BLACK IN THE IVORY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GRADUATE STUDENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

BRIANA N. SPIVEY

(Under the Direction of Isha W. Metzger)

ABSTRACT

Higher education within the U.S. has a long and withstanding history of perpetuating racism. As we continue to see a push for more diversity and inclusion within higher education, the question becomes, how safe are these spaces for Black people? Research has examined racism in academia and the biopsychosocial impact on Black graduate students' success. However, there is limited research examining the impact of COVID-19 and the ongoing pandemic of racism on the experiences and mental health of Black graduate students. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted with Black graduate students discussing being in academia while Black during this unique time period. Four major themes were identified: (1) racism in academic programs, (2) graduate school being lonely, (3) compounded stress by Blackness, and (4) the mental health significance. Recommendations are provided for how institutions, departments, faculty, and peers can create safer and more comfortable spaces for Black graduate students.

INDEX WORDS: higher education, Black graduate students, mental health, racism, PWIs

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BRIANA N. SPIVEY

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BRIANA N. SPIVEY

Major Professor:	Isha W. Metzger
Committee:	Rosalyn Denise Campbell
	Anne Shaffer
	Allison L. Skinner-Dorkenoo

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* decision ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, marking the end of segregation in the United States' (U.S.) educational system. Since this decision, there has been substantial growth in the number of Black students pursuing higher education (Allen, 1998), including those pursuing graduate level degrees (i.e., Masters and Doctoral) at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Lundy-Wagner, 2012). Despite this growth, only 5.6% of doctoral degrees awarded in the U.S. in 2020 were earned by Black students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Additionally, some reports indicate that Black students comprise only 12% of graduate students (NCES, 2020) whereas in 2020, it was noted that Black students made up only 10.9% of the graduate student population (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). Thus, exemplifying the disproportionate number of Black students pursuing graduate degrees as well completing graduate degree programs. Also, even though Black students make up only a fraction of the graduate student population, Black doctoral students across various programs have attrition rates as high as 38%, with the highest attrition rate being 47% for Black students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Sowell et al., 2015). These troubling statistics shine a light on a glaring problem within higher education: experiences of racism among Black graduate students.

Higher education has a long and troubled history of racism, which has negatively impacted the success of Black graduate students in several ways (Patton et al., 2016). Racism, a

multifaceted system of oppression, manifests across different levels of society to maintain a racial hierarchy wherein White people use racial categories to devalue, disempower, and differentially allocate resources to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC; Williams & Mohammed, 2013; Williams et al., 2019). The levels of racism are cultural, institutional, and individual. Cultural racism occurs when one group, deemed superior to others, holds the power to define the cultural values of the society at large. In higher education, cultural racism can look like mainly teaching theories created by and normed on White people rather than highlighting the intellectual contributions of BIPOC (Park & Bahia, 2022). Institutional racism, also known as systemic racism, refers to legalized policies and practices that result in different access to material conditions (e.g., quality education) for White people and BIPOC. In higher education, institutional racism can look like requiring the GRE for admissions despite research that shows that the GRE creates additional barriers for BIPOC admittance into graduate programs (Miller & Statsun, 2014). Individual level racism, which is typically understood to be synonymous with racial prejudice (Jones, 1997), exists in overt (e.g., using racial slurs) and covert forms (e.g., microaggressions). Specifically, Black graduate students have discussed experiencing individual-level racism that has manifested as microaggressions, such as being mistaken for janitorial staff or presumed to be intellectually incompetent (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2016).

In a qualitative study with Black, Latina, and White women in STEM doctoral programs, women reported that the higher education environment contributed to their increased levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022). For many Black graduate students, experiences of racism have undermined their mental health. Black graduate students have reported that their experiences with racial microaggressions have contributed to

lower belongingness in higher education (Clark et al., 2012), with lower levels of belongingness negatively impacting their psychological functioning (e.g., lower self-adequacy; Layous et al., 2017). Black students also tend to report feelings of isolation at PWIs due to not having same-race peers in their programs (Torres et al., 2010). This is important because feelings of isolation have been identified as a primary predictor of Black students wanting to leave their programs (Lewis et al., 2004).

Although some studies have underscored the impact of racism on the mental health experiences of Black graduate students, virtually no studies have examined this topic *during* socio-political and cultural crises that disproportionately impact Black people. Since 2020, Black communities have had to navigate two pandemics: the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising racial unrest due to the continued violence against Black people by the police. Since 2020, Black adults have experienced more pronounced mental health challenges than White adults in response to stresses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Pearman et al., 2022). This difference in mental health challenges can be explained by Black adults having greater exposure to COVID due to systemic racism in the job market (e.g., working essential and low-wage jobs), lower access to quality health care, being twice as likely to be hospitalized from COVID (CDC, 2020; Erdman, 2020; Garg et al., 2020; Sohn, 2017). Also, younger Black adults – between the ages of 21 and 30 – reported more symptoms of anxiety and depressive than younger and older White adults experiencing similar stresses (Pearman et al., 2022). Therefore, it is likely that Black graduate students, who already experienced racism within higher education prior to these two pandemics, were especially vulnerable to mounting racial concerns and mental health challenges during this time.

Several qualitative studies have explored graduate students' experiences during the pandemics (Kee, 2021). Yet, these studies have not examined Black graduate students specifically. This is a concern given that Black graduate students exist in communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and persistent racial unrest. Black graduate students tend to experience pre-pandemic psychosocial risks factors, such as financial strain, racial discrimination, chronic stress, that could exacerbate their graduate-level challenges and mental health concerns during these pandemics. However, it is unclear how Black graduate students have made sense of and understood the impact of this turbulent time in their graduate-level career.

It is imperative for both quantitative and qualitative studies to be done on this topic. Yet, additional *qualitative* work is vital to truly understand Black students' perspectives about navigating racism and mental health challenges in academia during two ongoing pandemics. Whereas a quantitative approach could allow for the examination of specific hypotheses and predictive testing, a qualitative approach provides a more contextual understanding of the experiences of Black graduate students during this particular socio-political and cultural moment – a step that seems necessary before hypothesis generating and predictive testing. Thus, the current study seeks to examine the racialized stressors and mental health concerns of Black graduate students at PWIs during the ongoing pandemics of COVID-19 and racial unrest.

The Double Pandemic: COVID-19 and Increased Racial Unrest

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (SARS- CoV2; COVID-19) is a respiratory disease with life-threatening adverse effects, including hospitalization and death (Fauci et al., 2020). Cases were first reported in late 2019 in China. As the world adjusted to the impact of COVID-19, various

countries and states within the U.S. implemented ordinances placing citizens on national lockdowns and issuing shelter-in-place orders with hopes of slowing the spread of the virus.

While COVID-19 has impacted the lives of many, Black Americans remain disproportionately impacted by this infectious disease. Black Americans die at a disproportionately higher rate than their White counterparts from COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In fact, some of the early mortality rates show that Black Americans were 6 times more likely to die as a result of COVID-19 infection (Yancy, 2020). In addition, 1 in 3 Black people reported knowing someone personally who died from COVID-19 (Washington Post, 2020). The effects of COVID-19 on Black Americans were exacerbated by the higher number of Black Americans living in densely populated areas, which increased the risk of exposure for those infected with COVID-19. Disparities in COVID-19 were also compounded by lower rates of healthcare access, high rates of unemployment, reduced likelihood of testing in low-resource neighborhoods, and higher rates of at-risk groups in urban areas (Laurencin & McClinton, 2020). COVID-19 thus, became another example highlighting the impact of racism on the health of Black people.

Alongside the rising rates of COVID-19 and the national lockdowns, the summer of 2020 brought out about another source of elevated stress. Breonna Taylor was murdered by Louisville police as a result of forced entry in March 2020. In May 2020, George Floyd was murdered on camera by a police officer in Minneapolis. These killings ignited a call for protests against the structural racism inherent in police departments and the subsequent violence against Black people. Protests led by the Black Lives Matter Movement erupted in most U.S. states, spurring national civil unrest and the resurgence of frustration, anger, hopelessness, and pain in response to current and historical injustices, racial disparities, and socioeconomic divides. It is in the

summer of 2020 that police violence continued to be examined for its public health impact as well as its historical foundations in structural racism. Some Black Americans answered the call to risk their health and safety to protest despite continued lock-down and shelter-in-place orders due to COVID-19, others who might have otherwise mobilized and protested found themselves coping in isolation due to social distancing and fears about contracting COVID-19, leaving them without social support thus exacerbating the health impact of the novel coronavirus.

The Double Pandemic and Higher Education

The double pandemic uprooted what was once the norm for higher education. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shifting rates of infection, required quick and significant shifts in the way education was delivered. For graduate students enrolled in traditional learning environments, they had to learn how to quickly transition to remote learning, causing a range of emotions and personal challenges (Kee, 2021). Despite preferring face-to-face instruction because it allowed for interaction with peers and enhanced learning through class discussions (Kee, 2021), graduate students were expected to bring school home with no separation between their school and home life, conduct research at home, and still maintain safety and productivity. Additionally, graduate students were forced to juggle a variety of professional and personal roles beyond their student role in new ways (e.g., parenting, designing courses, training faculty; Bal et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the speed and scale of these interruptions from these pandemics caused negative psychological and economic consequences for students (Jenei et al., 2020). According to a study completed by 3,500 graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic, 67% of students scored low on well-being factors, 32% endorsed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 35% reported moderate to high levels of depression, and 33% reported

moderate to high levels of anxiety (Ogilvie et al., 2020). In a qualitative study about graduate student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported fears and feelings of anxiety associated with worrying about the health and well-being of their family members, worrying about their own financial (in)stability, and worrying about finding access to adequate Wi-Fi connection and other technological struggles (Kee, 2021). Whereas these struggles were felt universally across graduate students, Black graduate students were particularly vulnerable. As the death toll for COVID-19 continued to rise, Black students were tasked with upholding their responsibilities of being a graduate student and continuing to navigate a never-ending cycle of systemic racism in their personal and professional lives. Black students had to work to balance personal grief, stress, and trauma they experienced based on personal interactions with COVID-19 and the 24/7 exposure to racial injustices on media outlets. Social media became inundated with images sparking traumatic responses for many students of color (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Eschmann, 2020). Anti-Black sentiments were further mainstreamed due to President Trump's public dog-whistle statements, further heightening racial tensions within the U.S. (McCoy, 2020). Black graduate students also had to navigate distinct challenges related to their professional responsibilities. For instance, BIPOC graduate students are more likely to conduct community-engaged research—a type of research that was particularly impacted by pandemic interruptions (Carson et al., 2021). This barrier, coupled with BIPOC student's existing experiences receiving fewer research-related supports (e.g., funding, grant writing support), likely exacerbated their already stressful graduate experiences. In addition, Black, Indigenous, and Latina women are often disproportionately burdened with mentoring and service work in academia (Guarino & Borden, 2016). For Black women graduate students, these service loads likely increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing racial unrest, especially in terms of

taking on efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion issues on campus. Unfortunately, service effort is typically not valued in the same way as research productivity, often creating a culture in which Black students' commitments to upending racism on campus are devalued and unappreciated relative to traditional metrics of success. Fighting racism becomes another task that is not consistent with the metrics of success explicit in doctoral programs.

Graduate Student Stressors and Mental Health Experiences

Graduate level education has become an essential component to upward mobility as the inequity of wealth continues to take its place in society (Hudson et al., 2020; Adair, 2001). Yet, graduate education is not without its challenges. Challenges associated with being a graduate student, include completing coursework, conducting research, publishing scholarly work, finding employment, managing social relationships, preserving relationships with advisors, and maintaining one's mental and physical health (Hyun et al., 2006). In addition, these challenges can vary across fields of study, personal characteristics, and program environment. For instance, these challenges tend to be amplified in graduate programs designated as helping professions (e.g., social work, clinical psychology, and medical school), given that these types of programs also require that students take on the additional labor of being responsible for someone else's wellbeing (e.g., clinical practicum; Thompson & Neville, 1999).

As students make the transition to graduate school, there is also a shift in the structure, responsibilities, and expectations necessary for success (A PhD State of Mind, 2018). For example, exams and classrooms are exchanged for highly productive lab environments. Instead of being in spaces with large numbers of undergraduate students, graduate students are now in classrooms with smaller numbers of students across programs and disciplines at different stages in their career. As students pursue a graduate career, exams are no longer the measures of

success, instead novel contributions to the field in the form of publications become measures of success (A PhD State of Mind, 2018). In adjusting to the workload of a graduate program, doctoral students have reported feeling inadequately prepared to perform the work of their program relative to Master's level students (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly, 2014; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013).

Evans and colleagues (2018) reported that graduate students were over six times more likely to have anxiety and depression compared to the general population, with studies showing that between one-third and one half of graduate students meet criteria for depression (Evans et al., 2018; Garcia-Williams et al., 2016; Levecque et al., 2017).The stress brought on by these challenges places graduate students at increased risk for developing mental health disorders (Garcia-Williams et al., 2014). In a qualitative study conducted by El-Ghoroury et al. (2012), 61% of graduate students reported having anxiety symptoms and 35% reported experiencing depression. Stressors reported by doctoral level graduate students were financial (e.g., debt, affording cost of living), personal (e.g., maintaining work-life balance; time management), and academic (e.g., academic workload; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013; Schramm-Possinger & Powers, 2015). For instance, in a predominantly White ($N = 295$) sample of 438 graduate students, 68% of graduate students reported that academic responsibility was their number one major stressor, and 64% of the sample reported that finances/debt was their second major stressor (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Students also reported feeling stressed due to burnout (38%), lack of social support (36%), and other interpersonal issues and marital problems (33%). Taken together, current evidence suggests that graduate school is a stressful experience for all students, in which they often feel overwhelmed by a combination of financial, personal, and academic burdens.

Black Graduate Students' Stressors and Mental Health Symptoms

Previous studies have linked this underrepresentation of Black people in academia to racism (Cabera, 2014; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1997; Harper, 2012; Patton, 2015). In addition to the general stress of being a graduate student, Black graduate students face unique, racialized stressors that make it more difficult to successfully complete graduate education (Alexander & Hermann, 2016; Keels et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2004; Proctor et al., 2017, Sowell et al., 2015). According to several quantitative studies, five types of racist experiences have been identified by Black graduate students: discrimination from White professors, discrimination from White students, enforced social isolation, underestimation of academic ability, and forced representation for the race (Clark et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2010; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). These experience of racial stressors for Black students occurs across various interactions, such as with faculty, in supervision for their training programs, and as teaching assistants (Noy & Ray, 2012; Gomez et al., 2011). Specifically, Black graduate students reported feeling as if their professors avoided contact with them outside the classroom; they also felt as if they received fewer teaching and research opportunities due to their professors' racism (Hall & Allen, 1982; Willie et al., 1991). Further, Black, and other students of color, report receiving fewer funding opportunities to carry out research, including opportunities to develop their grant-writing skills (Park & Bahia, 2022). This unequal access to vital research resources can significantly undermine Black graduate students' success in graduate school and beyond.

With the added weight of racial stressors on top of the typical challenges of graduate school, Black graduate students are at an elevated risk for developing psychological difficulties (Miller & Orsillo, 2020). Torres et al. (2010) reported that as Black doctoral students experienced daily microaggressions they also reported depressive symptoms and overall poorer

mental health. Also, high levels of negative race-related experiences among Black doctoral students were associated with higher levels of emotional distress (Clark et al., 2012). For Black male graduate students specifically, there was a link between experiences of institutional racism and severe psychological distress (Britt-Spells et al., 2016). Existing research has examined the implications of graduate school on the health of Black graduate students using a quantitative approach, thus utilizing a qualitative approach is important to contextualize and understand the various aspects of their experiences and the impact of these experiences on their mental health, especially during times of crisis.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to contextualize the narratives of Black graduate students during the double pandemic, I used two theoretical frameworks to inform my qualitative thematic analysis: Critical Race Theory and Racial Battle Fatigue. I discuss these frameworks in more detail below, with special consideration to how they can be used to highlight the pervasiveness of racism within higher education and the negative psychological impact of continuous exposure to racism for Black graduate students attending a PWI during the double pandemic.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from legal scholars (i.e., Alan Freeman, Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado) to highlight that race in legal systems is utilized to maintain and oppress people of color. Today, CRT is recognized as a movement, developed by scholars of color, to challenge the ways in which race and racial structures have been constructed to permeate American society as a whole (Crenshaw et al., 1995). At its core, CRT asserts that race impacts equality in educations systems and thus enables racism to enter these spaces. More specifically, CRT emphasizes the engrained and persistent role of race within systems,

institutions, and structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Relevant to the current study, CRT examines the systemic and situational factors that reinforce oppressive systems in academia (Patton, 2006). CRT is not just a theory but a perspective on current situations in society, and most relevant to the current research, higher education. CRT makes it clear that racism sits at the foundation of the American landscape (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). As explained by Solorzano and Yosso (2002), there are basic tenets that influence our understanding of racism within the higher education system. Specific tenets applicable to the current study are CRT's ability to challenge dominant ideology by challenging the master narrative, which posits that students of color are unable to excel in higher education. In the current study, the principle of counterstorytelling is utilized (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Yosso, 2006). Counterstorytelling magnifies the stories of the marginalized communities as a contrast to the dominant narrative. Much of our knowledge acquired in schools comes from the dominant narrative, but the dominant narrative lacks the experiences and insight of minority communities (Delgado, 1995). Thus, the current study challenges the dominant narrative by centering the experiences of underprivileged students, specifically Black graduate students. Also, CRT examines the interdisciplinary function of racism and race within systems of education. The use of this theory is to highlight that racism exists within the system of higher education, such that it is a daily part of the experiences of Black graduate students. The overall goal in using CRT is to increase equity and promote social justice within academic spaces. The current research is grounded in CRT, which emphasizes the engrained and continuous role of race within academic structures (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), while focusing on examining the systemic and situational factors that reinforce oppressive systems in academia (Patton, 2006).

Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue (RBF) is a theoretical framework developed to examine the intersecting psychological, physiological, and behavioral effects of encountering and fighting racial microaggressions (Smith, 2009). RBF is an extension of the biopsychosocial model of racism developed by Clark and colleagues (1999), which recognizes racism as a significant stressor for Black people in the US. However, very little attention has been placed on the psychological and physiological impacts of constant exposure to racism within education systems (Koo, 2021). Thus, RBF highlights the physiological symptoms of exposure to racism which can include increased sickness, tension headaches, trembling, ulcers, and elevated blood pressure (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2005a; Smith, 2005b). Psychological symptoms of racial battle fatigue include constant anxiety, insomnia, difficulty thinking, and rapid mood swings as a result of being in environments of mundane racial stressors or the mere likelihood of experiencing racial conflict (Smith et al., 2006). Thus, RBF is one of the theoretical frameworks that places a specific focus on the psychophysiological impacts of consistent exposure to racism. Racial battle fatigue builds upon CRT by highlighting the individual level reactions to constant exposure to racism within academic settings.

People of color existing in predominantly White spaces tend to experience hypervigilance, hyper-visibility (i.e., increased likelihood for scrutiny, marginalization, and isolation), and hyper-invisibility (i.e., increased likelihood of being overlooked or ignored), social withdrawal, self-censorship, and loss of self-confidence (Gildersleeve, 2011; Jay, 2009; Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2007). RBF has also been linked to psychosocial implications such as anxiety, frustration, anger, and anger suppression (i.e., experiencing feelings of anger but not

expressing them, helplessness, and hopelessness. (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Jay, 2009; Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2007).

Tenets from CRT and RBF have been utilized to inform the aims of the current study and situate the experiences of Black graduate students at PWIs. Specifically, the aforementioned theories guide the thematic analyses as the intricacies of what it means to be Black while in academia and the implications for student's mental health and well-being are examined.

The Current Study: Statement of the Problem

Although research into the experiences of graduate students has grown, there remains a dearth of studies that have explored this topic qualitatively in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing pandemic of racism for Black graduate students at PWIs. To date, some studies have examined Black students' experiences of graduate school, but they have not done so in times of crisis. Other studies have examined graduate students' perspectives of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they have not explored Black graduate students' perspectives specifically. Conducting qualitative studies during major crises, like the current pandemics, is a crucial time to contribute to the literature on crisis management, especially for populations likely to be most at risk for negative consequences associated with crises (MacNeil & Toppings, 2007). Black graduate students are currently entering graduate programs at increasing rates; however, an alarming proportion of them are not graduating from their degree programs (Allum, 2014), and it is possible that these attrition rates will worsen even more due to the consequences of the double pandemic. Thus, the current study extends prior work by exploring the racialized stressors and mental health experiences of Black graduate students' who attended a PWI during the double pandemic.

Specifically, the current study aims to:

Aim 1: Understand how Black graduate students at PWIs narrate the racial and academic stressors encountered in graduate school during the double pandemic.

Aim 2: Elucidate the mental health concerns of Black graduate students at PWIs during the double pandemic.

Overall, this project is designed to center the experiences of Black graduate students within the psychological literature. In doing so, these findings can be used to highlight the need for multifaceted, culturally-responsive interventions that address current and historical stressors faced in higher education among this population. In addition, these findings can inform institutional initiatives designed to retain Black students in graduate programs during times of major crises.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A purposive sample of 29 U.S. Black graduate students were recruited via social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) and word of mouth. Inclusion criteria were (a) identifying as Black/African American, (b) being between the ages of 18 and 30, (c) currently attending a PWI in the U.S., and (d) currently pursuing a graduate degree in the social sciences. Participants ages ranged between 22 and 30 years (M= 25.07, SD= 1.77). Students in the sample represented 23 institutions across the U.S., with between 2-4 students attending the same institution (e.g., 3 different institutions with 2-4 students from the institution participating). Within the sample, 82.8% identified as heterosexual and 13.8% of the sample identified as queer with 3.4% preferring not to disclose their sexual orientation. Across the sample, 34.5% of the sample reported their yearly income between $0 and $24,999, 44.8% of the sample reported their income between $25,000 and 49,999, and 21% of the sample, reported their income between $50,000 and $99,999. Demographic information for each participant can be found in Table 1.

Procedures

Prior to beginning the focus groups, participants contacted the researcher indicating interest in participating. Following initial contact, participants completed an online screener to confirm they met inclusion criteria as mentioned in the participants subsection. Eligible participants were then invited to complete the informed consent document which outlined the project description, benefits, and potential risks. After signing the informed consent document,

participants were contacted via email to complete a brief, 10-minute survey and to sign up for a focus group. The brief survey asked about demographics, the regional location of their current graduate program, and the type of undergraduate institution they attended. In efforts to protect participants' identities, each participant was assigned a pseudonym throughout the study.

Focus Group Facilitation

Six focus groups were conducted between January 2022 and February 2022. Focus groups were performed until theoretical saturation was met (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Focus groups were the data collection effort of choice given that they provide an interactive discussion for perspectives to be shared and rich data to be generated (Hennink, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Focus groups allow for synergy among participants which permits new answers to be developed and stimulate the interpretative nature of the researcher (Acocella, 2012), Also, focus groups allow researchers to identify the needs of a community and the types of culturally relevant intervention strategies that can be developed (White et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2016; Dangerfield et al., 2018) – a relevant method given the current study's desire to use these findings to inform programming for Black graduate students during times of ongoing crisis.

Participants were assigned to groups based upon their availability after completing an online scheduling poll. Focus group size ranged from three to six participants in a given session. As such, groups had representation from similar types of undergraduate institutions (e.g., HBCUs, MSI, and PWIs) but were designed to capture a range of experiences and norms across graduate programs by recruiting a national sample. The group assignment facilitated the development of community for focus group members while authentically capturing their experiences.

At the beginning of each focus group, guidelines for the session were discussed. These guidelines were co-created by the research team members and focus group participants. Guidelines (i.e., respecting the space and people's opinions, speak from the 'I' perspective, maintaining confidentiality of other participants' experiences, and making space for others to share) were designed to promote participant safety, comfort, and active participation among participants (Farquhar & Das, 1999). Focus groups lasted between 60-90 minutes, and they were facilitated by the PI (a Black woman in her twenties who is pursuing a doctoral degree in Psychology). A research assistant (a Black women in her twenties) also attended to take notes.

The facilitator used a focus group guide with broad key questions to guide the discussion. Sample focus group questions included the following: "What made you pursue higher education?" "What are some of your best experiences as Black graduate student at a PWI?" "What are some of your worst experiences as a Black graduate student at a PWI?" "How has your mental health been impacted by being a Black graduate student at a PWI?" "What changes are needed in academia to support and better protect Black graduate students?" All questions asked can be found in Table 2.

Focus Group Transcription

All focus groups were video, and audio recorded via Zoom. Audio recordings were placed into a professional transcribing software (Otter.ai), which was selected due to its accuracy in transcribing audio files with multiple speakers, cost effectiveness, as well as the ability to capture keywords. Following transcription, the author and research assistant reviewed the transcripts line by line and edited the text as necessary to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. Following line-reading of the transcripts, initial codes were identified and discussed by the research assistant and PI before coding all transcripts.

Data Analysis

Demarcation of Thematic Moments

The deeply-rooted racism within higher education as highlighted by CRT in combination with the psychological impact of consistent exposure to racism in academia, outlined by the RBF framework, were guiding principles for the researchers in constructing the significant themes of Black graduate students' experiences. With these two frameworks in mind, the following questions were used to guide the analyses of the focus group transcripts:

> 1) What does it mean to be a Black graduate student at a PWI during the double pandemic? 2) How did racism shape Black graduate students' experiences at a PWI during the double pandemic? and 3) What mental health challenges emerged for Black graduate students' during this time?

With these questions in mind, transcripts were thematically coded based on methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A thematic analysis approach involves demarcating data *moments* (i.e., "sentences, words, phrases, 'voice' or 'tone' of the data that… illuminate a theme of the phenomenon;" Garza, 2004 p. 133) that ultimately reveal the ways in which participants constitute the phenomenon as being meaningful. A 'moment' in this present study was any part of the transcript where something was revealed about the ways in which participants understand or make meaning of their racialized and mental health experiences as Black graduate students at a PWI during the double pandemic.

Because thematic analysis adopts a constructivist orientation (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 85), themes were inductively developed. This means themes were allowed to emerge from the data instead of forcing themes to map onto categories previously created by the researchers. In

alignment with the process outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), thematic analysis was conducted in six phases:

1. Become familiar with the data and begin developing thoughts about what is in the data.
2. Develop initial codes.
3. Sort the aforementioned codes into themes.
4. Refine the themes and select themes best supported by the data.
5. Further refine the themes by defining the "essence" of what each theme is highlighting.
6. Final analysis and writing of the Results section.

All qualitative analysis utilized MAXQDA software (VERBI Software, 2022).

Inference Quality of Qualitative Research Findings

Multiple perspectives. Multiple analysts were used to analyze the focus group transcripts (Patton, 2002) in order to provide nuanced interpretations of the interview data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Also, the use of multiple analysts allowed us to explicitly demarcate how our interpretations were substantiated by the data.

The PI and research assistant began the analytic process by reading through the six transcripts line-by-line in detail to develop an initial set of codes. Once the initial codes were developed, the PI and research assistant read through one of the six transcripts separately in order to determine the level of agreement. The MAXQDA software was used to calculate an interrater reliability estimate using the first transcript that was coded by both the PI and the research assistant. The PI and research assistant established excellent interrater reliability (ICC) (α = 0.94), suggesting agreement on 94% of initial codes. Once interrater reliability was established, the remaining transcripts (n= 5) were divided between the PI and assistant and individually

coded line-by-line using the first draft of the codebook to iteratively edit and develop an inclusive and exhaustive version of the codebook.

Member checks. Member checks were used to corroborate our understanding of the participant's narrative description (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Although this technique is often employed at the end of the data analytic process, in this study, member checks were conducted at several points during the focus groups. This means that at several points during the focus groups, the facilitator would reflect her understanding of what participants had said and meant and allowed participants to amend our interpretation if necessary.

Negative case analysis. Negative case analysis was another technique used to ensure the quality of inferences made regarding the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002). Although the researcher may formulate preconceived categories in which information from the qualitative cases are expected to neatly fit, negative case analysis involves identifying portions of the data that do not fit within these categories so that categories can be reworked, revised, or expanded. This ensures that researchers become aware of those preconceptions that are not grounded in the data (Rao & Churchill, 2003) and that findings that emerge from the data are privileged over the researcher's preconceived notions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Focus group transcripts revealed four major themes relevant to the experiences of graduate students: (1) academia is racist, (2) graduate school is lonely, (3) compounded stress shaped by Blackness, and (4) mental health matters.

Theme 1: Academia is Racist

According to focus group participants, graduate school was viewed as a unique environment not created for them but rather designed to uphold anti-Black racism and Whiteness. Although the racism within their programs was recognized prior to Covid-19 and the racial injustices of summer 2020, students described noticing this racism in news ways during these crises. Of note, these experiences of racism were often manifested in the invalidation of Black students' concerns, racist hiring practices that maintained predominately White academic departments, and unfair expectations of Black students compared to other students.

One student, Brandy, described the response of her department during the pandemic and the racial injustices highlighted in Summer 2020:

> The women in my cohort and other Black women in our department decided to come together to write a letter to the department. Basically, like, you know, every other letter, it's like, you're not doing enough, here's what you could be doing, yada, yada. We sent it to the department chair because it was not directed to our programs. It was just like, here's what you could be doing as a department. So, everyone's on the same page, you

> know, whatever. And my program's response to that letter, had nothing to do with the content itself. It was all about how that was the wrong way to go about doing that.

Brandy's response highlights how instead of making an effective attempt to validate and respond to Black women students' concerns in a caring way, her program dismissed these concerns because they did not like or agree with the approach taken. Therefore, the priority was not the wants, needs, and concerns of Black students, but rather on maintaining and upholding the current system – a system designed to police Black students' tone and behaviors in order to keep them in their place.

In addition, students discussed how, despite their programs repeated verbal commitments to anti-racism and social justice even during the pandemic and racial injustices, these commitments were often not reflected in the departments' actual behaviors and practices. For example, Brittany described how her program continued with racist hiring practices:

> I really don't know how to say in any other words, like our department is racist… And they made another comment about how like, maybe we can't hire people of color if they're not ready, because that's like a burden on the department.

From Brittany's account, her program did not see the value in hiring BIPOC faculty members; this lack of value also appeared to be rooted in negative stereotypes of BIPOC candidates as unprepared or unqualified for academic positions. Also, students juxtaposed this lack of hiring of BIPOC faculty against the fierce protection of "problematic White faculty." For instance, Gina described,

> I think it's also an issue of like, you have problematic faculty, in your department, and you have faculty who have certain privileged identities, who say that they're down for this work or whatever, whatever. But that also means supporting the people who do that

> work. And if you are going to try and make excuses for this man who just bulldoze me for 30 minutes, after not even letting me explain my project to him, like, that makes me feel uncomfortable, even though like you brand yourself as an ally or whatever, right?

Therefore, although many of these departments touted social justice commitments, their actions often fell short of these aspirations and ultimately served to gatekeep and maintain the status quo. Students also shared how racism was evident in their programs through differential expectations placed on Black students relative to other students. For some students, these expectations pertained to workload whereas for others these expectations pertained to how students were evaluated and assessed. For example, Jordyn described,

> (…) At the end of the day, like, there's a strong divide between the work that I'm seeing the White students in our department put in compared to the Black students and the expectations that we had, and that expectation, you know, setting ourselves to be great.

Similarly, she also stated, "(…) I feel like as a Black student, I'm held to a different standard, you know, and it's like, I don't want to feed into that narrative of like, I got to work 10 times harder, because I'm Black."

Thus, for Black students, there is often a burden to work ten times harder to get ahead. This burden is disproportionately impacting Black students such that they begin to feel overworked and their likelihood for burnout increases. Being Black in academia for these students meant that you weren't able to just coast but rather you were expected to always be working. Students also described the hidden curriculum of academic spaces and how it impacts the ability to maneuver throughout the space. You become uncertain of what is expected, as described by Brittany, who said, "So, I feel like there were like a lot of hidden things that you don't necessarily know about, from the university standpoint."

Jamie described similar thoughts about not being prepared:

> I guess, something that I wish I was prepared for was the politics that's involved with grad school. And even though people don't talk about it, like, faculty won't talk about it with students. And it's just weird. You don't know what's the right thing to say, you don't want to say the wrong thing, because you don't want to step on people's toes. It's just a lot of that.

Both of these quotes highlight the impact of racism within academia in which there is a "hidden curriculum." This hidden curriculum is used as a form of gatekeeping and a method for students to start to question their preparedness for a graduate degree. This hidden curriculum perpetuates racism as it the curriculum is more clearly provided and discussed among non-BIPOC students, thus creating a divide in how students navigate their programs and the unspoken expectations for how students should navigate their programs.

Theme 2: Graduate School is Lonely

Across all focus groups, another theme that emerged was the feeling that graduate school was lonely as a Black student. According to students, this loneliness included feeling isolated both physically and socially, feeling tokenized as the only Black student in their programs, lacking connection with other Black students and faculty, and not receiving adequate support from their department or professors.

Participants reflected on loneliness as both a physical and social experience. Due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants described its role in feelings of isolation at the intersection of their identity. Malcolm explained:

> So not only is being Black kind of a lonely experience in grad school, but I think now we're in a pandemic, so I'm not sure about y'all program, but like, 90% of our program, or classes at this point has been online.

For Malcolm, this loneliness was amplified by the pandemic. Malcolm highlights how students are no longer able to go in-person to their classes but are now isolated to conduct their classwork at home. Other participants indicated how these feelings of isolation led to "sadness" and "crying."

Isolation for many of the participants encompassed also feeling as though they did not have support from their institutions in situations (e.g., racial unrest impacting Black communities) where it is important. This support spanned emotional support, physical support, and social support. Students did not feel like they feelings were being cared for, they weren't able to find actual people to go to for support and feeling even more separated from the other students in academic and sociopolitical conflicts.

A few participants described the lack of support they received from their departments at the height of the racial injustices of summer 2020. For instance, Ebony described being the only Black woman in her department as "and when the whole George Floyd thing happened, obviously, like rock me, no checking in. Nothing. And mind you, I told y'all like, there's no Black professors in my school." In terms of emotional support, Ebony's statement highlights the emotional toll the lack of response from her department had on her. She is the only Black student in her program and during heightened racial injustice against Black people, she was not even considered. Thus, this lack of support produced feelings of isolation and disconnect between herself and her department.

Students also discussed how this loneliness was also exacerbated by feeling as if they were tokenized in their programs. Because students were often the only Black student in their programs, tokenism displayed through the expectation that they be representatives for their racial and ethnic group. This pressure to be representatives for their group was also most salient during conversations about racial injustices. For instance, Draya described how she felt tokenized during a conversation about the killings of Black people at the hands of police:

> And we're sitting here talking about justice for Breonna Taylor, and everyone is kind of waiting for the Black person to say something, there's this awkward silence. And this is the time we were required to have our cameras on we're all just looking like which Black person is going to say something first, and that was a very I had never really encountered I will say, never the times I've encountered being like the token Black person

For Draya, and other Black students like her, this pressure to represent one's race was also felt during times of intense race-related stress. Despite what should have been a time when she was offered support from others, she was still expected to show up and educate others about it means to be Black in America. Black students become the representative of their entire race and thus feel they have to work harder and present themselves flawlessly.

One participant highlighted the toll of what it means to be the only "one" in your program. She was asked to complete tasks that other students weren't asked to, such as serve on the Diversity committee and speak about issues regarding Black people. Due to this exploitation of her time, she found herself having less time to uphold the demands of academia. Thus, she questioned how things would be different if she wasn't Black and what impact being Black has on one's ability to reach academic goals. Nicole explained, "I think academia can be parasitic towards Black

students (…) I wonder how much less I would feel like my time was being just totally commodified by the institution that I work for, if I wasn't Black." This quote further highlights the minority stress that impacts Black graduate students' academic performance. The stress is not only due to the demands of being a graduate student but the demands of being a Black graduate student given that one's racialized status means being available for invisible labor on behalf of one's program. Time is not your own and the time you have is expected to be used to work harder and produce more than your White counterparts.

This point was also powerfully captured by Lauren who explicitly defined this token minority status as a form of "identity taxation:"

> For me, identity taxation is, I guess, like, being expected to do certain things, to do more based on the identities that I have. So as a black person, as a black woman, people come to me in ways that they don't come to a White woman, or a White man, or an Asian woman, or Hispanic man, to do certain things, and expect me to produce a certain amount of, certain specific type of work or to just exist a certain way based on the identities that I hold. And it's something that's unique to my identities that other people just don't have to go through.

Students reflected on the ways in which their intersectional identities impacted the expectations placed on them as well as the difference in treatment for BIPOC students in comparison to their White counterparts. Black students are placed on a pedestal that is not equal nor just compared to other students occupying their graduate programs.

Another participant highlights the double consciousness experienced by token Black students. Black students recognize that while they are in the institution, they do not feel as though they are accepted and recognized as integral to the institution. As they navigate being integral to the system of higher education, students recognize that being their authentic selves is not safe and thus have to mask who they are to be accepted and respected in the space. Specifically, Kelly explained

> But I think it's really hard for me to truly be my full self, and then also just do the things I have to do as a graduate student.

The students throughout the focus groups described the unequal expectations placed upon students of color and specifically Black students. This unequal expectation is rooted in the ideology that the systems are not created for Black students and thus they have to work ten times harder than their White counterparts to be acknowledged and respected in higher education. Not only are students fighting to be seen but they then become the only ones to fight for themselves and represent their racial group.

Quite a few participants across focus groups mentioned the idea of "all skinfolk ain't kinfolk." All skinfolk ain't kinfolk is a common phrase that once expressed by Black people is understood within social circles of Black people. This phrase emphasizes that as Black people share a similar ethnic identity, there are unspoken social cues in which Blackness is expected to be displayed, protected, and valued. Specifically, there is trust developed amongst Black people that emphasizes connection, attachment, and dependence (Gomez, 2018) that is intended to protect the Black community from oppressive and anti-Black systems. However, upon interaction with other Black people (e.g., Black students and Black faculty), there is a realization

that some Black people have internalized anti-Black ideals (e.g., reinforcing colorism, voting for laws that disenfranchise Black communities, and acting like the "good" Black person who doesn't yell, always speaks "speak properly," and doesn't argue). Ultimately the disconnect between the Black people who are fighting for the Black community and those who have internalized racism creates the division of what is considered "kinfolk" and "skinfolk", respectively. Essentially, the phrase describes that just because you are Black does not mean you have a shared worldview. "All my skinfolk ain't kinfolk" was initially coined by Zora Neal Hurston and continues to permeate conversations among academics. Thus, this phrase highlights the ways in which isolation can occur as a result of not being able to find community and form connections with other Black students and faculty. One participant described not being prepared for this possibility. Martin explained "I think what I wish I had was an awareness that not all skin folk are kinfolk."

One participant reflected on her values and the way in which she realized that just because she values Black community does not mean everyone Black is prioritizing the Black community. Jada explained the difference between the participants in the focus group and the Black people at her home institution,

> …Where I'm at something that I've noticed a lot of the Black people here really don't value community or it just looks very different. And how they understand their Blackness is very different than how I understand my Blackness.

Participants who came from spaces where they were connected to their Black community reported the jarring nature of realizing they would not have this connection with every Black person. Martin described his experience as follows,

> And so, I think what I wasn't prepared for, like, I came here and like has a good number of Black folks, but I wasn't prepared to still feel wildly uncomfortable around Black folks here. Because I'm like, y'all, y'all are Black, but y'all are still not my people, you know what I'm saying.

Similarly, James recognized the distinction of skinfolk and kinfolk and its impact on being able to connect with other Blacks students. He explained, “it's been difficult to connect with like, the other black folks here. It's been interesting to observe like this is not the sociologist in me, this is just like the chance to try to create some patterns that I see but just like, the personality type of black folks that have been making it to spaces like this, I'm like, oh, y'all are different.”

Theme 3: Stress is Compounded by Racism

Graduate school is a stressful career stage, as students are navigating the demands of academia, changes in personal life (e.g., marriage, death/sickness of family members), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., making friends, connecting with faculty). When prompted about how they categorize their stress, many participants reported that it was difficult to separate out just one stressor. Instead, much of their stress was reported as intersectional, such that their stress is interpersonal, academic, personal, and racial with some difficulty teasing those apart. Thus, through participants’ responses it is evident that racism functions as a building block for the higher education system and impacts the ways in which students understand their stressors in graduate school. When prompted about how students categorize their stress with different types of stressors (e.g., financial, academic, racial, personal, and interpersonal), Malcolm described his experience as being comprised of multiple stressors that vary in intensity,

> [Explicit] all of the above, literally, I think everything and not in all different to like, one time, you know, maybe your academic stress is super high. While the other time personal stress is not as high or thinking about, like, racial stress, like that's always there

Similarly, Diana reported,

> Because even my academic stress, it feels like racial stress, I be like, but you like the White people in my cohort don't even go as hard as, like, don't even come talking to me about no academic stuff.

The interconnectedness of the academic stress and racism was explained by one participant where she describes an instance of a White professor changing her grade, highlighting the interplay of various types of racial stressors. Patrice explained,

> I think most of my stress in some way is tied to like racism and like is racially impacted because I think even when I think about like the academic work in my program, like I've actually had to go to the chair and like fight older White men professors who literally would change my grade just because they just didn't think I should get an A in the class like just like, and there would be evidence like I had screenshots of this was my score.

Theme 4: Mental Health Matters

As Black graduate students navigate the stress of graduate school at the intersection of the identities, the mental health impact of graduate school was significant for various participants with many students discussing experiences with anxiety and imposter syndrome. To highlight this theme, and the overall negative impact of graduate school on her mental health, Tonya described:

> Yeah, I honestly, I think that grad school broadly, is just not good for mental health, period, like, at all. And I think it's obviously 10 times harder when you have all these intersection identities.

Relatedly, one of the largest areas participants reported experiencing changes in their mental health was within the realm of anxiety. One participant described the consistent feelings of anxiety as a result of her intersectional identities as a Black woman and her background. Specifically, Erin stated,

> Imma always put myself first but it's always just that, that feeling of anxiety and also just continue to stress that's always there……

Another participant described how her anxiety is externalized in her performance. Kennedy described,

> I think it manifests for me as like anxious, anxious perfectionism to where I feel like in academia, we're being critiqued all the time, where like, it was at one point, I couldn't even read anything without being like, what's the gap? What's the critique? How's like, I can't even enjoy things anymore.

Participants also described experiencing physical symptoms as a result of their anxiety. One participant reported feeling her anxiety as a connection between her mind and body. Gina reported,

> Draya was talking about like the mind body stuff, like I feel the symptoms of my anxieties so much more deeply like nausea. And just like when I'm not in a good mental place, the first thing that goes is taking care of my physical needs.

Collectively, these quotes reveal that graduate school produces psychophysiological changes in their mental health as a result of the stress of what it means to Black in academia. Participants

described an increase in anxiety which is consistent with their worries about how they will be treated, what they are expected to do, and how they are being evaluated. XX.

In addition to anxiety, students also reported stress associated with imposter syndrome, or the belief that their successes in graduate school would be believes that the success they have can be attributed to luck. also discovered as fraudulent. As a result, students reported internalized continuous doubt of their skills and capabilities, as suggested by Amber who reported, “Like, I was questioning myself on things I knew. And that wasn't in my nature. And I think that has been something that's been really hard for me to navigate.” Because of this constant self-doubt due to imposter syndrome, many students also talked about having to remind themselves that that they belonged in their programs. For instance, James discussed feeling as if he was constantly a “diversity hire”, highlighting the ways in which he internalized these messages that he didn’t belong in his program. As a result, he found himself doing more (e.g., working longer hours and committing to additional tasks) and overextending himself to prove his worth. He described,

> I think a lot of it in retrospect was like me trying to overcome imposter syndrome like me trying to tell myself like you belong you belong here, like you're here, good enough to be here. I was just, I was just like, pressing my head to do more and more and more. And now I'm burnt out and [explicit].

From these experiences of internalized imposter syndrome, it is important to understand that imposter syndrome is a result of having to navigate between and within systems of oppression and racism. Imposter syndrome attributes this disconnect between accomplishments and perceived ability as an individual issue, but instead reflects the places in which people are expected to learn and work. The learning and working environments are rooted in bias that places the standards for academics from marginalized groups over and above the expectations for

White academics. As more studies examine imposter syndrome, it is important to examine the impact of the system on this internalization and not simply attributing this struggle to the individual as they are expected to interact and thrive in systems developed to hold them back. Jada emphasizes a similar sentiment of challenging this idea of imposter syndrome,

> I think personally, I kind of take issue with this idea of imposter syndrome. I'm like, it's not that I think that I'm an imposter, it's that I'm hyper aware of how other people view me. And hyper aware of like, you know, how other people think that like, I'm not capable. And so, it's like, you know, I know that I earned the right to be here. I know that I can work, like run circles around these White folks. I know that I have a 4.0, like, and they don't. Um, and so I think I take issue with like the framing often of imposter syndrome, as though like, it's like, kind of like almost, I feel like often times used to gaslight, the experiences of Black people. Because like, there's a root to that. And the root is not within ourselves, the root is because like society has told us, you know, how we should feel about ourselves or people have projected, like, our unworthiness of being in these programs or our unwillingness of being in these spaces, but we've earned our right.

Necessary Coping Strategies

Students throughout the focus groups identified various strategies that were important to helping them get through and succeed amidst the ongoing stress of what it means to be Black in academia. Strategies such as having a social support system and utilizing mental health services were integral to students' ability to persevere.

Importance of Community

Community has been identified as one of the protective factors for Black graduate students. All of the participants across the six focus groups emphasized the significance of their community in helping them get through their program. Gina described how useful having community was for her,

> So, I think it's been really nice, like finding like little pockets of community in that way. And just knowing that like, even though, because I've never been anywhere else, like, where I grew up is where I went to undergrad. While here 'I've never not been in this space where it's mostly not been White people before. So, it's really nice to like, have these intentional small spaces of people who look like me and think like me, and have had life experiences like me, because I haven't always had that like growing up or under—during undergrad—or anything like that.

Participants also described the feelings of peace when they were not the only Black graduate students in their program, which increased their ability to build community. The community Tonya describes below provides some of the best experiences of her graduate school career and moments where she felt lucky to have other Black people to connect with while pursuing a graduate degree. Tonya explained,

> Yeah, like I will totally echo what you said, like the little pockets of community, I feel lucky. And this is wild, but like that my program has like three other black people in it that I can talk to and like have community with. And so, I think just some of the moments when we're sitting in our office and able to kiki or talk about things that like we understand. That's like some of the best parts.

As previously mentioned, isolation is an experience that brings negative emotions for many graduate students and more so for Black graduate students. But, for some participants,

community buffered those feelings of being isolated while pursuing their degree. James described his experience of struggling to find community while recognizing its importance in pursuing the Ph.D.,

> …Two and a half years so to kind of like, find a community where I felt comfortable. And that's a long time to kind of feel isolated, like the PhD is isolating as it is, but like, amidst the pandemic and [explicit]. Like, it's been difficult. So yeah, lack of community is a real thing. And it's been, it's been hard.

Therapy

One resource students discussed as significant for managing their mental health in graduate school was utilizing therapeutic services. One participant reflected on receiving advice prior to coming to graduate school that therapy is necessary in order to just make it through. Jada explained,

> So yeah, definitely the best advice that I got before I came to the program, everybody was like, make sure you get a therapist, make sure you get a therapist, and I was like, please, like, I'm fine. Um, but then I got into the program. And I was like, oh, this is why I needed a therapist. And thank God I wasn't hardheaded. Like I got a therapist, like when everything was fine… It's wild to think I got a therapist just to get through the program.

Students identified various stressors while in graduate school and recognized that therapy was a resource that helped improve their coping with academic demands. Kelly mentioned,

> I think for me, mine has gotten a lot better because my therapist, who is also a Black woman, she's just really good at like, bringing fresh perspective and helping me kind of like balance what I think and what actually is the truth, and like work on that kind of negative self-talk that we all sometimes fall victim to.

Another participant reported similarly about the utility of therapy in coping with the demands of graduate school. Gina focused on the internal work that was needed to cope with the experiences while simultaneously emphasizing the role of community and creating necessary boundaries in coping. She described:

> And then also just like a lot of self-reflection in therapy, like you're saying, like, I think one of the most, like, helpful realizations that I had is just like, or one of the most helpful things I think my therapist said was like, if people are not going to make like, accommodations for you, like, what are you going to do to adjust for yourself, and just realizing that like, and I have, like, all these quotes from my friends, right, like right above my desk, just like realizing the work just doesn't have to get done sometimes, doesn't have to get done now, doesn't have to get done at all.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The current study used qualitative methods and analytic techniques to identify and highlight the narratives of Black graduate students concerning their unique racial and academic stressors, and the mental health costs of attending graduate school at a PWI during the double pandemic. The current study situates the experiences of Black graduate students within the social and political climate of today. As students are navigating a double pandemic (i.e., COVID-19 and racial injustices), the impact of these experiences is contextualized and provides more understanding of the increased stress of the world and an already racist system that is academia. The intricacies of students' experiences were highlighted while emphasizing the notion that Black students are not monolithic. Specifically, from the focus groups themes such as loneliness of graduate school, the impact of racism permeating graduate programs, the mental health effect, and the compounded stress of graduate school were heavily discussed. With the understanding of the implications of experiencing racial stress, academic stress, and the cumulative effect of these stressors on Black graduate students, institutions, departments, and faculty can effectively develop strategies to combat these issues while navigating sociopolitical issues. Based upon the stories highlighted by Black graduate students, there are strategies PWIs can implement to reduce attrition and improve recruitment and retention of Black students pursuing graduate degrees at PWIs.

Consistent with previous literature identifying the significance of individual and systemic racism within academia, the current study's findings highlight the pervasiveness of racism within

higher education and the various ways in which the stress of Black graduate students exists atop these racist beginnings (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Linder et al., 2015). Within the current study, participants described experiencing racism in their departments as well as in interactions with faculty members which aligns with the literature **(**Alexander & Hermann, 2016; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Keels et al.., 2017; 2015; Nadal et al., 2010; Proctor et al., 2017, Sowell et al., 2015). Specifically, students highlighted experiences of microaggressions in which they were expected to be the spokesperson for race issues due to being the only Black student in their class, and for some, in their programs. There were also indications of secondary microaggressions such as gaslighting (i.e., single acts or a series of acts perpetrated by a person in power in order to manipulate those with less power to question their perceived experiences or to doubt themselves; Davis & Ernst, 2019; Sweet, 2019; Tobias & Joseph, 2020). An example of gaslighting mentioned by students was their grades changing as a result of their race and when questioning the decision, they were questioned more about their actual work instead of questioning the actions of the professors. As students are exposed to racial stress while matriculating through graduate school, students discussed the underpinning of racial stress with the various other stressors (i.e., academic, interpersonal, personal) students experienced. Thus, displaying the impact of race on academics and the increased toll of this interconnectivity on an already stressful experience.

As students experienced increased stress, they noticed an overall negative impact of what it means to be a Black graduate student on their mental health. Additionally, students mentioned the ways in which they noticed increased levels of anxiety as a result of being in graduate school and increased feelings of imposter syndrome due to receiving messages that they don't belong. Messaging about belongingness is rooted within racism and serves to distract and derail the

success of Black graduate students. Thus, Black graduate students began internalizing these messages and attached to the racist agenda of academic institutions, which is consistent with the literature (Evans et al., 2018; Gardner, 2013; Vickers, 2014). As students report a lack of belonging, this translated into increased feelings of isolation. Students also reported the impact of physical isolation due to the pandemic along with being the only Black person in their program. COVID-19 is embedded within the stories and perspectives students share about loneliness in graduate school. As precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as lockdowns, social distancing, and isolation were implemented, changes in students' engagement with their departments was reported. Students in previous research on the impact of the pandemic reported increased feelings of loneliness as the typical means for socializing in academic spaces was eliminated (Hopp et al., 2020; Kilgore et al., 2020). Thus, students situated their loneliness within the understanding that they either are the only one or one of few Black students or students of color within their respective programs. Experiences of social isolation were also highlighted by students not finding community within their programs and not finding community amongst other Black people. Various students identified the ideology of "all skinfolk ain't kinfolk" as a means for understanding their lack of connection to other Black students. This phrase reinforces racist ideals by creating a divide between how Blackness is expected to be displayed based upon cultural norms, and the preferred displays of Blackness deemed by institutions rooted in racist ideals. Thus, students recognized the impact of both a lack of physical connection along with a lack of social connection on their mental health and feelings of loneliness.

Participants throughout the focus groups explicitly described the loneliness that looms in the air of higher education. For Black graduate students, and specifically for some first-

generation Black graduate students, conversations about the isolation they would experience while pursuing a graduate degree were novel and non-existent. Consistent with the literature, students recognized that these feelings of loneliness were brought on by not feeling accepted by or being connected to their programs (Gardner, 2013; Vickers, 2014). Students identified feeling as though they were the "other" and lacked connection to the people and the current institution. Over and above the social lens for which we understand these experiences, Black graduate students continue to navigate the loneliness of higher education as an issue that feels personal but speaks to the inequity that exists within higher education. As Black students enroll into graduate programs, they become a part of the backdrop for higher education but remain at the "bottom of the well" (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Black students become a face for institutions (e.g., being placed on school websites to represent diversity) but still encounter the unequal and unfair treatment of systemic racism in the form of microaggressions and gaslighting, as highlighted by students in the current study. Thus, operating in the post-racial America to only use Black bodies as frames for disguising the inherently racist structures that permeate higher education.

The aforementioned inequity is further described when participants reflect on the entanglement of racial stress and academic stress. When you first enter higher education, there is no handbook for how to matriculate successfully and intact. Thus, many students reflected on the importance of community and mental health services as ways to cope with the consistent stress and demands of being an academic. Students emphasized that in order to be able to make it through, they had to get a therapist, and they suggest that this need is due to the negative toll graduate school has above and beyond mundane stress experienced day to day. Through the engagement of activities (e.g., traveling, hiking, cooking) outside of academia students were also able to find peace and recharge from their everyday stress of graduate school. The weight of

being a Black graduate student impacts all aspects of their livelihood and requires unique supports to be able to combat the inherently racist system and receive their degree.

Limitations

Despite this study's qualitative approach to studying the experiences of Black graduate students in the U.S., there are some limitations worth noting. One limitation of the current study is characteristics of the sample, such as participants being graduate students in the social sciences. As these experiences capture a subset of graduate students, it does not allow for the similarities and differences in experiences of students in different types of programs to be understood. Thus, future research should examine Black graduate students in various programs (e.g., biological sciences, social sciences, public health, JD programs, and MD programs). Expanding the current study to include other types of programs would provide more context and information to strengthen programming to support Black graduate students, while broadening our knowledge about the experiences of Black graduate students at PWIs. Another limitation of the current study is that focus group participants may have known each other prior to participating in the study. Although knowing other participants could have enhanced comfort with discussing the focus group prompts, it could have also hindered a participant's ability to feel comfortable to disclose their experiences in detail due to fear of judgement or being reprimanded (Bloor et al., 2001; Morgan, 1997). A third limitation is that focus groups were held over Zoom, which could have discouraged students from participating. In the era of COVID-19, Zoom has become a major means for communication with family members along with conducting scholarly activities. Thus, as Zoom becomes the new normal, participants may have difficulty sustaining attention, due to being at home and not being able to minimize distractions (which would be possible if focus groups were conducted in person). The increase in Zoom fatigue—exhaustion

due to increased engagement in videoconferencing (Bennett et al., 2021)— may have discouraged participation. Also, the possibility for technical difficulties could impact engagement in Zoom focus groups as some students' connections were unstable impacting the ability to hear some participants clearly. That being said, the use of Zoom also acted as a strength in the current study. The use of Zoom allowed for the recruitment of students from different geographical regions and from different programs of study—resulting in a more geographically diverse sample. Thus, future research should utilize a multimodal approach where focus groups are conducted via Zoom as well as in-person.

Implications

The brave narratives explained by Black graduate students were calls for change in higher education, and changes in the physical and metaphorical spaces that are intended to protect and nurture Black students. Thus, the implications of these stories require institutional level change and mental health care program development made accessible to Black graduate students.

Institutional Level Changes

Within academia, there has been an increased interest in recruiting diverse and underrepresented groups. Research has demonstrated that students who experience equity, justice, and inclusion report being more engaged and successful in academic environments (Walton & Cohen, 2007). However, the current spaces do not feel safe to the Black students and faculty members occupying them during pivotal years of their career (Davies et al., 2005; Person et al., 2015). Thus, from a departmental standpoint, the significance of having faculty and students of color is necessary to build community and increase feelings of safety, as Black graduate students in the focus groups mentioned. Students report that having Black and Brown

allies and accessible faculty provides validation and support for navigating the lonely environment that is graduate school. In order to build the community, there are adaptations that should be made to increase the presence of Black students and faculty. One of the methods for increasing feelings of connectedness among Black graduate students would be developing mentoring structures that would allow students to informally receive mentorship from faculty of color with the hope of creating significant connections and also establishing support networks for students outside of their current major professors (Austin, 2002; Baker & Griffin, 2010; Gasman et al., 2008;). Pietri and colleagues (2018) reported that students display an increased interest in programs that have mentors and role models of color. The responsibility of mentorship should not fall solely on faculty of color as they are already taxed and overburdened. Thus, non-Black faculty should take on the responsibility of mentoring and demystifying academia for Black students as a means for increasing students' sense of connection to the programs, as well as helping them successfully acquire their degree. Programs and departments should work to include mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training and curricula, as Black students want to be able to see themselves in the knowledge they are provided and know that the non-Black faculty they are engaging with are equipped for these interactions. Instead keeping curricula focused on historical leaders, more work should be done amongst faculty to incorporate the work of Black and minoritized scholars in the classroom (Thomas & Ashburn-Nardo, 2020). Mandatory DEI training will begin the stages for communication about what can be done to protect and mentor Black graduate students. Thus, there should be encouragement to recruit Black students into White faculty members' labs and increase social connections with Black professionals. Providing students with the ability to engage with the work of Black scholars through department visits and colloquia would allow students to build up their networks of Black

scholars while increasing feelings of community and connection to the fields they are growing in (Thomas & Ashburn-Nardo, 2020). Finally, students within the focus groups reflected on the need for more funding, which could open up opportunities that are not currently accessible to them and alleviate financial stress.

Mental Health Program Development

Many of the students within the focus groups discussed the negative impact of being in higher education on their mental health. Students reported feelings of increased anxiety and depression upon entering their programs that not only impacted them emotionally but also their academic performance and social relationships. Racism and discrimination have been identified as experiences that significantly affect the mental health of Black graduate students based upon the findings of the current study. As the stressors impacting Black students' mental health come from the environments and spaces students occupy, more culturally sensitive resources are necessary for students to better navigate mental health challenges. Due to the combination of stressors and the stigma associated with mental health in graduate school settings, institutions should do more to dismantle the structures (e.g., poor mentorship, bias from the department, climate of the program, and lack of social support; Evans et al., 2018; Hyun et al., 2006) that make graduate students reluctant to disclose their mental health difficulties.

Graduate programs should thus work to develop and support anti-racist and collectivist spaces where Black graduate students can find refuge and process their experiences of racism within their program. For instance, participants requested that I consider holding a monthly space where students can come and discuss the perils of being in academia while Black, highlighting the dire need for a space and resource for Black students navigating the terrain that is higher education. Many of the participants suggested that the focus groups created a space where they

felt comfortable and safe to discuss their experiences and suggest the utility of future process-oriented support groups.

Several participants discussed the need for increased funding to sustain the living and protected time for Black students and increased funding to the organizations that have been created to provide resources, support, and fellowship for Black students (e.g., Graduate and Professional Scholars Programming at the University of Georgia). Institutions and departments should funnel more resources into existing programs while also encouraging the development of more, as there is a desire to increase the number of BIPOC students, but current programs are not adequately supporting and nurturing Black graduate students. Thus, institutions and departments should begin to reflect on creating counterspaces for Black graduate students to build community, process, and receive support for the high levels of academic, racial, and personal stress that encompass their graduate school experiences. Counterspaces seek to provide nonjudgmental, meaningful, and authentic spaces for students to show up in their entirety while also developing relationships with likeminded individuals (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). Previous research has identified that counterspaces promote the social and emotional well-being of Black and Brown students who encounter marginalization and oppression (Case & Hunter, 2012). These counterspaces could consist of having weekly meetings after hours facilitated by a willing Black student in which they discuss their experiences within the program. Also utilizing these spaces to provide students with culturally responsive resources, such as mindfulness meditations (e.g., Black Lives Matter meditations; Watson et al., 2016) to actively cope following the emotional release of their experiences with racial stress.

Conclusion

The current research highlights what previously has been described: Black graduate students exist in a system that functions under racist ideologies and subsequently impacts the experiences and mental health of these students. Many of the issues described by participants highlight the rationale for why Black students decide to drop out or leave academia after they graduate, or if they decide to stay will be double-taxed and overburdened so much so that they will not make it to many heights. Another impact of the highlighted experiences is that Black grads may come to question themselves and their abilities, and if they decide to stay in academic spaces become more likely to internalize the biases in the system. Thus, Black graduate students continue the cycle of these biases rather than challenging and dismantling the culture/racial biases inherent in academia. As we consider the compounded stress of navigating the social and political climate of today and yesterday, it is important for programs to recognize that more work needs to be done to protect and encourage the success of Black graduate students into the realms of higher education. While conversations about diversity and inclusion remain important, the change in systems of oppression perpetuated in academia fall on the institution, faculty, and peers (Thomas et al., 2007). This change remains important for the safety and success of Black graduate students who desire to remain in higher education and become the next generation of psychologists, social workers, sociologists, and changemakers.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Participant	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Degree and Program	Location of Institution	Type of Undergrad Institution
Patrice	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Counseling Psychology	South	HBCU
Kelly	22	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Criminal Justice	Midwest	PWI
Draya	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	Masters, Social Work	Midwest	HBCU
Amber	24	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Clinical Psychology	Northeast	HBCU
Jamie	24	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD; Health Psychology	West	PWI
Melanie	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Clinical Community Psychology	Midwest	PWI
Ashley	25	Queer	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Clinical Psychology	South	PWI
Ebony	26	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Sport Psychology	Canada	HBCU
Tonya	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Clinical Psychology	South	PWI
Teyana	23	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Education Psychology	Midwest	PWI
Brittany	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Clinical Psychology	South	PWI
Alyssa	26	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Clinical Psychology	Midwest	HBCU
Brandy	27	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, School Psychology	Midwest	PWI

Participant	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Degree and Program	Location of Institution	Type of Undergrad Institution
Nicole	27	Queer	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Experimental Psychology	Midwest	PWI
Olivia	26	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Sociology	Southeast	MSI
Jordyn	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Counseling Psychology	South	HBCU
Devin	27	Queer	Cisgender Man	Masters, Public Diplomacy	West	PWI
Erin	23	Prefer not to say	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Counseling Psychology	South	HBCU
Chelsea	22	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Organizational Behavior	Northeast	PWI
Lauren	27	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Human Development and Family Sciences	Southwest	PWI
Kennedy	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Sociology	Midwest	PWI
James	24	Heterosexual	Cisgender Man	PhD, Sociology	Northeast	HBCU
Trina	24	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Sociology	South	PWI
Gina	23	Queer	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Education and Psychology	Midwest	PWI
Diana	30	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Social Work	Mid-Atlantic	PWI
Anthony	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Man	Masters, Applied Economics	Northeast	PWI

Participant	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Degree and Program	Location of Institution	Type of Undergrad Institution
Jada	25	Heterosexual	Cisgender Woman	PhD, Health Behavior and Health Education	Midwest	HBCU
Martin	28	Heterosexual	Cisgender Man	PhD, Counseling Psychology	South	HBCU
Malcolm	24	Heterosexual	Cisgender Man	PhD, Counseling Psychology	South	PWI

Table 2: Focus Group Questions

Domain	**Questions**	**Probes** **Prompts to be used for each question**
Rapport-Building Questions:	Tell us a little bit about yourself and your racial, ethnic, or cultural background. Tell us about what program you are currently in as well as what degree you are seeking? What made you pursue higher education?	
Undergraduate Institution	How do you think your undergraduate institution prepared you for graduate school? What preparation resources for graduate school were available at your undergraduate institution?	What do you wish you would have received from your undergraduate institution? What messages about higher education did you receive in undergrad?
Current Experiences/Stressors	Tell us about some of your best experiences as a Black graduate student. Tell us about some of your worst experiences as a Black graduate student. How would you characterize your stress? Academic, racial, interpersonal, personal? How have you seen this stress manifest in your life? (e.g., academic performance, relationship strain, physical health complications, mental health impacts, behavioral coping like drinking more etc.)	What about everyday experiences? How have those everyday experiences impacted you? How have these experiences impacted your motivation in graduate school? How has imposter syndrome played a role in your interactions or experiences on campus? Microaggressions vs overt experiences with peers and/or faculty?

	What has been the most difficult part of being a Black graduate student? Has our gender impacted your experiences in grad school? What about your intersecting identities (e.g., being Black and a woman)? How has the current social climate impacted your experiences?	How have you seen your gender/intersecting identities impact your experiences in graduate school?
Coping	How have you coped with being a Black graduate student at a PWI? How do your peers cope with being a Black graduate student?	Negative vs. positive coping strategies?
Mental Health Support	How has your mental health been impacted or played a role in your experiences as a Black graduate student? What changes have you noticed in your mental health if any?	What things have you done as your mental health has changed?
Current Institution Support	What social support do you have at your current institution? How do you feel about using these resources? What has your experience been? How much support do you receive from your department/advisor/cohort?	What is currently missing in the support of your institution?
Suggestions for Improving Student Support	What could your current institution do to better support you as a Black graduate student? What changes do you think are necessary for academia to support and protect Black students and students of color?	Programmatic changes, institutional changes, faculty changes, student changes?

Overall Impressions	Overall, how would you rate how much you enjoy your experience in grad school from 1-10 (1 being not enjoyable at all and 10 being extremely enjoyable) What else would you like to tell us about what it is like to be a Black student at PWI?	What is one thing you would have told yourself before starting graduate school?

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