

Promoting change through the voices of Black graduate students: A qualitative exploration of the experiences of Black graduate students in MFT programs

by

Kamille Marie Greene

B.A., University of Central Missouri, 2016
M.S., Oklahoma State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Applied Human Sciences
College of Health and Human Services

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2024

Abstract

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the woman who instilled in me the belief that I can be whomever I choose to be. Aflretta Marie Greene, I miss you more and more each day. Thank you for loving me and I hope you are looking down on me from heaven smiling with joy, proud of the woman I've become.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." – Philippians 4:13

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Mental illness is an increasing concern in this country, especially for people of color (POC). According to SAMHSA, 21% of African Americans reported struggling with mental health challenges (2021). Additionally, suicide is the third leading cause of death for African Americans aged 10 to 24 years old, and African American men 25 to 34 years of age (SAMHSA, 2021). Unfortunately, many POC hesitate to seek mental health services because they would prefer to seek help from other POC (Tien & Johnson, 1985). In 2023, it was reported 76% of therapists in the United States (US) identify as White, 4% identify as Black, 10% identify as Asian, and 6% identify as Hispanic or Latino (Hollander, 2023). When considering why the number of licensed Black clinicians is so much lower than White clinicians, it may be related to a low rate of Black students enrolled in mental health graduate programs.

Earning a graduate degree is a major accomplishment, but it can also be an incredibly stressful experience, making it difficult to complete. According to Chrzanowski and Poudyal (2018), 40-60% of graduate students do not reach graduation. This is typically due to heavy coursework schedules, high expectations, comparisons to others, and frequent evaluations of performance (Stratton et al., 2007). Experiencing the common stressors of the average graduate student, while also experiencing additional stressors that are associated with being a Person of Color, can be especially challenging. For this reason, the number of POC earning graduate degrees is disproportionately lower than those of their White counterparts. In 2019, it was reported Black students obtained only seven percent of all master's degrees and only five percent of all doctoral degrees in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field (Black Students in Higher Education, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the diverse experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in or recently graduated from various marriage and family therapy (MFT) graduate school programs in the United States. Although Black students experience stress at both the undergraduate and graduate college levels, this study focuses on graduate students because a graduate degree is required to become a mental health therapist. As mentioned previously, many POC prefer to seek services from a provider whose cultural background resembles their own and may choose to not engage if a clinician of Color is not available. In 2021, it was reported 21% of the Black population in the US struggle with mental health challenges and only 39% of those identified with mental health challenges received treatment compared to the 52% of the non-Hispanic White population who identify as having mental health challenges (SAMHSA, 2021). The treatment Black clients receive has also, reportedly, been of less quality than treatment provided to White clients due to the tendency of common behaviors within the Black community to be misconstrued and criminalized by others (Alang, 2019). This mistreatment has ultimately contributed to feelings of mistrust of mental health services within communities of Color (Alang, 2019). For these reasons, more Black therapists are needed to be an effective resource to minority populations, which would require more Black students earning a graduate degree in the mental health field. To help increase the likelihood of this occurring, improving the experiences of Black graduate students in MFT programs is paramount.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In 1993, Wilson and Stith published a study that examined the participation of African Americans in MFT graduate programs in the US. The authors interviewed 15 graduate students to understand their experience in their respective programs. Several program directors also reported on the logistical information used for the study, such as the total number of students in their program, the number of Black students present in their program, and the total number of African American faculty at the time of the study. The study found that African American students and faculty were both grossly underrepresented in MFT graduate programs at that time (Wilson & Stith, 1993). In 1993, less than one percent of graduates from MFT master's degree programs were African American (Wilson & Stith, 1993). The authors also reported only 4.3 percent of full-time faculty members in MFT programs were African American (Wilson & Stith, 1993). It was reported that students in these programs felt supported by certain faculty members, but not by all. In addition to a lack of support, it was also reported students felt they were not prepared by their programs to work effectively with African American clients. Lastly, some students reported feeling isolated and alienated at times by faculty and other students (Wilson & Stith, 1993). The current study will continue to build on the Wilson and Stith (1993) study. It has been 30 years since the article was published, thus the current study seeks to examine if students are still facing the same challenges or if improvements have been implemented.

General Stressors of Graduate Students

Graduate school is a unique experience where students are at risk of experiencing a variety of challenges that can result in increased levels of stress (Opal, 2014; Oswald & Riddock, 2007). In fact, a study that examined the decline in the mental well-being of graduate students reported 50% of the sample stated poor mental health, including symptoms of depression,

anxiety, and burnout were major contributors to their decisions to leave school (SenthilKumar et al., 2023). Allen and colleagues (2022) published a study that examined the variations in the use of substances and mental health among graduate students enrolled in different programs including, but not limited to, business, engineering, social work, art and humanities, professional doctoral programs (i.e., MD, JD, etc.), and behavioral sciences. The findings from the study suggested students in behavioral, social sciences, and social work programs were more likely to report mental health problems than students in engineering and business programs (Allen et al., 2022). Participants included in the sample of social work students were more likely to report lifetime anxiety and depression diagnoses (Allen et al., 2022). It was also reported that students in the behavioral and social sciences field were more likely to engage in higher alcohol consumption and social work students were more likely to experience comorbid substance use and mental health issues (Allen et al., 2022). Although stressors of graduate students are present across disciplines, this study will focus on students in mental health disciplines.

Financial stressors are also a common hindrance to students completing graduate school. With graduate school averaging at about \$63,000 for a master's degree, it can be an expensive investment with limited financial aid (Hanson, 2022). Many students rely on student loans to cover the cost of their education and graduate students are only eligible to receive unsubsidized loans with Federal Student Aid (FSA). Unsubsidized loans are not ideal for students because, unlike subsidized loans, they begin to accrue interest as soon as they are disbursed. Unsubsidized loans also have higher borrowing limits (Franke, 2019). Some students maintain full-time or part-time jobs while earning their degree (Elliott & Friedline, 2013). Unfortunately, there are no general requirements set in place for graduate programs to provide students financial support aside from tuition support and minimum stipends for students who commit to working for the

department in addition to their full-time coursework obligations (Chrzanowski & Poudyal, 2018). Additionally, graduate students perform extensive duties as required by their practicums and internships and many times they are not financially compensated for that work. For example, master's students enrolled in clinical mental health programs are required to provide several hundred hours of therapy before being allowed to graduate. Many of these therapy hours are provided in on-campus clinic settings and community agencies to give students an opportunity to hone their therapeutic abilities and work with a variety of populations. While these therapy sessions are offered at a discounted rate for clients, the graduate student typically receives no financial benefit from providing several hours of therapy every week. According to SenthilKumar and colleagues (2023), 85% of respondents to a global survey distributed to individuals who identified as graduate students reported feeling concerned they did not have adequate finances for living expenses. The process of earning a graduate degree can be an expensive burden for many students and potentially lead to adverse effects when combined with other stressors such as racism, generational trauma, and lack of support, which will be further examined in this study.

Racism

The racial climate on college campuses has been an ongoing topic of concern for many years. In fact, research has stated that students of color often perceive university campuses as being an environment full of racial conflict (Thelamour et al., 2019). Black students and other students of Color are often the subject of microaggressions at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Microaggressions are defined as “subtle (often unintentional or unconscious) forms of racial discrimination that negatively affect victims’ mental health” (Nadal et al., 2015, p. 461). Further research has identified other targeted groups of microaggressions that include other racial

minorities, women, disabled individuals, religious minority groups, and sexual minorities (Nadal et al., 2015).

Studies have shown that microaggressions in educational environments are especially harmful to self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2015). Microaggressions occur in classroom settings and other campus settings by White students, members of faculty, and administrative staff (Watkins et al., 2010). These experiences negatively impact self-esteem because they can cause one to feel invisible and unappreciated for their unique qualities. As mentioned earlier, these experiences with racism can cause one to feel inferior to those expressing microaggressions and other discriminative behaviors (Nadal et al., 2015). Victims of microaggressions have reported burnout, symptoms of depression, and suicidal ideation (Richards & Wohlauer, 2021).

It is also important to remember that Black students are not only dealing with their own direct experiences of racism, but many also experience secondary trauma that derives from witnessing several incidents of racism that plague communities through media outlets, such as social media. When examining the mental health of Black Americans following the tragic death of George Floyd, it was reported there was a significantly larger increase in rates of depression and anxiety within Black Americans than White Americans (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). It is difficult to explain the discomfort of watching live footage of a person being killed solely because of the color of their skin and, furthermore, a person who resembles yourself. To witness those disturbing images and then enter an environment, such as a college classroom, where those events are being debated to determine the legitimacy of racist acts undoubtedly has detrimental effects on one's mental health. This may speak to the sparse numbers of Black individuals pursuing graduate degrees in mental health. Examining the challenges being faced by Black

graduate students and finding ways to resolve those challenges is crucial to improving the overall mental health in the Black community.

Generational Trauma

Unfortunately, while Black graduate students face the stressors of racial discrimination while attending school, many of them are also experiencing stressors related to being an African American in modern society. Generational trauma is a term that describes how trauma can be transmitted through generations within families (Petion et al., 2023). The study of generational trauma began in the 1960s when researchers noticed increased numbers of children of Holocaust survivors seeking therapy services (Petion et al., 2023). It was eventually determined that an individual does not have to be present at the time a traumatic event occurs for them to be impacted (Petion et al., 2023). Many African Americans experience generational trauma that stem from slavery and the mistreatment of African Americans that has continued since that time. The trauma of deriving from ancestors that were enslaved has also shown to be a foundational component in the development of the sense of self for many African Americans, which is not only harmful for one's identity formation, but it also can cause generational conflicts (Petion et al., 2023).

Emerging adulthood is a period of an individual's life that begins in the late teens and concludes around the late-20s (Wood et al., 2017; Arnett, 2014). During this time, an individual might find themselves exploring the concept of independence. They begin to explore worldviews and redefine their sense of self according to their personal interests (Arnett, 2000). This newfound independence often creates a sense of conflict between generations because one begins to see the world differently than what they were exposed to, or previously taught (Gamboni et al., 2021). For many Black students, this presents as a lack of emotional connectedness with

families of origin. In a previous study, participants reported experiencing “surface level” communication with family members (Petion et al., 2023). Participants also reported the relationships lacked emotional depth which caused them to feel they existed within a family where they did not feel comfortable being authentic (Petion et al., 2023). Generational trauma and generational conflicts experienced by Black graduate students may create additional stress impacting their experience in graduate school.

Code Switching

Black individuals have been forced to learn how to assimilate in several environments using what is known as “code switching.” Code switching is defined as “alternating between languages, or dialects of the same language” (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 6). Although code switching is known as a linguistic practice, it is also a form of impression management that involves an individual adjusting aspects of themselves to conform to standards of appropriateness based on that specific environment (Johnson et al., 2021). For many, code switching is used to protect oneself from being judged by the majority who may apply negative connotations to dialect that differs from their own (Robinson, 2000). The concept of code switching also applies to emotional flexibility. Emotional code switching is defined as the ability to alter expression of emotions according to standard of the cultural context (Lozada et al., 2021). For example, from an early age, POC learn the “rules” and codes to carry conversations according to mainstream culture, as well as within their identified community. This could be displayed as altering one’s dialect when in a professional environment or hiding emotion expression during minoritized experiences to avoid becoming a victim of racial bias (Lozada et al., 2021). Code switching also has the potential to hinder the therapeutic process for several reasons. The most important being a therapist who identifies with the majority population may

fail to recognize how shifts in language are relevant to the therapeutic process (Robinson, 2000). The same therapists also may fail to recognize non-verbal cues that are prevalent in certain marginalized communities. Lastly, if a client feels rejected by a therapist due to disparities in language, they may feel the need to overcompensate and educate the therapist about their use of language which could potentially decrease the effectiveness of treatment (Robinson, 2000). This is another reason as to why an increase of Black clinicians would be beneficial to the mental health field. Black clients might not feel the need to spend time explaining language practices that are common in the Black community and instead could process their thoughts and feelings in a therapeutic manner. The current study will examine if code switching is a common experience of Black graduate students and its potential impact.

Lack of Diversity

It has been reported in previous studies that the lack of diversity in higher education has negatively affected students of Color. In a previous study, students reported their sense of well-being was constructed through strong interpersonal relationships (Owuso-Agyeman, 2021). Unfortunately, many students of Color find it difficult to form supportive relationships with others due to cultural differences and homophily bias, which refers to the tendency of humans to be naturally drawn to others whom they share similarities with (Fischer, 2008). While the formation of culturally diverse relationships is beneficial, there is significance in connecting with others that have a greater understanding of your individual experiences. According to the social belongingness theory, the formation of meaningful relationships is fundamental to a human's survival (Thelamour et al., 2019). When one feels they belong, they show an increase in motivation and lower suicidal ideation (Thelamour et al., 2019). With graduate students already experiencing a great deal of stress, it is important they feel a sense of community to aid in

managing mental health. The current study will examine the feelings graduate students have towards the nature of diversity within their programs. The study will also gather ideas from students that offer suggestions to help promote diversity in MFT programs if they feel it is currently lacking.

Lack of Mentorship

Support is a basic need that all humans share despite our circumstances (Ozbay et al., 2007). When a student enters a program, they are typically assigned a “mentor” to help guide them through the rough terrain that is graduate school. Mentoring is defined as the act of offering guidance and support to a protégé (Thomas et al., 2007). While the premise of mentorship is meant to be a positive experience, many students, especially Black students, find themselves at the bottom-tier of a power dynamic that can be difficult to navigate. For example, some faculty are not given the proper training to gain the competencies to mentor students effectively, especially, across racial lines (Thomas et al., 2007). For a Black student, receiving mentorship from a White provider will not always elicit negative outcomes, but it can potentially if that mentor struggles with diversity-based anxiety, lacks cross-cultural competence, and is culturally insecure (Thomas et al., 2022). The purpose of this paper is not to give the impression that White mentors cannot effectively support Black students, but instead remind readers of the importance of Black students also receiving mentorship from Black faculty. Unfortunately, there are not enough tenured Black faculty at higher education institutions. In 2022, it was reported Black faculty represented about 6% of all faculty in higher education in the United States with only 4% representing tenured professors (Conner, 2022). These numbers are concerning because Black students are entering programs with no representation and no guide as to how to effectively navigate the world of graduate school as a Person of Color. Introducing more Black faculty

members in higher education positions poses a benefit for promoting inclusivity and providing safe spaces for Black students to feel comfortable entering graduate programs. If more Black students earned graduate degrees, it would expand the pool of qualified professionals to enter academia and provide more diversity in mentorship of future students.

Black Mental Health

Black individuals have reported to prefer engaging in mental health services with a Black provider for several reasons (Tien & Johnson, 1985). In fact, it was reported that individuals who identify as Black are more likely to only attend one session or terminate services if they are assigned to work with a White therapist (Terrell & Terrell, 1984; Thompson & Cimboric, 1978). Racial/ethnic matching is preferred by some POC because it may enhance mutual understanding in the therapist/client dynamic and reduce any concerns about being mistreated (Cabral & Smith, 2011). Black individuals who hold middle-class positions have also reported to avoid mental health treatment because they fear experiencing double discrimination based on their racial identity and possibly being diagnosed with a mental disorder (Alang, 2019). The development and retention of Black graduate students in MFT programs to become therapists is extremely important because they could potentially provide life-changing services to those who would, otherwise, choose not to engage in mental health services.

Theoretical Framework

Minority Stress Theory

Ilan H. Meyer (2003) introduced minority stress theory to offer a framework to better explain the threats towards the mental health of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. According to Meyer, the presence of negative stimuli, such as prejudice behaviors and discrimination, influence hostile and stressful environments, which threatens the mental health of

individuals who identify as sexual minorities (2003). Stressful events can include personal life events, such as losing a source of financial support, the death of a loved one, or any other event that prompts some level of readjustment (Meyer, 2003). As the minority stress theory expanded, a new concept of social stressors was introduced, which highlighted that social conditions also have the potential to lead to physical and mental illness. Social stressors were later expanded to what is now known as minority stressors, which were taken more seriously because they provided insight to the experiences of individuals who are often forced to adapt to the changes brought on by unjust circumstances (Meyer, 2003). For example, an individual relocating due to being the target of hate crimes because of their sexual orientation can cause stress, which has a direct effect on mental health. These stressful events are described to heavily impact individuals in marginalized communities such as racial minorities, sexual minorities, and individuals with lower socioeconomic status (Cyrus, 2017; Meyer, 2003; McGarrity, 2014). Individuals within these populations often experience feelings of stress and discouragement because of the mistreatment and judgement they receive from others.

The minority stress theory also outlines the difference between distal and proximal stressors. Distal stressors are defined as objective stressors or external events such as discrimination (e.g., hate crimes). Proximal stressors are defined as internalized stress processes related to self-identity. They usually derive after experiencing distal stressors. Proximal stressors can lead to self-hate and cause individuals to build a disdain for their identified minority group (Mereish, Katz-Wise, and Woulfe, 2017). For example, a Person of Color exposed to unfair treatment might begin to believe the judgements made about them, causing them to feel inferior. Minority stress theory operates under three main assumptions (Meyer, 2003). The first assumption suggests that minority stress is a unique experience. Stigmatized people experience

minority stress in addition to general stressors so they should receive a greater level of support than individuals who are not stigmatized. The second assumption suggests that minority stress is chronic, meaning it is linked to underlying social and cultural constructs that have existed for several generations. The last assumption of the theory suggests that minority stress is socially based, as it stems from institutions and social processes beyond the power of the individual affected (Meyer, 2003).

The main premise of the minority stress theory is beneficial to understanding the experiences of marginalized populations because it explicitly speaks to the direct link between social stressors and decreased mental health. Minority stress theory was revolutionary because it finally gave a voice to the experience of marginalized individuals in the LGBT community. The research also later included application for gender minorities, same-sex couples, and other sexual minority populations (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Although this is important and necessary to promote inclusivity, research is limited regarding the relationship between the minority stress model and racial minority groups. Minority stress theory helps guide the current study because it highlights the experiences of individuals in minority populations potentially developing mental health concerns because of mistreatment and discrimination. Black graduate students may experience discrimination and unfair treatment at PWIs, which will be assessed during the study.

Critical Race Theory

In the 1970s, critiques began to arise about the laws that govern our nation and their purpose. Critical legal studies was created to address these concerns. A key component of critical legal studies was the notion that the law is interconnected with social issues, implying a social bias which benefits those who create the laws (Price, 2010). Like other theories created in the past, critical legal studies did not emphasize a racial component, although it argued that laws

were created with the foundation of inequality and mistreatment of certain individuals. Legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and others joined forces to create what is now known as the critical race theory (CRT) to transform the interconnectedness of race, racism, and power (Cabrera, 2018). CRT was founded in the 1980s to serve as a legal framework, but it was later developed to influence academic institutions. Critical race theory asserted racism is embedded within laws and policies that govern our country. CRT also identifies white privilege as a foundational component of American society (Price, 2010). While CRT was initially created as an extension of critical legal studies it was eventually extended even further to examine inequity in education. With this extension, CRT has been used to analyze research and practices at higher education institutions (Hiraldo, 2010).

Five tenets were created to express the core concepts of CRT within different disciplinary perspectives (Cabrera, 2018). The tenets used were originally established from a legal perspective but over the years scholars have worked to apply the tenets to an education framework. Yosso and colleagues (2009) address these five tenets within the education disciplinary perspective.

Tenet 1: Inter-centricity of race and racism. This is the core premise of CRT in education. It states race and racism are regular occurrences and permanent with American society. This tenet also states racism typically intersects with other forms of marginalization based on “gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, immigrant status, phenotype, accent, and surname” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 663).

Tenet 2: Challenge to dominant ideology. CRT scholars challenge claims of color blindness, neutrality, and equal opportunity because they assert these claims attempt to hide the true intentions of dominant groups to maintain power and privilege (Yosso et al., 2009). In other

words, the promises made by societal leaders to push the agenda of racial equality is simply a ploy to pacify marginalized communities and avoid the genuine issues that lie deeply with the institutional framework.

Tenet 3: Commitment to social justice. This tenet highlights the concept of interest convergence which was developed following the civil rights movement. Interest convergence argues that the advancement of Black people is stipulated on the condition that those advancements benefit White people as well. This concept argues that our society exists upon a foundation that was designed to keep POC inferior to White individuals. According to this theory, White individuals will benefit from any advancements allotted to POC, maintaining their superiority status. The CRT agenda is committed to social justice because it strives to permanently eliminate racism, sexism, and poverty. There is also a commitment to empowering all POC and marginalized populations.

Tenet 4: Centrality of experiential knowledge. According to CRT, to fully understand, interpret, and offer teachings about racial inequality one must first recognize the lived experiences of POC as legitimate. Counter-storytelling is a method that allows marginalized individuals to share their experiences and it also serves as a tool to analyze and challenge the stories of dominant groups or individuals in power (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). These methods include family histories, testimonials, and chronicles. Storytelling is a tradition in several diverse cultures because in its absence, POC would have no knowledge of their families' heritage. Several textbooks intentionally exclude experiences of POC to maintain the narrative of the majority. In fact, CRT founder Richard Delgado stated, "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (1989, p. 2436).

Tenet 5: Interdisciplinary perspective. This final tenet states CRT is not restrained to the disciplinary boundary of education to analyze race and racism in multiple contexts. CRT utilizes approaches from several disciplines including law, sociology, and psychology to address racial inequality in education (Cabrera, 2018).

These tenets inform the way CRT is conducted in higher education. They offer a unique approach that is more ideal because of the emphasis on race as a social construct and how it influences higher education institutions' structures and practices. This approach is also unique because it is told from the perspective of those affected by institutional racism (Cabrera, 2018). The current study assessed if Black students in MFT graduate programs feel comfortable openly discussing their experiences related to their racial identity in their programs.

The Present Study

To encourage more POC to pursue careers in the field of mental health and contribute to research, the purpose of this study was to understand the diverse experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in various marriage and family therapy (MFT) graduate school programs, or students that recently graduated following the year 2020. The qualitative approach will give a voice to the participants and allow them to share their story in their own words. The study will build upon Wilson and Stith's (1993) study, which also examined the experiences of Black students in MFT programs. It is the goal of this study to report any of the suggestions presented in that article (e.g., increased numbers of Black faculty and students in MFT programs, more open discussions around race-related concerns, and encouraging more Black graduates to remain in academia) have been implemented in MFT programs (Wilson & Stith, 1993). This study will also provide an overview of the unique stressors of Black graduate students and assess

if any changes can be implemented to help Black graduate students feel more supported. The research questions include:

1. What barriers and challenges do Black graduate students in MFT programs face?
2. What are ways that MFT programs can support Black graduate students?

Chapter 3 - Methods

Participants and Recruitment

The study sample included 14 individuals that identify as Black MFT graduate students currently enrolled, or recently graduated from, a predominantly White institutions (PWI) (Table 1). Participants were predominately recruited via the Minority Fellowship Program (MFP). The MFP is a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) funded program that was developed to minimize health disparities and strengthen behavioral health care outcomes for marginalized populations (SAMHSA, 2023). The fellowship is open to graduate students pursuing degrees in behavioral health fields administered through several behavioral health organizations including the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). Individuals selected to participate in the fellowship program are awarded educational scholarships and several training opportunities throughout the year. While most participants were recruited from the MFP network, other participants were recruited using the snowballing effect and posts made via social media. Eligibility for study participation included the following: participants must be at least 18 years of age, currently enrolled in an MFT program, or recently graduated from an MFT program no prior than 2020, and they must identify as Black.

Before recruiting participants, an IRB proposal was submitted for approval. Participants were provided a complete description of the study prior to interviews being scheduled. Participation was completely voluntary and participants were informed of the confidentiality practices, including the omission of any names of educational institutions in the final report. The

benefits and risks associated with the study were also disclosed to participants. Signed informed consents were obtained from all participants.

Philosophical Belief in Qualitative Inquiry

The purpose of this study is appropriate for the qualitative framework because it examines the hidden culture and experiences of an identified population. There are many assumptions about the impact of these negative experiences, but there is little empirical research available to confirm these assumptions. The process of speaking directly to graduate students about their experiences is useful to motivate faculty, supervisors, and higher education institutions to implement changes. The qualitative method was most appropriate because to fully understand the process of the Black graduate student experience, more in-depth conversations must take place and that cannot be accomplished with close-ended questioning. The concepts of discrimination, racism, and inequality can be complex for many; this qualitative approach allowed participants to express their thoughts and feelings and provided insight to an experience that so many individuals face daily.

Credibility of Researcher

I served as the primary researcher and interviewer for the study. My background as a therapist was useful throughout the interview process as I have a strong ability to build rapport with others and utilize open-ended questioning to promote reflection. This also helped me remain curious about the experiences of the participants and refrain from inserting my own potential biases, especially because I could relate to many of the participants as I also self-identify as a Black cisgender female, which was the self-reported identity for the majority of the participants. Although I relate significantly with this sensitive subject matter, it was my goal to offer a safe space for the participants to share their experiences even if they differed from mine. To assure

credibility, a second graduate student helped code and analyze the data. The second coder was selected to add an additional facet of diversity. The second coder self-identified as a Mexican-American cisgender female. Lastly, a faculty member who identified as a White cisgender female was asked to review the codes and themes to ensure reliability of the findings. I made a conscious decision to recruit a diverse research team because it was important for the data to be reviewed through a diverse lens in an effort to produce accurate research findings that were not rooted in any biases.

Interviews and Ethics

Interviews were conducted solely by the lead researcher, who was also Black graduate student in an MFT doctoral program during the time of the study. Before the selection process, the participants were given a complete overview of the purpose of the study. Each participant completed a one-to-one interview via Zoom. The interviews followed a guided interview format that included specific questions about each participants' personal experience of being a Black MFT graduate student at a PWI. To protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned a unique identification number. After each interview, the participants were asked to complete a demographics survey. All recordings, surveys, and completed informed consents were uploaded on an encrypted and password protected cloud account associated with Kansas State University. A date was also set for the footage to be automatically deleted after one year of the data being saved. The interviews were labeled with an assigned identification number to avoid the use of participant names. The interviews were transcribed using a professional online transcription

service. The written transcripts were de-identified to protect the identities of all participants involved.

Analysis Plan

After the interviews were conducted, the responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and interpreted to develop the results. With thematic analysis, data is analyzed by identifying patterns or themes present (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are six phases of thematic analysis: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) creating initial codes, (3) look for themes, (4) review identified themes, (5) define and assign a name to themes, and (6) produce a report.

The first phase of thematic analysis included transcribing the data, reading the data, and making notes of what initially stood out (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase included systematically developing the initial codes from the entire data set. Once this was completed, the data was collated to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third phase included assigning codes to specific themes and gathering all data to those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth phase included reviewing the themes to ensure there was enough data to support them.

According to principles of thematic analysis, some themes are to be collapsed into single themes if they are similar while others are separated to create new themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth phase began once a thematic map of the data was established. From this point, the themes were ‘defined and refined’ to capture their true essence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The sixth and final phase of thematic analysis began when the set of themes was determined. The final analysis

of themes occurred in this final phase, as well as completion the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Coding Process

Before the coding process began, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using a professional service. Once the interviews were transcribed the primary researcher read the full transcripts and compared them to the audio recordings to check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial coding was also conducted by the primary researcher at that time. The second coder was then given copies of the transcripts to review and identify codes. After the transcripts were coded by both the primary researcher and the second coder, a meeting was scheduled to compare codes for interrater reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the coders agreed upon the identified codes, they began to assign those codes into themes. The themes were then given specific definitions and prepared for analysis.

Chapter 4 - Results

When asked to describe their experiences, each of the participants identified barriers associated with their time in their graduate programs. When examining these barriers, a total of five major themes were found, including: financial concerns, racism, difficulty practicing self-care, lack of diversity within programs, and lack of support. Participants were also asked to report what support measures would have been helpful while in the program. A total of four themes were found including: mentorship, representation, allyship, and provide more opportunities for self-care.

There was a total of 14 individuals who agreed to participate in the current study. The participants represented either current, or recently graduated, students in both master's and doctorate level programs. All 14 participants identified as Black or African American. The participants of the study included 13 cis-gendered women and one cis-gendered male. All participants were given a unique identification number to protect their identities. (Table 1)

Barriers/Challenges for Black Graduate MFT Students

Financial Concerns

When asked about barriers associated with graduate school, at least 12 participants expressed concern with the state of their finances as a student. It was mostly reported that graduate students financed their education by securing student loans, which was an unpreferred option, as most would prefer not to accrue more debt while earning a degree. It was also reported that graduate students covered their expenses by maintaining jobs outside of their program (full-time or part-time). While off-campus jobs serve as additional income for students it is also burdensome because it is an added responsibility. For example, Participant #11 stated:

“...the first year I worked overnight three, 12-hour shifts. So, I would get out of school on Wednesday and then go to my shift and then get off Thursday morning. That was horrible”.

Another source of income for at least five of the graduate students who were interviewed for the current study comes by way of graduate assistantships, which are university-based, part-time positions (no more than 20 hours a week) that students can work in exchange for tuition assistance and/or an additional stipend (Adekson, 2020). It is also uncommon for the basic expenses of a graduate student to be covered by an assistantship in its entirety. For example, participants reported their financial obligations were greater than the amount of the assistantship stipend and student loans combined, requiring them to work an additional job to cover the difference. Participant #5 reported feeling exhausted at times during her program because she spent most of the day in classes followed by working assistantship hours, seeing clients, and later fulfilling Door Dash orders to earn extra money:

“Basically, I was working two jobs...I was [working an] assistantship and then doing Door Dash. It would be late at night so that impacted how I showed up the next day. I was tired after going to class...going to multiple classes, going to my assistantship, seeing clients, then Door Dash. I was exhausted.”

Students are usually advised that working outside of the program is “not recommended,” but that is the only option for many, especially when alternative sources of funding are not offered. Participant #13 described an awkward interaction with a faculty member who expressed confusion after she disclosed it was necessary for her to maintain a part-time job along with her assistantship to cover housing expenses and pay her tuition:

“I don't know if I'm just perceiving this because I'm a black student or if it's just like a thing, but money is an interesting thing. There seems to be this expectation of like, oh, with what it is that

we're giving you should be able to sustain you, and you should be good to go but when I say I have this assistantship and I'm working here and doing this, there's like a shock in the face of like, 'well I guess if you need it' and I'm like uh yeah! This is helpful; however I need to pay for school...and I do need to pay for where I live. I do need to get like, groceries, like I do have other things I need to pay for, but I have not known anyone else that has had that same experience."

Overall, participants in the study identified financial concerns as a barrier/challenge they experienced while in their MFT graduate program. The concerns reported were significant because they caused distress in students that, ultimately, impacted their performance in the program at times. It was also reported students felt uncomfortable disclosing details of their financial state because of the potential of it leading to awkward discussions.

Lack of Diversity (Racism)

At least 11 participants reported personal experiences of discrimination, as well as feeling isolated, misunderstood, and unsafe because of the color of their skin, or they noticed their peers be discriminated against. While it was reported some programs have evolved to include greater diversity in students and faculty, there are still concerns in the racial disparities for many MFT programs. When speaking about her experiences Participant #14 expressed feeling as though she was discriminated against because of her racial identity: *"I think for me personally, advocating for myself and what I needed. Didn't come across as advocacy, it came across as being difficult or being aggressive. And I don't think that would have been the case if I would have been a white woman."* Historically, African Americans have been perceived to be more impulsive and aggressive by the dominant group (Taylor et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this causes statements made by Black individuals to be perceived more harshly than others at times. As a result, some

choose to not advocate for themselves because they fear being ostracized and being unfairly judged by others. For those that choose to self-advocate do so with the understanding they will be viewed in an unfavorable light, which is disappointing because the same does not occur with other racial groups.

Participant #9 reported noticing behaviors of faculty members possibly behaving in a manner that displayed biases towards certain groups of people: “...*not like on purpose and not because they were going out of their way, but just the, the different things I was hearing about it, it had more to do with like students of color or students of diverse ability status or different things like that.*” Biases, stereotypes, and systemic discrimination are directly linked to racism, and they’ve been shown to be factors that influence educational outcomes (Taylor et al., 2019). Participant #9 did state she did not believe discriminatory practices happened intentionally, but whether racial bias is displayed consciously or sub-consciously, does not alter the outcome of those affected.

Tokenism

Participants in the study reported that the lack of diversity in MFT programs was a barrier for them because it can cause uncomfortable feelings to develop. Due to a lack of diversity within these programs, there were also several reports of Black students feeling as though their experiences were tokenized. For example, Participant #14 stated, “*I felt that I was the token Black woman. I was a doc student and because I have lived experience and I found myself often having to give a ‘Black perspective’ in class.*”

Participant 14 shared her experience of feeling obligated to teach master’s level MFT students about the experiences of Black people from her own personal perspective, and others,

because she did not feel confident they would receive those teachings from faculty members.

When asked to elaborate on her feelings regarding this matter she provided the following:

“Oh man, I had mixed emotions. I didn't want the master's students to go out in the world and have a very skewed view of Black Americans and therapy. So, I felt like I had a responsibility to give that part of it. Um, frustrating because we have these faculty that are paid really good money to teach future therapists and they're not able to give a full, realistic representation of what therapy looks like in the ‘real world’ and then still very sad because in 2023, 2022, and 2021 we still aren't putting racial diversity in the forefront.”

In 2020, millions of Americans tearfully watched the footage of the heinous murder of George Floyd. It was a difficult time for many, but especially for members of the Black community. The incident sparked several conversations including many debates that did not always end with everyone coming to an agreement. It was a difficult time in our country as it caused some divide between racial lines. Unfortunately, Black individuals in non-diverse spaces were often looked upon to offer the “Black perspective”. During her interview, Participant #13 shared a time when she was asked to speak to the class about her views on the incident solely because of her identity as a Black woman.

“I had a professor who I already had a conversation [with]. She already checked in with me about how I was doing, and in class, she let me know beforehand that she was going to do this, but in class she was like I'm aware of the death of George Floyd that took place. I just want to give the space for us to talk through that...This isn't just for our students of color. This isn't just for our black students, but this is for all of you guys in this class. And a student literally unmuted their camera...and was like, oh, well, [participant's name] is black. What do you have to say about it?”

For example, Participant #5 stated: “...*me and other Black students in the program felt like we were the only [people] that spoke up about our culture. We didn't feel like anybody else spoke from their perspective about our culture...and experiences. It would have been nice to hear how other people view police brutality [against] Black people or the struggles that we face...*”

Overall, Black graduate students reported experiencing several incidents of tokenism that caused feelings of discomfort at times. It was also reported these experiences caused Black students to feel pressured to overcompensate in ways other students did not.

Clinical Impact of Lack of Diversity

Participants of the study reported that the lack of diversity was not only prevalent in the academic space, but it was also shown to be present in clinical spaces as well. Participant #2 reported feeling overwhelmed because his caseload was typically heavier than others. He stated Black clients would typically request a Black therapist and there was only one other Black student in his cohort, which meant their caseloads would become full much quicker than others. This was highlighted by Participant #2: “*As far as advocating for myself, it's just that a lot of the clients would see me and [name of other student] and all of them were asking for us and our caseloads are full. We didn't have the capacity to take on more, so we had to advocate. These clinicians will have to work with clients of color too so assign them to [their caseloads]. [Clients] can ask, but if our caseloads are full, don't keep assigning us more clients.*”

A similar experience was also described by Participant #11, except she reported her caseload filled quickly with White clients specifically requesting a Black therapist. She stated she had previously informed program leadership she was passionate about treating Black clients, but the White clients took precedence on her caseload: “...*they (White clients) came in and said*

'I want a Black therapist' and it was only three of us to choose from so our caseloads filled up more.'

Overall, Black graduate students reported their clinical experience was negatively impacted by the lack of diversity in MFT programs. They reported being overworked due to clients expressing a high demand for Black clinicians. Black students reported they were asked to overcompensate for the lack of diversity, and they were also forced to advocate for themselves.

Lack of Diversity in Leadership

Another barrier reported by participants was the lack of diversity in leadership in their program. It was also expressed by a participant that although her program was progressive in that it consisted of mostly Black students and faculty members, she noticed there were no minority individuals in positions that make final decisions that affect the programs, such as department heads or program directors. This caused her to feel concern for Black faculty members who appeared to be overworked. For example, Participant #10 stated: *"On the micro level, I feel surrounded, I feel seen, I feel supported. But when you start talking about leadership and the decisions that are being made, you can tell the decision makers aren't us...between that and seeing the black faculty it seems like they're worked really hard."*

Black graduate students reported an overall lack of diversity in program leadership. While there has been an increase in Black faculty, there is still a lack of POC in roles that make decisions for MFT programs. It was also reported that Black faculty members are overworked in the roles they are fulfilling.

Code Switching

Another theme that was identified in the current study was participants' experiences with code switching. While some participants reported to have experience with code switching while both in and outside their programs, others reported making intentional decisions to remain authentic to themselves and avoid the use of code switching. For the students who felt it was necessary to engage in code switching they reported doing so for different reasons. For example, Participant #9 reported engaging in code switching behaviors when engaging with faculty members in uncomfortable environments. They stated, *"...if I would talk about my experiences [I would use] more proper English around the faculty but would speak a bit differently around friends and people I was a bit more comfortable with. It almost seemed like they wanted a lot out of us. They wanted us to be honest, but the environment provided wasn't the best to be honest."*

Participant #13 also expressed feeling fearful she might not be viewed as "professional" because of perceptions of the way she speaks: *"...it definitely causes a bit of stress because I want them to perceive me as someone responsible, respectful, professional, all of those things and if it doesn't come across that way, then I'm like, oh gosh..."*

While some participants felt the need to code switch in their programs, other participants had completely different experiences. For example, Participant #6 expressed feeling extremely comfortable to be herself in the program as it was encouraged, fostered, and appreciated. This participant also reported her program was highly diverse in terms of faculty and students. She stated: *"[There's] never been a time that I felt like I wasn't accepted. [There's] never been a time I felt like I couldn't say what was on my mind. I've never had a problem speaking up and saying what I need to say and not feeling like, oh, they're going to think something of this or they're not going to...and I struggle with that sometimes just in my life just [thinking] they're*

going to judge me if I say that but not so much within this arena. I've grown into being able to say they accept me and they love me for just who I am."

Hearing this perspective was pleasantly surprising, but unfortunately it was not shared by all participants. Participant #11 reported noticing favoritism amongst members in her program that did not make for a welcoming environment, but she also did not allow that to cause her to act in an unauthentic manner: *"My first day there, I told them I'm not code switching. I'm not. You understand me if I say it [using Ebonics] or straight. Y'all culturally appropriate everything, so I don't code switch. I talk to everybody the same way. I'm respectful and very intellectual but shucking and jiving, I'm never doing."* Participant #14 also expressed similar sentiments. When asked about her experience with code switching, she stated the following: *"I don't feel like I had to code switch and nor did I. I just didn't. I pride myself in being able to show up in all spaces authentic."*

Whether incidents of code switching were done intentionally or subconsciously, it can be concluded that there are still spaces in MFT graduate programs where diverse individuals do not feel safe expressing themselves due to fear it may lead to judgement or discrimination.

Feeling Isolated (Racially)

The journey of pursuing a graduate degree in MFT can be an isolated time for students. Some participants report feeling unable to be fully present for family and friends during their time in graduate school because they are consumed with school obligations. For example, Participant #4 stated, *"I felt like I spent more time at the clinic with my cohort than I did with my family for two years."*

While most students experience the 'isolation' of graduate school, many Black students reported feeling that isolation was exacerbated as a result of their racial identity. This is largely

attributed to the fact that these students are required to uphold the same obligation as any other student, but they also must do so in a space where very few people resemble them. For example, Participant #2 explained: *“...I feel like this experience is very isolating and I know they’re like, oh well, a PhD program is isolating, but I feel like it’s exacerbated as a person of color and someone who identifies as Black because when I look around, even at our Black Graduate Caucus, a lot of them are master’s [students]. So, for the PhD, we’re an even smaller group.”*

Overall, Black graduate students reported feeling a high sense of isolation in their MFT programs. Both master’s and doctoral students reported feeling isolated, but the doctoral students reported feeling more isolated because those cohorts are generally smaller in size.

Program Location

Program locations also contributed to the discomfort for some Black students in the study. It was reported by several participants that their programs were based in communities that were not receptive to students of color. Participant #1 explained that although her hybrid-based program is mostly facilitated online, she must travel for intensive courses that were required to be attended in-person. When describing the environment she stated:

“...being a Black graduate student in that area is actually a little scary. I’m more scared about my own personal safety being in that area than I am anything else although I am familiar with that area, so I just get in and I get out. I don’t linger. You don’t linger because people will be keeping an eye on you because you are a Black person in an affluent White area.”

Participant #5 recalled an incident when she feared for her safety after being pulled over by a police officer: *“...I also didn't feel safe with police there at all. They were very racist and very aggressive. I've been I was pulled over before and, literally, taunted by a White male police officer. So, that impacted my experience because it made me not want to be there...”*

Students reported the location of their program impacted their experience whether they lived in the area full-time or traveled to the main campus at least twice a year to fulfill program requirements. In both cases, students reported feeling unsafe at times and unwelcomed.

Lack of Support

Another barrier that was found in the current study was a lack of support. All 14 participants reported a lack of support in some area throughout their studies. The subthemes include connecting students to campus resources, lack of support in research interest, and lack of support from their personal network. Lack of support was a barrier because it caused other Black students to overcompensate for what was lacking. It was reported some students felt they had to assume leadership responsibilities and mediate discussions amongst other students because the instructor did not take the initiative to advocate for the needs of the minority students. Participant #4 recalled a time when her cohort member had to step up to rectify a stressful situation that occurred in class after a hurtful comment was made by another student:

"I did not feel like he should be the one to have to step up. I was just surprised with her experience that she did not do [things] differently and she didn't have to chastise [us] but let's go over some ground rules with some stuff. Let's try to be more respectful...even when we were trying to explain to the white cohort member why it was offensive. I still feel like as the instructor/facilitator, like come on...help us out."

Students reported feeling the need to overcompensate for the lack of support they received from faculty members when difficult conversations would arise during class. It was reported that in these moments, Black students, who were also targeted by offensive comments

made by other students, were placed in the position to advocate for themselves and educate the class when they should not be in the position to assume that responsibility.

Connecting Graduate Students to Campus Resources

It was also reported that many MFT programs are not effective with acting as a bridge from the secluded walls of the program to university-wide programs. It would be unfair to expect MFT programs to be all things to graduate students, but these programs are housed at major educational institutions that have a number of programs students can use at their disposal. A participant in the current study spoke extremely highly of her program and expressed feeling supported most of the time by faculty, but it was only so much support they were equipped to offer due to a lack of resources. Students were not made aware of additional university-based resources that were not related to academics. For example, Participant #10 stated: “...*our faculty is limited and has so much on their plate, I don't think that they have the time to really invest in, you know, really preparing us to put ourselves out there. I would say definitely [they shared] academic resources. Other resources, not so much.*”

Students reported they were not made aware of helpful campus resources that could potentially alleviate the symptoms of stressors experienced in graduate school. It was reported that faculty were limited in offering support to students, and they did not share additional resources to support students in areas that were not academically based.

Lack of Support in Research

It was also expressed that Black graduate students felt unsupported in exploring their research interests. They reported that it was difficult to discover their own research identity without having opportunities to develop those skills and pursue those interests. For example, Participant #2 reported: “*My advisor at the time was very quantitative focus in her research. So,*

that was the expectation for me to [complete] quantitative research as well. So, going through the process of taking these research classes, trying to figure out what type of research identity I wanted to have for myself, and [other] things...was heavily influenced by the advisor.” “...there were comments [stating] qualitative research isn't as beneficial, or if you want to be successful you need to be able to quantitative. So, that project took longer because the passion wasn't there. I didn't enjoy the quantitative aspect of it, and I didn't have the support I needed.”

Participant #14 also expressed having a similar experience in her PhD program after making it known she was interested in researching the experiences of other Black women. She stated, *“So, the biggest [barrier] for me was being a part of research because my target was African American women and that's what I wanted to focus on. I hadn't had a lot of support or encouragement to do what I wanted to do. There are no faculty studying it. There are no Black faculty, so it was it was really difficult for me to get the support I felt like I needed to do the research that I wanted to do because no one really cares about studying Black women [except] Black women.”*

Black students reported not feeling supported by faculty in exploring research interests relatable to themselves. It was also reported they were discouraged from utilizing certain research methods that were distinct from what their research mentors were doing.

Lack of Support (Personal Network)

Unfortunately, the lack of support being offered was not just a concern regarding program faculty and leadership. There were also reports of graduate students feeling a lack of support from family and friends, which often caused misunderstandings. For some loved ones, it was difficult to understand, or relate to, all of what a full-time MFT program requires. Due to the high rigor of these programs, graduate students often spend a lot of time away from their support

networks, which can lead to more feelings of isolation. For example, Participant #4 stated: *“You have this settled community [and] you have this community of support but nobody understands the demands of school and the MFT program...and the sacrifice you have to show up being this grad student for that program. Nobody understands but your cohort members.”*

Ineffectiveness of Diversity Protocols

Another barrier Black graduate students identified in this study was the ineffectiveness of diversity protocols utilized by program leadership. At least 3 participants reported feeling as though advocacy for all marginalized populations was not made a priority in their graduate program. For example, some felt their programs lacked in providing training materials to educate students on working with certain populations. It was also expressed by some that there seemed to be an emphasis placed on advocating for one particular marginalized community, but the efforts were not matched for other communities. For example, Participant #13 stated: *“At times I feel like certain minority groups are more highlighted than other minority groups and not to say that one is more important than the other, because absolutely not. However, your program has pretty much all of the minority groups in them, so they all would need to be recognized and so I think it's a matter of while they're taking those steps to do better with their diversity and inclusion...just being mindful that they're doing their best to acknowledge all groups and celebrate all groups.”*

Another participant also reported they would have liked to have the opportunity to learn about diverse cultures not only rooted in race. She expressed interest in learning about different religious backgrounds and understanding the tools for addressing those concerns with clients.

Participant #7 reported: *“I would say we've touched on it in some classes here and there...but I think just wanting to feel a bit more equipped on how to have those conversations [about] people from different backgrounds, or religions, that I might not know about and guiding that or bringing it a bit more into the room.”*

Lastly, several participants found issue with the “diversity statements” made by their programs being nothing more than just words. Some expressed beliefs that the statements were created to simply pacify minority students and little to no action was used to enforce new policies and increase diversity. When asked his opinion regarding his program’s efforts to increase diversity, Participant #2 replied: *“Yeah, definitely the action piece of it I feel like is missing sometimes.”* Another participant was asked the same question and she replied:

“I think it's just statements. I haven't experienced them being anything other than statements.”

Unfortunately, there is a common perception amongst Black graduate students that while programs are intentional about promoting a diverse and inclusive environment for students, they fall short on following through with behaviors that support those statements.

Difficulty Practicing Self-Care

The final barrier identified by two participants in the current study was difficulty practicing self-care. Although MFT programs teach the significance of self-care, they do not leave much time for students to engage in self-care practices. Participant #5 described her experience in graduate school as not being conducive to engaging in self-care. When asked how she practiced self-care during graduate school she replied: *“I don't think I did, looking back. I literally would just sleep. I honestly don't even think I took care of myself back then at all. I didn't really have time to take care of myself.”*

Participant #4 also expressed she did not practice self-care as frequently as she should have while in her graduate program. After recognizing the importance of self-care, she stated she is now being more intentional with self-care practices as she navigates life post-graduate school. She stated: “I don't feel like I did a great job. I'm working on the self-care thing even now.” It was reported that self-care was difficult for some Black graduate students to practice. These students attributed their lack of self-care to a lack of time provided as MFT programs are rigorous with tight schedules that leave minimal time for students to use for themselves.

How to Provide Support to Black Graduate Students

The current study identified barriers that Black graduate students in MFT programs experience, and the second research question focused on how MFT programs can best support Black graduate students. When asked what supportive measures they would have liked to see from their graduate programs, the following themes were identified: mentorship, increased financial support, representation, and allyship. These themes will be discussed more thoroughly in an effort to encourage leaders in MFT programs to implement changes that will allow students to thrive without experiencing severe stress.

Mentorship

The primary theme that arose when reviewing the data was the concept of mentorship. At least 10 participants reported mentorship was not provided their programs, and they believed increased mentorship would be a positive way to support Black graduate students.

For example, Participant #8 stated: “*Mentorship does not exist in my courses. I mean, you have your advisor, but your advisor handles how many people? We don't know and they definitely don't really know you. They don't reach out to get to know you that much. They're like, 'I'm your advisor. I'll help you if you have a question'. That's it, but that's not a mentor for sure.*”

Participant #3 echoed similar sentiments, stating: *“Mentorship overall is not something that honestly, they've even talked about. Of course, certain students connect with certain professors. I don't think that I have found that one professor that I really would want to even be my mentor. I think that's just because of certain requirements or different things that I would want for myself, like personally and professionally, that I would want for that person to have. When I think of mentorship, I think of someone that is doing what I want to do...and we have some type of personal like core connection or similarities to where they can actually assist in navigating in my career.”*

While most participants reported their programs did not facilitate mentorship relationships, some did report they took alternative avenues to seek mentorship. For example, some participants became involved with programs such as the Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) because it included being placed with a mentor in the MFT field. Other participants reported they took it upon themselves to connect with other students and alumni from their programs to request mentorship. Some also connected with other individuals in the field.

Participant #1 stated: *“I love mentors. I collect mentors. I've had the same three mentors for over 20 years and I'm busy collecting new [mentors] to go along with my older [mentors] because I recognize the power of mentorship.”*

It was also important for some participants to have mentors that also identify as Black because there is pride one feels after seeing someone who resembles them accomplish the goals they are striving for as well. For example, Participant #8 stated: *“It's like picking a doctor, you want a doctor that looks like you. You want someone who can relate to you. Seeing another*

Black person succeed in having that boost of confidence, of knowing, okay, I can get through this. So yeah, I think that should be provided.”

Participants reported that having mentors that looked like them, whether that is faculty members, alumni, or other members of the community would be a key way to support Black graduate students. Participant #10 stated: *“I’m making it through this program because I have not just my cohort, but I’ve got Black women alum who are like ‘we’re getting you to the finish line. You’ve got to finish’. And that is literally the wind beneath my wings. To me, those kinds of things are just invaluable.”*

Overall, Black students reported a need for consistent mentorship while in graduate school, preferably from other Black individuals in the field. It was reported that Black students would have felt more confident while maneuvering such a rigorous program if they had the inspiration of other Black therapists to look up to during that time. They also reported having additional support, other than an assigned advisor, would have been beneficial to their growth.

Representation

Another theme identified by at least 12 participants was the need for greater representation in MFT programs. It was expressed that if MFT programs included more diverse students and faculty members, it would make for a better experience. Not only would representation contribute to Black students feeling more comfortable, but it would also improve the educational experience for this population as well. Students who reported higher rates of diversity amongst students and faculty in their program expressed they were given the opportunity to better explore diverse cultures and populations. For example, Participant #6 stated: *“...my doctoral program...is more diverse. So, I have more African American professors than I ever had in my master's program and it has exposed me to different cultures because I*

would say Whites are the minority in my current school; let me rephrase that, in the program. In our marriage and family therapy program, I would say that the Whites were the minority.”

It was also reported by another participant that she has had the opportunity to explore and learn more about Black culture because of the diversity presented in her cohort. Participant #12 stated: *“I value the experience of having likeness as well. Even though I say African American, within our cohort we actually have [three] ladies [who are descendants] from the Caribbean culture. So, they don't identify as just solely African American. It's been interesting learning [about] different cultures even within our [own] culture. It has been expansive and...somewhat transformative as well.”*

Another participant also reported appreciating the way diversity was discussed in a diversity course that was taught by a Black professor. He did express some concerns about this professor potentially being tokenized to teach this course, but he also felt she created a positive experience for students to learn about diversity. Participant #2 stated: *“...we have the diversity course. Of course, which is taught by the Black woman. I know she enjoys teaching it, so she brings a lot of positivity into it. In the same regard, I'm like, is it strategic that they have her teaching it because she is the diverse representation of the program?”*

When asked to describe the factors that contributed to her positive graduate school experience as a Black student, Participant #6 reported that having professors who were also Black was beneficial: *“I think having professors that look like me and not only having professors look like me, professors who look like me, who've [also] been through the program that I'm going through as well.”*

Black students reported they would have liked to see greater representation in MFT programs. It was reported increased representation improved the educational experience for this

population. Black students reported their cultural competency increased when being taught by Black professors, but there were still concerns of potential tokenism expressed when Black professors were asked to fulfill certain roles in the program.

Allyship

At least five Black graduate students reported they would have liked to see more allies while in their graduate programs. Many of the participants reported they would have liked to see their White counterparts advocate for racial justice. Some participants also reported feeling disappointed by the silence of White individuals when there were clear incidents of mistreatment. For example, Participant #5 expressed: *“I had a friend that was White, and we became close. We were talking about something serious in class or something [that involved] one of the professors or something and we had a mutual understanding that she would speak up with me, and she didn't.”*

When individuals, other than minorities, call out racism it allows for underrepresented communities to be seen and acknowledged. It also helps to improve their experience because it fosters a supportive environment which is ideal for learning and growth to take place. Participant #1 described a faculty member in her program who she identified as an ally. She described her with the following: *“...if I'm going to have a White woman teaching me, I need the White woman that could come to the 'cookout', and she is the one that can come to the cookout. She will call somebody out [and tell them] that's very racist what you said or that's not appropriate...she's awesome.”*

To add context to the previous quote, when a Black individual describes someone, particularly a White person, as someone whom they feel comfortable inviting to the “cookout” it basically symbolizes they are connected to the Black community. It also symbolizes a Black

individual may feel comfortable socializing with this person in places other than professional spaces, and they have proven to be an advocate to the Black community. The “cookout” is used as a reference because, in the Black community, it represents a gathering of friends and family who all come together to fellowship and have a good time around food, great conversation, and positive vibes. An invitation to the cookout is not seen as literal in the Black community, but more as a sign of admiration for those who show up for marginalized communities in spaces that consist of people who are not always proponents of equality (Cormier, 2022).

Black students reported witnessing support from White allies would have been beneficial and reassuring. When discriminatory issues arise, the silence from those who purport themselves to be allies can be hurtful and frustrating in situations when allyship is needed. Black students reported to feel seen when they are advocated for by allies, which helps to create a safe environment for them to be a part of.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This study sought to examine the experiences of Black graduate students in MFT programs, including barriers they faced and ways MFT programs could help support Black students. Participants reported the primary barriers they experienced were financial concerns, lack of diversity within MFT programs, lack of support, ineffectiveness of diversity protocols, and difficulty practicing self-care. Students also identified the ways they would feel the most supported while in their graduate programs. These supports include mentorship, representation, and allyship.

Financial Concerns

Students reported financial stressors were a major hindrance during their time in graduate school. This is consistent with the findings from the Wilson & Stith article published 30 years ago that reported the biggest struggle for some Black students was a lack of finances (1993). In the current study, several students reported they maintained multiple streams of income to cover their expenses. For example, students reported they maintained full-time student status while also remaining employed (either full-time or part-time), securing student loans, and obtaining assistantship positions that offer financial benefits. Assistantships serve as a valuable resource for students because they offer financial and professional benefits, but unfortunately, not all students are not guaranteed to receive an offer (Adekson, 2020). Many graduate students find themselves in a financially fragile state due to an overall lack of resources (Schuman, Aluso, & Nguyen, 2022).

The amount of financial support MFT programs can offer graduate students is indicative on the amount of funding they receive each year from various sources. If programs are unable to equally fund all MFT students, then a compromise might be to offer priority disbursement of

assistantships and financial aid to those with greater financial need, similar to how federal financial aid is disbursed. In order to be eligible for federal financial aid, students must first demonstrate financial need to determine how much aid they might receive (FSA, 2024). In other words, while everyone is welcome to apply for financial aid, they are only eligible to receive assistance if they can prove some sort of financial hardship. This concept is similar to that of interest convergence within the critical race theory that basically implies individuals from marginalized communities will continue to struggle to attain equality if they are not given adequate tools to stand beside those from dominant groups (Yosso et al., 2009). Granting financial aid to students with affluent financial resources allows certain groups to maintain superiority status and prohibits the playing field for all students to be leveled. Students with a lower socio-economic status (SES) and no financial aid are more likely to drop out than other SES groups (Chen & DesJardins, 2010). With this being considered, the disbursement of scholarships, grants, and assistantships should be based not only on merit, but also on need, to allow equal opportunity for all students who would like to become a therapist to have a greater chance to do so.

Lack of Diversity

Lack of diversity was also a concern for Black graduate students. To be in accordance with the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE), MFT programs are required to report their program's demographic data annually. Although there has been some progress since 1993, these numbers may not represent all current MFT programs. There may be some more diverse programs that skew the percentage to be higher. In 2022, it was reported that out of 124 MFT programs, only 9.9% of the faculty self-identified as African American/African/Black, and 63.8% identified as White/Non-Hispanic

(COAMFTE, 2022). The report did not specify the status of the identified faculty members such as if they were tenured-faculty, full-time, or adjunct faculty members. According to the same report, 18.1% of the students in MFT programs self-identified as African American/African/Black. The supervisor demographics were also included in the report, which stated 67% of the supervisors identified as White/Non-Hispanic and only 12.4% identified as African American/African/Black (COAMFTE, 2022). While these numbers are low, they do show improvement from the Wilson & Stith article published in 1993. In that study, it was reported only one percent of all MFT master's degree graduates identified as African American (Wilson & Stith, 1993). At the time of the study, only three percent of students enrolled in master's degree programs and 2.7% of doctoral MFT students were African American (Wilson & Stith, 1993). There has also been a slight increase in full-time faculty and clinical supervisors in MFT programs. In 1993, only 4.3% of the full-time faculty were African American, as well as only one clinical supervisor from the programs that responded to the survey at that time (Wilson & Stith). This suggests that racial diversity among faculty and supervisors has increased in recent years, but they are still underrepresented.

Additionally, an overall lack of diversity led to code-switching behaviors for many Black graduate students, which was not mentioned in the Wilson & Stith article (1993). While many POC have normalized the act of code switching, participants in this study reported that this was problematic in the context of an MFT program. While in graduate school, students may be asked to be extremely transparent and vulnerable in MFT programs to develop a greater sense of self, which can be difficult if an individual feels unable to present as their authentic self. The use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has historically been associated with perceptions of lack of education, lower social class, and unacceptable in professional environments (Rahman,

2008) which also speaks the tenet of CRT that states individuals are often mistreated due characteristics associated with racial identity (Yosso et al., 2009). For this reason, it has been engrained in many Black individuals to alter their speech, tone, and demeanor when in certain settings. Participants in the current study believed they cannot utilize AAVE in the educational arena because they may not be taken seriously by others. In order to contradict this belief, MFT programs can promote educational spaces that are welcoming to different vernaculars, asking for clarity, and creating spaces where everyone feels comfortable showing up as their authentic self.

Another finding in the current study was reports of tokenism in MFT graduate programs. The theory of tokenism suggests that individuals that identify with minority populations may endure uncomfortable situations, such as social isolation or increased visibility (King et al., 2010). In the context of higher education, this may appear as racially diverse students being asked to share their personal experiences and act as representation for their entire community. Unfortunately, with many MFT graduate programs lacking in diversity, participants in this study felt pressured to educate their White counterparts on their experiences, which felt unfair to them. For example, one participant was suddenly called upon by a fellow classmate to share her perspective after the George Floyd murder, which felt disturbing because she was unable to fully process the tragedy before being called to offer a perspective.

Many participants expressed frustration with the silence of their White counterparts during those moments and their unwillingness to verbally express empathy or support for marginalized communities. MFT programs can prevent incidents of tokenism by avoiding asking minority students to act as a spokesperson for their identified racial group. If students would like to voluntarily share their experiences that should be welcomed but no singular student can speak solely for an entire population. It sometimes feels as though there are unspoken rules regarding

the discussion of race relations because these topics are often uncomfortable to speak about, but that does not mean they should be avoided in educational spaces, especially where future therapists are being trained. The foundation of race in this country has always been the source of negativity, which is the premise of CRT and its implication on higher education institutions (Yosso et al., 2009). This may explain why so many shy away from these conversations, but that not only prevents important conversations from taking place, but it also prevents change from occurring.

It was also reported that Black students often felt unsafe in the communities where some MFT programs are located due to several incidents of police harassment and racial profiling. Unfortunately, this happens often as POC are often marginalized in communities that are predominately White (Hudson et al., 2021). It was reported in the Wilson & Stith (1993) article that Black students felt isolated and alienated because of the underrepresentation of minorities on university campuses, but actual program location was not mentioned to be a factor. It is concerning because Black students are expected to suppress their feelings and remain present and support the needs of others (i.e., clients, cohort members, family, etc.), all while lacking support of their own. While program leadership cannot be held responsible for racist acts and discrimination that occurs in the community, they need to support students who experience these acts while in their program. As stated previously, students that experience microaggressions in academic settings may also experience burnout, symptoms of depression, and suicidal ideation (Richards & Wohlauer, 2021). This is also consistent with the minority stress theory that states incidents of discrimination and stressful environments pose a threat to minority populations (Meyer, 2003).

Lack of Support

Overall, Black students reported feeling a lack of support in several areas of their lives while actively engaging in graduate school. The basic framework of a standard MFT program includes requirements that consist of, but not limited to, course work, clinical hours, conducting research, and assistantship responsibilities. Managing these obligations with little to no support can cause students to experience symptoms of extreme burnout (Clark, Murdock, & Koetting, 2009). There were reports of Black students feeling as though they did not receive full support from loved ones and others in their personal network because it may be difficult for some to understand the stress and pressure associated with a MFT graduate program if they never shared a similar experience. It is also challenging for loved ones to support graduate students because they are often confined to graduate school obligations with limited time to engage socially with others outside of the program. Although MFT programs do not have the power to dictate how much support students receive from their personal networks, this should be considered when the performance of students is being monitored. The amount of support received by students should be assessed when student evaluations are being completed and resources should be offered for students who report lacking support from their loved ones.

An interesting finding not found in the previous Wilson and Stith (1993) article was that Black graduate students in this study did not feel supported in their research interests. Students need proper guidance and support, as selecting a research advisor is said to be the most important decision for a student researcher (Al-Hadlaq, 2019). For example, some students expressed interest in conducting qualitative research because of its usefulness for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups (Campbell et al., 2021). However, that was not always encouraged by faculty members whose research identities are rooted in quantitative methods. If

faculty members are unable to support the research needs and interests of prospective students, that should be considered and discussed before offering invitations for those students to join the program. Research concerns should be directly communicated to students prior to acceptance so students can have the opportunity to secure a research advisor who does have the capacity to support those research interests, even if that advisor is not within the program.

Another finding in the current study that was not found in Wilson and Stith's (1993) article was that many students reported they were not made aware of university resources outside of those directly associated with the MFT program. Although faculty should not be expected to encompass all the support graduate students will need, but as leaders they can direct students towards finding additional resources that could assist them during this difficult time. Most universities offer student support services that are designed to improve student performance, contribute to the success of students, and increase retention and degree completion (Johnson et al., 2022). Unfortunately, most students in this study were unaware of all the helpful resources their university offered such as financial aid, tutoring, and student support services.

Diversity Protocols

This study found that Black students were not pleased with the diversity protocols used within MFT programs (i.e., diversity courses, diversity statements, etc.). Many students expressed feeling as though their programs were doing a poor job of implementing effective diversity procedures, and although it is often communicated from MFT programs a desire to promote diversity, it felt like little to no action was being initiated in order for that to take place. When asked about her program's diversity efforts, Participant #9 stated: "...*they talked the talk, but they didn't walk the walk.*" This participant, and others, expressed they would have liked to see those in leadership positions make a stronger effort to support minority populations and

diversify their program. Students in the previous Wilson & Stith (1993) article expressed similar concerns. The recommendations in that article included the recruitment of greater numbers of Black faculty and students (Wilson & Stith, 1993). The percentage of Black representation in current MFT programs is a clear indicator recruitment efforts for MFT programs can still be improved, more than 30 years later. Suggestions for recruitment will be discussed in greater detail in the implications section of this paper.

Self-Care Concerns

Black graduate students in this study indicated that the ability to practice self-care was of concern. Self-care is defined as the ability to recharge oneself utilizing healthy methods that promote physical and emotional well-being (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Some participants reported they were unable to practice self-care as their schedules simply would not allow it. This poses a problem because these students are preparing to become mental health professionals, where it is crucial to actively practice self-care to avoid stress and burnout (Posluns & Gall, 2020). While most graduate programs were designed to be rigorous and demanding, those factors are predictors of stress amongst graduate students (Allen et al., 2021). Without the practice of self-care, that stress can increase and, ultimately, impact the students' academic performance and future clinical practices (Sweetman et al., 2022). Lack of self-care is also linked to increased risks of burnout and health status decline, where "self-care is not a luxury but is a clinical and ethical imperative in the mental health professions" (Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 4). MFT programs can assist students with self-care by giving them the space and opportunity for those practices to take place. It could also be useful to assess if students are actively engaging in self-care practices during student evaluations.

Mentorship

While there were several barriers identified in the study, participants in the study also identified helpful supports that could have improved their experience in MFT programs. A significant theme identified in the study was Black students' desire for mentorship. Most students reported they did not receive mentorship in their graduate programs. Those that did report having mentorship in their program stated they were responsible for cultivating those connections themselves. This has been a request from Black students since the publication of the Wilson and Stith (1993) study 30 years ago. The students that participated in that study requested a mentor program that included Black alumni volunteers to support current Black graduate students in MFT programs and integrate Black content into the curriculum (Wilson & Stith, 1993). In most graduate programs, faculty serve in "advisory" roles for students, but that does not always transform to a mentor/mentee dynamic. The goal of an advisor is to offer strategies, or suggestions, related to a specific event (Marcdante & Simpson, 2018). A mentorship is typically indicative of a long-term relationship that involves the mentor offering experiential wisdom to help a mentee make decisions about their future (Marcdante & Simpson, 2018). This wisdom can include support, feedback, and advocacy for professional and personal concerns (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). While all faculty members, regardless of race, have the ability to provide mentorship, there are difficulties associated with individuals who do not identify as a racial minority to mentor students of color because the lack of diversity may cause discomfort in establishing a close relationship (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Mentorship should be strongly considered when discussing improving the retention and success rates for Black graduate students, as well as promoting diversity for the program (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). MFT programs could benefit from establishing mentorship programs that include Black volunteers

who are previous graduates of MFT programs and/or local Black mental health professionals that reside in the community. MFT programs could compile a list of individuals who are open to providing mentorship and provide that list to current students for them to pursue if they choose to do so. Implementing a mentorship program would be beneficial as it would help current students build confidence and give alumni the opportunity to stay involved with the program.

Increased Representation

Increased representation was also found to be a desire of Black graduate students to help improve their experiences in MFT graduate programs. This finding is consistent with those found in the Wilson and Stith (1993) article regarding representation in MFT programs. According to an article published in 2023, representation is mandatory in higher education because “it increases confidence, well-being, and sense of place in terms of where they are and what they can ultimately achieve” (Finn & Kamerlin, p. 1). Previous research suggests all graduate programs should strive for racial parity (Young, Chamley, and Withers, 1990). MFT programs should dedicate more efforts towards the recruitment of Black faculty, students, and supervisors by promoting MFT programs in spaces that are greatly populated with Black individuals such as college career fairs and inner-city community events. It might also be helpful for MFT programs to develop diversity boards with the sole intent to create initiatives and strategies for the recruitment and retention of racially diverse program members. This could also be a resource to provide additional support to Black graduate students and other marginalized populations.

Allyship

Racial allyship was also found to be a contributing factor in the support of Black graduate students in MFT programs. The term "racial justice allyship" refers to individuals who are proactively advocating for racial justice (Williams et al., 2023). Wilson and Stith (1993)

previously reported that while Black students felt generally supported by at least one faculty member, which improved their overall experience, MFT programs were still lacking faculty members that developed a deep understanding of the impact that racism and oppression had on the Black community at that time. Unfortunately, this theme is still relevant in the current study. It is important for White allies to understand White privilege and institutional racism, as well as proactively working with marginalized populations (Williams et al., 2023). Speaking against injustices can be uncomfortable, but that should not absolve anyone from doing so. For those who are aware of their privileged positions, it is imperative that they become knowledgeable about discrimination and microaggressions and how they appear in educational spaces (Arif et al., 2022). When individuals from the dominant culture witness discrimination and avoid speaking up against negative behaviors only perpetuates the problem by deflecting responsibility (Arif et al., 2022). The overall mission of any MFT program is the development of future clinicians. According to COAMFTE guidelines, MFT programs have a duty to the development of culturally competent clinicians (COAMFTE, 2021). An extension of cultural competency is the practice of allyship (Kuehl, 2021). In order to be taught properly, cultural competency and allyship must first be exhibited by program leadership and faculty. If MFT programs promote culturally diverse environments, then allyship, especially from faculty, is imperative in cases of discrimination, microaggressions, and racism towards POC.

Financial Support

Participants in this study reported increased financial support would be helpful in improving their experience in their MFT program. These findings are similar to those published in a previous study, where Black students reported increased financial assistance could potentially aid in the recruitment of Black students (Wilson & Stith, 1993). In the current study,

most of the participants reported accruing student debt because they had to take out several student loans to support themselves financially and finance their degrees. Some also reported maintaining additional jobs outside of the program, despite being told “it is not recommended” by faculty, but no other alternatives were provided. Graduate students would benefit from consistent assistantships, scholarships, and grants that would prevent them from taking out more student loans. When expressing why the financial status of many MFT graduate students is so bothersome, Participant #7 stated: “...it's because of the lack of funding that MFT [students] even get...it's like something that bothers me. I know internships [are] about getting the experience, but I also think we're doing so many hours and not getting financial gain from it.” MFT graduate students carry a large amount of responsibility, and they should be adequately compensated for their contributions to MFT programs, universities, and local communities.

Implications

The primary goal of this study was to highlight changes that could be implemented by MFT programs to improve the experiences of Black students, and eventually encourage the enrollment of more Black students who will go on to become licensed therapists. The biggest takeaway from the findings was the students' request for mentorship from other Black individuals in the field of mental health. Students reported they would have liked their programs to emphasize the significance of mentorship and provide a list of qualified mentors in their area. Some reported they would prefer that the mentors not technically be hired by the university, for confidentiality purposes, but potentially be associated with the program, such as alumni. Ideally, mentors would be volunteers who are willing to help students and have no technical obligation to the MFT program. This was preferred by students because they would feel more comfortable disclosing certain details to their mentor knowing that those details would be repeated to

someone in the program. There were consistent reports from the participants that mentorship would have significantly improved their experience.

The need for increased representation was also a major finding from the study. Students reported feeling more “seen” when the classrooms were more diverse. Students reported they learned more, and their overall experience was more positive when representation was present. MFT programs should be more intentional with recruiting Black faculty members, supervisors, and students. Some students recommended leadership attend career fairs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to directly recruit from institutions that are widely known to confer degrees to Black students. In 2022, it was reported 74% of degrees were conferred to Black students by HBCUs (NCES, n.d.). If these students were made aware of the opportunities provided by MFT programs, then maybe more qualified candidates would apply to MFT programs as future students and faculty members.

Limitations and Future Research

While the current study yielded helpful findings to support Black graduate students in MFT programs, it is important to address the limitations of the current study. This study was limited to only 14 participants, with only one who identified as male. This could potentially limit the generalizability of the study. Future research could benefit from interviewing additional participants, and potentially more male Black graduate students if possible. Another limitation for the study was the methodology that only allowed for one participant interview. This was limited because certain points were unable to be clarified during the qualitative analysis. If this study were to be replicated in the future, it would include an initial interview and at least one follow-up interview to clarify specific details reported by participants. There were also four participants that attended one particular MFT program, which may not represent the experiences

of all Black graduate students in MFT programs. In the future, it would be beneficial to have at least one participant from each COMAFTE-accredited MFT program to gain a better perspective of program similarities and differences. It would also be helpful to possibly adapt a longitudinal research and interview students their first year entering the program, once a year during their duration in the program, and finally one year post-completing the program to develop a better understanding of their experiences at multiple times during and after the program.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This qualitative study was guided by Minority Stress Theory and Critical Race Theory and contributes to the literature on Black graduate students, specifically in MFT programs. The purpose of this study was to offer Black graduate students a platform to share their experiences and provide a narrative that is not usually told in traditional research. The themes discussed in this study indicate Black students are still treated differently in higher education institutions and there is still progress that needs to take place to make these programs truly equal for all. Unfortunately, Black students reported feeling isolated and underrepresented in MFT programs 30 years after a similar study was published in the same field, examining the exact same population (Wilson & Stith, 1993). The themes identified in this study can help MFT programs improve the experience of Black students in their programs. One main finding was that increasing Black representation in MFT programs and the implementation of mentorship programs would likely improve the experiences of many Black graduate students. There is a void waiting to be filled in the field of mental health that requires an increase of Black clinicians and the journey of filling that void begins with education. Improving the state of MFT graduate degree programs for Black students is crucial in improving the state of mental health for not only Black communities, but for all communities.

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Table 1 - Participant IDs, Gender Identity, Age Range, Degree Type, and Current Graduation Status

Participant ID	Gender Identity	Age Range	Degree Type	Region	Graduated (Y/N)
01	Female	35-44	Doctoral	Northeast	N
02	Male	25-34	Doctoral	Mid-West	N
03	Female	18-24	Master's	South	N
04	Female	45+	Master's	South	Y
05	Female	25-34	Master's	South	Y
06	Female	45+	Doctoral	South	N
07	Female	25-34	Master's	Northeast	N
08	Female	25-34	Master's	East	N
09	Female	18-24	Master's	South	Y
10	Female	35-44	Doctoral	East	N
11	Female	25-34	Master's	Northeast	N
12	Female	45+	Doctoral	Mid-West	N
13	Female	25-34	Doctoral	Mid-West	N
14	Female	35-44	Doctoral	Mid-West	N

Table 2 - Themes and Subthemes

	Themes
Barriers Associated with Black Graduate Students	Financial concerns
	Lack of Diversity (Racism)
	Difficulty Practicing Self-care
	Lack of Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal Support Network - Connecting to Campus Resources - Research Support
	Ineffectiveness of Diversity Protocols
How to Provide Support to Black Graduate Students	Mentorship
	Representation
	Allyship

Appendix A - Informed Consent

Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE: A qualitative exploration of the black graduate student experience

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE: 10/06/2023

EXPIRATION DATE: 05/31/2024

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Kamille Greene

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Kamille Greene (kamille@ksu.edu)

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Dr. Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this qualitative study will be to understand the dynamics of Black students in MFT graduate school programs, with emphasis placed on support within these programs, campus resources, and mentorship opportunities available to these students. The purpose of this study is also to identify program changes that can promote an improved experience for Black graduate students.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED & LENGTH OF STUDY: The participants will each complete a pre-interview questionnaire to determine their eligibility for participation. If eligible, each participant will complete a 90-minute guided interview that will include specific questions about their personal experience of being a Black graduate student at a predominantly white institution. The participants will also complete a demographics survey.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: Risks may include experiencing uncomfortable feelings, such as sadness, guilt, anxiety, anger, frustration, loneliness, and helplessness because the process of answering the interview questions may require discussing the unpleasant aspects of your graduate student experience.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Study benefits could lead to future research and changes within educational programs to include more support and mentorship for students of color. Benefits also include providing insight into the experience of graduate students of color to implement changes that promote greater diversity in these programs.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Video recordings will be stored within the KSU Zoom encrypted cloud, each video is protected by a password and the account is protected through password. Transcripts that are downloaded from Zoom will be deidentified and saved in password protected word documents, on to the W-Drive in the BGSE Experience folder and on flash drives. It is anticipated that this study will be completed at the end of May 2024, in which the data will be deleted from the responsible graduate student and co-analyst's computer and flash drives and Zoom recordings will be deleted. Any hard copy of the transcript will be shredded.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. I verify that by clicking the consent box below, that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Do you provide your consent to participate in this study?

- **Yes**, I give my consent to participate in this study.
 - **No**, I do not give my consent to participate in this study.
- (Participants who click “Yes” will be allowed to continue with the screening survey, those that click “No” will be thanked and exited from the survey).

Appendix B - Pre-Interview Screening, Interview Questions,

Demographics

Pre-interview Screening

1. Do you currently attend, or have you previously attended, a Marriage and Family Therapy graduate degree program?
2. Is the degree program located at a predominantly white institution?
3. Did you attend this program prior to the year 2020?
4. What race/ethnicity do you primarily identify with?
 - a. Caucasian/White
 - b. Black (African American, Afro-Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino, or otherwise connected to the African Diaspora)
 - c. Asian
 - d. Hispanic Latino or Spanish origin
 - e. Middle Eastern
 - f. Multi-racial
 - f. Other

Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to join an MFT program?
2. Overall, how would you describe your experience in the MFT graduate school program?
3. How diverse was the program regarding students and faculty?
4. Do you feel you experienced challenges related to being a Black graduate student? If so, what were they?
5. How did these challenges impact your experience?
6. What has been helpful to address these challenges?
7. What could have been helpful to address these challenges?
8. What does mentorship look like within your program?
9. Any other recommendations you would provide regarding improved mentoring for Black MFT graduate students?
9. What are your thoughts about the diversity & inclusion protocols implemented in the program?
10. What is campus culture like for students of color?
11. Do you have any suggestions for how the campus culture could be improved towards Black graduate students?
11. How has the location of your institution and community resources, or lack thereof, contributed to your graduate school experience?
12. What were your methods of self-care during your time in the program?
13. Any other recommendations you would provide for improving recruitment and retention of Black MFT graduate students, or improving their overall experiences in graduate school?

Demographics Survey

1. Gender
 - a. Male

- b. Female
 - c. Transgender
 - d. Non-binary
 - e. Prefer not to answer.
2. Age
- a. Under 18
 - b. 18-24
 - c. 25-34
 - d. 35-44
 - e. 45 or more
3. What years did you attend your MFT graduate degree program?
4. Did you complete the MFT graduate degree program?
- a. Yes, I graduated.
 - b. No.
5. Employment Status
- a. Full-time
 - b. Part-time
 - c. Self-employed
 - d. PRN (can you describe what this is on your survey)
 - e. Retired
 - g. Not currently employed.
6. Current Job Title

Appendix C - Debrief Statement

Debriefing Statement for Promoting change through the voices of Black graduate students: A qualitative exploration of the experiences of Black graduate students in MFT programs

Study Overview: This qualitative study explores the diverse experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, various marriage and family therapy (MFT) graduate school programs in the United States. Our research questions are: What are the overall experiences of Black graduate students in MFT programs at PWIs? What stressors are identified by Black graduate students in MFT programs that influence their experience? How supported do Black graduate students feel in their MFT programs? How has the experience of Black graduate students in MFT programs changed in 30 years since the publication of the Wilson and Stith (1993) article? As a participant of this study, you have the right to withdraw your consent at any time with verbal or written communication without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Contact information:

- If you have any ethical concerns or want more information on participant's rights you can contact: Dr. Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.
- If you have more questions about the purpose, procedures, or results of this study, you can contact: Kamille Greene (kamille@ksu.edu)

Here are some additional resources/ opportunities for support:

- These are websites where you can type in your zip code and mental health providers in your area will populate.
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us>
 - <https://www.blackfemaletherapists.com/>
 - <https://wellness.beam.community/>
 - <https://borislhensonfoundation.org/>
 - <https://www.melaninandmentalhealth.com/directory-therapists/>
 - <https://therapyforblackmen.org/therapists/>

Thank you! On behalf of all the researchers on this team we would like to sincerely thank you for your participation in this study. Because of courageous people like you we can better understand the experiences of Black graduate students to influence change in higher education systems and promote the well-being of students of Color.