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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Unveiling the Influence of Intersectional Identity, Racialized Experiences, and Sense of
Belonging on the Persistence of Black School Psychology Students: A Mixed Methods
Exploration

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Education

by

KeAysia A. Jackson

June 2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Unveiling the Influence of Intersectional Identity, Racialized Experiences, and Sense of Belonging on the Persistence of Black School Psychology Students: A Mixed Methods Exploration

by

KeAysia A. Jackson

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Education
University of California, Riverside, June 2023
Dr. Eui Kyung Kim, Chairperson

The school psychology profession currently faces a significant shortage of Black school psychologists. While all school psychologists should be able to serve diverse students, research suggests that Black school psychologists are especially valuable for supporting Black K-12 students due to the racial marginalization they often face both inside and outside of school. To address this shortage, it is crucial to investigate the factors that impact the persistence of Black school psychology students in their graduate programs. Notably, Black school psychology students may encounter racialized experiences at the intersection of salient identity markers, such as gender and undergraduate affiliation, that may affect their sense of belonging and subsequent persistence. This proposed study will employ a mixed methods explanatory sequential design to explore the intersectionality of racialized experiences, their impact on students' sense of belonging, and how this sense of belonging influences their persistence. The findings from this research will empower school psychology programs to create supportive environments that foster the persistence and success of Black students in school psychology.

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**Unveiling the Influence of Intersectional Identity, Racialized Experiences, and Sense
of Belonging on the Persistence of Black School Psychology Students: A Mixed
Methods Exploration**

School psychologists play a crucial role in supporting students' academic and socioemotional success. However, the profession continues to grapple with a long-standing and growing shortage. This challenge is further compounded by a glaring underrepresentation of school psychologists of color. Even though students of color represented the majority of public elementary and secondary school students (54.2%) and the overwhelming majority of students served under IDEA (85%) as of the fall 2020-21 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), school psychologists of color represented only 9.8% of practicing professionals, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020). This underrepresentation is concerning as it can limit the ability of schools to provide culturally responsive services to students of color, contributing to the perpetuation of inequities in the education system.

Although all school psychologists, regardless of race and ethnicity, should be prepared to serve diverse students, the presence of educational professionals from minoritized groups is imperative to the academic and socioemotional success of students who are also members of these groups (McKinney de Royston et al., 2020; Maylor, 2009). Moreover, studies from related disciplines suggest that lack of racial concordance between mental health professionals and the clients they serve may impact their ability to effectively relate to clients and provide appropriate services (Yeh et al., 1994; Thompson

et al., 2006; Meyer & Zane, 2013). Recognizing this, the field has shown an increasing interest in addressing the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the profession (Schilling et al., 2021; National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). For example, NASP has developed recruitment initiatives such as the NASP exposure project and the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Ambassadors of recruitment project, which aim to increase the awareness and knowledge of school psychology to high school and undergraduate students. Additionally, school psychology research has attempted to identify retention strategies that are effective for racially and ethnically diverse students (Proctor & Owens, 2019) given that they are at greater risk of leaving their programs in the absence of these strategies (Schilling et al., 2021).

Although there have been some improvements in diversifying school psychology graduate programs (Gadke et al., 2022; Proctor & Truscott, 2012), this has not translated into a more diverse workforce. Moreover, school psychology programs often experience higher attrition rates than related fields like counseling and clinical psychology (American Psychological Association, 2016). Thus, more work is needed to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, receive the support that they need to persist and succeed in their graduate training.

The Increased Need for Black School Psychologists

A more representative workforce of racially diverse school psychologists may be especially salient to Black students, who face unique marginalization inside and outside of the school setting. For example, Black students are disproportionately overrepresented in special education categories that require significant amounts of clinical judgement

(such as Emotional Disturbance and Other Health Impairment). These special education placements carry poorer long-term outcomes, such as low graduation and employment rates (Graves & Wright, 2017; Skiba et al., 2006). Additionally, once identified for special education, Black students are frequently placed in substantially separate educational settings compared to their typically developing peers (Grindal et al., 2019). Compounding this, Black students are also subject to educator biases that result in lower expectations for their achievement and underrepresentation in gifted programs (Proctor et al., 2022; Ford & Grantham, 2003). Moreover, Black students are often subjected to various forms of racial marginalization, such as policing in schools, criminalization, and adultification, all of which cause physical and mental harm and contribute to the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Proctor et al., 2022; Turner & Beneke, 2020). Aside from school-based marginalization, Black students are witnesses and victims of societal injustices that affect their sense of well-being as well as their learning experiences. For example, Black children and youth may indirectly or directly be exposed to police violence against Black people, causing them to fear for their own safety given that they are similar to those who are killed (Proctor et al., 2020). Relatedly, recent attacks on pedagogy relating to systemic racism, Critical Race Theory, and African American studies (Hartocollis & Fawcett, 2023) create conditions that increase student anxiety and stress (Sondel et al., 2018).

Recent research has suggested that European American school psychologists may lack the necessary training, preparation, and experience needed to address these complex issues facing Black students. A study conducted by Proctor and colleagues (2020) found

that European American school psychologists and school psychology students received little exposure to topics such as police violence against Black people in their programs and did not receive adequate training on how to support Black students through these issues. Moreover, they felt underprepared to support students impacted by this form of violence. In contrast, Black school psychologists feel that they can connect well with Black students and families, particularly through affinity networks. They also view themselves as positive representations of the Black race for Black youth, countering negative stereotypes that Black children often receive about their educational and professional possibilities. Additionally, they may feel more prepared to advocate for Black students, particularly being mindful about disproportionality in school systems (Truscott et al., 2014).

The lack of training and preparation of European American school psychologists to address the complex issues facing Black students, coupled with the documented ability of Black school psychologists to connect with, represent, and advocate for Black students and families, emphasizes the necessity to prioritize the representation of Black school psychologists in the field. Doing so not only promotes a more diverse workforce but also addresses the historical and current disenfranchisement of Black students in the education system. This aligns with the profession's growing commitment to anti-racism and social justice (García-Vázquez et al., 2020).

Ensuring Black School Psychology Student Success: The Importance of Persistence

To increase the representation of Black school psychologists in K-12 schools, it is essential to prioritize the success of Black students in school psychology graduate

programs. Although diversity efforts thus far have primarily focused on recruitment and retention strategies, these strategies alone may not be sufficient to ensure successful program completion. Consequently, research aiming to promote the success of Black students may want to investigate persistence, a variable closely linked to retention. *Retention*, a program-controlled variable, describes the direct involvement of students in the academic and social life of their programs (Proctor et al., 2018). Some retention strategies recommended by NASP include retaining diverse faculty, providing students opportunities to work with diverse populations, creating a diverse student body, and including racial and ethnic minority students on research teams (Schilling et al., 2021). On the other hand, *persistence*, a student-controlled variable, describes a student's active continuous decision to remain enrolled in a program (Proctor et al., 2018). Proctor et. al (2018) suggested that retention and persistence strategies go hand-in-hand. That is, school psychology programs must establish systemic retention strategies to bolster students' fortitude to persist.

Black students, regardless of retention strategies used by their individual programs, often face internal and systemic racialized experiences that impact their ability to persist. These experiences come at the intersection of their complex identities, which is important to acknowledge because identity is multidimensional. For instance, while Black students may view their race as a defining aspect of their identity, they may also possess other marginalized and minoritized identities, such as being a woman or having an undergraduate affiliation with a Historically Black College or University (HBCU).

The subsequent sections will delve into the salience of gender and undergraduate affiliation in shaping the experiences of Black students.

Intersecting identities can expose students to bias or prejudice stemming from either individual or combined facets of their identity (Proctor et al., 2018). This bias can undermine students' perceived sense of fit, value, and belonging within their programs, ultimately impacting their decisions to persist. Thus, understanding the "invisible work" done by Black students to persist, as coined by Sabnis and colleagues (2023), is vital for optimizing their persistence alongside retention strategies. This understanding will empower programs to cultivate an environment that enables Black students to persist and succeed. Studies of persistence are limited in the school psychology field with little focus on Black students specifically. As such, there is a significant opportunity to expand current knowledge and examine how the unique experiences associated with Black identity shape the school psychology graduate experience.

Sense of Belonging as a Theoretical Framework for Understanding Persistence in Black School Psychology Students

Sense of belonging, or social connectedness, has consistently been predictive of, or associated with, the persistence of Black students at both the undergraduate and graduate level (Hausmann et al., 2007; Oocumma, 2020). Sense of belonging can be conceptualized as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environments so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p.173). In other words, a sense of belonging represents a person's perceived fit or perception of being valued within a particular environment. The most

prominent model that examines student belongingness is Tinto's model, which argues that social and academic integration are essential to student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Under this model, students are more likely to withdraw from their college campus when they are not integrated into their college community.

Hoffman and colleagues, with Tinto's theory as a foundational framework, developed a model to explain the sense of belonging in first-year undergraduate students. This model argues that a sense of belonging consists of 1) perceived student/peer support, 2) perceived faculty support/comfort, 3) perceived class comfort, 4) perceived isolation, and 5) empathetic faculty understanding (Hoffman et al., 2002). The first two factors describe the perception of feeling academically and socially supported by peers and faculty, including the extent to which students feel comfortable reaching out for help and how they feel that solicitation for help is received. Perceived class comfort describes the extent to which a student feels comfortable "speaking up" (asserting their opinions) and sharing their ideas in the classroom context. Perceived isolation describes how well students relate to others on a personal level and how well students believe others know and relate to them. Finally, empathetic faculty understanding refers to the perception that faculty members will be empathetic when difficult situations arise. The application of a sense of belonging framework in this study will assist in categorizing Black student experiences and perceptions, providing valuable insights into students' perceived alignment with the program and its impact on their persistence.

Critical Race Theory as a Conceptual Framework to Understand Black School

Psychology Student Experiences

Although Tinto's foundational model and subsequent understandings of belongingness informed by this model are useful in investigating belongingness as a facilitator of persistence, these models have received criticism. Specifically, researchers have questioned the validity of Tinto's model for students of color given that it adopts an acculturation/assimilation framework in which students of color must "integrate" and "conform" into spaces that disenfranchise them to be successful (Rendón et al., 2000; Alejandro et al., 2020). This model also fails to address the tangible systemic issues that contribute to a lower sense of belonging. Therefore, when considering the role of belongingness in the persistence of Black school psychology graduate students, it is important to recognize two key elements. First, one must recognize the realities around race that Black students must navigate. Second, one must consider the kinds of systems, practices, and policies within academia that negatively impact their sense of belonging. *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) is a conceptual framework that provides much needed context to the complex experiences of Black students in graduate programs.

CRT is a theory that was primarily developed in legal research as an outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies, challenging traditional legal scholarship and focusing on the specificity of individuals in groups and sociocultural contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The theory was introduced to the education field by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) as a tool to examine race, racism, and white supremacy within the education system. For the purposes of understanding Black graduate student experiences, this proposal will draw on

four tenets of CRT as outlined by Solórzano (1998): a) The Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism, b) The Challenge to Dominant Ideology, c) The Commitment to Social Justice, and d) The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge.

The Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism

One of the main tenets of CRT is that racism is likely permanent and endemic to daily life (Bell, 1992). Given that race is central to students' daily experiences, graduate students of color often experience racism on individual, institutional, and structural levels (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harris & Linder, 2018). As stated before, Black graduate students possess multiple complex identities that are not mutually exclusive (i.e., race, gender, undergraduate affiliation) and the intersectionality framework emphasizes that these identities interact with one another to shape racialized experiences in the graduate setting (Cooper, 2016; Crenshaw 1989). For example, Proctor and colleagues' (2017) study investigating microaggressions faced by racial/ethnic minority school psychology graduate students found that, although Black students reported the highest frequencies of racial microaggressions, Black males experienced notably higher frequencies than all other groups on assumptions of inferiority and school and workplace microaggressions. This was a significant finding that would not have been revealed if an intersectionality framework was not utilized in the study. Therefore, it is critical to understand that racialized experiences for Black graduate students are multifaceted and may vary depending on their various identities. At its core, grounding this work in intersectionality and centrality embodies social justice. This study will challenge inequity and exclusion (Case, 2017) by examining and contextualizing the experiences of students who belong to

multiple “othered” identities that contrast with the typical identity represented in school psychology (European American and Female).

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

CRT in education challenges traditional claims that the education system is objective, colorblind, and gender and racially neutral. It also challenges the notion of “equal opportunity,” which argues that talent, hard work, and one’s own merit are all that is needed to succeed in higher education (the myth of meritocracy; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As such, recognizing the intersectional oppression that Black graduate students face in academia dispels the myth of meritocracy (Villalpando, 2004) and allows for a more fruitful analysis of the systemic barriers that affect these students’ ability to thrive.

The Commitment to Social Justice

CRT scholars have an overall commitment to social justice, which involves empowering groups that have been minoritized. Within this, CRT scholars in education recognize that educational institutions have the potential to “oppress and marginalize” while simultaneously having the potential to “emancipate and empower” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As aforementioned, understanding the experiences of Black school psychology students is an act of social justice and anti-racism. Through this study, school psychology programs can be made aware of how they may “oppress and marginalize” Black students during graduate training experiences. Once they gain this awareness, they can make tangible efforts to mitigate harm and instead empower these students to succeed in their programs. This will allow them to become effective social justice agents for students in the K-12 system.

The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

CRT in education views educational curriculum to be “a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a white supremacist masterscript” (Ladson-Billings, 1998), particularly legitimizing dominant, White, upper class, male ideologies as “standard knowledge.” Consequently, Black stories and experiences are muted and erased when they challenge these dominant ideologies. Thus, the fourth tenet, *The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge*, disrupts this reality by recognizing that the experiential knowledge of Black school psychology students is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about various systemic injustices in the graduate setting (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, the CRT framework encourages qualitative agency of these students through counter-storytelling and personal narratives.

Overall, by employing Critical Race Theory (CRT), this study exemplifies social justice work and highlights the significance of recognizing and validating Black student experiences in the graduate setting. While the sense of belonging framework highlights the importance of student belongingness experiences for persistence, CRT further enriches our understanding by revealing that belongingness is impacted by intersectionally racialized experiences. By acknowledging the presence of systemic inequities, CRT also underscores the critical need to examine specific nuances Black students endure in the graduate setting.

Intersectionality of Identities and Sense of Belonging

Black Students at Historically White Colleges and Universities

Given that most school psychology programs are located within Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCUs) and are comprised of primarily European American faculty and students (Proctor et al., 2022), it is essential to understand how Black students navigate this setting. Generally, students of color often perceive HWCUs to be unwelcoming and racially discriminatory (Lewis et al., 2004; Harris & Linder, 2018; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). For example, Sailes (1993) found that racial tension and perceived hostility from the university environment were main drivers of non-persistence among 46 Black students at an HWCU. Similarly, racial microaggressions have been found to play a significant role in the attrition of Black school psychology students (Proctor & Truscott, 2012). Additionally, Lewis and colleagues (2004) found that Black doctoral students at HWCUs navigated perceived racism, such as social isolation and tokenism, at both individual and institutional levels. These general racialized experiences in the HWCU setting contribute to race-related stress, defined as "the emotional, physical, and psychological discomfort and pain resulting from experiences with racism" (Truong & Museus, 2012, p.228) and significantly impact Black students' sense of belonging, academic progress, and mental wellbeing (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009).

Unique Barriers Faced by HBCU-Affiliated African American Graduate Students

The HWCU setting can undoubtedly be a site of marginalization for all Black students. However, since efforts to enhance the diversity of the school psychology field

have been predominantly centered on recruiting from minority-serving institutions like HBCUs (Schilling et al., 2021), it is imperative to be cognizant of the challenges faced by Black graduate students as they transition from the HBCU environment to the HWCU environment. The experience of moving from one cultural milieu to another can create circumstances that may uniquely impact this group of students' sense of belonging and overall persistence.

The Significance of the HBCU as a Place of Liberation for Black Students

HBCUs represent a vital part of American higher education, established specifically to provide education to African Americans. The second Morrill Act of 1890 barred African Americans from attending publicly funded white institutions, perpetuating the notion that they were intellectually inferior to Whites and should receive a "separate and lower-caliber" education (Proctor et al., 2022; Harper et al., 2009). Despite these racist and essentialist motives, HBCUs have played a critical role in advancing the educational attainment and social mobility of Black people. HBCUs have shown remarkable success in graduating Black students, outpacing other institutions in this regard (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017), and boast social mobility rates that are twice the national average (Hammond et al., 2021). Moreover, HBCUs have produced a disproportionately high number of African American science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degree holders, highlighting their crucial role in promoting diversity in these fields (Clay, 2013).

To highlight the unique features of HBCUs and how they positively influence the lives of their students, it is important to understand the six goals at the core of these

institutions, as outlined by Brown and Davis: (a) preserve and maintain Black history and culture; (b) provide key leadership for the Black community; (c) serve as an economic center in the Black community; (d) provide Black role models to interpret the way that social, political, and economic forces impact Black people; (e) create competent Black graduates that can address issues between minoritized and dominant groups; and (f) produce Black change agents for research, training, and dissemination of information that improves the lives of Black people and other minoritized groups (Brown & Davis, 2001). As such, HBCUs aim to be facilitators of social agency and equity for Black people (Joseph, 2012) and support their students accordingly.

According to Fries-Britt & Turner (2002), students who attend HBCUs often feel a strong sense of belonging, akin to being a part of a family. For HBCU students, being on a campus where the culture, activities, and people reflect their values and identity also increases their desire and ability to be engaged and involved. For example, one student in Fries-Britt and Turner's study noted that the activities at HBCUs are designed with Black students in mind, making them feel included in the campus structure and environment (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Not only do HBCU students feel connected to the social environment of the institution, but they also perceive that they are given individual attention by faculty who go "far beyond the call of duty" to provide encouragement and support (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). The culmination of these factors offers students a solid foundation upon which they can establish a sense of pride and confidence in themselves and the Black community (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). As a result, HBCU students often undergo an identity transformation during their matriculation and develop

a strong sense of identity attached to their HBCU because of the institution's facilitation of that transformation (Joseph, 2012).

Difficulties in Transitioning from an HBCU to an HWCU for Graduate School

The transition from an HBCU environment to an HWCU environment for graduate school can be challenging for students, as they must adapt to a markedly different cultural setting and may experience marginalization related to their HBCU affiliation. As implied previously, HWCUs have been described as more hostile and isolated environments where there is a lack of faculty advice and support, students are expected to be independent, and where students rarely associate with programs outside of their own (Joseph, 2012). Socially, in contrast to the experiences of Black students in Fries-Britt & Turner's study, research suggests that Black students perceive social programs on HWCU campuses to be "special" efforts to reach out to Black students rather than genuine efforts to include them and integrate them into campus life (Joseph, 2012). In terms of racial marginalization, the legitimacy of HBCUs has historically been questioned by HWCUs and their faculty, who have assumed that HBCUs are academically inferior (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Joseph, 2012). As a result, HBCU students who transfer to HWCUs may have their intelligence, work ethic, commitment to education, and talent questioned by peers and faculty, making it harder for them to integrate into their new departmental culture (Joseph, 2012). Relatedly, HBCU-affiliated students may feel pressure to not ask for help from peers and faculty for fear of being labeled as "lazy", "unintelligent", or "rude/angry Black students from HBCUs" (Joseph, 2012). This lack of integration and resulting isolation can make it more likely for

HBCU-affiliated students to leave their program within the first two years (McCall, 2015; Joseph, 2012).

School Psychology Specific. In the context of school psychology, Proctor and Truscott's (2012) study of the reasons for Black student attrition from school psychology programs found that only HBCU-affiliated students indicated that race played a significant role in their relationships and subsequent departure. For example, one student noted being told by a professor that students from HBCUs "didn't tend to do well" and she perceived that this professor "spoonfed" her the exact wording of a test, assuming that this was what she needed to pass.

Additionally, students who come from HBCUs may feel uncertain about the field's inclusivity and relevance to their community. This is partly because HBCU leaders do not endorse school psychology as a favorable career choice (Graves Jr. and Wright, 2009; Beeks & Graves, 2017). Beeks and Graves (2017) conducted a study which revealed that HBCU department chairs perceived school psychology to be "against the full development of Black youth" due to its historical association with testing and placing Black children in special education. Furthermore, department chairs did not believe that school psychology addresses topics such as racial identity, Black strengths, or Black family issues, nor do they focus on Black children in a non-deficit way (Beeks & Graves, 2017). Although the school psychology community is making efforts to build trust and relationships with HBCUs, this dynamic, paired with the aforementioned

considerations, may uniquely underprepare HBCU-affiliated students to navigate the school psychology graduate experience.

Unique Gender-Based Barriers faced by African American School Psychology Students

In addition to HBCU affiliation, gender is a significant factor that influences the experiences of Black school psychology students. This assertion finds support in existing research in the field. For example, research by Proctor and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that Black school psychology students frequently encounter race-based microaggressions regardless of gender, but Black men notably experience these microaggressions at a higher frequency compared to Black women. Specifically, Black men face significantly higher instances of assumptions of inferiority, whereby they are perceived as intellectually or socioeconomically inferior based on their race. Black men also face significantly higher school and workplace microaggressions, such as being overlooked during group discussions or having their work deemed inferior to work produced by other racial groups. Interestingly, Proctor and Truscott (2012) found that one Black male program leaver perceived his identity as a Black man in school psychology as inherently "political and oppositional" among a cohort comprised entirely of European American women. Consequently, he felt apprehensive about his fit and avoided participating in social gatherings or cohort-related activities.

In a similar vein, it has been empirically demonstrated that Black women also encounter distinct forms of marginalization within the school psychology program setting. For instance, Black women also endure high frequencies of workplace and school

microaggressions in their school psychology programs (Proctor et al., 2018). As another example, Black women often report exercising restraint when it comes to expressing their opinions, anger, and frustration within the graduate environment. This limitation stems from the apprehension of being negatively labeled as the stereotypical "angry Black woman," especially in situations where they must respond to microaggressions or perceived acts of disrespect (Jones, 2023). Additionally, Black women enrolled in school psychology programs often experience a sense of obligation to address matters of equity and diversity due to the perception that others may not speak out (Sabnis et al., 2023). Furthermore, Black women encounter distinct racialized and gendered experiences that are closely tied to their physical appearance, particularly concerning their hair. For example, one Black student in Sabnis and Colleagues' (2023) school psychology persistence study debated conforming to Eurocentric definition of "professionalism" by straightening her hair versus embracing her cultural identity and serving as representation for Black girls in K-12 schools by wearing her hair natural.

Although these gendered experiences are certainly not exhaustive, the findings presented suggest that Black school psychology students may encounter unique experiences of gendered "othering" and feelings of isolation, which profoundly influence their sense of belonging and ability to persist.

The Need for the Proposed Study

In summary, Black school psychology students face unique experiences at the intersection of their multiple identities (i.e., race, gender, and undergraduate affiliation). These experiences significantly impact their sense of belonging and, consequently, their

ability to persist in their programs. A robust sense of belonging allows them to access and utilize persistence mechanisms that contribute to their holistic success. However, when they encounter marginalization in their program experiences, their sense of belonging may weaken; this requires them to employ cumbersome persistence mechanisms to protect themselves, which can be exhausting and isolating. Therefore, it is not sufficient for programs to solely employ retention strategies. Rather, it is imperative for programs to intricately understand Black student experiences and optimize their ability to persist without being exhausted and disillusioned. As such, conducting a study that explores the relationships between intersectional identities, racialized experiences, sense of belonging, and persistence in detail is crucial to ensuring the success of Black school psychology students.

The Proposed Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a wider breadth and depth of understanding of Black school psychology graduate students' persistence in their graduate programs. A mixed methods social justice design will be conducted, in which CRT and Hoffman's sense of belonging theory will serve as overarching frameworks for the study. The study will use an explanatory sequential design, gathering quantitative and qualitative data sequentially. This involves obtaining statistical quantitative results in the first phase and then following up with a smaller number of individuals from the quantitative phase to explain or elaborate upon those results in more depth.

In the quantitative phase, survey data will be collected from Black school psychology graduate students across the United States to test the hypothesis that

intersectional identities and racialized experiences impact a sense of belonging, which in turn affect students' persistence. In the qualitative phase, the tentative plan is to conduct semi-structured interviews with selected representative participants from the quantitative phase to help explain significant, surprising, or unexpected findings. Additionally, participants will be asked to reflect on how their racialized experiences impact their sense of belonging and how that subsequently impacts their intentions to persist. These two forms of data will be integrated to unveil complex marginalization in the graduate space, reveal retention strategies (or lack thereof) that school psychology programs currently employ, understand persistence mechanisms, and elevate the voices of Black students.

As stated before, identity can comprise many factors, such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and sexuality. Given the evidence mentioned above suggesting that some identity markers may carry unique experiences for Black students in the graduate setting (i.e., gender, undergraduate affiliation), this study will target those identities and specific experiences. As such, the research questions are as follows:

Research Questions for the Quantitative Analyses

1. What is the interaction effect of undergraduate affiliation (i.e., non-HBCUs vs. HBCUs) and gender (i.e., man, woman, transgender man, transgender woman, non-binary, self-describe) on the sense of belonging in Black school psychology students?
2. After controlling for undergraduate affiliation and gender, does the sense of belonging have a significant positive relationship with the intention to persist for Black school psychology students?

Research Questions for the Qualitative Analyses

1. Based on quantitative findings, how do Black school psychology students understand racialized experiences based on their intersecting identities to impact their sense of belonging?
2. In what ways do Black school psychology students perceive their sense of belonging impacting their intention to persist in their program?

Methodology

Philosophical Assumptions Guiding Methodology

The researcher's worldviews are primarily constructivist and transformative, with elements of pragmatism, which informs her approach to the methodology of this study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). In terms of ontology, the researcher believes that both singular and multiple realities exist, and multiple realities are shaped by social and cultural identity markers. These identity markers, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, offer different power positionalities in society. The fact that identities are intersectional gives way to even more nuanced understandings of reality from individual to individual, and as such, multiple perspectives are needed from multiple participants to truly understand the complexity of a phenomenon like the graduate school experiences of Black school psychology students. In terms of epistemology, the researcher posits that knowledge is not neutral, research can never be “fully” objective, and the positionality of the researcher(s) is important in all aspects of the research process. The researcher also champions being in direct contact with participants through means such as interviews and

believes that researchers should actively involve participants in the research process (such as inviting them to review findings).

Building upon the researcher's belief that positionality matters, a guiding axiology is that researcher subjectivity can be fruitful and informative. This is especially true when the researcher is a minoritized individual researching their own community, facilitating the use of counter-narratives and storytelling. As such, the researcher champions the discussion of subjectivity and how that influences the conducting and interpretation of research. Therefore, in terms of methodology, the researcher values the mixing of qualitative and quantitative data to explain phenomena, using quantitative methods to tap into ideas of a singular reality across a certain group but using the qualitative strand to highlight the multiple realities that those in the group experience.

Study Design: Mixed Methods Explanatory Sequential Design

As aforementioned, this study will employ a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), which is a framework for collecting, integrating, and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data within a single study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The rationale for conducting a mixed methods design is that there are limited studies that aim to understand the experiences of Black graduate students in school psychology specifically, and current studies primarily use one methodology (primarily qualitative or conceptual). While all methodologies are undoubtedly valuable on their own, mixed methodology provides a way to harness strengths that offset the individual weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). When combined in a single study, quantitative and qualitative methods can

complement each other and provide a more complete picture of the experiences of Black graduate students. Since the success of Black school psychology graduate students is part of a national, profession-wide effort, it would be advantageous to gain an understanding of their experiences that is both nuanced and more generalizable to the population of Black school psychology students as a whole.

This study will specifically use an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (quan→QUAL), consisting of two distinct phases. In this design, the quantitative, numeric data are collected and analyzed first, while qualitative data are collected and analyzed second in sequence. This way, quantitative results help to inform general relationships among variables (gender, undergraduate affiliation, sense of belonging, persistence) while qualitative data can help to build that understanding and better inform intention to persist (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Given that the literature available is primarily qualitative or conceptual, there is sufficient evidence to suggest what variables are worthy of investigation, hence the quantitative strand appearing first in sequence. Then, qualitative data will be used to add nuance to this broad understanding. Qualitative data is emphasized in this design to honor the CRT tradition of the centrality of experiential knowledge.

Target Population

The proposed target population for this study is self-identified Black or African American students currently enrolled in NASP-approved graduate degree programs (Master, Specialist, Doctoral) in the United States. Students can be anywhere from their first year to their internship year, but they must not have graduated yet. If students are in

their first year, they must have taken courses for at least one quarter or semester (depending on the university layout) to have enough time to determine their sense of belonging. Exclusion criteria include non-Black students, practicing psychologists, and students who are not in a NASP-approved program.

The Quantitative Phase

Procedure

The researcher will recruit participants from school psychology graduate programs across the United States through nonprobabilistic sampling (snowball sampling), in which participants are identified through other participants (i.e., the researcher asks a participant to share study information with those who meet the inclusion criteria; Noy, 2008). The researcher will also recruit participants by emailing the directors of school psychology programs and disseminating recruitment flyers via social media. The rationale for these recruitment methods is that there is a limited estimated number of Black school psychology graduate students, and it is difficult to identify and access them. For example, Proctor and colleagues attempted to survey a similar population (Black Master's Specialist students only) but were unsuccessful in recruiting enough participants to yield adequate power for the data to be meaningful (Proctor et al., 2018). Therefore, utilizing networks-based recruitment methods may be most effective in obtaining participants. The rationale behind re-attempting to meaningfully sample this population is that there may be a larger population of students who are available to respond; this is due to increasing efforts to recruit more racially diverse students since the publishing of that study.

The researcher will create a list of all directors of NASP-approved school psychology programs using information made available by NASP on their website. Utilizing this list, the researcher will send a recruitment email to program directors with a link to the survey, requesting that they disseminate it to Black students currently enrolled in their programs, if applicable. With snowball sampling, participants will be asked to share the survey link with individuals whom they believe meet the inclusion criteria for the study. All flyers disseminated on social media will also contain the link to the survey.

Survey data will be collected anonymously through Qualtrics. When participants click on the survey, they will be presented with an informed consent form, which will include information about both qualitative and quantitative portions of the study, participant rights, and the contact information of the researcher if there are any questions before the individual participates. The informed consent page will have two options: to consent to only the survey, or to consent to both the survey and interview, if selected to participate. Once participants give consent, they will be asked about their demographic information, including age, gender identity, race, undergraduate affiliation (HBCU vs HWCU/PWI), year in the program, degree the participant is working toward (Master's level, Specialist-level, Doctoral level), and geographic location of their program (i.e., Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West). Then, items from an instrument that measures sense of belonging will be presented, along with a question that gauges participants' intentions to persist. At the end of the survey, participants will be asked to share their email addresses if they indicated that they were interested in participating in

the qualitative portion of the study, along with links to mental health resources, given the potential emotionally distressing nature of the survey.

Instruments

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging will be measured using a version of the Sense of Belonging Scale- Revised (SOBS-R) (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003) that was reduced by Tovar and Simon (2010). The original SOBS measured various aspects of student belongingness in a program context and included 26 items. These items made up four subscales: Perceived peer support, perceived classroom comfort, perceived isolation, and perceived faculty support. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = *completely true*, 5 = *completely untrue*); as such, lower scores on the SOBS indicate a higher sense of belonging. Tovar and Simon (2010) assessed the psychometric properties and factorial structure of the SOBS and proposed a reduced 16 item scale with three subscales: Perceived classroom comfort, perceived peer support, and perceived faculty understanding/comfort. This scale reports its internal consistency as follows: Total Sense of Belonging Scale $\alpha = 0.89$, perceived faculty understanding/comfort $\alpha = 0.90$, perceived peer support $\alpha = 0.89$, and perceived classroom comfort $\alpha = 0.90$ (Tovar & Simon, 2010). A sample item from the perceived faculty understanding/comfort subscale is “If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (i.e., during office hours, etc.). Prior research demonstrates the appropriateness of this scale with an ethnically diverse sample of undergraduates (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003) and Asian

American graduate students (Holloway-Friesen, 2018), and touches upon belongingness factors suggested in previous literature.

Persistence

Persistence will be assessed using a single-item self-report “intention to persist” measure. This measure has been adapted from a previous study conducted by Hausmann et al. (2007) and has been applied to assess persistence in both African American and European American college students. While intention to persist and actual persistence are not synonymous constructs, empirical evidence supports a strong association between intention to persist and actual persistence, thereby validating its use as an outcome measure in persistence research (Hausmann et al., 2007). The specific item employed in this study will be "I intend to complete my school psychology degree at my institution." Participants will be asked to rate their level of agreement with this statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*. By directly soliciting participants' self-assessment of persistence, this measure enables a straightforward and explicit evaluation of their subjective perceptions and intentions.

Analytic Plan

Once survey data collection is complete, data cleaning will occur, consisting of deletion and correction of errors in the dataset such as missing values and incomplete surveys. As data cleaning occurs, inconsistencies, outliers, and odd or surprising results will be noted and considered for the qualitative portion of the study. Then, descriptive statistics will be conducted on the independent and dependent variables. To examine the first research question, a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to

facilitate the testing of the interaction effects of gender and undergraduate affiliation on sense of belonging. Post-hoc analyses will be conducted to determine the significance of pairwise comparisons between the levels of undergraduate affiliation and gender on the experiences of sense of belonging. Significant differences between groups will be further explored in the qualitative portion of the study. For the second research question, a simple regression will be conducted to test whether sense of belonging has a significant positive relationship with intention to persist.

Note on Gender

An important consideration to note is that gender is often treated as dichotomous in research literature, which fails to encompass the diverse range of gender presentations in society. To address this, the survey in this study will offer multiple gender options, including woman, man, transgender man, transgender woman, non-binary/gender non-conforming, and a qualitative self-describe option. This inclusive approach aims to better capture the complexity of gender identity. However, it is anticipated that the sample size of individuals with minoritized gender identities (those not identifying as a woman or man) may be small. Consequently, it may not be feasible statistically to compare these groups against those who identify as a woman or man. In such case, employing descriptive statistics will be particularly valuable in quantitatively understanding the experiences of this population. To gain a more comprehensive understanding that descriptive statistics may not capture, a sample of gender minoritized individuals may intentionally be invited for interviews to allow for a deeper exploration of their

experiences. This way, this study may provide a starting point to explore the gender intricacies in Black students further.

Reliability and Validity

Although the survey instruments employed in this proposed study have shown sufficient levels of reliability and validity, there exist potential threats to the validity of the data analysis, mainly associated with utilizing convenience sampling techniques. While the study's attempt to identify members of the population from multiple sources, including social media recruitment, snowball sampling, and emailing program directors, may be less biased than a single form of convenience sampling, this method still poses threats to validity. One of the most significant threats to the validity of this study is selection bias, which can result in the overrepresentation of individuals who are easily accessible or close to the researcher. In addition, self-selection bias may arise, given that individuals with stronger opinions on the topic are more likely to participate in the study (Bethlehem, 2010). The culmination of these factors may potentially lead to an inaccurate representation of the population under study. The researcher acknowledges that these issues may impact generalizability, and therefore, results should be cautiously interpreted.

The Qualitative Phase

Procedure

For the qualitative phase of the study, semi-structured interviews will be used as a primary data collection technique. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility, a dialogue between researcher and participants, and opportunities for follow-up questions,

probes, and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). To select participants for semi-structured interviews, a purposeful sample will be used, which involves intentionally selecting individuals to understand the central phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Due to the sequential nature of the study, this sample will include individuals who participated in the quantitative phase.

There are several reasons for the sample selection method for the qualitative phase. First, these individuals are “information rich” (Patton, 1990), meaning they can best answer the research questions based on their identities and willingness to participate in the quantitative portion. Relatedly, it is likely that those who respond to the survey are the only individuals from the population who will also be available for qualitative interviews. Second, since these individuals participated in the quantitative portion, they are the quintessential individuals to be able to add context to qualitative inquiry. The qualitative sample is anticipated to be smaller than the quantitative sample; this is because explanatory sequential design does not seek to converge data, but rather uses qualitative data to further explain the quantitative data.

Among participants who indicate an interest in participating in an interview, the researcher will select participants that differ in their scores on significant predictors so that the reasons behind different results might be further examined (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), given the research aim of investigating how intersectionality impacts experiences. Depending on the feasibility of the planned quantitative analysis, the researcher may alternatively select participants for interviews who are typical or representative of different identity groups (HBCU graduates, Male-identifying students,

female-identifying students, gender minoritized students etc.). This may involve conducting descriptive analyses on typical trends within these identity groups.

The content of the semi-structured interview protocol will be grounded in the quantitative results from the first phase of the study and will elaborate upon them, consisting of questions relating to racialized program experiences, feelings regarding a sense of belonging, and intentions to persist through their programs (or into the field for those in their internship year). To honor the social justice framework of involving participants in research, interviewees will also be asked at the end if there was anything that they would have liked to have been asked, or anything that they would like to add to the study. Interviews will be pilot tested with an individual who meets inclusion criteria for the study, and their responses will be excluded from the full study. The purpose of the piloting will be to gain information on the clarity of the interview questions and to potentially glean suggestions for their relevance to the study aim.

All interviews will be conducted via Zoom to facilitate accessibility and will last approximately one hour. As aforementioned, only those who provided their email addresses at the end of the quantitative survey will be among those chosen to participate in the qualitative interviews. Identified participants will be invited to sign up for an interview date and time using a meeting scheduling tool, such as Calendly. After signing up, participants will receive an email with a zoom link and password to ensure confidentiality. This email will additionally include expectations and instructions for the zoom meeting; to give participants agency over their narratives and further ensure confidentiality, they will be asked to change their zoom name to a pseudonym of their

choice. Additionally, participants will be informed that they will be video and audio recorded and they are able to turn off their camera at any time during the interview. On the day of the interview, the interviewer will remind participants of their rights under the informed consent and ask participants if they had any additional questions about it. All participants will be allowed to withdraw from the study prior to the completion of the interview and before any compensation is given (if applicable); however, participants will be informed at the beginning of the interview that they are unable to withdraw once compensation is given.

Analytic Plan

Thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, organizing, describing, and reporting themes within a qualitative dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) will be used to analyze the data from the qualitative arm of this study. The use of thematic analysis allows for examining the perspectives of research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and revealing unanticipated insights (Nowell et al., 2017). The thematic analysis will be guided by the six steps developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, the researcher and potential research assistants will familiarize themselves with the data. All interviews will be transcribed verbatim and then checked for accuracy. Then, research team members will engage in a preliminary exploration of the data by reading transcripts and writing memos or noting ideas, particularly noting possible ideas for coding. Secondly, transcripts will be uploaded into a qualitative coding software, such as Dedoose, to facilitate effective coding of the transcripts. The research team will highlight sections of the text (phrases or sentences) of a few interviews to

describe their content. After this, the research team will come together to create a codebook, where all team members agree on how to code certain phrases, sentences, and ideas. Then, the team will work to establish a sufficient intercoder reliability and agreement (Campbell et al., 2013) to ensure consistency across interview transcripts. Then, every interview will be coded according to guidelines set by the codebook. Third, the research team will review the labeled text, identify patterns among codes, and then develop themes based on those patterns. Fourth, the team will review themes to ensure that they are useful and accurate representations of the data. At this stage, combining, changing, creating, or discarding themes might be necessary to ensure that they represent the data well. Fifth, the team will generate clear and descriptive names and definitions of themes, ensuring that they embody the story that the data is trying to convey. Finally, the team will create a detailed write-up of the findings, selecting compelling and descriptive examples that relate back to the research questions, literature, and quantitative portion of the study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a widely known and utilized metric in the literature to persuade researchers and their audiences that their qualitative research findings are robust and worthy of attention (Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined trustworthiness using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to parallel the conventional quantitative reliability and validity measures.

To enhance the credibility of the qualitative analysis in this study, intercoder agreement will be used to ensure triangulation of data among researchers. This process

involves multiple coders reviewing the data and ensuring consensus in the coding process, as aforementioned. To ensure transferability, “thick descriptions” will be used, allowing readers to judge the applicability of the findings to their own contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, member-checking (Birt et al., 2016) will be utilized, allowing participants to review discussions of the findings and provide feedback or suggestions if desired.

To establish dependability, an audit trail will be maintained, providing readers with evidence of decisions and choices made during the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). This includes the detailed coding process, and additionally includes the researcher’s use of a reflexive journal, where she will document day-to-day research logistics, methodological decisions, rationales, and personal reflections of her researcher's values, interests, and insights during the research process (Nowell et al., 2017).

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Data

In line with the goals of explanatory sequential design, a sequential integration approach (Morse & Niehaus, 2009) will be used to connect the qualitative findings to the quantitative findings. Through a joint display described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), the researcher will illustrate both strands of the results and emphasize the value of the mixed methods approach in answering the research questions.

Advantages and Limitations of Explanatory Sequential Design

As reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of the quantitative arm and qualitative arm have been addressed separately, it is worth noting the advantages and limitations of

explanatory sequential mixed method design as a methodology. These advantages and limitations have been discussed widely throughout the literature and are as follows.

Advantages of this design are that it is easier to implement for a single researcher, as it proceeds from one stage to another sequentially as opposed to concurrently. As stated previously, this design is useful for exploring quantitative data while also honoring the voices and experiences of the participants in a study. However, this design comes with practical limitations. Firstly, this design is relatively lengthy to complete (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) and requires the feasibility to obtain robust amounts of both kinds of data, which heavily requires participant response. Explanatory sequential design also requires information from the quantitative arm of the study to partially inform the qualitative, therefore potentially causing issues with obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. To prepare for this, when going to obtain IRB approval, the researcher will frame participant selection and proposed interview protocol content for the quantitative arm while acknowledging that those aspects may need to be revised at a later stage in the study. Additionally, a threat to the validity of the design is that the quantitative arm could fail to identify important results to explain. To combat this, the researcher will consider all possibilities for explanations for results (i.e., significant predictors and non-significant predictors). Along those lines, the quantitative findings could fail to explain qualitative results. To combat this, the researcher will design the semi-structured interview protocol in a way that probes for surprising results or results that require explaining (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Ethical Considerations, Protection of Participants, and Research Permissions

Ethical considerations will be carefully addressed throughout all phases of the study. The University of California, Riverside Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations will be followed to ensure that all ethical requirements are met. To begin with, the IRB Application for Use of Human Participants/subjects in research will be completed, providing detailed information about the project, including its significance, methodology, and procedures. The application will also detail how the privacy, safety, and confidentiality of participants will be ensured. The study is expected to pose minimal risk to participants, although it may involve recalling uncomfortable or emotional experiences. However, the negative emotional impact should not extend beyond the scope of the interview or cause any psychological harm that is beyond what is experienced in daily life. Also, participants will not be required to answer any questions they do not want to.

Prior to participating in the survey, participants will be presented with an informed consent form that will explain their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw from the study, the right to not answer questions, and the acknowledgement that their rights are protected. Participants are reminded again of their rights if they are selected to participate in an interview.

The anonymity of participants will be protected by numerically coding each returned survey, and only the researcher, potential research assistants, and the researcher's doctoral advisor will have access to the data. A master list with interview participants' names and pseudonyms, and the audio and transcriptions from interviews,

will be saved on the researcher's university google drive (not personal laptops). Any identifiable information will be deleted upon completion of the entire study. When descriptions of findings are shared with participants, they will be aggregated, coded, and de-identified before sharing. Participants will also be informed that summary data will be disseminated in scholarly literature, but their identities will not be traceable.

Role and Positionality of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this proposed study is dynamic and changes as the research progresses through the quantitative and qualitative phases. During the quantitative phase, the researcher will create and administer the survey, recruit participants, conduct reliability and validity checks, and perform statistical analysis to obtain meaning from established values for statistical significance. In the qualitative phase, the researcher will adopt a more participatory role, drawing on her "sustained and extensive experience with participants" (Creswell, 2003) as well as her positionality toward the topic.

The researcher is a Black woman, an HBCU graduate, and a doctoral student in a school psychology program with an advocacy and social justice-oriented worldview. This intersectional identity undoubtedly influences her decision to embark on this project. As a member of the group being studied, the researcher may develop cordial and supportive understanding of some of the participants. Although the researcher posits that researcher positionality is important to understanding unique experiences of marginalized groups, this positionality also introduces the potential for criticism of "Me-search" (Gardner et al., 2017).

Despite these concerns, there is value in research where the researcher has a firsthand understanding of the community being studied. This can enhance the researcher's ability to connect with research subjects and promote richer data analysis, facilitating interpretive insight that may be lost on researchers who are not part of the group being studied (Ayoub & Rose, 2016). Moreover, it is important to recognize that the researcher's identity is intersectional and not monolithic, and she differs from some participants in ways that may offset subjectivity. For example, the researcher does not have experience being a masters/specialist level student or attending an undergraduate HWCU, and she is only approaching her third year in her program. Nonetheless, to address critical biases that might threaten the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of the study, the researcher will take steps to ensure reflexivity and minimize problematic bias. Furthermore, she will receive careful advising from her advisor and committee members on all research procedures and data analysis in the study. While acknowledging the role of subjectivity in this study, the researcher's positionality and identity can enrich the research process and provide valuable insights that may not be attainable through other means.

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