Peer-Reviewed Article

"I Wish I Wasn't the Only One": Understanding the Racialized Experiences of Graduate Students of Color in the Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study seeks to explore the racialized educational experiences of graduate students of color (GSOC) seeking degrees in humanities disciplines. Using Critical Race Theory, this investigation sheds light on the lived experiences, inside and outside the classroom, of minoritized graduate students as they navigate their educational environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of nine graduate students who were selected through purposive sampling to participate in the study. The findings support and extend the literature examining the educational experiences of graduate minority students in higher education. Implications are discussed, as are best practices for faculty and educational administrators to better support and address the racialized encounters experienced during graduate study for minoritized students of color.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Graduate Education, Graduate Students of Color

INTRODUCTION

In academic spaces, there is an array of student ethnicities, races, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and languages (Gollnick & Chinn, 2017). Graduate student enrollment is expected to increase from 2 million to 3.3 million by 2026 (Allen et al., 2020). University faculty and administrators must be prepared to effectively mitigate oppression based on race, culture, ethnicity, and language (Yuan, 2017) in those educational environments. The way students experience and navigate their graduate education journeys and manage the stressors will often differ. Graduate students, especially doctoral students, have however been absent in educational literature which has led to the misunderstanding of their mental, physiological, motivational and social experiences (Sverdlik & Hall, 2019). Additionally, the intersectionality of race and gender highlights the unique experiences of graduate students of color.

There is minimal research on humanities doctoral experiences (McAlpine & Austin, 2018) and few studies have focused on the racialized educational experiences of minoritized students enrolled in humanities graduate programs. While existing literature does systemically account for the graduate school experience, researchers must consider that these experiences come from various academic disciplines, numerous methodologies, and diverse types of graduate education (Brunsma et al., 2017). This phenomenological study explored the educational experiences of graduate students of color pursuing degrees within humanities disciplines using Critical Race Theory to understand impacts to academic success, accessibility to professional opportunities, and the overall graduate school experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduate students of color (GSOC) often face racism, discrimination, and daily microaggressions (behavior, speech, ideologies) in the classroom (Harris & Linder, 2018), in their departments, or in their programs (Brunsma et al., 2017). Scholars have implied that both race and gender are interconnected units that should be examined together (Dinsmore & Roksa, 2023) and increased marginalization of GSOC could be a result of intersecting identities. Park and Bahia (2022) found that Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) graduate students are regularly confronted with racism, colonialism, and pressured to represent their entire racial group while simultaneously feeling alienated in their respective academic courses of study. Especially because of lacking or insufficient systems of support, Black, first-generation doctoral students experience discrimination and isolation, struggle with imposter syndrome, and resort to survival to persist in their

studies (Wallace & Ford, 2021). That survival is seen in GSOC self-advocacy and community, both out of necessity in environments ineffectively designed to support their success (Perez et al., 2020).

Graduate students of color experience unique challenges at colleges and universities (Bowers et al., 2016). GSOC experience isolation, a lack of sense of belonging, racism, discrimination and microaggressions, mental health, stress, identity issues and lack of support or mentoring (Brunsma et al., 2017), lack of cultural diversity and awareness, absence of multicultural curriculum and course materials, and solitude all which have a negative impact on GSOC achievement (Gayle, 2016). Research indicates that campus climate, expectations of faculty, curriculum structures, predominately White student spaces, and lack of institutional support for this unique population of students are all impediments to GSOC academic and psychosocial attainment (Harris & Lee, 2019). When support is obsolete or inadequate, minoritized graduate students' impression is that their overall sense of who they are, their educational experiences, and their perspectives have no place in academe (Brunsma et al., 2017).

Sense of Belonging

When students feel that their institution is generally unsupportive of them as students (Hussain & Jones, 2019) sense of belonging is at its lowest (O'Meara et al., 2017). Inhibited sense of belonging can have a negative impact on student retention, students' perception of campus climate, student's academic success and can contribute to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Campus Racial Climate (CRC) is the policy atmosphere and the overall perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of a college or university (Bowers et al., 2020) that are also present through cultural and racial group interactions and the interplay of internal forces such as governmental policies and external forces such as the racial setting of a university (Lewis & Shah, 2021).

Mental Health

Humanities and art and design graduate students are more likely than others to experience mental health issues, report suicidal ideation, (Lipson et al., 2015; Kaler & Stebleton, 2020) and suffer from anxiety and depressive disorders (Chirikov et al., 2020; Kaler & Stebleton, 2020). Lipson et al. (2015) attributed the cause to the nature of humanities disciplines which requires original contributions to the field, is susceptible to scrutiny and subjectivity, and is highly competitive. For many racial minorities, negative race related experiences can cause racial stress or trauma that may impact their physical, psychological, academic, emotional or overall well-being,

coined Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) (Charles et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2021), yet students of color remain an under-researched population regarding mental health issues (Lipson et al., 2018). Institutional systems, financial difficulty, academic structures, and meager mentoring are additional factors that attribute to elevated stress for graduate students (Charles et al., 2021).

Institutional Response

As racial dissension continues, it is important to acknowledge the action of racialization to establish a better understanding of racial practices (Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2019) that occur both inside and outside the academy. Institutions committed to creating lasting, campus-wide reform, related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) on campus should be thoughtful when instituting changes and must be fully dedicated to the process. Lingras et al. (2021) indicated when committing to this work, it is imperative to reframe DEI as essential to institutional effectiveness to form capacity for this effort and it must be included in the strategic goals and plans of the institution. There is no standard solution for all colleges and universities; changes will be slow and incremental, but the goal is to generate continual improvement around this concept (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). As institutions of higher education create and implement strategic plans addressing diversity and inclusion issues on their campus, it is important to understand the experiences of GSOC (Bowers et al., 2020).

The Current Study

This phenomenological study allowed for GSOC to use their voice and share their stories about how they experience the educational space as a racialized minority. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, organize, describe and report themes that are found within a set of data (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, peer debriefing was utilized to assess and confirm the methodology, findings, and themes.

The study of Critical Race Theory (CRT) guides this research to understand more deeply the racialized educational experiences of students of color. The purpose of CRT is to expose what is taken for granted when race and privilege are evaluated as well as the forms of exclusion that is prevalent in United States society (Hiraldo, 2010). There are five tenets that comprise the framework of CRT: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest conversion, and critique of liberalism (Hiraldo, 2010). These tenets can be used to dismantle inequities that are often utilized to create systems of privilege and oppression (Hiraldo, 2010).

CRT can play a critical role when colleges and universities and educational leaders work toward becoming and creating more diverse and inclusive spaces and climates. Higher education CRT scholars have centered their work around three predominant themes, including (a) colorblindness, (b) selective admissions policy, and (c) campus racial climate (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Applying the CRT framework supports the purpose of this study, will give relevance to the topic, and provide a better understanding of the significance of this research in the field.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design. Qualitative research is utilized to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts (Sutton & Austin, 2015). A phenomenological design allows the researcher to make meaning of or explore the lived experiences of the individuals under-study. Further, phenomenological research allows the researcher to familiarize oneself with the philosophical analysis of the human experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). Utilizing a phenomenology design is where new perspectives and acknowledgements can be established to both inform and redefine how we understand that experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). A phenomenological study allowed for GSOC to use their voice and share their stories on how they experience the educational space as a racialized minority. The study involved gathering qualitative data that was descriptive through semi-structured interviews via Zoom for approximately one hour and observing the participants' movements and reactions during the interview process. Prior to the scheduled interview, participants completed a demographic survey via Google Form which included demographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity), year of study and major. The interviews were transcribed utilizing the transcription feature via Zoom. Once the transcripts were completed, each participant had the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. When member checking was completed, the information was sorted into categories, and themes and codes were developed from the data. The researcher identified details such as phrases, ideas, concepts, keywords and terms that addressed the research inquiry. The transcripts were read multiple times and notes were taken in the margins to help detect any themes that emerged.

Participants

This study took place at a predominantly White, private, 4-year university. Black or African American, Hispanic and Asian make up about 28% of the total student enrollment. Nine students elected to participate and

were asked to complete a demographic survey to verify eligibility, then contacted to schedule a Zoom-based interview. Participants (Table 1) ranged from the first year of study to seven years or more.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Department of Study
1	Natasha	Female	Black	Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MA)
2	Hibbert	Female	Black	Music (PhD)
3	Hai	Male	Multiracial (White/Hispanic/ Native American)	Music (PhD)
4	Frida	Female	Black	Visual Arts (MFA)
5	Ella	Female	Multiracial (Black/Asian)	English Language and Literature (PhD)
6	Lu	Male	Asian	Middle Eastern Studies (MA)
7	Sola	Female	Multiracial (Black/Asian)	Music (PhD)
8	Lain	Female	Asian	Cinema and Media Studies (PhD)
9	Rosa	Female	Multiracial (Afro-Indigenous)	Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MA)

Note. Ethnic categories were self-reported. Degree programs are listed in full with abbreviations provided in parentheses.

RESULTS

The following major themes emerged from the study: *barriers to involvement, relationships, engagement and connectedness,* and *identity.* Table 2 provides a codebook for these themes, including a description and sample phrases from the data collected.
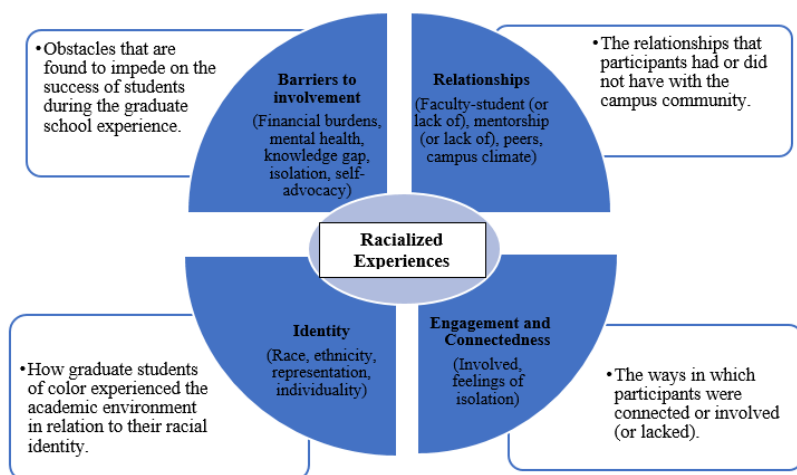
Table 2

Theme	Subthemes	Description	Sample Associated Quote from Interview Data
Barriers to Involvement	Financial burdens, mental health, knowledge gap, isolation, self-advocacy	Obstacles that impede the success of students during graduate school experience.	"…figuring out…billing and insurance and all…that's a big burden that takes my time away from the program."
Relationships	Faculty-student mentorship (or lack of), peers, campus climate	The relationships that participants had or did not have with the campus community.	"I'm still…looking for those social spaces in which I can see other scholars and support other scholars…"
Engagement and Connectedness	Connected, involved, feelings of inclusion (or lack of)	The ways in which participants were connected or involved (or lack of).	"…defeatism… It doesn't give you a sense that academia is going to… suddenly become a welcoming career path for you."
Identity	Race, ethnicity, representation, individuality	The academic environment in relation to their identity.	"I think being a student of color means that you're always aware of…double consciousness... consciously aware of how your white faculty are thinking as well."

Codebook of Themes and Subthemes Derived from Interview Data

Figure 1
Themes Revealed to Address the Research Inquiry

- Obstacles that are found to impede on the success of students during the graduate school experience.

Barriers to involvement
(Financial burdens, mental health, knowledge gap, isolation, self-advocacy)

Relationships
(Faculty-student (or lack of), mentorship (or lack of), peers, campus climate)

- The relationships that participants had or did not have with the campus community.

Racialized Experiences

- How graduate students of color experienced the academic environment in relation to their racial identity.

Identity
(Race, ethnicity, representation, individuality)

Engagement and Connectedness
(Involved, feelings of isolation)

- The ways in which participants were connected or involved (or lacked).

Note. This figure was created by the author to illustrate key themes from interview data.

Barriers to Involvement

Countless obstacles that can impede on the success of students were revealed, as well as details about how these encounters make graduate school a difficult space to navigate. These barriers included financial burdens, knowledge gap, feelings of isolation or exclusion, mental health issues and the need to self-advocate. Natasha said, "*A lot of the barriers for me have been financial, it's a very expensive year.*" Hai talked about having enough money to take care of himself and his partner: "*Trying to find a way to live roughly, the two of us, off of my stipend has just been really, really hard.*" Another barrier participants indicated was being expected to already have an understanding coming into the university because they were graduate students. One participant described it as having a "base knowledge." Hibbert said:

> ...another barrier that I felt for me was just knowledge because I came straight from undergrad and so there was a lot that I didn't learn that master students would have known...unsaid knowledge that you know professors would have expected us to have.

Ella retorted:

…feeling like we can't ask questions about how to do things that are just kind of pushed onto us in very matter of fact ways whenever people are like, oh yeah, you should be submitting to conferences and things like that but then no one wants to tell anyone how to write an abstract…

Lain talked about this gap from a cultural capital perspective.

I would say part of it is, that there's a big sort of initial gap if you do not come from a background that is familiar with what graduate education looks like and academia as a whole. So, I come from a working-class background and also my parents were not American and so they weren't familiar with the American university system, especially the academic system.

Participants expressed the graduate school journey as being isolating or having felt excluded at times. Frida categorized her experience of isolation to her identity, her age and being a parent. Natasha associated her feelings of isolation to her current experience as a graduate student.

I initially came in with the intention of getting a PhD… However, seeing the way that grad school has been for me and like the first term being so again identically rigorous and kind of causing a little bit of social isolation for me, I just don't think that's a great plan for another six years of continuing it down that path.

Mental health is another major issue that may affect graduate students of color. A few participants identified mental health issues as being a challenge as they navigated academia as graduate students. Lain expounded:

I sometimes hear people at other schools describe their experience in graduate school as more of you know, as a nine to five job and as that being sort of a healthy way that they've come to understand their role. And I really don't know anyone at the [redacted name] as a graduate student who experiences it that way. It really feels like you're expected to be producing all of the time. I don't feel like I really am able to shut off from responsibilities tied to the university.

Self-advocacy is how students navigate their graduate school experience with little to no support from the academic departments or institution. Participants expressed the need to provide self-direction or self-advocacy to be successful in the program. When describing his overall graduate school experience, Hai used the word "*tumultuous*" and shared "*I've constantly just had to do a lot of things on my own with no support*." Sola noted:

> *…there are certain bureaucratic systems that make it hard for anybody kind of to get what they need in a fast way…another thing with kind of the bureaucratic stuff is just what self-advocacy looks*

like in a department that, you're gonna have to rely on for a long part of your career, especially in the beginning.

Relationships

This theme focused on the *relationships* students had or did not have with faculty, peers and academic staff in their departments as well as how these relationships may affect departmental culture. Most participants had established relationships with faculty, more so with their advisors or faculty on their committee; however, students in masters' programs indicated that because their programs go by relatively quickly, establishing faculty relationships are not always easy. Frida shared "*It's a very short program…So that's not a lot of time to build relationships with faculty, which is certainly the model that we see in other countries and even in more traditional programs.*"

The advisor relationship plays an integral role in the faculty-student relationship. Rosa defined these relationships as being "*positive*" and shared how these advisors serve as "*sounding boards*" that she can continuously turn to. Other participants noted feeling supported by their faculty advisor, even beyond the academic space. In reference to his advisor, Hai stated: "*We just had lunch a few weeks ago and it was not academic, you know, just hey, how are you doing? Haven't seen you in a while, thing. She's absolutely great!*"

When describing the relationship participants had with peers, many indicated they have connected with peers and for some, these relationships extend outside of their immediate departments and among other cohorts of students. Rosa described the relationship with peers as "*rewarding*" and academic discourse is both "*enriching*" and "*fruitful*". Critical aspects of these peer relationships were that of support and having a shared experience with others. Sola said:

> *I came to [redacted name] because I met my cohort during prospective students' weekend and really, really loved all of them. To me that was one of the most important things about finding a school is that even if the professors don't get it, that my peers will at least, and I have found a lot of support, in my black peers and also other peers of color and also white students.*

The culture of the academic departments was an indication of student's feelings related to campus climate. One student described their department as having two cultures, meaning there is one culture you experience when you are a prospective student and another being "*academic presumption*". Culture was also expressed in relation to matters of social justice. Sola replied:

I think that like a lot of departments, especially since the murder of George Floyd, there's been a lot of reckoning in the department with what steps do we need to be taking to make this a better environment for everybody?

Two participants talked about the disconnect within their departments in reference to the culture and efforts to effectively support students of color. Related to her department, Ella stated:

I think there is still a disconnect. It's very much in the sense of their hearts are in the right place. You know, they're trying, they mean well, but they're not as effective as, in my experience, just not as effective as they seem to think they are.

When it comes to leading efforts of equity and justice, there is often an additional responsibility or an expectation that faculty of color spearhead DEI related work and provide support to students of color in their department. Hai details this complex relationship.

I think that, there's still just a huge disconnect between the students and the faculty and my advisor…I feel like she has gotten just all, you know, a lot of the race relations kind of [expletive] has been put on her to do all this kind of reconstructive work in our department…I just don't think it's fair to her at all.

Though there appeared to be a disconnect among faculty in relation to students, Hibbert talked about the culture of community and comradery amongst the graduate students in the department.

Particularly among students, we really try to pick each other up. I don't say that that's reflective of all cohorts, but at least for, you know, my cohort, the ones under us, there is this, you know, not family, but just the really deep community. We wanna support each other. We wanna make sure that we survive the ridiculousness, that's happening around us and make sure that each of us makes it through every successive level.

Engagement and Connectedness

The data revealed that the *engagement and connectedness* theme identified ways in which participants were connected or involved in either their academic departments or other areas on campus and how students utilized campus resources, such as the career development office. Involvement and feelings of inclusion lends to academic success and positive experiences. Participants discussed how their involvement, or lack thereof, impacted their graduate school experiences. Some participants felt the need to be involved was not just important for them as individuals but for future graduate students of color at the university. Sola noted:

> *...part of it is there's only three black students in the department and one of them has already been very involved. And although the work shouldn't have to fall on us, I do feel a certain responsibility to the next generation of black students, to make things better for them.*

Although campus involvement is important and attributes to student success, some participants admitted to not being engaged on campus. The need to set boundaries, disconnect from campus life and the academic space was important for some participants who purposely made decisions to not live near campus and limit their campus engagement. In reverse, student organization involvement has been beneficial in various ways for those participants who do elect to be engaged on campus. Both Lain and Rosa talked about their involvement with their respective student groups. Lain said:

> *...the graduate student union has been a really important outlet for me both to sort of get a better sense of bearing when I've been really confused about how to progress through the graduate program but also as a way to sort of build solidarity and have a real sense of community outside of classrooms, but still at the university and also I think that's built a stronger connection with the south side neighborhood as well.*

Career prospects become increasingly significant for graduate students as they matriculate, and connection to campus resources such as the career development office can assist in this process. Lu acknowledged how his department is "*super supportive*" and has gone above and beyond to make him aware of various opportunities stating that his current academic year was funded by a fellowship. Rosa indicated that her program, shares job opportunities with students in their department that are in the local area, in the country and even abroad. Even if they had not utilized campus career resources, they were at least aware that the career development office existed to guide in career exploration. Due to negative experiences in academia, several participants discussed having little desire in exploring or securing careers in the academic environment. One student explicitly used the term "*traumatized*" to describe her experience and noted that she would be taking a long break following graduation. Neither Ella or Hibbert are interested in pursuing careers in academia and indicated exploring other options.

Identity

The data revealed that the final theme, *identity,* uncovered how graduate students of color experienced the academic environment in relation to their racial identity. For participants, identity was connected to their race or ethnicity, representation, being the only person or few persons of color and identifying as first-generation. Some of these same identities, in addition to

being an older graduate student and parent, overlapped with the theme of *barriers to involvement* related to isolation. Hibbert shared about the nuances of being a student of color to immigrant parents, how there aren't many opportunities to engage about that experience, and how that unique experience may not be understood in a primarily white space.

> *...a lack of having students that were like me, simultaneously black but also a child of immigrants. That's a very specific worldview where you understand what it means to be treated differently because of your race but you're also shaped by parents who are migrants. And so, understanding what it means to be almost like this dual citizen. And that's a very different head space that faculty don't necessarily know how to access or, given that it is a predominantly white space.*

Related to representation, or the lack thereof, in the program Natasha noted:

> *While there are other black students this year, there are only I think, five of us and they're really aren't any black mentors or preceptors or senior faculty in the program. And I think that's an important thing to highlight just because if you are looking at this program from the outside, and you don't know anyone here it doesn't seem like a place that you are meant to be if you don't know that other people like you are here at every level.*

Participants talked about identity as being the only person of color, Frida simply stated "*I wish I wasn't the only one.*" Sola talked about the burden she feels to perform well as a graduate student, being one of the few students of color in her department.

> *I think there's a lot of pressure to do well… the visibility of being one of the only black people in the department or one of the only students of color, there's implications for when you don't do well and I think that pressure keeps me up more at night than getting a job. I feel there's a need to see black students do well and not because of affirmative action. There is a need to, for me to prove that in whatever way kind of as problematic as it is, there is a need for me to kind of prove that to my professors…the people superior to me.*

Lain used the work "*precarity*" in relation to identity and how that has shaped her experience as a graduate student of color.

> *…if you were to take an intersectional approach that brings together sort of minority status racially with gender identification, with class background, then I think that it really sort of heavily determines what I feel is possible. What kinds of sort of social, even just interpersonal networks I'm able to have within my department.*

Identity, especially when connected to other systems of inequity, is a critical component related to the way in which GSOC experience and progress through their programs. Particularly within a predominately white academic environment, identity shaped their experiences in various ways as participants often felt isolated due to their racial identity, being non-represented and compelled to perform well being the only student of color or the first in their families to pursue graduate education.

DISCUSSION

A review of scholarly literature suggested that there is a disconnect between humanities programs and university commitments related to creating a more diverse, expansive, equitable and inclusive academic experience that eliminates obstacles for GSOC. The results of this study confirm those findings. As GSOC experience increased demands to perform and produce high caliber work, mental wellness becomes more imperative for academic success. In a pursuit of higher education, particularly at the graduate level, there is an expectation that students automatically know how to successfully navigate the environment. That is not always the case for many graduate students, and this can be increasingly discouraging for GSOC who often have multiple challenges (financial burdens, food insecurities, disabilities) they are confronting that may disrupt their academic progress.

Barriers, Belonging, and Backing

Financial difficulties were one of the primary barriers that participants admittedly face while completing their graduate degrees. Whether it was to pay for course materials or to cover personal expenses such as rent or food, some of the participants described finances as being a struggle they dealt with that sometimes led to them prioritizing work over academics. In the absence of programs and support to mitigate or even eliminate these challenges however, mental wellness is adversely impacted.

Feelings of isolation was a meaningful factor in how GSOC experienced graduate education. Due to the absence of cultural diversity, students of color often experience separation and isolation during graduate school (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). GSOC hesitate to challenge authority figures or systems that could result in a negative consequence for them (poor grade or lack of job references). Support is unsubstantial, the space is isolating, and resources are limited. Rather than assessing these needs and offering specialized assistance, the attention is back on the recruitment of prospective students rather than the immediate needs of current students.

To recruit graduate students especially GSOC, it is no longer adequate to lean solely on the name recognition of a university or prestige of

a program, but to effectively communicate how the program and the university can offer the best educational experience to its students. Programs must be transparent about the strengths and academic requirements, but also committed to ensuring they are addressing critical issues and advancing the program to its full potential so GSOC can make informed decisions on the academic environment best suitable for them and their needs.

Though advocacy and the need to self-advocate as they cycle through their programs was mentioned by a few participants, this subtheme was not more prevalent in the data collected, enough to rise to the level of a primary theme. Still, its emergence as a common thread merits recognition. The conclusion is that students are either unfamiliar with how to advocate for themselves or others in an academic environment or are unaware that they are already doing this in some way. People of color are expected to be resilient in the face of adversity and persevere through tough times, but to always be required to use these skills becomes exhausting. Rosa explained more intently the weight of resiliency for a student of color.

> *Being a graduate student of color…comes with being told often you're so brave and you're so creative and you're so resilient. And as I've grown up, I've kind of hated those words because they're so charged and weighty and they [are] really weaponized, against, women specifically, women of color specifically.*

Reducing or eliminating barriers to involvement for GSOC means creating a safe academic environment that includes physical and psychological safety, creating and following equitable practices that address the individualized and specialized needs of students, reviewing policy through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens, and ensuring that funding resources are available and equally accessible.

Representation

Course offerings and limited topics, particularly in gender and ethnic studies, also appeared to impact the scholastic experiences of humanities GSOC. Natasha, a Black female student said, "…*class opportunities, there aren't always things in Black studies or in the English department that are particularly about my topic of race and gender… I had hope there'd be a kind of a larger swath of topics.*" Regarding curriculum diversity, Hai, a multiracial male student of music mentioned trying to create a diverse and inclusive classroom experience for the students in the course that he lectures because his own experiences often do not reflect similar goals:

> *I see my role of just trying to change curriculum, just support students. Especially in the classes that I lecture as well, just really support the students of color in my classes. Not teach them from a*

colonial standpoint at all… I teach through migrations and encounters and just what this music or what any music can do for different communities and build on solidarities… I try and teach it that way and I think that a lot of the students of color really get more involved or just care about it more when they are seeing that, they feel represented in this way.

Hai's comments highlight the unfortunate truth that the GSOC experience is lacking true representation of the growingly diversified educated society.

Relationships

The quality of relationships, particularly with faculty, can impact the academic success of GSOC. In this study, many participants confidently shared the support provided to them through faculty relationships, mainly when trust was established. It is confirmed that faculty mentors, especially those who share a similar background (race, ethnicity, gender) as their students, can contribute to the welfare and student success of GSOC when these relationships are formed and maintained (Brunsa et al., 2017). As students are seeking support from faculty of color, they too are grappling with similar encounters (invisibility, proving themselves, questioning of intellect or expertise) in the academic space (Gorski, 2019). Unfortunately, not all students have a faculty mentor or feel supported by faculty in their academic department.

Social Engagement

Campus engagement and humanistic connections are positive indicators on GSOC academic progress and graduate experiences, yet scholarly demands often impede on students establishing meaningful connections or their desire to engage. Increased academic demands and the effort of wanting to succeed make extracurricular involvement and forming connections challenging. Many participants did see the academic value in being connected with their peers or engaged in various areas on campus or in their departments. Hibbert stated:

I think my cohort was the reason why I ultimately decided to come to [redacted name] as opposed to the other great offers that I was courting at the time…because I knew that regardless of how crazy [redacted name] would drive me at least I would have people to talk about it with as opposed to other institutions where I was maybe one of two and I didn't feel like I would survive that very well.

The institutional structure related to campus climate and the academic climate can impact the educational experiences of GSOC. Prioritizing ways to create a supportive climate and one actively engaged in equitable practices

can reduce students' negative experiences, feelings of marginalization and help to retain them (Bowers et al., 2020). Participants described the culture of their various departments and the ways in which that culture effects their academic experiences. For some participants there was a sense of a supportive climate that positively influenced the way they excelled academically or even experienced the environment. In relation to social justice concerns, there appeared to be greater intention in assessing the climate and seeking ways to remove barriers, especially for students of color. Yet, it is highly evident that some departments were doing better than others in creating a more equitable space where GSOC felt supported, visible, and connected.

Being a graduate student is alienating, especially when engaging in independent research. Campus involvement allows students to explore ways that enhance their educational experience. This form of engagement combined with strong reciprocal relationships with faculty and peers have a favorable outcome for GSOC in relation to academic success. Students can lean on their peers as other individuals who are sharing a similar experience or share an affinity to shape healthy networks and a strong sense of belonging. It is equally important that faculty create an academic climate where connection with peers, especially connecting students of color with other students of color, beyond the department or institution, and involvement in extracurricular activities, inside or outside of the academic space, are encouraged. Faculty must also establish a rapport with students as faculty serve as vital resources that attribute to the success of students. Further, college campuses are urged by Critical Race Theory (CRT) to actively address matters that align with inclusive and equitable practices (Harris & Linder, 2018). These practices must not be exclusive to the overarching campus environment, rather should permeate within the academic departments as well. In doing so, this creates a positive campus climate and culture where students are understood, protected, and supported in their graduate journey.

Engagement and Connectedness: Campus Resources

Securing a job in their field is usually the goal for many if not all graduate students as they near graduation. Research implies there is a decrease in academic appointments, forcing students (particularly those completing degrees in the humanities) to search for industry jobs (Ganning, 2018; McAlpine & Austin, 2018). Due to many negative experiences in the academic space, participants in this study indicated not having an interest in seeking academic roles. The academic demands of a humanities program have left some students unsure about an academic future beyond graduate education. Despite some of the adverse experiences that many participants

had, and even considering the less than favorable job market for humanities careers, Hai, though he professed he has been turned off by academia, and Sola both still would consider pursuing careers in academia. Hai shared:

> *One reason why I would want to stay in academia is to help support just more students of color who are coming in after me. I really do, you know, care about that a whole lot. I think that if I were to stay in academia, it would be to try and change things…*

Establishing relationships and connecting with the career office, as a student but even as a faculty member or administrator, can prove to be beneficial as programs work to aid students in determining life after graduate school.

Identity

For many of the participants, identity impacted their overall educational experience, with many shared sentiments of being the only or one of few GSOC in their programs or departments. Rosa, said that being a GSOC was both "*special*" and "*complicated*." She added, "*I would say that overall being a graduate student of color at this university and also being a woman of color from a nation that is still colonized also brings its own context.*" Additionally, students felt exposed and more self-aware of how they represented themselves and how they may be perceived by others because of their identities. Hibbert explained:

> *I think being a student of color means that you're always aware of the famous double consciousness. You're aware of your own situation but you're consciously aware of how your white faculty are thinking as well. So, it's just like, how am I presenting? Even when I'm talking, it's like, how do I sound? Because this is not a space where I can say ain't.*

GSOC, regardless of their environment but particularly at a university, are hyperaware of themselves in relation to their identities and their experiences, and even more so when there are intersections of those identities. Experiencing varying emotions of the graduate school journey or even imposter syndrome is a natural occurrence for GSOC. Understanding GSOC experiences help higher education staff and faculty recognize and mitigate what may be contributing to those realities, and the harm caused to the overall GSOC trajectory in academia.

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to examine the experiences of minoritized graduate students completing degrees in the humanities field. The results of the qualitative data analysis uncovered graduate students of color (GSOC) racialized educational experiences as they navigate through their academic programs. After a thorough review of the

data collected from the qualitative interviews with nine participants, four themes emerged: *barriers to involvement, engagement and connectedness, relationships* and i*dentity.* These four themes connect to the research questions which, as designed, sought to illuminate the educational experiences of minoritized graduate students completing degrees in the humanities. A review of scholarly literature suggested that there is a disconnect between humanities programs and university commitments related to creating a more diverse, expansive, equitable and inclusive academic experience that eliminates obstacles for GSOC. In higher education especially, the goal is to create a campus climate and infrastructure that promotes high levels of engagement and community. Thus, this study was important to understand the authentic experiences of GSOC more deeply.

Limitations of the Study

This study focuses only on graduate students of color experiences seeking degrees in the humanities and does not reflect the experiences of GSOC studying in other fields who may have different or similar experiences. Although humanities disciplines are pertinent for critical human society (Dorot & Davidovitch, 2020), there is a decrease in humanities enrollment when compared to other areas (Costa, 2019). Thus, it is important to note that by focusing on the humanities, the study is already focused on an academic field already experiencing some form of marginalization. The influence of the limitation however is mitigated by evidence in the literature which validates the experiences found in the data.

IMPLICATIONS

As the study presented, GSOC are significantly impacted in various ways by their educational experiences. Dinsmore & Roksa (2023) denote that minoritized students are more dependent on institutional support systems but are less likely to receive it. Which further demonstrates that GSOC need additional resources and "*better infrastructure support from the university*" to be successful yet support may look differently depending on their specific needs. GSOC equally deserve an educational environment where they feel seen, heard, and better represented in a space that was not designed with them in mind. Dismantling oppressive systems and removing barriers to involvement must be the primary responsibility of college and university faculty and administrators to improve the educational atmosphere, specifically for minoritized students. The findings of this study indicate that for GSOC to have an educational experience that is positive, barriers must be eliminated, campus must be supportive and collegial, accessibility to resources that abet their professional goals and sense of belonging.

Participants indicated the lack of representation within their cohorts and academic departments but also the "*lack of representation at higher levels…*" as it relates to faculty and staff. Institutions should seek to improve the diversification of its campus at every level. Participants also desired diversity of course offerings and classroom discussions that were inclusive of varying ethnic backgrounds and experiences and often had to find alternative spaces to engage in these conversations beyond their department or university "*…to go fill these gaps…*". Faculty must also consider and reflect upon their own understanding of power, privilege, and oppression, which will better equip them to address and incorporate diverse topics into the classroom environment (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021).

Students seeking graduate education has steadily increased. For GSOC, it is important that educators address the marginalization and the racialized experiences of this population as they matriculate. Colleges and universities should first assess and measure the perceptions of the university climate including curricular and cocurricular offerings, then prioritize efforts to increase and advance DEI efforts. The enhancement of the campus climate and the betterment of educational experiences for students is a shared responsibility of everyone (faculty and staff), and everyone must be held accountable in promoting these efforts. It is no longer acceptable to call upon these individuals who we deem as the experts in all areas of diversity and inclusion when we all have the power and ability to disrupt harmful behaviors and engage in discourse, no matter how uncomfortable.

Due to the growing number of minority students attending colleges and universities, the focus should be on how to improve educational philosophies, instruction and curriculum design, as well as investment, and organization to meet their needs and demands (Yuan, 2017). The cultural background and the personal experiences of minoritized students are all constructed by their identity, their learning, their communication, and their academic performance styles (Yuan, 2017). It is imperative that faculty can engage in difficult discussions related to racial violence that students of color face (McGowan et al., 2021), that they are capable of leading students through various research interest and topics, and that higher education institutions are ensuring structural diversity exists within programs (Scott & Johnson, 2021). Therefore, if students encounter microaggressions in the classroom, receive minimal support from advisors, have limited connection with faculty of color and experience marginalization in their disciplines or with their peers, faculty engagement in diversity related research or changes within department admissions and recruitment policies will be insignificant (Slay et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

The results of the qualitative phenomenological data analysis uncovered that graduate student of color (GSOC) experiences related to *barriers to involvement, engagement and connectedness, relationships*, and *identity* impact educational experiences as they navigate through their academic programs. Students can be the university's greatest ambassadors; however, if they are having negative encounters, they will not encourage prospective students to consider our schools. Yet, when students are having positive experiences, they can share these experiences confidently and genuinely with other students.

As educators seek to support and advocate for GSOC, they too must advocate for themselves and communicate their needs to be successful in their academic programs and graduate. Afterall, educators cannot assist if they are unaware of the concerns. However, when we are aware of the problems, work can be done to fill in the educational gaps as appropriately. As educators positively influence the educational landscape, so too can they provide the impetus to demolish inequitable practices, improve policies and procedures and provide quality educational experiences for graduate students of color.

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