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Surviving, Thriving, and Everything In-Between: A Black Immigrant Woman's Social Work PhD Journey

Chinonyerem Nwachukwu https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5051-533X

[1] University of Calgary, Canada; chinonyerem.nwachukw@ucalgary.ca
* Correspondence: chinonyerem.nwachukw@ucalgary.ca

ABSTRACT

Doctoral education is often framed as an intellectual pursuit; however, it is also an emotional, social, and identity-shaping journey. For international and immigrant students, these experiences are frequently complicated by systemic inequities, cultural expectations, and challenges of belonging within new academic environments. This autoethnographic paper presents a narrative account of my PhD journey as a Black immigrant woman in Canadian higher education. Drawing on autoethnography and narrative inquiry, I reflect on the "good, bad, ugly, funny, and in-between" aspects of doctoral study and situate these experiences within broader scholarship on doctoral education, supervision, and student well-being. The narrative highlights the interplay between intellectual growth and structural challenges, including institutional bureaucracy, power dynamics, imposter syndrome, and the emotional demands of researching mental illness stigma. It also illustrates how supportive supervisors, peers, family, humor, faith, and community solidarity contributed to my persistence and resilience. This paper argues that doctoral education should be understood not only as an academic endeavor but also as a deeply human experience shaped by identity, relationships, and institutional context. Recognizing these complexities is essential for fostering more inclusive, equitable, and supportive doctoral environments for international and immigrant students.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Black immigrant women, Canada, doctoral education, identity formation, international students, narrative inquiry

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INTRODUCTION

When I began my PhD journey in Social Work at the University of Calgary, I was excited and hopeful, imagining a steady path of intellectual curiosity, deep reflection, and meaningful contributions to the field. As Lee and Boud (2009) note, however, doctoral education is less a straightforward path and more a complex "process of becoming," where students are continually challenged to negotiate shifting roles, expectations, and identities (p. 7). What I did not anticipate was the rollercoaster of emotions, challenges, and unexpected moments that would shape me as much as the research itself. This reality reflects what Lovitts (2001) identifies as the complex nature of doctoral study, where persistence is not solely about academic skill but also about navigating institutional structures, supervisory relationships, and the emotional dimensions of the doctoral process. Similarly, Gardner (2009) emphasizes that doctoral education is a developmental journey in which students continually adapt to shifting expectations, roles, and sources of support.

Doctoral education has been widely studied, with scholars highlighting both its rewards and its difficulties, particularly for international students who navigate academic, cultural, and psychosocial challenges alongside opportunities for personal and professional growth (Gao, 2021; Mao, 2022). As an example, McAlpine and Norton (2006) argue that the PhD is not only a research training process but also a deeply personal and professional journey that often exposes students to stress, uncertainty, and the negotiation of complex institutional systems. On the one hand, the PhD offers opportunities for intellectual growth, professional advancement, and the development of a scholarly identity as students acquire advanced research skills, disciplinary expertise, and professional competencies (Gardner, 2008; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Research also consistently highlights the challenges of academic pressure, institutional bureaucracy, financial stress, and the emotional toll of research among doctoral students (Hazell et al., 2020; Kismihók et al., 2022; Levecque et al., 2017). Feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome are common across programs and often lead students to question their abilities despite demonstrating success (Bravata et al., 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978). These challenges do not affect all students equally. For those from marginalized backgrounds, including racialized, immigrant, and first-generation students, the PhD journey is further complicated by systemic inequities, racism, and microaggressions within higher education (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989).

My own experience as a Black immigrant woman reflects these complexities. I entered my PhD program with the dual aspirations of contributing to social work scholarship and of caution born from earlier experiences of marginalization during my master's studies in Canada. This duality aligns with recent research showing that Black international graduate students in Canadian universities frequently report racial disparities, even as institutions assert commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (Colley et al., 2025). My positionality shaped not only how I engaged with my doctoral program but also how I interpreted the struggles and triumphs that defined my journey. These dynamics mirror findings that Black African immigrant women in Canada often navigate systemic inequities shaped by race, gender, and immigrant status, which influence both academic and professional trajectories (Amoako et al., 2024).

While I experienced moments of deep growth and accomplishment, I also faced obstacles that tested my resilience, including ethics reviews, heavy workloads, and the challenge of navigating supervisory expectations. At the same time, humor, solidarity with peers, and encouragement from family members sustained me, reflecting scholarship that emphasizes how immigrant women draw resilience and well-being from social and community networks despite experiences of exclusion and isolation (Crawford, 2024; MacDonnell et al., 2024).

This paper offers a first-person reflective narrative of my doctoral journey, written through the combined lenses of autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2022), narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and critical self-reflection (Klefbeck, 2025; Proud & Morgan, 2021). This paper shares both the challenges and moments that shaped my PhD experience, situating these reflections within the broader literature on doctoral education. By presenting my journey through the themes of The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, The Funny, and Everything In-Between, I aim to illustrate the transformative dimensions of doctoral study, particularly as experienced by a Black immigrant woman in higher education in Canada. In doing so, this reflection contributes to ongoing conversations about doctoral student well-being, persistence, and identity formation while offering insights into how doctoral programs can better support diverse students and foster more inclusive academic environments.

While a growing body of literature has examined doctoral student well-being, supervision, and identity development (Gardner, 2008; Martínez-García et al., 2024; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018), relatively little research has explored these experiences through the lens of Black immigrant women in Canadian social work doctoral education. Existing research often relies on surveys and broad analyses that may overlook the emotional, relational, and identity-based dimensions of doctoral study. This autoethnographic narrative addresses this gap by providing an in-depth account of how race, gender, immigrant status, and professional identity intersect to shape the doctoral journey.

To explore these experiences in depth and highlight the complexities of doctoral education from the perspective of a Black immigrant woman, this study employs an autoethnographic narrative inquiry approach.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper presents an autoethnographic narrative inquiry into my journey as a Social Work PhD candidate at the University of Calgary. Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that uses the researcher's personal experiences as data to understand broader cultural and social phenomena (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than treating the self as separate from the research context, autoethnography uses personal experience as a lens to examine and understand broader cultural, institutional, and structural realities (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography combines personal narratives with critical analysis, situating the researcher's lived experience within broader cultural, social, and institutional contexts (Adams et al., 2022; Bochner & Ellis, 2022). In this study, my doctoral journey serves as a site for exploring how identity, migration, race, and academic structures shape the experiences of Black immigrant students in higher education.

Narrative inquiry emphasizes the storied nature of experience, recognizing that people make meaning of their lives through the construction and retelling of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to this task because it acknowledges that stories are central to how individuals make sense of their experiences and identities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Similarly, autoethnography allows researchers to critically situate the personal within broader cultural, institutional, and systemic contexts, making visible how individual experiences both reflect and resist wider structures of power (Adams et al., 2022). Recent scholarship underscores that narrative and autoethnographic approaches offer powerful ways to foreground marginalized voices, illuminate the affective and relational dimensions of doctoral education, and disrupt the dominance of purely quantitative accounts (Birindelli, 2023; Cong-Lem, 2025; Hjalmarson & Xu, 2022; Xu, 2023). By embracing narrative inquiry and autoethnography, this paper not only validates lived experience as knowledge but also exemplifies the reflective and justice-oriented ethos central to social work research.

By weaving these two approaches together, I use my own doctoral journey as both a site and a source of inquiry. Writing itself also became a method of inquiry through which I interpreted, organized, and made meaning of my experiences (Richardson, 2000). Through this process, I aim to contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities of doctoral education in social work. It required me to continuously reflect on my research paradigms, methodological choices, and theoretical frameworks, ensuring that I could clearly justify why particular approaches were best suited to my study. Such critical reflection is increasingly recognized as an essential component of the development of a doctoral identity (Klefbeck, 2025; Xu & Hjalmarson, 2022).

Autoethnography is particularly appropriate, as this paper focuses on my lived experience as a doctoral student (Chang, 2008). Narrative inquiry complements this approach by providing a framework for understanding how experiences are constructed, interpreted, and communicated through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Together, these methodologies allow me to examine not only what happened during my doctoral journey but also how I made meaning of those experiences as a Black immigrant woman in Canadian higher education.

My positionality shapes both the content and interpretation of this narrative. As a Black immigrant woman, my engagement with doctoral study in Canada is filtered through the intersecting lenses of race, gender, migration, and professional identity. These identities influence how I experience academia, how I navigate structures of power and supervision, and how I reflect on challenges such as racism, imposter syndrome, and systemic inequities. This approach aligns with recent scholarship showing that autoethnography provides a powerful means of foregrounding marginalized voices and exposing the emotional and structural dimensions of doctoral study that are often overlooked in traditional research (Xu & Hjalmarson, 2022; Wu et al., 2025).

Rather than presenting my story as a detached account, I embrace reflexivity and acknowledge my location as an "in-betweener" (Chhabra, 2020, p. 307), positioned simultaneously as both an insider and an outsider within Canadian higher education. I am an insider because I inhabit the daily realities of doctoral study—attending seminars, navigating supervision, writing proposals, and confronting the intellectual and emotional demands that all students encounter. At the same time, I am an outsider whose experiences as a Black immigrant woman are marked by systemic inequities, racism, and microaggressions that differentiate my journey from those of many peers. My immigrant background also means that I entered Canadian academia from a distinct cultural and educational context, learning to negotiate norms that often felt unfamiliar or exclusionary.

This duality allows me to critically examine the doctoral experience: to speak with the authority of someone living it while also stepping back to analyze its structures and inequities. Narrative inquiry values this tension, recognizing that stories gain richness when told from positions of both belonging and marginality, enabling the researcher to illuminate dimensions of experience that dominant perspectives may overlook (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Reflexive autoethnography is increasingly recognized as a mode of resistance and knowledge production in doctoral education, especially for students negotiating intersecting identities and power relations (Cottrell, 2024; Lu, 2024; Maritz, 2024; Zavattaro et al., 2024)

The use of self-narrative in this paper is not intended to be generalized to all doctoral students but rather to highlight one perspective that illuminates wider systemic realities in social work education. Following the tradition of critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017), my experiences are presented not only as personal reflections but also as an entry point into the examination of how structures of doctoral education reproduce both challenges and possibilities for marginalized students. As recent studies demonstrate, centering lived experience enriches our understanding of doctoral persistence, well-being, and

identity formation and challenges traditional academic narratives (Callary et al., 2012; Leshem, 2020; Melián et al., 2023; Schmidt & Umans, 2018). For instance, scoping reviews map multilevel stressors affecting PhD student well-being across individual, institutional, and policy levels (Mahsood et al., 2025), while longitudinal research reveals how doctoral students' well-being and disciplinary identity evolve together, shaped by stress and psychological needs (Gonzalez et al., 2021). This methodological stance allows me to center my own voice while also contributing to ongoing conversations about supervision, identity, resilience, and justice in doctoral programs.

What follows is a storied account of my doctoral journey, organized around the "good, the bad, the ugly, the funny, and the in-between." These themes emerged from reflecting on the moments, relationships, challenges, and triumphs that defined my experience as a Black immigrant woman pursuing doctoral education in Canada. While presented separately for narrative purposes, they are deeply interconnected and collectively illustrate the emotional, intellectual, and relational complexities of doctoral study. By sharing these experiences, my goal is not only to tell my story but also to illuminate broader questions about belonging, identity, resilience, supervision, and equity within doctoral education.

My PhD Journey

The Good

My PhD journey was a valuable experience that challenged me to read constantly, reflect critically, and question my own biases. It also taught me how to write academic papers and conduct research across diverse topics. As Lee and Boud (2009) observe, "Doctoral education is a process of becoming; students are challenged to constantly read, think, and write themselves into the academy" (p. 7). Through continuous engagement with literature, I deepened my knowledge of qualitative methodologies, particularly phenomenology and narrative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology enhanced my understanding of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and emphasized the importance of exploring the meanings people attach to significant life events (Van Manen, 2023). It taught me to attend closely to participants' subjective realities and to understand experiences from their perspectives rather than imposing predetermined interpretations.

Narrative inquiry further expanded my understanding by highlighting the role of storytelling in shaping human experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2012). Through narrative inquiry, I learned that individuals construct meaning through the stories they tell about their lives and that these stories are situated within broader social, cultural, historical, and relational contexts (Clandinin, 2022). Together, these methodologies strengthened my appreciation for participant-centred research and reinforced the importance of listening deeply to people's experiences while recognizing the complexity of how meaning is created and communicated.

Another important lesson I learned was how to apply critical theoretical frameworks such as critical feminist theory, intersectionality, and black feminist thought (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1994). Critical feminist theory helps me understand how gendered power relations shape women's experiences and knowledge production (hooks, 1994). Intersectionality provides a lens for examining how multiple social identities, including race, gender, immigration status, and class, interact to produce unique forms of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Black feminist Thought emphasized the importance of highlighting Black women's lived experiences and recognizing them as legitimate sources of knowledge (Collins, 2000). Together, these frameworks strengthened my ability to critically examine the complex social, cultural, and structural factors shaping participants' experiences and informed my analytical thinking and research approach.

These frameworks did not just shape my research; they shaped me as a scholar, sharpening my ability to critically interrogate power, identity, and justice. Recent scholarship affirms that doctoral education is transformative precisely because it requires students to navigate epistemological debates and situate their voices within them (Hjalmarson & Xu, 2022).

One of the most encouraging aspects of my journey was the relational support I received. My supervisor and committee consistently challenged me to think critically without prescribing "right" or "wrong" answers. This aligns with Lee's (2008) view that effective supervision fosters curiosity and independence rather than dependency. A memorable moment came when a professor reminded me to breathe during a committee meeting, reassuring me that their role was to support me, not fail me. This exemplifies McAlpine and McKinnon's (2013) point about the affective dimensions of supervision. My peers also played a vital role; our informal networks of encouragement and laughter echo Jairam and Kahl's (2012) finding that peer support is a key buffer against isolation. Families, too, are critical allies in doctoral persistence. My own family's reassurance, "Soon you will be done," served as an anchor, resonating with Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw's (2012) claim that families provide essential motivational support. Recent studies reinforce these insights, showing that relational ecosystems, including supervisors, peers, and families, are central to doctoral well-being and persistence (Mahsood et al., 2025).

The PhD also provided opportunities that shaped my scholarly and professional identity. Presenting at conferences, publishing, engaging in community work, and teaching all contributed to my academic socialization. Gardner (2009) highlights such experiences as essential for embedding students in their academic communities, whereas Austin and McDaniels (2006) argue that doctoral education is as much about professional socialization as it is about completing a dissertation. Each accepted paper or abstract affirmed Kamler and Thomson's (2014) insight that publishing is not just about producing outputs but about becoming a scholar. Beyond research, community work and teaching expanded my skills and networks, reflecting Manathunga's (2007) argument that doctoral education should foster holistic professional development. One of the most memorable milestones was passing my candidacy exam. This not only validated my academic journey but, as Gardner (2010) described, marked a rite of passage that instilled a profound sense of accomplishment and confidence. Recent research has highlighted such milestones as crucial for sustaining doctoral motivation and affirming scholarly identity (Maritz, 2024; Zavattaro, Bellingham, & King, 2024).

Ultimately, the "good" of my doctoral journey lay not in isolated achievements but in the cumulative process of becoming, growing into a scholar, teacher, and advocate. These intellectual, relational, and professional gains show that, despite the struggle, the PhD journey remains deeply generative and transformative.

The Bad

One of the most challenging aspects of my PhD journey was the constant academic pressure to meet deadlines, complete assignments, prepare presentations, and engage in endless cycles of critical reflection and writing. Many nights were spent sitting up until morning to finish papers while also navigating the expectations of teaching responsibilities. Lonely stretches of research and writing were particularly difficult, especially when working on mental illness stigma-related topics that carried a heavy emotional weight. This finding resonates with Lovitts (2001), who observes that doctoral students often experience isolation and emotional strain, which can make the process feel overwhelming.

Another challenge in my doctoral journey was navigating institutional systems, particularly the University of Calgary Research Ethics Board (REB). Bureaucratic procedures and policies often slowed

my progress and created significant stress. I recall a discouraging moment when my ethics submission underwent line-by-line scrutiny, and I was summoned to a full-board review. At the same time, my supervisor was unwell and unable to attend. Going into the meeting alone, I felt unsupported, anxious, and deeply vulnerable. This aligns with the literature, which shows that institutional processes, especially ethics reviews, can become major stressors for doctoral students. McNeill (2002) argued that ethics boards often emphasize bureaucratic compliance over genuine ethical reflection, a practice that can frustrate researchers and add unnecessary emotional burden.

Recent research highlights how administrative burdens such as procedural rigidity, unclear expectations, and insufficient support can intensify feelings of isolation, anxiety, and burnout among doctoral students, particularly during high-stakes experiences such as full-board ethics reviews (Acharya et al., 2023; Prieto et al., 2025). At the time, I had never attended a full-board ethics meeting, and none of my peers had any such experience to draw on. I walked into a room filled with professors from different departments, each taking their time to ask difficult questions about my research. The atmosphere was intimidating, and I felt overwhelmed by the power dynamics and lack of preparation for what was ahead. Although I eventually gathered the courage to answer their questions confidently and was even applauded at the end, the process left me drained and underscored how vulnerable doctoral students can feel when institutional systems fail to provide adequate support. This experience reflects broader findings in the doctoral education literature, which suggest that doctoral students often experience vulnerability, uncertainty, and stress when they are navigating high-stakes academic evaluations, particularly when expectations and institutional support are unclear (Gardner, 2008; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

At this point, I began to experience self-doubt and imposter syndrome, questioning whether I could continue and complete the program. My frustrations spilled into conversations with classmates, who became an outlet for my discouragement. Such experiences are not uncommon; Clance and Imes (1978), who first coined the term “imposter phenomenon,” argue that even high-achieving individuals often feel inadequate and attribute their success to luck rather than competence. Recent research echoes this, showing that feelings of imposter are particularly common among doctoral students navigating the high-stakes and uncertain environment of graduate education (Jairam & Kahl, 2012)

The Ugly

As a Black immigrant woman in academia, I had my doctoral journey shadowed by earlier experiences of racism and microaggressions during my master’s program in Canada. Those experiences left me constantly on guard, determined not to endure the same pain in my PhD program. This vigilance even made it difficult to choose a supervisor until the end of my first year. Such realities reflect Crenshaw’s (1989) insight that intersecting identities create unique vulnerabilities within institutions and Collins’ (2000) argument that Black women in academia often encounter the devaluation of their perspectives. My hesitancy was not simply individual insecurity but part of a broader structural reality in which marginalized doctoral students must navigate power, belonging, and safety.

Another ugly aspect was the gap between my expectations and the reality of doctoral study. I imagined a program led by renowned professors offering structured guidance. Instead, much of the learning was student-led, with peers presenting and teaching one another. While Wenger (1999) argued that peer-led learning can foster independence and shared knowledge production, the absence of consistent guidance often left me feeling confused and overburdened. My story illustrates how well-intentioned pedagogical models can inadvertently reproduce anxiety and disillusionment when institutional support is lacking.

Balancing academic pressure with financial stress, family responsibilities, and employment further exacerbated this struggle. Writing my proposal was among the most overwhelming experiences. The committee's feedback eroded my confidence, as they scrutinized every aspect of my project—topic, methodology, and theoretical frameworks. Manathunga (2007) notes that supervisory practices can oscillate between mentoring and oppression, creating uncertainty that undermines confidence. My own experience reflected this tension: while critique sharpened my thinking, the lack of affirmation reinforced feelings of inadequacy.

The toll was not only intellectual but also physical and emotional. Long nights of reading and writing eroded my health: I gained weight, developed elevated blood sugar, and experienced persistent back pain. Levecque et al. (2017) reported that PhD students are significantly more likely than the general population to experience mental health problems, and my experience confirmed this reality. The mental strain was equally severe. Approaching deadlines triggered anxiety and depressive symptoms, echoing Juniper et al.'s (2012) description of the well-being cost of doctoral education. Sleep deprivation compounded these challenges, with known risks of impaired concentration, mood disturbances, and long-term health consequences (Sivertsen et al., 2009).

At times, I questioned whether pursuing a PhD was worth the exhaustion, especially given that I had a stable job outside academia. Burnout became a constant companion, blurring the boundaries between personal life and academic survival. Research confirms that this struggle is widespread, as doctoral students experience higher rates of anxiety and depression because of workload, pressure, and a lack of balance (Levecque et al., 2017). My reflections underscore that the "ugly" side of doctoral education is not simply a matter of personal resilience but evidence of what Manathunga (2007) critiques as the hidden costs of neoliberal academia, where productivity is privileged over well-being.

Ultimately, these experiences highlight that completing a PhD is not only an intellectual undertaking but also a physically and emotionally taxing process. Without institutional attention to student well-being, doctoral study can easily become unsustainable, eroding the very health students need to thrive as scholars.

The Funny

Even though I often questioned why I chose to pursue a PhD, lighter moments also made me laugh and reminded me I was not alone. At times, when I worried that I was the only one struggling, a classmate would post in our group chat that she was exhausted because her committee had changed her topic, theories, or methodology, and now she had to start over. I would laugh, reply that she was not the only one, and soon another student would send a funny image that lightened the mood for everyone. Humor became a shared coping strategy, helping us ease the stress of difficult moments. As Jairam and Kahl (2012) note, peer networks often provide not only academic support but also emotional resources that sustain persistence. More recent research echoes this, showing that humor and solidarity among peers buffer stress and foster a sense of belonging during doctoral study (Mahsood et al., 2025; Tollafield et al., 2014).

I also had personal moments that made me laugh at myself. For example, I once sent the wrong document to my supervisor, full of track changes, and she replied, pointing it out. I quickly laughed, apologized, and sent the correct file. In other instances, during long virtual classes after sleepless nights, I would catch myself nodding off. I would quickly turn off my camera, grab a coffee, and return, laughing at myself but also encouraging myself to finish this PhD. Humor in these moments was not trivial—it functioned as what Boud and Lee (2009) describe as academic coping work, helping me manage vulnerability and sustain resilience in the face of exhaustion.

Sometimes the tension between employment and doctoral work also became a source of ironic humor. When my job schedule clashed with school demands, I would laugh at myself for wondering whether I should "forget my PhD and focus on my job." These small acts of laughter reflect what McAlpine and McKinnon (2013) call the affective dimensions of doctoral life, where resilience often emerges from reframing difficulty with humor and perspective.

As a group, we also celebrated victories that felt enormous amid constant challenges. When a classmate published a paper or presented at a major conference, we sent congratulatory messages and celebrated their success. One highlight was our cohort's decision to coauthor a paper on decolonizing social work education. Each student wrote from their own perspective, and we presented them together at conferences. It was one of the funniest and most joyful moments—we took pictures, congratulated each other, and basked in the sense of accomplishment. From time to time, we also went out for lunch, cracked jokes, and shared laughter, making the PhD journey feel lighter. These small but meaningful moments of joy and camaraderie reflect Wenger's (1999) emphasis on the importance of community and shared identity in learning. More recent scholarship underscores that these micro moments of solidarity, laughter, celebration, and shared rituals are crucial for combating isolation and sustaining well-being (Xu & Hjalmarson, 2022)

Overall, these experiences illustrate that humor is not peripheral to doctoral life but is integral to survival. For me and my peers, laughter became a collective strategy for resistance and resilience, reminding us that even in the most demanding contexts, community and humanity remain central to the doctoral journey.

Everything in between

In my PhD journey, there were also gray-area moments that were neither wholly good nor entirely bad but fell somewhere in between. My days were always full; there were no dull moments because I constantly had something to do. My laptop became my closest companion, and my quest for knowledge seemed endless. Sometimes I would reflect on a topic and imagine how I could turn it into a paper. At other times, I questioned injustices in society and reflected on the role social workers could play in creating change. These 'in-between' reflections show how doctoral study often merges the academic with the personal, blurring the boundaries between learning, identity, and social responsibility (Hjalmarson & Xu, 2022).

First, I did not enjoy the "rituals" of doctoral life—endless coffee, long nights of writing, wrestling with APA formatting, and preparing countless PowerPoint slides for conferences. However, with time, I came to accept these as part of my academic routine. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, doctoral learning is not just about research but about weaving experiences into a narrative of becoming. Recent studies similarly highlight that doctoral students' growth often occurs through these mundane yet persistent practices, which accumulate to form an embodied scholarly identity (Adams et al., 2022; Cottrell, 2024; Lu, 2024).

On a personal level, reading, writing, teaching, and presenting became integrated into my everyday life—no longer as a burden but as part of my identity. I adjusted my daily schedule to accommodate this new lifestyle. Professionally, I began to see myself as an emerging scholar, researcher, and teacher, particularly in terms of social work, mental illness stigma, and the experiences of immigrants in Canada. Intellectually, I noticed significant growth in the way I think, speak, and write, and I became increasingly comfortable engaging in constructive debates. This aligns with Austin and McDaniels' (2006) description of doctoral education's role in preparing students for multiple professional identities. More recent research

confirms that doctoral programs are vital sites of identity formation, where students negotiate and inhabit overlapping roles as scholars, teachers, and advocates. For example, a systematic review revealed that doctoral identity develops through participation, mentorship, and the navigation of complex academic contexts (Chen, 2025). Additionally, grounded theory research involving Black doctoral students in counsellor education highlights how reflexivity is central to their emerging professional identities across multiple roles (Ngadjui & Doughty Horn, 2024).

Perhaps most importantly, I found joy in blending academic work with community engagement, teaching, and advocacy. These "in-between" spaces—where research met practice—allowed me to integrate my scholarship into meaningful work beyond the academy. Wenger's (1999) concept of communities of practice captures this well, and recent scholarship in social work doctoral education highlights the importance of such integration in bridging academic knowledge with real-world application (Ngadjui & Doughty Horn, 2024). These moments revealed that my PhD journey was not only an intellectual undertaking but also part of a larger social mission, connecting my studies to the lives of real people.

Discussion

My reflections on the doctoral journey reveal that pursuing a PhD in social work is not simply a matter of producing research but also a transformative process shaped by intellectual, emotional, and relational dynamics. This resonates with broader scholarship that conceptualizes doctoral education as a developmental journey of becoming (Gardner, 2009; Lee & Boud, 2009). My narrative illustrates how persistence requires navigating not only academic demands but also systemic structures that can either support or hinder student success.

A key theme that emerges from my experience is the tension between rigor and care in doctoral supervision. On the one hand, constructive critique from supervisors and committees sharpened my research skills and deepened my intellectual engagement. The excessive critical feedback without adequate support often fuels self-doubt and imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). Research shows that supervisory relationships are central to doctoral completion and student well-being (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). My journey underscores the need for supervisors in social work to balance academic rigor with relational attentiveness, recognizing that doctoral study is both a scholarly and a deeply human endeavor.

Another significant dimension is the role of identity in shaping the doctoral experience. As a Black immigrant woman, my journey was influenced by both race and gender, which affected how I navigated institutional systems and how I was perceived in academic spaces. Scholars such as Collins (2000) and Crenshaw (1989) remind us that intersectionality and black feminist thought are crucial for understanding how multiple systems of oppression converge in higher education. My hesitancy to select a supervisor early in the program and my heightened vigilance regarding racism and microaggressions reflect the intersecting pressures faced by many marginalized doctoral students navigating predominantly white academic institutions. These experiences are not merely individual struggles but point to structural inequities within doctoral programs that must be addressed if social work education is to embody its stated commitments to equity and justice.

Equally important are the strategies of resilience and solidarity that sustained me throughout the journey. Humor, peer support, and collective reflection helped mitigate the isolation of doctoral study. Wenger's (1999) concept of "communities of practice" captures how my peers and I cocreated spaces of belonging and learning, where laughter and encouragement became tools of survival. These communal

practices reflect the relational ethos of social work, demonstrating that even within the competitive and high-pressure environment of doctoral education, solidarity is a powerful form of resistance.

Finally, my reflections highlight the blurring of boundaries between personal, professional, and academic life. The rituals of doctoral work—late-night writing, endless APA formatting, teaching, and conference presentations—have now become part of my identity as a scholar. This integration of roles mirrors what Schön (1983) describes as the making of the reflective practitioner. For social work, this is particularly significant: Doctoral education not only trains researchers but also prepares reflective educators, practitioners, and advocates who bridge the academy and community.

Overall, my narrative points to the need for doctoral programs in social work to move beyond a narrow focus on research output and to recognize the doctoral journey as an intellectual, emotional, and identity-shaping process. By attending to supervision practices, systemic inequities, peer solidarity, and the holistic development of students, social work education can create environments where diverse doctoral scholars not only survive but also thrive.

Implications for Social Work Doctoral Education

Recognizing the whole journey

Doctoral education in social work should be understood as more than an intellectual exercise; it is an emotional, social, and identity-forming process. While academic rigor is essential, research shows that persistence and success also depend on students' ability to navigate stress, institutional barriers, and overall well-being (Gardner, 2009; Nelson & Lovitts, 2001). Recent studies confirm that perceived stress directly undermines students' satisfaction with their programs and increases attrition risk (Ngadjui & Doughty Horn, 2024). Too often, students internalize isolation, stress, and self-doubt as personal failings rather than as systemic features of doctoral training, reinforcing imposter syndrome and contributing to attrition (Clance & Imes, 1978; Levecque et al., 2017).

Programs must normalize these challenges as part of the doctoral process rather than as signs of inadequacy. By openly acknowledging the emotional and identity-shaping aspects of doctoral study, schools of social work can affirm that students' experiences are valid and shared. This recognition is especially vital for students from marginalized backgrounds, for whom doctoral study is compounded by systemic inequities, racism, and microaggressions (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Social work programs that embrace the full complexity of the doctoral process not only strengthen academic competence but also foster resilience, authenticity, and transformative growth among emerging scholars.

Supporting Marginalized Students

My hesitation to select a supervisor because of earlier experiences of racism, discrimination, and marginalization underscores the importance of culturally responsive mentorship. These experiences suggest that social work doctoral programs must move beyond symbolic commitments to equity and intentionally cultivate mentoring relationships that promote trust, inclusion, and a sense of belonging for marginalized students. Intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, and immigrant status—exacerbate exclusionary experiences in higher education (Crenshaw, 1989). Black women often contend with the devaluation of their perspectives within predominantly white institutions (Collins, 2000). Recent work affirms that the doctoral journey for women—particularly those navigating multiple marginalized identities—extends beyond intellectual labor to encompass caregiving, identity negotiation, and systemic inequities that heighten its emotional costs. For instance, Adelaja's (2025) autoethnographic

account of first-generation Black female doctoral graduates in Ontario reveals how immigrant women scholars must constantly negotiate between cultural expectations, family responsibilities, and the demands of academic life. Her findings echo my own experience as a Black immigrant woman in Canada, where doctoral study became less about producing scholarship and more about negotiating belonging and resilience.

To support diverse cohorts, doctoral programs should move beyond symbolic diversity initiatives and embed equity and anti-racism in supervisory practices, curricula, institutional policies, and daily interactions. Faculty should be trained to recognize the impact of systemic oppression and adopt mentorship approaches that validate diverse scholarly voices. Equally, resources such as writing centers, counselling, and peer networks must be culturally responsive and accessible. By cultivating inclusive spaces, social work doctoral programs can ensure that marginalized students not only survive but also thrive as scholars who contribute critical perspectives to the discipline.

Valuing Relational Support

Relationality, a core value of social work, should also be central to doctoral education. Students' persistence and sense of belonging are shaped not only by academic guidance but also by the quality of relationships with supervisors, committees, peers, and families (Lee, 2008; McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). Good supervision involves more than technical oversight; it requires trust, encouragement, and holistic support that affirms students as whole persons. Recent research shows that relationally attuned supervisory practices directly correlate with doctoral well-being and scholarly confidence (Hjalmarson & Xu, 2022).

Peer relationships and informal communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) are equally essential, providing spaces for shared coping strategies, mutual encouragement, and collective celebration. Families also play an invisible yet vital role by offering encouragement and stability (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Doctoral social work programs should create intentional opportunities for mentorship, peer writing groups, and open dialogue to reinforce the discipline's commitment to relational practice.

Fostering Community and Solidarity

Finally, social work doctoral education should foster community and solidarity, recognizing that scholarship is most sustainable when rooted in collective support. Peer groups, collaborative projects, and informal networks allow students to share frustrations, celebrate milestones, and affirm that challenges are part of a shared journey (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Wenger, 1999). For students from diverse cultural backgrounds, the community also extends beyond the academy to families and cultural networks, which provide crucial anchors. Recent ecological models of doctoral well-being emphasize that community-level interventions, peer networks, solidarity spaces, and cultural validation reduce isolation and increase persistence (Chen, 2025).

The importance of integrating structured opportunities for reflection in doctoral education is increasingly emphasized in the literature, with recent reviews showing that reflexive practices help students manage uncertainty, negotiate identity, and persist despite systemic challenges (Klefbeck, 2025; Lucas & Hains-Wesson, 2026). In this context, humor, reflection, and peer support serve not as peripheral support but as essential strategies that mitigate the isolation, pressure, and vulnerability that often characterize doctoral study. By valuing these practices, social work doctoral programs not only promote student well-being but also embody the discipline's ethos: that growth, resilience, and transformation are nurtured through relationships, collective care, and community.

Conclusion

The journey to a PhD in Canada has not been easy, but it has never been entirely good or entirely bad. Instead, it has been a complex path that demands patience, endurance, resilience, and determination. Along the way, I have learned to work hard, do my best, and stay focused on the goal. I have also learned not to take constructive feedback personally but to use it as an opportunity to refine my work and grow as a scholar. Just as importantly, I have discovered the value of celebrating every achievement—no matter how small—as each milestone represents progress in this long and demanding process.

Through this journey, I have learned much about myself, my discipline, and the broader role of social work research. Personally, I have discovered that I am more resilient and resourceful than I ever imagined, capable of persevering even when self-doubt and exhaustion set in. In my discipline, I have deepened my understanding of qualitative research, narrative inquiry, and critical frameworks such as feminism and intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Creswell & Poth, 2018), realizing how these tools can reveal the lived realities of marginalized communities. On a broader scale, I have come to see social work research as more than an academic exercise; it is a vehicle for truth-telling, advocacy, and the pursuit of social justice.

Moreover, my experiences highlight important implications for social work doctoral education. Institutions must recognize that the PhD is not solely an academic pursuit but also an emotional, social, and identity-forming process. Doctoral programs should acknowledge that students are developing as scholars, researchers, and professionals beyond their dissertations. As Austin and McDaniels (2006) note, doctoral education socializes students into multiple faculty roles, underscoring the need for holistic support across intellectual, professional, and emotional dimensions. Supervisors and committees play crucial roles in supporting not only intellectual growth but also the well-being and confidence of doctoral students. Furthermore, greater attention should be given to the unique challenges faced by Black immigrant women and other marginalized groups in academia, including experiences of racism, microaggressions, and systemic barriers that can hinder persistence. Creating inclusive and supportive environments, valuing diverse perspectives, and acknowledging the human dimensions of doctoral work are essential for enabling all students to thrive.

While the journey has been long and difficult, it has also been transformative. I carry forward the lessons, the struggles, and the triumphs as part of who I am becoming, with the hope that my story contributes not only to understanding doctoral education but also to reimagining it as a space of growth, belonging, and justice.

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Author Bio

Chinonyerem Nwachukwu is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary, Canada. She is a Registered Social Worker (RSW) and a Transition to Adulthood (TAP) Practitioner with the Government of Alberta. She is also a sessional instructor at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on mental illness stigma, Black immigrant women's mental health, migration, intersectionality, narrative inquiry, anti-racist social work, and health equity. She has published in the areas of immigrant mental health, intimate partner violence, doctoral education, and social work.
Email: chinonyerem.nwachukw@ucalgary.ca
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5051-533X
