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# Factors Graduate Students of Color Find Supportive and Challenging and the Coping Strategies They Utilize

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FACTORS GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOR FIND SUPPORTIVE AND

CHALLENGING AND THE COPING STRATEGIES THEY UTILIZE

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

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MASTER OF ARTS IN PSYCHOLOGY THESIS

OF

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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND
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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of students of color as they obtain advanced degrees in psychology. The study focuses on what students of color find supportive and unsupportive as they pursue their doctoral degrees. Twelve graduate students of color participated in the study. Qualitative methods were utilized and data obtained through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using both manifest and latent content analysis. During the interviews, the students shared the types of supports that helped facilitate their success in graduate school, the challenges and unpleasant experiences they experienced during graduate school, the types of strategies they used when faced with obstacles, and the advice they would give new students of color beginning their doctoral degrees in psychology. The results revealed that students of color reported multiple factors that facilitated their success in graduate school such as support from faculty, mentors, upper level students within their programs, and university and campus resources. However, many of the participants reported negative experiences, such as how they do not feel included in their program. Commonly identified challenges included feeling like they are isolated or ignored and many reported experiencing stereotyping or micro-aggressions from faculty, students, and clients. In terms of strategies they used when faced with obstacles, the majority of participants stated that they relied on family and friends outside of school. In providing advice for new students of color beginning their doctoral degrees, most participants provided encouragement and advice about how to navigate graduate school as a person of color.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lastly, I would like to say an extra special thank you to my parents without whom I could not have been able to be the first person in my entire family to obtain a college degree and now pursue an advanced degree. Thank you for your selflessness and endless love and support.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mother, Johnnie Hall, who has always made sure I achieved my dreams. Mom, thank you for your selflessness, support, and love.

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**CHAPTER 1**

INTRODUCTION

The present study aimed to examine factors that graduate students of color find helpful and challenging as they obtain their advanced degrees in Psychology. Significant changes in the demographic makeup of the U.S. warrant study of graduate students of color. Between 1980 to 2005, the percentage of Asians/Pacific Islanders increased 260%, the Hispanic population grew 192%, American Indians/Alaska Natives increased 68%, and African Americans have increased 39% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In contrast, the White population increased just 10% between 1980 and 2005, which demonstrated that the U.S. population has become more diverse over the past three decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). According to the most recent U.S. Census, ethnic minorities make up 33% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2013). In projecting ahead, the ethnic minority population is expected to increase by 32% between 2005 and 2020, compared to a 4% percent increase in the White population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). By 2050, people of color are expected to make up the majority of the U.S. population and children of color will represent 62% of the country's school-age students (U.S. Census, 2010). These demographic changes are already apparent in the U.S. public schools, where about 46% of students are currently identified as a racial or ethnic minority group member (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

Although the U.S. as a nation is rapidly becoming ethnically and linguistically diverse, this trend is not observed in higher education contexts across most disciplines, especially among those pursuing advanced degrees, and particularly in psychology.

Recent data from psychology shows that only about 20% are students of color, and these data have changed only marginally since 2003 (APA Center for Workforce Studies, 2013). In addition, among those who graduate with advanced degrees, 20% of masters level degree recipients are ethnic minorities and about 22% of new doctorates are members of an ethnic minority group (APA Center for Workforce Studies, 2013). These data suggest a sizeable gap in the representation of minorities in the general population and those within the psychology pipeline. We know little about the graduate school experiences of students of color and what they find supportive and challenging as they obtain advanced degrees, and the present study was designed to shed light on these features of their experiences.

**CHAPTER 2**

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the small numbers of people of color obtaining advanced degrees, it is important to investigate what they find helpful during their pursuit of an advanced degree to help create welcoming and supportive training environments for them. While previous quantitative studies have examined negative influences affecting graduate students of color as they work towards their masters/doctoral degrees (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Moher, 2000; Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, & Dufrene, 2012; Gardner, 2005; Maton, Wimms, Grant, Wittig, Rogers, &Vasquez, 2011), there have been few qualitative studies exploring factors that students of color deem challenging and helpful as they obtain their advanced degrees. It is important for institutions to incorporate supports for students of color to improve their overall training experiences, to limit their negative experiences, and ultimately increase graduation rates. The present study examined what students of color perceive as helpful as well as challenging as they pursued their advanced degrees. It also examined successful strategies utilized by students of color when they encountered stress and challenges as they work towards their degrees. The results of this study may provide valuable information regarding practices that institutions can follow to attract students of color, support them while they attend school, and ensure they successfully obtain their degrees. In addition, the findings identified helpful strategies graduate students of color utilized to address the stress they encounter during their graduate studies.

**Challenges for Students of Color**

A handful of existing studies have shown that students of color often report negative experiences as they pursue their degrees. In one of the few studies found about African American graduate students, Ancis et al. (2000) reported that the students stated more negative perceptions of campus climate, less positive experiences during their psychology and academic training, and less equitable treatment than White students. Similarly, a study conducted by Clark et al. (2012) examined factors that served as obstacles of success for ethnic minorities and White school psychology graduate students. Using the Inventory of Micro-aggressions Against Black Individuals (Clark et al., 2012), they found that the ethnic minority graduate students reported significantly more negative race-related experiences or racial micro-aggressions, which led to higher levels of emotional stress than their White counterparts. Racial micro-aggressions are described as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group…often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs, or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). In the Clark et al. (2012) study the ethnic minority students also reported lower levels of belongingness than the White students. This is important because belongingness was significantly related to academic engagement for both ethnic minority and White students. These results highlight the influence of racial micro-aggressions and the lack of belongingness felt by ethnic minority students, which as a result, negatively impacted their graduate school experience.

Other studies have documented other discouraging experiences for graduate students of color. Maton et al. (2011) conducted a national web-based survey of more than 1,000 African American, Latina/o, Asian Americans, and European American psychology students to better understand their experiences as they pursued their doctoral degrees. The results showed that within their graduate classes, ethnic minority group members often heard stereotypes representing their ethnic group; something not experienced by the European American students. Maton et al. (2011) found that African Americans were 12.6 times more likely and Asian Americans and Latinas/os were 5.1 times more likely, when compared with European Americans, to report stereotypical representations. In addition, the ethnic minority students also noticed that their ethnic group was often entirely left out of classroom materials, discussions, and illustrations. In an extension to the Maton et al. (2011) study, Lott and Rogers (2011) asked a racially and ethnically mixed group of undergraduate students about their classroom experiences in psychology. They found that undergraduate students of color saw Psychology as representing their ethnic groups stereotypically or not at all, felt that their professors did not respect them, and were less satisfied with their Psychology studies compared to their White counterparts. Thus, negative experiences may be influencing the minority pipeline in Psychology leading to fewer people of color obtaining degrees in Psychology.

Previous research in other disciplines also reveals negative experiences of students of color during their graduate studies. A study of 15 ethnic minority nursing students conducted by Gardner (2005) used semi-structured interviews to examine their experiences as they attended a predominately White nursing school. The

interviews revealed that the ethnic minority students felt lonely, isolated, and different from their White peers. They reported not being acknowledged or supported by their teachers, and feeling that their White peers did not understand cultural differences that existed between them. The students of color also reported the constant need to manage insensitivity and discrimination from peers and faculty.

Taken as a whole, these results reveal commonalities in the factors that ethnic minority students believe affect their success as they obtain advanced degrees (such as being subjected to racial micro-aggressions, hearing stereotypes about their ethnic group, failing to see evidence of cultural diversity and awareness, the absence of ethnic minorities within course materials, as well as feelings of isolation within the program). It would help to learn what graduate students of color find encouraging as they progress towards their advanced degrees, as well as helpful strategies utilized by them when they encounter trials and challenges. What helps programs retain students of color through to their graduation? The following section explores what is known and still unknown about supportive training environments.

### Encouraging Factors for Students of Color

A number of investigations have examined factors that students of color find supportive as they obtain their advanced degrees. The following sections draw from research performed in a variety of fields and disciplines and identify various factors students of color deem supportive and helpful.

**Mentoring**

Several studies have explored student perceptions of mentoring. Ethnic minority students identify having successful mentorships as an important factor as they obtain undergraduate degrees (Kreuter et al., 2011). Cherwitz (2005) used semi-structured interviews to examine the experiences of Latino/a undergraduate students in a mentoring program at the University of Texas (entitled the "Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate School Internship Program") that focused on increasing the diversity of students pursuing graduate degrees. Participants were assigned graduate student and faculty mentors and engaged in multiple activities with them such as attending conferences, assisting in mentor's research, as well as researching and discussing graduate programs. The findings revealed that the mentoring program as well as familial support and the desire for the students to improve their communities in the future all played a considerable role in demystifying graduate studies. Students reported that the benefits of participating in the mentoring program included expanding their networks of faculty and graduate students, helping them to develop a clearer conceptualizing of their graduate studies, and self-empowerment, all of which allowed them to feel as if they could succeed in graduate school.

Other studies also focused on the value of a strong mentoring experience with students of color who pursue degrees in natural science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) created a multifaceted approach (called the Meyerhoff Scholars Program) that has increased the number of African American students who obtain advanced degrees in

STEM fields for several years. This unique approach has a number of important elements, such as encouraging mentoring relationships between faculty and students to ensure student's success in these fields (Maton & Hrabowski, 2004). The mentoring provides students with assistance in selecting coursework, advice about preparing for graduate study, as well as advice aimed at preventing or countering the influence of academic or personal problems. Consistent personalized feedback is also given to students to provide them with valuable input about their strengths, weaknesses, and decision options. The results suggest that well-designed university programs such as the Meyerhoff Scholars Program with a strong mentoring component, can lead to an increase in the number of ethnic minorities obtaining advanced degrees (Maton & Hrabowski, 2004).

Strong mentoring has also been seen as a supportive factor for students of color in disciplines at the graduate level. Kreuter et al. (2011) examined the "Eliminating Health Disparities Pre-doctoral Fellowship Program" used at St. Louis University, which provides specialized education and mentoring to African American graduate students in Public Health. The mentoring program allowed students to meet African American men and women in high-level positions to give them a sense of what they could do in their professional lives, thus creating a role model component for the students within the program. Their Pre-doctoral Fellowship Program offers five recommendations to increase workforce diversity in Public Health. The recommendations were to reward mentoring, build a community of minority students rather than a string of individual recruits, provide a diverse set of role models and

mentors, dedicate staffing to assure a student-centered approach, and commit to training students with varying levels of academic refinement.

A positive mentoring relationship can also be beneficial to ethnic minorities obtaining advanced degrees within counseling psychology programs. For example, Hollingsworth and Fassinger (2002) examined the mentoring experiences of 194 third and fourth year counseling doctoral students using the Research Mentoring Experiences Scale (RMES). Results showed that mentoring was a significant predictor of research productivity for graduate students regardless of students' race or gender. There was also a positive correlation between the research training environment and research mentoring relationships, suggesting that strong mentoring may contribute to a strong research training environment.

Thus, it appears that mentoring is an important factor for students of color to help them successfully navigate through a variety of psychology undergraduate and graduate programs. Still unknown is what students of color have found helpful about the mentoring they receive as they obtain advanced degrees. The present study examined what graduate students of color found helpful about the mentoring they received as they pursued their graduate studies.

**Social Support on Campus**

Previous studies have also found that social integration and peer connections are factors that may improve the retention of students of color as they obtain advanced degrees. Research conducted by Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Caplan (2013) examined factors that influenced college retention for ethnic minorities and White undergraduate students at a predominantly White university. Based on previous literature, they

hypothesized that students who were well integrated into their communities would be more likely to remain in college, and that positive integration would further strengthen students' educational goals and their commitment to education. Results showed that student's social integration within their university community influenced their commitment to remain in college, a finding that held more strongly for ethnic minority students than White students. Students of color, as in other studies on predominantly White campuses, reported remaining on the outside of campus life. Unfortunately, a large proportion of minority students reported having experiences in which peers treated them disrespectfully. These experiences of micro-aggressions were shown to decrease social integration for students of color obtaining college degrees (Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 2013).

Other research suggests that social support is an important factor for graduate students of color. For example, research by Williams (2002) involving a large-scale investigation of 1,454 ethnically diverse doctoral students assessed their perceptions of social support on their campus. The results showed that most doctoral students across ethnic groups were moderately satisfied with their programs and perceived the academic environment and faculty advisors to be strong sources of social support. However, White doctoral students reported greater program satisfaction, more positive perceptions of the academic environment, and fewer program problems than African-American doctoral students. African American students reported more negative perceptions of the social environment than did White, Asian American, and Hispanic doctoral students. What is not yet known is what students of color find supportive in regards to social support within graduate programs, and the present study was

conducted to investigate what graduate students of color deemed important and helpful throughout their studies.

**Financial Aid**

Research has indicated that financial aid is an important factor that minority students rely on when pursuing their advanced degrees. A study conducted by Kirby, White and Aruguete (2007) examined predictors of academic success in a private women's college. Researchers investigated socioeconomic status (e.g., parents' occupation, need for financial aid) as a possible predictor of academic success among White and non-White students. Results indicated that all students regardless of race who reported a need for financial aid, tended to have higher grade point averages than students who did not indicate such as a need. Students who needed financial aid may have been especially motivated to keep their grades high because federal financial aid is taken away from students who fall below a certain college grade point average.

Moreover, according to the American Psychological Association (2014), the average cost of a doctoral education has increased more than 50 percent from 1995 to 2003, and is steadily increasing. Furthermore, there is a substantial difference in the amount of debt graduate students have based on racial and ethnic background. Underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students are more likely to incur greater debt than their White counterparts (Rapport, 1999). African American students are found to be the heaviest borrowers of loans, followed by Latino/a students, and Asian American students (Malcom & Dowd, 2011). These findings highlight the relationship of family wealth and doctoral student debt, as well as the racial and ethnic disparities of graduate student expenses.

In addition, a study conducted by Rogers and Molina (2006) examined ways to improve the minority pipeline in psychology by identifying recruitment and retention strategies used at 11 departments and programs. These programs were considered to be making excellent efforts to attract and retain minority students. One of the most successful recruitment strategies used with minority students, as reported by both faculty and students, included offering attractive financial aid packages. All programs provided some kind of financial aid to new students. The type of financial support varied from full tuition waivers with stipends for the entire length of the program, to less consistent aid. These findings highlight the importance of financial support for ethnic minorities to successfully obtain advanced degrees.

**Additional Supportive Factors**

There are additional supports found within the literature that students of color deem useful as they obtain advanced degrees. Research conducted by Meeuwisse, Born, and Severiens (2014) found that familial social support (e.g., offering help with college tasks, giving advice and strategies to use at school, and offering encouragement and emotional support) resulted in higher study effort and grades for undergraduate minority students. Moreover, a study conducted by El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawqqdeh, and Bufka (2012) showed that in addition to familial support, graduate students of color reported supervision and spiritual resources as supportive factors as they obtained their advanced degrees within psychology. Additionally, Maton et al. (2011) found that perceived cultural diversity within programs was related to higher levels of satisfaction for African American graduate students.

**Helpful Strategies**

Previous literature has examined helpful strategies that students of color utilize to successfully navigate through their graduate programs. Research conducted by El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) found that when students of color were faced with hardships during graduate school, the majority of them sought out support from friends and family, talked to a classmate, exercised regularly or engaged in hobbies as coping mechanisms. In addition, a study conducted by Hoggard, Byrd, and Sellers (2012) examined the actions of African American students when faced with racially stressful events. Results showed that students of color used more avoidant and rumination types of behavior when dealing with racially stressful events.

**Purpose of Study**

The present study used semi-structured interviews to examine what students of color found supportive and challenging within their psychology graduate programs, the helpful strategies the students used when faced with obstacles or stress within their programs, and the advice they would have for new minority graduate students. This study addressed three research questions:

1)      What are the supportive and challenging experiences of students of color as they obtain their advanced degrees within their psychology graduate programs?

2)      What are the helpful strategies that students of color use when they experience stress or obstacles?

3)      What recommendations do graduate students of color make to new students of color who are beginning their doctoral programs in psychology?

This research project was conducted as part of the requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts in Psychology. Additionally, the project has personal significance because I am interested in working with ethnic minorities after the completion of my doctoral degree.

# CHAPTER 3

## METHOD

**Participants**

Twelve graduate students of color obtaining their doctoral degree in psychology participated in semi-structured, audiotaped telephone interviews. The sample included females ($n = 9$, 75.0%) and males ($n = 3$, 25.0%). Participants ranged in age from 24 to 41 (mean = 29.5, SD = 4.46). Participants reported that they lived in New York ($n = 3$, 25%), Tennessee ($n = 2$, 16.6%), Massachusetts ($n = 2$, 16.6%), Colorado ($n = 1$, 8.3%), Pennsylvania ($n = 1$, 8.3%), Michigan ($n = 1$, 8.3%), and Canada ($n = 1$, 8.3%). Participants identified their race or ethnicity as Latino/a ($n = 5$, 41.6%), African American ($n = 5$, 41.6%), and Chinese American ($n = 2$, 16.6%). All of the participants stated that they speak English ($n = 100\%$). In addition to being fluent in English, participants also stated that they were fluent in Spanish ($n = 5$, 41.6%), French ($n = 3$, 25%), American Sign Language ($n = 1$, 8.3%), Haitian Creole ($n = 1$, 8.3%), Portuguese ($n = 1$, 8.3%), and Italian ($n = 1$, 8.3%). In terms of marital status, nine (75%) participants reported being single, two were married (16.6%), and one (8.3%) was in a committed relationship. All of the participants came from predominately White institutions and non-North American students were not included in the sample.

**Measures**

Participants responded to two sets of questions including demographic and personal background questions, and interview questions. Below is a description of each measure used.

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**Demographic and Personal Background Questions.** The participants responded to a set of demographic and personal background questions. The four demographic questions included gender, age, marital status, and race/ethnicity. The seven personal background questions asked about university attending, graduate program enrolled in, year in graduate program, highest degree, first generation graduate student status, graduate program specialty, and if participants attended the same undergraduate school as their graduate programs.

**Interview Guide.** A semi-structured interview guide containing 23 questions was created to complete the goals of the study (see Appendix B). The semi-structured format was chosen because it allows for openness and flexibility throughout the interview process (Kvale, 1996). Although pre-determined questions are prepared, the interviewer is able to ask follow up questions, and he or she is granted some flexibility in the sequence and form of the questions asked during the interview (Kvale, 1996). Interviews were appropriate for this study because it allowed the interviewer to explore individuals' experiences, as well as examine the meaning they put into those experiences. Questions in the interview guide address what participants find supportive and unsupportive as they pursue a doctoral degree in psychology. In addition, they were asked five questions that examined what helpful strategies participants' utilize when they face stress or obstacles within their graduate program. Participants were also asked at the end of the interview if they had any advice for other students of color beginning in their graduate programs.

**Procedure**

Prior to implementation, the University of Rhode Island Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the methods and procedures of the study. After receiving approval for the study, participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which is a process of identifying individuals who are in the same network. This sampling was conducted by sending recruitment emails to professional contacts, as well as psychology LISTSERVS. Participants were also identified through conferences, such as the National Association of School Psychologists' annual conference. The emails included information about the purpose of the study, the contact information of the researcher, and the IRB status of the project. Potential participants were contacted and sent a recruitment letter (see Appendix D) as well as a consent form (see Appendix C) that describes the study goals, as well as the risks and benefits related to participation in the study. Participants were asked if they completed at least one year of graduate school within a psychology program, if they were in good academic standing, and if they identified as being an ethnic minority. Those meeting all three criteria were contacted and the interview times were established. Audio-taped semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 45 minutes were conducted by phone. A second interview was scheduled if supplementary information or clarification was needed or if technical difficulties occurred during the interview. After the completion of the interviews, participants were entered in a drawing to win a $50 gift card as an incentive for their participation.

A research assistant trained by the primary researcher transcribed all audio-recorded interviews verbatim. Each audio-tape and transcript was reviewed multiple

times to ensure accuracy. The transcribing process provided the researcher with the opportunity to develop a deeper familiarity and understanding of the data as well as serve as the initial analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Any identifying information was removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity and to maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees. The primary researcher then trained one of the research assistants to serve as a secondary data coder. The data was then coded to reveal patterns and key words to allow for systematic categorization of the data. The two coders met to compare, discuss, and revise the codes until adequate agreement was reached (above 80%). An audit trail was also maintained.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative analyses were performed to analyze the demographic data, while the interview data employed a qualitative descriptive approach. The goal of a qualitative descriptive study is to create a comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms of those events (Sandelowski, 2009). Content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from this study. Researchers describe content analysis as a flexible method to analyze text data (Cavanagh, 1997). Both manifest and latent content were analyzed using content analysis. Manifest, also known as surface-level content, is represented by what participants directly say in their interviews, while latent content is usually represented by themes that are inferred (i.e., what is read between the lines) by the researchers (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

To begin the analysis of the manifest content, each interview was listened to and read several times to obtain a general impression. Then, text that represents the initial research questions were identified. The two researchers independently broke down the data into smaller units or codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). The researchers then compared and discussed the codes until at least 90% agreement was reached. This process continued until the data in all of the interviews were coded. The researchers also took note of the similarities and differences across interviews, and codes were included under developing categories. For analysis of latent content, each interview was listened to again and read several times. The two researchers then identified themes that emerged from the data in all of the interviews. Once again they compared and discussed the themes until at least 90% agreement was reached. The findings are presented using descriptions of graduate students' experiences and quotations are used to enrich the results as well as to support the conclusions and inferences made by the researcher (White & Marsh, 2006).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a fundamental part of conducting qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four criteria for evaluating research findings: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility deals with the focus of the research and refers to how well the data and analysis addresses the intended focus. Transferability refers to the applicability of the findings beyond the study. Dependability describes the consistency of the findings. Confirmability relates to the neutrality of the findings, which allows the researcher to admit their predispositions to the findings (Polit & Hungler, 1999). In the present study, the

researcher ensured trustworthiness in a variety of ways. The researcher participated in informal member checking to ensure appropriate understanding of the participants' responses. Next, two researchers analyzed and interpreted the data in order to reduce bias. In addition, an audit trail was completed. This means an additional researcher monitored all of the steps taken until the completion of the study. Trustworthiness was also established by maintaining communication with an individual who is an expert in qualitative research.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are an essential characteristic of the interview process. Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting all interviews. In addition, all interview data was confidential and participants' responses were not linked to identifying information. Finally, all data have been locked in a secure location.

# CHAPTER 4

## RESULTS

**Demographic and Contextual Data**

Participants provided demographic and personal background information concerning (a) their highest degree, (b) what graduate program they attend, (c) their graduate specialty, (d) their year within their graduate program, (e) their status as a first generation graduate student, and (f) if they attended the same undergraduate university as their graduate program. As shown in Table 1, there was high variability in the highest degrees that the participants obtained thus far.

Table 1

*Participants' Highest Degree*

| Highest Degree | *n* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| Masters of arts | 6 | 50% |
| Bachelors degree | 2 | 16.6% |
| Masters of science | 2 | 16.6% |
| Masters of education | 1 | 8.3% |
| Masters of social work | 1 | 8.3% |

*Note:* N = 12.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of doctoral programs that participants attend and their psychology specialty. It is important to note that the majority of the participants are pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology, and their graduate specialty is in clinical psychology.

Table 2

*Graduate Program Attended and Graduate Specialty*

| Programs Attended | *n* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| Ph.D. | 10 | 83.3% |
| Psy.D. | 2 | 16.6% |
| Graduate Specialty | | |
| Clinical psychology | 7 | 58.3% |
| School psychology | 4 | 33.3% |
| Community psychology | 1 | 8.3% |

*Note:* N = 12.

Table 3 provides a breakdown of participants' year of study within their graduate program. Most participants were in their third year of their graduate program.

Table 3

*Year Within Your Graduate Program*

| Year Within Your Graduate Program | *n* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| Second | 2 | 16.6% |
| Third | 6 | 50% |
| Fifth | 2 | 16.6% |
| Sixth | 2 | 16.6% |

*Note:* N = 12.

Participants also reported if they were first generation graduate students and if they attended the same undergraduate university as their graduate program. The majority of the participants stated that they were first generation graduate students (*n*

= 7, 58.3%). Additionally, most of the participants attended a university that was different from their undergraduate institution ($n$ = 10, 83.3%).

**Research Questions**

The results of the interviews are organized with respect to the three research questions. For each research question, descriptive tables are provided to summarize the findings by the categories or explicit messages elicited from the participants. Implicit messages that were expressed throughout the interview are also provided.

*Research question 1: What are the supportive and challenging experiences of students of color as they obtain their advanced degrees within their psychology graduate programs?*

The first interview question asked participants to describe what facilitated their success in graduate school. Their answers fell into six categories, as illustrated in the following section (see Table 4).

Table 4
*What has Facilitated Your Success in Graduate School?*

| Categories | $n$ (%) |
|---|---|
| Mentors, advisors, faculty, role models | 9 (75%) |
| Unhelpful factors, negative experiences, barriers | 7 (58.3%) |
| Miscellaneous factors - (e.g., success outside my program, graduate school preparation program) | 6 (50%) |
| Other students, upper level (advanced) students, students of color, classmates | 6 (50%) |
| Internal support, upbringing, drive | 5 (42%) |

| Family support, parents | 2 (17%) |
| --- | --- |

*Note*: Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more

 than one response category.

**Mentors, advisors, faculty, role models.** The majority of participants

indicated that mentors, advisors, faculty, or other role models facilitated their success

while in graduate school. One participant spoke directly about how their mentor

worked with students similar to them:

> Working closely with my mentor…she was aware of like me being a first
> generation college student, coming from a low-income family…she's worked
> with a lot of students like that.

**Unhelpful factors, negative experiences, barriers.** Although this question

asked about factors that have facilitated individual's success in graduate school, half

of the participants described unhelpful factors, negative experiences, or barriers they

encountered. For instance, one participant described how she wanted to drop out

because of the lack of support she received. She stated "I was really ready to drop out,

I wanted to quit." Another participant described how isolated they felt being the only

student of color in their cohort:

> Um, this is kind of a tough question because, so I'm the only student of color
> in my cohort. And when I started off last semester I was struggling a lot.

**Miscellaneous factors.** Participants also shared a variety of other factors that

facilitated their success in graduate school. For example, one participant talked about

attending a graduate school preparation program:

> Before going to graduate school I had been a part of a program, which was a
> grad school prep program for first generation college students. That definitely
> offered great resources of like understanding the process of like how to write
> your letters, how to do research and that sort of thing.

Others mentioned that they are still trying to find a way to facilitate their success in

graduate school:

> Haha that is a very tricky one. I am still trying to find the frame to help me out.
> I am in community psychology in Montreal, and I'm the only visible minority,
> yeah they call us "visible minorities" here.

**Other students, upper level (advanced) students, students of color,**

**classmates**. Half of the participants responded that other students of color, peers, or

advanced students help facilitate their success throughout graduate school. For

example, one participant reported:

> In my fifth year that's when I started talking to other students, more advanced
> students who had already graduated…really helped a lot, validating my
> experience and feeling like I wasn't the only one.

Another participant described how they received significant support from upper level

students as well:

> Most of it has actually come from other students, mainly the upper level
> students. When I first got into the program the upper level students helped me
> a lot.

**Internal support, upbringing, drive.** Some participants reported that it was

their own ambition and drive that has facilitated their success in graduate school.  For

example, one participant reported:

> So there's not a lot of external support available to me so I've realized that I
> have to, I have to want this more than anyone else wants this, whether or not
> they want it. I guess my first year of grad school was a lot of disappointment
> realizing that people weren't very excited that I was here and what I was doing
> and I had to remind myself why I was doing it, so I definitely had to be excited
> for myself.

**Family support, parents.** Two of the participants described how their families

acted as the main factors that facilitated their success while in graduate school.  One

participant stated "Um, hmmm…the support of my family." The other participant

talked about her parents having advanced degrees:

> My parents. I'm not a first generation graduate student. My father has a Ph.D.
> and two master's, and my mom has a master's degree, so I think just the values
> of these skills and the emphasis, you know, education is very important, kind
> of always striving for excellence.

It should be noted that although the first interview question and probes ask

participants about positive aspects of their graduate programs, several students

described negative characteristics. In follow-up to the first interview question,

participants were probed with eight further questions. The first "Are your supports

located in your program, such as fellow peers?" received both positive and negative

responses. Table 5 represents the four categories that emerged. Of note is that 75% of

the participants felt as though they have no peer support and do not feel a part of their

school's community.

Table 5

*Supports Located in Your Program*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Upper level students, cohort, friends | 9 (75%) |
| No peers, no support, don't feel a<br>    part of schools' community | 9 (75%) |
| Mentoring program, diversity student<br>    group, research lab | 3 (25%) |
| Faculty and staff | 1 (8.33%) |

*Note*: Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more

than one response category.

**Upper level students, cohort, friends.** Most of the participants said that the supports located within their programs consisted of upper level students, their cohort, and friends. One participant commented on the friendships she has made within her program:

> Yeah, I mean the friends that I've made, people that I've known over the five years, yeah they've been a great help for me too. And not just talking about academic things, we can just hang out with each other, and sort of just share the same experiences and frustrations I think does really help a lot as well. I think when teaching, we like to share ideas, so that has also…yeah that has played a role.

Another graduate student explained how the current graduate students within her program have been a principle source of support:

> The current students here, that's what really attracted me to the University of Memphis, was not just the professors, but also the current graduate students, who, you know were also very supportive, very understanding, you know, very honest, and so it's, you know the program in general is not like a competition, you know where everybody is working against each other to look better or to have the most publications or something. Everyone is very supportive, and we also, outside of class, we also go out and hang together and talk about our experiences and relate to one another.

**No peers, no support, don't feel a part of schools' community.**

Unfortunately, the majority of the participants reported that they do not experience supports located within their program, and that they do not feel a part of their school's community. One participant stated, "In my particular program there's just a need for support." Another participant described how she never feels a part of her program's community.

> Yeah, I mean like there are students and like student programs and like conversations and informal get togethers where people discussed issues like pertaining to…not just like issues pertaining to students of color, but like the typical struggles a grad student goes through. I was never really part of that, like I never felt like I was a part of that community, like I knew the resources were there but I never used it and I never really felt it would be helpful to me.

When asked to elaborate on why she didn't feel a part of those groups, she responded:

> Initially, I felt like they wouldn't really understand my experience. And I felt like a lot of times…like my program really emphasizes cultural competency and social justice, and like the program does a really great job, like it talks about the students in different graduate programs, where their programs didn't really talk about like having these really important conversations in the classes, but I also felt like a lot of students are just giving lip service to that, like 'yeah I'm all about like, social justice or cultural competency," but like they didn't really practice it, like talk about it in a very detached way so I felt like that wasn't the kind of crowd that I wanted to be involved with.

Another participant described how isolated she feels because she is the only person of color within her cohort:

> Within my own cohort, there's not too much support, I'm not the only person of color but I'm the oldest by five years, freaks them out a lot I think.

Another participant described how there is an overwhelming lack of support within her program:

> Honestly, I would say no. At least, I don't feel like there are, and from conversations that we've had as groups I know that others who feel like there aren't as well. Um, I'm trying to think…yeah, no within the program, no.

**Mentoring program, diversity student group, research lab.** A few of the participants stated that mentoring programs, diversity groups, and/or research labs provided them with support within their programs. A participant explained:

> I guess that's another thing about my program is that they do have like a mentorship program. So every first year is matched with a third year and every second year is matched with a fifth year. Um, oh I'm sorry fourth year. And so my third year kind of mentor, she and I got along really well. So she was able to help me kind of navigate, like "go take this class" or "avoid this teacher" (laughs). Like "if you want to work in the TA-ship with this professor you should start taking their class." So the upperclassmen were really great.

**Faculty and staff.** Only one participant described faculty and staff as a source of support within their program, "I feel like for me I found more support in like faculty and other staff members."

The second probe asked for more information about factors that facilitated the participants' success in graduate school by asking "Are your friends people of color or are they from different races?" Table 6 illustrates how the participants' responses fell into two different categories.

Table 6

*Are Your Friends People of Color or are They from Different Races?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Majority people of color | 8 (66.6%) |
| Majority Caucasian | 4 (33.3%) |

*Note:* N=12

**Majority people of color.** Many of the graduate students reported that the majority of their friends were people of color. Here are some of their responses:

All people of color, my closest friends are all people of color.

But usually if I want to have a conversation about myself it will have to be with a person of color.

Um, mainly people of color. I have some friends of different races. Usually I'll have some from school and through some people that live in the neighborhood, but as far as my main squad my friends are all people of color.

**Majority Caucasian.** Other participants stated that the majority of their friendship group were not people of color. One participant said:

So my classmates are not very diverse. I think there are two Hispanic girls in my class, but for the most part I think it's a Caucasian group.

Another graduate student said that his friend group consisted of mainly White individuals because his program is not ethnically diverse:

> Um, most of them are White. I hang around mostly people that I meet. I've never really had too many problems making friends when I was little or now. I kinda make friends with people I'm around, and our graduate program isn't that diverse, so most of them are White.

As seen in Table 7, the third probe asked participants "What about faculty or mentors" in terms of facilitating their success in graduate school. The participant responses fell into three categories as listed below.

Table 7

*What about Faculty, such as Mentors?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Faculty or advisor as mentor in program | 4 (40%) |
| No faculty or mentor that facilitates their success | 4 (40%) |
| Faculty or advisor as mentor not in program | 2 (20%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents did not respond to this response category.

**Faculty or Advisor as Mentor in Program.** Some of the graduate students of color stated that they had a faculty or advisor as a mentor within their program. Student responses included:

> However, the professors in the program, they're doors are open and they're always you know asking me how things are going, and you know I can go and speak to any of the professors. I see all of them as my mentors, even though there's just one that I guess you can say assigned, but it's definitely, it doesn't feel like that though, I talk to all of them.

Oh yes them too. However, I think there's really one professor that I consider a very important mentor and very supportive of me. The other faculty are supportive as well, I just think I connected very well with one professor.

**No faculty or mentor that facilitates their success.** A surprising 40% of the participants felt as though they have no faculty or mentors that facilitate their success within graduate school. For example, one participant stated, "In graduate school I haven't had that success." Another participant, when asked if she had faculty mentors, she responded, "Hmmm, I don't know anything about that. Not that I know of."

**Faculty or advisor as mentor not in program.** Two of the participants stated that they had faculty mentors that are not located in their program. For instance, one participant described his relationship with a mentor that was not connected with his graduate program:

> I had one through a stacked mentoring program. It was a woman of color who's probably been the best mentor for me. She wasn't related to my program or even the university at all.

Another participant described how he developed strong mentor relationships with individuals outside his program as well:

> Actually I'm a TA for "Introduction to African American studies." And I was a TA for another class beforehand for a professor who consistently helped me out a lot. He was not in my department, but he was in the department where I got my master's from, not where I'm getting my PhD in. And there was another professor, what's his name? Well, I guess I won't use names, but he was in the African American Studies Department.

The fourth probe asked participants "What has helped at the university level," and the fifth probe asked if "Anything on campus" facilitated their success in graduate school. Because of the similarity with the probes and in how participants responded to them, the responses categories were collapsed and reported in one table (see Table 8).

Table 8

*What has Helped at the University/Anything on Campus?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Campus resources (e.g., recreation center, library, writing center, counseling center) | 9 (75%) |
| Student organizations, graduate school organizations, graduate center, government programs, undergraduate activities | 7 (58.3%) |
| Does not utilize any university/campus resources | 4 (33.3%) |
| Other students of color at the university | 3 (25%) |
| University funding | 3 (25%) |
| Connections to professors and supervisors outside of their programs | 3 (25%) |
| Miscellaneous responses | 1(8.3%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than

one response category.

**Campus resources (e.g., recreation center, library, writing center,**

**counseling center).** Participants whose responses fell into this category reported that

they utilize a variety of campus resources. Participants noted:

> Well, um yeah MSU has a lot of like undergrad, like a lot of activities for
> undergrad students, I like to attend those when I need those. I also go to the
> writing center sometimes at MSU, they help me, you know especially if I am
> writing an article, making sure that it is clear and easily understood. When I
> was in my second year I joined a writing group, a doctoral writing group, and
> that was helpful because I was able to be accountable for my writing and kind
> of just share ideas with other people across the department, you know. So,
> outside of my own department. It was kind of neat, actually.

> I go to the gym very often. And I would say that I had to talk to the dean
> because I have a difficult, well I wouldn't say difficult, but a hard time
> understanding my tutor's requests because she had a hard time understanding

me, so I have like a direct communication with the dean. And the secretary's been very supportive also.

**Student organizations, graduate school organizations, graduate center, government programs, and undergraduate activities.** Some participants communicated that student organizations and activities have been a source of support for them. One participant reported:

> I'm located at the County College, which is part of the graduate center…the director of graduate studies, she's called the executive officer, she's been super supportive since I started…different professors in the graduate center have been very supportive.

Another student discussed how helpful her student government was. She stated:

> Yeah, I mean I was part of…it was part of my grad program, kind of this student government version of our program where I organized a lot of events for us, and we got to meet, you know interesting people and that definitely helped.

Another student explained how she was a part of a variety of organizations and groups:

> I was student class representative and student class president…focused on cultural diversity, a club focused in sexual orientation…a bunch of different clubs…student council…in terms of clinical development, like the diversity in age and perspective and experiences of our students.

**Does not utilize any university/campus resources.** Four of the participants reported that there are no university or campus resources that facilitate their success in graduate school. One participant stated that she does not have time to take advantage of university resources because of her busy schedule:

> I mean I haven't taken advantage of it…we have like, some of the students use counseling services if they need it. There's a multicultural program, there's a graduate student program that they do have, like you can join the student council, which may be helpful. Just the structure of having a graduate assistantship, the class schedule and then being at my school sites, I actually don't have time to participate in those.

One participant reported that he relies on his friends and family and not his university

for support:

>Mainly just friends outside friends and family. I really haven't had that much, I would say I believe that much help outside of my department.

>**Other students of color at the university.** Some participants stated that

students of color in other programs are a great source of support for them. One of the

participants stated that the counselors of color at her university have been helpful:

>And it was especially like the counselors of color who are like "We notice that you're the only one, how you doing?" So they've been really supportive. And I kind of feel like that whenever I walk in the building I stop and say hi and go to my office and my classes.

>**University funding.** Participants described how university funding has been a

large source of support for them. One student described how he is funded through a

large university network:

>Funding has definitely helped, I have funding through my local…where my lab is located, the college. It's a part of a large university work. They fund me through the National Institute of Health. So they have a whole support system through like funding. You know it's the thing that has helped me that I've been able to take advantage of, so the local level, like support for writing, any support through the department and so forth. But that's just the basic support that anyone has access to.

Another student described how her university provides financial support to students

when they go out of town to present their research:

>Well, one thing that I really like, and this is on the program university level, is that they provide financial support or funding. Or like whenever you go on research…we have research conferences that are out of town, they'll definitely try to support you with funding, so you don't have to you know pay out of your own pocket because you know being a graduate student you don't get paid that much and they understand that and they try to accommodate you the best way that they can. So I can say that definitely helps and also, you know I guess I can say motivates you when it comes to being more willing and open to say yes to like going to a research conference in Florida or somewhere outside of the state.

**Connections to professors and supervisors outside of their programs.** A

few participants described how they have found support from professors or

supervisors at the university level. One participant described how she felt connected to

professors outside of her program:

> So like being connected to other professors in other programs was very helpful
> because I…I was kind of alone in my own program. I mean, I wasn't like the
> typical grad student, like I wasn't looking for an academic life, so I wasn't
> producing as much as other students were, so I felt a little outside, like an
> outsider I guess? So connecting with other professors in other departments was
> very helpful, just to get that support, and to get involved in other studies that
> were of interest to me.

**Miscellaneous responses.** One participant shared other characteristics of her

university that she found supportive. She noted:

> I definitely think that at my program I've been very fortunate, I'm at a
> consortium, they really kind of emphasize multicultural perspective…,
> diversity is very central to their, like it's one of their principle tenets to their
> program. And so we have a lot of … courses on diversity integrated into all of
> our classes. I think they definitely emphasize trying to recruit, you know,
> individuals of diverse backgrounds, not only just cultural and ethnic, but kinds
> of disabilities, or age, or you know just across the spectrum of diversity. So I
> think that's fortunate, and you know just kind of having a lot of people that
> emphasize the importance of taking that into consideration, especially with
> what we do as clinicians.

The sixth probe asked participants about the financial aid assistance that may

have facilitated their success in graduate school. Five main categories emerged from

participants' responses (see Table 9).

Table 9

*What about Financial Aid Assistance?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Assistantship, research assistant, teaching assistant, or lab | 4 (33.3%) |

| | |
|---|---|
| No financial aid or scarce financial aid | 4 (33.3%) |
| Fully funded | 2 (16.6%) |
| Fellowship, scholarship, or honor organizations | 1 (8.3%) |
| Financial aid or loans | 1 (8.3%) |

*Note:* N = 12

**Assistantship, research assistant, teaching assistant, or lab.** One third of the

participants discussed how their education is funded through a variety of

assistantships. They stated:

> Financial aid. Um sure so for me the first year in my program, so I'm in my sixth year now, but my first year I was a research assistant, so that was helpful. And my second year onward I was a teaching assistant, so I started out as a TA and I gradually became the main instructor of the course. Um, but I think once you hit your fifth year funding kind of gets scarce because they have to give it to the new students.

> So in my program they have different lines of funding. There's either graduate center funding where they give you five years of support and expect you to teach or TA at a certain point in your career. And then there's other types of research assistant or teaching assistant lines, which is how I started first year. And then they have built in, different types of things, depending on how well you do and so forth

**No financial aid or scarce financial aid.** One third of the participants stated

that their program offers very little to no financial assistance. One participant

described how funding was lacking in her program:

> Financial aid…um, it's definitely lacking in my program. We each receive some sort of stipend or tuition remission, but it wasn't very much. We receive a certain amount of money for our first two years and not the third or fourth year.

Another participant described how she paid at least four years of tuition in her

program and has not been able to find any scholarships.

(laughs) Yeah, that's a good question. Yeah, I don't know. I think my laughter is an appropriate reaction for that. I definitely feel…so, I looked for financial aid. I am a PsyD. And my program is incredibly expensive. I pay about 40,000 a year. And it's a five-year program and you pay four years of tuition. Um…and so, I'm pretty in debt, and I think one of the things that I really tried to do was to look for scholarships and financial aid. Um…I was always offered financial aid as part of my, you know, program. I was also given a scholarship, but it was very small. And I will say, one thing is that I looked for scholarships for graduate students of ethnic minority and I didn't find any, to be honest.

**Fully funded.** Two participants stated that they were fully funded within their

graduate programs. They reported:

So I was fully funded for five years? Yeah, five years. I was a TA the first year and then did the practicums the following years and then I taught a class for a year, for one semester and I was paid through that.

Well, it's good. Like right now, the tuition, I don't have to pay any tuition, that's waived. And then also, they provide a stipend every year. So if you came in without a masters you get 14,000 with or…I'm sorry, for this year it's 14, 15 for the academic year. They provided 13,000 for students coming in without a master's and 14,000 for students with a master's degree, so I came in with 14,000. However, next year there has been a raise. They're also always working on trying to raise the amount that they give students.

**Fellowship, scholarship, or honor organizations.** One of the participants said

that she received fellowships or scholarships to help alleviate the financial burden of

graduate school. She described how she was awarded a minority fellowship:

Um, financially, typically in my program it's not that good. Um, most people get half of their tuition covered. I actually got a minority fellowship, so that was helpful financially for the first three years. Um, but I'm a fifth year, so like this year and the year before that I have it a little bit more difficult, but at the same time, I'm not taking classes so tuition isn't as expensive at all, but yeah before I had the fellowship to help me cover and had an additional stipend.

**Financial aid or loans.** One participant stated that she relies on loans to pay

for her graduate education. She stated:

So within our program you can always take out financial aid loans if you need them, pretty much like any program. And then as far as, so I've taken them out every year.

The seventh probe asked students "Are you involved with other students and faculty in diversity issues research?" Table 10 illustrates how students' responses fell into three different categories.

Table 10

*Are you Involved with Other Students and Faculty in Diversity Issues Research?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Conducting own diversity issues research or working with students/faculty on diversity issues research | 6 (50%) |
| Not working on diversity issues research currently | 5 (41.6%) |
| Miscellaneous responses | 4 (33.3%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Conducting own diversity issues research or working with students/faculty on diversity issues research.** Participants whose responses fell into this category reported that they conducted diversity issues research. They stated:

Well, my thesis is on discrimination in Latin Americans, and it's not a topic that is usually studied in my program.

Just my thesis and …that's probably about it, just my thesis. There's not too much going on in my research area as far as like child and families. It's basically just about…well, it's not going too well right now. Well, it is going well, but. It's just about teachers and students and how the race of the student's affects grades for referrals to special education.

Yeah, I am. So one of my advisors specifically research like micro-aggressions, whether they're like race, gender, sexual orientation, stuff like that. So I'm really lucky where I have two advisors, so the other advisor, she

does more like positive psychology. So we're always studying like women's roles and relationships or power struggles and stuff like that. But it's always an emphasis on a female population.

**Not working on diversity issues research currently.** Some participants reported that they were not currently involved in diversity issues research.

**Miscellaneous responses.** A few participants described factors unrelated to the question about their participation in diversity research. For example, one student described how professors asked to meet with her to incorporate diversity into their syllabi because she is the only person of color in her program:

> This was kind of annoying, but a lot of the professors kept asking me to meet with them before they create their syllabus for the classes they take and offer. They'd ask me for like input on like diversity issues that were brought up in class. So it's helpful but also kind of annoying that you're always, THAT person. Yeah, and sometimes you're like "sometimes I want you to teach ME stuff," I don't know…(laughs).

The eighth and last probe for the first research question asked participants "Do you feel included within your program?" Three categories emerged from participants' responses and they are described below.

Table 11

*Do You Feel Included Within Your Program?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Does not feel included within program | 7 (58.3%) |
| Feels included within program | 2 (16.6%) |
| Miscellaneous responses | 3 (25%) |

*Note:* N = 12.

**Does not feel included within program.** The majority of students reported that they do not feel included within their program. One student stated:

Oh, not at all. Not at all. I am going to give you a very clear example. Last fall, you know sometimes they hire students, such as research assistants or you know? And I'm going to give you a little bit of a background. I grew up here, then went back to Costa Rica, and while I studied in Costa Rica I was working for the UN as a program manager. I was a program officer down there before I came here. That is for five years. And so last year, there were asking for a research assistant on this project. And so I sent my resume five minutes after I saw the ad. And they wouldn't answer me, they wouldn't answer me so I wrote back to the girl who was working there and she told me "listen, we already hired someone, and she was the first person to send her resume, so we hired her on those basis. And I was in shock because you don't hire someone just because they send their resume first, and even then I sent my resume in five minutes after I had saw the ad. And then I found out that the person they took is a person that has no experience on project managing. She was a singer before she started school. And I mean I have a lot of experience. I know my resume, right? And so I was in shock completely and I can't understand why they didn't take me and they took her without any sort of background on project managing. But I mean, she's French Canadian, she's from here, she's knows them, but they know me too because I'm there everyday. But you know it's situations like that where you ask yourself "what is really going on here?"

Another student described how he feels repeatedly excluded from his cohort:

When it comes to including people in classes I'm excluded repeatedly from the cohort. By the way you assign the classes we all get assigned to the same classes usually, and for some strange reason, which is not a strange reason at all for me they will never include me in that. And then when I complain they talk about me having to make sacrifices for the cohort and so forth, but then if I ask for something in return, to be like excluded from a class, to take another class that I need or that I want to extend my training they will then use the reverse logic argument with me that you're in a cohort and you need to stick together and so forth. So that's been very annoying to me from the beginning.

**Feels included within program.** Two students reported that they did feel included within their program. One stated, "I feel that I do. So, I feel included. Um, I can't really think of a time when I didn't."

**Miscellaneous responses.** Other participants discussed issues that were not related to the question.

The second interview question asked students "Once you got accepted into their program, what has been good about it?" It should be noted that although this

question asked about positive factors relating to participants' graduate programs

several students responded negatively. Table 12 provides a breakdown of students'

responses.

Table 12

*Once They got Accepted into Their Program, What has Been Good About it?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Support (e.g., classmates, faculty, staff and mentors) | 10 (83.3%) |
| What doesn't work (e.g., funding, irrelevant classes, unresolved classes, and practicum) | 7 (58.3%) |
| Teaching undergraduates, practicum, and classes | 5 (42%) |
| University resources (e.g., funding and specializations) | 4 (33.3%) |
| Diversity within faculty, staff, and classmates | 3 (25%) |
| Research and scholarly writing opportunities | 3 (25%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than

one response category.

**Support (e.g., classmates, faculty, staff and mentors).** One thing that

participants said that they like about their program is the variety of support that they

receive. Participants said:

> Just like, in the classes in the beginning we had regular check in, in regards to
> self-care, we had to report every week, like 'I did this" and other self-things, so
> that really pushed you to think about it and make it a habit. And in general, like
> I was saying, I find the faculty very supportive because they check in with you
> when you go and meet with them, they're not like 'What are you doing, did
> you do this?' They really take the time and ask 'Are you taking care of
> yourself? You look a little tired Are you getting enough sleep, are you eating,
> are you exercising?' Like, they really emphasize that. And I've personally had
> medical issues in the past, and they have been very supportive and really
> understanding of that.

The relationships that I have that are good relationships are very close relationships, some of my best friends that I have I've met in graduate school. So all of that has been great.

**What doesn't work (e.g., funding, irrelevant classes, unresolved classes, and practicum).** Although this question asked students about what has been good about their program, many participants discussed aspects of their programs that do not work for them. One participant stated that she feels that some classes required by her program are irrelevant:

> I think what's not so helpful is having to take classes that are not so relevant. And you know, that's just probably specific within my program, I don't know, just like certain classes that are not like relevant and not well taught. And just like, they're pushing it down our throats, so that didn't help in many ways. Um, so that's been frustrating to me because it's been a waste of time and money.

Another participant commented on how unprofessional her professors can be:

> And I also feel that on the plus side, our complaints about the professors, some of them can be a little unprofessional, and our complaints don't really go anywhere. Um, so example one; one of my classmates, she was missing class for Yom Kippur, which is a Jewish holiday, and my professor said to her "I didn't realize you were Orthodox." And it was unprofessional and inappropriate because you don't have to be Orthodox to celebrate that, you know? So it's comments like that that can be rude. Although we point them out to other faculty, or other people, nothing really gets done.

**Teaching undergraduates, practicum, and classes.** Some participants stated that they really enjoy their teaching opportunities, practicum sites, and the classes that they take within their programs:

> I mean I like teaching, I taught stats for a year, my first year. And I love that I really loved connecting with the undergraduate students, I didn't expect to like it. It gave me a lot of confidence. I was able to…I didn't realize that minority students would be so affected by, just by my presence. Someone told me it was the first A they'd ever received in college, so that was a really great experience in many ways, professionally, personally. I got close to a lot of students who came to the lab to work with me, and some of my teaching assistants also, so that's been wonderful. Training students has been wonderful, I've had a couple

who went to graduate school; PhD programs, got funded. So that's been amazing, doing that.

Um…I think what works is the level of clinical training-that I really like. I really appreciate the ability to locate to different clinical sites and I think the importance of self-care, I think my program does a good job with that.

**University resources (e.g., funding and specializations).** The graduate

students also stated that they enjoy utilizing their university resources. For example,

one participant described how she likes to go to the university's gym:

And then they also have different resources and things on campus, for example like access to the gym, and different, um activities in that facility that you can take part in, like yoga or I'm trying to think of what else -Zumba- you know things like that.

**Diversity within faculty, staff, and classmates.** A few students talked about

how they like the ethnic diversity within their programs:

One thing that I really liked about the program and the reason that I decided to come was that it has the most faculty of color, in the clinical psychology program that I sought, or any of the other places I interviewed at. And, at least what they told me, I'm not sure like how much like lip service or not, is that they're making diversity…like they're trying to cultivate it more in the students.

**Research and scholarly writing opportunities.** Other participants said that

they like the fact that their programs provide them with research opportunities. One

participant described how she had the opportunity to write book chapters and conduct

research:

I've had opportunities to write book chapters, I actually have two book chapters coming out this year. So that's been fun. Tons of opportunities to write research articles and it's been interesting actually learning the process of how you actually submit the research article, the articles, the journals, the practices and all of that, that's been interesting. And an eye-opener because I didn't realize that until the day I came into the program. I came in naïve, and I didn't really know what went into publications.

In addition to the second interview question, participants were probed with two additional questions. The first asked students "What works and what does not?" in their graduate program. Two categories emerged from participants' responses (See Table 13).

Table 13

*What Works and What Does Not?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| What works? (e.g., professors, funding, collaborative program, and research opportunities) | 7 (58.3%) |
| What does not work? (e.g., funding, competitive classmates, lack of diversity, demands, adjusting, departments separated, and being myself) | 6 (50%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**What works? (e.g., professors, funding, collaborative program, and research opportunities).** Participants discussed many different aspects of their program that work for them:

> I just really like the fact that students are happy and it's a very collaborative program. People are not competitive. They're competitive with themselves, but not with each other.

> My mentor was a really great resource for me and very helpful throughout the process and continues to be helpful throughout the process. I've also liked the classes, like the emphasis on social justice. Like we don't only have these conversations in our culture and mental health classes, we have them in all of our classes, like research methods, and stats and that sort of thing.

> I like that a lot of the things that we do are hands on and I like that. The professors are willing to take time on the side and work on things that we have, I mean they all have backgrounds in psychology. They're all willing; I mean we don't even have to talk to our advisors or supervisors. They're always perfectly fine with us talking to other professors. They all collaborate and kind

of work together to make sure that they're on the same page. They kind of give us information and talk to us, which I really like a lot. And they also they're like, they spend a lot of their time outside of things that they have to do to help us out.

**What does not work? (funding, competitive classmates, lack of diversity, demands, adjusting, departments separated, and being myself).** Half of the participants mentioned factors that they did not like about their program. For instance, one student stated how she feels that her program only gives lip service when it comes to diversity issues:

> I've been realizing that there's a lot of lip service, you know, that's one thing, and they want it to be diverse at one point, and then they don't anymore, you know? They want it to look diverse. But there are certain things that I've like suggested that have kind of gone nowhere, like "You guys should do like a diversity committee that meets regularly and at functions. And everyone was invited, it wasn't just people who were quote unquote diverse." You know? Yeah, but they don't really do those anymore. I've offered to help lead them, put them together, but they're like "We have to focus on so many other things." These weren't my thoughts when I first came in, but like one student who graduated from my program, she also was like the only woman of color. She's a…like she just graduated so we just kind of missed each other, but she's a Black woman, also first generation college student, and she kind of said to me in private, they're gonna treat you like "you got in here, what else do you want?"

Another participant stated that he cannot be himself in his program:

> So in the clinical program we treat patients, and one of the patients…and we all have supervision so we all sit and talk. So it's all junior clinicians talking with experienced clinicians and we talk about the patient. So we have a patient and a White male junior extern who I actually really like, he's a really nice guy. But he has an African American female client, who's a very strong woman. She's having a lot of reactivity I think, just like to the fact that he's a white male. So it's coming out in some of the interaction. She had an experience where she recorded someone calling her ghetto, that was very uncalled for and her being very upset about it. The initial time he brought it up he was looking for ways to help her and the responses of the senior clinician was that she was the one at fault, she had the problem and that maybe she was ghetto. It was just like ridiculous. So I just stayed very calm and didn't say anything, didn't flinch. One of my other cohort members, who was an Asian female afterwards approached me and asked me "how could you just sit

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through that and not say anything?" So then I had to explain to her I have to choose my battles with my advisors because I have to work with them everyday and this is like a daily occurrence.

The second probe asked, "What has helped you to handle it," which refers to the aspects of participants' programs that do not work for them. Five categories of responses emerged and the following section provides a description of each (see Table 14).

Table 14

*What Has Helped You to Handle it?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Support (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, and pets) | 5 (42%) |
| Love studying, motivation, self-reflection, and words of encouragement | 4 (33.3%) |
| Professors and mentors | 3 (25%) |
| Nothing has helped | 3 (25%) |
| Finding an outside community | 1 (8.3%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Support (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, and pets).** Almost half of the graduate students reported that they rely on different types of support for the aspects of their program that do not work well for them. One participant stated that her family and her pets are a big support system for her as she completes her graduate program:

> Well, a lot of things, my colleagues as I mentioned, my family members I think, my brother who's back from Illinois about two years ago, and so he's right down the street and so he got me to like hang out with my nephew, and my brother and my parents. So that has helped me through it. So you know, having social support, and just taking time for myself is very important. And I

think that's something that a lot of grad students forget because we get so wrapped up in our work. And having my dogs and my pets around too.

Another participant also stated that her family is a big support for her:

Calling my family back at home. Going home every now and then too. That's good. The more time I can go home the better. The better I am, I go home.

**Love studying, motivation, self-reflection, and words of encouragement.**

Other participants reported that it is their love for psychology and their own

motivation that helps them handle aspects of their program that do not work for them:

Well, I also really love what I'm studying. I love um, psychology and I love working in a school, um I've always known that I've loved it so that's kind of like even when I'm having a bad day I know in the end it's what I wanna do, so it's all okay.

Another student stated that she handles tough times by self-reflecting and realizing

how privileged she is to be in a doctoral program:

But then, to be honest what helped me get through was not school related but I had like a month, almost a month and a half break between semesters and I went home and saw my family, so that's the other thing. I didn't move for the program, but my family was in California. So I went home and saw my family and I like listened to my aunts and uncles stories, like their immigration stories and listened to all of the crap they had to go through in their lives. And it's not to minimize my own feelings, but I was like "Wow, you guys had to go through some real stuff for me to sit here a real privileged position and be like I'm not happy in my doctoral program, " you know?

**Professors and mentors.** A few of the participants said that their professors

and mentors are helpful in navigating situations that are not ideal for them in graduate

school. One participant described how her mentors are supportive to her because they

are also first generation college students:

Like both of my advisors are first generation and people of color so they were like really supportive and took a lot of work off my load. Like in both the labs they were like "I just need you to survive the first semester and I can almost guarantee that you'll feel better once you get through it." And I was like "Okay, okay!" So they were really helpful in realizing that this is a real issue.

You know that a lot of minority students feel this way, especially in the beginning.

**Nothing has helped.** A few students reported that nothing has been helpful when things do not work out for them in their graduate programs:

What has helped me handle it? In all honesty, last semester I was just really depressed. And I kind of just let it flow through me. I was like this kind of sucks, it's very alienating. I was very honest with my professors, of like turning in crap, at least what I thought work that was crap. Um, I don't know if I wanna be here.

**Finding an outside community.** One participant stated that finding a community outside of her program acts as a support system for her:

Where, this is like a community thing for me. Like, I may not have my community at school, but I have my community through my family. Like, last semester, as depressed as I felt, I was very proactive and also looked outside of my school and found other doctoral students of color in other disciplines. It's like "Hey, you're an engineer, and you're like Haitian? Cool. Hey, you're from Sri Lanka and you're doing biogenetic engineering? Awesome. You know?

The third interview question asked students, "What kinds of challenges have you encountered during your graduate studies?" Seven categories emerged from participants' responses (See Table 15).

Table 15

*What Kinds of Challenges Have You Encountered During Your Graduate Studies?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Problems with professors and mentors | 5 (41.6%) |
| Training issues, practicum issues, and academic issues | 5 (41.6%) |
| Administrative issues and program politics | 4 (43.3%) |
| Cultural adjustments and transitioning into graduate school | 2 (16.6%) |
| Funding and financial issues | 2 (16.6%) |

| Issues with classmates and colleagues | 1 (8.3%) |
|---|---|
| Social barriers and micro-aggressions | 1 (8.3%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Problems with professors and mentors.** Five of the participants reported that their main challenges in graduate school are problems they encounter with faculty and mentors. One student described how his professors do not give him credit for all of his accomplishments:

> So, I'll focus what I'm doing now and then I'll talk about something I went through before. It's just not being recognized and rewarded equally for my work. They're not being interested in my publishing, they're not being interested in getting credit for what I do, my ideas, me having to fight and push, and having to react. Like fuck, I want exactly the same thing as every student, and I deserve it, it's a right that I have. I don't actually believe it's a right, like I think education is a form of privilege that we should be grateful to have, but it's as much as a privilege and right for me as it is for any other student. But any fault I have is maximized and spoken about repeatedly.

He continues:

> For example, every time I want to do something my advisor talks about how busy I am, how I don't know how to manage my time, he's unsure, he doesn't know, it just becomes this "Well, no conversation," whereas another student is like "I want this, I'm interested in this," he promotes it as a huge "Wow." These are undergrads I'm talking about too, people who are juniors to me. How smart they are, how good they are, how the obvious thing to be, and so forth. And then I'm having to end up supervising these people, doing things that they're not qualified to do, and I'm doing all the work, they get the credit for it. You know this is a pattern that's been happening, currently and since I've been here. The only way for me to get anything is to get upset and complain. So that's immediately turned into aggression, you know spoken to as if it is aggressive, whereas anyone else can pretty much do anything they want. So that's the main thing I'm dealing with now, having to seriously use verbal and communication dynamics, just to get any point across. And not be accused of aggression or something.

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**Training issues, practicum issues, and academic issues.** Other participants indicated that they have been met with training, practicum, and academic challenges within their graduate program. One participant stated that she feels that professors and students are not trained well in statistics:

> I've realized that, it's been sad, but the more I kind of watch the faculty and work in research labs and read research articles, this is like not great science. Um, and no one wants to change it, because then you have to change the entire way psychology has been run. Yeah, yeah of course. So I've noticed like not everyone, but most people don't know what the heck they're doing with statistics, myself included, I'm awful at statistics. But everyone like writes these research articles that either uses statisticians or writes their own analyses. But no one really, I don't think anyone actually understands what they're doing (laughs).

Another participant said that he struggles to get diverse practicum experiences:

> I guess just trying to gain experience in places that I need to have like a destiny and if I need more hours or more assessment reports, writing skills, that's something, that's not really hard. Yeah, just some of my practicum placements, some of the communities wasn't welcoming of outsiders too much. I just kind of felt that… And so it kinda, limits my experience and the people that I get to work with in my placements.

**Administrative issues and program politics.** A number of participants stated that there are a lot of administrative problems and divisive politics that cause challenges for them during their studies:

> I think a lot of the good teacher assignments go to the more, you know, popular students. You know, sometimes there's a little bit of favoritism, I'll put it that way. So that I think has been a struggle. Uh, other than that, besides funding, that's also a struggle, but besides that I think everything is, there's no problems there.

**Cultural adjustments and transitioning into graduate school.** Two of the participants said that they have a hard time adjusting to graduate school. One participant described how moving from California to graduate school in Boston was very difficult for her:

Um, a lot (laughs). Um, I've had some problems navigating through the whole process. Like I said, I did have some mentors before starting graduate school, but once I started I still felt like a lot of it was new to me and unknown and very…well, it was definitely a huge learning process. Also, like I'm living in Boston now. I'm from California, from LA. And so moving out here was very difficult for me, and not having my family around. Everything seemed like a really big culture shock because Boston's completely different.

**Funding and financial issues**. Two of the students expressed that funding is a challenge for them in graduate school.

**Issues with classmates and colleagues.** One participant described a problem with one of her classmates:

I had an issue with another classmate and it's very difficult because these kind of programs are very small. And she accused me of something that I didn't do and fortunately the professors are on my side, but it's caused issues with between classmates and between faculty and that's been difficult because it's such as small program, and it's such a small world, and when someone tries to smear your name, it can become hard to get that back.

She continues:

No, I'll tell you. She accused me of plagiarizing/CG: Okay. / Her work. Yep, and this was recent. And um, four different faculty were involved. All of our classmates heard about it. And it turned out that, my faculty, they believed me and they saw all the work and did not think that I plagiarized, so that I stole her idea. Um, but it was just a very stressful process.

**Social barriers and micro-aggressions.** One of the students stated that the micro- aggressions that she experiences are a challenge for her during her graduate studies:

The challenges that …I encounter during graduate studies so far, have been, I mean really like micro aggressions, like people not speaking, um there's a lot of like you'll walk in a room and people will be talking and as soon as you walk in they'll stop talking. What else...those would probably be the biggest ones, those are the ones that are a constant thing.

In follow-up to the third interview question, participants were probed with three additional questions. The first probe asked "Have you ever felt ignored or

isolated?" Table 16 provides a summary of the categories that emerged from

participants' responses.

Table 16

*Have You Ever Felt Ignored or Isolated?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Has felt ignored or isolated | 6 (66.6%) |
| Has not felt ignored or isolated | 3 (33.3%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some participants did not respond to

this response category.

**Has felt ignored or isolated.** Many participants reported that they have felt

ignored or isolated. One participant explained how she questioned whether her

perceived isolation had to do with the fact that she was not White:

> That's a good question. I definitely think I've questioned whether certain
> administrative issues were due to…I definitely think that…there have been
> times where I've questioned whether or not it has to do with, like whether it's
> isolated or ignored trying to think about the other reasons and it's crossed my
> mind. Like is it possible since I'm Hispanic, because I'm not…you know, I'm
> gonna sound very judgmental but blond hair, blue-eyed Caucasian female, you
> know? Um, I'm not a man. I've definitely had moments where I've questioned
> whether that's it.

Another participant stated that she does not feel like part of her cohort:

> There are very strong personalities in my program, as I'm sure there are in
> many and sometimes if I don't, I feel like I don't belong with certain people, I
> can feel a little bit isolated.

**Has not felt ignored or isolated.** Three participants reported that they do not

feel ignored or isolated.

The second probe for question three asked, "Have you ever experienced stereotyping or micro-aggressions?" As shown in Table 17, the majority of participants provided affirmative responses. Four themes emerged from this category.

Table 17

*Have You Ever Experienced Stereotyping or Micro-aggressions?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Experiences with stereotyping and/or micro-aggressions from peers | 8 (66.6%) |
| Experiences with stereotyping and/or micro-aggressions from faculty, clients, and department | 6 (50%) |
| Miscellaneous responses (e.g., wants to do research on topic) | 4 (33.3%) |
| Have not experienced stereotyping and micro-aggressions | 3 (25%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Experiences with stereotyping and/or micro-aggressions from peers.** The majority of the participants stated that they had experienced stereotyping or micro-aggressions from their peers within their graduate programs:

> Stereotyping…um, well yeah I think so, yeah I think being Asian, being Chinese people sort of expect like a higher, you know, I don't know a higher output from you I suppose? Like, they expect you to do certain things. Like nobody's really said that to me, like to my face, like they haven't been like 'Grace, you're Chinese, I expect more from you,' but I mean you can kind of infer that…like my advisor is also Chinese herself so…. which is kind of interesting. But um, yeah that's what I would say for that.

One participant explained:

> Yeah, micro, macro-whatever the words you want to use. Yes, plenty of it. So one of the things, I remember one the very first things is when I applied for…so I used to be in the neuroscience program. I applied for National

Science Foundation in graduate research…I don't know what the other letters stand for. A bunch of us applied at the same time, we were in the neuroscience program, and there was a white female student who we were talking to, and this is when I was still very naïve. I was talking freely about it and she was talking about it and she said "Oh, you applied to this?" and I said "yeah" and she said "Oh, you'll get it." And I said "Why would I get it and not you?" and she said "Well you know…" and I was like "what?" "You know you have certain advantages that we don't, and so you'll get it." "Well are you talking about the fact that I'm brown and you're not?" And she was like "Well you know yeah, I didn't want to say that."

He continues by describing how people are always surprised that he is intelligent:

Micro-aggressions-surprised that I'm a neuroscientist, a clinician. You know they're surprised that I got this far, that I'm not in the sociology program or a technical program. Surprised that I don't study minority issues only. You know I'm interested in psychotherapy, I'm interested in memory, I'm interested in perception, emotion regulation in general, not specific only to minorities. So the expectations, that that's all I do and that's all I'd be interested in. They also seem to be surprised that I'm disappointed with level of, or the lack of minority representation and organizations and efforts to improve the number of minorities in an organization.

**Experiences with stereotyping and micro-aggressions from faculty, clients, and department.** Half of the participants reported that they had experienced stereotyping and micro-aggressions from faculty, their clients, and their program's department. One student described how his professors were surprised that he performed so well on his comprehensive exams:

Yes I have. I remember specifically in one instance, when we're doing comps, I think it was our master's comp final, you know to get our doctorate, and I actually scored higher than all of my cohort. My professor was really, really shocked. Actually, two of the professors, both of them were White, were really, really shocked. One of them mentioned to my other professors that they were actually surprised that I scored so high, higher than everybody else. I felt like that was kinda like, you know, that they kind of underestimated me.

Another student described how one of her professors asked her to comment in class about a topic because she is Latina:

But one of the most obvious ones is, so I didn't like identify to anyone as being Latina, but to me it's obvious that I am, you know? But we were in a psychopathology class and we were talking about how like Latinos supposedly show lesser rates of depressive symptoms, once they acculturate to U.S. society, so if they're immigrants and they become quote unquote Americanized, they don't feel so depressed, which I know as a fact is completely wrong because I've done a lot of research on it, and like worked on a few papers, and it's actually not true. And there's this like big paradox that when they do actually acculturate their depressive symptoms get higher. And so I didn't say anything because it was one of my first weeks as a doctoral student there, and I'm like, I'm not gonna argue with the professor, you know?

She continues:

But I've made kind of a note to myself, like maybe this is something that I want to address in a paper that I have to write. And he just looked at me and goes "Did you want to talk about this?" And I was like um, I don't know if you the same way, but I often get really worried that I'm gonna be like labeled "the angry Latina." So when I'm in class I try to be so level, like even with my face, like if I don't agree with something, I just like poker face, you know? And so I was really confused as to why he asked me to speak, and when he said that I was like "Oh, I don't know why you want me to speak about this, I don't actually, like study Latino immigration." And then he was like "because it's your background." And I was like that's interesting because you don't really know what my background is, you know?

**Miscellaneous responses (e.g., wants to do research on topic).** A few

participants did not provide a direct response to the question. One participant

described how she wants to do her dissertation on stereotyping and micro-aggressions:

Okay, actually so this is what I kind of want to write my dissertation on, so I started taking notes in class every time something, like something that was said to me or anyone that's not White, or like able-bodied or straight, said in class.

Another participant stated that she believes she receives more opportunities because

she is Hispanic:

I think in many ways I've actually utilized my kind of Hispanic descent to my benefit. For a lack of a better term I've kind of exploited it in a certain way…I've called upon it as a very strong asset of mine. And I think that has afforded me a lot of opportunities, so it's almost kind of like a reverse racism, in that I've been awarded a lot more practicum opportunities because there is a need for a bilingual provider, or a native speaker, a culturally aware provider.

**Have not experienced stereotyping and micro-aggressions.** Three students stated that they have not experienced stereotyping or micro-aggressions. One stated, "Yeah, no. I haven't, I haven't… Like I said stereotypes, it's never been like a personal experience with me or with the program." Another student said, "Not at my school, nothing I can think of."

The final probe for the third interview question asked the participants "How did they end up dealing with that," referring to the stereotyping and micro-aggressions they have experienced. As shown in Table 18, there were a variety of ways that students handled these types of challenges during their graduate studies.

Table 18

*How Did They End Up Dealing With That?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Ignored the situation or kept going in program | 6 (50%) |
| Confronted the person or asked questions during the situation | 4 (33.3%) |
| Talked to advisor, professor, faculty and/or mentor | 3 (25%) |
| Talked to friends, peers and/or family | 3 (25%) |
| Went to therapy | 1 (8.3%) |
| Became depressed, drank alcohol, or smoked | 1 (8.3%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Ignored the situation or kept going in program.** Half of the participants stated that when they experience challenges and/or stereotyping and micro-aggressions they ignored it and kept pursuing their degrees. One participant described how he

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ignored his White professors when they express how surprised they are because he is doing so well:

> Um kind of just ignore it really, but also kind of use it as motivation to keep surprising them. Also, I kind of felt some pressure for myself, because I feel like I gotta represent and do really, really well. Um, you know that there's always an assumption that one Black person represents all, so…and a lot of times I ignore and kind of talk to, talk to my wife a lot about it.

Another participant responded similarly:

> You just go on with your research and try to do what you can and publish what you can, that's all you can do, you know? I mean I've never really talked about that to the chair of the department about it or anything like that. You know you just gotta keep going.

**Confronted the person or asked questions during the situation.** A few participants stated that when they experience stereotyping and/or micro-aggressions they confront the individuals in the situation as the situation unfolds. One participant described how she confronted her peers for consistently confusing her with another person of color from a different program:

> Sometimes if it's not a faculty member, I still don't really feel comfortable calling out faculty members, but if it's not a faculty member I kind of act stupid and ask people to really spell out what they're saying, and be like "Oh, why did you confuse us?" And they'll be like "Oh, because you guys…" Why, because I have straight hair and she has curly hair? Or because we're both brown? Like what is confusing. Yeah. So it kind of makes them spell it out entirely.

Another participant explained how she confronted a peer who told her that she should not apply for a scholarship because she was not qualified:

> So one of the students came to my office and was like "Oh, what are you up to?" Well, I'm working on my application for the scholarship this fall. And he was like "Well, you know you really need good grades to apply for that, right? And I was like "What makes you think that I don't have good grades, because I'm a woman?" Because I'm Latin American? What's the difference between you and like I talked about it with other students "Have they asked you about

this?" And they were like "No." So in my head why would you allow yourself to ask me this and not others?

She continues:

I had to take a break for a couple of weeks, you know just because it was very…it was an accumulation. Everyday there's something in school, outside school. And then I spoke to him, I was like "Listen I don't like what you said to me, I think you said it because you have some preconceptions about me because…is it because I'm a woman, or because I'm Latin American or both at the same time?" So I had to speak to him face to face to understand the situation.

**Talked to advisor, professor, faculty and/or mentor.** Three participants stated that they talk to professors, faculty or mentors when they experience challenges because they are ethnic minorities. One participant described an instance when a professor was surprised that she was teaching, and she talked to her advisor about the situation:

So I was supposed to teach my fifth year, no, my fourth year in the program. But I didn't get to, I didn't have a finished master's thesis. So one time I was sitting in a conference room with other professors and they're doing advising, and they look at undergrads. One of them looks at the roster for the following years. Like, courses. And she's like "Oh, you're teaching next year.' And I'm like 'Yeah, I'm excited.' And she looks at the roster and says Oh, you're teaching research methods?' And she was like "Oh, *you're* teaching research methods?" Like, they didn't think students teach this course. And she's been in the program for years. I told my advisor about it. And she just kind of talked it through with me and gave her the benefit of the doubt, and said 'Maybe she meant it in another way' and I was just like 'No, I don't think so.' And I've talked to a lot of other students, and this professor is a little bit intimidating and she makes these side comments sometimes.

**Talked to friends, peers and/or family.** A few students reported that they talk to their friends, peers, or family when they encounter challenges during their studies. One participant described how his friends and family are a source of support:

I talk quite a bit to friends who are supportive, and I've had mixed results, it can also be very depressing. If you talk about it too much it's very depressing. I'm in a stable, romantic relationship now that has probably had been the

biggest help. Something that you have at home to go to that's different than school. That's the family support that I have. You have to realize that academia is a very small, it's like my entire life but it's a very small part of life in general.

**Went to therapy.** One participant stated that he went to therapy to cope with the challenges of graduate school. He stated, "I try to, when I go to therapy twice a week I spend one of the days only talking about graduate school just so I can deal with the feelings that I have."

**Became depressed, drank alcohol, or smoked.** One participant stated that he has dealt with the challenges of graduate school in a variety of unhealthy ways:

> I've dealt with it in healthy and unhealthy ways. Unhealthy ways, I drink a lot of alcohol, smoking cigarettes, smoking marijuana, eating too much, being very, very, very, very depressed. My health suffered to the point that one time I couldn't even eat food. I couldn't even drink water without throwing up. That's when I knew I had to change my strategy.

*Research Question #2:What are the helpful strategies that students of color use when they experience stress or obstacles?*

To answer this research question, participants described what kind of strategies they use when they are faced with obstacles in their graduate program. Participants answered one main question and four follow up questions. The vast majority of participants stated that they rely on family support as well as their friends in and outside of their programs. Table 19 provides a breakdown of their strategies.

Table 19

*What Kinds of Strategies do You Use When You Are Faced with Obstacles in Your Program?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Support from family, friends in program or | 7 (58.3%) |

out of program

| | |
|---|---|
| Support from faculty, staff, advisors, mentor, or dean | 4 (33.3%) |
| Therapy, journaling, or exercise | 4 (33.3%) |
| Positive thinking, self–reflection, problem solving, or playing nice | 4 (33.3%) |
| Religion | 3 (25%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than

one response category.

**Support from family, friends in program or out of program.** The

participants stressed that they utilized family and friends when faced with obstacles.

Some stated:

> I usually just talk to someone about it, I talk to my friend about it or I just, yeah…I find it helpful to talk to people outside my program sometimes, even though I can talk to people in my program um, sometimes it's not as helpful. I don't really know why, but sometimes there isn't really…like everyone else already knows how bad things are, with like mentors in general, so sometimes it's not as helpful because we can't really get as good of a perspective. Or people just talk about their own things in the process, so I find it helpful to talk to people outside.

> I'll like call my family or I'll like talk to one of my friends at school and be like "You will not believe what this professor just said." So I tend to try and do it outside of school, and I've always had a life outside of school, which I've been finding in a doctoral program they don't want you to have that or something…I just look for support from either friends on campus who are like-minded, or my family or friends.

> Talking to my family, talking to friends. I think once I started talking to more advanced students who were interning or who had just finished were helpful because they were just like "Oh, yeah that's how they are…that's how the program is, you just have to finish, you just have to get through it. And it was helpful to see that there was an end." You know, as a grad student you feel like it's never gonna end (laughs). It was nice to get that support and that validation and like 'yeah, if you keep going, you know, you'll be fine.' And one of my friends once said "A good dissertation is a done dissertation."

**Support from faculty, staff, advisors, mentor, or dean.** Some participants

reported that they consult with faculty, staff, advisors, mentors or deans when faced

with obstacles in their program. One participant stated:

> Well, the mentor in the department that I'm still working with now, so he's
> been really great, you know I've really talked to him about a lot of things, and
> I feel like I can trust him and I can confide in him and you know he always
> takes time to listen to what I have to say.

Another participant stated that she consulted directly with the dean to help her

navigate obstacles in her program:

> I'm talking to the dean directly now. I'm trying to come up with some
> strategies with my tutors because I'm gonna be working with them for awhile,
> so I need to build good relationships with them, or something…we need to
> understand each other.

**Therapy, journaling, or exercise.** Some of the students stated that they attend

therapy, journal, or exercise when they are faced with obstacles. One participant stated

that she enjoys journaling when she is stressed about school:

> I also, sometimes, not everyday, but sometimes if I get really stressed out I'll
> journal, and I'll write about how I feel, you know which is helpful because
> sometimes you can't, you don't really wanna talk about it, but you still wanna
> get it off your chest. So I just take a small little book and write about how I
> feel, so…and I actually like to write, I don't really like to type things out, for
> personal things I like to write, yeah, because I think it's more relaxing.

**Positive thinking, self–reflection, problem solving, or playing nice.** Other

students indicated that they use a variety of strategies when faced with obstacles, such

as positive thinking, self-reflection, consultation, problem solving, and "playing nice."

One stated:

> Well one thing I have improved on tremendously is like positive
> thinking…you are your hardest self-critic, or critic. So I think there have been
> times when I'm faced with challenges or times when I feel like I've failed or
> didn't really achieve the way that I felt like I should have on something. You

know I will come down on myself and just really look at it in a negative way and how school is my ultimate decision. Or the way someone might perceive me.

Another participant explained how she "plays nice" with her cohort:

I still feel somewhat alienated from my cohort, like you know we're like pleasant and there's one guy that I really don't like hanging out with. And the other thing too is they're all very neurotic and I'm not, so I tend to not wanna hang out too much, they just stress each other out, I can't deal with this. So a lot of what I do is, is I'll just be like okay, play nice with everybody, but I don't really take their shit, if that makes sense…So yeah, I guess like with the obstacles I just, I really just troubleshoot them.

**Religion.** Three of the participants reported that they utilize their religion when faced with obstacles. One stated:

Really the main thing is to take advantage of my religion, going to church, getting the best guide from that, that's an integral part of my life. Even for me to just really stay within the program and department.

In order to gain more information about the specific strategies participants used when faced with obstacles, I asked them what got them through particularly challenging times. Of note, most participants (n = 9) did not have a response to this probe because they already provided an answer during the previous question and they had nothing else to add. Of the three participants who responded, Table 20 provides a breakdown of their responses.

Table 20

*What Got You Through Tough Times?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Self care | 1 (33.3%) |
| Going out to relieve stress | 1 (33.3%) |
| Breaking problems into smaller steps | 1 (33.3%) |

this question.

**Self care.** One of the participants stated that she handles obstacles in the program by taking care of herself. She said, "Well, I try to remember self-care and I try to remember to do things that are relaxing and not let myself stress out so much about the obstacles of grad school."

**Going out to relieve stress.** Another participant reported "I guess going out on the weekends. And partying, you know. That's always a way to get stuff off your mind."

**Breaking problems into smaller steps.** One participant stated that she likes to dissect problems that arise in her program, she reported "The thing that works best for me is breaking up problems into smaller steps."

Every participant was probed to talk about the ways in which faculty, students, or family help them overcome obstacles in their program. Three main categories were developed from participants' responses: relied on faculty, students or family when faced with obstacles; did not rely on faculty, students or family when faced with obstacles; and employed other strategies when faced with obstacles. Table 21 provides a breakdown of their responses.

Table 21

*What About Faculty, Students, or Family?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Relied on faculty, students, or family when faced with obstacles | 6 (50%) |
| Did not rely on faculty, students, | 4 (33.3%) |

or family when faced with obstacles

| | |
|---|---|
| Employed other strategies when faced with obstacles (e.g., reflection, conferences, resolve conflict as quickly as possible, external funding) | 3 (25%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Employed faculty, students, or family when faced with obstacles.** Half of the participants reported that they utilize faculty, students, or family when faced with obstacles within their program. One participant explained how she relies on a new faculty member as a source of support:

> There's a new faculty member, she just started last year. And she's a professor, she's a woman of color. She's like, she's younger than the other ones, and she and I have talked a little bit. I mean, I think we're just starting to develop our relationship. But I think she would be somebody that, if she had been in the program when I started she would have been a great resource for me. But yeah, I'm not really close with any of the other professors in the program.

Another student described how his family was a great source of support when he encountered obstacles, he stated, "My family now and my fiancée have been a very huge support. I also have a 10 year old daughter, so that definitely helps. I spend time with them."

**Did not rely on faculty, students, or family when faced with obstacles.** Other participants reported that they did not use faculty, students, or family when they experience problems in their program. One stated:

> I don't go to other faculty. I honestly don't trust other faculty. And then as far as family, I don't talk to my family typically about the obstacles because they get way more upset about things than I did. Because they'll be like "Why's that not working?" and then they get upset. They don't understand all the academic politics and I was like "Yeah I didn't understand it before I came here either, but it's real." I mean I'll talk to them if I'm a little stressed, but I'll get over it. But that's about it.

**Employed other strategies when faced with obstacles.** Three participants

stated that they used other strategies besides faculty, students, or faculty when faced

with obstacles in their graduate programs. One participant reported that he attends

conferences for encouragement:

> I go to conferences, as much as possible, to hear about minority student
> success. And then I can relax and enjoy being present and being a scholar and
> be celebrated for that. So I look for those opportunities.

The third probe asked participants what types of family support have been

helpful and important to them when faced with obstacles in their program. Three main

categories developed from participants' responses (see Table 23).

Table 22

*What Types of Family Support Have Been Helpful and Important to You?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Support through communication, talking on the phone, words of encouragement, stories, and/or visits | 11 (91.6%) |
| Miscellaneous responses | 4 (33.3%) |
| Financial support | 3 (25%) |
| Academic support | 2 (16.6%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than

one response category.

**Support through communication, talking on the phone, words of**

**encouragement, stories, and/or visits.** Nearly all of the participants reported that

they receive support from their family through various forms of contact or

communication. One participant stated how she visits her brother and nephews

frequently:

> My brother, he's a single parent, his wife passed away a few years ago. Yeah, it's okay, he got through it okay. So I have two nieces and nephews, and they're small. She'll be 10…no, 11. Um, so you know they're still young. And so I've really enjoyed taking them to and exposing them to college life, and having been a camper, being involved in some of their camping journeys. I think…it has been a great release from work sometimes and just to have fun. And my Mom and I are very close, so I usually talk to my Mom a lot.

Another participant explained how she communicates with her mother often, and that

listening to her families' stories of immigration helps her through difficult times in her

program:

> My parents call me a lot, which is nice because it's kind of a constant reminder that one, you have a life outside of school, two, that they're like proud of you and they like love you, which is really hard in a doctoral program where you don't see anyone like you and you often think that you're not supposed to be there. I have some family who live nearby, so I try and see them like at least once a month. And just like communication. And I think I mentioned what really helps you is and what stays with me is having heard, I guess reheard, re-listened to all my relative's immigration stories.

Another participant reported that receiving words of encouragement and support when

faced with obstacles in his program is helpful to him:

> Probably the most supportive has been my fiancée. I don't have any other family to support me. She listens, she puts up with my moods, she helps me keep on track and remember what I'm doing, celebrates my success with me, helps me to deal with my failure, reminds me to exercise, reminds me to eat right, gives me something else to focus on other than school because I can become very focused on only that sometimes. Companionship - she has her family and they're very supportive so that has helped quite a bit.

> **Miscellaneous responses.** A few participants replied in ways that did not fit

into any of the other response categories. For example, one participant explained how

her younger cousins view her as a role model because she's pursing a doctoral degree:

And then I also realize during the process that like my cousins who are younger than I am how much they've like looked up to me I guess, kind of encouraging and inspiration. Like "If cousin K can do it, then we can do it too!" And I've never looked at being like a role model, but clearly like I'm that person so it's like okay, let me make sure I'm doing this right. So, that's helpful too because some of my cousins are in college now, so I'll be able to help them out or give them advice. And that helps me because it kind of grounds me and makes me realize, and I'm able to give back which is also very important.

**Financial support.** Three participants stated that the financial support that they receive from their family is extremely helpful. One stated, "My family was financially supportive when I wasn't able to like pay rent and that sort of thing. Like pay for my car insurance." Another participant responded similarly:

They don't pay for my grad school but they do support me in other ways that are financial. They helped me, they help me pay for my car, which I needed for school. It would have made my life extremely difficult if I didn't have that car.

**Academic support.** Two participants stated that sometimes their families offer them academic support, one stated, "Actually, I've had my sister try to help and edit stuff as well. So yeah, that's been helpful." Another participant said, "Um, just talking to me, if I have something that I don't feel right about, like what I wrote or something they might read over it. That's pretty much about it."

The fourth probe asked the students, when faced with obstacles, if they utilize anything on campus. Three response categories emerged from participants' responses (see Table 23).

Table 23

*For Strategies, Do You Use Anything on Campus?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
| --- | --- |
| Does not use anything on campus | 9  (75%) |

Takes advantage of associations and facilities on campus       3 (25%)

Staff /faculty on campus       2 (16.6%)

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than

one response category.

**Does not use anything on campus.** The majority of the participants indicated

that they do not utilize anything on campus when faced with obstacles in their

graduate program. One participant stated that she finds most of her support outside of

school because she dislikes being at her school:

> Not really. To be honest like I find most of the help outside of school. Because
> I tend to not like to be at school that much because not a lot of…I don't know.
> Not that I don't feel safe there, I feel like uncomfortable there. … I'd rather
> just dip out[1] and go with my friends or even just do my work at home.

Another participant provided a similar response:

> Honestly, I don't use anything on campus. I take a lot of breaks so that I'm not
> just in a room where I feel like there's a lot, not necessarily tension, if it gets to
> be a but much. I mean I might take breaks, but I don't actually utilize …
> resources or other people.

**Takes advantage of associations and facilities on campus.** Three

participants stated that they take advantage of various associations and facilities when

faced with obstacles. One stated:

> I actually go to some of the services here on campus, like for example,
> research associations and all of our research things, or the people that are doing
> IRBs, the people that work at the offices. I've actually shook up[2] friendships
> with quite a number of those people.

**Staff /faculty on campus.** Two participants reported that they use staff and

faculty when faced with difficulties in their program. One stated, "And I guess there is

[1] To leave
[2] Created

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a problem that is outside of my control that is within the department, I would go to the director or the chair or something."

*Research # 3: What are some recommendations graduate students of color would suggest to new students of color that are beginning their doctoral programs in psychology?*

The last interview question asked participants what advice would they give to students of color that have just been accepted into their psychology graduate program. Table 36 provides a summary of participants' responses.

Table 24

*If You Were Talking to a Group of Ethnically Diverse Students Who Just Got Accepted into Your Psychology Program, What Should They Know Before they Get Started? What Would You Tell Them to Boost Their Opportunity to Succeed?*

| Categories | *n (%)* |
|---|---|
| Find support in and outside of program, don't isolate yourself, find like-minded people, and/or share experiences | 9 (75%) |
| Become involved, take advantage of university resources, and/or be assertive | 6 (50%) |
| Communicate and/or talk to previous students | 5 (41.6%) |
| Don't give up, be your own supporter, and/or focus on your work | 4 (33.3%) |
| Set boundaries, learn to say no, and/or find balance | 4 (33.3%) |
| Be yourself, take care of yourself, and/or have fun | 3 (25.0%) |

*Note:* Total does not equal 12 (100%) because some respondents reported more than one response category.

**Find support in and outside of program, don't isolate self, find like-minded people, and/or share experiences.** The majority of participants stated that they would advise students of color to find support in and outside of the program, not to isolate themselves, to find like-minded people, and/or to share their experiences with others. One participant stressed the importance of finding support within her program:

> I'd just highlight how much they need each other…regardless of race or whatever. It's hard, and if you have people who are supporting you, and helping you out even with assignments…So as long as you … find your kind of community you'll be okay…finding … that sort of emotional support group has really helped.

Another participant stated that it is crucial for students of color to share their experiences with one another and to find support outside of their program:

> I would share my experiences, we have like a student of color meeting. So it's kind of informal, it's not for the admissions process, it's not recorded for people to get into the program. But we all sort of go around the table and share our experiences about being students of color in the program. So I definitely say that I'd reach out to other programs, because if students don't get along with those professors in the program, there are others who are doing interesting things and other kinds of research that you might be interested in. I would also say that I would socialize outside the program, because I think the program puts a lot of emphasis on people getting along in the program, and like the first two or three years, you're with your cohort nonstop. Just like, finding people outside. And if the cohort isn't a great match for you there's always support outside so you won't feel totally isolated, the way that I did.

**Become involved, take advantage of university resources, and/or be assertive.** Half of the participants reported that they would advise new students of color to become involved in their program, take advantage of resources, and to be assertive. One participant stressed the importance of getting involved in the program as well as in the university, she stated "Well I would tell them to get as involved as they can in the program, well, not just our program, in the school in general…taking

opportunities, teaching, starting a group, it could be whatever." Another participant

encouraged new students to be assertive:

> Volunteer or do anything that you're like asked to do, any meeting that you
> have with professors. Because a lot of times, what happens is a lot of students
> don't have the hours or the hours that they need to stand out, and another thing
> I would tell them is to just be involved and actually show yourself because a
> lot of times what happens is, especially among Black students, is that we're not
> around and we don't show out[3], and it's all about bigger picture, finishing the
> program on time.

**Communicate and/or talk to previous students.** Five participants stated that

they would encourage new students to communicate and talk to previous students.

Two stated:

> Some of it is specific to who you're working with. So I would say … talk to
> the students in the lab that you're about to enter because I feel like I would
> have to talk to students in my lab if they had told me a little bit more, like how
> my advisor works. I feel like when you're first here and you're already in the
> program, like you're not going to go anywhere. So I think that would be my
> advice. Try to figure out whatever you can from other grad students who are in
> your lab. Talk to other grad students that know how to work with your advisor
> specifically.

> I would tell them to make sure that they work hard and show that they're
> capable because there are opportunities, but there's a lot of stress that can go
> on based on being a student of color.

**Don't give up, be your own supporter, and/or focus on your work.** Four of

the participants stated that they would tell new students of color to never give up,

support themselves, and stay focused on their schoolwork. One participant stated:

> One is that people need you here more than they're willing to act like they
> need you here. So don't give up. You have to be your own cheerleader in many
> ways, so remember that. Remember to look for support outside of your
> program and in nontraditional ways. Savor the good things and do not hold on
> to the difficult times. You have to have about 15 layers of thick skin to get
> through this, so it's okay to have these feelings but don't let them stop you

---

[3] To stand out

from succeeding and getting what you need…focus on producing things and action. That's more powerful than any of the feelings that you go through.

**Set boundaries, learn to say no, and/or find balance.** A few of the participants said that they would advise new students to learn how to set boundaries, and find a balance between their school and personal life. One participant commented on setting boundaries:

> I would also tell them don't be afraid to say no to things because I think often most people of color who get to the doctoral program are … really hard workers and they've overcome a lot of stuff, and you're like "I don't wanna look bad" or "I don't wanna look lazy" or "This professor asked me to do it, so I have to do it." But I would let them know that it's okay to say no and make sure you're okay, make some boundaries for yourself, you know like "I won't work passed stuff on whatever time it is" or like if you're in a relationship be like but I need to spend X amount of time with my boyfriend, girlfriend, whatever. Like making sure that you take care of yourself and set some boundaries too.

**Be yourself, take care of yourself, and/or have fun.** Three participants reported that they would tell the new students to be themselves, take care of themselves, and try to have as much fun as possible. For example:

> I mean, have fun when you can, but this is not about fun, this is about getting something that a lot of people don't think you deserve. So get through it and there are people who will from their hearts celebrate with you, but you're gonna have to find them. In the meantime, get the job done, protect your sanity, choose your battles, and yeah hang on. Don't stop.

# CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION

The current study used semi-structured interviews to explore what students of color find supportive and unsupportive as they obtain their doctoral degrees in psychology. The study also examined the types of coping strategies students of color utilize when faced with obstacles in their graduate programs and examined advice the students would give to incoming students to help them succeed. The interviews yielded rich descriptions of the unique challenges students of color face, as well as the strategies and support structures they utilize to overcome challenges. The participants also provided recommendations for new graduate students of color as they pursue their degrees.

**Encouraging Factors for Students of Color**

Participants described in detail what they found to be supportive in their graduate programs. The majority of participants ($n = 9$) stated that they were able to find mentors, advisors, or faculty members who were supportive to them within graduate school. In addition, when participants were further probed to discuss if they believed faculty and/or mentors have aided in their success in graduate school, 40% of participants said that these individuals have. Previous studies attest to the importance of mentoring for students of color (Cherwitz, 2005; Fassinger, 2002; Kreuter et al., 2011; Maton & Hrabowski, 2004) and it is noteworthy that in the present study students have benefitted from these professional relationships.

Additionally, half ($n = 6$) of the participants reported that they found support from other students, especially upper level students and other students of color. The

participants stated that these students validated their feelings and oftentimes helped them navigate their programs. The majority ($n = 10$) of participants responded similarly when probed with questions that asked them about the supports located in their programs as well as what has been good about their programs. Previous studies have found that social integration and peer connections are factors that may improve the retention of students of color as they obtain advanced degrees (Williams, 2002; Zea et al., 2013).

Another important finding in regards to what has facilitated the participants' success in graduate school was their internal support and drive. Some participants ($n = 5$) described how their love for psychology, helping others, and their motivation to succeed has contributed to their achievements in graduate school. This was a major theme that participants discussed throughout multiple interview questions, including how they have dealt with challenges in graduate school. These findings are unique to this study and have not been reported in past studies examining the experiences of graduate students of color.

Participants also communicated whether their friends were people of color or from different races. The overwhelming majority of graduate students ($n = 8$) reported that most of their friends were people of color. And of the participants who stated that their friends were predominately White, many of them stated that this was because their graduate programs lacked racial and ethnic diversity. This finding is important to note because research has shown that students of color who perceived their programs as being culturally diverse had higher levels of satisfaction in graduate school (Maton et al., 2011). This finding supports the need for graduate programs to have diverse

students as a way for students of color to feel more accepted and comfortable within their programs.

Participants also described what resources at the university and campus level have contributed to their success in graduate school. Most commonly, participants ($n = 9$) reported that they utilized campus resources as a source of support. More specifically, the participants said that they used resources such as the recreation center, library, and the writing and counseling centers on campus. Other participants ($n = 7$) stated that they are involved in student organizations, government programs, as well as undergraduate activities. Some participants ($n = 3$) also stated that they found other students of color at the university level. They also said they utilized university funding and made connections with professors and supervisors that were outside of their programs. Additionally, when participants were asked about factors in their program that worked for them, one third of participants ($n = 4$) listed the same university resources discussed above. Research suggests that people of color who used additional resources and are a part of their campus communities tend to be more satisfied with their studies compared to students who do not (Williams, 2002; Zea et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the majority of participants ($n = 4$) stated that they receive some form of financial aid assistance within their graduate programs. Participants reported that they received assistantships (e.g., teaching or research), fellowships, scholarships, financial aid and loans, or support from honor organizations. Two participants reported that they were fully funded for the entirety of their doctoral programs. It is important to note that one third of the participants ($n = 4$) stated that financial aid assistance was scarce and was an area of concern for them, and this response

reoccurred when participants were probed to describe what did not work for them in their programs. This finding speaks to those from previous studies that have found that one of the most successful recruitment and retention strategies to attract and retain students of color was to offer attractive financial aid packages (Kirby et al., 2007; Rogers & Molina, 2006).

Participants also shared whether they were involved in diversity issues research with other students or faculty. Half of the students ($n = 6$) reported that they were currently conducting diversity issues research on a variety of topics such as, micro-aggressions, international students, and the academic achievement of students of color. Some of the participants ($n = 5$) reported that they were not working on diversity issues research and were researching other topics (e.g., eating behaviors). The present study found that students of color who were conducting research in this area felt connected, fulfilled, and invested in their research.

Participants also described the aspects of the program that have been good once they were accepted into their graduate programs. Some participants ($n = 5$) stated that their teaching experiences, practicum placements, and classes were parts of their program that they thoroughly enjoyed. They also reported that they liked the research and scholarly opportunities available to them ($n = 3$). When participants were further probed to discuss what works and what does not work for them in their programs, the majority ($n = 7$) revealed that they like their professors that they work with as well as research opportunities available to them. Participants ($n = 6$) also reported aspects they did not like, such as the lack of diversity within their programs. When participants were probed to explain how they handled graduate school, the majority ($n = 5$) of their

responses reflected themes that were stated in the previous interview question, such as friends, colleagues, motivation to succeed, professors, and mentors. These findings are important because it provides examples of factors that can improve as well as hinder the experiences of people of color.

**Mixed Responses**

A common theme throughout the interviews was the mixed responses the participants provided. For example, although the first interview question specifically asked participants about factors that facilitated their success, many participants ($n = 6$) responded negatively. For instance, 50% of participants stated unhelpful factors such as being the only person of color and constantly wanting to drop out of school because of how unhappy they were.

Also, when participants were asked about supports within their program, 75% of the participants said that they felt like they had no support and did not feel a part of their program's community. When participants were probed to describe how faculty and mentors have facilitated their success, 40% of individuals reported that they have no faculty or mentor in their program that helps them thrive. Additionally, when participants were asked what helped them at the university or campus level, 33% of the participants stated that they do not use any of those resources and rely primarily on external forms of support, such as family and outside friends. These findings are disconcerting as they speak to how their negative experiences and feelings of exclusion are pervasive thoughts for these students of color.

**Challenges for Students of Color**

The participants also experienced several challenges and unpleasant reactions during their graduate studies. The graduate students of color were probed during the first interview question to examine whether they felt included within their program. The majority of participants ($n = 7$) stated that they did not feel included in their programs for numerous reasons such as being the only person of color, feeling excluded from their cohorts, and feeling like their program only includes them to display that they have students of color in their programs. This finding is not surprising considering past studies have found that students of color often have less positive experiences and less feelings of belongingness than White students (Ancis et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007).

Participants explained the various challenges they experience during their graduate studies. Some participants ($n = 5$) stated that they have encountered challenges involving their professors and mentors. They reported that they do not feel like their professors support them or recognize them for their accomplishments. Other participants ($n = 5$) stated that they have training, practicum, and academic issues. In such cases, participants described how they struggle to find diverse practicum experiences. In addition, students ($n = 4$) complained about the administrative and program politics within their programs and stated that their programs' faculty members display favoritism towards White students. These findings extend previous literature because past studies do not examine students of color experiences in terms of practicum placements and favoritism within their psychology programs.

Another major finding is that the majority of participants ($n = 6$) have felt ignored or isolated multiple times during their graduate programs, a theme that ran throughout most interviews. Multiple participants ($n = 6$) stated that they did not feel a part of their graduate cohort. In addition, individuals ($n = 6$) reported that, oftentimes, they feel as though they are isolated or ignored because they are ethnic minorities. This finding supports previous literature, which states that students of color were often less satisfied with their psychology studies compared to their White counterparts (Lott & Rogers, 2011).

Additionally, the majority of participants ($n = 8$) reported that they have experienced frequent stereotyping and micro-aggressions from peers, faculty, clients, as well as from their departments. Participants ($n = 6$) described instances wherein professors were surprised at how well they performed on assignments, though faculty were not similarly surprised at the achievements of White students. Other students ($n = 6$) of color described experiences wherein professors asked them to speak for their entire race during class discussions. In addition, some participants ($n = 8$) stated that their White peers questioned why they were applying for certain scholarships, implying that they would not be competitive enough or, conversely, that they would be competitive solely because they are a person of color. Unfortunately, these findings build on previous studies, which has found that students of color experience high levels of stereotyping and racial micro-aggressions (Clark et al., 2012; Maton et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2007). These findings are particular interesting and disconcerting because it speaks to the students' sense of desolation.

The participants were also probed to examine how they dealt with the challenges they experience in graduate school. Half of the participants ($n = 6$) reported that they ignored the feelings of isolation and the stereotypes and micro-aggressions they experienced and kept going in their programs. Participants ($n = 6$) reported that they ignored the situation because they felt powerless, and others stated that they used these negative experiences as motivation to finish their programs as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, this avoidant behavior is often seen when students of color are faced with raced related challenges (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Although, one third of the participants ($n = 4$) stated that they confronted the individuals when stereotypes or micro-aggressions were targeted towards them, while other participants mentioned that they discussed these challenging experiences with their advisor/faculty or vented to friends, peers, and family members.

**Strategies Used When Faced With Obstacles**

The graduate students of color also described the strategies they utilize when faced with obstacles in their graduate problems. Much like the findings from previous studies, the majority of participants ($n = 7$) stated that they rely on faculty, family, and friends in and out of their programs when faced with challenges in graduate school (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). When the participants were probed to discuss the types of familial support they found most helpful, they indicated ($n = 11$) that they were in constant communication with their families via phone or video chat and received frequent words of encouragement. This finding extends previous literature because although it is known that students of color rely heavily on familial support (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012), the types of support have not been explored previously. Of

note, when participants were probed to discuss if they utilized anything on campus when faced with obstacles, the majority of them stated that they did not.

**Recommendations to Other Students of Color Obtaining Advanced Degrees**

Participants were asked to provide advice to a group of ethnically diverse students that were recently accepted into their graduate programs. The participants provided various types of advice. First, they recommended that incoming students find support from both inside and outside of their programs ($n = 9$). They also stated that it is crucial to not isolate yourself, although many participants said that this is easy to do, especially if you do not feel included within your program. They also said that it is important to find like-minded students as a source of support and as a way to vent and share experiences. Participants ($n = 6$) encouraged incoming students to take advantage of as many resources as possible and to be assertive. Many of the participants stated that being assertive and a self-advocate is crucial for success because oftentimes, peers and faculty act as if you do not belong in the program. Participants also advised the incoming students to communicate with more advanced students to learn about the nuances of their programs. These recommendations highlight actions that students of color can take to hopefully be more successful, less isolated, and less stressed as they obtain advanced degrees.

It is important to note that one of the participants is pursuing her doctoral degree in Canada, but had similar experiences to the participants studying in the U.S. (e.g., feelings of isolation and experiences of racial micro-aggressions). It is also crucial to mention that the majority of participants ($n = 9$) displayed a strong negative emotional reaction during their interviews. The participants expressed feelings of

sadness and distress because of the nature of the information they disclosed about themselves. Many of the participants stated that this was the first time they discussed their painful experiences about graduate school. This was particularly distressing to the researcher who frequently experienced this negative reaction from the participants over a short period of time.

**Limitations and Methodological Considerations**

There are a number of limitations that need to be discussed when interpreting the findings of the current study. The sample size may be considered a limitation. A larger sample size would have allowed for a more diverse group of participants, which may have allowed the researcher to discover additional information of what students of color find supportive and unsupportive and the strategies they utilize when faced with obstacles in their programs. Another limitation is the recruitment strategies that were employed. It is possible that because participants were recruited from similar networks and organizations, the study may have attracted students of color that have similar experiences. Thus, these results should reflect the individual experiences of the 12 participants, and the findings should not be generalized to represent the experiences of all students of color obtaining an advanced degree in psychology.

It is also important to discuss how the researcher can influence the meanings of findings throughout the research process, which is referred to as reflexivity (Hale, Treharne, & Kitas, 2007). On the one hand, this can be beneficial because the researcher can provide insight knowledge when analyzing the results. It is important for me to acknowledge how my personal and professional interest in this current study may have impacted how the study was conducted and interpreted. I identified with

many of the experiences that the participants reported, which may have led to a confirmation bias.

**Directions for Future Research**

Future research may probe the experiences of White students as they obtain advanced degrees in psychology to learn how these compare to the experiences of the students of color who participated in the present study. This information would also allow researchers to compare the experiences of students of different race and ethnicities in the hope of identifying recommendations to make the experiences of graduate students more equitable and enjoyable regardless of individuals' race or ethnicity.

In addition, it would be helpful to obtain information about how faculty and staff handle obstacles (e.g., micro-aggressions, isolation, desolation) experienced by students of color when these situations are brought to their attention. It would also be interesting to examine how faculty and staff have handled student of color reports of discrimination or micro-aggressions. This information would shed light on how programs are handling these issues and ensure that programs are addressing these situations in a corrective way that may help to improve the minority pipeline for students of color in psychology.

## Appendix A

## Demographic and Personal Background Questions

1. What is your gender? _____

2. What is your age? _____

3. What state do you live in? _____

4. What languages do you speak? _____

5. What is your marital status? _____

6. What is your highest degree? _____

7. What is your race/ethnicity? _____

8. What graduate program do you attend? _____

9. What year are you within your graduate program? _____

10. Are you a first generation graduate student? _____

11. What is your graduate specialty? _____

12. Did you attend the same undergraduate university as your graduate program?

_____

## Appendix B

## Interview Guide

*[Hello, may I speak to _____ please.] This is Crystal Gayle; I am an African American doctoral student from the Psychology Department at the University of Rhode Island. I recently contacted you about participating in a phone interview regarding factors you find supportive and challenging within your graduate program. Thank you again for agreeing to participate. As noted in the consent form, this study is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question and/or discontinue the interview at any time. Let's begin.*

(Ensure that equipment is working properly, if technical difficulties arise, re-schedule the interview with the participant.)

1. What has facilitated your success in graduate school? What kinds of things have helped you in your program? Probes include:

   a. Are your supports located in your program, such as fellow peers?

   b. Are your friends people of color or are they from different races?

   c. What about faculty, such as mentors?

   d. What has helped at the university level?

   e. Anything on campus?

   f. What about financial aid assistance?

   g. Are you involved with other students and faculty in diversity issues research?

   h. Do you feel included within your program?

2. Once you got accepted in the program, what has been good about it? Probes include:

   a. What is it like for you?

   b. What works and what does not?

   c. What has helped you to handle it?

3. What kinds of challenges have you encountered during your graduate studies?

   a. Have you ever felt ignored or isolated?

   b. Have you ever experienced stereotyping or micro-aggressions?

   c. How did you end up dealing with that?

4. What kind of strategies do you use when you are faced with obstacles in your program? Probes include:

   a. What got you through tough times?

   b. What about faculty, students, or family?

   c. What types of family support have been helpful and important to you?

   d. For strategies do you use anything on campus?

5. If you were talking to a group of ethnically diverse students who just got accepted into your psychology program, what should they know before they get started? What would you tell them to boost their opportunity to succeed?

**Appendix C**

**Informed Consent Form**

The University of Rhode Island
Psychology Department
142 Flagg Road
Kingston, RI 02881
Phone: (401) 874-2193
Fax: (401) 874-2157
Project Title: Experiences of Students of Color: Supports and Challenges

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

You have been invited to take part in a research project described below. You should feel free to ask any questions you may have.  If you have more questions or concerns later, you may contact Crystal Gayle, Student Investigator, at (718) 877-2535.  You may also contact Dr. Margaret Rogers, Principal Investigator, at (401) 874-7999.

*Description of the project:*
This thesis research study involves responding to a series of questions regarding experiences of graduate students of color in psychology doctoral programs.

*What will be done:*
If you decide to take part in this study, your part will involve participating in an interview lasting about 30-45 minutes that will be audiotaped and transcribed.

*Risks or discomfort:*
The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal.

*Benefits of this study:*
If you choose to participate, your answers will help increase the knowledge base about positive factors graduate students of color experience to successfully navigate through their programs. You may also elect to be entered into a drawing to win $50.

*Confidentiality:*
Your participation in this study is confidential. Identifying information will be removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms will be used.  None of the information will identify you by name.  All data will be maintained in a locked facility at the University of Rhode Island.

*Decision to quit at any time:*

There are no consequences for not participating in the study and you may refuse to answer any question.  If you decide to take part in the study, you may elect to discontinue your participation at any time.

*Rights and complaints:*
If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed you may discuss your complaints with Crystal Gayle at (718) 877-2535 or Dr. Margaret Rogers at (401) 874-7999, anonymously, if you choose.  In addition, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the office of the Vice President for Research, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

You have read the Consent Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you are over 18 years old, understand the information, and agree to participate in this study.


_____
(Signature of interviewee)


_____
(Printed name of interviewee)


_____
(Date)


**Enclosed are two copies of this consent form. Please keep a copy of this form and return a signed copy to Crystal Gayle in the stamped envelope provided.**

Thank you for your time and help in this study.  Your assistance is greatly appreciated!

**Appendix D**

**Recruitment Letter**

The University of Rhode Island
Psychology Department
142 Flagg Road
Kingston, RI 02881
Phone: (401) 874-2193
Fax: (401) 874-2157


Dear _____,


  I am a doctoral student in the School Psychology program at the University of Rhode Island. As part of my thesis research project, under the direction of my major professor, Dr. Margaret Rogers, I am conducting a study on **the graduate school experiences of people of color obtaining advanced degrees in psychology**.

Participants will take part in an audiotaped phone interview relating to their graduate school experiences. Any information that is provided will be strictly confidential and your name will not appear in any reports resulting from the study. The interview will address questions about participants' experiences during graduate studies. More specifically, there will be questions about the types of support they consider helpful and the challenges they have encountered during their time as a graduate student. In addition, there will be questions to address successful strategies that students of color use within their graduate programs when they experience stress or obstacles. The interview is expected to last about 30-45 minutes. Participants will also be entered into a drawing to win a $50 gift card as compensation for their participation.

Individuals that meet the following criteria may be eligible to participate:
- Students who have completed at least **one** year in a graduate doctoral psychology program.
- Students who have a **3.2** grade point average or better.
- Students who identify as an **ethnic minority**.

I will follow up with an e-mail and phone call to obtain the names and contact information of potential participants. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

| | |
|---|---|
| Crystal Gayle, B.A. | Margaret Rogers, Ph. D. |
| (718) 877-2535 | (401) 874-7999 |
| crystal_gayle@mail.uri.edu | mrogers@uri.edu |
| Doctoral Student | Full Professor |
| School Psychology Program | School Psychology Program |
| University of Rhode Island | University of Rhode Island |

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