

“RACISM, WE GOTTA DEAL WITH IT”: EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
GRADUATE STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE UNIVERSITY

by

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## **Abstract**

Universities around the country are consistently focusing on increasing diversity among the student population, yet little is known about how minority graduate student populations fair academically and personally in predominately White institutions, specifically African American graduate students. This qualitative study examines the lived experiences of six African American graduate students. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide on their experiences in a predominately White graduate program. The findings support previous research that indicates that social conditions have not changed and minority students are still not well integrated into their programs. Findings also suggest that although Berry's (1987) model of acculturation can be used to conceptualize the experience of African American undergraduate students, the experience of graduate students is more complex, and only partially supported by this model. Suggestions for how universities can better improve the environment for African American graduate students are included.

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## **Dedication**

To the memory of my grandmother, Arlette Jurdene Pickett, who fought for me and loved me unconditionally with all her heart. I have always felt you near me on this journey and everything I do is for you.

To my mother, Tanya Hall, who never gave up on her dreams. Thank you for showing me that it's never too late to be the kind of person you want to be.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Historically, African Americans have attained higher education at a much lower rate than their White counterparts. In 2007, only 13% percent of students enrolled in degree granting institutions were African American. Among those who completed master's degrees only 10.4% were African American, an increase from 1998 in which only 7% percent of degree recipients were African American (National Center on Education Statistics, 2010). When looking at doctoral degrees, African Americans made up even lower proportions of degree recipients: 4.5% in 1998 and 6.1% in 2008.

The relatively small number of African Americans in higher education has been attributed to the lack of mentorship by African American faculty (Negga, Applewhite, & Livingston, 2007). In a 2009 study of faculty, African Americans were found to make up just 6.6% of faculty in universities across the country (National Center on Education Statistics, 2011). According to a 2007 study done by the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, only 4% percent of college professors in American Universities (excluding historically Black colleges) are African American. Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia reported the largest number of full-time African American faculty -- 6.8% of its 2,710 full-time faculty.

The only way to increase the number of African American faculty is to first focus on the success of the African American graduate student. Universities must first cultivate successful African American graduate students who can then serve as future faculty. University policies need to consider the unique needs of African American graduate students in today's educational environment in order to provide the most effective support to these students. The lack of

literature that examines the unique needs of African American graduate students makes knowing how to best serve this group of students a challenge.

Studies thus far have primarily focused on undergraduate education. We know that college is a transitional period when young people undergo new experiences, meet new people, as well as face opportunities that may compound stress in their lives (Negga et al., 2007). Rimer (2004) discussed the importance of studying stress among college students (undergraduate students). He noted that the pressures of balancing interpersonal relationships, academic demands and personal expectations can be a difficult task. Stressors encountered include academic load, being away from home, family obligations, work, maintaining personal relationships, time management, financial obligations and becoming acclimated to a new environment. As students embark on the more demanding graduate curriculum they may face a set of stressors that we do not yet fully understand.

For example, attending school year round, which can be a new experience for students coming from traditional undergraduate experiences of having summers off, and more rigorous coursework in graduate studies are likely sources of a graduate student's stress. In her book, *The Ultimate Guide to Grad School Survival*, author Leslie Mitchell discusses some of the major differences one can expect when enrolling in graduate education, all of which can contribute to new stresses. These differences include leaving the nest or being expected to be self-motivated and independent along with having to learn to shop for groceries or manage finances. Learning to specialize refers to having to narrow one's interests and choose a topic to study a thesis or dissertation. Social changes refers to the idea of having to make an effort to get to know people, especially outside one's department and playing the game which refers to learning to navigate the politics within a department.



Aside from universal differences between undergraduate and graduate education, little research has explored those experiences that are unique to African American graduate students. For example, based on the cultural importance of family, the complications of losing familial support due to relocation may affect African American graduate students differently than White students. Furthermore, smaller class sizes, although good for individual attention and student participation, make one's minority status more observable. Subsequently differences among students become more prominent making the African American student's ethnicity more likely to be noticed.

Moreover, it is highly likely that minority graduate students will continue to experience stress related to their minority status, or minority status stress (Prillerman, 1989), as they did in their undergraduate years. As such, these students will be compounding additional years of minority status stress. Such stress can contribute to poor academic performance, high attrition rates and overall lack of motivation and ability to be successful. Universities can play an important role in helping to mitigate this stress and its potential consequences. In fact, the high rate of first year attrition among minority students has been attributed to failure of the universities to develop a "social climate" that readily helps minority students become part of the mainstream community (Duncan, 1976). For institutions to better serve African American graduate students, especially in predominately White universities, it would be important to first understand the experience of these students as they acculturate into mainstream graduate school culture.

### **African American Acculturation into Graduate School**

A feature of entering graduate school is the embrace of a specific set of values based on the chosen field of study and the university climate. For African American graduate students,

embracing the values of their institution may require them to set aside their own values and goals. The tension created by this struggle can transform the passion to explore one's field into disappointment and bitterness toward graduate school (Nyquist et al., 1999). Essentially, the experience of African American students in any non-historically black college environment can be conceptualized as an acculturation process.

When different cultural groups are in contact over a period of time, as can be seen when minority students enter the predominantly White culture of graduate education, they are involved in a process of changes that Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok (1987) refers to as acculturation. The process of acculturation involves a group or, as in the case of this study, individuals finding a "balance" of their own culture with that of a dominant group or culture. The process of achieving this balance can create a form of stress known as acculturative stress, or the stress that results from the acculturation process. There exists a limited amount of literature on acculturation and acculturation stress in the African American graduate student (e.g. Berry et al., 1987).

The acculturation process in any graduate program can be influenced by a variety of factors. These include characteristics of the graduate program such as the cultural climate, the diversity within a given field and characteristics of the student such as age, gender, race, and hometown, the racial identity development of the student and previous race related experiences of the student. Ideally, these factors interact to create an "agreement" between the student's values and beliefs and those of the graduate program. The process of working toward this agreement is an acculturation process and is related to a student's level of acculturative stress (Berry, 1997).

In one of the first studies on acculturation, Berry et al. (1987) describes his use of a model based on the level of concordance, or agreement, between dominant and non-dominant

groups on two major issues – cultural maintenance and contact and participation. Cultural maintenance is the degree to which a group wishes to maintain its own culture's traditions and schemas. Contact and participation refers to the degree to which groups wish to engage in relationships with one another. Since the dominant group is likely the majority, it will have the power to determine whether or not the non-dominant group is allowed to maintain its own culture and have relationships with the dominant group.

In graduate school, African Americans represent one of many non-dominant groups. Furthermore, in some departments and graduate programs there may be just one African American student, and he or she becomes the non-dominant individual representative of all African American students – present and future. If the graduate program environment is not accepting of the desire of African American students to maintain certain cultural traditions (e.g. natural hair styles) there will be some level of conflict between the groups. The desire to maintain cultural traditions and schemas and the level of acceptance to those traditions will vary by individual and program. In order to facilitate the acculturation experience of African American graduate students, universities should cultivate an environment that promotes acceptance and tolerance.

The purpose of this study is to explore the acculturative experience of current African American graduate students with the aim of uncovering their unique needs that can ultimately be presented to university policy makers who can affect change - change that can cultivate a university environment that is conducive to the needs of African American graduate students in order for these students to be successful. The following section will review of the existing literature on African Americans in higher education and the acculturation process.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **African Americans in Higher Education**

Research overall suggests that the success of African American students in higher education is highly influenced by the primary racial composition of the universities they attend (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). More specifically, educational class level (freshman, sophomore, etc.) and school setting (predominately White institution vs. historically Black college) were significant predictors of stress for African American students contributing to their educational success (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). From their study of colorblind ideologies and intergroup relations at predominately White universities, Lewis, Chesler and Forman (2000) concluded that regardless of secondary school background, students of color are required to negotiate and renegotiate their identities, expectations and relations with others once they enroll in predominately White institutions. Their results uncovered students' feelings of being confronted with pressures, demands and expectations by their White peers to be representatives of their racial/ethnic group and to embody certain stereotypes, both positive and negative.

DeFour and Hirsch (1990) studied how social integration and social support were related to academic performance and psychological well-being among African American graduate students. The findings indicated that Black graduate students were not well integrated into their academic environment. Those students who were "more integrated" into their departments were found to be better adjusted, have higher grades and had a positive outlook about their progress in graduate school. They were also less likely to have considered dropping out of school. Results also indicated that the number of Black students in the department as well as out-of-class contact with Black faculty were important social support variables. Similarly, Ellis's (2001) study on the impact of race and gender on Black and White doctoral students at predominately White research

institutions concluded that having positive relationships with faculty was an important factor in academic success. She concluded that the nature of the contact doctoral students have with their advisors has a great influence on the nature of the experiences they had in their departments and that race appeared to influence whether students had good relationships with their advisor.

One of the initial studies on African Americans in graduate school (Duncan, 1976) found that minority students were not socially integrated into their respective departmental communities. Many students reported not having much dialogue with students in their department about their field or otherwise. During the mid to late 70s racial conflict was becoming commonplace on American college campuses which likely contributed to their isolation (Hurtado, 1992). Isolated students cannot take advantage of social learning opportunities such as study groups nor can they use social comparison for self-evaluation (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Duncan, 1976). In a more recent study on ethnic minority graduate students, Maton et al. (2011) found that regardless of ethnicity, more satisfied students differed from less satisfied students in reporting greater academic supports, access to more mentoring, greater cultural diversity in their academic environments, and more confidence in their ability to obtain their desired position upon graduation. Students also reported more satisfaction with an academic environment that supported and encouraged interactions with faculty. The results of this study support the idea that supportive and inviting graduate program environments can enhance the experience of minority students.

Smith, Allen and Danley (2007), in a study of the psychological experiences of African American male college students, found that the social conditions these students face had not dramatically improved in the past twenty years. The authors also noted that universities “must assume an immediate and definitive role... and be more proactive in promoting adaptive coping

for Black students” (p. 574). Lewis and colleagues (2000) found that African American students reported struggles with social mixed messages and expectations from both their White peers and their own identity groups’ membership “qualifications” (e.g., are they “too Black?”, do they “act White?”), which put students into uncomfortable circumstances. The results suggest that for students of color this causes an extra burden of mental and emotional stress and leads them to struggle with figuring out what is real about themselves. In the pursuit of better understanding the experience of African American students in higher education, researchers have attempted to superimpose various models on this phenomenon in order to conceptualize the unique experiences that these students face.

### **African American Stress and the Student**

This section outlines the different ways in which African American stress has been conceptualized in the literature. Four specific models have been applied to understand this stress: Transactional model of stress, racial battle fatigue, minority status stress and acculturative stress.

#### ***Transactional Model of Stress***

A model that has been used to study stress in African American college students specifically is the Transactional Model of Stress by Lazarus (1984). This model assumes that interactions between the environment and the individual influence that individual’s vulnerability to symptoms of distress (Anderson, 1991). According to this model, campus climate, personal characteristics and experiences of African American students interact to produce varying levels of stress and coping strategies (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Features of this model include acculturative stress, sources of stress such as daily hassles, chronic stressors and major life events, mediating factors that refer to one’s perception of risk, assessment of whether one’s resources can manage the risk and possible outcomes of coping or experiencing stress.

### ***Racial Battle Fatigue***

Racial battle fatigue is the psychological and physiological strain experienced by racially marginalized groups and the energy lost due to coping with racism (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). This phenomenon is a natural response to living and working under conditions of heightened distress or the perception that one's life, personal dignity, or character is being threatened. For African Americans, racial battle fatigue is the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less than ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments. Based on interviews with 36 Black male students, Smith et al. (2007) found that students struggled with coping with negative stereotypes, debilitating actions, and White people's ability to interfere with their dreams. They concluded that the social conditions Black students face have not dramatically changed in the past 20 years and universities should assume an immediate role in minimizing racial roadblocks and be more proactive in promoting adaptive coping for Black students.

### ***Minority Status Stress***

While stress is common among all college students, African American students at predominately White colleges are said to experience stress that is specific to their ethnic minority status (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Sophomore, junior and senior African American students were found to have higher stress levels compared to freshman, which may indicate that prolonged exposure to what Prillerman, Myers and Smedley (1989) refer to this stress as minority status stress has compounding effects, which may be similarly experienced in graduate school.

In fact, Greer and Chwalisz (2007), in their study of stress and coping of African American students at both predominately White universities and historically Black universities, concluded that African American graduate students' experiences of racism, discrimination and

other forms of oppression influence the academic outcomes of this population. They found that African American students at predominately White universities experienced higher levels of minority status stress than those at historically Black universities.

### ***Acculturative stress***

Acculturative stress is the stress experienced by individuals as they move from their culture of origin toward another culture (Berry et al., 1987). Participating in majority White cultural institutions, such as universities, often requires African American students to engage in values, beliefs and practices that may be different from their culture of origin (Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo, & Hurst, 2010). African Americans are often socialized in the African American culture and universities are typically composed of White American values and beliefs. The conflict of these two sets of values creates acculturative stress (Thompson et al., 2010). Thompson and colleagues in their study of African American college students found that family pressure to maintain cultural norms accounted for a statistically significant proportion of the variance in acculturative stress.

The pressure to maintain cultural norms is antecedent to the normal process of acculturation experienced by students. The acculturation process is a dynamic process that entails the extent to which a person values maintaining relationships with larger, dominant society or culture. Four distinct reaction strategies based on the perspective of the non-dominant group members include: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Assimilation refers to those members of the non-dominant group who give up their own cultural identity and move fully into the dominant culture. Integration is the strategy of those members of the non-dominant group who want to maintain their own culture and simultaneously engage in relationships with the dominant culture. Separation is the strategy of those who want to maintain



their cultural identity and refuse the dominant culture. Marginalization characterizes those who give up cultural and social contact with both dominant and own cultural group (Berry et al., 1987).

Not only do African American students have to contend with stress from acculturation but the stress from mismatched acculturation attitude with the dominant group. Pointkowski, Rohmann and Florack (2002) posit that with (mis)matched attitudes of acculturation comes four levels of concordance: consensual, culture-problematic, contact-problematic and conflictual. As mismatch between attitudes of acculturation increases between dominant and non-dominant groups, perceived intergroup threat increases. As such, integration of groups can only be achieved when there is mutual accommodation (Berry, 1997). This step calls for dominant groups to accommodate the needs of non-dominant groups. Because this model has been most often utilized to study African American students, I chose to test its concepts with another group of African Americans.

### **Research Questions**

Given the void in the literature as described above, this study is designed to uncover the needs of African American graduate students that can help inform institutional policies and practices. This study will be guided by the following overarching (ORQ) and specific (SPRQ) research questions:

ORQ: What is the lived experience of African American graduate students at a predominately White university?

SPRQ 1: What are African American graduate students' experiences of their minority status in their predominately White graduate program?

SPRQ 2: How do African American graduate students cope with cultural differences related to their minority status?

SPRQ 3: What are African American graduate students' perceptions of university support of their success as minority students?

## **Chapter 3 - Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative methodology that allowed an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of participants. Qualitative data provides detailed information that is necessary to understand the scope and nature of a phenomenon. Research on this population has rarely utilized open-ended interviews to understand campus interaction, coping strategies, and use of support systems (Barnett, 2004). Utilizing a qualitative methodology will allow me to capture the meaning of participants' experiences that has until now been silenced.

### **Theoretical Approach**

The heuristic inquiry paradigm, developed by Clark Moustakas (1990) explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher, to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research. Heuristic inquiry answers the question, "What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experiences of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?" (Patton, 2000). This approach requires the researcher to draw upon his/her personal experiences with an intense interest on a particular topic and utilize it in the data collection and analysis of the study. This is the essence of my study. Moustakas (1990) argues that, "heuristics is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences" (p. 15).

Since beginning my graduate studies as the only Black graduate student studying in a predominately White graduate program, I have experienced various emotional and cultural changes. For example, I chose a well-respected graduate program located 1000 miles from my family's home in a predominately White small town in the Midwest. The distance decreases the

frequency of my visits home for the holidays and the time I can spend with my family, thus, making the type and amount of support I get from them very limited. Also the lack of readily available community support from other African Americans makes being away from my family that much more difficult. As such, I am passionate about the research questions as they directly pertain to my own experiences – past and present. I anticipate that this research process will have a transformative effect on my own experience. This transformative experience is an explicit feature of the heuristic inquiry that makes it unique from other qualitative methods.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

Heuristic inquiry emphasizes the need to establish intensity criteria, which participants need to meet in order to be a part of the study. The intensity criteria for participation were as follows: the student must self-identify as African American or Black, at the time of the interview the student must be enrolled full time (>6 credit hours) in a predominately White graduate program with no more than one African American faculty in their program and have been in graduate school at least one year under these circumstances.

By recruiting only those students in predominately White graduate programs, I increase the likelihood that an acculturation process has taken place. I chose to stipulate that the participant be enrolled in the program for at least one year because this amount of time almost ensures that the student has had to make some adjustments in various areas of the acculturation process. For example, the student will have had time to make decisions regarding cultural maintenance behaviors and will be able to discuss those decisions. By recruiting participants from programs with few African American faculty, I increase the likelihood that the student has had to experience this acculturation process individually.

To recruit participants, I obtained the names of all the graduate students who were identified as African American by the Office of Student Life at a large Midwestern university. I emailed all students on the list indicating the nature of the study, the inclusion criteria and details about compensation and then asked to contact me if they were interested. Approximately 90 students were contacted via email and I received approximately 20 responses with only 10 of those meeting the requirements for the study. Of those ten, only 6 were able to be scheduled for interviews.

The six participants included five women and one man. Students represented the Colleges of Human Ecology, Business and Education. About half the participants were nearing the end of their program of study. Two participants were married with spouses living with them in the area, one participant was in a romantic relationship and three did not discuss their relationship statuses. Pseudonyms were given to participants to protect their identity.

### **Data Collection**

A semi-structured interviewed guide was used to collect data (presented in Appendix A). Each interview took no more than one hour. Participants were asked if I could contact them after the interview if there was a need to clarify any information. Five of six participants gave consent for future contact. All interviews were video and audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. I listened to each recording following transcription for accuracy.

The semi-structured interview guide allowed me to be conversational and to use self-disclosure as necessary. Questions in the interview guide covered the following topics: undergraduate education experiences, expectations for graduate school, cultural identity, positive/negative aspects of being an African American graduate student, relationships with people inside/outside of the classroom, experiences of stress and coping related to being an

African American graduate student, and perceptions of and suggestions for improvement of supportiveness of the university and individual programs.

Some portions of the interview guide in Appendix A are in bold indicating that the information was to be said as close as possible to what is written. Some items were bulleted, which indicated the information should be probed for if was not spontaneously offered by participants. I also included the research questions that correspond with the interview questions. Anything that is italicized was solely for the interviewer and was not shared with participants. Transitions were included to facilitate a change in topic. The interview began with information about confidentiality, informed consent, and introductions. The interview ended with payment to the participants. My goal was to make the interview more casual to create an environment that was safe to share personal information. I also made a point to use the term Black instead of African American in the interview because it is a more widely used term among members of the race when communicating with one another. This subtlety of language was also present in writing this manuscript. As a member of the culture, I am comfortable labeling myself and others as Black but when I write in academia, I am required to write “African American” because it is seen as socially acceptable. I even notice during data collection participants interchanging the terms.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis focused on inductive techniques. Lauri and Kyngas (2005) argued that if there is not enough former knowledge about the phenomenon or if this knowledge is fragmented, the inductive approach is best suited. Content analysis was used to form a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon under study. The outcomes of the analysis are concepts or categories that describe the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). Interviews were transcribed and

reviewed several times for words and phrases that describe specific aspects of the participants' lived experiences. Open coding in content analysis is the inductive process of creating notes and headings while reading the text (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding was utilized to create as many headings as needed to fully describe what was being said and these codes were constantly compared between all transcripts. Open coding was followed by axial coding where codes were grouped together based on similarities and then a larger theme was developed to describe the codes in each group. Comparison between identified themes was performed until saturation occurred and new themes no longer emerge (Creswell, 2009). Cross checking of codes and themes was done with the help of my major professor who read and coded some of the transcripts and then worked with me to create larger themes. Our themes were compared and like categories were consolidated to create the themes presented here. The product of the analysis was the identification of common experiences and shared meanings that participants ascribed to being African American graduate students at predominately White institutions (van Manen, 1990).

After themes were developed they were compared to the previously discussed models used to study stress in African Americans – racial battle fatigue, transactional model of stress, racial microaggressions and minority status stress. By comparing the themes to these concepts and models, I was able to determine to what extent each of these concepts can explain the experiences of African American graduate students.

Another methodological strategy utilized was taken from the Listening Guide developed by Gilligan (1982). The Listening Guide method involves a series of sequential listenings, each designed to bring the researcher closer to each participant's distinct voice by tuning in or listening to distinct aspects of a person's expression of his or her experience. The second step,

which was utilized in this analysis, involves developing what Elizabeth Debold (1990) as cited in Gilligan, 2003) calls “I-poems”. This step focuses the listener on the participant’s voice of “I” by following the use of this first person pronoun. To construct an I-poem, the listener (researcher) should first underline or otherwise highlight every first person “I” within a passage of data along with the verb and any important accompanying words, maintaining the sequence in which they appear in the text. Then pull out these “I” phrases and, keeping them in order, place each phrase on a separate line, like the lines of a poem. The I-poem picks up on an associative stream of consciousness carried by the first person voice, running through the narrative rather than being contained in the structure of full sentences (Gilligan, 2003). In the findings, one participant’s experience was summarized as an I-poem and I also included my an I-poem of my own experiences related to one of the themes. The major themes are presented in the next section along with excerpts from the interviews to capture the essence of the themes.

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Multiple strategies were utilized to ensure trustworthiness of analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main strategy utilized was triangulation. Triangulation is the combination of at least two or more theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, data sources, investigators, or data analysis methods (Denzin, 1970). The intent of using triangulation is to decrease, negate, or counterbalance the deficiency of a single strategy, thereby increasing the ability to interpret the findings. Triangulation in this study took the form of data triangulation, investigator/coder triangulation and theoretical triangulation. The use of multiple informants (participants) allowed the for the discovery areas of both convergence and divergence through the constant comparison of codes across interview transcripts. The use of multiple coders decreased potential bias in coding, interpreting and reporting of data. This form of triangulation



helps keep the investigator honest by counterbalancing the effects of bias thus, increasing the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the use of multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the findings can help broaden and deepen the analysis, prevent premature acceptance of plausible explanations, and increase confidence of findings (Banik, 1993). Together, the use of triangulation helped ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings, all of which improve trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another aspect of trustworthiness is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the intent of this study is not to generalize to the larger population of Black graduate students, the findings may be transferable to a similar group of graduate students, i.e., students at a predominantly White university who are at least a year into their graduate studies.

### **Self of the Researcher**

In choosing the heuristic methodology, it is important to explore how my own experiences influenced the execution of this study. Being that I am an African American graduate student, I had my own experiences to reflect on while creating this project. Unlike much of what the literature described, I had an exceptionally positive experience in my graduate program. I had great relationships with my cohort and faculty. My undergraduate experience was also at a predominately White university and again, I had an exceptionally positive experience. Despite these facts, I went into this study with the idea that most other African American graduate students would not have such positive experiences.

Throughout the interview process, I utilized skills obtained in my training as a mental health professional – empathic listening and being present. Since I did not have negative experiences of my own, often I was surprised by what was reported by participants. With empathic listening, I was able to take in their stories and control my own reactions, saving them

for reflection after the interview, and be present and attentive to the participants' experience. Had I not had these skills to utilize during the interviews, it would have been more difficult to maintain my role as an empathic yet neutral interviewer.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

A defining feature of heuristic inquiry is the researcher's introspective look at how the project has influenced him/her. This heuristic study is no exception. I took on this project with great excitement and some apprehension as to who I would meet and what I would learn. Would other Black students even be willing to discuss their experiences with me, would their experiences be similar to my own or would I find that experiences are as different as people? I wasn't sure.

Findings from the data analysis were collapsed into five themes: (1) educating Whites and representing Blacks, (2) inner conflict and the pseudo self, (3) experiences of microaggressions, (4) it's not all bad, (5) suggestions for improving university support. Each of these themes and its sub-themes are illustrated below with excerpts from the interview transcripts. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

### **Educating Whites and Representing Blacks**

The responsibility of educating Whites and representing the Black race was experienced by most participants. This responsibility included educating fellow classmates as well as faculty. Some participants were surprised at the amount of ignorance they encountered at the graduate level and took it upon themselves to address their White classmates' inaccurate or inappropriate ideas surrounding African Americans. Some participants made it their mission to educate, thus they set out seeking opportunities, while others found themselves inadvertently roped in. Ashley used the phrase, "*I try to make them teachable moments,*" several times to talk about how she tries to help White people around her understand that the things that they say are not acceptable. Beth seemed to have a sense of duty about this role, "*Um I set out to educate. If they don't know*

*something I let them know 'hey that's not appropriate' or 'hey maybe you should try this (a more respectful way of saying something).'*"

There were times however when participants found themselves being appointed as the representative of African Americans and expected to address diversity-related issues solely because they were African American. Ashley described her experience of being expected to comment on issues related to being Black in the classroom,

*...in class you know if you're talking about Black people or if there's an experience they wanna know about diversity they automatically look at you as the person who can make this light bulb go off in their head and make them understand and so in [such] a situation you want to educate them.*

Although participants wanted to address these situations, they varied on how it affected them. Reactions ranged from tired and frustrated,

*"It gets tiring and then it gets frustrating... why are you so fascinated like I'm an alien species or something" (referencing being asked a lot of questions about Black people by White students),*

to having a sense of obligation, *"In my heart I feel a sense of responsibility."*

Overall participants felt responsible to assume the role of educating Whites though sometimes they were concerned that they may be misrepresenting African Americans as a whole. Desiree said, *"I'm a representative of my background or culture... I hope I'm not embarrassing my race."*

One participant, Georgia, referenced her awareness of the responsibility she had to be a positive representative of African Americans in her program. Georgia was aware of the stereotypes that were attached to her as an African American and she consciously made an effort

to live in such a way that negated those stereotypes. She explained her awareness of being the only Black student in her class and how that shaped her behavior:

*I mean it's a it is awkward being sometimes being the only Black person in the class but I sometimes I feel like 'oh I gotta come on time because there's gonna be stereotypes like oh you know the Black girl's gonna be late' or even just the fact that oh um you know just realizing I stand out so I can't just blend in [when I come in] late like I'm the only Black person so it's just a distinguisher there so there's things like that.*

Although participants were generally stressed with their role of educating Whites, they endured it knowing that what they did as an African American student in their program paved the way for future students in their program. These participants were mindful of the influence they could have and wanted to have more opportunities to give back to African American students at the university. This motivated the students to educate Whites they encountered and to work towards leaving a positive legacy of African Americans in higher education. Erica said,

*I feel a sense of responsibility to be a role model because since there aren't so many and especially when you're at a predominately White institution you have undergraduates looking at you and in my heart I wanna do it for them and I wanna do it for me. When I go out there people can see that it can happen cus most of the time people will count themselves out early on because of the misconception 'I'm not smart enough, I can't do math, it's so hard like seven more years [of school], I'm ready to get out of school now' you know...,*

Ashley said, *"It makes me feel sad sometimes and it makes me think, you know I have children so I'm always thinking about, 'I don't want them to experience the same things'"*

It appeared that participants assumed the role of educating Whites and representing Blacks knowing that it would make a lasting impression for future generations of Black students. The effort that this role demanded was stressful yet participants not only obliged but made it their mission to make a difference.

### **Inner Conflict and the Pseudo Self**

Some participants made reference to battles within themselves related to being African American graduate students. Erica spoke about struggling to believe that she belonged in graduate school because she was a qualified student and not just adding to her program's diversity statistics. Georgia struggle with wanting to see her aggressiveness in the area of leadership as a strength because her staff often labeled her aggressiveness as a stereotype of African American women. Ashley discussed the inner struggle she experienced in deciding to keep her two worlds (school and her partner/family) separate because she felt it was more work for her attempt to blend them together,

*I tried to integrate them (her relationship with her boyfriend and her graduate school cohort) my first year... and that doesn't work, not for me anyway. I think it would have been a greater amount of stress if I would have kept trying to integrate everything.*

In order to cope with such inner conflicts, some participants created what I call a pseudo self, to aid them in fitting in with the culture of graduate school. Half of the participants made reference to living a double life. They referenced their true authentic self that they reserved for their private life and a pseudo self that they must project in graduate school. It appeared that these participants did not feel free to say and do things that would reflect or reveal their authentic self because it did not fit with the dominant culture of graduate school. Charlie described his experience as “putting on a front” or acting differently in front of White people. These students

recounted instances in which they had to hold back or change their behavior to prevent conflict. For instance, Ashley explained how she made adjustments to her mannerisms because her White classmates were put-off by the way she communicated,

*And something I do a lot if you haven't noticed is I talk with my hands and so when I'm talking with other people I have to put my hands in my lap cus then I'm not just expressing myself, I'm coming close, physical contact... no none of that. You have to you know relax your body and change your tone and try to speak softly because if you raise your voice um they back down and then it gets construed that you're this angry person.*

There were also instances where participants described holding back their real or “authentic self” responses because they did not feel that those around them really wanted to know what they thought or felt. When asked to consider what she says to people when they ask her what it is like to be a Black graduate student, Erica spoke about how her answers varied depending on who was asking, and made reference to knowing the difference between who was genuinely interested in her well-being and who just wanted to hear “the happy great things (response),”

*I really depends on who I'm talking to, if I'm talking to another Black person you know I say it's mentally stressful but it's nothing you can't get through... but to a White person it depends too on who they are because it's all about genuineness. There's a few people that genuinely want to know and some people... just wanna hear the happy great things and so if they're the happy great things I'm like 'oh it's great it's good you know I'm getting through my program...'*

The need to use a pseudo self as a protective shield often led to feelings of loneliness and isolation because participants felt that no one readily understood them and they had to spend

much of their time explaining themselves to others. The energy exerted in doing so forced them to not focus on their own needs. The excessive focus on their Black identity made it difficult for participants to be themselves and do what really mattered in graduate school – form authentic friendships.

The process of initiating one's pseudo self involved considerable thought and effort. For example, Charlie used a metaphor of putting pasta through a strainer to symbolize filtering his authentic self response when interacting with Whites to avoid being misrepresented.

*And the thing is you're characterized based upon your opinion. They think, because you say something you feel this way, but that's not the case. When I'm just giving a perspective, I'm giving an idea a theory. So I have to be careful, in what I say. And sometimes, I have to reprocess what I think. Like I have to kinda, like its kinda like puttin', puttin' something through a strainer, like you know like you if you're cookin' pasta, you know you gotta, you got your pasta and you put it through your strainer right? So you take your strainer man, you know you gotta get all that out, then you rinse the pasta off...to get all that gunk off...*

Ashley described her pseudo self as a chameleon, “*You shift. You become a chameleon. You blend in you don't make waves.*” In this case, Ashley's pseudo self acted as protection for her to help her get through her program.

With all of this time spent living as the pseudo self, participants found that they needed a respite at some point to reconnect with their own true self and be real and not have to “put up a front”. Participants utilized same race friends whom they made locally and friends and family back home to keep them grounded and to act as a source of stress relief. The availability of social



connections with other African Americans through jobs, campus organizations, community involvement, and family, allowed participants time and space to be real.

### **Experiences of Racial Microaggressions**

Five of the participants spoke of having had experienced microaggressions in graduate school. The sources of these aggressive acts included fellow students, faculty and administrators. Experiences ranged from overt to covert forms of microaggressions. Charlie described an encounter with an administrator who perceived him as harsh and rude. This administrator complained about his behavior to his major professor. Charlie was stunned by this accusation and addressed it with his major professor. His recount of this experience was analyzed as an I-poem:

I defended myself

I said

I said

I did not do that

I'm not that kind of person

I'm wrong

I said no

In his I-poem you can sense Charlie's frustration and how strongly he wanted to defend himself against a negative label. Charlie found himself in a difficult position as he did not feel supported by his major professor. He ultimately lodged a complaint to the department head about the situation involving both his major professor and the administrator. He later discovered from other Black students that the administrator was known to "not like people of color" and was

considered racist. He went on to discuss how he had to work hard to reject being stereotyped as a “troublemaker.”

While Charlie found a way to address the injustice he experienced, other participants either did not have any chance or were taken by surprise and were not prepared to address the microaggressions they experienced. Examples of such microaggressions included being assumed to have used illicit substances, being called “a racist” on a course evaluation, and being thought of as unique due to being an excellent student. Georgia described her experience:

*I had a professor... who communicated to a friend of mine in just sayin' how awesome I was and how great um how intelligent and all those things and how like he's encountered so many people um of color and you know like he's never seen anyone like me...*

Georgia continued to describe how this professor's comments impacted her,

*Why do I have to be compared on the scale of people of color, why couldn't I just [have] been someone who you know out of all your classes [that was great and intelligent] ... you degraded me*

Participants generally took their experiences of racial aggression in stride and many had no way to make sense of what those experiences really meant. Erica, for instance, did not have a way to explain and make sense of her experiences until after her professor gave her an article about microaggressions. Reading it relieved Erica because she was finally able to give language to what she felt she was experiencing but could not identify it. She explained:

*I was able to say I'm not crazy like I you know like I'm not being overly sensitive to what's going on that's not being said but I can feel it and I know it happened but I can't prove it.*

Erica further spoke of how she knew that her Black identity was being “pimped” or used by others for their own good but she appeared ambivalent about her reactions to being used because she felt that as long as she was able to get something in return (i.e. - receiving a full scholarship for her master’s education), it was a fair trade:

*I’ve been asked to introduce deans and sit on boards and I’m like you know I don’t know anything about this but I know that you’re trying to promote that your college is diverse so I mean I did that... it’s like school was paid for you know so I’m like hey if you wanna pay for it, I’m qualified and... but I know that it’s not like you don’t see my color and that you won’t utilize it so we can roll with it... I was like I’m gone pimp you if you gone pimp me you know kinda thing.*

Participants had varying degrees of experience with microaggressions and because every participant was able to share an experience of microaggression, covert and even overt racism is still a struggle in today’s society.

### **It’s Not All Bad**

In the midst of the unfortunate and negative experiences that participants encountered in graduate school, there were some moments of true joy and positive encounters. These positive encounters appear to have a lot to do with being able to build a community of Black students who served as a support, as well as focusing on the benefits that graduate school offered.

Desiree and Georgia both experienced positive race-relations in their programs of study. They both attributed their positive experiences to having an ethnically diverse group of students in their program and having the opportunity to build relationships with other African American students. Erica and Desiree were members of an African American sorority and thus when began

graduate school they had immediate connections to other African American students on campus.

Desiree describes how important her sorority was to easing her transition into graduate school:

*It's a sisterhood and I feel like I have a automatically identifier, we're not just Black, we're sisters and that's important to me and I'm really glad that I was able to have that and I don't know that my transition here would have been as smooth for me if I didn't have those connections.*

Georgia and Beth felt that being able to attend graduate school as an African American woman was a privilege and an honor. Georgia said, *"You get an education; you have an opportunity... just like your peers to get an education,"* and Beth responded, *"It's a privilege to be here. It's a privilege to um have um education especially um as a African American woman"*.

Participants also spoke of enjoying learning from other types of people, being around other educated African Americans and being able to have intellectual conversations with people around them, Charlie said:

*Oh man, positive about bein' a Black graduate student. Um, being with your peers, learning, learning new things about people, learning about different people... Bein' a graduate student you get more people from more areas, you learn, you learn from people who have families, who are married, who are goin' back to school just to get a promotion, you get to learn from people who are up and coming, who are goin' to be the next dean of wherever, you learn from people who are goin' to be the next athletics directors, you learn from everybody*

Georgia said,

*Like the conversations that we have when we talk about anything we can talk about you know positives we can talk about um race and gender... especially sometimes when I go*

*home...it's not about like about the latest rap video and whatever we're talking about stuff that really matters and it's just an awesome experience to see Black people engaged in education.*

In general, participants enjoyed the stimulating conversations they were able to have in academia versus the mundane conversations they had with friends back home and reveled in being surrounded by other educated African Americans.

### **Suggestions for Improving University Support**

Participants were asked for their suggestions of how to improve the supportiveness of their program and/or the university. Ideas for improvement focused on having more open discussion about diversity and increasing the social connectedness of current African American graduate students via a formal organization. Charlie suggested,

*We can't be non-confrontational about things, you can't let things slide. You know, let people get away with what they wanna do. We have to just, sometimes we have to sit down and deal, ok, what's the issue, yes there is an issue, racism, we gotta deal with it, but, so, that's the main, that's the main problem...maybe come up with a couple of seminars um about dealing with Black students both undergraduate and grad.*

Beth's suggestions focused on creating a student organization that works,

*Well we could come up with an organization that works or is a organization that kinda is for Black students Black graduate students and we tried to do that uh but it didn't work so much... maybe raise awareness a faculty and faculty raise awareness to the university that it's necessary.*

Ashley spoke of having a more diverse faculty and a diversity point person in the department who could deal with multicultural student concerns,

*I know this is difficult but a more diverse faculty is, is key in my opinion. I mean just to have somebody that looks like you just make it easier to walk down the hall... and I think you know um you need someone who is culturally aware and culturally sensitive. It doesn't matter if that person is a professor it doesn't matter if they're an advisor, you need somebody that you can go to that's actually going to listen and then that can guide you through whatever it is, um at this point I don't feel, I think there's a lot of talk there's not a lot of action.*

Desiree wanted more emphasis on connecting students together via a listserv,

*Giving us more opportunities to know what peoples' studies are going to be um have having us be more supportive so we can you know like either participate or get the word out or so I wanna even if it's just a listserv just tellin' me you know things going out for BSU (Black Student Union).*

Other ideas included providing more help to students as they matriculate through their program. For example, Erica discussed how unfamiliar she was with the process of a doctoral program and how she wished there was more guidance about what she could expect to encounter.

*There's minimal help with getting through the process and if you're not vocal if you're like I don't know what it means to be a doctoral like I don't know what prelims mean you know like but I'm in this doctoral program you know it's like no I don't have a mom and a dad who went through a doctoral program when I was three years old with them so I know what all this stuff means like I know nothing but the majority of the you know faculty don't know that I need that kind of information so kinda sucks...*

Overall, participants wanted to feel as though they were a part of something larger, whether that includes the university, which could provide academic support, or more specifically the African American community on campus, which could provide emotional support.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

The participants in this study gave a glimpse into their experiences as African American graduate students. Their accounts support findings by Smith et al. (2007) and Duncan (1976) that the social conditions that minority students face have not dramatically improved in the past twenty years and that minority students are not socially integrated into their respective departments. The participants in this study seem to feel as though they belong to the out-group in their respective departments and most developed a pseudo self or persona that did not typify their authentic personhood to manage interactions with White students and faculty. The pseudo self was particularly useful with dealing with experiences of microaggressions. To cope with the stresses that accompanied their inability to be authentic for fear of being misunderstood, many participants utilized a community of fellow African Americans with whom they could be their true self.

According to the transactional model of stress proposed by Anderson (1991), these findings support the idea that climate, personal characteristics and experiences of African American students interact to produce varying levels of coping and stress. To cope with this stress, participants created a pseudo self that protected them because they felt that it was not safe for them to say and do what they would do as their true authentic self. Participants also found it necessary to filter out their authentic self responses because they did not always feel that inquirers were genuine or really wanted to know what they really thought or felt. This filtration left participants feeling isolated and alone. These experiences support Smith et al.'s (2007) concept of racial battle fatigue whereby the psychological strain from coping with racism and microaggressions can lead to lost energy and fatigue. The experiences of participants appear to fit with two concepts from the acculturation model proposed by Berry et al. (1987): assimilation



and integration. With assimilation, the non-dominant group gives up their cultural identity and moves fully into the dominant culture. The findings of this study partially support assimilation – participants created a pseudo self that was utilized when in the academic setting among Whites. However participants found refuge with local same race friends and maintained relationships with friends and family from home, so assimilation only occurred periodically. Similarly, because participants were only engaging in relationships with Whites on their terms (i.e., - under the guise of the pseudo self), integration or attempting to maintain their own culture and simultaneously engaging in relationships with the dominant group, was only partially evident. The findings suggest that although the concepts from acculturation resonate with undergraduate students in previous research, the experiences of African American graduate students is more complex and is not fully captured by the acculturation model proposed by Berry et al. (1987).

Participants also provided many examples of aspects of graduate school that they were pleased with. This included intellectual interactions with other educated African Americans as well as students at different life stages and students on different career paths. The diversity they encountered appears to have enriched their lives and made the graduate school experiences worth their while.

Another aspect of this study was to gather suggestions from participants on how to improve the supportiveness of the university. The most common suggestions included the idea that the university did its part to facilitate social connections among African American graduate students and increasing opportunities to give back to undergraduates which would support the collectivist culture of African Americans. The whole idea of building a community and creating opportunities that promote longevity and continuity of future generations of African American graduate students appear to be a value that resonated with participants. Participants were willing

to invest time and effort to ensure a positive experience for future students and need the support of the university to provide a structure that would sustain their efforts.

### **My Personal Journey**

The week that my qualitative methods class covered heuristic inquiry was the day a light bulb went off inside me. I had a warm feeling about the methodology; something I never thought was possible. As I was developing my ideas about how to study the experiences of African American graduate students, I knew two things: 1) I wanted to do a qualitative thesis and 2) being that I too am an African American graduate student I anticipated some reflection on my own experiences would be required. After I settled into the idea of using heuristic inquiry, it hit me that I would need to revisit my own experiences on a deeper level, something that until now I have managed to avoid completely. Even as I sit down to write this personal reflection I am experiencing anxiety about telling people what I *really* think and feel about who I am in this context of graduate school.

During my first semester in graduate school, as I sat around the table in the conference room for class, it was fairly obvious that I was the only African American. There were 11 students in my cohort: 9 were White, 1 was Indian. We shared our building with another department and I was the only African American person (faculty or student) in the building. The interesting thing about that is that I was alright with the idea of being the only African American. I completed my undergraduate degree at a predominately White university and I had many classes and had participated in many extracurricular activities in which I was the only or one of a few African Americans.

As the semester wore on and our coursework expanded and the conversations became deeper and more personal, I began to notice that at the end of the day when I went home I had a

different feeling than I did when I was an undergraduate student. I was beginning to realize how different it is to be the only African American student in a graduate program. Graduate school, in my mind, was a place of professionalism and intellect. It was something that no one in my family had attained and essentially something I had little knowledge about. I doubted myself when I did not know the answer to a question or could not keep up with the reading or received less than an “A” grade on a paper. I remember wondering if I was the only person who went to a mediocre public high school and who did not have parents who attended college.

I made it a point to spend time with my cohort outside of the classroom. I wanted to try to get to know people in hopes of feeling more comfortable and confident in the classroom setting. What I found was that I had a great group of students in my cohort. We could laugh together, we could cry together, and we were there for each other both personally and academically. Despite the positive experiences I had, I still felt that something was missing and as I carried out this study I realized what I was missing – relationships with other African American graduate students.

This process of finding, meeting and learning about other African American graduate students on campus was an eye-opening experience. I had no idea that there was such a tight knit community on campus and that it had been here the entire time I was a student. I immediately felt disappointed that I did not seek out the support from the African American community and I missed out on making great friends to share my experiences with. I was able to connect with this community after my study was completed and I felt a sense of relief. I appreciated the small things like listening to R&B music or eating home cooked “soul food” meals and the bigger things like talking freely about what it was like to live in a small town in the middle of the Midwest when you are from an urban area and getting advice about African American friendly

places in town. I also appreciated hearing other African Americans reflect on experiencing racism in the community and had a sense of, “I’m not the only one that happened to.”

In developing the themes presented here, I was struck by the idea of the pseudo self that many participants spoke of. Before this project, I was completely convinced that I was “myself” in all contexts but as I reflected on the sense of relief that I felt when I met these other African American students, I came to see that this may not be the case. I used an I-poem to reflect on my experience of uncovering my pseudo self:

I have a pseudo self  
I need to recognize it  
I think  
I think  
I don’t recognize it  
I think  
I don’t feel like it exists  
I can’t take it off  
I don’t know if it’s good or bad  
I question my identity

In this I-poem, I hear a sense of confusion – part of me wants to accept this concept as being true for me and part of me is rejecting the idea all together. It seems that I am unsure about whether I feel comfortable admitting to myself that I have a pseudo self. I think this discomfort comes from not wanting to question who I am or who I have become. The following lines focus on how difficult it has been for me to “take off” this pseudo self in the past.

I don’t feel like it exists

I can't take it off

I don't know if it's good or bad

The last line closes in on what probably cautions me the most, "I question my identity". Now I am wondering who I am and how that person changes in different situations. Is who I am as an African American graduate student in a predominately White university the same as who I want to be seen as and if not, is there a way to make them congruent or will they forever be separate?

I wish I had started this project sooner and I wish I had known the amazing, talented and intelligent people I met during this process sooner. What I lacked in my graduate program was connections – social connections to other African American graduate students.

### **Implications**

Much of the previous research as focused on the experiences of undergraduate African American students. The findings from this study highlight the importance of separately studying African American graduate students rather than attempting to superimpose findings from previous research onto this group. An important first step for university officials is assessing the current state of African American graduate students, including a thorough needs assessment that identify what students say is going well, what needs improvement and suggestions for improvement. Universities should also consider the idea that students may have needs will be unique to their status as African American graduate students in addition to general needs of a regular graduate student. The specificity of the needs of African American graduate students make it important if not necessary that university administration partner with these students who are already invested in their future and the future of their successors.

Other suggestions for improvement include bringing more attention to the diversity point person already established in each college, discussing diversity in workshops more often for

faculty, staff and students. At this university there is a faculty member in each department appointed as the diversity point person, who is supposed to handle all diversity related issues, which is something that all universities can implement. However, not many students are even aware that this position exists or who their departmental representative is. The university should highlight these individuals at the graduate orientation and direct students to these staff should any concerns arise. This diversity point person should be someone of color, if possible, and if not, someone who has shown to be culturally sensitive, knowledgeable of issues that minority graduate students face, easy to approach, and express a willingness to help these students.

Universities could also make more of an effort to hire faculty of color. As one participant mentioned, it makes it so much easier to walk down the halls when there is someone who looks like you in each of the offices. It reminds you that you can succeed and even though it may be tough, it is possible because another person like you was able to do it. It can be difficult to recruit faculty and even students of color in extremely rural, predominately White areas, but reminding potential faculty what they can offer students in comfort and confidence may be a place to start.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Like all research, this study had strengths and limitations with all the decisions I made in the development process. First, this study was the first in-depth study of African American graduate student experiences. This study gave voice to a silenced community which is essential to improving the quality of the graduate school environment and the education of African American graduate students. By utilizing a heuristic approach, I was a member of this population which allowed me to ask more difficult questions and made participants more comfortable with sharing both positive and negative experiences.

When considering limitations of the study the inclusion criteria led to some limitations. An aspect of the recruitment process was that participants were self-selected which meant that maybe more students qualified for participation but for whatever reason felt they did not meet the criteria and chose not to respond to the inquiry. Had I taken the time to research the inclusion criteria and invite those who I knew met the requirement I may have had a larger sample. Requiring participants to have completed one year of graduate school may have excluded some participants with valuable experiences and the perspective of newly navigating graduate school as a minority student. Also in terms of participants there was a lack of the male voice because the sample was predominately female.

### **Conclusion**

Although African Americans have come a long way in the journey of attaining higher education, there seem to be subtle reminders that times have not changed as much as we may assume. Unfortunately, experiences of racism and microaggressions litter their graduate school experiences forcing a dichotomy between who they present to their graduate school community and who they truly are. We cannot help but imagine that the efforts exerted from having to cope with minority status stress is depleting and can potentially threaten the successful completion of one's graduate education. The findings of this study suggest that students expect the university and individual departments to do their part in reducing the occurrence of covert and overt racism and their experiences of isolation and disconnection with the graduate community as a whole. It is evident from these findings that the university is eager to capitalize on the value that African American graduate students offer the university community but is slow to reciprocate with services for these students.

## Chapter 6 - References

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## Appendix A - Interview Guide

*Introduction:* The following is a semi-structured interview guide focused on understanding the lived experience of African American graduate students. Questions and topics covered will focus on how African American graduate students experience their minority status in their program, how they cope with stress related to their minority status, and how they perceive the availability/effectiveness of services, staff, and faculty in supporting their success as minority students. Some questions are written in **BOLD** which indicates they should be read as they are written. Other questions/topics are bulleted (●) which indicates a necessary probe if not spontaneously discussed by participants. *Some information is written in italics. This is for the researcher and should not be shared with participants.* Try to make this interview conversational; relax and feel free to utilize self-disclosure at your discretion.

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### **\*\*\*Start Audio/Video Recording**

**Hi, my name is Jurdene. It's nice to me you. First I wanted to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As a result of this discussion I hope to understand more about your experience as a Black graduate student. Questions will cover topics such as your experiences in higher education, what kinds of things you do to cope with stress, and your perception of support from the university. The discussion is being audio and video recorded, which you have signed a release for. Even though we are recording, I may stop and ask for clarification on something. Just as a reminder, your name will not be used in the data collection process. Any identifying information, such as what department/program you are in, names of faculty/staff/students you mention, will not be included in the final manuscript. At the end of the interview you will receive \$15 for your participation. What questions do you have? .... Okay, let's get started by introducing ourselves: give your first name, what year you are in your program, where you are from originally and why you choose this university for your graduate study. I'll start...**

*SPRQ 1: What are African American graduate students' experiences of their minority status in their predominately White graduate program?*

**First we're going to focus on your experiences in your graduate program and in your undergraduate university as a Black student. Think back to when you decided to attend graduate school. What influenced your decision on choosing a graduate school?**

- Was diversity something you considered before you accepted an offer?
- Was your undergraduate university also a predominately White environment?
- How do you think that influenced your experience in your graduate program?

**What was your image of what graduate school would be like?**

**How did your program here measure up to that expectation?**

**In front of you there is a sheet of paper with a stick figure on it. There are also arrows next to the head, heart and mouth. Consider this question: When someone asks you, “What’s it like to be a Black graduate student here?” what do you say? Write that next to the arrow at your mouth. When someone asks you, “What’s it like to be a Black graduate student here?” what do you think? Write that next to the arrow at your head. When someone asks you, “What’s it like to be a Black graduate student here?” what do you feel? Write that next to the arrow at your heart.**

**\*\*Have participant share drawing**

**When I say the word “cultural identity” what comes to mind? \*\*Write these answers in the margin. Refer to these when asking future questions about culture. If the following are not mentioned, ask if these are included in culture.**

- Music
- Food
- Recreational activities
- Clothing
- Language
- Values
- Norms and rules

**How do you maintain aspects of your culture that aren’t supported in this community?**

**During the first year, describe your relationships outside of the classroom.**

- Who did you spend time with (old friends, new friends, family, others)?
- What did you do with “free time”

**Talk about a time when you felt unsure about sharing your perspective because you were the only (or one of a few) Black student in a class.**

**Talk about something you feel is a unique experience that you had at this university related to being Black in a mostly White program.**

**What’s positive about being a Black graduate student here?**

**What’s negative about being a Black graduate student here?**

*SPRQ 2: How do African American graduate students cope with cultural differences related to their minority status?*

**Now we’re going to talk about how you have coped with stress related to being a Black student in your program. So what are some things you have found to be helpful?**

- For each below ask: how often this support was used, if any person in particular was sought out, what advice they gave
  - Family support
  - Seeking out other Black students
  - Seeking out non-Black students
  - Talking with non-Black faculty

- Talking with Black faculty
- Spirituality
- Other

**What was some of the best advice you got (and from whom)?**

**What advice did you get (and from whom) that was not helpful?**

*SPRQ 3: What are African American graduate students' perceptions of university support of their success as minority students?*

**Now we are going to move to your perception of how supportive your program and the university are. In general, what are the strengths of your program in regards to supporting your success as a Black graduate student?**

- Faculty supportiveness
- Approachability of faculty on race related issues
- Other

**What role did your major professor play in your personal race-related concerns?**

**Did you get involved in Black student organizations? How were they helpful (or not)?**

**What other university services did you seek out?**

- Why were they helpful/not

**How would you make the program/university more supportive/What would be helpful for future students?**

**We have come to the end of the interview. Is there anything that anyone would like to add that was not asked? Thank you for your participation in this interview. All the information and unique experiences you offered will be helpful in understanding more about how universities can be more supportive of your success as a Black graduate student. On the informed consent, there was a place for you to initial if you consent to being contacted in the future regarding this research topic. If you initialed that area, I may be getting in touch with you in the coming weeks to make sure that I captured what you said correctly. If at any time you wish to withdraw your interview data from the study you may do so. Also, as noted in the informed consent, you will be receiving \$15 for your participation. This sheet requires you to sign your name and social security number for the university records and I have those funds for you now.**

**\*\*End Audio/Video Recording**

*Make sure that each participant signs the form with the necessary information and hand them an envelope with \$15. Also collect the drawings of each student.*

Figure A.1

