advancing to candidacy. He stated:

During our advancement to candidacy, they had an information session that wasn't really useful because it was just a PowerPoint and then they read the PowerPoint to us when they could have just sent it to us. So I would say that I don't think that there's a lot of programmatic support.

Nick echoed this sentiment, referring to a supportive program "keeps you on track and pushes you out." He continued by saying, "one thing that a lot of us experience in our department is the floating around. We're on our own. You just figured that out on your own. You don't have [anyone] pulling you along and helping you build the blocks to graduate."

Financial support from the institution for some participants—and the lack thereof for other participants—was another theme that emerged in the study. Many of the participants pursuing Ph.Ds cited the importance of financial support from the institution. All but one of the participants pursuing an Ed.D. did not receive any financial support from their institutions and noted the amount of student loan debt as one of their top concerns. Nicole was the only participant in the study receiving tuition reimbursement from her employer because she is employed at the institution at which she is enrolled. She stated:

I don't think that if my institution did not have an employee tuition waiver program [that] I would [be] pursuing my doctorate degree. I would have definitely had to wait until I was more financially stable to afford the program. I do still pay something, but it's crumbs compared to the overall cost of the program.

The four other Ed.D. participants are using loans to cover the cost of their programs. These same participants expressed that they felt pressure to complete their degrees as soon as possible to save money on their degree programs. For example, Cheryl said, "I had to pay out of pocket and I told my professor I need to get this done. Money is running out because I had loans."

Conversely, the Ph.D. participants reported receiving more financial support from their institutions. Renee explained that the program's costs were mainly covered because her Ph.D. is in STEM. Nick said, "If I didn't have any financial support, I wouldn't be here. That's a major influence." Melanie explained how adequate financial support from her institutions allows her to focus on being a full-time student, "I made it very clear to my department that I want to be able to be the best student I can be, and that means a bare minimum of financial support. A bare minimum is the cost of tuition, access to housing, and transportation." Melanie shared a similar sentiment, "My biggest thing was the financial support. I wanted the freedom and the flexibility only to be a student."

Acquiring Tacit Knowledge and Finding Solutions

Being the first in their families to go to college, the participants talked extensively about navigating postsecondary education with limited assistance from their families, high schools, and colleges. When asked about barriers to success during their educational journeys, participants described, as Mia put it, "not knowing what you don't know." Renee expressed, "[There are] secret things no one tells you, like [how] to reach out to a PI beforehand." Melanie described the notion of not knowing what you don't know as:

This constant feeling of I don't know what I don't know. And that a lot of academia to me feels like politics or just like tacit knowledge. Where you just supposed to know how a CVs works and abstracts work. And how to interact with professors and that's not information that people write down or is in books. It's just assumed knowledge.

In her line of questioning, she wondered who was explaining the unwritten rules to other students. She continued, "Was someone supposed to tell me these things? Who's telling y'all? Y'all parents really having this conversation with y'all? How does this information get picked up? Who was supposed to tell [me] like whose telling y'all?"

In the literature, this concept is referred to as the hidden curriculum, which refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unexpected lessons, beliefs, and viewpoints that students acquire in school (Portelli, 1993). Multiple participants in this study experienced the challenges of figuring out how graduate school works as “acquiring tacit knowledge.” Melanie described tacit knowledge as “all these things that exist in academic spaces that are accessible—if you know when, where, and how to access it. But we don’t get the institutional support in learning how to acquire the tacit knowledge.” When discussing an experience where she used information from a peer to request additional financial support for housing, she commented:

I didn’t realize you can negotiate things. I don’t know if it’s because I’m first-generation. I don’t know if it comes from being Black. I don’t know if it comes from being a woman or the lovely intersection of all three, but I definitely came into the space [thinking] what they give you, is what you get. I didn’t realize [my institution] can offer housing to certain students. This White girl who also got accepted already knew she was going to a different university, but she was still trying to negotiate more money from [my institution]. I asked her about [the negotiation], and she explained to me you should just ask for a relocation grant. Which apparently they had never done before, but learning from that girl that you can bargain, I [told my institution] that another school offered me money to move, so they gave me money to move and guaranteed housing.

As mentioned in the section above, participants expressed that they were left to their own devices to learn how to navigate postsecondary education. Renee stated:

I feel like my ability to find resources and then also tell people what I want has been what’s been helpful in getting access to that knowledge. I feel like the institution provides it a little bit, but really [it has been] me going out and finding the resources and asking people [that] has been what’s been helpful.

Sandra shared a similar sentiment about having to seek out information. She stated, “Even if you don’t know the answer, you know how to find the answer.” She further explained:

There’s a lot of trial and error and being comfortable and being uncomfortable in being okay with not knowing how to do something. And not letting that discourage you from still trying to do it, because I think there were a lot of points along my academic journey, where, if I were the type of person who got really discouraged by failure, I had a lot of opportunities to take an exit ramp.

Alex also spoke about gaining tacit knowledge about academia over time. He stated, “I have the tools I need to be successful. You gain them by living the experience. It’s just a big game. You have to jump through all these arbitrary hoops. And you’ll make it to the other side.” As discussed earlier in the chapter, participants noted that the lack of representation in their doctorate programs influenced their educational experiences. Black students report being among the only Black students in their academic programs (Cintron, 2010; Felder et al., 2016 Poncil, 2009). Black scholars reported feeling isolated and unsupported in their classroom settings due to their exposure to racism and the lack of interaction with Black faculty and students. Participants expressed the difficulty of not having academic peers who share similar experiences or are from the same ethnic and racial backgrounds. The scholars had to rely on other Black students who had more tacit knowledge about doctoral education than them, but these peers were also in the process of unmasking the hidden curriculum. Most participants also had to rely on external Black affinity groups to acquire information about doctoral education. While these resources are helpful, it is not ideal for scholars to divert attention away from their studies to learn how to navigate the academic landscape.

Remaining Committed to a Doctoral Education

Nine out of the 11 participants shared that they considered leaving their programs at least once. Adam, the participant who never considered leaving his program, expressed, “I am the kind of person that I’ll see it through [because] I made that commitment.” Nicole shared that her program was amazing and has never thought about leaving. Conversely, Mia expressed that she thought about switching from an Ed.D. to a Ph.D. program. She said, “I was not expecting to enjoy research so much.” Mike stated, “it’s just too expensive to leave at this point.” Although

all participants acknowledged that they had pondered leaving their program at some point, they all stated that they had not seriously considered leaving. Renee stated:

I'm not incredibly serious about leaving the Ph.D. program because I don't want to leave, because I do love science. But also, I feel like this is my most clear path to reach a new social class and then move up and get a faculty job. I'll probably make a pretty good amount of money. More than my family's ever made before, and so I know that I have nephews I have to think about. And I have family that have to think about and at this point, even now, like if something financially bad happens, they look at my dad or me. My dad's getting old, to be honest, and so I think a big reason why I keep going is because I think about the people who are going to come after me. I think about my family, making sure I can financially support them.

Nicole and Julie were the two participants who switched from their previous programs to their current programs. Nicole left a Ph.D. program to pursue an Ed.D. because she realized she didn't want to be a faculty member. She explained:

Originally I went into a Ph.D. program for education, but after a year of course work I realized I'm not going to be a faculty member and a lot of the courses were around teaching pedagogy. [I switched] program of study to the Ed.D. program in educational leadership and since then I've been a lot more successful.

Julie left her first program to pursue her degree at a different institution. She explained:

The program [that I'm in now] is my second doctoral program. I started out at a prior institution and [my] chair ended up being dismissed and then I was assigned to a new chair. But prior to all of that there was a lot of delays with the program itself and so I ended up transferring to this program, where I'm facing some of the same delays.

Positionality

Similar to the participants in this study, I, too, identify as African American and a first-generation doctoral student at the time of this study. I have experienced some of the same challenges as some of the participants in this study, such as: attending a high school that did not adequately prepare me for college and dealing with racism at the academy. In addition, I have faced many of the challenges identified in the literature concerning the experiences of African-American college students. During high school, I was not encouraged to attend college by teachers or college counselors. I learned about college while participating in my high school's

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. AVID is an in-school academic support program for grades seven through twelve that prepare students for college eligibility and success. With support from the AVID program, I applied and was accepted to San Diego State University (SDSU).

I'll never forget these words: "We regret to inform you that you have been disenrolled from the university due to your failure to pass your developmental English course." I read them in a letter from SDSU informing me that I could not return to the university after my first year. After the initial shock settled, I sat in my empty dormitory room with tears streaming down my face. First, I felt sad; then, the sadness turned into anger and disappointment. I was bewildered by how quickly my aspirations of earning a college degree could dissipate. I was overwhelmed by feelings of despair and inadequacy, and I did not know where to go for guidance. As a first-generation student, my parents didn't understand the college system. They could not provide direction on how to overcome the challenges I faced in pursuing higher education. As was the case with participants in this study, I had to figure out how to overcome educational challenges with minimal assistance. I fulfilled the university writing requirement at a community college over the summer and fall semesters and gained readmission to SDSU the following spring.

After returning to the academy, I reflected on the fact that I was dismissed from the university for failure to pass a developmental English course, even though I maintained a high grade-point average. My dismissal from SDSU led me to ponder why the university doubted my aptitude and motivation for learning so early in my educational journey. Unfortunately, many of my peers who were dismissed from SDSU did not return to the university. I wondered how many students fell through the cracks due to California State University's (CSU) remediation policies. After their first year at a CSU, students who cannot finish their remedial courses are often

disenrolled from the university. The remediation policies that led to my dismissal from the academy are still in place, but efforts are being made to provide reform. Recent remedial education reforms have been implemented, which help students pass developmental classes by providing additional support in English and math development courses. After overcoming challenges with college preparedness, I made three promises to myself: I would dedicate my career to serving students, I would obtain a position in higher education leadership to influence policies that affect BIPOC students, and I would someday reach the highest level of education so that I could galvanize others to reach their full potential. Similar to the participants in this study, my motivation to earn a doctorate stems from a deep desire to make a meaningful impact on society.

While my experiences related to college preparedness differed from most of the participants in this study, I experienced many of the racially based experiences mentioned by the scholars. During my undergraduate education at SDSU, I was often accosted by campus police. During my junior year at the academy, I experienced one of the most troubling encounters of my life. I was harassed and handcuffed on campus on my way to class. The police officer claimed I fit the description of a reported car thief. Words can not fully describe the trauma and sense of embarrassment I felt being detained on campus in front of my peers. This was not my first encounter dealing with this type of racism, but the campus that I called home was no longer a safe space for me. I did not share the experience with university officials because I felt they would not be able to relate. Reflecting on my educational journey while learning about the experiences of the scholars in this study has made me realize that I, too, have overcome traumatic educational experiences. Akin to participants in this study, I am fueled by the impact I can make by earning my doctorate.

Throughout my professional career, I have served in several roles responsible for providing direct support to minoritized student populations and creating programs that enhance student experiences in college. In my current role as the director of a Student Success Center at UC San Diego, I develop, lead, and manage the delivery of student developmental services and administer programs that increase access and provide support to students who are traditionally under-resourced and underserved on college campuses. My motivation for pursuing a career in higher education administration stems from my lived experiences as a first-generation student. I aim to offer students the support that was unavailable to me when I was attending college. My professional experiences serving BIPOC students are consistent with the study's findings, which show that first-generation Black doctoral students encounter significant hurdles at every step of post-secondary education. Based on my experience working with minoritized students and the importance that early literature places on the socialization process for students of color, I expected the scholars to express the importance that academic and social integration has on their persistence. None of the study's participants cited academic or social integration in their degree programs as a significant factor that influences their ability to persist. The testimonies of the participants show that, while socialization is crucial for African American students, becoming integrated into their degree program is not the most pressing issue they face in higher education. The scholars are enamored with figuring out how to lessen the opportunity gaps that exist between them and their peers, succeeding in educational environments that are unwelcoming, and finding creative ways to unmask the hidden curriculum that exists in graduate education.

Summary

This chapter contains the findings from the semi-structured and unstructured interviews with participants' regarding their experiences during their journey through the educational

pathway, as well as the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate. The researcher used the phenomenological research method, informed by CRT and ADAF, to answer the questions posed in the study and to obtain rich descriptions and personal meanings of the lived experiences of the study participants. This chapter details the lived experiences of eleven African American first-generation doctoral students enrolled in Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs.

The themes presented by participants highlighted their experiences transitioning from high school to each stage preceding doctoral education and their experiences in their doctoral programs. Six themes emerged, impacting the educational experiences of the eleven African American scholars in this study: readiness for undergraduate education, being a first-generation college student, importance of college preparation programs, feelings of alienation and isolation, supporters as information brokers and morale boosters, and unmasking the hidden curriculum. There were also contrasting themes that emerged among the participants that were intriguing and deserving of attention, despite the fact that all scholars did not share them. The two bi-racial participants in the study, Sandra and Melanie, did not feel accepted and supported by their Black peers. Similarly, Nick—one of the two participants who identified as Gay, reported feeling accepted for his Black identity, but not his sexual orientation.

Participants noted that being the first in their family to earn a doctorate and the prospect of making an impact in society were major motivations for pursuing doctoral education and persisting in their degree programs. Consistent with existing asset-based literature, the findings of this study suggest that although first-generation African American doctoral students face significant challenges in higher education, many students use resilience and creativity to overcome educational challenges and persist in doctoral education. Chapter five presents a

discussion of the research findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This final chapter presents an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings, implications, strengths, and limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences that African American doctoral students had during the pursuit of their doctorate and to determine the factors that aided or hindered their ability to complete a doctorate. Research on the college experiences of African American students reports that scholars deal with feelings of alienation, isolation, and self-doubt resulting from the racism they experience on college campuses. Despite these challenges, many African American students overcome obstacles along their educational journey and obtain doctorates. Much of the research on the experiences of Black students have been conducted at the undergraduate level. Although some authors have conducted studies on graduate success for African American doctorate students, this topic is still insufficiently explored.

This study sought to understand from the students' perspectives how they overcame challenges during their educational journeys. A qualitative phenomenological approach was utilized to give voice to this population's educational experiences. This study utilized the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) theoretical frameworks to explore the experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students during their educational journey towards degree completion and the factors contributing to their success. ADAF was utilized to undergo a strength-based inquiry into how the participants effectively navigated higher education, while CRT provided historical context for the complex experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students on college campuses.

Discussion of the Findings

Participants in this study offered important insights into their experiences navigating the educational pathway to doctoral education. The students described challenges related to the lack of exposure to college, a lack of understanding of how college works, and not having anyone in their family to guide them through the process. Despite these challenges, the scholars remain steadfast in their goal of earning their doctorate degrees and making meaningful contributions that will better society, particularly those who are traditionally disenfranchised. Participants described the role that non-cognitive and institutional factors had on their ability to persist, their ability to acquire the knowledge necessary to be successful in graduate education, and the factors that motivated them to pursue their doctoral programs despite their significant challenges.

Navigating the Academic Landscape

Most of the research on the experiences of African American students in higher education suggests that the support of family members, support from peers, teachers, and members of the community is instrumental (Anumba, 2015; Cintron, 2010; Scott, 2007; Steward, 2019; Wallace & Ford; 2021). The participants in this study successfully navigated to and through doctoral education with limited support throughout their educational journey. Participants noted challenges related to being African American students and first-generation college students, respectively. Many participants expressed a lack of guidance from their families, high schools, and post-secondary institutions on navigating college. Specifically, they asserted that they were left to fend for themselves to figure out how to navigate the postsecondary education system.

Except for two participants, the first-generation African American doctoral students in this study mentioned challenges with being the first in their family to go to college and that high schools did not adequately advise or encourage their desire to attend college. Participants stated

that the difficulties encountered when transitioning from high school to undergraduate education were intensified when transitioning to graduate school—due to the lack of diversity among the student body decreasing at each advancing level of education. Participants felt isolated during their transitions to graduate school due to the lack of representation. They stated that they felt disconnected from their departments and universities. The students in this study acquired navigational capital through trial and error and learning from how their peers navigated the college environment. Navigational capital is one of the six inputs in Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth. Yosso argues that students' navigational capital gives them the capacity to navigate successfully amid environments that are unsupportive and often hostile. The participants in this study described the methods they utilized to overcome obstacles throughout their pursuit of a doctoral degree.

Racism and Stereotypes as a Form of Opportunity Obstruction

Research has indicated that minoritized doctoral students report having fewer opportunities to engage in professional development opportunities and receive less support from faculty than their White peers (Felder, 2014; Graham, 2013; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). Gay (2004) argued that African-American doctorate students are denied opportunities to demonstrate their intellectual ability, inhibiting their personal, academic, and professional growth. The doctoral students who were part of the present study described experiencing racism and stereotyping at each level of education. The findings of this study are consistent with extant research indicating that racial microaggressions play a significant role in students' ability to form meaningful connections with their peers and teachers, as well as with their departments and institutions.

All of the universities that the participants in this study attended declared a commitment to building inclusive and equitable learning communities for all students. Yet, all participants said their universities fell short of this objective. Many participants could not remark on the overall racial campus climate at their respective universities due to a lack of in-person instruction and engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, participants in the study described encounters with racism while also dealing with feelings of alienation, isolation, and self-doubt.

Non-Cognitive Factors

The findings in this study suggest that successfully handling the system (racism), preference for long-term goals, availability of a strong support person, and knowledge acquired in a field are salient non-cognitive factors that influence the participants' persistence. Sedlacek (2011) noted the importance of a student's ability to understand and handle racism to persist in an education system created for White, heterosexual, cis-gendered males of European origins. As discussed earlier in this chapter, an unfortunate reality for African American students is that they often experience some form of blatant racism during their academic careers. Students in this study demonstrated the ability to persist despite experiencing racism inside and outside of the classroom. Participants in this study demonstrated the ability to navigate hostile racial environments and were also committed to fighting to improve the experiences of BIPOC individuals at their institutions.

Participants in this study overcame educational challenges by being resilient and focusing on their long-term goal of completing their doctorate. Literature on resilience suggests that the asset describes an individual's ability to persist despite adversity (Johnson et al., 2015; Shaw, 2012). It is important to note that resilience is not a trait one either has or doesn't have. An

individual can develop resilience, and it can be nurtured by external support systems. The scholars in this study exercised resilience during each stage in their educational journey. They reported that their ability to remain steadfast in the face of adversity is a valuable asset. The participants in this study reminded themselves of the impact they would have after finishing their program when they felt like quitting. Academic success depends on a student's ability to demonstrate delayed gratification by prioritizing long-term goals above short-term objectives. (Thomas et al., 2007). The participant's ability to focus on the long-term goal of earning their doctorate and making a meaningful impact on society served as motivation despite the racism they experienced at the academy.

In addition to being motivated to complete their doctorate, support from peers, friends, and Black student affinity groups played an essential role in their educational experiences. Participants in the study created support networks and found creative ways to supplement the support they did not receive from their institutions. Participants used their support systems as information brokers. Multiple students shared that they relied on Black affinity groups that consist of current students and alum to learn how to navigate doctoral education and acquire the specific knowledge required for their fields. These support systems helped expose students to critical information about graduate education.

Unmasking the Hidden Curriculum with Peer Support

Research in the field of doctorate persistence and completion indicates that the ability to decipher the hidden curriculum in graduate education is crucial to the success of doctoral students (Gardner, 2010; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Perez-Felkner et al., 2020). Multiple participants in this study experienced the challenges of deciphering the unwritten, unspoken, and often exclusionary "rules of the game" within their educational environment. Participants

described the hidden curriculum as tacit knowledge that you are supposed to have about how the education system works, but no one tells you. Evidence from studies regarding the experiences of first-generation college students suggests that scholars often inherit their parent's understanding of how college works (Dumais & Ward; 2009; Gofen, 2009; Hébert, 2018). The students in this study broke this intergenerational cycle by being resilient and resourceful. Students who have a network that includes people who have earned graduate degrees and to whom they can turn for help have an advantage over students who have to expend energy acquiring the tacit knowledge necessary to be successful in graduate education.

Participants noted that they didn't receive guidance from their institutions on acquiring the knowledge necessary to succeed in graduate education. Without an informed parental figure to guide them through the college process or formal structures to support them, participants in this study created their own support systems through informal peer networks and relationships with faculty members outside of their institutions. Many participants in this study emphasized the importance of their abilities to independently locate resources and advocate for themselves to gain access to information regarding graduate education.

Motivating Factors for the Continued Pursuit of a Doctorate

According to the US Census Bureau, only 1.2% of the US population and less than 2% of the world's population have a doctorate (National Science Foundation, 2019). To earn a doctorate, one must have the determination and fortitude to persevere in the face of the difficulties that come with obtaining a terminal degree (Cintron, 2010; King and Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). In addition to pursuing their degrees, many students in this study had other significant responsibilities, such as being a parent or having a career. Participants stated that having a doctorate would help decrease oppression and close opportunity disparities for them,

which was consistent with CRT. They also believed that their education would pave the path for other Black people to succeed.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, participants were able to remain committed to their goal of earning their doctorate despite experiencing discrimination, racism, and bias in their learning communities. During difficult times, participants reminded themselves of the purpose of pursuing their degree and the impact that becoming a doctor will have on their families and society. Participants noted their willingness to advocate for educational equity by participating in department-level diversity committees, assisting recruitment efforts, and addressing diversity-related issues on their campuses. These scholars aspire to positively impact social justice through their research. For example, Melanie serves as a board member on the Black Graduate Council at her institution. She is involved in activist work on her department's climate committee and helps improve relationships between campus police and the housing community. Similarly, Renee shared that she does teaching and community building in low-income areas and Black communities in the city where her institution resides. She mentioned that a portion of her research is dedicated to researching how to engage BIPOC communities in dialogue about marine biology.

Many of the participants are researching issues that impact African American communities. Adam is researching the intersection between urban planning and cardiovascular health outcomes, emphasizing urban health. Mike's research interests involve student success outcomes for Black students who have experienced foster care. Sandra's research focuses on the complexities of transformative leadership at the junction of gendered and racialized expectations of Black female leaders. Mia's research interests center around race racism, anti-blackness, and white supremacy and how that influences how Black students characterize student success. Nick

is studying the stereotyping and stigmatization of gay Black men of color. Finally, Nicole's research involves conducting a program evaluation for our Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) summer bridge program from the students' perspectives. The participant's desire to positively impact society is a significant factor in their decision to pursue a doctorate.

Implications for Social Justice

In a time of social turmoil, many institutions reaffirm their commitment to learning to be consciously anti-racist by seeking individual, systemic, and structural reforms to dismantle anti-Black racism. However, many post-secondary institutions fail to create supportive learning communities for African American students. Unwelcoming and unsupportive college environments exacerbate the educational inequality for African American students in higher education and worsen the opportunity gap between African Americans and their White counterparts.

The burden often falls on equity-minded individuals to advocate for equitable treatment and access to educational opportunities for themselves and others. BIPOC faculty, staff, and students who demonstrate a commitment to social justice issues in educational settings are particularly susceptible to burnout because they devote a substantial amount of time and resources to enhancing the campus climate at their respective institutions. (Gorski & Chen, 2015). Participants in this study described this emotional labor as "paying the equity tax" and explained that although taking part in efforts that improved the racial climate at their institutions was rewarding; those efforts made them feel overwhelmed and discouraged. In addition to focusing on their studies, many Black students dedicate additional time and resources to participating in social justice-related voluntarism to help improve their campus for current and future BIPOC students.

The lion's share of the burden should not fall solely on BIPOC individuals to contribute to creating equitable and inclusive learning communities. Universities and colleges should institutionalize practices that promote anti-black and educational equity in and out of the classroom. Campus administrators play a vital role in developing strategies that promote social justice and compel faculty, staff, and administrators to reflect critically on and understand issues related to educational equity (Gordon et al., 2017). Administrators must go beyond merely formalizing university diversity statements and creating committees to discuss diversity issues. Educational leaders should address potential institutionalized discriminatory practices and give voice to minoritized individuals on their campuses rather than create performative diversity-related programs and initiatives.

Implications for Educational Leadership

University administrators frequently overlook doctoral students due to their smaller numbers than undergraduates and the belief that they are more self-sufficient since they have more college experience. While institutions have a central graduate division dedicated to helping graduate students navigate their path from admission to graduation and serving as the central resource for all matters related to graduate education, most of the engagement between graduate students and their institution occurs within a scholar's specific graduate program (Gardner, 2008; Gardner 2009a; Pérez et al. 2017). Although one-third of all doctoral students are first-generation, first-generation doctoral students receive virtually no programmatic resources. Many institutions do not track the first-generation status of graduate students and are unaware of their unique educational experiences and challenges.

A few participants in this study spoke about the importance of school recruitment preparation programs in helping them decipher the hidden curriculum. Yet, no such

programmatic efforts were offered to them once they enrolled in their doctoral programs. The findings in this study suggest that institutions need to provide more targeted assistance to first-generation doctoral students of color to help bridge the opportunity gaps between them and their peers. The central graduate offices at universities should engage first-generation doctoral students on the “hidden curriculum” centered around understanding academic norms, establishing mentorship relationships, building a professional network, creating a work-life balance, and addressing mental health.

In addition to institutionalizing these resources, graduate offices should partner with the various graduate programs at the university in creating interventions that address the specific needs of African American first-generation doctoral students. One intervention is the development of programs that could serve as bridge programs for students entering doctoral programs. Institutions could create space for first-generation students to learn how to navigate doctoral education from faculty, staff, and peers. As mentioned earlier, some institutions have provided this type of support to undergraduate students, but this approach has not been widely adopted at the graduate level. All students, especially those who are the first in their families to pursue a doctorate, benefit from programs that address knowledge gaps that students may have when they first begin their studies.

While it is essential to ensure that first-generation African American doctoral students have the information required to succeed in graduate education, institutions should also be responsive to their emotional well-being. It is not uncommon for doctoral students to experience mental health issues while pursuing their degrees (Wallace & Ford, 2021). The potential for mental health problems is aggravated for African American doctoral students, who must manage the rigors of doctoral-level studies while contending with forms of racism. (Banks, 2010;

Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Gordon, 2012). Pursuing a doctoral education requires a significant amount of effort, and dealing with race-based discrimination takes a toll on a student's mental health and severely influences their ability to succeed in their studies. Participants in this study shared that the frequent interactions with racism and negative stereotypes impacted their ability to thrive academically and resulted in academic trauma. One participant expressed that he had to seek counseling outside his institution because his campus didn't provide resources for assisting African American students with mental health issues. He explained that no counselor could relate to his experiences as an African American male attending an HWI.

Educators must show genuine concern for African-American students inside and outside the classrooms. Administrators and faculty should think more deliberately about how to create resources to demystify the doctoral process. African American students must be included in the discussion about their successes and persistence. One approach is to solicit feedback from current BIPOC graduate students to understand their experiences acquiring the tacit knowledge required to be successful in doctoral education. This information could be used to implement policies and practices that help students navigate the daily challenges of graduate education, improving the overall mental health of African American doctoral students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This phenomenological study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge about the experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students by highlighting their lived experiences. Further studies should be conducted to analyze the specific gaps in opportunities for students and what resources are required to eliminate them. Such research should investigate the effect of racial discrimination on a student's access to educational and professional opportunities. Several studies have revealed the need for educators to understand the experiences of students of

color who have persisted in higher education to learn how to provide better support. Future literature should illuminate the students' voices and challenge master narratives created by the dominant culture. Including students' voices in scholarship regarding students, persistence allows for a deep analysis of the topic (Ingram, 2007). These studies could investigate the conditions and lack of resources contributing to African American students' challenges using an anti-deficit approach to explore how successful students from diverse backgrounds persisted in doctoral education. Researchers, institutions, and educators must better understand this population's unique experiences, emphasizing students' strengths and positive assets.

The present study reported many factors influencing first-generation African American doctorate students' educational experiences. Literature suggests that the institutional variables affecting African American students' experiences include campus environment, role models/mentors, and financial support (Felder, 2014; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; King & King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). There is a need for research to analyze specific conditions and factors identified in the literature to influence this population's persistence. One such factor is institutional support for students researching social justice issues. The researcher found it interesting that most of the participants chose research topics related to improving the conditions of African American students on college campuses and in society at large. A few participants mentioned that their research chair advisors did not support the use of theoretical frameworks and research methodologies that considers the impact that race has on the phenomenon they were researching. Further phenomenological research on this topic would help understand the experiences of African American doctoral students conducting social justice research at HWIs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided an in-depth look into the educational experiences of 11 first-generation African American doctoral students during their educational journey towards degree completion and the factors that contributed to their success. The participants explained challenges they faced navigating the academic landscape, such as dealing with racism, being viewed as a representation of their entire race, being stereotyped, and feeling isolated. Despite these challenges, the students continued to persist. The students were motivated by the possibility of becoming role models for their families and inspired by the influence a doctorate may have on their communities and society. When institutional support was inadequate, the scholars created opportunities and cultivated support systems. Much can be learned from students who overcame obstacles to obtain a doctorate. Rather than forcing students to adapt to the university's culture, educational institutions must emphasize being able to serve all students, particularly those who are underrepresented on college campuses. As described in Chapter 2, educators must confront and dismantle institutionalized doctoral socialization norms that perpetuate White supremacy to build educational environments where all students can thrive and feel supported.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO COLLEAGUES

Recruitment Email to Colleagues

To:

Subject: Dissertation Study Opportunity for First-Generation African American Doctoral Students

Hello,

I am seeking assistance with my dissertation study, “Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral Students.” Would you be willing to help me distribute this call to your students? Also, if you know anyone interested in this study, I would be grateful if you could forward this information directly to them.

Best,

Franklin Garrett

Hello,

My name is Franklin Garrett, and I am a doctoral student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of California, San Diego and California State University, San Marcos. I am seeking participants for my dissertation study, “Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral Students.” I am interested in finding out more about how first-generation African American doctoral students persist through and to doctoral education, as well as the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate.

For this study, I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- identify as being a first-generation college student (neither of their parents holds a 4-year college/bachelor’s degree from the U.S. or any other country)
- identify as being African American
- are currently enrolled in a doctorate program in their 3rd or 4th year or final year of their doctoral programs, respectively.

Students interested in participating can complete the interest form at the link below.

[REDACTED]

All information submitted for this study will be kept confidential and secure. Only pseudonyms will be used in my dissertation’s data collection and publication.

Participants interested in participating in the study should email [REDACTED], and I will provide them with more information about the study.

Participants will be interviewed and compensated with two \$25 Amazon gift cards for participating in each interview, for a total of \$50.

For questions about this study, please call me at [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED].

I greatly appreciate your support!

Franklin Garrett, MAEd

Doctoral Student - Cohort 16

Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO PARTICIPANT

Recruitment Email to Participant

Hello,

My name is Franklin Garrett, and I am a doctoral student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of California, San Diego and California State University, San Marcos. I am researching the experiences of first-generation African American doctorate students. My dissertation study is titled Persistence in doctoral education: Experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students. My study seeks to explore the experiences of successful first-generation African American students and the factors that contribute to their success.

For this study, I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- identify as being a first-generation college student (neither of their parents holds a 4-year college/bachelor's degree from the U.S. or any other country)
- identify as being African American
- are currently enrolled in a doctorate program in their 3rd or 4th year or final year of their doctoral programs, respectively

Students interested in participating can do so by completing the interest form at the link below.

The data for this research will be obtained from two one-on-one-interviews. The interviews will last approximately one hour each. The interviews will take place at your Convenience via Zoom—a cloud-based video communications program that allows users to collaborate via audio and video conferencing. Your involvement is voluntary, but I would greatly appreciate your cooperation.

Participants interested in participating in the study should email [REDACTED], and I will provide them with more information about the study.

If you feel you are not a good fit for the study and can recommend someone you believe may be interested in the study, please share this information. I am happy to answer any questions or provide more information about the study or the eligibility criteria.

I greatly appreciate your participation in the study!

With gratitude,

Franklin Garrett, MAEd

Doctoral Student - Cohort 16
Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

APPENDIX C: SNOWBALL RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Snowball Recruitment Email

To:

Subject:

Hello,

Thank you for participating in my dissertation study, “Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral Students.” I’m looking to recruit a few more doctorate students pursuing their degrees in the social sciences and humanities. Would you be willing to help me distribute this call to your peers that meet the eligibility criteria? Participants can be from any university. Also, if you know anyone interested in this study, I would be grateful if you could forward this information directly to them.

Best,

Franklin Garrett

Hello,

My name is Franklin Garrett, and I am a doctoral student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of California, San Diego, and California State University, San Marcos. I am seeking participants for my dissertation study, “Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral Students.” I am interested in finding out more about how first-generation African American doctoral students persist through and to doctoral education, as well as the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate.

For this study, I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- identify as being a first-generation college student (neither of their parents holds a 4-year college/bachelor’s degree from the U.S. or any other country)
- identify as being African American
- are currently enrolled in a doctorate program in their 3rd or 4th year or final year of their doctoral programs, respectively.

Students interested in participating can complete the interest form at the link below.

All information submitted for this study will be kept confidential and secure. Only pseudonyms will be used in my dissertation’s data collection and publication.

Participants interested in participating in the study should email fjgarret@ucsd.edu, and I will provide them with more information about the study.

Participants will be interviewed and compensated with two \$25 Amazon gift cards for participating in each interview, for a total of \$50.

For questions about this study, please call me at [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]

I greatly appreciate your support!

Franklin Garrett, MAEd

Doctoral Student - Cohort 16

Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

APPENDIX D: CONFIRMATION EMAIL

Participant Confirmation Email

To:

Subject: Dissertation Study Opportunity for First-Generation African American Doctoral Students: Participation Confirmation and Interview Scheduling

Hello,

Thank you for completing the interest form and agreeing to participate in my dissertation study titled “*Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-generation African American Doctoral Students*.” My study seeks to explore the experiences of first-generation African American students and the factors that contribute to their success.

Choose from a list of times for the first interview in the study. There will be a total of two interviews. The second interview will take place soon after the first interview is completed. Please provide your availability at the link below:



The interviews will occur at your Convenience via Zoom—a cloud-based video communications program that allows users to collaborate via audio and video conferencing. Please review the attached basic zoom instructions document for instructions on downloading and installing Zoom on your computer.

Review the attached information sheet before the interview. I am happy to answer any questions. I can be reached at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. I greatly appreciate your participation!

Finally,

With gratitude,

Franklin Garrett, MAEd

Doctoral Student - Cohort 16
Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Persistence in doctoral education: Experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students

Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

My name is Franklin Garrett, and I am a doctorate student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at UC San Diego /CSU San Marcos in the Education Studies Department/School of Education at California State University San Marcos. I am conducting a research study to examine how first-generation African American doctoral students make sense of their experiences during their journey through the educational pathway, as well as the factors that aided or hindered their ability to earn their doctorate. The purpose of this form is to inform you about the study.

Why am I being invited to take part in this study?

You are invited to take part in this study because you have self-identified as meeting the following criteria: (a) identify as being a first-generation college student (neither of your parents holds a 4-year college/bachelor's degree from the U.S. or any other country), (b) identify as being African American, (c) enrollment in a doctorate program at UC San Diego.

What will I do if I agree to participate?

If you agree to participate in the study, you will participate in two one-hour one-on-one semi-structured and unstructured interviews. All interviews will be conducted using Zoom, a cloud-based video communications program that allows users to collaborate via audio and video conferencing. You will be given instructions on how to obtain and download the program. All transcripts from the initial interview will be available for you to review and make corrections to and for them to share new experiences not previously highlighted. The second interview will take place soon after the first interview is completed, and the field notes from the first interview will be transcribed. All interview data will be recorded, transcribed into text, and kept on a personal laptop that will be password secured.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time, even after the study has started. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, there will be no penalty, and you will be able to keep any incentives you have earned up to the point at which you withdraw.

What are the benefits to me for being in this study?

There are no direct benefits to participating in the study. However, the P.I. may learn more about the educational experiences of first-generation African American doctoral students. Knowledge gained from this study may lead to a better understanding of students from diverse backgrounds.

What happens to the information collected for the study?

Your responses will be confidential. Only the researcher will have access to the recorded data. All the data will be stored on a password-protected laptop that belongs to the researcher. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. After data analysis, the researcher will delete the recordings.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? Is there any risk to me by being in this study? If so, how will these risks be minimized?

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. However, potential risks include: (1) the time required to participate in the interview, which can be inconvenient; and (2) you may experience emotional stress when answering questions about your school experiences which require you to recollect unfavorable memories. To mediate these inconveniences, you can stop the interview at any time, skip a question, and take a break.

Who should I contact for questions?

If you have questions about the study, please call me at [REDACTED] or e-mail me at [REDACTED]. You can also contact my faculty advisor Dr. Sinem Siyahhan at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or [REDACTED].

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR RECORDS

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee pseudonym:

Introduction of Study: Thank you for participating in this interview. My name is Franklin Garrett, and I am a doctorate student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at UC San Diego /CSU San Marcos in the Education Studies Department/School of Education at California State University San Marcos.

I am here today to learn about your experiences during your educational journey towards degree completion and the factors contributing to your success. I would like to focus specifically on your persistence through and to doctoral education and the factors that aided or hindered your ability to earn your doctorate. The goal of this interview is to gain an understanding of your educational experiences.

Our conversation will last approximately 60 minutes, and it will be audio recorded to ensure that I don't miss anything you say during the interview. You can request a copy of the recording as well as the transcripts of the interview at any time after the session has concluded. I advise you to turn off your camera during the interview.

All of the information that you share will be confidential and anonymous. Your name will not appear on any documents resulting from this study.

If at any point you feel uncomfortable, we can stop this interview. Likewise, if at any time you do not want to answer any particular questions, please let me know, and we can move on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Let's begin the interview.

Explain Researcher's Positionality: I would like to start by explaining how my own beliefs, worldviews, and personal experiences could influence this research study. As the researcher conducting this study, I am cognizant of my position as an African American male, a first-generation student who attends and is employed at the institution where this study will take place. I will keep a journal to record my feelings and reactions during the research process to minimize the influence I have on the research. I will also give participants the opportunity to review all interview transcripts to ensure that I accurately capture their experiences.

Confirmation of Study Guidelines: Can you please confirm that you have read and agree to the guidelines established in the information sheet? Do you have any questions about the study or your participation before moving on?

Collect demographic data: I will now collect demographic data from you. Can you provide me with:

1. What is your age?
2. Is there anyone in your family who earned a doctorate? If so, who?
3. What is the highest level of education for both your parents/caretakers?
4. What city and state are you from?
5. What was your family's socioeconomic status?
6. A personal pseudonym.
7. Your personal gender pronoun.
8. The name of your program of study and what institutions are at?
9. Are there any identities that you hold that are meaningful to you?
10. Can you please describe your research interests?

Description of Key Terms

- Success - For the purposes of this study, success is defined as the confluence of student behaviors such as overcoming challenges, demonstrating strong academic performance, maintaining high levels of engagement with their institutions both in and out of the classroom, and matriculating toward graduation on time.
- Cognitive Factors - cognitive factors have been defined as the ability to perform mental processes involving reasoning, abstract thinking, problem-solving, and planning.
- Non-cognitive Factors - non-cognitive factors have been defined as personality traits or patterns of thought, feelings, and behavior. A few common examples of non-cognitive factors as social awareness, resilience, self-confidence, self-management, and motivation.

Start the Interview: Now that we've gotten the housekeeping items out of the way, it's time to start the interview.

Interview Questions:

- A. Experiences Throughout Educational Journey
 1. Tell me about your experience during your educational journey that impacted your decision to pursue doctoral education.
 - a. Let's start with high school.
 - b. What about undergraduate education?
 2. Did you face any barriers to success during the various stages of your educational journey? If yes, please describe them. If not, how have you been able to avoid encountering obstacles to success in pursuit of completion of your doctorate?
 - a. Any challenges associated with pre-college factors (i.e. (i.e., demographic characteristics, initial academic dispositions, academic preparation)
 - b. Any challenges associated with external influences (i.e., finances, employment, family influences)?
 - c. Any challenges associated with individual influences (i.e., sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and academic performance)?
- A. Non-cognitive factors (Researchers broadly defined non-cognitive factors as personality traits or patterns of thought, feelings, and behavior)
 - Positive self-concept, Realistic self-appraisal
 3. How would you describe yourself as an African American and first-generation student?
 4. Were there any challenges you faced at your institution that you believe are unique to African American students? If so, please explain.

- 5. Were there any challenges you faced at your institution that you believe are unique to first-generation college students? If so, how did you overcome those challenges?
- Successfully handling the system (racism)
- 6. Have you experienced any barriers to success associated with navigating the academic landscape of your institution? If yes, Can you describe them and how you were able to overcome them or how were you able to avoid the barriers?
- 7. Do you feel that your race or ethnic identity played a role in the experience that you had at the institution? If so, what role did it play?
- Preference of long-term goals
- 8. Did you ever consider leaving the program? Why or why not?
- Availability of strong support person
- 9. What inspired you to obtain a doctorate? Did you have a role model?
- 10. Who was your support system while getting your doctorate?
 - a. Faculty?
 - b. Peers?
 - c. Friends?
 - d. Family members?
- Leadership experience, Community Involvement
- 11. Please describe your level of commitment to community involvement inside and outside of school.
 - a. Leadership/involvement in the program
 - b. Leadership/involvement at the university
 - c. Leadership/involvement in the larger/local community
- Knowledge acquired in a field.
- 12. Do you feel you have the information required to succeed in doctoral education? What are non-traditional ways you have acquired knowledge?

C) Institutional Factors

- Experiences in Doctoral Program
- 13. Tell me about your experiences in your doctorate program at this institution.
 - a. Experience with Faculty
 - b. Experiences with Peers
 - c. Experiences with Department
- 14. In the doctoral program, can you talk about interactions you've experienced with other faculty that shape your identity as a first-generation? Can you describe your reaction to those interactions?
- 15. In what ways has the doctoral program hindered you in your pursuit of the degree? Any examples of specific interactions or events?
- Institutional Support
- 16. What kinds of programmatic support have you received in pursuit of your degree? Any examples of specific interactions or events?
- 17. Did you receive any institutional support that influenced your ability to persist?
 - a. Faculty?
 - b. Peers?
 - c. Staff members?
- 18. What institutional supports/constraints do you believe are in place for your graduate training?

- Campus Climate
 19. How would you describe the campus racial climate at your institution?
 - a. Have you experienced racism or racial microaggressions at your institution? If so, how have you maintained the commitment to obtain your doctorate?
- Financial Support
 20. To what degree does financial support from the institution influence your educational experiences in your degree program?

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