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## My Story, My Identity: Doctoral Students of Color at a Research University

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## **My Story, My Identity: Doctoral Students of Color at a Research University**

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# **My Story, My Identity: Doctoral Students of Color at a Research University**

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## **Abstract**

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We are deeply concerned about the small representation of faculty of color in the academy; thus, we address the question of how and why doctoral students of color choose a particular career path. This qualitative research study, through the voices of the doctoral students of color, identifies and explains both the overt and covert obstacles encountered by graduate students of color in their consideration of academic careers. The stories of leading change efforts through the pursuit of an advanced education are stories of individual agency. At the same time, their education was not an individual effort; rather, these students of color pursued an advanced education both for themselves and for others. These results suggest specific implications for practice that focus on the unique perspectives of doctoral students of color.

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**Keywords:** doctoral, graduate students, students of color, faculty, agency

# **Mi historia, Mi Identidad: Estudiantes de Doctorado de Color en una Investigación de la Universidad**

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## **Resumen**

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Estamos profundamente preocupados por la escasa representación de la facultad de color en la academia; por lo tanto, abordamos la cuestión de cómo y por qué los estudiantes de doctorado de color eligen una carrera en particular. Este estudio de investigación cualitativa, a través de las voces de los participantes, identifica y explica los obstáculos, tanto visibles como invisibles, que encuentran los estudiantes de doctorado de color al considerar las carreras académicas. Las historias de dirigir los esfuerzos para lograr el cambio a través de la búsqueda de una educación avanzada son historias de la acción individual. Al mismo tiempo, su educación no era un esfuerzo individual; más bien, estos estudiantes de color buscaron una educación avanzada, para sí mismos y también para los demás. Estos resultados sugieren implicaciones específicas para la práctica que se centran en las perspectivas únicas de los estudiantes de doctorado de color.

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**Palabras clave:** doctorado, estudiantes de postgrado, estudiantes de color, facultad, agencia

**A**t a recent professional association conference a presenter borrowed from Takaki's (1993, p. 16) work and asked, "What happens... 'when someone with the authority of a teacher' describes our society, and 'you are not in it'? Such an experience can be disorienting—'a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing'" (Milem, 2011, p. 332). Students of color have suggested that their educational experiences, which include being overlooked, disrespected, underappreciated, and discriminated against, are often a deterrent to further education and career choices in educational environments. Arguably, racism is deeply woven into education settings (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Given the structural and personal challenges faced by graduate students of color throughout their educational pathways, why would we expect these students to seek out careers within the academy despite the numerous appeals for an increase in faculty of color?

We are deeply concerned about the small representation of faculty of color in the academy; thus, we address the question of how and why doctoral students of color choose a particular career path. The purpose of this study, then, is to identify and describe both the overt and covert obstacles encountered by graduate students of color in their consideration of academic careers.

Claims of a paucity of faculty of color in universities and colleges are endemic. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), 7% of college and university faculty are African American, 5% are Hispanic, 7% are Asian, 1% are American Indian/Alaska Native, 1% were of two or more races, and less than .05% were Pacific Islander. Over a five-year reporting period by NCES percentages of Black faculty remained the same and Hispanic and Asian faculty increased by 1%. NCES released in 2016 also shows that only 25% of graduate assistants were students of color.

The literature on both student development and student academic persistence identifies the negative implications of an overwhelming White faculty population. One argument is that the lack of an ethnically diverse faculty limits opportunities for students of color to have faculty role models and mentors who share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences (Singh & Cooper, 2006; Smith, 2015), which can negatively affect student success and persistence (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Swail, Redd, & Perna,

2003). A second argument is that an ethnically diverse faculty provide an educationally rich environment that is associated with improved student learning outcomes such as intellectual, social, and civic development for all students (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Singh & Cooper, 2006). These effects are even stronger for White students (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004). Positive student outcomes are associated with specific diversity experiences: “College diversity interactions are only associated with educational benefits when these experiences occur frequently” (Bowman, 2013, p. 889), which means there is organizational commitment to diversity that is reflected in a diverse environment, particularly among the faculty. Bowman (2011) suggests, “Diversity experiences are associated with increases in civic attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors, and the magnitude of this effect is greater for interpersonal interactions with racial diversity than for curricular and cocurricular diversity experiences” (p. 29). These interactions can only take place when the campus environment includes diversity among faculty, staff, and students. Students who gain experience in racial interactions not only grow personally, but also become valuable employees in organizations that value diversity that are leading change and innovation (Lopuch & Davis, 2014).

Due to the fact that faculty, especially in four-year colleges and universities, and in academic programs in community colleges, emanate from university graduate programs, we focus upon the experiences and career choice process of graduate students, particularly those graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds. To identify and explain these experiences and the process, we rely upon students’ stories to illustrate the perils of the path to the academy for students of color.

### **Graduate Students of Color and Career Choice**

One justification for low numbers of minority faculty, and thus an answer to career choice of graduate students of color, is the low number of minority students enrolling in doctoral programs (Myers & Turner, 1995; Thurgood & Clarke, 1995), a claim which is not wholly supported by evidence. These pipeline claims are countered by recent data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates, which indicate a 45% increase of earned doctorates for minority students between 1996 and 2006 (Denecke, Frasier, & Redd, 2009).

However, these increases in doctoral degree attainment have not been sufficient to alter the makeup of faculty. They have not led to significant changes in current faculty demographics. Arguably, then, the pipeline in and of itself is unlikely the problem (Cannady, Greenwald, & Harris, 2014; Miller & Wai, 2015; Morelon-Quainoo, Johnson, Winkle-Wagner, Kuykendall, Ingram, Carter, & Santiago, 2009; Trower & Chait, 2002; Tuitt, 2009).

Instead of pipeline issues, research points to a variety of behaviors, conditions, and practices that present obstacles for graduate students of color, including campus climate, curricular issues, faculty expectations, and lack of institutional support for specific student populations (Gopaul, 2015; Howard-Hamilton, Morelon-Quainoo, Johnson, Winkle-Wagner, & Santiago, 2009). More pointedly, graduate students of color express the need to prove their academic ability (Antony & Taylor, 2001) and, correspondingly, faculty underestimate their academic abilities (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). These students report graduate life as “something to survive” (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009) or as a dehumanizing experience (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). The research literature on graduate students of color suggests graduate students of color experience graduate school differently because of their race (Gopaul, 2015; Howard-Hamilton et al., 2009). For example, Latina doctoral students report experiences that lead to a negative socialization; however, success can be achieved through the support to challenge the assumptions about their intellectual capacities (Gonzalez, 2006). Faculty plays a significant role in challenging assumptions and shaping the experiences of doctoral students.

Another perspective on the issue of career decisions for students of color suggests that students of diverse backgrounds are channeled into low prestige institutions with missions and status allocation functions that lead to social reproduction (DeAngelo, 2009). Although access to graduate school may be available, access to particular research opportunities and a university culture that supports the development of future faculty may not be available. DeAngelo (2009) refers to this as a form of “anticipatory socialization” (p. 42). Students of color follow a path that will not lead them to a university graduate program where they will become future faculty, and other undergraduate students of color do not enter graduate school at all. Tuitt (2009) notes that “students of color perceive that instead

of supporting their future aspirations to pursue an advance degree, the institution's social structure, environment, and mission aim to ensure they are educated in a manner to make them suitable for the employment marketplace and not for the scholarly marketplace" (p. 208).

A third perspective on career decisions for students of color centers on what Haley, Jaeger and Levin (2014) suggest is cultural social identity. Students connect their cultural identity to their professional work in a way that integrates their identities and limits conflicting values (e.g., choosing a research topic based on the needs of their cultural community or becoming a faculty member to become a role model for their cultural and social communities). For graduate students of color, career decision making is more than considering the perspectives of their family and community, which many graduate students do; these students often make their career decisions based on the needs of their family and community, and in the study sample, a faculty career was often incongruent with those needs (Haley et al., 2014).

Because we take the position that marginalization, isolation, and discrimination are often commonplace for graduate students of color and influence how these students make decisions, we rely on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to frame our discussion of graduate students of color and career choice and highlight the students' narratives that bear witness to the lived experience in a racist society (Bell, 1987).

### **Theoretical Framework**

We build on the work of Haley et al. (2014) and focus on the unique voices of graduate students of color. CRT includes theoretical orientations that highlight inequality and suggest that inequality and privilege underpin experiences and career decisions (Massey, 2007). CRT as "a form of oppositional scholarship... challenges the experiences of Whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color" (Taylor, 1998, p. 122).

CRT has four primary tenets in education (Solórzano, 1998). The first tenet states that racism is seen as endemic and deeply ingrained in American life (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) and is normalized as a component of U.S. society (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism is a way "society does business, [and] the

common everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Second, scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) suggest that the U.S. system of White-over-color dominance makes racism difficult to address in that formal rules only acknowledge the most obvious forms of racism. Furthermore, the idea of interest convergence adds to the challenge of addressing racism. Because racism advances the interests of both White elites and working-class people, large segments of our population have little incentive to eliminate racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The third tenet adheres to social construction that suggests that race is a product of our social thoughts, which “society invents, manipulates, and retires when convenient” (p. 7). Characteristics that a society assigns to race are of critical importance to CRT. A final tenet as articulated by Delgado and Stefancic (2001) concerns the notion of a unique voice of people of color. The stories of those who have experienced unfair or unjust treatment are most critical to the explanation of inequality. Counter-story telling from the CRT perspective collects stories that aim to cast doubt on the validity of accepted ideas, traditions, or myths, especially those that are held by the majority. Counter-story telling is a method of conveying the stories of those people whose experiences are ignored, or marginalized, or not articulated publicly (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These narratives recount individuals’ experiences with racism and sexism and challenge dominant discourses on race (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In educational arenas, adopting “and adapting CRT as a framework for educational equity means that we will have to expose racism in education and propose radical solutions for addressing it” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22). Asking critical questions helps to disrupt the status quo of theories and methods that do not take into account race as a factor in experience and those that devalue the scholarship of researchers of color (Bensimon, 2012). Some examples of using CRT in higher education research include the educational journeys of Mexican-American PhD students (Espino, 2012), the social experiences of Black students at a southern university (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009), and the experience of doctoral education culture by Black and Latino/a students (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). These studies use CRT as a way to forefront race as a factor of experience and give voice to students of color.

This research investigation shares the knowledge we gained from the stories of graduate students of color as they discussed their career choices.

It provides an emerging understanding of how a graduate student's background and cultural values influence their decisions to pursue a faculty career.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to explore the overt and covert obstacles encountered by graduate students of color in their consideration of a career in the professoriate. Questions related to meaning, understanding, and process are appropriately explored through a qualitative research process (Merriam, 2002), specifically a basic interpretive design as described by Merriam (2009), which was used in our study. This design, according to Merriam, seeks to discover and understand the perspectives and worldviews of the participants and supported our purpose of understanding the career choice experiences of students of color. Critical Race Theory, together with the interpretive strength of qualitative research, allowed for an integral understanding of individual experiences within a larger social context (Creswell, 2007; Grbick, 2007; Merriam, 2009), which was necessary for our study. CRT served as both a conceptual and analytical framework.

A CRT framework, incorporated to its full potential, involves strategy, research method, and definitional premises (Closson, 2010). One strategy of CRT is counter-storytelling (Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009), writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or beliefs, especially those held by the majority. Counter-storytelling thus highlights the unique voices of graduate students of color by offering a place for narrative in the lived experiences of graduate students of color as they consider their career choices (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1995). Counter-story telling allowed participants to express their personal narratives.

One way to understand oppression is to hear the stories of those who live these experiences. The act of remembering past experiences in which difficulties were faced and negotiated assists the storyteller in exploring, deconstructing, and reintegrating memories into a more meaningful and cohesive personal identity narrative (Cozolina, 2008; Pellico & Chinn, 2007). Delgado (1989) contends that stories are a powerful means for destroying and shifting preconceived notions. Stories of those from underrepresented backgrounds can counter the stories of dominant groups

or power structures. Stories and counter-stories can show what is customarily accepted as the norm is “ridiculous” (Delgado, 1995).

Storytelling provides a lens for viewing experiences in a new, renewing, instructive, and even transformational ways (Wiessner & Pfahl, 2007). Through storytelling, participants “construct alternative scenarios, reflect on assumptions behind them, and contemplate meanings for their implications for the future” (Weissner & Pfahl, 2007, p. 27). The act of storytelling “can free people from silently imposed socio-cultural limitations and help them to gain a renewed sense of self and enhanced capacity to act in meaningful ways” (Weissner & Pfahl, 2007, p. 27).

For our analysis, storytelling and participant reflection offer ways to make sense of the career choices of graduate students of color, including the rationales for these choices. As individuals reflect on their past from their current perspective, which involves arriving at a revised understanding of themselves and the world around them, their interpretations of past experiences shift. This provides a means for them to re-write or re-imagine future potentials, even to change trajectories of behavior, and thus to enable a form of agency. This transformation of perspective in the present can construct a future that is not a repetition of the past (Kenyon, 2001; Mezirow, 2002; Taylor, 1998). In addition to revealing the structural, sociocultural, interpersonal, and personal dimensions of one’s life, personally constructed stories offer both fact and possibility within this story making and telling process (Kenyon, 2001).

### **Setting, Participants and Data Collection**

The research site was a public, comprehensive, high research activity university with a highly diverse undergraduate population of 15,000 (80% students of color). The graduate population at the time of this study included 2,000 students (23.8% students of color, 34.8% international students). At the institution, 242 graduate students identified as Latino, African American, or Native American, 227 students identify as Asian and 772 as Caucasian. Graduate degrees were offered in engineering, humanities and social sciences, natural and agricultural sciences, education, and management. The researchers of this project included one faculty member from the study institution who identifies as White and three additional faculty members from outside the study institution: one who

identified as Black and two who identify as White. In addition, there were two doctoral students (one white, one Asian-American) who helped collect data and review coding.

Most of the current literature uses the terms minority student or underrepresented minorities to address populations that traditionally have been underrepresented in higher education. Another term, students of color, which is often used interchangeably with minority students, is a more appropriate term for our research site because the campus is diverse and includes significant populations of African American, Asian American, and Latino students, some of whom are not underrepresented on this campus.

All graduate students at the institution were contacted by email asking them to participate in a research study on doctoral student experiences. A link provided in the email directed those interested to a short demographic survey and an email contact. From those who responded, which included White students and international students, a smaller subset of students of color were chosen for this particular research project. All interview transcripts of graduate students of color participating in the larger study (n=48) were read with the specific goal of identifying those participants who indicated that telling their story was “transformational” or “meaningful” and noted that career decision making within graduate study was an important event in and of itself. Eleven participant transcripts were chosen. These eleven participants articulated how their cultural identities related to their career choices and projected compelling stories within the interview. Because our intent was to highlight individual stories, we found that the eleven identified gave us ample data to highlight commonalities, differences, and address our research purpose through saturation of the data (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

Interviews were the primary method of data collection because they allow for the exploration of the experience based on individual perspectives (Fontana & Frey, 2000). While interviews were semi-structured lasting 60-90 minutes each and led to the collection of similar data from all participants, individual narratives provided personalized accounts of their graduate school experiences in career decision making. These narratives emerged from the open-ended nature of the interview rather than the specific interview questions.

As part of the institution review board’s requirements, we maintained confidentiality of our participants by using board descriptive characteristics.

We were not allowed to offer program or department information as there could be instances of only one graduate student of color in a particular area. Students identified their own ethnicity and gender.

Table 1.

*Participant Descriptions*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>College</b>
Ahmad	Multiracial	Male	Sciences
Calistro	Latino	Male	Engineering
Danielle	Black	Female	Sciences
Darius	Multiracial	Male	Engineering
Gary	Black	Male	Education
	American		Social
Lana	Indian	Female	Sciences
Paolo	Latino	Male	Sciences
Shakina	Black	Female	Sciences
Verena	Mexican	Female	Education
Jose	Chicano	Male	Engineering
			Social
Martina	Multiracial	Female	Sciences

## Data Analysis

Our analytical approach was a socio-cultural narrative analysis providing a broader interpretive framework of behaviors in context (Grbich, 2007). This approach preserves the personal accounts and associated sequential and structural features, both hallmarks of narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Participants reflected on their lives from personal, professional, and academic perspectives, and they provided the researchers with narratives amenable to analysis.

Narrative analysis involves the collection of personal stories that discuss and articulate how individuals make meaning of important moments (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Josselson & Lieblich, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). The analysis of narratives can range from data reduction according to linguistic structures to a more holistic reading involving the entire text. Our analysis

integrated Glasser and Strauss' (2006) method of keyword analysis and cultural assumptions and Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) holistic content process. The choice of Strauss' method enabled us to explore deep assumptions often left unsaid while the holistic content analysis aided us in probing the significance of a story (or stories) as a whole. Both methods concur with Atkinson and Delamont's (2006) view that a narrative is a performance, "a cultural resistance on the part of the marginal, the dispossessed and the muted" (p. 168) and McAdams, Hoffman, Day and Mansfield's (1996) conclusion that these self-defining stories give unity and purpose to the tellers' lives. Getting students to openly discuss their experiences relating to their ethnic/racial identity is a challenge, despite initial participant nervousness, a single interview can illustrate unique and profound experiences. According to Jensen, critical to the qualitative interviewing process is "the quality of the analysis and the dignity, care and time taken to analyze interview, rather than the quantity" (as cited in Baker & Edwards, 2012). Our research team paid significant attention to details of design and implementation throughout the study.

The data derived in the form of interviews were analyzed using a narrative technique that views participants' life stories as sequential, contextual, and plot-driven. Particular attention was paid to counter-story episodes (Garcia, 2005) and the themes of agency or independent motives in contrast to communion or relationship-oriented motives (Bakan, 1966), which we used as our analytical framework for this research. McAdams and colleagues (1996) suggest that adults construct self-defining stories to provide their lives with unity and purpose that include both agency and communion. Hogan and colleagues (as cited in McAdams et al., 1996) state that communion represents 'getting along' and agency represents 'getting ahead.' The concepts of agency (self-mastery, status, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment) and communion—such as love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community (McAdams et al., 1996, pp. 345-346) were prominent in the participants' stories.

### **Trustworthiness**

Prior to, during, and on post site visits, members of the research team met to discuss the project, compare perceptions, discuss researcher notes and journals, check and refine data collection techniques, and propose

explanations of behaviors. This approach to data collection and data analysis ensured credibility of the research process and its findings (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and offered a peer-debriefing process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Within the traditions of qualitative and ethnographic research, we acknowledge the researchers' role in shaping our interactions with graduate students of color and their responses to us. Luttrell (2005) argues that researchers cannot "eliminate tensions, contradictions, or peer imbalances but we can (and should) name them" (p. 243). The research team for this study consisted of tenured and tenure-track faculty and graduate student researchers. The research team included individuals from underrepresented backgrounds as well as those with and without an affiliation to the study site. This permitted considerable opportunity for both breadth and depth in the investigation.

In that personal narratives adhere to and are shaped by cultural convention (Plummer, 1995), we paid particular attention to signals from participants during this exploration of issues of racial and ethnic identities. This was important as we addressed the socio-cultural context of graduate school education and how this influences the choice of a faculty career. Although self-selection by the participants to respond to our original email may have influenced the overall findings, participant commitment was reflected in time spent and narratives produced, and data collection continued until saturation was reached (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This investigation relied primarily on interview data with confirming data obtained from follow-up emails. It is reasonable to assume that other graduate students who did not participate may have had different yet equally valuable stories.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This investigation explored the individual experiences of graduate students of color in a research university and connected those experiences to students' career choices. In using Critical Race Theory and narrative analysis, this investigation relied upon the storytelling of graduate students

of color who recounted their experiences with racism and constructed their future direction toward a professional career. This storytelling from the perspective of CRT is a form of counter-narration that reveals both individual and group experiences—encounters with racism in graduate education—suggesting that graduate students of color face conditions that do not reflect those of White students as they are considering career choices. Three themes are provided to offer an interpretive framework for the students' stories.

### **My Story, My Identity**

Participants found meaning in describing their experiences to us. They shared their first impressions of our invitation to interview them and they expressed initial doubt that what they could contribute was going to be unique. This condition is exemplified by Shakina, a Black student in the sciences:

My experiences are probably like other people...probably exactly like my friend Carla that is white who is in my cohort. Her experiences and mine are probably almost exactly the same in terms of growing up and wanting to be in science so I didn't think there was anything more that I could add.

Yet, similar to others, Shakina concluded the interview with a different perspective: "The questions helped me realize some things." Hearing her own story helped put other issues she was considering into perspective: She discovered that her story was not exactly the same as others and thus represented her own unique perspective.

Calistro, a Latino engineer, described his story as one of learning and realization. He acknowledged his early-life situation was one that needed to change:

I was getting into trouble, and it was really a bad area to live, and I saw a lot of my friends...eventually going to prison...[T]hey were basically locked up. I realized that I should get out of there so I moved back to Michigan. Some [friends] were really good at academics. One guy in particular...was already accepted into a school and asked me what I was going to do. He was like, "you

should come [to college].” In fact, if I did not know he was going. I don’t know if I would have been brave enough to say “I am going to go [to college].”

Stories included both assertions of fact and of possibilities, suggesting that life is open to change (Kenyon, 2001). Calistro claimed his space by telling his own story. His story included ideas of agency as he described his need to move out of his current situation, overcome the obstacles, and meet any challenges before him.

Shakina, in spite of her original assumption about having “nothing” unique to add to the conversation, related a story that, while similar to other students of color, was clearly different from students who are not marginalized. She described her experiences as a student, using an analogy to a competitive athlete:

I feel that I need to out run my own pace...[S]o I feel like I need to be perfect almost or close to perfect in terms of the grades that I get...[so] they don’t think it is because of my color. I am trying to do something that may not be possible for me now, and I am trying to out run everyone else so that I can feel ok.

Autobiographical memories provide motivation (McAdams, 1996, 2006), and the authoring of personal stories enables a form of agency. Shakina continues to author her story, but the process of telling her story helped her explore how her past experiences explain current conditions. McAdams et al. (1996) state that the agentic person may seek recognition, particularly in competitive situations, which correlates with Shakina’s story. Her story suggested that her agentic behavior is driven by being seen as equal rather than being seen as “number one” or having a higher status than others. Her story supports Antony and Taylor’s (2001) idea that graduate students of color have a need to prove their academic ability. In her story, Shakina was seeking not to be better than everyone, but to be seen as an equal. She hoped she was accepted to graduate school because she was “smart,” not because she was “Black.”

## **Resisting Oppression and Reclaiming Power**

Participants maintained or developed agency—control over their lives to some extent— by identifying oppressive behaviors and refusing to be inhibited by them. The story of an individual's condition leads to the realization of how she or he came to be oppressed. Stories of those who have been treated unfairly are most important in explaining inequality as well as challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The narratives are a self-presentation that lead students to self-discovery and exposed inequality. For example, Gary, a Black education student, described his experiences in educational settings and refused to let the dominant perspective be his story:

It's given me a position; it's always my race. My race has always put me in a position as an underdog...I don't consider myself an underdog but statistically I have to acknowledge what history and what these numbers say and so that's always made me either try to figure out why or work that much harder. I refuse to be a statistic. That used to be one of my slogans in undergrad, 'I refuse to be a statistic.' I'm not going to be that two-thirds! Once I get to that point, I want to change that number to something higher. Then being at a PWI (predominately White institution) where only one-third of the minority students graduate was just nuts. They were showing us these numbers, and I remember my first night on campus they said "look to your left and look to your right; only one of you are going to be here." And we were all at this bridge program. And that just blew me away. I was like, "what do you mean we're not going to be here?" It's just the same as my elementary teacher who would just outright flunk the students color, and as soon as they left her class their grades would shoot right back up.

Gary, as CRT suggests, was challenging the dominant claim. Gary suggested that his undergraduate higher education experiences, as he recalled them, were bringing back memories of experiences in elementary school. At the same time, Gary refused to let stories of the majority be his stories.

Verena, a Mexican female student, discussed her struggles with being the only student of color in her graduate program. She lacked mentors or people of influence who looked like her. She struggled with others' perceptions, but ultimately knew she had to persist and have confidence in her abilities:

Are they going to think that... because you know, I actually worked for it, got the grades, published a lot or are they going to say she got it because they needed to hire someone of color to fit into their quota...[M]y parents have always been like "you need to be better than everyone else in order to be equal," and it is something that I always adhere to. So if I win something I know it is because if you look at me versus the other applicants I am better.

At the outset of this discussion, we suggested that students of color experienced graduate school in ways different from White students and educational environments perpetuate inequities. Danielle, a Black scientist, reflected this in her experiences: "Well, I've never trusted school and teachers and so it's hard to envision being a part of the school and the role [teacher or faculty... is] the most oppressive. For her, "the teacher with low expectations or the professor that's just ridiculously rigid and blind to issues of race" is the mainstay of this form of oppression. Danielle cannot remove herself from her earlier experiences: "I guess that's tough to kind of move away from."

It is evident that the participants' stories suggest that racism is overt and common in educational environments, lending credence to the statement that "the places where African Americans do experience education success tend to be outside of public schools" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 55). The act of recalling these past emotionally-charged experiences, which participants faced and overcame, can, according to Delgado (1989), shift perceptions and self-understandings. These narratives offer a compelling image that illustrates how underrepresented groups are marginalized. In turn, the stories illustrate agentic perspectives and actions taken by the participants as well as their success in meeting and overcoming obstacles (McAdams et al., 1996).

## **Leading Through Learning**

Participants made decisions about their education and learning opportunities, such as serving as a model for other students of color in disciplines that had few if any students similar to them or engaging in research that mattered to them and their community in spite of what faculty suggested. By doing so, they were taking on a leadership role for other students of color.

Participants expressed their choices of academic discipline as intentional and purposeful. For example, Lana, an American Indian student, her choice of anthropology was deliberate. For her, “it can be a conflict. I have lots of native friends who are like why would you choose anthropology because anthropology has done some pretty uncalled for things in native communities.” Lana saw the situation differently. Through anthropology, she can undertake community-based participatory research, explaining, “All my aunts had diabetes and I had cousins who died from it, so it’s a big deal. I want to focus on health ideas and things like that. You should help the community.” These graduate students expressed that they viewed education, as did their parents, as a means to gain respect and to help their community. McAdams and colleagues (1996; 2006) talk about communion as involving people coming together in warm, close, and caring relationships. This communion involves caring for others who share a community, constituted by those who relate to each other of the same background or ethnicity. Several of our participants saw the end results of education as a means to support their ethnic community and to provide leadership for future generations.

The choice of pursuing a Ph.D. for these students was based on in-depth family discussions about the value of education, as illustrated by Calistro:

Since I was young my parents emphasized education. I didn’t have any family who were college educated. They are all smart people but they just didn’t have a college education. So it seemed like more of a hurdle...I don’t really know anyone that went to college. It was more like I know a person who said they know somebody who went there and graduated and it was like stories, success stories, about how people had taken a path to college and how things turned out really well.

Lana suggested that her mother’s opinion was critical to her decision to gain an education and she knew that education would help her help others:

My parents grew up really poor...and it was always my mom...[Y]ou need to get an education if you want to do something else, if you want people to respect you....I ended up getting a cosmetology license and did that for a couple of years then decided I couldn’t do that for the rest of my life. I wanted to go back to school....Well, you know, if the biggest thing you’ve got going in your life is what your hair looks like, then it’s kind of a small world...I got tired of it...Education was always a big deal in my family.

For one student, education was the step to “success” as he and his parents defined it.

Ahmad, a Multiracial scientist, referred to his understanding of education and its importance through his parents. His father was Persian and his mother Hispanic: “For Persians, education is very important. My mom, on the Hispanic side, is very into ‘you have to have an education.’” With this as a backdrop, Ahmad believed that education would lead him to success in his life.

Darius, a Multiracial engineer, talked about his role in education as a means to lead change—changing the makeup of the faculty:

I think in general the number [of faculty of color] is low because if you don’t have role models, then you don’t usually want to go that path...If you are never around people like you then you are less likely to go into that field professionally. I think one of main deciding factors to continue my education was, over the summer at Berkeley, having heard the ridiculously low number of Black PhD students, male and female, which is like 1%, if that. So I was like, you know, maybe I should try and change that for my community. At least .0001%, a little higher.

Darius possessed the conviction that he had a responsibility to use his education to change the composition of the faculty.

As a first generation college student and Chicano engineer, Jose was encouraged to continue his education even though his family was not

certain of the ultimate benefits. He was invested in teaching other students whose experience in college was similar to his. While teaching an undergraduate class, Jose found that he was connecting with students in a way that validated not only his career choice, but also his role as a leader in educating students outside the majority:

So I knew the best way to give it to back was to present it [the course material] well, and I would see that they did well and respond to it well. And that's what I want. They're like "Oh yeah, you helped me out so much in this class in the way you taught it. You know it was better." I got a "Best TA Award" my first year.

Jose assumed that he was contributing to the future of students who were similar to him. He noted that he had been "in their shoes." Jose, similar to other graduate students, conveyed his experiences about the feelings of isolation in the academy.

The stories of leading change efforts through the pursuit of an advanced education are stories of agency and community (McAdams et al., 1996), as students knew that to move ahead (agency) they needed an education. At the same time, their education was not an individual effort; rather, these students of color pursued an advanced education both for themselves and for others (communion). They spoke of helping other students similar to themselves. Several students' views about moving forward and making intentional agentic actions were framed by their acknowledgement of racial identity. This suggests that racism is deeply ingrained in American life (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) and that racism is a "common everyday experience of most people of color in this country" (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, p. 7).

### **Race is Real in Choosing a Faculty Career**

Graduate students discussed race as a critical component in choosing to pursue a career in academe. Race was apparent in their classes, curricula, and general university environment. At times, it was apparent in the most noticeable ways; at other times, it was "just the way things happen around here," as suggested by one student. Lana added that particular areas in the academy are where students of color can be found:

It always seems like the people of color end up with the jobs in ethnic studies...They're not getting the TA ships with other departments. When you're TAing a class, or teaching a class, you are talking to kids who want to be there. So usually you're talking to people that are like you...[Y]ou're not talking to White kids, which is also good. You know they [students of color] need to see role models, but I think there needs to be more diverse opportunities. (Lana)

Other students noted that there were departmental differences with respect to cultural and ethnic diversity and these differences could influence not only their current education, but also future opportunities. For example, Martina, a Multiracial social scientist, described her primary department as primarily comprised of White faculty and White students. yet her lab work was done in an interdisciplinary department that was more diverse by race and international status. She claimed that she has more contact with the lab environment: "So I see multiculturalism in my life a lot more and that has a more direct positive emotional impact." Martina suggested that she chose her research focus in part for opportunities to collaborate with diverse others while at the same time focusing on an important topic, yet most of her experiences were in homogenous environments in which she did not always fit.

Indeed, faculty have a contributory role in the experiences of students of color. There is a clear need for students of color to have faculty advisors who share similar research interests or who can support unique topics relevant to students of color. Opportunities for research topics related to specific community needs were not often available to students of color, suggesting that an institution's social structure and environment may limit the experiences students of color and create barriers for success (DeAngelo, 2009). Danielle clarified this point:

You [graduate students] need to publish or perish. [I want to be] respected in the field for what I want to study, because you know I'm Nigerian American. I want to study African Americans. I want to study Nigerians. I want to study women, and, you know, that's not always respected—to study who you are or whatever...I was like well, "let me try this applied route."

Her inability to find support for her interests and the path she wants to pursue in research led her away from the faculty role. She suggested that she wanted to be a sociologist because of Martin Luther King and DuBois. Yet her experiences with faculty were not positive: “Faculty just care about their articles and they’re just mean and angry people. That’s not all faculty you know...and I’m just like, whatever is going on in your life, I don’t want to be a part of it.” She articulated that the role of faculty, by what she has seen and experienced, is not one with which she wants to be involved by joining academia.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This investigation uncovered not only the conditions of graduate students of color in a research university, but also the career choices of these students based upon the combination of their educational experiences and their racial/ethnic identity. In using Critical Race Theory and narrative analysis, this investigation relied upon the storytelling of graduate students of color who recounted their experiences with racism and constructed their future direction toward a professional career. This storytelling from the perspective of CRT is a form of counter-narration which revealed both individual and group experiences—encounters with racism in graduate education—suggesting that graduate students of color face conditions that do not reflect those of White students. That is, graduate students of color inhabit a different institution than their White peers. The graduate students of color in this investigation comprised both males and females from a diversity of ethnicities. A composite narrative reflecting these students’ lives included a childhood that was rich in role modeling and expectations, a continuing struggle between the challenges and rewards stemming from education, and consistent resistance to racism.

For institutions of higher education, and particularly for graduate programs, the conveyed experiences of these graduate students should not only give pause for current practices, but should also sound an alarm signaling what has to change for improved conditions for this population. Student voices have illuminated the multitude of factors policy makers and educators must consider when attempting to address the limited numbers of graduate students of color choosing careers in academe (Levin et al., 2013).

We offer three important practical implications of this research. First, in order to attract more graduate students to academic careers—whether at research universities, comprehensive state universities, or community colleges—universities must consider the differing needs and identities of their students and determine how best to align their approaches to guidance of and advising for these students so that an academic career can be considered. A universal approach to advising graduate students that assumes they have similar goals, aspirations, and experiences is inadequate. Graduate students of color often bring with them their disdain for education from discriminatory experiences in elementary and secondary education, yet faculty often assume graduate students are seeking a career in the academy when many students want options not connected to the expected outcomes of their educational degree because of these past discriminatory experiences.

Thus, if we first acknowledge that students are coming to graduate school with different experiences of education and differing expectations of a graduate education, we arrive at our second practical implication—providing students with academic experiences that build on their racial identities and counter their previous experiences with education. Students expressed an interest in working with issues related to their ethnic communities, yet research opportunities in the academy are rarely developed with a community engagement focus. This type of research is often more expensive, time-intensive, and under resourced than other pursuits (Holland, 2005; Morin, Jaeger & O’Meara, 2016; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006; Tierney & Rhoads, 1994); nevertheless, more graduate students overall are seeking these types of research opportunities (Austin, 2002; Stanton & Wagner, 2006). Furthermore, social problems need new scholars who can bridge academe and the community. Research should be relevant and significant to those inside and outside the academy. Community engagement, teaching practicums, peer mentoring involving interracial teams, and interdisciplinary research projects are practical actions that graduate programs can promote among students. For example, community engagement opportunities enable graduate students to “acquire research and teaching skills, to learn the knowledge of their disciplines in ways that promote deeper understanding and greater complexity, and to make connections with public agencies and groups that enrich the quality of their education” (Jaeger & Thornton, 2006, p. 4). The nature of the

academic work experiences graduate students engage in influences the career they choose (Austin, 2002; Fuhrman, Halme, O'Sullivan, & Lindstaedt, 2011; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Thiry & Laursen, 2015).

The third practical implication centers on the professional community within our graduate programs. Educators must take action to provide more inclusive workplaces for students of color. It is not acceptable that these students live on the periphery of their departments. The norms of isolation affect the lives and future career aspirations of these students (Levin et al., 2013). As noted by most of our participants, graduate school is particularly isolating for students of color. This problem is not new, but remains a problem and research suggests continues into the postdoctoral role (Jaeger & Dinin, 2015).

While there are numerous paths for future research, we focus upon two that are extensions of the problems we have addressed here. First is research that addresses program or disciplinary differences as related to career choice. There are considerable differences in the experiences of graduate students of color between the academic divisions of Arts and Sciences and Social Sciences/Humanities and Laboratory Sciences. Further disaggregation—breaking down the categories to the disciplinary level—and expanding the divisions to include professional schools such as Engineering and Education, for example, would permit more precise knowledge about the effects or influences of units, programs, or disciplines on student experiences.

Second is research that addresses experiences of career choice through a longitudinal perspective. Literature does not direct us to how the experiences of doctoral students, post docs, and new faculty affect career choices later in a career. New models (Jaeger, Hudson, Pasque, & Ampaw, *in press*) propose to shift the current paradigm from examining the representation students and faculty of color and their specific career outcomes at one point in time to investigating career decision making across a lifespan. Jaeger et al. (*in press*) note the importance of understanding the learning that occurs in the past that affects career decision making in the present and future.

The implications of both of these lines of research would have considerable salience for addressing both increasing the number of graduate students of color who pursue an academic career path and the condition of our universities and colleges where White faculty constitute 79% of full-

time faculty (NCES, 2016), a considerable imbalance to the student population which is only 61% White. Doctoral students in this study suggest that their experiences in graduate school as well as their ethnicity matters in their career decision process. Their compelling stories offer perspectives not yet heard in research on graduate education.

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