



## **Where Are All My Sista's @?!: Exploring the Graduate School Experiences of Black Women and Implications on Faculty Career Choice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As access to higher education, including graduate school, is pushed to the top of the education agenda, individuals from minoritized groups have enrolled in graduate school in increasingly large numbers (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016). While this may all sound promising, a serious problem still exists. The number of Black female faculty members has not followed pace. This qualitative pilot study used Black Feminist Thought to understand how Black women's experiences in graduate school influence their decision to pursue faculty careers. This study exposed the importance of socialization, advising, and mentoring for promoting Black women's success in graduate school and to create a pipeline of Black female faculty members.*

**Keywords:** Black women, graduate school, intersectionality, socialization, Black feminist thought, faculty careers

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**A**s access to higher education, including access to graduate school, has been pushed to the top of the education agenda, individuals from minoritized groups have begun to enroll in graduate school in increasingly large numbers (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Moyer, Salovey, & Casey-Cannon, 1999). The National Center on Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) reported that enrollment in graduate school has increased for Black women by 410% since 1976. While this may all sound promising, a serious problem still exists. The number of Black female

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faculty members has not followed pace. In fact, the NCES (2013) reported that of the 791,391 faculty in the United States, only 24,283 are Black women. More troubling is that of these Black female faculty, only 2,647 are full tenured professors. That number has unfortunately remained the same for more than a decade. In an exit interview conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago more than 50% of all Black doctoral graduates in 2013 cited seeking employment in the academy as their goal after graduation. However, data suggests that they are not entering the academy as faculty and instead are selecting alternative career paths (Levin, Jaeger, & Haley, 2013).

While the graduate student population continues to increase, Black women report their graduate school experiences as negative. These negative experiences typically leave the women feeling isolated, marginalized, undervalued, spotlighted, silenced, and having to conceal or possess multiple identities to survive (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Knowing that the path to an academic career begins in a graduate program, understanding how Black women experience graduate school is critical to improve not only the graduate school experiences of this population, but also to provide a pipeline of new Black female faculty (Levin et al., 2013).

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Black women in graduate school, and to understand how those experiences shape their career choices. This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Black women in graduate school?
2. How do these experiences shape their career choices?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Prior to 1970 there was very little research on the experiences of specific groups in graduate school, such as Black women, since the number of Black women enrolled in graduate school was very low (E. Ellis, 2001). As a result, there was inadequate knowledge about the graduate school experiences of groups, specifically Black women, prior to that time; however, since the mid-1990s more research has been conducted in this area, and the emerging themes are discussed in this section. These themes provide potential reasons for why Black women are not seeking academic

positions (Moyer et al., 1999). Levin et al., (2013), argued that upon entering graduate school, students have a specific career in mind; however, they change their minds based on their graduate school experiences. Emerging from the literature are three key themes for consideration as they relate to the graduate school experiences of Black women.

### **Socialization**

A large part of any new experience, including graduate school, is socialization. Socialization into graduate school is defined as an individual's ability to connect to peers, faculty, and advisors, and to find opportunities for research and service in areas of one's interest (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Graduate school socialization moves one step further and is described by Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2016) as "the process through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills" (p. 5). Black women, due to the intersection of both race and gender, occupy a unique space in society, which differs from Black men, as well as other populations, and makes successful socialization more critical. The key to the socialization process is understanding and adopting the institution's cultural norms, and those that reflect their discipline (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Weidman et al., 2016). Failure to do so often results in penalties or harsh consequences, such as being excluded from certain groups and opportunities (Weidman et al., 2016). Black women who fail to obey those cultural norms are not accepted, which exacerbates their feelings of isolation (E. Ellis, 2001). Thus, when socialization does not occur, individuals cannot move from the position of outsider to insider (Weidman et al., 2016). This lack of socialization leaves Black women in the position of an outsider, which could prevent them from seeing themselves in certain roles, including as faculty members.

### **Self-Perception and Self-Doubt**

One area that socialization influences is self-perception. How one perceives their own academic ability is important for success. Black women in graduate school report negative feelings, low academic confidence, and anxiety about completing graduate level work (Coker, 2003; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2003; Shavers et al., 2014). Having their academic worth challenged by other students and faculty invalidates Black women's sense of worth, which makes them feel like they are presented as tokens on campus (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). In a study conducted by Shavers and Moore (2014) they investigated self-preservation strategies of Black female

doctoral students and found that the women developed an “academic mask” to shield them from sharing their full selves with those in their academic programs. The women described instances where they had to present themselves as professional as possible, even when they were unsure about themselves, to prevent negative assumptions about their academic ability. How others view Black women may influence their own self-perception and could jeopardize their graduate school success.

### **Mentoring and Advising**

Black women have difficulty finding mentors in graduate school. Due to their negative experiences, they can find it hard to find mentors. Mentoring is like advising; however, mentoring takes advising one additional step. Advising is defined as “providing expert advice in a specific field,” while a mentor is defined as a “trusted advisor” (Dixon-Reeves, 2001; L. Patton, 2009; L. Patton et al., 2003; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). The literature on both mentoring and advising is conflated and can be mistaken to suggest they are the same. However, mentoring is much more personal than advising and extends beyond superficial interactions and requires a much greater degree of transparency. Therefore, mentoring relationships are a critical component for the successful completion of any doctoral program (E. Ellis, 2001; Thomas et al., 2007; Wilde & Schau, 1991). Black women have been shown to benefit greatly by positive mentoring relationships that provide trust and support (H. Ellis, 1992; L. Patton, 2009; Thomas et al., 2007). Most definitions of mentoring include trust and support and have also been described as “going beyond mere career development to include a strong personal relationship” (Thomas et al., 2007). In addition, graduate students have long rated mutual support and comprehensiveness of relationship as two of the most important factors in successful mentoring (Wilde & Schau, 1991). Yet formal mentoring programs and opportunities are still absent from many doctoral programs outside of each student’s assigned advisor.

In addition to mentoring, advising relationships are also key to the overall experience of doctoral students, and more so of Black women, who have reported that poor academic advising stifles progress toward degree completion and potentially could cause a student to discontinue study (Aryan & Guzman, 2010). However, of the nine factors E. Ellis (2001) examined, mentoring was reported by all of the participants as critical for social and academic integration into a doctoral program, and influenced their overall satisfaction with doctoral study (p. 33). While having a mentor has been shown to influence the persistence of Black women in doctoral

programs, having a mentor who is also Black and female has been shown to be equally as important (Schwartz, Bower, Rice, & Washington, 2003). Black women may feel most comfortable and trusting of mentors who understand what it is like to be both Black and female, because they have a greater understanding of the issues and challenges they face as Black women (Collins, 2000). This is supported by Collins (2000) in her theory of “othermothering,” which describes that Black women can feel a responsibility for other Black women. Through othermothering Black women can provide support, nurturing and caring as a “strategy to undermine oppression” (p. 209). Participation in positive mentoring experiences has the potential to help Black women overcome and reduce their negative experiences by providing them with tools to navigate the academy. Thus, allowing them to feel more connected to their institutions and potentially influence their decisions to pursue faculty positions.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminist thought (BFT) specializes and focuses on formulating and expressing the distinct, and self-defined perspective of Black women (Collins, 1989). BFT seeks to provide insight and understanding for the broader society and the interpretations of the life experiences of Black women in their own voice, as they have created meaning. BFT is framed by one central idea: Black feminist ideas originate and are generated by Black women. That central idea is supported by three themes: (a) others may research and document BFT but they cannot produce BFT; (b) Black women share a common and unique perspective that can be shared among Black women; and (c) the intersectionality of class, religion, age, and sexual orientation provides for many diverse representations of these commonalities.

The experiences of Black women represent a diverse and ever-changing narrative within the larger context. Understanding these themes involves further investigation into the construction of identities of Black women. First, we must consider how Black women both define and value themselves. As Black women create an identity within the dominant society, they must make a choice whether to accept or deny the normative identities that are prescribed for them or to challenge those images and create counter images for themselves. BFT argues that in the dominant culture, Black women are negatively stereotyped to dehumanize and control Black women (Collins, 1986). The process of self-definition and self-evaluation is

extremely important in identity creation and how Black women create meaning from their experiences. Jones, Wilder, and Osborne-Lampkin (2013) asserted the importance of listening for the “true and real experiences of Black womanhood with the Black woman at the center of analysis” (p. 330). BFT centers on resistance, activism, and voice. These core ideas were central to the development of study and the interpretation of its findings.

## **METHODS**

The negative graduate school experiences of Black women explain in part why they are not selecting careers in the academy after graduation. However, understanding what shapes their identification with the academy during graduate school, and what ultimately directs them to choose careers as faculty, has not been widely examined (Levin et al., 2013). As a result, little is really known about what influences the career choices of Black women in graduate school. Since the purpose of this qualitative investigation was to understand how the graduate school experiences of Black women affect their decisions to pursue careers as faculty, selecting a method that focused on making meaning of one’s experiences was essential. This study was conducted as a pilot study, in preparation for a dissertation to evaluate feasibility for a larger study. For that reason, to conduct this pilot study, an adapted version of Seidman’s three-interview model was selected. In Seidman’s original model, participants are interviewed three separate times for approximately 90 minutes each. In the first interview for this study, participants were asked to provide a focused life history as it related to the topic. This set the stage for the remaining two interviews, which were more focused and directed. In the second interview, the participants concentrated on specific details of their lived experience in relation to their graduate school experiences. Finally, in the third interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experience and derive meaning. For this study, however, only two interviews were conducted. The focused life history interview was completed in accordance with Seidman’s framework; however, I combined his subsequent interviews into one and divided the interview protocol into separate sections to capture both the lived experiences and the derived meaning.

## **RESEARCH SETTING**

The site for the pilot study was a large, public, predominantly White undergraduate institution in the Northeast. According to the Carnegie classification, the institution is primarily an undergraduate degree-granting

institution that also awards graduate and professional degrees. The institution is situated in an urban center and has a combined undergraduate and graduate enrollment of approximately 30,000 students. The undergraduate student body is comprised approximately 15,000 White students and fewer than 1,000 Black students. The graduate student body contains approximately 8,000 students with fewer than 400 of those graduate students reported as Black. Of those Black graduate students, it is unclear how many are women, as the institution did not have that information publicly available.

### **Participants**

Participants for the study were located using a convenience sampling method. Participants were located through the researcher's peer and faculty network. Once identified, emails were sent to participants to provide an outline of the study and request voluntary participation. Seven participants were identified and two agreed to participate. Prior to enrollment in the study, participants were briefed on the study purpose and required to complete an informed consent form. Enrollment criteria for the study required participants to self-identify as Black, female, and be enrolled in a doctoral program with at least 2 years completed and a minimum of 50% of their coursework completed.

The first participant, Tamara, was a 37-year-old, single, first-generation college student born to immigrant parents. At the time of the study, Tamara was enrolled in a doctoral program in higher education management. She had been working on her degree full-time for over 5 years and was in the process of completing her comprehensive exams. Prior to enrollment in her current institution, she attended two different institutions to complete her bachelor's and master's degrees and previously worked full-time in higher education in various student advisory, student affairs, and admissions positions. Upon graduation, she desired to return to higher education in an executive capacity in the area of student affairs as well as teach on a part-time basis.

The second participant, Tracey, was a single mother of one in her early 40s and a first-generation college student. Tracey was in her fifth year of full-time enrollment in a doctoral program in higher education management and was completing her comprehensive exam during the time the study was conducted. Tracey attended two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to complete her bachelor's and master's degree before enrolling in her current institution to complete her doctorate degree. She was employed full-time in higher education in a high-level

administrative position working in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). After graduation Tracey indicated that she would like to continue working in this area and to teach.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

Qualitative research is conducted with a human being as the mechanism by which data is collected. The purpose of research is to understand a phenomenon, test theory, understand multiple perspectives, and report the findings in a balanced and neutral fashion (Collins, 2002). As a result, qualitative researchers must acknowledge their biases, personal experiences, and theoretical inclinations before beginning the research. My role as a Black female doctoral student at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) during the study, had the potential to influence the research process, data analysis, and findings. I was motivated to conduct this study based on my own graduate school experiences. I have completed two master's degrees at two separate institutions and found that I had similar experiences at both institutions. I was acutely aware of the lack of Black female professors in both instances. Upon enrolling in my doctoral program, I noticed that my White counterparts had more information than I, and appeared to be more connected than I. They knew when and how to complete milestones and were involved in academic opportunities such as participating on research teams. As a way to better understand my own experience, I began research in this area, which led me to conduct this study. While allowing another researcher to conduct the interviews was an option, access to the participant population to be studied is made easier when the participants view the researcher as a complete participant rather than a participant observer (Creswell, 2013). Being viewed as a member of the participant population as a Black female doctoral student allowed the participants to feel more comfortable sharing their experience since they did not view me as an outsider. Therefore, it is important to note that the experiences of the researcher shaped this study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

As part of this study, semi-structured interviews, as defined by Hatch (2002), were conducted. Semi-structured interviews are interviews in which the researcher designs specific questions to ask the participant during a set period; however, the researcher may deviate from the interview protocol to ask follow-up questions if necessary (Hatch, 2002). Since the study was a pilot study to determine feasibility for further investigation, the three-interview series model developed by Seidman (2013) was adapted to a



two-series model. For this study, in the first interview the participants were asked about their life history and why they decided to pursue a doctoral degree, if they had a career path in mind prior to applying, if that career path has changed during their time enrolled, and what, if anything, impacted that decision. Open-ended questions that allowed the participants to talk about their experiences and tell their own story were utilized. In the second interview, participants were asked to clarify answers to questions previously asked. It was in this interview that the participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their experience for the researcher (Seidman, 2013).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Understanding the data collected and getting at the essence, or what is expressed, in the raw data, is how researchers reduce the amount of data and convey the meaning of that data to the reader (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The audio interview transcripts were transcribed manually by the researcher, which allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data. The transcripts were then coded through the process of deductive, thematic coding. Deductive coding is defined by M. Patton (2002) as a process of analyzing data with an “existing framework” (p. 453). The themes presented in literature review and concepts within BFT were used to analyze the interview transcripts and used as codes for analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

Upon completion of the manuscript, the participants were asked to review the document to ensure that the researcher did not misrepresent their statements. This process is known by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “member checking,” which is done to increase the credibility of the study and to provide a level of “factual and interpretative accuracy,” also known as trustworthiness or validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was implemented in an effort minimized any researcher bias from being presented in the findings of the study.

## **FINDINGS**

Numerous themes emerged that provide insight into the experiences of Black women in graduate school and how those experiences affect their career choices. The women had very strong feelings about their experiences. Those categories included advising/mentoring, institutional support, and faculty/peer interaction. These themes provide the basis for the findings of this study.

## **Advising and Mentoring**

Both the women reported having multiple advisors during their program. Advising was reported as being haphazard and lacking organization. While both women reported their current advisor as better than their prior two, they still felt that their current advisor “didn't always get it.” They felt the difference in their races acted as a barrier for common ground and a starting point for understanding. This impediment prevented them from having successful advising relationships. When asked to discuss this further, Tamara offered the following:

*My first advisor, I only saw a total of 15 minutes over 2 years. My second advisor, she helped me get through my milestones, but because of her lack of organization that wasn't enough for me to get through my independent work, um and actually her work and mine kind of align more but she didn't understand the race thing. She thought she did but she didn't.*

There was, in her opinion, a lack of commitment from her first advisor and a lack of organization with her second. This was interesting because she said her second advisor had research interests that were more closely matched with her own; however, other issues within the relationship overshadowed this alignment. Tamara had a similar experience with her first two advisors and stated that:

*With my first two advisors, I was always the advisor. I would walk in and say, “this is what this says, can I have your sign this?” I felt like I was the advisor in that process. With my current advisor, she provides more scaffolding than my past advisors.*

It was clear that the women faced many struggles with advising up until they met their current advisors. What is more interesting is that the women are both in the same program and had different advisors for their first two advisors and both now have different advisors for their third advisor. Neither of the women had an advisor who was the same race, but both indicated that their current advisor was the same gender. They also indicated that their advisors were minoritized women, which they felt helped them to better relate to their advisors in some regards.

Also discussed were their mentoring experiences. The women in the study both said their current advisor served as a mentor, but they also had additional mentors outside of this relationship. When asked to describe what

they felt were the characteristics of a good mentor, Tracey cited the following:

*Someone that is in my corner. Someone that is equipping me. Stretching me a little bit. Helping me to accomplish my goals. I think mentors provide space for you in terms of connections. I feel like mentors provide connections, networks sometimes. Think about opportunities that you did not think about and present them to you.*

The women were both certain that mentors were significant to their doctoral success, especially as they completed the independent work phase. Having a mentor who had already navigated the process was also deemed critical.

Neither of the women had a Black woman in their program to act as a mentor and both had to find Black women outside of their program to fill this role. The women felt that it was important to have another Black woman as a mentor, because she could understand the specific challenges Black women face.

### **Institutional Support**

By design, doctoral programs are supposed to prepare future faculty, researchers, and leaders within their selected discipline. Institutions have a responsibility to provide adequate support to students of every race, gender, and ethnicity. For students from underrepresented populations, it is even more critical because statistics show that the attrition rates for graduate students are over 50% (Lovitts, 2010). Part of socialization is institutional support, which can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. In the following excerpt, Tamara described her experience in her current institution in comparison to her previous: “This experience has been the total opposite of everything I have ever experienced. So, I've always been supported and this was the first time I was at an institution that didn't care about me.” This powerful statement summarized her entire graduate school experience. Not having institutional support can have damaging effects on an individual and could potentially impact persistence through degree completion. In Tamara’s case, her strong external support system and commitment to finish have helped her to continue her doctoral studies, despite her experience. Her statements demonstrate that in the following quote:

*So, I went to an HBCU so that was a different experience. I think the push was you always have to do more. So, you just don't do a bachelor's degree you need to do a Ph.D. You need*

*to go to graduate school and you need to give back. I guess coming from an HBCU, that experience was different. I always had people in my corner or people looking out for me. Like constantly peers, professors. The system was working collectively to move me along. Here you didn't have the same level of support.*

Many aspects of institutional support are intangible and critical for students since they make up the “hidden curriculum” socialization is intended to uncover. Lack of institutional support resulted in poor socialization for these women. As a result, they were in a hurry to complete their programs instead of embracing the full doctoral experience.

### **Peer and Faculty Interaction**

Peer and faculty interaction are also integral part of obtaining a degree, but even more so during doctoral studies. Doctoral studies are comprised of coursework, research, and writing to demonstrate subject matter mastery. Students are required to work closely with their peers in group settings to review papers and complete projects. They are also required to work closely with faculty for degree guidance. The women participating in the study noted that their doctoral experience was different than their peers. They cited a lack of understanding the “hidden curriculum” and “understanding the process” as key issues. Tamara described the hidden curriculum as the unspoken rules, rituals, and expectations within a program or school. Both women described feeling left out and alone in trying to navigate the process while watching others move through the milestones with ease. Tamara described her experience in the following way:

*What made it horrible was there was no one like me. There was no one in the faculty like me. There was, my voice wasn't in the curriculum. It was very cliquish. Us and them. All the White students in the program were either family or friends of someone in the program so they didn't have to do anything. They knew the hidden curriculum.*

Their interaction with faculty was similar and they felt like no one understood them as Black female academics. Having to explain themselves constantly to everyone was a struggle and ultimately caused the women to feel withdrawn and to look for support and interaction outside of their departments and institutions.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study is important because it offers a greater understanding for how Black women experience graduate school. Black women are one of the largest growing graduate populations; however, literature shows that Black woman experience graduate school in a negative way. These experiences include difficulty in socialization, issues with self-doubt, and lack of proper advising and mentoring (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Coker, 2003; Collins, 2000; Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2003). The literature is further supported by the findings in the study as the participants presented similar experiences. These experiences reported by the women in this study add to the body of knowledge regarding the experiences of Black women in graduate school. This study also demonstrates the need for additional research in this area.

While the study set out to understand the relationship between the experiences of Black women in graduate school and their desire to pursue faculty careers, it was not completely clear if their graduate school experience influenced that decision. They made references to their experience and their future career choices; however, it was not clear if their experience was the primary determinant for their decision not to pursue faculty careers.

The connection between the experiences of Black women in graduate school and their decision on whether to pursue faculty careers requires further investigation. The negative graduate school experiences the women described have shaped their idea and understanding of what it would look like to become faculty members, and neither is inclined to pursue faculty positions after graduation. This is disheartening, because both women expressed their desire to teach, conduct research, and mentor graduate students, which are the primary duties of a faculty member. However, these women are choosing to complete their degrees and work in higher education in other capacities, because they believe that will allow them to be present in the academy and to influence change for Black women yet to come.

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study have several far-reaching implications. First, Black women are still reporting negative experiences in graduate school. As institutions claim to place diversity and inclusion as institutional priorities, it is important for them understand that Black women are not experiencing graduate school in a positive way. Increasing the enrollment of this group is

not enough. Understanding how Black women experience graduate school should be a priority for institutions serious about connecting with Black women and finding ways to support them. Second, development of curriculum that speaks to their scholarship and interests is also important. Presenting scholarship that Black women can relate to in every discipline must be considered as part of program development. Third, creating academic and non-academic spaces and communities where Black women can find support is imperative. This requires institutions to be intentional in their development of every initiative on campus. This includes in faculty and staff hiring practices, enrollment practices, and non-academic programming. Finally, institutions need to acknowledge that they are failing in this area because the first step in a new direction is to acknowledge the need for change.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This pilot study demonstrated that further research into the graduate school experiences of Black women, and its connection with their career choice, is sorely needed. Additionally, research into Black women's persistence is needed to explore the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school to change the conversation away from a deficit-based perspective to a positive perspective.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The experiences of Black women in graduate school are reported as negative and this study further confirms those findings. Black women remain underrepresented in the ranks of the student body and the faculty. As the diversity and inclusion agendas of universities become more focused, it is important for institutional leadership to consider the experiences of Black women during graduate school to better understand how Black women experience graduate school. Also, ensuring that Black women occupy positions where they can provide mentorship and advising to Black female graduate students is one way institutions can provide support to this population. Implementing focused and specific initiatives to support Black female graduate students may help to shed some light on how Black women make career decisions, in particular, decisions on whether or not to pursue a faculty career.

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