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BEYOND ACCESS: SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN WRITING TO COMPLETE THE Ph.D.

A Dissertation Presented

By

SABRINA V. DURAND

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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College of Education
Educational Policy, Research and Administration

**BEYOND ACCESS: SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITING TO COMPLETE THE Ph.D.**

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SABRINA V. DURAND

Approved as to style and content by:

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Gretchen B. Rossman, Chair

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Jennifer Randall
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
College of Education

# DEDICATION

To my dad, Caxton Durand

Thank you.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the family, friends, teachers, mentors, co-workers and so many others who nurtured and facilitated my pursuit of a doctoral degree--thank you for seeing my potential and encouraging me to pursue an education as far as my doctorate long before I ever thought about it for myself. There are too many of you to mention in this space. I am grateful to you all.

To my father, Caxton Durand, who made the decision to send me thousands of miles from our tiny island to the U.S. at an early age for the sake of my education; a decision which he would later share with me was the most difficult he has ever had to make. Dad, as someone who was forced to leave school at such an early age because of your life circumstances, the value you place on education and your desire to have your children to become independent, critical thinkers motivated you to take some considerable risks and make huge personal sacrifices. I am grateful for your vision for your children and your courage to see it through.

Finally, special thanks also to my committee members: In producing this dissertation, I am especially grateful to my committee chair Professor Gretchen B. Rossman for her patient, yet lovingly firm encouragement to move forward, as well as her many readings, re-readings and commenting of my work to help me progress to the end. To Professor Benita J. Barnes, who started me out on this journey and without whose initial encouragement, guidance and support, I would have not made it to this point. To Professor Joya Misra for her judicious and keen feedback and input, always accompanied with an engaging smile- which inspired me to believe always that I could do this!

**ABSTRACT**

BEYOND ACCESS: SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN WRITING TO COMPLETE THE Ph.D.

MAY 2018

SABRINA V. DURAND, B.A., CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

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Directed by: Professor Gretchen B. Rossman

Success in the doctoral context has traditionally been measured by persistence. However,
solely equating doctoral persistence with success overlooks salient academic experiences
that may address how to assist different students in successfully negotiating and
navigating the emotionally complex and complicated terrain of graduate school (Gardner,
2009). Sense of Belonging provides an expanded lens through which to view student
success in the doctoral context. This qualitative study explores Black/African American
women doctoral student's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging and how it impacts
their academic experience during the dissertation phase. A narrative approach using semi
structured interviews was used. Data collection involved a one-phase semi-structured
interview protocol, supplemented with journal memos and participant portraits. Findings
demonstrate that Sense of Belonging as experienced by these doctoral students is
complex and often impacted by multiple layers of the institution including the discipline,
department, lab, cohort and faculty advisor; each one of these are increasingly more
salient for students during the dissertation phase. The need for doctoral programs to
create a more engaging and nurturing environment which is inclusive of diverse and
traditionally underrepresented students remains a priority.

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# CHAPTER 1

# WOMEN AT THE DOCTORAL LEVEL

## Introduction

American women of all backgrounds and experiences have struggled long and hard to gain access to, and equality in, higher education (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Thelin, 2011; Solomon, 1985). Traditionally, women have been viewed as outsiders in higher education. When our Founding fathers set out to establish their first institutions of higher education in the rapidly changing landscape of the early American Republic, they were assured of one component, who belonged: Elite, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men belonged; women, and certainly non-white women, did not (Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2011). Gradually, enrollment among students who were once denied this privilege because of gender, race, class, and/or tradition was revisited and would result in providing women greater educational access (Solomon, 1985). Yet, access to higher education did not immediately make all women insiders (Grant & Simmons, 2008). African American/ Black women would struggle to gain access to, and equality in, academe long after their white female counterparts. Studies that have focused on the lived experiences of African American/Black women in academe have summed up their experiences as students whose educational experiences are impacted by multiple marginalities (Ellis, 2001; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Turner, 2002). In fact, Collins (1986) observes that the educational experiences of Black women, whether as professionals or students is often negatively impacted by what she terms as their "outsider within" status. Couched in this idea is the recognition that Black women, even after overcoming numerous barriers to gain access to academe, often retain a marginal

position on the inside (Harris, 2007). An "outsider within" status is one of marginality which compels African American/ Black scholars to continue to search for a place and importance in academe long after gaining access to the academy. Collectively, too many women operate on the margins of academe (Gay, 2004; Nettles & Millett, 2006), often at the expense of their overall psychological well-being (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor & Uzzi, 2000).

Women and Expanded Access

Collectively, women scholars are no longer a minority across all levels of higher education. At the graduate level, the number of women from various backgrounds and college-going experiences has been rapidly rising (Gardner, 2008; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004) and have now earned much of the doctoral degrees in each year since 2009 (Council of Graduate Schools, 2016). For the eighth year in a row, in 2016, women earned most doctoral degrees awarded at U.S. universities. Women earned or 52.1% of the 78,744 doctoral degrees awarded in 2016 compared to 47.9% awarded to men (Council of Graduate Schools, 2016). Even among the most underrepresented students, over the course of past ten years, women were among the top degree recipients. For example, Latinas earned 55% of all doctoral degrees awarded to Latino students in 2013, and Black/African American women earned 65% of all doctoral degrees awarded to Black/African American students (NCES, 2014). Indeed, African American/Black women's enrollment in graduate programs has more than tripled in the past ten years making them among the fastest growing group of students pursuing doctoral degrees (NCES, 2014). Women of all backgrounds increasing presence and performance as scholars, relative to their male counterparts has motivated some observers to contend that

the "leaky pipeline" metaphor traditionally used to describe women's traditionally

tenuous position in higher education no longer holds true (Van Norden, 2015). Yet,

expanded access to higher education has not necessarily made all doctoral students feel

that they are welcomed or Belong (Gay, 2004; Herzig, 2004).

Men's and Women's Experiences

While it is certainly true that Black/African American women have made

important strides in higher education--particularly when considered against the historical

backdrop of social policies and practices intent on excluding them from these very

institutions (Johnson-Bailey, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009) -- numbers alone reveal an

incomplete story about their educational experiences at the graduate level (Grant &

Simmons, 2008; Herzig, 2004; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor & Uzzi, 2000).  For example, when

compared with their white male and female counterparts who traditionally have been the

highest degree earners, Black women still complete fewer doctoral degrees in certain

disciplines (NCES, 2016).  Additionally, most women, and certainly Black/African

American women, who begin a doctoral program leave before completing their degrees

(Ellis, 2001; Lovitts, 2001; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Unfortunately, women scholars leaving their graduate programs before getting

their degree is not a new phenomenon in higher education. Research on graduate student

experiences suggests that doctoral programs are marked by high attrition rates among all

students, irrespective of gender or race (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2000; 2005).  For

example, Golde (2000, 2005) and Gardner (2008), in separate studies, found that about

50 percent, and in some disciplines as high as 67%, of matriculated doctoral students in

general never finish.  Although numbers continue to vary by discipline, departure rates

have been estimated to range from 30 to as high as 70 % with the highest rates in humanities and social sciences versus the natural and physical sciences (Herzig, 2004). Further, many women who persist to graduation are likely to take a distressingly much longer time than their male counterparts (Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004); this is more the case with Black/African American women compared with all other groups. Remarkably, this trend is happening although most doctoral students arrive on campus equipped with the skills needed to successfully meet the academic rigors of their respective programs (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001).

Research indicates that students experience the complex doctoral journey in distinct ways at each stage (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Grover, 2007; Nettles & Millett, 2006) and can be in the same graduate programs and yet have strikingly different experiences (Lovitts, 2001). Thus, different women will have differing experiences in the same programs, and men and women face different challenges during their doctoral studies (Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2012). Moreover, the literature suggests that there is a very male structure to Ph.D. programs (Gardner, 2008; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor & Uzzi, 2000), and when men enroll, they become quickly immersed and included in their programs in ways that some women never do (e.g. Gardner, 2008).

Unlike their male counterparts, women face unique barriers that make the doctoral experience especially challenging and as a result are more likely to report higher levels of stress (Herzig, 2010; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). In her study of over 800 doctoral students, Lovitts (2001) recognized that the experiences of women in graduate school were significantly different than those of their male peers. For example, women

were seven times more likely than men to experience discrimination. Women were also less likely than men to receive teaching or research assistantships even though their incoming GPAs were higher, and they were often told to choose between their family and their doctoral program. Also, while attrition is unacceptably high among doctoral students—men and women—it tends to be higher among women, and highest among traditionally underrepresented students such as Black/African American women.

Certainly, this state of being should be of vital concern particularly when the research on the graduate experience highlights "a prevailing academic culture that provides inadequate direction and guidance for women, thereby eroding their self-confidence" (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, Neuschatz, & Uzzi, 2000; p. 83). Some scholars aptly note that regarding women's experiences, it is more than simply one of persistence but a more "subtle one of whether women have a graduate experience that is of a high quality" (Etzkowitz, et al., 1992, p. 158). For many doctoral women, isolation and alienation takes its greatest toll and some students may either leave or maintain a marginal position on the inside (Harris, 2007). Several reasons have been cited why this is problematic: Added to the great financial loss for students and institutions is the enormous negative psychological impact this can have on individual lives (Ampaw & Jaeger (2011). Some scholars contend that this variation in women's experiences makes pursuing a degree a less attractive option and takes away from the time women may have to contribute to the professional role (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004).

African American/Black women's ongoing perilous position

While navigating through graduate school in pursuit of a terminal degree is a challenging endeavor for most students, irrespective of gender or race, it is especially

striking in the experiences of African American/ Black women  and other students of color (e.g. Ellis, 2001; Gasman, Hirchfield & Vultaggio, 2008; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Students of color experience many core aspects of graduate education differently than their White peers (Ellis, 2001; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez,  2011; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Although institutional and departmental culture is of considerable concern to the persistence of all students, the entrenched practices and norms of dominant departmental cultures have led to higher departure rates for women and minorities (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Lovitts, 2001). For example, attrition rates of students from traditionally underrepresented racial and economic backgrounds have been reported at higher rates across disciplines (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005).  African American/Black women's overall completion rates, particularly when compared to White and Asian women, remain disproportionately low, pointing to what's been confirmed by some scholars as an inequitable experience for these students (Ellis, 2001; Gardner, 2008; Grant & Simmons, 2008;  Johnson-Bailey, Cervero & Bowles, 2009; Nettles, 1990).

Certainly, the research is clear that race and class are salient factors in the educational experience and are intertwined with gender in ways that can determine and negatively shape women's educational experience (Ellis, 2004: Felder 2010; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). Given that Black women occupy many social identities that strongly intersect and influence their educational experiences, their expectations of, and experiences through, the doctoral process will be appreciably different than that of their male counterparts (Ellis, 2001).

Again, in the few studies that have focused on the experiences of Black/African

American women in academe, there is a recurring theme of a campus experience shaped by multiple marginalities that include isolation, lack of support and lowered sense of self (Ellis, 2001; Gasman, Hirchfield & Vultaggio, 2008; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004).  Furthermore, completion rates for women doctoral candidates who are African American, Latina, Native American, or Alaskan Native have lagged when compared to their white, Asian American female and male counterparts (Chronicle of Higher Ed., 2014). Gasman, Hirchfield and Vultaggio (2008) used a sample of 67 graduate students, 40 of whom were recent graduates, to explore what has/had been the nature of the graduate school experiences of Black graduate students. As previous research has confirmed, the most difficult aspects of these students' academic journey was not the academic rigor as much as it was the academic climate (e.g. Gay, 2004). Students described the overall climate of institution and department as one that caters to the values of white privilege and is often marked by hostility; a finding consistent with previous research regarding Black students as well as other students from traditionally underrepresented groups (Ellis, 2001; Gardner, 2008; Gonzalez, 2006).  Students' experiences were characterized as hard, particularly because of an isolation they experienced by both faculty and their cohort.

Regrettably, the themes of marginality and isolation are familiar themes highlighted in the few studies on this population.  Perhaps this is why in academe, the notion of 'Belonging' is a recurring and increasingly important theme for Black/African American women;  particularly at a time when their enrollment and participation in higher education is on the rise.  Consequently, building students' Sense of Belonging at the doctoral level has been proposed as an important feature of an equitable graduate

experience (Collins, 1986; Strayhorn, 2012). Indeed, like every student in academe, Black/African American women's need to feel a Sense of Belonging is tied to their overall progress, performance, psychological well-being and academic success.

To Belong is to Matter

Within the higher education context, the notion of Belonging signifies the degree to which students are fully supported and integrated into the overall academic and social culture of their department (Strayhon, 2012). Educational scholars have suggested the significance of Sense of Belonging to the doctoral experience (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012). In her seminal study on doctoral student attrition, Lovitts (2001) proposed that the alarmingly high attrition rates characteristic of doctoral programs could be explained in part because of students' lack of integration or sense of fit in their programs, departments and/or disciplines. Additional research has shown that the importance of Sense of Belonging is particularly important for women and other students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds (White & Nonnamaker, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). Moreover, the research also highlights that there are often several obstacles women face in developing a Sense of Belonging (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Felder, 2010). Although we know Sense of Belonging is an important factor in contributing to overall student development and success, more studies are needed to unpack the concept—particularly as it relates to different students' perceptions at different levels of higher education.

At the graduate level, social and academic integration into the department and discipline is a defining characteristic of the graduate student experience and is considered one of the most critical aspects of graduate student success (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). However, a graduate student can have some level of integration and an understanding of

the mores of a graduate department and remain in many ways as an outsider in that setting. Golde's research (1998) on doctoral students suggests that the degree to which students incorporate not only a sense of themselves as having the interests and skills to achieve, but also a sense of being accepted and valued by the educational institution is central to this idea of Belonging. The two together are critical to doctoral women's level of performance and can impact in very important ways their decision to remain in their graduate program. Additionally, for women, and African American/Black women who have endured a long history of policies intent on restricting their access and integration into academe, building their Sense of Belonging may be intimately tied to having a graduate experience that is as high a quality as most majority students.

In what was their groundbreaking assessment of the undergraduate experience almost thirty years ago, scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990; p.48) observed, "Many students, perhaps most, experience the academic community in only momentary and marginal ways." Carnegie scholars acknowledged the need to increase student's Belonging in their classrooms and in the broader campus culture as a means of facilitating their overall success. Accordingly, in the higher education context, Sense of Belonging is said to play a critical role in a student's overall development and success as a scholar (Hausmann, Schoefield & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012).

The role of diverse women in shaping our country's educational landscape has become increasingly important as national demographic trends continue to shift toward women of color becoming part of the increasing diversity of the student body. Moreover, in the recent re-awakening of racial upheaval on American campuses, a call has been

reissued for more faculty of color; a call that will be difficult to respond to given that most still operate on the margins of academia.  The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of African American/Black women students regarding their Sense of Belonging and how this in turns impacts their overall experience at the doctoral level. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of African American/Black women students regarding their Sense of Belonging during the dissertation stage of their doctoral journey?

2. What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in relation to their perception of Belonging at the doctoral level?

Sub-questions:

3. How do African American/Black women perceive their background characteristics as impacting their Sense of Belonging?

4. What support systems do African American/Black women attribute to facilitating their Sense of Belonging while working on their dissertation?

5. What aspects of African American/Black women's doctoral experiences facilitate their perceptions of their Sense of Belonging?

Considering the visibly growing challenges with which  Black/ African American women at the doctoral level are confronted, more focus should be on more fully understanding the extent to which they feel a Sense of Belonging.  For African American/ Black women, a better understanding will hopefully motivate educational practitioners to foster an environment that provide opportunities to allow the best graduate educational experience for this group of scholars; such an experience is likely only when students feel that  they are respected, their experiences are valued and, they are well integrated into, and supported by, their departments and institutions.

## Definitions of Terms

*Sense of Belonging (SOB) and Belonging* are used interchangeably and generally have many meanings. For the purposes of this study, I use Strayhorn's (2012, p. 17) operational definition of Sense of Belonging as a "basic human need and motivation sufficient to influence behavior and refers to student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (Strayhorn, 2012).

*Black/African American* - the terms are used to be inclusive since Black women who come to North America from other countries are considered Black regardless of their country of origin. These will include those who identify as being of African descent but may be born in the diaspora (Europe, Caribbean, North and South America) and living or studying in the United States. Use of this term does not presume that all women who fall under this umbrella have the same experience; rather this is more a way of representing a group who share the common experience in the United States (Brown, 2015; Ellis 2001)

*Latina* refers to women who identify themselves as being of Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South America or Central American descent. Some of these women are of African-descent. The term Latina is used rather than Hispanic to acknowledge the increased preference for this pan-ethnic identity (Brown, 2015; Lopez & Gonazalez-Barrera, 2016; Nieves-Squires, 1991).

*Women of Color* - In this study, I define *women of color* as those who identify as Black/African American, Latina, American Indian, Asian American, and Multiracial/Multiethnic.

The term *under-represented* refers to Black/African American, Latino/a, and American Indian people and Multiracial/Multiethnic women.

## Theoretical Orientation

The impetus for this study is grounded in the concept of Sense of Belonging which at the doctoral level is highlighted as facilitating students' success and overall quality of experience (Nettles & Millet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2012). The literature suggests that doctoral students are undergoing an intense developmental change that takes them from the role of a novice through several stages or phases to become a full-fledged

member of a professional academic community (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Felder, 2010; Gardner, 2007, 2008; Golde, 2000; Sweitzer, 2009; Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001). How well students are integrated into the complex ways of knowing, of doing, and of experiencing the graduate context are improved by programs and departments that act to positively increase women's Sense of Belonging. A student's Sense of Belonging--that is, the extent to which a student feels a sense of fit, feels supported and is valued in their college environment-- is positively correlated with their motivation to persist (Hoffman, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). For the purposes of this study, I use one of Strayhorn's (2012) operational definition of Sense of Belonging as a both a need and motivation and is conditioned by environmental and institutional factors. Specifically, Strayhorn (2012, p.17) defines Belonging to student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group ( e.g. campus community) or others on campus ( e.g. faculty, peers). Baumeister and Leary (1995) contend that so important is having a sense of Belonging that there are potentially adverse consequences for those who lack it that include heightened anxiety, stress, maladjustment and even potential health problems. Accordingly, some researchers have argued that the need to Belong is perhaps among the most fundamental human needs and can significantly impact the overall quality of one's psychological and physical well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.497).

Thus, given that Sense of Belonging carries such tremendously profound implications in the educational context, its significance cannot be dismissed.

## Significance of Study

This study is significant to higher education in many ways. First, relatively few studies seek to understand the overall experiences of African American/Black women and this study addresses this gap by making these doctoral scholars the focal point of study. This study may also be useful in suggesting how the doctoral experience can be improved for Black/ African American students and help to answer questions more specifically about what types of support they need to succeed in their doctoral programs. For example, what features of these doctoral students' experiences rest with faculty and which aspects rests elsewhere? How are faculty and student relationships, particularly within the Advisor/Advisee dyad, being played out in the academic context? What type of mentoring relationships as evidenced in the experiences of these students are effective? In what other areas could attention be paid to improve the experience of these doctoral students—i.e. office space, policies and practices? What specific resources should be placed across different areas of departments, disciplines and the broader institutional context to facilitate the success of these students? Furthermore, it is likely that Black/African women doctoral students will themselves learn new ways to strategically think about and better navigate their doctoral experience. Moreover, graduate departments could benefit considerably from understanding more fully the range of doctoral experiences for Black/ African American women who, despite their increasing numbers in the graduate context, continue to maintain a marginal status.

Actually, in the fall of 2016, UMass Amherst conducted a campus-wide Climate Survey (https://www.umass.edu/diversity/sites/default/files/Abridged-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf ). Survey results underscored that Black graduate students experienced the

lowest levels of Sense of Belonging and felt little or no connection to their respective colleges. Consequently, university leaders articulated the critical need to take a closer look at this group of graduate students to understand why they are having considerably more negative experiences than their peers. Thus, findings of the Survey further highlight the significance of this study to understand the nature of the doctoral experience for Black/African students from their lived experiences so as to put forth better practices that will allow for a more equitable and inclusive experience. Given the troubling findings with regards to graduate students low Sense of Belonging in the University's recent campus-wide Climate Survey, the need to study this group is evident.

Finally, few studies have attempted to understand Sense of Belonging from the lived experiences of doctoral women in the context of diverse demographics and experiences. This study will add needed insight to the relatively few qualitative explorations of Black/ African American women's experiences and their Sense of Belonging at the doctoral level. Educational success at all levels is a complex process and effective and enduring change in doctoral programs will come about when institutions of higher education come to feel more keenly their responsibility in making immediate and purposeful change in a context that unfortunately benefits some and excludes others. A critical step towards creating a nurturing environment where all students can succeed is to learn from the multifaceted interactions of student experiences. This study was designed with this purpose in mind.

## Organization of the Study

Method

      This was a qualitative study, a method ideal for exploring and understanding the multifaceted experiences of diverse scholars at the doctoral level. Generally, qualitative methods are intended to achieve depth of understanding (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Importantly, qualitative analysis provides a strong complement to previous quantitative studies on Sense of Belonging in the doctoral context and provides a unique interpretation of the African American doctoral experience at this institution (Nettles & Millet, 2006).   As mentioned earlier, the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst), where I conducted this study, implemented an online campus-wide Climate Survey during the fall semester of 2016.  Conducted approximately during the same time of my study,  the purpose of the study was "to help the University understand the challenges of creating a respectful and inclusive campus environment" (UMass Climate Survey Abridged Report, p.2).  Sense of Belonging was one of the five core dimensions measured among all segments of the campus community -- Undergraduates, graduates, faculty and staff-.  Although, Sense of Belonging varied considerably among all segments of the campus population, Black graduate students rated among the lowest in having a Sense of Belonging. According to the report, this group of students "to a great extent … fell among the "extreme low" of less than one tenth percent" (p.9).  Overall, Sense of Belonging was highest among undergraduates and white males.   In part, the report concluded that although there was a generally high level of satisfaction with campus climate, satisfaction varied considerable when it came to race and ethnicity and provided cause for concern.  Moreover, importance and need to consider the "specific contexts in

which these populations exist on campus-- given that they are likely related to specific experiences on this campus" was also reinforced (Abridged Report, p. 43).

UMass Amherst ranks among the top major public research universities in the United States. Roughly 7,000 students are pursuing their graduate degrees at UMass Amherst contributing to the 30 thousand undergraduate and graduate students. UMass Amherst has a progressive research agenda and has 1,300 full-time instructional faculty and 48 doctoral programs in nine schools and colleges (University website, 2018). In the fall 2016, when the Climate Survey was conducted, the total campus graduate student population (Master's and Doctoral students) was 4,022 students attesting to the increasing growth of the graduate student population.

Description of Participants

African American /Black women students at the doctoral level who attend UMass Amherst composed the sample for this study. The term Black/African American is used to be inclusive of the diverse women who identify as being of African descent. All the women, four of whom are international students, identified as Black or African American and were diverse in all sorts of ways. Four of the women came from an academic background where they were not the first in their families to attend college. For three of the women, English was not their first language and interestingly for one woman, English was her fourth language. Four women were married at their time of their enrollment, and another woman married at the completion of her comprehensive exams. These scholars were all in the advanced (dissertation) stage of their doctoral journey and most had been part of their programs for over six years. Advanced doctoral students were selected to get

an understanding of these women's experiences and interpretation close to the end of

their programs.

I conducted a total of twelve semi-structured interviews lasting between an hour

to an hour and a half.  Individual interviews were scheduled at a mutually agreeable

location on campus and were transcribed verbatim. Experiences related to the women's

overall doctoral experience and Sense of Belonging were collected through these in-

person semi-structured interviews. Given the relatively small pool of women from which

to choose, I used snowball sampling to add to my number of participants.  Once I

interviewed a participant, I asked if she could recommend other individuals who might

want to share their experiences (Creswell, 2012). Once a student recommended a peer, I

followed up with an invitation email (*See Appendix C*) which provided an overview of

the study and an invitation to take part in the study.  My approach in conducting this

study followed the ethical standards and guidelines set forth by the institution's IRB

Board.  I supplemented my interviews with a journal with observations and insights about

the participants as well as my reactions and insights of the interview process.  I asked the

participants open-ended questions related to their doctoral experiences and their

perceptions of their Sense of Belonging of the academic environment. Given this format

the women could allow the conversation to flow on experiences in their journey they

regarded as most important in their doctoral experience.

Also, as part of the analysis process, I wrote individual *Portraits of the*

participants and used these to illustrate varied aspects of emerging themes in their

experiences.  While the focus of each *Portrait* varies, there is a shared theme of the

challenges and tension of their experiences with their Sense of Belonging throughout

each one.  What this means, particularly with the primary themes, is that any one of the *Portraits* could be used to highlight some aspect of that theme.  However, I use specific *Portraits* of my choosing to highlight and frame six primary themes:  (1) Existing on the Margins; (2) Hostile and Nurturing Spaces; (3) Support Systems; (4) Advising and Mentoring Relationships; (5) Persisting with Purpose, and (6) Authentic Selves. Moreover, in presenting these themes, I organized these topics into three larger clusters: 1) Institutional, 2) Interpersonal, and 3) Individual headings.  For each topic, I begin by discussing that theme briefly and use a *Portrait* to illustrate 2-3 key ideas.

Presentation of Key Findings

All the participants suggest that Sense of Belonging is critical to promoting their scholarship, emotional well-being, and intellectual and social development as doctoral students which is consistent with previous research (e.g. Strayhorn, 2012). The experiences of nine of the twelve women also support previous research which asserts that Black/ African American students often do not have a Sense of Belonging to their departments and programs and are faced with numerous challenges that hinder integration into, and connection with their departments (e.g. Ellis, 2001; Herzig, 2004). The participants describe their perceptions of faculty behavior as having a significant impact on their Sense of Belonging and overall development. Three women cite that their initial Sense of Belonging were fostered by their relationships with their advisor and the support provided by their nurturing departments was crucial to cultivating this feeling. Most of the participants discussed how their involvement and collaboration with peers--- whether with students from their cohort or the broader academic community, directly

affected their Sense of Belonging and academic progress. Indeed, for most of the women, their peers were most influential in providing them with a Sense of Belonging. Participant's responses highlight the dynamics associated with interacting with faculty and students within the context of their programs.

Collectively, the organization of this dissertation is as follows: In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature relevant to the doctoral student experience which include some of the ongoing challenges that impact all doctoral students. This overview serves as a segue to highlight how these challenges are often magnified among traditionally underrepresented students such as Black/African American women. In Chapter 3, I present an overview of research design used for this study on Sense of Belonging among Black/African American women at the doctoral level that details the collection and analysis of data as well as description of participants that comprised the study's sample and procedures taken for optimizing the quality of the research.

In Chapter 4, I explore the themes that highlight this study's findings which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5. In the concluding chapter, I sum up the findings of this study and turn back to my starting point: What have we learned from this study about Black/African American women's Sense of Belonging at the doctoral level, particularly in the final stage of their dissertation? In summarizing my major findings, I discuss some key themes in the women's experiences and suggest that Sense of Belonging as a predictor of persistence and success as detailed in previous studies, in some ways, minimizes the experiences of these women scholars who persist while being on the margins. Moreover, I revisit the role of faculty and student mentoring within the context of nurturing departments and its connection to contributing to the authentic self -- a

feeling that is the core of Sense of Belonging for the women in this study.  In conclusion, I emphasize that Sense of Belonging is vital in fostering the overall quality and long term success of Black/African American women in the doctoral context. Finally, I explore the personal and policy implications of findings for educational practitioners.

Summary

This study explored Black/African American doctoral women scholars' perceptions of their Sense of Belonging and its impact on their lived experiences during the dissertation phase of their graduate journey.  In this chapter, I introduced the background of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, the significance of the study, limitations and definition of terms. Additionally, I outlined some details about the study's design, research methods, sample and some of the key findings and conclude with a summary of the overall organization of the study.   In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature relevant to the doctoral student experience including some of the ongoing challenges that impact all doctoral students. Finally, I end with a general review of Sense of Belonging and its importance to enriching the overall quality of the doctoral experience for Black/ African women and potentially all doctoral students.

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I present a review of the literature relevant to the doctoral student experience, specifically as it relates to the importance of Sense of Belonging to the overall success of African American/Black women.  First, I explore briefly the stages of progression through the doctoral process and follow this with a review of attrition at the doctoral level.  Next, I discuss some of the ongoing challenges and institutional deterrents confronting all doctoral students, irrespective of gender or race, as a segue into an overview of some differences in experiences between different groups of doctoral studentsl.  Lastly, I follow this overview with an introduction of Sense of Belonging as the conceptual framework used to guide this study.

## **The Stages of Doctoral Study**

The doctoral experience is a complex and dynamic process in which student success is traditionally recognized as program completion and getting the doctorate (Felder, 2010).  Traditionally, there are three distinct phases/-stages of progression in the doctoral journey-the Transition, Development and Research or Dissertation stages-- each with its own challenges (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Grover, 2007).  Some educational scholars assert that previous research on doctoral experience have largely ignored these doctoral stages and in doing so have presented a partial portrait of the doctoral experience (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011). During these different doctoral stages, students are having varied experiences with faculty, graduate/research assistantships, courses, and peers during (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011).  Thus, upon entry into the doctoral program the novice scholar is expected to advance to the final stage where students

complete their research and defend their dissertation. These stages not only mark

transitions from one level of coursework to another for doctoral students but also marks

different developmental shifts, needs, and  skills sets that often take place in student's

experiences (Gardner, 2008; Weidman, Twale, Stein, 2001).  The dissertation stage is a

period in the doctoral journey when relationships with the advisor and the department is

particularly critical given the long, complex, isolating and often intimidating independent

work required during this final stage (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Felder, 2010).  Grover (2007)

notes that while each stage requires a unique set of knowledge, skills and strategies to

successfully navigate through the process, these skills are not mutually exclusive; instead,

they build on one another and can have considerable implications for the student's

progress.  If, for varied reasons, a doctoral scholar is not able to initiate and develop a

trusting relationship with an advisor in the first or second stages, the likelihood of seeing

the culmination of this faculty-student relationship manifested in the final stage is

improbable.

Admission through to the first year of coursework marks the first or Transition

phase of a doctoral program (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011). Coursework continues during the

second year where students begin to work independently on their research interests

towards achieving candidacy in the  Development phase.  The Development phase  is a

time when students are expected choose a dissertation topic in her respective field; this

phase has been identified in one important body of research as being an instrumental

stage for students of color as well as a particularly troublesome (Ampaw & Jaeger,

2011).  The Final or Dissertation stage, which follows, marks the time where students

complete their research and defend their dissertation (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011;  Grover,

2007). Previous research suggests that the dissertation phase is often the most difficult time for many students and also a time when many students complete their required coursework, but not their dissertation (e.g. Gardner, 2005; Grover, 2007). Some scholars highlight that during the final stage students experience the climax of their abilities and that relationships with faculty, mentors, and advisers is key to shape successful completion for students (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Felder,2010). Though relatively more attention has traditionally been given to the first, or Transitional doctoral phase, particularly as a time to help students transition into varied aspects of their new environment and thereby lessen the likelihood of attrition, doctoral students do drop out at any stage (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Grover, 2011). In their longitudinal study, Ampaw and Jaeger (2011) reviewed admission transcripts from a sample of 2,068 doctoral students. The sample consisted of 61% male and 39% female comprising 61% Whites, 27% Asians, and 12% Minorities who enrolled at the institution between the academic years of 1994/1995 and 1998/1999 and observed over a 10-year degree completion rate; more than 50% of attrition occurred during the Development stage. Moreover, the results suggests that students of color were more likely to drop out during the Development stage of their doctoral education.

Although the Developmental phase is highlighted as an 'instrumental' phase for Minority Students, (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011), some scholars contend that the Dissertation or final stage is the most difficult of the doctoral journey (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Gardner, 2005; 2008; Grover, 2007). Part of this difficulty, some scholars posit, stems from the fact that it is during the dissertation stage that doctoral students' work as an independent scholar begins in earnest (Gardner, 2008). This level of independence often means that

students are working in isolation and with little, if any, structure, support system and guidance. Moreover, Gardner (2008) asserts that student's feelings of isolation so prevalent during this stage is likely intensified by the culture of the discipline. Similarly, Ampaw & Jaeger (2011) note that funding and varied external commitments continue to be significant concerns for doctoral students who are likely balancing a host of other responsibilities that include family and work, making academic life during this final phase a more daunting and stressful experience. Some have argued that while doctoral programs by their very design often lack structure, this void is often heightened in the dissertation phase (e.g. Ali & Kohun, 2007; Grover, 2007). In part, this might explain why some graduate students leave without completing their degrees during this phase. Although, it is in this stage that successful completion of the dissertation results in obtaining the doctoral degree, the completion of the dissertation is often a challenge that many doctoral students never meet. This occurrence of drop-out, or attrition, appears to have a tenacious grip at the doctoral level.

## Attrition in the Doctoral Context

Regrettably, doctoral students dropping out at various stages of their programs before receiving their degree has become an all too familiar part of the doctoral experience. Consequently, graduate programs are considered less than ideal, given that far too many students leave their doctoral programs before completing their degrees (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006). Although previous studies have highlighted the multifaceted nature of doctoral attrition (Golde, 2005; Nettles and Millett, 2006), some of the earliest seminal research on this topic has been unequivocal in its declaration that most students who enter doctoral programs have

the capability to successfully complete their studies (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Lovitts, 2001).  Though it has been widely accepted that attrition happens primarily during the first year of the doctoral journey, more recent research suggests that attrition can, and does, happen at any stage in the doctoral journey (Ali & Kohum, 2007; Gardner, 2008).  Interestingly, attrition at the doctoral level is among one of the major concerns and widely studied topics in higher education (e.g. Gardner, 2008), relatively little change has been seen in its impact.  In truth, attrition at the doctoral has been an ongoing concern to the extent that it is regarded by some scholars as a "fundamental weakness of doctoral education" (Lovitts & Cary, 2000, p.45); some scholars have estimated that about 40,000 or 50% of students per year drop out from doctoral programs before completing their degrees (e.g. Ali & Kohun, 2007).  However, numbers may vary given that several factors impact attrition rates.  In some disciplines, numbers have ranged from 40% to as high as close to 70% (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006).  While exact figures have sometimes been difficult to pinpoint, studies have consistently identified a national average of fifty percent (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Ampaw & Jaeger; 2012; Powers 2004). On average, this means that only one of two students who enroll in a doctoral program will successfully complete their degree (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012).  "Alarming" is one of many adjectives used to describe the remarkably high rate of doctoral attrition (Gardner, 2009, p. 97).  Moreover, the research has confirmed that while there are many reasons to be concerned about high attrition at the doctoral level, the most important concern is that "it can ruin individual lives" (Lovitts, 2001, p. 6).

Lovitts' (2001) seminal study of student departure at the doctoral level remains particularly relevant given its impact in  helping to shift the focus of early departure from

the student to the student context.  Lovitts (2001) suggested that the longstanding

departure problem at the doctoral level persists because institutions focus primarily on

incoming student characteristics rather than the culture of the academic departments

which they enter.  Golde (2005) built on this premise in a qualitative case study in which

she interviewed 58 *non-completers* from varied academic departments to understand how

discipline practices may impact students' decisions to leave their programs. Golde (2005)

identified six themes that contributed to doctoral attrition and were fueled solely by

department culture and practices.  Additionally,  Golde' s(2005) findings suggests that

departments are the primary lens through which doctoral students gage their graduate

experience and  will ultimately be a deciding factor in their decisions to persist.   While

the reasons for doctoral attrition are as diverse as the students themselves, "a good deal of

attrition," Golde (2005, p. 670) asserts, "is unnecessary and preventable."


Doctoral Students and Attrition

To be clear, attrition impacts all doctoral students.  Attrition occurs in every

department and discipline (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005) and it impacts all students at all

stages. Likewise,  attrition rates are likely higher among certain students and in certain

disciplines (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millet, 2006). For example, previous

research specifies that dropout rates tend to be lower in the sciences and higher in the

humanities (Golde 2005; Nettles & Millet, 2006); these studies have identified lows of

20% in sciences and higher rates of 70% in the humanities and social sciences (Golde

2005; Nettles & Millet, 2006).   Furthermore, attrition is impacted by gender, nationality,

and race/ethnic background of the student (e.g. Gardner, 2009). Although previous

research on graduate student experiences suggests that doctoral programs are marked by high attrition rates among all students, irrespective of gender or race, some of this research notes that women, and particularly Black women, are often least likely to complete their doctoral journey (Nettles, 1990; Ellis, 2001; Gardner, 2008); attrition rates are often higher among women minority students (Ellis, 2001). Moreover, men generally complete at higher rates than women and white students have the overall highest rates of completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Nevertheless, attrition is often felt most keenly among the Black/ African American student population which continues to remain largely underrepresented at the doctoral level and in the educational research literature (Ellis, 2001; Gonzalez, 2006; Gardner, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Even as they persist, most of these students do not feel a sense of fit and often operate on the margins of academe. Consequently, Felder and Barker (2014, p. 80) contend that "while the number of degrees attained has increased over generations, the representation of African American doctoral recipients remain a cause for concern."

Different students, Different Experiences

This idea of existing on the margins highlights how student success in higher education is conditional and can vary significantly depending on multiple intersecting identities that include gender, race, and social class (Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, Cervero & Bowles, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). For example, gender and race intersect, such that women of color experience graduate education differently than men of color or white women or men (Ellis, 2001). What happens to doctoral students on campus (i.e., how they relate to the institution and the institution relates to them) then determines to a great degree the tenor of their educational experience. It appears then that all students, male, female and

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students of diverse backgrounds, experience doctoral programs differently.  For example, in her seminal work *Leaving the Ivory Tower*, Lovitts (2001) used a sample of over 800 doctoral students and found that different students had significantly different experiences. Women, for example, were seven times more likely than men to experience discrimination and were less likely than their male counterparts to receive teaching or research assistant positions even though their incoming GPAs were higher. This experience was echoed in a qualitative study conducted by Ellis (2001) using a sample of 42 Black and White graduates of doctoral programs and 25 currently enrolled students. Specifically, Black women reported significantly poorer relationships with their advisor, higher levels of isolation, and a lack of connection with their graduate community than their white peers. Ellis' (2001) finding is one that has been confirmed by more recent studies such as a qualitative study of 40 doctoral students in two different disciplines at two different institutions where Gardner (2008) found that a prevailing theme for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, such as Black women, was the belief that they did not 'fit the mold' of their respective graduate programs. Thus, it appears that equating doctoral student success exclusively with degree completion rates overlooks key perspectives that may address how to assist students in successfully navigating the challenges and complexities of graduate school (Gardner, 2009).

Common Challenges Confronting Doctoral Students

It is traditionally acknowledged that the students who pursue a doctoral degree -- the highest and most prestigious academic credential that a scholar can earn (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel & Hutchings, 2008), are viewed as higher education's most "academically capable" students (Golde, 2000, p. 199).   It is also no secret that these

'academically capable' students—all of whom have had to successfully navigate various

levels of academe to get to this point—are uncharacteristically at high risk for failure.

The educational literature has highlighted some of the well-known and long-standing

challenges confronting doctoral scholars (See Table 1). While the challenges vary, most

of the themes identified in the research revolve around issues of isolation, alienation, or

ill fit between the student and the department, discipline, and/or faculty.   Further, Walker

and his colleagues (2008, p. 2) note that many doctoral students who do persist are likely

to take longer to complete their degrees and in doing so, "find their passion for the field

sadly diminished" by the time they graduate.  The pressure of pursuing a doctoral degree

is great. This is perhaps why doctoral success appears to be inextricably linked with the

idea of 'survival,' as is evidenced by the multiple references made about 'surviving' the

doctoral experience in the literature. (e.g. Wiedman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).  Some

scholars have likened the challenges and competitiveness that undergirds the doctoral

experience to a perilous journey (Wiedman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).  Among the perils of

the doctoral journey are the many transitions and identity shifts which doctoral scholars

must undergo in their competitive and chilly environment (Carter, Blumstein & Cook,

2011; Gardner, 2008; Gasman, Hirchfield & Vultaggio, 2008).

Further, some scholars observe that doctoral programs often fail to

acknowledge the whole student and work within the expectation that 'grad student' will

be the primary role of doctoral scholars (e.g. Carter, Blumenstein & Cook, 2011).

Moreover, while institutions of higher education are often referred to as 'communities' in

the literature (Lovitts, 2001), there is strong support that the doctoral journey is primarily

an individual and isolating quest; one where individual student differences are too often

overlooked and always taken for granted. Golde (2000) aptly notes that a doctoral student can attain some level of integration and an understanding of the habits of a graduate department and yet remain in many ways an outsider in that setting.

Table 1: Challenges Confronting Doctoral Students

| Major Challenges | Scholars Cited |
|---|---|
| Hostile and/or chilly departmental climates | Gardner, 2008, 2010a; Gasman, Hirchfield & Vultaggio, 2008; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Gonzalez, 2006; Nettles & Millet, 2006 |
| Lack of Mentoring | Felder, 2010; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006; Patton and Harper, 2003; Nettles, 1990 |
| Adverse faculty/ student relationships | Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006) |
| Advising | Barnes & Randall, 2012; Ellis, 2001; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006 |
| Lack of financial support | Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad & Miller, 1996 |
| Lack of fit into academic/social integration of their departments and disciplines | Ellis; 2001; Golde , 2000, 2005; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993 |
| Intersecting Identities and Success | Collins, 1986; Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, Cervero & Bowles, 2009; Lovitts, 2001 |
| Race/ gender | Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Ellis, 2001, 2003; Felder, 2010; Gardner, 2008; Gonzalez, 2006;  Herzig, 2004; Turner, 2010 |

Although most students will feel a sense of isolation and disconnection at various points in their educational journey (Schlossberg, 1999), for many doctoral students, 'marginality' is a way of life (Ellis, 2001; Herzig, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, Cervero & Bowles, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Strayhorn (2012, p. 10) observes that students "function

better in contexts where feeling of isolation and intimidation are removed and [their] belonging needs are satisfied." Yes, even the best and 'most capable' of students need to fill a sense of fit and connectedness to the broader university, department, faculty and peers.

## **<u>Sense of Belonging</u>**

Sense of Belonging or Belonging is a psychological concept described "as a fundamental human motivation" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). In their seminal study, Baumeister and Leary(1995) contend that the need to Belong is more than the need for social interaction but instead is marked by interpersonal relationships that are perceived to be "lasting, positive, and significant" (p. 497). This relational connection of interactions with other people is essential for satisfying the need to Belong. A perceived lack of a Sense of Belonging may lead to feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness.

The psychological concept has since been broadly applied to many contexts, including education; In the educational context, Sense of Belonging as a framework for understanding student experience has been linked almost exclusively with undergraduate students (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). In the higher education contex, Sense of Belonging -- that is, the extent to which students view themselves as being connected to and valued in academic community-- (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) has become positively correlated with student persistence, the quality of their experience, and their overall success (Hausman, Ye, Schoefield & Woods, 2009; Hoffman, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2010; Strayhorn, 2012). Researchers have used a sequence of survey items to measure Sense of Belonging. In a

longitudinal study, Hurtado and Carter ( 1997)  explored factors associated with Sense of Belonging-- "I feel a sense of Belonging at this college";  "I feel like a member of this college community" and  "I feel like I fit in at this college"-- and observed that these elements contributed significantly to student persistence.  Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging measure focused on students' attachment to the broader campus community. Hoffman et al. (2003) developed a measure of Belonging that included five factors that included perception of peer  and faculty support, comfort in the classroom context,  perceived isolation and empathetic understanding. Other measures that have been used are "I have developed personal relationships with other students in class, or  "I feel that  a faculty member  would take time to talk to me if   I needed help" ( Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Most often, these measurements have ranged between one and five items.

Another, more recent example is in the University's campus wide-Climate Survey where  researchers used three measures to capture  Belonging among students in their question: To what extent do you feel you Belong?: i.e. *Not at all; To some extent;  and, To a great extent*. These measures are consistent with previous research. Often responses are recorded on Likert scales ranging from 0 -strongly disagree,  to 5 -neutral, to 10 strongly agree (E.g. Bollen & Doyle, 1990) on instruments that are similar in nature; differences have been in what has been measured.  For example  Museus & Maramba's (2011) examination of the influence of cultural factors on Filipino American undergraduate's Sense of Belonging used a four-point Likert-type scale and asked culture specific questions.  One hundred and forty-three of 400 potential participants returned the

survey consisting of questions regarding demographic information, cultural congruity, perceptions of campus climate, Sense of Belonging, and ethnic identity ( p. 242).

Sense of Belonging then signifies the degree to which students feel fully supported and integrated into the overall academic and social cultures of their college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2010). Essentially, students who feel that they Belong will likely have a more positive and successful academic experience. Accordingly, in the undergraduate context, Sense of Belonging is said to play a critical role in a student's overall development and success as a scholar (Hausmann, Schoefield & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). This means that the converse is also true: that students who feel disconnected do not feel they Belong to their academic community and are more likely to leave their studies before completing their degrees or simply become detached Success in the higher education context has traditionally been measured by persistence -- if a student persists to graduation, then they have succeeded.

At the undergraduate level, which, to date remains the focus of most studies on Belonging in higher education, Sense of Belonging has been found to positively impact academic achievement, retention, and persistence (e.g. Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Collectively, Sense of Belonging has been presented in the literature as a psychological experience that is critical to the overall intellectual and emotional development, persistence and success of all students, particularly for those who continue to be marginalized (Hausman, Ye, Schofield & Woods, 2008; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salamone, 2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2010; Strayhorn, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007)

In the few studies that have examined Sense of Belonging at the doctoral level, Sense of Belonging has also become predictive with a host of positive outcomes (Hoffman, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). In one of the rare qualitative studies at the doctoral level, White and Nonnamaker (2008) conducted a two-year qualitative study in which looked specifically at Belonging – through the lens of "community" among 60 doctoral students in the three science disciplines. The results showed that most doctoral students felt they had a "marginal" connection to their department and institutions in spite of being " integrated into the social and academic structures of their departments. Essentially, students who feel they Belong will likely have a better quality experience. Also, Strayhorn (2012) examined data from several qualitative and quantitative studies conducted between 2008 and 2011 which focused on both Master's and Doctoral students across 15 universities. The findings revealed that meaningful engagement with faculty and peers during the early stages of their graduate experience led to a Sense of Belonging for most students, and these students were more likely to have a high degree of motivation for persisting. Indeed, some scholars contend that, like the undergraduate level, graduate student's overall success is intimately tied to and facilitated by their sense of fit—i.e., Sense of Belonging (Hoffman, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2010; Strayhorn 2012. Belonging then signifies the degree to which diverse students feel fully supported and integrated into the overall academic and social cultures of their college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Maramba, 2011). Still, a smaller group of studies are demonstrating that while persistence is important, academic success is not simply about persistence (e.g. Ostrove & Long, 2007; Solomon, 2007; White and Nonnamaker, 2008). Moreover, how success

is defined and what it looks like for different students could benefit from a reassessment in the doctoral experience; the prevailing expectation of persistence as the principal standard by which success is measured remains problematic. There are doctoral students who continue to persist, but because they do not feel a sense of fit and often operate on the margins of academe, struggle with perceptions of success in their various doctoral communities.

While the broad application of Sense of Belonging to the college context can be difficult given the varied and complex contexts and communities to which students can Belong-- i.e. with peers, professors, advisors, departments/disciplines, classrooms--- Hurtado and Carter's early (1997, p.327) conceptualization of Belonging in which they emphasized "the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" in the study of the undergraduate student also remains useful to this study in the graduate context. In an earlier body of research, Hagerty, Williams, Coyne and Early ( 1996) saw this view of connection to/inclusion as epitomizing the individual's measure of having a sense of fit and valued involvement in the various structures of the campus community. Accordingly, one scholar captures the seriousness that a positive Sense of Belonging holds for students early in their academic careers by noting that a "college student's need for Belonging must be satisfied before any high ordered need such as knowledge and self-actualization"—as takes place in the academic setting—"can be achieved" (Strayhorn, 2012; p. 18).

Summary

In Chapter 2, I presented an overview of the literature important to highlighting the varied aspects of the doctoral journey that contribute to its complexity and how the resulting challenges affect different graduate students.  In this chapter, I also presented an overview of the doctoral attrition. In Chapter 3, I briefly introduce my pilot study from which this study on Sense of Belonging was developed. Next, I present an overview of the research methods used for this study on Sense of Belonging among Black/African American women at the doctoral level that include the overall research design; this piece also details the collection and analysis of data as well as description of participants that comprised the study's sample and is followed by a brief discussion of my role as researcher and how I addressed potential ethical issues. Finally, I end the chapter with potential limitations of the study.

# CHAPTER 3

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Research Questions

This chapter provides a description and discussion of the methods I used to

explore the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of African American /Black women students regarding their Sense of Belonging during the dissertation stage of their doctoral journey?

2. What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in relation to their perception of Belonging at the doctoral level?

Sub-questions:

3. To what extent do African American/Black women perceive their background characteristics as impacting their Sense of Belonging?

4. What support systems do African American/Black women attribute to facilitating their Sense of Belonging while working on their dissertation?

5. What aspects of African American/Black women's doctoral experiences facilitate their perceptions of their Sense of Belonging?

I begin this chapter with a review of a pilot study that informed the development of the

current study's research methods, followed by a discussion of the research design which

includes the procedures for collecting data and the study site and sample. Next, I discuss

the procedures I undertook to optimize the quality of the research. Finally, I discuss some

ethical concerns, including my role as a doctoral student and researcher within the

research context, and end with the potential limitations of the study.

### Pilot Study

In the fall of 2012, I conducted a small qualitative study that serves as a pilot for

the current study. I used a convenience sample of three Black/African American women

doctoral scholars as the unit of analysis to explore their perception and understanding of

their Sense of Belonging in their respective disciplines. The research participants had to meet two criteria: 1) African American women and, 2) currently enrolled in a doctoral program. The two participants were full time students and one women, who had already completed her qualifying exams, was in the dissertation phase of her journey. I interviewed each scholar twice in a 60-90-minute format guided by a semi-structured protocol. In addition to my interviews with the participants, I kept a journal of the data collection process.

Broadly, I defined African American to be inclusive of those who identify as being of African descent and comprising different ethnic backgrounds that consist of mixed race individuals and/or those of Caribbean and Latin American heritage. In keeping with this definition, I often used the terms Black and African American interchangeably; in the cases where some participants preferred the use of one term over the other, when referring directly to that student, her preferred terminology was used. My interviews were conducted at UMass Amherst. My choice of UMass Amherst was purposeful given it was a site to which I had immediate access given my status as a doctoral student.

I began each interview asking for demographic information and then asked the women to describe their doctoral history--- their motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree, early experiences, and how they have developed as scholars. Additionally, I asked the women to discuss the way their educational experiences and aspirations were impacted by their early experiences within their departments. Finally, I asked the women to describe the ways in which they felt that and felt they were very much a part of their department/ programs/ institutions.

As discussed in Chapter 2, *Sense of Belonging* in higher education is commonly used to describe institutional *fit* or membership and acceptance within the context of the academic community (Lovitts, 2001; Strayhorn, 2012). Studies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels demonstrate that students who experience a sense of *fit*, or Belonging are more likely to be satisfied with, and persist through, and succeed in their programs (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2012). Within the doctoral context, the notion of Belonging signifies the degree to which students are fully supported and integrated into the overall academic and social culture of their department. However, previous research has shown differences among students in their perceptions of Sense of Belonging particularly among students from historically underrepresented backgrounds (Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Strayhorn, 2012).

In my pilot study, the three women expressed feelings of Belonging, in spite of their many challenges. The participants viewed their doctoral journey as being, by far, one of their most rewarding and equally challenging experiences, to date. The notion that integration into department structures and relationships of all types mattered to the participants in the pilot study was clear. Whether the women were talking about their relationships as advisees or mentees with faculty or their peers, each participant articulated the Sense of Belonging she felt when these relationships were frequent, positive, and consistent. Although the participants acknowledged their initial feelings of isolation as a result of being far away from home and of the doctoral process itself, they felt that they "Belonged" in their departments." Each woman cited day-to-day interactions, in both informal hallway meetings among their colleagues and more

professional settings, that made them feel valued, appreciated, and welcomed.  Moreover, consistent with previous research (e.g. Golde, 2005, White & Nonnamaker, 2007), the scholars emphasized that practices within their respective departments reinforced their inclusion and Sense of Belonging. Examples given ranged from the frequency and way faculty were available to students as well as how faculty invited them to lead and/or support with different department activities. More importantly, the women were united in echoing the importance of feeling a sense of fit or Belonging when they could be their authentic selves.  Additionally, the women shared that while background characteristics such as gender and race shaped the quality of experiences they sometimes had, these were not the primary factors that influenced their idea of Belonging.

Although limitations for this pilot were heightened by a small sample and constricted timeline, the insights gained and themes that emerged are useful in guiding the current study. For example, the pilot informed the methodological approach of the current study. In the pilot, I used a purposeful sample that allowed me to engage participants with interview questions that aligned specifically with the topic for which I had recruited them.  Additionally, in the pilot I defined individuals as the unit of analysis, choosing not to focus on their respective disciplines.  I think this was effective because I was most interested in understanding *student perceptions* of their experiences as well as how, if in any way, these perceptions played out in lived experiences as scholars.  I believe that the emergence of the theme of "*authentic selves"* was largely due to this focus on the individual level. Likewise, in the current study, the primary unit of analysis was at the individual level, rather than departmental level. Lastly, I used the data collection experiences in the pilot to further refine my interview protocol.   This current

study built on the insights and themes that emerged in the pilot to explore, across a

broader segment of African American/Black doctoral women, how they perceive their

sense of Belonging as scholars.

## **Methodological Stance**

This qualitative research design is based on the premise that the doctoral journey

is a complex experience and is a challenging undertaking for all students who all face

obstacles to participation (Herzig, 2004). A second premise is that the practice of doctoral

education is anchored by a normative "mold" based largely on white, male, upper middle

class ideology (Gardner, 2008). Consequently, students in the same graduate program

can have strikingly different experiences that vary by, among other factors, race and

gender (Ellis, 2001; Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Moreover, this structure

allows for several obstacles that are either unique to women of color, and African

American/Black women, or are more challenging for them than for their peers (Gasman,

Hirchfield & Vultaggio, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). A third premise is that doctoral

programs can simultaneously empower and marginalize certain student communities.

Indeed, some scholars contend that doctoral students from traditionally underrepresented

backgrounds such as African American/Black women, who do not "fit the mold" of

doctoral programs, can experience emotional and cognitive dissonance due to the

assumption of doctoral education as being monolithic (Gardner, 2005). Consequently,

these students, although having gained access to higher education, often operate on the

margins as "*outsiders*".

This "outsider within" status, Collins (1986) observes from her own lived

experience how African American/Black women are frequently lodged in an unequal

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struggle of race, class, gender.   Consequently, an "outsider within" status is one of

marginality that impels African American/Black women to continue to search for a place

and importance in academe long after gaining access to the academy. Collins (1986) had

a strong awareness of African American women's resilience when, in her quest to make

meaning of her own marginality in academia, she observed that women in this category

"tap into this *insider/outsider* status in producing distinctive analyses of race, class, and

gender and as a result understand both the inside and the outside" (p. 14-15).

Social Constructivism

Like the pilot study, a constructivist perspective whereby knowledge is built from

the lived experiences of individuals and then interpreted within social contexts anchored

this qualitative research Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2006).  The constructivist lens

informed my study through its focus on participants' perspectives and experiences.  As a

researcher, I seek to understand the insider's or emic view of the doctoral experience

emphasizing the perceptions and experiences of participants as well as integrating their

voices in the research (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The current study focused on African

American/Black doctoral women as a unit; yet a constructivist epistemology recognizes

that the perceptions and experiences among a group are open to variation. Additionally,

this epistemology provides space for my voice and experiences. Therefore, my

experience as African American female doctoral student and my previous work with

traditionally underrepresented students in higher education influenced my interpretation

of the data.

Equally, a qualitative approach allows for the intersection of identities (e.g., race,

gender, social class) to be explored. Thus, the use of a qualitative approach to understand

African American/Black women's lived educational experiences through an emic view

allows for greater depth, description, and explanation by the very act of engaging them in

the inquiry process. (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).  Consequently, the research subjects are

active *agents* in the study and not simply *objects* of study.  Rossman and Rallis (2017)

note that qualitative research does not operate on the logic of probability; rather it

operates based on analogy. In other words, the purpose of a qualitative study is to

describe a phenomenon in enough detail so that the reader can make a judgment about

how relevant the data are to his or her experience (Creswell, 2012).  Again, my interest is

in the individuals lived experiences within a certain educational context during a time in

her academic experience. Thus, given my interest in understanding in more depth the

lived experiences of the individual doctoral scholar, a qualitative design provides the best

method to do so.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a very strong type of qualitative inquiry for a diverse group of

African American/Black scholars from different disciplines because it is an "amalgam of

interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and

innovative methods all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated

by the one who lives them" (Chase, 2005, p. 651).  I was especially interested in

capturing the "lived [educational] experiences" and meaning making given through first-

hand accounts of participants. As a mode of inquiry, the narrative approach emphasizes

the first-person account (Creswell, 2013).  Equally, Chase (2011, p. 241) observes that

narrative inquiry is distinct in its goal to work collaboratively with research participants

"to improve the quality of their everyday experiences."  Finally, narrative inquiry "is

used to challenge taken-for-granted ideas and to raise disturbing questions about educational issues asking all involved to reconsider and reorient their thinking" (Latta & Kim, 2010, p. 139). Creswell (2012, p. 502) adds, "For educators looking for personal experiences in actual school settings, narrative research offers practical, specific insights." Taken together, these various aspects of narrative inquiry make it a productive genre of qualitative inquiry for this study.

## **Data Collection**

Consistent with qualitative inquiry, I collected data for this study using a variety of methods that included primarily semi-structured interviews, augmented by reflexivity through journal writing, character portraits and member checking. The table below highlights an initial organization of the primary methods that were used in the study.

Table 2: Data Collection Approach

| Method | How the Methods Will Address the Question | Point of Research |
|---|---|---|
| Unstructured Interviews | Interviews provide in-depth descriptions from participants of how they perceive and experience Sense of Belonging. | Throughout Research

Throughout Interview |
| Reflective Journal | Allows researcher to reflect on, and record feelings, reactions, and assumptions about the interview/study. | Ongoing through interviews and analysis. |
| Participant Portraits | To provide a space for immersion in data as a way of identifying and interpreting emerging themes. | During analysis/end of write-up |
| Member Checking | Provide an opportunity for participants to check accuracy of their statements/experiences as relayed to the researcher. | |

In-depth Interviews

To capture African American/Black doctoral student's unique beliefs and the meanings they make of their experiences, I conducted a face-face interview with each participant. Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes using a series of semi-structured questions that allowed for themes to emerge as the study unfolded (Rallis & Rossman,

2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2013). Although qualitative researchers may have access to several forms of qualitative data, interviews are the primary means by which the researcher collects individual stories and experiences (Chase, 2011; Creswell, 2012, 2013). Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 10), note that qualitative interviews are "conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion to understand something from the research participant's point of view and to make meaning of these experiences."

During the pilot study, I edited questions as needed; this meant omitting some, crafting new ones, and changing their ordering as needed during the interview. The flexibility that this process provided helped me to better understand how these women doctoral scholars made meaning of their doctoral experiences (Daly, 2007). I used this same strategy in the present study. Given that different students experience the doctoral journey in different ways, a primary goal of these interviews was to integrate multiple perspectives of doctoral experiences. Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews, as with any research method, do have some disadvantages; this is especially true for narrative approaches where stories form the bulk of the data. Storytelling is never a distinct linear process; there is not a clear beginning, middle, and end. Depending on the "internal world" of the storyteller, certain experiences will stand out while some will not; the storyteller is likely to digress in some areas or completely overlook certain elements.

Chase (2011) advises that a researcher should know how to formulate interview questions that elicit stories from participants. Consequently, my role as an African American doctoral student might have caused the participants to present biased responses—responses that they might assume I wanted to hear. To reduce the possibility

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of biased responses, researchers develop conversations with the interviewees to gather information about their experiences (Patton, 2002).  Consequently, the role of the researcher necessitates a level of reflexivity and flexibility when working with her participants to reorganize or "re-story" collected stories into some chronological thematic sequence (Creswell, 2012; 2013).  Accordingly, I began the interview process using semi-structured interviews; learning about women doctoral students through interviews addressed my research question holistically because semi-structured interviews provide greater breadth (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006). As the interviews, progressed, I relied less on semi-structured interviews and more on an unstructured approach to allow the women greater freedom to reflect and share their experiences as they remembered it.

Reflective Journal

In addition to interviews, I kept a reflective journal. Throughout the research process, the journal provided a space for me to reflect on and record my feelings— reactions and assumptions— about the interview and overall study.  Journaling is a popular data collection and analysis process in qualitative studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) and proved helpful in my efforts to identify and synthesize key themes that emerged in this study. The journal included my overall observations about the research context and participants and provided additional data for analysis.  Indeed, my researcher role in this study was an active one; it was iterative and systematic. Through these data collection techniques, I came to understand in depth African American/Black women scholars' perceptions regarding their Sense of Belonging at the doctoral level and how this in turn impacted their experiences as doctoral scholars. Collectively, these techniques provided a complex tapestry of data for the final report (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) as

captured in part by the participant *portraits.*

Study Site

The research site for this study was informed by the approach I used in the pilot study in which I focused on one institution and conducted the interviews on campus. Since the purpose of this study was to get a more in-depth understanding of what was happening among doctoral African American/Black women at a single location, I again focused on one institution. Again, my choice of University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst) is a purposeful one given my affiliation with the institution as a graduate student. UMass Amherst is the Flagship University of the Commonwealth and is a comprehensive public university in the rural Northeast. Consistently ranked among the top public research universities in the nation, the University typically awards about 50 doctoral degrees in nine schools and colleges annually (University Website, 2017). In Fall 2017 UMass Amherst enrolled 2, 519 doctoral students, of which 1, 281 were female (University of Massachusetts Amherst, Fact Sheet, 2017). According to the University's Campus Climate Survey (2017) Across the university, the demographics of staff vary considerably. Overall, women comprise most staff (60 percent), although the percentage varies within units, with women composing nearly 80 percent of the workforce in some units. The clear majority of staff identify as white (82 percent)

Research Sample

As mentioned earlier, African American/Black women struggled to gain access to and equality in academe long after any other group of students. Consideration of differences among racial/ethnic and gender groups in academe is important particularly

since there are significant differences in how each group experiences the educational setting. Given that more African American/Black women are increasingly enrolling in doctoral programs, creating a culture where these (and all) students can succeed will require understanding their experiences.

For this study, I was interested in African American/Black women who completed their qualifying exams and were engaged in the dissertation phase of their doctoral journey. As discussed in chapter two, previous research on the doctoral experience has placed much emphasis on the inclusion of students into the academic and social spheres of their programs during the critical first year to ensure their success and persistence (e.g., Golde, 2000). In one of the earlier qualitative studies on doctoral attrition, Golde (1998) interviewed fifty-eight students who left their doctoral programs and found that most them left during the first year. Interestingly, the key question these students were attempting to answer was: "Do I belong here?" (p. 56). Since then, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, a good deal of research has focused on the "critical" first year to help students feel this Sense of Belonging. Ironically, the focus of previous studies on the first year has been done to the neglect of other equally critical stages of the doctoral experience. For example, the years leading to and following the comprehensive exams are as critical as the first year. Too often the dissertation phase of the doctoral journey is overlooked in the literature; even though a good number of doctoral students are likely to leave their programs during this time (e.g. Ali & Kohun, 2007). Lastly, the dissertation period is a one of great transformation for doctoral women as they transition from novice to independent researcher and should be studied in more detail, particularly from first-hand student accounts.

Sample Selection

In my pilot study, I used a sample of three participants in two separate interviews ranging between 60-90 minutes. In the current study I utilized purposeful sampling to recruit 12 African American/Black women at the doctoral level. Having worked primarily with undergraduate students in the past, the doctoral experience was a new topic of interest for me; my pilot study was the first stage in what I hoped to be a series of studies to help me frame more precise questions on this topic for future research. In sum, I wanted to become familiar with some of the basic realities and concerns of Black/ African American women's experiences at the doctoral level. Given the explorative nature of my pilot study in this initial stage, data saturation, although a useful guiding principle for establishing sample size in qualitative studies was not my goal (Boddy, 2016; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Mason, 2010). Dworkin ( 2012; p.1319 ) observes that most qualitative researchers define saturation " as the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data". Nevertheless, some scholars suggests that saturation can be achieved at any point in a study (Guest, Bunce, Johnson, 2006) including in a sample of one interview (Boddy, 2016). In the end, I found in my sample of three the emergence of sufficient categories/ themes to design and execute this second, more systematic and relatively more extensive study.

Consequently, in considering the sample for this this second study, also explorative in its scope , my goal was to continue to develop more depth of understanding of this women's experiences. Given my tightly defined or 'unusual' population' (Dworkin, 2012) of Black/ African American women in the dissertation phase of their doctoral journey , I considered several equally important factors that included: the scope

of the study and nature of the topic, the contact time to be spent on each individual

research participant and the homogeneity of the population under consideration (Boddy,

2016)--what Dworkin refers to as the " practical" features to make that the sample is as

representative of the population. Moreover, in the analysis of their data of a study

comprised of 60 participants examining perceptions, GUEST et al. (2006) found

evidence of saturation at six in-depth interviews and certainly evident with 12 in-depth

interviews. Guest at al. ( 2006, p.78) concluded that "a sample of six interviews may [be]

sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations".

Further, Guest and his colleagues, ( 2006, p. 78) recommend that "12 in-depth

interviews (or that multiples of 3) may be more appropriate" and used this reasoning to

pre-determine my purposeful sample size of 12 for the current study.

Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification

and selection of rich data cases related to the interest of study (Patton, 2002). Creswell

(2012) explains that purposeful sampling works well when in need of finding individuals

who have first-hand experience with the phenomenon being studied. Additionally, I used

snowball sampling to recruit more participants. In addition to knowledge and experience,

the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to

communicate experiences and opinions is important. The use of snowball sampling has

been highlighted as method particularly effective when dealing with small or hard to

reach populations. This is an effective means of sampling when potential participants are

scattered throughout a population. This method was particularly useful to the current

study, given that most students in the dissertation phase are not likely to be away from

the university. I identified potential participants using my personal student networks. I

worked with contacts made with students whom I knew or had already interviewed to introduce me to other participants who met the research criteria.  I provided each participant with an electronic recruitment letter (**see Appendix C)** that she could send it to potential other participants.  I asked participants to connect with me via email to individuals that express interest in being part of the study. Seidman (2013) notes that developing the quality of the interview relationship begins Once I received a lead, I contacted the student by email and /or phone to explain the purpose of the study and to personally invite her to participate. the first time that a potential participant hears about the study.

Participants

To reiterate, I interviewed twelve Black/African American women from diverse backgrounds and experiences in nine disciplines for this study.  I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably, however there are cases where participants prefer one term over the other, and I use their preferred term. Although the term Black/ African American is used to be inclusive, I also realize that it does not quite capture the considerable diversity of this group of women--a few of whom I should say liked neither term. These women represent various nationalities, economic backgrounds, cultures and college-going experiences and have helped to dramatically redefine the traditional student profile (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Some of the women were Latina, or of African or Caribbean heritage; some were biracial--African- European; For some women, English was the first language, while for others English was their fourth language -- however, given the larger American context in which they live and study, all the women identified as Black and or African American.

Again, the twelve women were selected as a purposeful sample to represent as much as possible a range of experiences. Participants ranged in age from their early thirties through their mid 40s. Most of the women had either attended other graduate schools or had worked between two and ten years before entering their current graduate program; two of the women did not have their Master's before starting their doctoral program and one international student was required to complete a second Master's degree before starting her doctorate. Seven of the twelve women were first in their families to receive a college degree and therefore identified as first-generation college students. All the women scholars had completed their comprehensive exams and were at some point in the dissertation phase--i.e. data collection, analysis, writing, final edits. (*See Table 3 for additional participant demographics).* Except for one participant for whom Amherst has always been home, all the women had moved hundreds and in some cases several thousand miles away leaving behind the comfort of family and friends to pursue a doctorate.

Interviews/Anonymity

All the women were interviewed in a face to face setting. The interviews were semi-structured conversations in which all the participants were asked similar questions though I allowed the women to focus the conversation to those aspects of their experiences that they thought most relevant to their narrative. To maintain participant confidentiality, all names--Adja, Raina, Micheless, Maria, Natalie, Roslyn, Tina, Grey, Butterfly, Anne, Sophia, and Amanda-- are pseudonyms which the participants (except two women) chose for themselves. Additionally, since most of these women were the "*only one*" --Black/African American/ Biracial--in their departments, I do not identify

specific disciplines. Also, in some instances I have edited personal quotes to further conceal personal information and to allow for greater flow in reading.

Interviews focused on African American/ Black doctoral women's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging, the ways in which their perceptions impacted their experiences, and how they negotiated and navigated the doctoral journey as a result. I asked participants to tell me their story of their time in graduate school, what their graduate school experiences have been like, and what aspects of their doctoral experience made them feel like they were fully integrated in, and supported in their programs. I asked participants to talk about the various social connections a graduate student at this institution could have and to describe how they were a part, or not, of that network. Essentially, I asked students to build their concept of Sense of Belonging and success.

The Case of Disciplines

For the purposes of this study, I was not interested in the discipline as a unit of analysis, although the discipline is traditionally viewed as the locus of the doctoral experience (e.g. Golde, 2000, 2005). My decision to take the focus off the discipline was purposeful; it was an attempt to disentangle the personal from the departmental. Golde (2005) found that many disciplinary norms and departmental structures could affect students' experiences and decisions in their programs. Indeed, several studies have confirmed that the context and culture of different disciplines can vary in ways that have a marked impact on its students (e.g., Gardner, 2005; Herzig, 2004). For example, African American/Black women in a STEM culture, which is a largely white and/or male-centered, competitive, and hierarchical setting, may have a difficult time experiencing a sense of fit (Herzig, 2004). Comparably, in the humanities, the prevailing

spirit is more likely to be individualistic and isolated as opposed to the high degree of collaboration that is more typical in the helping professions such as nursing and education where women have traditionally been in the majority. The extent to which women feel a sense of fit can vary widely, especially for women from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds who have been socialized in ways that run counter to the prevailing value system.

Table 3: Participant Demographics

| PARTICIPANT | First-Generation Student | Parent/Married | MA at Different Institution | Financed PHD partly through Loans | Had professional Career before Start of Ph.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adja | X | XX | X | | X |
| Raina | | | | | |
| Lorraine | X | XX | X | | X |
| Maria | X | | X | | |
| Natalie | X | | | | |
| Roslyn | | XX | X | | X |
| Tina | X | | X | X | X |
| Grey | | | | | |
| Butterfly | X | | X | | |
| Anne | X | XX | X | | X |
| Sophia | | X | X | | |
| Amanda | | | | X | X |

1. First-generation college status; 2. Married/Parent/ 3. Received MA at different institution before starting Ph.D.; 4. Financed Education through Loans; 5. Worked professionally for minimum of five years before starting doctorate.

Nevertheless, I am interested in participants' *perceptions* of their fit and

development at the doctoral level, irrespective of their department.  Although I invited

African American/Black women from a variety of disciplines that included the

Humanities, Social Sciences, Education and Science, Technology, Engineering, and

Mathematics (STEM), English, Education and Psychology to allow for diverse

representation, women scholars in the dissertation writing phase were the overall focus of

my study.

## Data Analysis

I tape recorded, transcribed, coded and wrote summary portraits for all interviews.

I reviewed transcripts to find topics yielding themes centered on Belonging and a

consciousness of fit and connection. Given the psychosocial nature of Sense of

Belonging, themes that fell within subjective assessment that included academic self–

confidence (I can do this!); a sense of integration and support (I belong here/ this is a

good fit); and a value of the "authentic self" (I'm not just seen and valued as a student but

as a complex individual with many different roles), as emerged in the pilot study, served

as initial elements of analytic themes. The objective in the analysis process was not

merely about counting or providing numeric summaries, but rather "to discover variation,

portray shades of meaning and reflect the complexity of human interaction by portraying

it in the words of the interviewees" (Rubin & Rubin 2005, p. 202).

Thematic Analysis Process

For purposes of data analysis, I used a basic thematic analysis method posed by

Creswell (2005). This analysis method involved multiple readings of the text followed by

a process of categorizing narrative data into common themes; this process entailed

organizing the transcript texts based patterns to help me derive meaning and I remained open to surprising themes that emerged during this process. Thus, part of my initial analysis of the data consisted of a careful reading and review of the interviews. In subsequent readings, I connected patterns in participants' experiences as I identified them. Following this phase of analysis, I grouped themes into patterns to allow for greater clarity in illuminating meanings associated with these experiences. As an additional data source, I used my own perspective as doctoral student to make sense of and attach significance to the meanings of the phenomenon for participants. A third and culminating piece of my analysis included the writing of up participant *portraits t*o highlight defining moments or emergent primary themes in the experiences of the women. These portraits helped me to bring meaning to the women's experiences by allowing me to organize these data into chunks to more fully immerse myself in the data--- thereby allowing further insight in my efforts to interpret the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Throughout the study, I also maintained a journal with observations regarding the interviews, participants, and the ongoing research process.

Procedures for Optimizing Research Quality

Data triangulation includes the use of multiple sources of data available to the researcher (Creswell, 2003). Following analysis, I took further steps to enhance the credibility, trustworthiness, and integrity of the data using the validation strategies of member checking, triangulation, researcher reflexivity, and thick rich description. As mentioned earlier, I kept a journal about the process and about my own experience of being a doctoral student that contribute to integrity of the data. Member checks with

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participants also ensured that the interviews and subsequent written portraits fully reflected their personal experiences. I conducted member checking with participants as a follow up to their interviews. Member checking involves testing the interpretations of the data that I developed with the research participants or other stakeholders in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided participants with summaries of our interviews as well as my initial themes to elicit their feedback. Additionally, I asked participants to read through the documents and comment upon whether I captured the "gist" of our conversation and to provide any feedback with regards to my preliminary findings. Finally, I achieved thick rich description by presenting the participants' voices under varied themes and, in the final write up, I used quotes from the original transcripts to support the emerging themes.

Trustworthiness can also be achieved through reflexivity which served a variety of purposes in this research study. Reflexivity aligns with my epistemological position and research methods approach (social constructivism [qualitative] and narrative inquiry) by providing a space for my role as a researcher role to be considered. Additionally, reflexivity provided another form of credibility and trustworthiness to these research data because it required me to be conscious of the ways in which my background and experiences might have influenced how I collected and interpreted the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These practices contributed to establishing trustworthiness as well as providing the basis for some transferability of findings to other contexts.

Transferability refers to the usefulness of the findings and interpretations if they are placed within another context. One way to establish transferability is using thick, rich data description of women's experiences, which the qualitative approach proposed here

sought to do. Findings from the interviews of African American/Black women doctoral students may well be useful for understanding the varied experiences among doctoral students from a holistic perspective. The transferability of findings regarding experiences among women of color, though limited, is useful when applied to a context of exploration, particularly of African American/Black women who are engaged in the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral study.

Again, few prior studies related to the doctoral experience have sought to explore in-depth meanings specifically from the perspective of African American/ Black women students. Instead, although this is gradually changing, much of the prior research has focused more broadly on graduate student issues between master's and doctoral students and/ or white and black students as a monolithic group. At times, men and women are viewed as the same unit of study. Moreover, these studies have examined such student experiences primarily from the perspectives of white male and female students. Additionally, several studies that have focused on the graduate population, whether quantitative or qualitative in nature, tend to look at doctoral experience from a deficit model—why students leave as opposed to why and how they persist.

## **Ethical Concerns**

Protection of Human Subjects

I considered potential ethical dilemmas that could arise during the research before I began to collect data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). First, before implementing this study, I obtained approval from the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Moreover, I kept my role as a doctoral student-researcher transparent and

explained my interest in this research as a means of informing my dissertation topic.

Prior to meeting with participants, and in some cases when we met for our first interview,

I shared with participants an informed consent form that explained what would happen

during the interview and provided them a printed copy. After participants read the form,

I asked if they have any additional questions or if there was anything I could clarify to

help ensure that they were making an informed decision about whether to participate.

Equally important, I informed participants that they could choose at any time to stop

participating in the study without penalty or consequence. Participants who chose to

participate were asked to sign a copy of the informed consent form.

Accordingly, I informed my research participants of their rights to

confidentiality and asked them to choose pseudonyms in the research report to protect

their identity. All names used in this dissertation and in any related publications or

presentations are pseudonyms. I also maintained participant confidentiality in the data

analysis and reporting process. Any information collected, whether written or digitally

recorded, was not documented in a way that could identify participants. Where

necessary, I've also edited some participant quotes for readability, and to obscure any

information to lessen the chances of identifying the student; electronic audio files and

interview transcripts will be deleted/destroyed once the research is completed. Also, in

writing up and presenting findings from this study, certain descriptive, discipline and

demographic information about participants is not included at a level that might cause the

participant to be individually identified. An audio recorder was used to collect the raw

data. I informed participants that all interviews will be audiotaped only if they consented

to this process. All individual interviews were conducted in a private area to maintain

privacy and I cautioned participants that information shared in the interview session should not be shared outside of the interview.

The Role and Background of the Researcher

Finally, I tried to remain mindful of my biases resulting from my role as an African American woman and a doctoral student in ways that could negatively impact the one-on-one interviews, and the specifics of data analysis. Given that reflective dialogue is central to the qualitative process (Rossman & Rallis, 2017), I wrote reflective memos after each interview. This process helped me to reflect more broadly about the participants and my interpretation of their understanding and experiences during the interview; it also helped me to further ensure validity of the data. Additionally, active listening and paraphrasing helped me to better understand the research participants and how they perceived and made meaning of their experiences.

My interest in understanding more fully the experiences of this group of women scholars emerged largely from my varied experiences as a professional and as a student in the higher education context. Interestingly, much of my professional experience has been in higher education. In the relatively brief season that I left academia, my work entailed equipping rising first-generation college students with the necessary skills to make a successful transition from high school to college. As a first-generation college student, my transition to the undergraduate context was eased considerably by the guidance of devoted teachers, mentors, and extended family members. Though initially intimidated by all that my college experience presented, I accomplished varied success in that setting

and believe that my eagerness to help other students enroll in, and succeed in college was born from that experience.

Interestingly, prior to starting my doctoral journey, integral to my work with diverse international and traditionally underrepresented students involved helping them to feel a sense connection and Belonging in their new academic environment. This goal was pursued through a series of programming that provided several resources across several offices through the critical first and sophomore years and up to graduation. In the evaluation of these student's progress and experience-- we measured GPA, involvement in academic programs, among others, and found that when compared to our control group (students of similar backgrounds and experiences who were opting out of participating in in our Bridge Program-- that there was a statistically significant difference in how these students performed.  More importantly, the informal qualitative assessment came from the stories that students shared of their positive college experience and growing sense of Belonging on campus.  These undergraduates could better navigate their academic context and have an overall better quality of experience --when their feeling of Belonging in their academic community--were enhanced.

Thus, it was not without surprise upon entering the doctoral context, with years of experience behind me, I found myself l at times anxious and lost and my own need to feel a sense of connection to and comfort in my new academic setting heightened. I soon learned through first-hand experience that the need to Belong was not an experience restricted to the confines of the novice undergraduate student but remained a vital necessity even at the doctoral level.  Some academicians might be prone to contend that doctoral students need minimal help making the transition to their programs, having

already navigated several stages of academia (e.g. Nonnamaker, 2008).  Nevertheless, in talking to other doctoral students of all backgrounds and genders, I learned that this assumption is a myth.

<u>**Limitations**</u>

There are some potential limitations associated with this study. First, this study was conducted at one institution and one institutional type, which means students' experiences may not be strictly generalizable across different institutions/institutional types. This study is also culture specific, looking specifically at the experiences of Black/African American women. It should be clear that while the reflections in this study provide important data about the role of Sense of Belonging of Black/African American women doctoral students, it does not attempt to fit all Black/ African American female doctoral students at public research universities into a common box of experience or to generalize the findings beyond these twelve women. However, using twelve participants in this study is a potential strength in that I could capture the lived experiences of women; though identifying major patterns of experiences may require more participants than I included in the present study. Nevertheless, while these experiences may not be generalizable across institutions, variations might occur within this educational context that may be transferable. By conducting interviews with students across several disciplines, I could explore multiple perspectives, some of which are likely transferable. Since, as White and Nonnamaker (2008) observe that common among all disciplines (and institutions) is the need for all doctoral students to feel a Sense of Belonging.

Another possible limitation is that I conducted this study as part of my dissertation research during a time in which I too was a doctoral student.  Additionally, I

am an African American woman. In part, this means that my assumptions, expectations, and experiences about doctoral education exist at the time of the study. However, as mentioned earlier, I was mindful of my biases, and the use of member checks, reflection, memo writing and *portraits* aided in counteracting the impact of these potential challenges. With these procedures in place, my familiarity with, and closeness to the subject matter were strong and genuine advantages for the strength of the research. Finally, the number of African American/Black women is still very low at the doctoral level and this may impact variation within the sample. Nevertheless, the use of this qualitative approach lends well in capturing thick and rich data whether using a few participants like the pilot study, or several participants as the current study sought to do (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

In Chapter 3, I presented the research methods used to complete the study on Black/ African American women's perception of their Sense of Belonging during the final stage of their dissertation. In addition to introducing the research plan of action for conducting the study, I provided an overview of the population and sample, research instrument, procedures of data collection and analysis and procedures taken for optimizing the quality of the research; potential limitations of the study were also presented. I present in Chapter 4 the varied themes that emerged after the implementation of the research design using participant *portraits* and personal quotes as a platform to discuss the varied topics.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## FINDINGS

## <u>Purpose of Study</u>

The purpose of this study was to explore Black/African American women scholar's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging during the dissertation phase of their doctoral journey. Findings suggest that while the participants in this study consider Sense of Belonging as a critical component to their overall success as doctoral scholars, this concept is  deficient or non-existent in their experience.

In this chapter, I summarize the findings of this study into six primary categories or themes: (1) Existing on the Margins; (2) Hostile and Nurturing Spaces; (3) Support Systems; (4) Advising and Mentoring Relationships (5) Persisting with Purpose, and (6) Authentic Selves.  Additionally, I organized these themes into three larger clusters: Institutional ( themes 1 and 2),  Interpersonal (themes 3 and 4),  and Individual (themes 5 and 6) and use *Portraits* to illustrate the major themes that fall under these headings. The stories shared by the 12 women  in the final stage of their dissertation, and the meaning they make of these stories are critical to this qualitative study.Thus, the goal of this chapter is to weave together the narratives of the 12 women who are the focus of this study in these *Portraits* to present findings that might help educational practitioners foster an environment that protects intellectual exploration, advance mutual respect, and promote equal opportunities so that all students feel they Belong.

Findings address the study's two primary research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of African American/Black women students of their Sense of Belonging

during the dissertation stage of their doctoral journey?  2) What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in relation to their perception of Belonging during the dissertation phase?  Three secondary questions were also explored: 1). How do African American/Black women perceive their background characteristics as impacting their Sense of Belonging? 2). What support systems do African American/ Black women attribute to facilitating their Sense of Belonging while working on their dissertation?  3). What aspects of African American/Black women's doctoral experiences facilitate their perceptions of their Sense of Belonging? Thus, the findings should provide a broader, more descriptive portrait of the often complex and complicated journey that is the doctoral experience.

In keeping with the qualitative approach of this study, I use participant *Portraits* to explore and expand on these themes. The *Portraits* allow the distinct voices and experiences of the diverse women to speak for themselves.  Many of the different themes are often present in individual *Portraits*.  However,  I often use one *Portrait* to highlight a primary theme, though I may later refer to the *Portraits* broadly when speaking of other themes.  As the women's stories unfold through these *Portraits,* we see that the experience of these doctoral scholars is such that they learn and perform better in contexts where feelings of isolation and intimidation are replaced with compassionate and caring environments, where positive interdependent relationships are valued, and Belonging--institutional, interpersonal and individual- -needs are satisfied.  Accordingly, this broadened portrait should help to guide educational practitioners in their effort to foster an environment that is inclusive and provides equal opportunities for all learners in specific and tangible ways.  This includes policies and priorities as well as distribution of

resources across individual departments and disciplines.   Finally, the findings should also be helpful to fellow graduate students on how to better understand their transition to the doctoral context and successfully navigate their complex graduate contexts.

Primary Themes

I narrowed the findings down to six primary themes, all of which were present across the women's narratives. These themes dealt with perceptions of: (1) Existing on the Margins; (2) Hostile and Nurturing Spaces; (3) Support Systems; (4) Advising and Mentoring Relationships; (5) Persisting with Purpose, and (6) Authentic Selves. Collectively, the themes emerged around the significance of affirming and affable interactions and relationships that help to facilitate these women's progress and quality of experience throughout their doctoral journey. These themes which were very much anchored around institutional, interpersonal and individual connections found among the range of experiences suggest that Belonging, or the need to Belong is undergirded by a common foundation of respect, trust, friendship, fellowship and mutual support within a community of practice. The women's experiences suggest that the significance of affirming and supportive interpersonal human relationships in academia should not be overlooked. In sum, a recurring theme expressed in varied ways by all the women is that their Sense of Belonging and overall success in academia is very much tied to their ability to be their authentic selves--this sense of self-actualization finds its culmination in institutional, interpersonal and individual levels of the academic context.

Accordingly, in presenting these themes, I divide this chapter into three sections:(1) Institutional (2) Interpersonal and (3) Individual.  I first explore Institutional themes by looking at the women's perception of Belonging to their departments and/or

disciplines through "On the Margins: The Outsider Feeling" and "Hostile Spaces and Hospitable Departments". Next, I look at Interpersonal aspects of Sense of Belonging through the lens of "Support Systems" and "Academic Relationships". Finally, I look at Individual level of the women 's experience -- "Beyond Persistence" and "Authentic Selves: A Sense of Belonging". While many of these themes are neither new, nor surprising, these women's stories may help explain the low sense of Belonging among Black graduate students as well as the small numbers of African American/ Black women completing the Ph.D.

## Perceptions of Belonging

Before moving into a discussion of the Institutional, Interpersonal, and Individual categories and their associated themes, I present *Portraits* of Grey and Maria which I believe underscore the range in student's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging. This presentation is intended to provide insights into the overall construct of the analysis of Sense of Belonging. To that end, these opening *Portraits* frame the general tone, tenor and tension of themes of Belonging that emerged from these women's experiences. Grey's *Portrait* introduces an idea of what Belonging looks and feels like in her student experience. Though confronted by specific challenges that appear to be part and parcel of her journey Grey has a positive and high Sense of Belonging in several segments of her campus community. Grey's perception of being connected to, of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to her campus community-- department, faculty and peers—is apparent. Not only is this feeling evidenced by Grey's overall performance and success in her department but is also captured in her closing statement. In many respects, Grey is not unlike many of her doctoral peers. Over the

course of her six years, Grey's pursuit of an advanced degree has been punctuated by "*moments*" of scholarly trials and triumphs; she has tangible evidence of activities deemed as successful markers of the doctoral experience--published research, grants to support her work and presentations of her work at national conferences. Yet, there is an unmistakable cognizance of insecurity and anxiety that reverberates through Grey's experience; that, despite her successes, Grey has ongoing doubts about her overall academic success. Grey's mindset suggests an attitude which appears to be part and parcel of the doctoral experience. Fortunately for Grey-- and this is where her similarity to many of her peers ends--- her insecurities and challenges are made less onerous by her strong Sense of Belonging. Grey feels that she is valued, respected, connected to, and supported by faculty and others in her department had this not been the case, she asserts that's would have long left her program. Grey's experience raises an important question of what is the experience of other Black women doctoral scholars. Grey's *Portrait* is immediately followed by a *Portrait* of Maria whose experience of Sense of Belonging varied considerably and highlights the range in experiences.

## Portrait 1: Grey

### "I've been here for so long. I'm going so slowly and I haven't done anything"

Grey's six years of graduate school has not been one of inactivity. Grey is a consummate student who has mentored close to 30 undergraduates in her lab, published several articles, presented at major conferences every year since matriculating, and has a slew of other accomplishments-- including leadership positions that go well beyond her department. Yet, the singular goal of completing her degree within a set time frame dominates Grey's thinking to the point that it overshadows her academic accomplishments. In fact, Grey recalls her incredulity to a younger graduate student's gratitude towards her as a role model; Grey's "gut reaction" was -- "*I've been here for so long. I'm going so slowly, and* I *haven't done anything and you really see me as a role model*?" Grey's anxiety is fueled in part by her overriding philosophy of doctoral student success as students who come in and complete their courses, do their research, present at conferences and publish, all within four to five years.

To be fair, Grey's doctoral tenure has been impacted by some circumstances beyond her control. For example, Grey's Master's project took nine months longer than anticipated. Furthermore, when her first advisor with whom she had already worked for four years, moved to another institution, Grey's work was set back an additional seven months. Grey sought the support of faculty in her discipline, many of whom encouraged her to stay and assured her of their interest in working with her. Indeed, Grey, who raves about her department faculty and many aspects of her program, insists that her Sense of Belonging was made even more apparent during this "*moment*" of deciding whether to leave with her first advisor.

Essentially, Grey explains that she has never had to question her Sense of Belonging and that that feeling has developed and nurtured through a variation of these "*moments*". In a "*presentation moment*", Grey recalls the resistance she encountered with a seasoned professor on her topic of interest in her first year and how she stood her ground. Grey says that these "presentation moments" are opportunities to put herself out there and get positive feedback; she says these make her feel like 'ok, you belong in grad school'; Grey notes her ability to do so would not have been possible had her department not cultivated an environment where she was comfortable to take such risks.

Another *moment* happened when Grey was asked to be on the department's diversity committee. Grey jests of this point *"let's ask the only black kid in the department to be on the diversity committee"*—which she says she didn't it take that way particularly since her topics of interest and the questions that she asks in seminars are often diversity-related. Moreover, the other student asked was white and had similar interests. Grey explains that her Sense of Belonging has really been driven by the incredible support from her department as a whole—on the student, faculty, and staff level-- and is about the many ways that she is given the opportunity to be involved, to try, to fail, and get up and try again-- with confidence. She declares:

> It is so important to feel like I can walk into my building and there are friendly faces and I can smile and say hi... Yeah, you have challenges where you have hard conversations and disagree with people, but having this feeling that I belong to this community is so important. Because if you don't, I would feel like I just won't want to keep going at all. Especially in the days where I've just been told that 'you did it wrong" or something's not working (she laughs), if I didn't feel like I could go to bed and come back the next day, or call somebody up and say aah, this really sucks! - If I didn't have that, I would not be here for six years—are you kidding?

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## Portrait 2: Maria

## "Belong here? --It is not possible!"

Maria, a first-generation doctoral student who comes from a cultural context *"that [has] had very few Ph.D.'s"*, explains that her training and preparation for her current pursuit was nurtured in that very context and, at a very early age.  In fact, Maria credits her overall motivation for pursuing a Ph.D. to her lived experience of being part of a community of "*organic intellectuals'— people from the community who are always learning and providing knowledge as a means to improve the overall condition of the entire group."* During our conversation, Maria often referred to her pursuit of a doctorate in the language that recognizes it not as an individual effort but rather a collective pursuit of "us" "we" and "our".  She reminds me that her philosophy is the essence of the *ubuntu* spirit of '*I am because we are*."
For that reason, Maria exclaims that she's always loved to learn and evidence of this is seen in the number of additional certifications she's received here in the relatively short time that she has been pursuing her doctorate.

 In reflecting on her doctoral experience, Maria is careful to stress that any discussion of her Sense of Belonging requires that she distinguish her experience into the academic, social and emotional aspects of her journey--which she believes all intersect with and impact the other.

Academically, Maria thinks that her program is among the best in the country and values the rigor she says the program provides. Similarly, Maria praises the many ways that her professors are supportive of her work. Even in instances where some are not versed in her native Spanish language or don't have as broad a knowledge about a topic of interest, they're always able to provide some information or direction which have helped her to make important connections to her work-- and this, Maria says, "has *been crucial"* for her success.

Academics aside, Maria admits that the emotional aspects of her doctoral experience have proven most challenging. Maria explains that this is so primarily because she attends a predominantly white university and "*as a woman of African descent... this place is full of macroaggressions all the time."*  which all converge to contribute to emotional shifts. Maria recalls her breakdowns and her ongoing bouts of self-doubt - *Can I do this? Do I **deserve** to be here?* -- that have negatively impacted her ability to see her studies through to completion.  Maria's efforts to successfully navigate through these largely "white*" spaces"* have helped her to connect to the social-- and strongest-- part of her doctoral journey-- her need for community. Of her community here, Maria has "found *other black women who are struggling through the same things"* who became her "allies *and friends "*in this process and it is these relationships that have helped her to develop and feel some Sense of Belonging in the academic context.

However, she says this is where her Sense of Belonging ends.  Maria is clear that she *"does not feel that belonging is possible"* and is adamant that *we [black women] will never belong in academia"*. Maria states this with such candor and seriousness that I'm initially dazed given the tone and tenor of her conviction. When I catch myself, I ask "so, are you saying—just to clarify— that you [black women scholars], in some way, operate on the fringes, on the margins of academia as a doctoral student?  "*We live on the "frontiers.  We exist on the frontiers."*
*"On the frontiers?"*  I look at Maria intently--searching for some hope, some additional reasoning.  Nothing more is said however, Maria has made her point.  I ask if she believes that we can succeed on the frontiers. Maria is prompt in her response, "*Definitely! ...we [have made] that a strength for us."*

As the opening portraits highlight, Grey and Maria experienced widely divergent aspects of a similar theme related to their Sense of Belonging; these 'extremes' frame the experiences of the women in this study. For the few women in the study, like Grey, their Sense of Belonging was nurtured through positive and affirming relationship -- "*moments*" of support, challenge, opportunities to be engaged in the department or discipline with faculty, staff, and other students in ways where they felt valued, respected, and relevant to the educational process and context. Whereas, for fewer of the women, their Sense of Belonging was episodic-- often marked by a series of loosely connected parts that might include a positive conversation or feedback from an advisor that were too often isolated and infrequent. Nevertheless, like Maria, most of the women experienced the undeniable sense of existing on "*the margins*". This feeling of marginalization was often powered by an experience that reminded them that the barriers they continually faced in the department, classroom and/or with their advisor—made having a Sense of Belonging almost impossible. The words of one study participant that, "*it [Belonging] often involves compromising so much of who we are*" so that being on the margins sometimes provides a better alternative.

**Institutional**

Theme 1: On the Margins: The Outsider Feeling

Amanda's portrait which follows, highlights the feeling of marginality and the resulting despondency which many of the women with a low Sense of Belonging described. On one hand, Amanda believes herself to be part of, and engaged in a community of practice-- that she Belongs, only to come to perceive in many other ways

that she really is not. This picture starts to capture the dynamic nature of Sense of

Belonging which is not static, but flexible and changing.  It is also interesting to note that

much of Amanda's initial feelings were fueled by her perception of her relationship with

her advisor  and a lack of connection to and guidance from her advisor and department:

# Portrait 3: Amanda

## "I'm of you, but I'm not OF you

In her late twenties immediately after graduating college, Amanda enrolled in a MA/Ph.D. program. In our conversation, Amanda made several references to herself as an "*older*" student which initially peaked my interest given her very youthful demeanor. As if reading my mind, or more likely the inquiring look on my face, Amanda clarified that while she was not actually "*super old*," that her experience as an "*older student who had already spent time in the workforce before pursuing her doctoral degree primed her with the maturity and determination necessary to see her program to its completion when confronted with challenges.*"

What challenges? For one, a deep feeling of alienation was the first unmistakable challenge. Amanda recalls not having any one in her department with whom she could talk about her work during her first few years. *"I felt like an outsider in the department...* She adds*, "I had somebody [Advisor]who I was paired with and who seemed to like me in classes but whenever I would send her emails, she would just never respond. So, it was years of just like nothing."* The result was heightened moments of self-doubt which swiftly turned into bouts of dejection and depression. "*It just felt like something I was doing was wrong."*

Fortunately, after years of not getting the kind of departmental support she needed and expected, Amanda explored classes and resources in other departments. In that process, Amanda developed relationships with faculty who took interest in, and provided insight and direction for her work. Amanda asserts, "*Those[outside] relationships have been really, really, good in keeping me going and keeping me interested and making me think that I CAN DO THIS!"* These positive relationships also helped Amanda to return to her work and department with more clarity and a renewed level of confidence. Amanda said that she knew she eventually, had to come back to figure out what it [doctoral journey] meant for her --part of which meant getting a new advisor. Of her relationship with her new advisor, Amanda notes, *"Just knowing that I can talk to her-- or even one of the other faculty of color [in other departments] that I have talked to in the past—these are people that I can just be real with. It feels good.*"

Amanda's new sense of optimism is heightened by her department's funding of her work including her participation in an intensive week-long summer institute at a renowned institution. Of that experience, Amanda notes "*that was the beginning of coming up with my own definitions of what all of this [journey]means to me—instead of just looking and trying to find models everywhere else...* While Amanda admits that the isolation of academic work is still very real, she is motivated by the thought that there is something that her department finds supportable in her work; in some ways, she is feeling more a part of her department and admits that she's in a good period of her journey now.

Ironically, however, Amanda is quick to note that despite this seemingly positive change in her experience, the overwhelming feeling that she still comes away with in terms of her relationship with her department and her overall Sense of Belonging is the feeling of being a "*stepchild--* which she explains as a feeling of, *I'm of you, but I'm not "OF" you.*" When I ask, "*do you feel a part of your program right now, that you bel...---?*" Amanda abruptly interjects and responds with a sharp-witted and emphatic "*NO!"* Conscious of her forthright and instinctive reaction, Amanda laughs unashamedly for some time. A palpable period of silence follows as Amanda gives both my question and her reaction to my question some thought; she starts up again, only to follow with a deep, palpable sigh.

The 'I'm of you, but I'm not OF you' experience

Amanda's experience of "*I'm of you but not OF you" feeling* captures those students who perceived themselves as being on the margins.  This perception was experienced among most scholars in this study and was often, though not always, fueled by negative relationships with the faculty advisor.  In fact, one scholar remarked that *"a lot of the faculty are more concerned about letting you know how intelligent they are and that you don't deserve this degree and are [not] helping you get through your program"*.  This was a common refrain echoed among many of the participants.  For example, Amanda's feeling of disconnect *in* her department was attributed to her advisor's surreptitious disregard of efforts to connect with her in person; an experience which made Amanda feel very early in her journey that all department faculty were indifferent to her presence, interests and needs.  Amanda recalls:

*I felt like an outsider in the department. "*I *had somebody [Advisor]who I was paired with and who seemed to like me in classes but whenever I would send her emails, she would just never respond. So, it was years of just like nothing.*

Theme 2: Hostile Spaces and Nurturing Departments:

Where feelings of being *an outsider* for Amanda was fueled in part by faculty's seeming indifference and disrespect, other students explained that some of their feelings of marginalization also came from the very space-- the cultural workings of their department and rendered a perception akin to Amanda's marginal experience of "*The 'I'm of you, but I'm not OF you' Experience.*   Roslyn's *Portrait* of "A square peg in a round hole"  which follows helps frame this theme:

## Portrait 4: Roslyn

## "A square peg in a round hole"

*When I came to the program, my expectation was that I would be here for about four and a half to five years...so, um, that hasn't happened." Roslyn* laughs sincerely and instinctively I join her, underscoring my own experiences as a doctoral student. "*I know exactly what you're talking about,*" I utter empathetically.

Roslyn continues, "*Well, the first feeling I experienced coming here was that I felt like a square peg in a round hole*." "Really?" I asked, with an intimation of incredulity. Roslyn describes what she did not find upon arrival to her program: *A feeling—when you walk into a space and it feels welcoming. It feels like this is space that says "aah! you're here. We could use you. Umm, there are things here that you can relate to. There are people here that are open to your presence and there are things here that you can do—you can contribute and you can make the space richer, better in whatever way…*

Instead, Roslyn talked about the ensuing distress and intimidation she experienced as a result of feeling unwelcome in her department. One incident which fueled Roslyn's feeling of marginalization was her '*activism*' on behalf of a white professor, whom many of the students believed was being unjustly let go. Consequently, the space, Roslyn remembers, became openly hostile towards her and she was intentionally excluded from the department mailing list. However, the crushing blow for Roslyn came when her advisor, overwhelmed by the politics all of this "*dropped her*"; an action Roslyn recalls, made her feel like "*Kryptonite*." All of this adversely impacted how she approached her work for some time, she floundered. Against this backdrop, a major challenge for Roslyn was taking on the mindset where she believed that she could successfully pursue her goal of a doctorate while weighing that against feeling *like an outsider.* Nevertheless, when Roslyn considered that she had given up her career, her home and had relocated her family, she did not, she says, *"have the luxury of quitting."*

Roslyn adds, *"I came here because of those children that I left in [state]... because of my grandmothers, my mother and those women who would insist that I not stop talking/speaking out and doing what I was doing. I felt I was meant to do this and, also too I felt that I did not have a choice."*

Like her mother from whom she draws much of her inspiration, Roslyn is a teacher by profession and her motivation to pursue a doctoral degree is intimately tied to her commitment to help improve educational opportunities and a better quality of life for her students--*" mostly black and brown who they said was affected by the achievement gap", who, on the one hand, I found to be so deeply intelligent, smart, articulate about the issues that mattered to their lives."*

Regrettably, Roslyn believes that her department remains as cold and unwelcoming as it was when she first arrived. Instead, what is different is the person who she has become-- her role as an academic has changed-- *"When I first walked in here, I felt like I needed to change. I felt kind of intimidated."* Roslyn radiates a brilliant smile; her facial expression speaks volumes and in some ways, attests to her personal triumph in the face of her disappointments and setbacks -- none of which succeeded in getting her to leave. *"I'm here",* Roslyn declares matter-of-factly, *"and I am going to finish."*

Roslyn recalls her initial reaction of disbelief upon entering her department and efforts to navigate her department and the ways in which she continued to feel on the margins.

*well, the first feeling I experienced coming here was that I felt like a square peg in a round hole and that was what I kept saying. I just felt, you know like, wow! what have I done? I really felt like I did not Belong here. I felt like it was a white space. Like, it was hostile to me... so that's the thing that stuck out at me, that this was not a space that was particularly welcoming.*

Interestingly, doctoral students have anthropomorphized their departments, attributing human characteristics and personalities to these spaces such that comments as "it *hostile to me", my department was not welcoming" or even, "my department is great!"* were made by different women. Perhaps, it's easier for us to attribute human attributes to what could be otherwise cold empty spaces as a way of making meaning of its role and impact in our lives. Departments are spaces occupied and shaped by individuals and it is often what they do-- their policies, practices and principles- that permeate these otherwise neutral spaces. Given that perception often shapes reality -- students accept these practices as both personal and salient to their experience. For some of the women like Roslyn, perceptions of disconnection and the resulting isolation that ensued were made unnecessarily more onerous by department culture and practices through individual faculty and staff. Although Roslyn and others talked about their departments as being hostile spaces, it is the practices of individuals in the department that left them feeling marginalized. Again, several students talked about behavior of faculty, often, though not always, their advisor. For Tina, whose *Portrait* follows, a combination of these colored her experience:

# Portrait 5: Tina

## "The Twilight Zone"

The start of summer has been an eventful time for Tina who is busy wrapping up her six-plus years at the university to return home. Though extremely busy, Tina confides that she really wanted to share her story with me and evidence of this is seen in the high energy she brings to our interview. Tina is all smiles, ecstatic to be leaving this harsh Northeast region to return to the south--a friendlier, more familiar environment she believes is more conducive to completing her final edits in a healthier, more congenial frame of mind.

With much enthusiasm, Tina remembers vividly the relative ease of her transition to her doctoral coursework. The rigor of the work, which she found interesting and challenging, was never an issue for Tina who had already earned two master's degrees prior to starting her doctorate. Tina gives a hint of unmistakable satisfaction when she describes the numerous compliments faculty gave her with respect to her caliber of academic work; she gloats, albeit briefly, that if I were to ask about her work of any faculty in her department, their retort: "*She's brilliant. She's sharp. She's a great student,*" would be unanimous. Given her early academic experience, Tina was certain that she would have little difficulty successfully completing her program in four years, certainly no more than five.

However, academics aside, Tina concedes that her integration into the broader culture of the department and university proved more challenging. Despite Tina's upbeat personality throughout our conversation there is a distinct solemnity in Tina's tone as she reflects on this troubling aspect of her experience. "*What I have struggled with in my department*" notes Tina, "is *my personality and certain characteristics about my identity.*" Tina explains that in addition to being from the south, she speaks, dresses and thinks differently; she admits proudly of being very direct and outspoken; traits she feels may sometimes "*rub people the wrong way.* However, Tina feels this reaction is likely "*indicative of not having a grounding in different types of experiences of Blackness.*" Tina explains that "*Blackness*" is not a monolithic entity yet she often felt that "*they [faculty] just did not seem to understand this*" to the extent that it became a problem for her. she concedes "*And I wasn't supported.*" Tina muses that she always wished that her department saw her [diversity] personality as a strength-- "*but they never did*," she laments.

Although Tina admits that her department did a great job in bringing together a racially, geographically economically and ethnically diverse cohort of students, she confesses that she still did not feel comfortable; in fact, she felt quite out of place. The disconnect of her department in enrolling a diverse student body, while failing to create and cultivate an environment where these students could thrive seemed irrational to Tina. Moreover, Tina notes that her department did not reflect, even remotely, the diversity of the student body. This shortcoming, she believes, was a recipe for failure and Tina saw evidence of this in the ensuing high attrition among her cohort and her own mental health struggles. "I *felt the very glaring presence of whiteness and as a black woman, was trying to find home and I never really felt like I was finding that",* Tina explains. Against this backdrop, Tina likens her experience of entering a space that she felt was alien and hostile to her way of thinking as entering the "*twilight* zone". Consequently, Tina says that she has never felt that she belonged. Belonging "*would look/feel like when I leave a room that faculty members are not talking negatively about me. [It's about] me, feeling like, I'm supported...*"
Tina also believes that as Black students we "*operate on the margins*". Do you think we can succeed on the margins, I ask? With a deep sigh, Tina asserts that while success on the margins is possible, *it often involves compromising so much of who we are.*

Depending on departmental cultures, competition within cohorts for financial

resources, access to faculty members and opportunities for research can result in further

marginalization (Herzig, 2004). Some women talked about not being mentored through

any presentations and publications, or experiencing behavior by advisors that suggest

strong favoritism of some students over others. The following practices highlighted by

various women highlight barriers and practices that contribute to this perception of

hostile spaces:

*My observation has been that there are students who (long pause) for lack of a better*
*term –are favored more by faculty.  I know one person who gets all kinds of support from*
*faculty—publication support, funding support—she never has to ask for anything.  She*
*doesn't have the concerns that I have daily—... and yet, that advisor with other students –*
*she doesn't really care.  But with this student—it's almost like this is the golden*
*student...there is disparity in which students get certain help from faculty ...*

*sometimes as students of color --and I experienced this as well in my own journey—our*
*work...if we express ourselves in a way that the academy is not used to—then they think it*
*is wrong—which I think is wrong. So, there is that undermining of our work where we*
*have to do our work over, and over and over again for it to be validated at the top.*

*I was teaching and in my evaluation, students talked about my accent; another student*
*talked about the fact that I am sooo sweet, that I am like a mother. Why don't they just*
*evaluate my teaching abilities, my teaching skills ...And you know what ...the supervisor*
*in the [--] program told me- (she inflects her voice to a soft low tone to impersonate*
*supervisor)'Oh, this is usually what they say about international students.*

*If the people that you can identify with, that you can trust, that you don't feel ashamed*
*talking to, that do not look at you like something different…like a case (she laughs) …*
*so, if the [--] department was structured in such a way that everybody… that opportunity*
*for everybody to feel somehow connected.*

On another note, some students who had great respect for their respective

departments pointed to individual behaviors which contributed to this feeling:

*Everybody cares… like if you're walking by the hall— "hey "Sophia, how are you doing?*
*How's your Ph.D. coming? – anything I can help you with? – even if they're not your*
*advisor, they always say hi to you. They always worried about stuff related to you--like*
*right now with the hurricane—everybody on the faculty that saw me today asked me*

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*about my family—I think they do take in-- of knowing how you're doing to see how they can help you achieve [your goal]—and not just the faculty but also other people in the department like the administrative assistant--like everybody is really nice.*

Grey adds:

*One thing that stood out to me...in my relationship with my advisor very early on is that she strongly identifies with her gender identity and being a neuroscientist. She would repetitively say "being a neuroscientist and a woman is not very common'. Her research is very interested in cultural and racial/ethnic perspectives and perception. So, to me, she was very open about having dialogue about race and that she wanted to make sure that I could talk to her about any experiences I had and that was made clear very early on, which I thought was very nice.*

Once student sums what for her is a culminating aspect of nurturing contexts from a

scene in her personal life beyond the confines of her academic department:

*So, I live in [location, a little further from campus] and the people are friendlier. You meet people and—I guess maybe it's a dog-people thing--but you meet people and when they don't see you they are going to ask if everything has been ok. 'I haven't seen you in the last couple days. Do you need help with anything?' I think in those first few years [of doctoral journey] when I was super stressed and felt like I was dying all the time...- I find a deeper Sense of Belonging is finding people who are asking if you're ok. So, If I had that—I feel like it [my experience] wouldn't have been so bad.*

Overall, in each of these ways these women faced explicit obstacles or clear

messages that either undermined or affirmed their Sense of Belonging; a lack of

acknowledgement of salient differences from those in their department reinforced these

women's perception of exclusion; while similar aspects were affirmed in more nurturing

departments. However, for most of the women, when that sense of connection and

mattering was not met, they left these spaces to navigate more hospitable spaces beyond

their departments. In some instances, women went beyond their academic institution to

find these connections that would help them progress in their doctoral journey.

Additionally, several scholars talked about the benefits of the support that came from

important networks of students.  These relationships helped these women scholars to not merely persist, but to have a better quality of experience while doing so.

## **Interpersonal**

Theme 3: Support Systems

Natalie and Adja's *Portraits* highlight an important and third theme of support systems. Cohorts, colleagues and communities seemed to be the magic word in both women's narrative. Whether comprised of twenty or two students, the power of interpersonal relationship with peers in this context was transformative. Additional quotes from several of the women scholars confirm this as a shared experience. Howver, there was one participant who was not part of a cohort and she experienced that void with great emotional intensity  For Natalie, who is effortlessly gregarious and outgoing, her ease in building positive and mutually supportive relationships with her peers appeared to be a relatively easy and "*organic*" process. The *Portraits* of Adja provide additional insight into this theme of non-faculty relationships but also highlights other faculty and student relationships as an important resource in fostering a Sense of Belonging among these women scholars.

Importantly, while there were specific institution-wide support systems that students mentioned as having a positive effect on their doctoral experiences-- having a good advisor, being funded, being part of a welcoming and caring department environment, availability of workshops provided by Office of Professional Development, and having diverse faculty, scholars and curriculum in their departments--by far, the most frequent and influential resource was a community comprised of, and bolstered by peers.

## Portrait 6: Natalie

## "You feel the same way too? I thought it was just me!"

The gregarious and affable Natalie finds quite a lot to laugh about in the recounting of her doctoral journey. For instance, Natalie recalls her hilarity after being told that it can take 8-10 years to complete her program. "*I laughed so hard when I heard that… certainly that was not going to be my experience*." She laughs out loud, "*but now that I'm here six years, I'm thinking ok, it's time to wrap up."*

Natalie is currently in the throes of wrapping up but remembers the many times during her first years when she questioned what she was doing, why she was doing it, and whether it was worth it? *"So, my doctoral experience became this emotionally painful journey. And so, I just remember feeling overwhelmed"*, Natalie recalls. However, a vital support network began to develop among the six women who comprised her cohort that would help to stem the tide of self-doubt and isolation. Of her cohort, Natalie remembers*, "I*t *was interesting, it was sort of organic. I just remember one person inviting all of us to go out to lunch and we said oh that's a good idea—so we all got together and started going to lunch. And so, once a month we all got together…"*

And it is in this supportive context of venting and sharin*g* where Natalie says she had that --*"Wait a minute. You feel that way too? I thought it was just me! —*experience. That revelation that she was not alone, Natalie's says, was very reassuring. This early experience and others like it that would follow with her colleagues and has kept Natalie resolute in her conviction that her Sense of Belonging has come principally from her peers. "*When, I'm with my friends and colleagues[peers], we encourage each other – we tell each other that …'we are very intelligent women—we are on this journey for a reason and so we reassure ourselves – so I find solace in that.*"

Nonetheless, the nature of the doctoral journey is such that lives change and roads often diverge Natalie explains that as much as they all tried to stay connected, after the first two and half years that the lives of her colleague's lives evolved and they ended up at different levels--a few people dropped out of the cohort, one of the cohort members got married and eventually dropped out of the program. "*I realize that this is what this journey is—it's a lonely journey.* Natalie acknowledges that the university offers many helpful resources in terms of personal development and it's important for her and other graduate students to take advantage of those opportunities.

Natalie is resolute in her thinking that when an institution/program accepts students into their program, the responsibility to provide guidance to these students should be first and foremost. She explains that it is unfortunate that the prevailing assumption is that when students are accepted into a doctoral program, they already know what they're expected to do, which is often not necessarily true. Natalie believes that most of the things she came to know [as a doctoral student], came about by happenstance; and that experience, Natalie observes, is not exclusive to her.

Of the dissertation phase, Natalie admits, "*It has been somewhat of a nightmare, really, it's been very isolating*, *but I have to say...I feel like I'm in a good place now...I have definitely evolved as a scholar.*

Against the backdrop of a doctoral experience often intruded upon by feelings of self-doubt and 'imposter syndrome', Natalie found a shared familiarity among her cohort. The self-doubt  that is part and parcel of the doctoral journey and the emotional difficulty necessitated having a support system from those who are experiencing similar challenges. Natalie's *"Wait a minute. You feel that way too? I thought it was just me!"* experience is telling.   Not surprisingly,  attributes what Sense of Belonging she experience primarily to her  relationships with her peers.  Natalie observes:

*When, I'm with my friends and colleagues[peers], we encourage each other – we tell each other that …'we are very intelligent women—we are on this journey for a reason and so we reassure ourselves – so I find solace in that.*"

Moreover, given the overall chilly and competitive culture of many doctoral programs, it is a support network that many students must be intentional in creating as the experience of some of the other women highlight.  For instance, Roslyn, whose *Portrait* was used earlier to introduce the theme of Hostile Spaces asserts:

*The support system, unfortunately, does not come from the academy…no, not at all!  It doesn't come at all from the[discipline] It comes from the connection that I have been able to form with my friends and fellow students.  That's where it came from.  The fact that I'm even here...our taking initiative...and together...we [peers]kind of formed our own circle of support and bond with each other, where we would sit and process and cry with each other, laugh with each other, help each other and that's how—one [student]graduated in June—umm, I don't know that she would have been able to, had she not received the kind of support [ from us] that she did.*

Maria, whose earlier *Portrait* spoke to the theme of being on the margins adds:

*I define community as a group of friends-  Ninety percent of them are grad students. They are black wo*men and o*ther women of color, mostly, but they are from different departments* [ whom *I've met] through taking classes that were relevant for us ...And we also met through extra-curricular activities…  so basically, its people who share similar interests [with me]*

Students who got opportunities to build communities with others--including faculty- who shared similar interests across different departments and in the broader community really got to enhance their overall experience as Maria notes:

*I have no family [here]... plus the academic piece is demanding, so the emotional piece has been one of the challenges for me in finishing my PHD. You know a lot of times you have these breakdowns. You think that maybe you're not going to be able to do it. So, I have found other black women who are struggling through the same things, who became my allies and friends in this process- who, you know, have helped me to develop discipline…*

Similarly, another scholar lamented that the difficulty of the isolation she experienced in her early doctoral experience could have been greatly assuaged by seemingly small practices of finding people who are asking "i*f you're ok"*, and recalls the invaluable role of the African Student Association in helping making her feel to be part of a caring community and help to build her Sense of Belonging:

*You can go a whole semester [during the dissertation stage] and see someone [in her program] only once. So, there's no real connection to people. With the African Grad students, if someone disappears, everyone checks up on them and it's like "hey, what's going on?" ...with the African Grad Students, you are friends. There were times when [I] would have no food in the fridge and people would just turn up and be like 'oh, I saw you by the bike path and after I cooked dinner I said, Butterfly lives next door, let me take her some food or just stopping by [ to say hello].*

She adds:

s*o, it's been definitely very helpful. … It's just that support system where – you're in a class and someone is like, "I can't even hear you, your accent is so off—and you go into that environment [African Grad Student Association] where all of our accents are off.*

Nevertheless, while building community in this transitory context is an especially easy undertaking for Natalie and some of her scholar peers, this was not always the case. Remember Tina "*twilight zone" e*xperience? Tina understood first-hand the need to build

community and worked hard to do this with what she says was relatively little long-term success which made her experience here more difficult:

*I built pockets of communities [but] they never really lasted very long because this is such a transitional space—people come in, people go out and as a result it's hard to create lasting communities... And a lot of folks that were in my community--- some of them just left and said, I can't take this anymore. Some of the people who were closest to me just decided that – either they will go somewhere else to finish the program or just dropped out altogether.*

Tina explains her primary approach as follows:

*I had dinners and invited people of color over.  I created networks with [graduate] and undergraduate students of color as well; did a lot of mentoring with them as well, brought them in. But, the sustainability component of it –  everybody leaves in the summer—those who can afford to leave.   I was just rarely that person who could ever afford to leave for the summer. There was always this kind of ebb and flow—there is a community then, there isn't and that kind of instability just kind of added to making this place just more difficult*

Given the transitory nature of the doctoral journey-- where lives and schedules evolve, priorities change and students leave before getting their degrees-- Tina's experience is an important reminder that institutions should always consider different resources available to its doctoral students.  For some students, different graduate student associations and outreach programs that called for student's involvement and leadership skills in ways that help to foster a broader Sense of Belonging.  Many of the women became active in the broader community.

Adja's experience, depicted in part in the closing portrait to this segment, captures well the recognition of her need for building community in her remark, *"I did not have a person...I have many people."*  Her comment speaks to the community or network of faculty and students that she created to help her survive the isolation and  navigate more successfully the disconnect that often marked her doctoral experience:

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## Portrait 7: Adja

## "I did not have a person...I had many people"

In 2012, eight months after getting married, Adja was bound for the United States to teach French at a small, selective private liberal arts college; her intent was to complete her year-long tenure and immediately return home to start a family-- and a Ph.D. program. However, with a bit of encouragement and plenty of persuasion from her new colleagues, Adja, who'd completed a Masters in American literature in her home country, temporarily relocated to enroll in a Ph.D. program.

The disorientation Adja experienced in her graduate program during her early years was "*very overwhelming*". *"I knew no one. I was the only, African/Black student in the entire department and I was pregnant. It was tough."* Adja recalls vividly that "*EVERYTHING* was *different and new"* to her. She quickly had to change a lot of things, including how she process things-- For example, *"like the idea that for me, that when I think, I [first] think in my native language and then I translate it into French and then I think about in English.*

Conspicuously present in her department was the absence of a "*welcoming environment"*. Adja says she felt first-hand the seeming lack of solicitude and indifference to her background differences; and the detached manner of how programmatic support was provided in her department struck a jarring note. She tries to explain this to me this to me with an illustration of seeking help with her international student visa- I*n my department you go there and you ask them—they don't know anything about it. They don't have to know details about the visa, but at least they should know where [her country of origin] is located."* She laughs at this experience, and explains *"I did not find a lo*t of *support there."*

Adja's expectation of her department structure was such that opportunities would be provided where she says "e*verybody would be made to feel connected either through programming, through mentoring, through various resources*"; Instead, student life was based on checking off a list —*you can do this, do that-- check, and you're done—No! -- that's not how it works." A*dja explains that it was not that folks in her department would not provide help/information when she asked but *"there was something missing."* Adja had to quickly begin to try and figure things out for herself because she realized that if she kept trying to make the department her welcoming place, it wouldn't work.

"*So, I made connections and started to build my own community outside of the departmen*t". She went about doing this in several ways--including taking classes outside of her department in the Afro-AM. department and even at the liberal arts college where she once taught. In taking this approach, Adja connected with faculty and built friendships with other students. The African Graduate Students Association, where she says she could see people like her going through the same experiences, also served as an important resource. Currently, Adja notes that while her journey is easier per se, it is different because she knows where to go, the type of people with whom she needs to talk because she figured that out during her first three years. *"I did that by myself and it was not easy at all",* she recounts. Yet, Adja remains positive; she feels like all these challenges have helped her to think more critically about her role as a woman of color in this country—" I've *never thought about race before coming to this country."* In terms of Adja's support network to help keep her on the path towards getting her doctorate, she exclaims, *"I did not have a person... I had many people."*

Theme 4: Advising and Mentoring

The advisor-student role looms large in the doctoral context and it certainly did in the experiences of these scholars. As a matter of fact, incompatible advising relationships, marked by a lack of interaction, trust, and intellectual support, contributed significantly to high number of students leaving their programs before getting their degree (Golde, 2005) also impacted greatly these women's Sense of Belonging. The centrality and gravity of the advisor's role in the experience of these women was apparent. Evidence of the continued importance of this relationship was seen by the frequency with which that relationship was brought up by the women. Evidence of the importance of this relationship was marked by intensity of emotion when these women talked about this relationship. Essentially, the women who had a positive and healthy relationship with their advisors throughout the various stages of their doctoral journey were more likely to have a strong Sense of Belonging throughout the different stages and culminating in the dissertation stage. I use Sophia's *Portrait* to introduce this theme. Sophia's comment "s*he really cares"* while not necessarily illustrative of the advising relationship of most women in this study, does provide a telling argument for the ongoing significance and influence of this faculty-student relationship.

# Portrait 8: Sophia

## "She cares about me"

Pursuing an advanced degree in STEM beyond her Master's was an endeavor that Sophia always knew she wanted to undertake. Despite her challenges, Sophia has made excellent progress in her Ph.D. program and commends her advisor's guidance and mentoring as being crucial components to her overall success.

Sophia declares matter-of-factly *"In a doctoral program, you need to know that your advisor has your back in the sense that you know that --for example, you're about to defend your proposal that that she's going to prepare you, your mentor is going to know if you're ready or not to defend before you go through—because you don't want to get derailed by the other faculty."*

Although she has not found any one thing particularly difficult, Sophia quips sarcastically, "i*t's difficult staying motivated, maintaining effective time management and prioritizing work, because* y*ou can do it WHENEVER*". Fortunately, with the help of her advisor, Sophia's "w*henever*" moments have been minimized and well-managed because her advisor *"is the type of person who will do everything in her power to get you to finish on time."*

Notice in the above quotes how Sophia uses the terms advisor and mentor interchangeably. Essentially, Sophia's doctoral experience has been such that the two--advisor and mentor-- are one and the same. Her usage, no doubt, piqued my curiosity and led me to inquire if this is in fact what she was doing. "O*f course, I know the difference between the two",* she countered in a tone and manner that suggested that I had bordered on insulting her intelligence. Oops!

Sophia reasoned that her advisor goes beyond mere academic activities of advising and has a keen interest in other matters of importance in her varied and complex life. *"In my experience, my mentor knows what I want to do afterwards...she's always [generous]—with all of her networks...is on top of what workshops I should get for me to expand my knowledge.* Similarly, the guidance and the opportunities for growth that her Mentor provides shows that she is keenly interested in Sophia's success. "S*he also gave me the tools to apply for a grant – tailored to minorities to increase their numbers in certain areas of STEM research – my advisor was the one who came up with the idea and helped me develop the grant proposal. I wrote the proposal and she mentored me through the process...Yeah, we got it!"*

Indeed, it was intriguing to see Sophia's sincerity when talking about her advisor-- and mentor. An individual who provided guidance, provides some challenge and motivation and practices strong interpersonal connectedness. Sophia sums up her assessment of her advisor by stating that, *Obviously, she's not going do your work for you, but she gives you the time and advice that you need to finish.* "*she's pretty nice about it and she cares".*

Advising and Mentoring

Sophia leaves little doubt as to the high regard with which she holds her advisor. Sophia's experience suggests a mutually positive advisor relationship. Her advisor has a good understanding of Sophia's abilities, interests and timeline and provides the needed guidance to help her move forward.  In Sophia's words, "*she gives you the time and advice that you need.*" Equally important, Sophia believes that her advisor not only cares about her overall academic success but also about her as an individual; an assumption, no doubt, which is based on behavior: Sophia's advisor makes time for her, makes sure she is doing what she needs to be doing to complete the work on time, encourages and challenges her to do/be her best academic self. Sophia in turn, trusts her advisor implicitly and as a result is likely to bring her concerns to her advisor and expect that she will be helped.

Remarkably, even the women who, for varied and seemingly valid reasons, had disappointing advisor relationships found that when their academic experiences were at its best there was often an engaged, supportive, and knowledgeable advisor involved. Sophia's comment that "*you need to know that your advisor has your back*" suggests in its most succinct form her belief that an advisor is there to support the student's academic progress unconditionally to the extent that they will not only "*watch out for you*" but challenge you in ways that take your work to a higher level. Like Sophia, that perception of the advisor as being an important connection to building a sense of Belonging to the department is also expressed by another student in the following way:

*My advisor is very approachable so I always felt like if I had questions or concerns I can go to him.  my advisor is great in that ...he very much lets you work the level of independence that he wants--.  So, once he knows that you have the skill set, he will then*

*leave you to do things---   he'll tell you what needs to be done… – so I had room to grow that way—because, I didn't have someone breathing down my neck, so to speak."*

Unlike Sophia, scholars like Amanda, depicted earlier, initially felt an overwhelming sense of feeling like *an outsider* when relationships with her advisor was not working. However, as relationships improved, Amanda viewed her advisor as the one and very important link that helped her develop a sense of connection to her department during her dissertation phase. Amanda notes:

*Now that I have an advisor, I do have a little bit of a touch tone with the department, so that's nice.*

However, Natalie whose relationship with her advisor has shifted at different stages of her experience, captures some of the nuances of this important relationship:

*My main resource has been my Advisor. In the first couple years, she was extremely helpful.  And then all of a sudden- you know—as I was preparing for my comprehensive exams, she went through a phase in her life where she was dealing with some personal issues and somehow, I just felt lost because she wasn't there during that time.   So, personally, I just felt really abandoned for a while… but after that phase passed, she came back on board again and we've continue to work together—so I found her extremely helpful.*

The reverse has also played out to be true in the experience of  doctoral students when things are not going so well and there is an ill-matched Advisor behind the scenes. Anne, who's portrait has not yet been highlight, but whose experience captures well this idea notes:

*My advisor insisted that I had this other person who is now retired…on my committee. I'd meet with my advisor and we'd do all this work and then this other person, she'd be like 'well, I don't think it should be that way... And then my [current] advisor would be like' she has a good point'.  I'm like "are you my advisor or not?"  That's one of the times I stopped… it was around my Comps. and everything she would want, everything redone, even though my advisor- we had agreed upon and I did all this work.  So that was because she never would stand up to this woman...And then I didn't do anything about doing my dissertation --till after this woman retired.*

*To this thought,  Natalie, whose initial Sense of Belonging was  anchored by the positive and close connection with her cohort, notes:*

*[When ] I wrote my work for my comprehensive exams--when she [advisor] saw my literature review, she was so blown away by it.--Instead of just saying it was good work, she passed this comment to the effect of - Did you write this yourself?—that I found extremely offensive and it made me question whether I really belonged in this place…*

On an equally important and serious note, Tina talked about the emotional anguish she experienced after having to part ways with her advisor with whom she had spent years building a solid personal and professional relationship:

*I had solidified a very close very tight-knit professional and personal relationship with this person.  And it's almost like a break up—an academic break up.  It's like relationship break up—sometimes it can really get that intense.  And, it was probably one of the worst experiences that I've have to deal with during my time here. -- I've never been that disappointed before in my life.*

Mentoring

Additionally, another observation highlighted in Sophia's narrative is her usage of advisor and mentor as interchangeable terms.  Sophia did so in a manner that suggests that her advisor's readiness and ability to mentor her through varied aspects of her doctoral journey makes her a better, if not, superior advisor.  Conversely, women like Roslyn who felt that her department space was *"hostile"* declared the lack of mentorship available to people like her as "*criminally non-existent."*  Sophia's idea of mentoring is tied to Advisor's practices as evidence that she is keenly interested in her advisee's overall success.  Sophia highlights one example of her Advisor's approach as follows:

"S*he also gave me the tools to apply for a grant... my advisor was the one who came up with the idea and helped me develop the grant proposal. I wrote the proposal and she mentored me through the process...Yeah, we got it!"*

In like manner, Grey who also valued her advisor's varied manner of mentoring echoes a similar note:

*She was—both of my advisors are well-connected in their respective fields – but she was much more proactive in introducing me to her colleagues.  And I thought that was huge!*

Relatedly, one participant who felt that she'd grown in knowledge and as a scholar credits a big part of her development as a scholar to her advisor's mentoring:

*Last academic year, I definitely knew I was done here (she chuckles), not because I had finished writing or anything, but because I felt at the point where my knowledge was as good as any… I was the one people were asking questions. My advisor was asking me questions and asking me to show other students things.*

Adja, whose transition to her program was "*very overwhelming*" given, the cultural incongruity with which she was confronted would later find inspiration in the care and empathy in how her advisor related to her.  Adja exclaimed with delight:

*She is awesome! she doesn't just deal with academic things; it's also personal, --like me feeling overwhelmed or doubting myself. —I still have those moments now in my fifth year of doubting myself— I just go to her and say, 'I don't know what I'm doing here, I don't know what I'm thinking; I don't know what my research is (she starts laughing); and then she [ say,] 'oh "Adja" sit down, breathe. Ok. So, tell me..."—and I'd tell her the details and I leave her office just feeling totally different.  I'm like Yay, **I can do this!***

### Individual

Theme 5: Persisting with Purpose

I can do this! Much of the motivation of several, if not most of the women, to finish their doctorate stemmed from a deeply personal desire to use their degree to make things better within some context of their broader community. One student voiced what other women have said, a*s coming to the place where I believe in myself, believing that I could do this, and doing it*!   It was interesting to note that while all the women had some non-traditional conceptions of what success in graduate school entailed, getting the Ph.D. remained a crucial mark of success for all.

Anne's *Portrait*  which follows captures an important aspect of this theme of persisting with purpose.  Essentially, the ability or motivation to persist is greatly diminished in contexts described by these women and yet they persist.  The high attrition rates in their respective departments left some of the women with less than subtle

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innuendos of whether they were doing the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way.  Still there is some feeling of satisfaction and success in beating the odds. As Roslyn sums it:  *They didn't succeed in getting me to leave.  I'm here and I am going to finish* which is a continuation of Anne's declaration *"I've started this and I need to finish it"*

# Portrait # 9:  Anne

## "I've started this and I need to finish it"

At the time of our interview, Anne was scheduled to defend her dissertation the following week. *"I don't like defeat, failure. So, I tell myself, I've started this and I need to finish it-- despite all the obstacles here."*  Anne's response to my question of who has been most instrumental in keeping her on the path towards completing her doctorate is swift, simple and delivered with an unabashed smile; a smile which comes at the end of our hour-long talk and disrupts the tenor of our mostly serious conversation, speaks in part to her triumph over her struggles. While Anne's looming defense, which comes almost nine years after her matriculation, is certainly a great accomplishment, her bigger success, she explains, is being able to move on to her bigger goals.

"I*t is not uncommon*", Anne explains, "f*or students to be in the program for over ten yea*rs."  She rejoins, *"there's a very high percentage of students who don't finish.  So, after they get through their Comps…there's a lot of students who decide that it is not worth it and leave."*

The temptation to leave has not been completely absent for Anne who, since matriculating, has felt an intense disconnection to her program and department; a feeling, she explains which has been one of her major obstacles.  Anne describes her perception of an initial "*lack of community'* in her department as *"there* was *no orientation, no cohort, nothing at all."*  Thus, the temptation to leave has been fueled by the lack of having any real connection to her program and department. *"That whole Sense of Belonging has never been there, she* sighs deeply. *"I have no connection to this place-- "it's hard for me to feel like I belong somewhere when I don't have any connection whatsoever."*

That connection which Anne longed to have in her academic context never came *"I still don't feel like I belong here*."   Anne says that given the very independent and isolated nature of the dissertation phase, that connection-- Sense of Belonging- is needed more than ever.   How is that impacting your work, if in any way, I *ask.*  "S*ome days, its goes well and I get a lot done, and other days I have no idea what I'm doing--* I *hit a wall again*".    While she laughs at this experience, Anne admits that the doctoral experience would a lot easier if she had that kind of connections where could, for example*, "send out a paper to somebody often and say—could you just read this and tell me what they think about it?... and I don't."*

Fortunately, the department and programmatic culture is gradually changing, Anne says. There are now new student orientations; a website with updated program information, funding opportunities for students and even a small but growing more diverse groups of students and faculty.  Anne hopes that there will be more opportunities where students get to know each other and that faculty will be more *accessible to students.*  All these pieces will help students to have a better sense of community which Anne believes is crucial to their overall success.

"*I think you do have to find your own community and really make sure that you have other connections-especially with other black women, --because everyone really feels really scattered and isolated and I would suggest to anyone coming in that they find that for themselves and cultivate that because you will find yourself just kind of floating out there if you don't.* "Anne admits that while quitting is not part of her academic mindset, her efforts to persist could not have happened without the network of support from a host of "*people in my life not associated with the college"*.

No Connections but Persisting with Purpose

Anne's comment *"I don't like defeat, failure. So, I tell myself, I've started this and I need to finish it-- despite all the obstacles here,* was echoed by all the scholars in this study. Anne echoes a sentiment that Roslyn, who from the beginning likened her connection to her program as feeling "*as a square peg in a round hole"* sums up in her need to finish against the backdrop of her struggles as follows:

*While I've been studying, I'm a wife, I'm a mother. I have to help provide a home for our son. Every weekend, my husband is gone, because he works in [another state]. During the summertime, I don't' have an income—it's more than summer—so that's a sizeable amount of time…And that has to happen while I'm doing this—trying to stay the course and weighing that against survival issues. so, I'm fighting on many different fronts. And so, it really is exhausting but very important that I kind of stay the course because it's important for him [her son] to see me finish.*

Also, Anne's remark that *"there's a very high percentage of students who don't finish" was* an experience keenly felt by each of the women. Of the nine different disciplines represented by these women, there was not one woman who did not experience first-hand either one or several of her peers leaving the program before getting their degrees as the respective responses indicate:

*So, when I came here interestingly enough, the first two friends that I made-- one of them became dissatisfied soon after being here…the one that was a member of my cohort became dissatisfied as well by the end of the first semester-- she left…*

*Half [of cohort] have dropped out or drifted off —they're no longer here. And some of them, for reasons similar to my own struggles, who didn't have an advisor that was there for you [ have left]*

*I think there were like eleven of us and now there are like 6... or seven of us left*

*There were six of us and somehow…the cohort evolved and a few people dropped out of the cohort; one of the cohort members got married and she essentially dropped out of the doctoral program.*

*In my year, there were two PHD students—and one of them left after her first year.*

Theme 6: Authentic Selves: A Sense of Belonging

A final theme which figured prominently in varied ways in all the women's narratives revolved around the desire/need "*to just be*" in their different academic realms. In large part, what this has meant for most of these women is respect for all they bring to their programs; an experience, no doubt, anchored in the comfort of simply being, "*without apology*"-all their varied and complex selves -- cultural backgrounds, personalities, and experiences as scholars. I referred to this feeling, albeit briefly, in my pilot study as the scholar's '*authentic selves*' and I found this idea to hold an equally significant place in my conversations with this group of women scholars. What is a doctoral scholar's authentic self? The women's narratives suggest that at its core is the freedom to : engage in a space that gives an individual an equal and unparalleled opportunity to be comfortable, confident and vulnerable, while feeling safe and supported in their varied selves. Interestingly, nowhere in the doctoral journey is this need more vital than during the dissertation phase. Importantly, though, experience suggests that while Sense of Belonging is flexible and can change in different stages, authenticity is a culmination of the development of Sense of Belonging from the first stage down to the final stage.

I use Raina's portrait "*I felt like I could be myself*", which undergirds the core of this theme, to introduce this topic. Interestingly, while Raina was fortunate to have this experience of authenticity, it remained elusive for most of the women. In fact, the women scholars who experienced a positive Sense of Belonging all sounded the same tone of '*I can be myself*'. The opposite was also true that scholars who saw themselves as being *on the margins* were those who felt that they did not have a space where they could be

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themselves and certainly did not feel supported--—this includes their academic,

emotional, social and academic/ professional identities.

# Portrait 10: Raina

## "I feel I can be myself"

*"The blood, sweat and tears--d*on't you know that song?"   *"No",* I---now visibly impatient and slightly peeved-- snapped back at my good friend Raina.  Seemingly un-phased by my irritation, an exceptionally jovial Raina smiles at me and continues to hum the rest of her song; '*I got a heart full of pain, head full of stress'* she adds a bit of a twist and twirl movement in her chair. , Raina looks me in the eye,  *"I'm serious, because of the  blood, sweat and tears. You know what they say, —misery likes company." S*he laughs again before adding *"when you go through struggles together, you know you get close to people, you bond over the hardships you have."* Again, Raina interjects a chuckle here before completing her thought, *"so yeah!  I feel in that way I belong here."* At this point, I realize that Raina is indeed quite serious.

 She continues, "*all the skills I've acquired, in terms of technical lab skills- I learned from someone in this program who was ahead of me. So, it didn't just magically happen.  "I might be the only black student [in my program] but...I never felt like the **only** one."* Raina begins to name her lab mates and their diverse cultures of origin.  While the diversity in Raina's lab is relatively impressive, equally admirable is the informal deliberateness and creativity with which they unite and celebrate these differences.  In addition to their popular monthly "*cultural-exchange*" potlucks, the students organize varied opportunities to come together and build community. "*And just starting out – we had a soccer team.  If we didn't know each other, well, by the end of that season (she chuckles), we did."* Certainly, the 'blood, sweat and tears' of which Raina crooned have been tempered by these social experiences and a context where practice suggests that mentoring is modeled. Raina sums up the collaborative and supportive culture of her lab/office as a place where her peers are her friends and she says, "*I can be myself."*

Moreover, Raina who claims to be an introvert, explains that her department culture helps to nurture these student friendships and in turn provides a powerful anchor for her undeniable sense of connectedness and belonging. *I think that has a lot to do with my friends here because belonging is how comfortable you feel in a place. If I look around, do I see people who look like me? And, do I feel welcomed here or am I made to feel like I am different or lacking in somewhere?  Do I belong or not? That's what I think of...  I mean, looking at my peers, for me and looking at my classmates, I did not feel like I was lacking in any way.  I felt comfortable.  I felt like I could be myself which it is really what it is for me."*

We are sitting in a quiet, bright, and colorful space in Raina's lab, where the assorted green plants give the comfortable workspace an additional level of warmth.  Across the hall is the part of the lab filled with varied high-tech machines and divers sized instruments which always leaves me in awe when I watch Raina at work. The lab space is one with which I am familiar having come here several times over the years to do my own work. On occasion, I've also attended one of Raina's team's varied monthly social gatherings which has given me a chance to know some of her other friends equally well.   Habitually, I've left this lab and its students, deeply impressed with the genuine camaraderie shared among them--never fully realizing as I do now, how their bond and Sense of Belonging is shaped in large part as a result of the opportunities provided be able to share collaboratively in the blood, sweat and tears.

Aspects of Authenticity: "*I Can be Myself"* Feeling

In the introduction of this section chapter, we met Grey whose distinguished

doctoral experience, while tempered by ongoing "*moments"* of self-doubt and censure, is

impressive. Grey's endurance and motivation to do better, she attributes mainly to

relationship to those in her department.  Grey's experience in, her department is such that

she is comfortable enough to be herself.   For example, Grey can have  "*hard*

*conversations and disagree with people*" about her work, and yet, return to her building

the following day where *she "can smile and say hi"* and begin again. This feeling

punctuates what is at the core of Raina's "*I can be myself"* feeling which she describes as

follows:

*I think that has a lot to do with my friends here because Belonging is how comfortable you feel in*
*a place.  If I look around, do I see people who look like me? And, do I feel welcomed here or am I*
*made to feel like I am different or lacking somewhere?  Do I Belong or not? That's what I think*
*of...  I mean, looking at my peers and looking at my classmates, I did not feel like I was lacking*
*in any way.  I felt comfortable.  I felt like I could be myself which it is really what it is for me."*

However, Raina's experience was not one shared by many of the women in this

study, including Roslyn who described her surprisingly immediate reaction upon entering

her department as that of being "*a square peg in a round hole."*  Roslyn explains that her

department was not a space where she could be herself and that she never quite got to

hear what she expected to be part of her doctoral experience:

*Aaah, you're here!  We could use you...there are things here that you can relate to.*
*There are people here that are open to your presence ...and there are things here that you*
*can do—you can contribute and you can make the space richer, better...*

Like Roslyn, couched in Tina's *Twilight Zone* experience was this feeling of folks

in her department not being open to, or being able to relate to her as a Black woman. Tina

attributed this condition in large part to the entrenched policies and practices shaped by a

history of racial bigotry.  Tina asserts:

*Blackness is not monolithic and they just think that everyone is supposed to be the exact same. And when I wasn't, that became a problem.  And I wasn't supported…I make no qualms—I am who I am.*

Like Roslyn and Tina, another scholar noted that Raina's "*I can be myself*

*feeling"* was not a shared experience and was also negated by the *lingua franca* of the

program that assumed that everyone is the same; or worse, everyone, while different,

must operate by the principles of dominant, cold, indifferent, and inflexible department

culture.   She shares one of her more difficult experiences that came through this practice:

*The most difficult thing was dressing...where when they're talking about how to prepare for your interview and what you're going to wear...they would say' you wear your nude stockings and pull your hair back. At the beginning, I was like- Pull your hair back? —I even considered getting a wig or a hair piece that would work for that...– it took me a while to get to the place where I was like—ok.  So, I'm never going to look like that, that's never going to be my image.*

Amanda, whose portrait introduced the "*I'm of you, but not OF you feeling*" of being on

the margins recounts her own experience in terms of how folks reacted to her image and

how this in turn impacted her work:

*When I first got into the department I had an afro; people used to call me Angela Davis in the halls—so there's like this romantic association of radical politics with Blackness which is all assumed to be in my work, instead of really engaging with it or giving me some feedback… that element of it also makes me feel as if I don't Belong.*

Amanda explains the length to which she went to change this feeling;

*But [I] had to reject all of that and I started different things to my hair and dying it and not wearing it in an Afro because I didn't want to feed in to these perceptions of self.*

Unfortunately, Amanda's concern of how this permeated her work--how, when,

and in what ways did her work matter? --which she explained always feels like is a push-

pull kind of negotiation within her department. She explains:

*So, there's this sense that if you're only doing research that reflects upon your own experience or your own historical experience then it's only of interest to you; and that is definitely something that I feel…- that's kind like **your** thing over there- so there is definitely a bracketing off of subjects pertaining to Blackness that's always been—and that's how I felt outside of the department.*

Finally, Amanda adds:

*Success then is being able to be me, being able to define myself and my own path.  I don't want that dictated to me and I think being able to maintain that throughout this whole process is a form of success. I think if I'm able to produce work that is a part of the conversation that these other folks in the literature are having; If I can produce something that they are also engaging with, that would feel pretty successful…*

Authenticity and being "One of them"

In one of the earlier *Portraits,* Tina expressed some anxiety about what she thought to be the extraordinarily high cost for Black/ African American women's want of a Sense of Belonging in Academe--- "*it often involves compromising so much of who we are*" -- she lamented.  Tina's evaluation is akin to -- despite its importance, given this alternative, it will behoove us to continue to work and study on the *margins*. How then, if in any way, does Butterfly's narrative, depicted in the next *Portrait* support or counter this idea?  Is this a paradox? In her dissertation stage, Butterfly recognizes the sundry and subtle ways that she is now "one *of them"*.  At the beginning of her doctoral journey, Butterfly certainly felt like an outsider; now in her final stage, Butterfly sees clearly that she is in some ways a full-fledged member of her department as evidenced by aspects of her behavior and approach to her academic practice. Foremost, her language and its contextual nuances speaks to her prevailing department culture-- one with which, for that very reason, she has had a very conflicted relationship; also, Butterfly's style of clothing has been replaced by the dull hues of grays and browns, which for her once epitomize her department's mechanical-- "robot"-like personality and practices.  While Butterfly

considers the possibility of her presence to inspire some change in her department as a "senior' student, her tone signals some alarm for what she believes she has become.  In some ways, Butterfly wonders if this is the culmination of her Sense of Belonging.

# Portrait 11: Butterfly:

## "I never meant to be one of them"

Butterfly is an international student now in the sixth year of her doctoral journey. As the youngest of five children and a large extended family where many have earned their Ph.D.'s or some other terminal degree, Butterfly has been primed for higher education for some time now. Bolstered by a range of rich and diverse personal and academic experiences, she arrived on campus excited for what lay ahead; yet, Butterfly declares with unmistakable dismay that nothing prepared her for the emotionally and culturally jarring experience that awaited her. Butterfly describes her first two years -- years when her own family encouraged her to return home -- as being an unpleasant experience.

A series of mishaps marked the early phase of Butterfly's doctoral experience; chief among them was the loss of her funding because of her delayed offer response. Though Butterfly would find an assistantship, she explains, with an absolute look of dread when recalling this, that she did not get her first paycheck till three months later. This loss would, on one hand, set the tenor of Butterfly's early experience -- in terms of basic survival issues of food, shelter, etc. -- for the next several months. She recounts, with horror, that she even got malnutrition. However, Butterfly is quick to add, "b*ut I made it through, it could have been worse.*" Her mother is of the impression that Butterfly has been trying this graduate school experience for a long time and that she probably should be married and having children. Her father, on the other hand, continues to motivate Butterfly to persist. Butterfly's persistence is fueled in part by a familiar saying which she champions to the affect: How you start something does not necessarily determine how you finish it-- and your finish could be much better than your start.

Interestingly on that note, though Butterfly's initial experience made her feel disconnected from her department, she exclaims with an equal mixture of marvel and unease that she is now *"one of them";* This reaction is about Butterfly's new and unusual sense of connection to her department. She recalls that she never felt welcomed in her department and for that reason she talked about "THEM". So, *it was "me" and "them or "THEY did that",* she remembers. That feeling/reaction, she says changed very recently when she noticed a subtle but telling change in behavior:

> P*eople don't really wear color in [my department] it's black, white, gray, blue. so, this past summer someone was defending their dissertation and it was the middle of summer and it's a beautiful day and then I looked around and I was wearing a blue dress...and looking around, we're all in that blue/ grey/ black/ white [color] on a beautiful day. And I realized, "I'm one of them" (she chuckles) I'm saying, I don't know how this happened but somehow, I'm one of them.*

Ironically, although Butterfly wanted to feel a sense of Belonging, the "*one of them"* is not exactly what she was looking to become, it seemed. You don't seem thrilled by that idea, why? I asked with some surprise. "No", she is not thrilled, because the very thought of her being just as aloof as everybody else is a "scary thing" She now realizes that when she talks that she also does a lot of "we believe, and "we" and "we…; —and she know she is one of them. "I *am the corporate robot now. I have no idea when it happened",* Butterfly laments.

I resisted the urge to retort but asked, "does that sense make you feel like you fit in, you belong now? She laughs, and tells me "I *never meant to be one of them, but somehow I am*" Butterfly consoles herself with the thought that this change in her is not a bad thing, after all, people change and images change and now that she is "*on the inside',* she surmises, she could "*add a human aspect to it."* She hopes.

While there is this idea for some of the women in this study that Belonging in the Academy is a futile pursuit, this is not the case for most. In looking at the notion of authenticity of selves---likely not what Butterfly is experiencing--Belonging as most of these women scholars see it is a somewhat broader than it has defined in previous research. It is not simply about feeling connected to, being supported by and valued and respected by faculty in one's department --although these are all very important. Instead, perhaps it is this place in which the scholar-- from novice to independent researcher can have the opportunity to go against all these traditional department norms--i.e. Grey's expression of messing up, failing, having difficult conversations, being told you did it wrong;-- in short, room for risk and failure-- and then getting up with integrity --no shame-- and being able to smile and be smiled back at-- and do it all over again-- until success-- as mutually defined within the context of a positive relationship that cuts across various elements of department and discipline -- you succeed-- or something like that!

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the overall findings of this qualitative study which provided an opportunity to present a summary of the data of Sense of Belonging of 12 African American/Black doctoral women scholars. Through personal interviews, I explored the doctoral experiences of these women and established that there were 6 primary themes which figured prominently in the study. These themes dealt with perceptions of: (1) Existing on the margins; (2) hostile and nurturing academic spaces; (3) support systems; (4) advising and mentoring relationships; (5) persisting with purpose and (6) authentic selves. In the chapter that follows, I discuss more thoroughly the primary findings of this study.

**CHAPTER 5**

**DISCUSSION**

<u>**Summary of Study**</u>

In this chapter, I discuss more thoroughly some of the primary findings of this study. Again, this exploratory study provided an opportunity for Black/African American women scholars to reflect on and make meaning of their Sense of Belonging experiences as doctoral scholars at a predominantly white institution. Implications that may provide guidance for enhancing the overall doctoral experience for non-traditional scholars such as African American/Black women--indeed for all doctoral students-- follow this overview. This is followed by recommendations for future research and lastly, I conclude with my final remarks.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black/African American women doctoral scholars Sense of Belonging. Ostrove and Long (2007) observe that the need to Belong is important for persistence given that higher education institutions have --racial, gender class markers--that shape student experiences and define those who belong and who do not. Previous research has highlighted that Sense of Belonging plays a critical role in a student's overall persistence and success as a scholar (Hausmann, Schoefield & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). However, as highlighted in this study, while many doctoral students do persist, their Sense of Belonging to department, discipline or institution is often very low, nonexistent or problematic. Accordingly, for many Black/ African women, the doctoral experience has become one

of simply trying to survive rather than thrive through to the dissertation stage and getting the degree.

Importantly, the study focused on women during the final phase of their academic journey. Grover (2007) highlights ways in which the dissertation phase presents several additional academic and psychological challenges to the doctoral student. Demand on time is more arduous given that the need to make continued progress towards the dissertation the balance and prioritizing of work intensifies.; in addition to their work as a scholar which helps to fund their education, the student's own research interests demand more personal commitment, while needing to be proactive in keeping up with the varied responsibilities required of the looming job market. Additionally, the scholar's need to maintain and manage a respectful and collaborative working relationship with her advisor remains a priority. Thus, students are often dealing with what Grover (2007; p.17) calls the "cumulative effects of projects" started earlier in their doctoral journey possibly striking during this final stage. Consequently, the risk of increased stress levels for the now independent scholar-researcher looms large. Against this collective backdrop, it would be of interest to see how a student's Sense of Belonging facilitates successful progress towards completion of the dissertation. In the sections that follow, I use the research questions that guide this study to frame the discussion of the findings.

## Graduate Student Perceptions: Sense of Belonging

**Research Question** 1: What are the perceptions of African American/Black women students regarding their Sense of Belonging during the dissertation stage of their doctoral journey?

Overall, in this study, Black/ African American women scholar's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging was questionable and in most cases non-existent. In sum, most

of the women felt that they did not Belong.  The women's perception hinged, first and foremost, on their troublesome relationship with their departments. While disciplines were not a unit of focus for study, experiences suggest that structural designs and practices within departmental contexts greatly influence student perceptions.  Across disciplines, almost all of women had negative experiences that made them question their Sense of Belonging.  Often, though not always, this perception took root during the first two years and persisted to the dissertation stage resulting.  This trend resulted in this recurring feeling of operating on the margins.

Theme 1: On the Margins: The Outsider Feeling

The importance of Belonging and the obstacles Black/African American women face in developing a Sense of Belonging in their graduate programs up through their dissertation phase is evident in the findings. Not only was the "*Outsider"* feeling a theme common across the experiences of most of the women but for all Sense of Belonging was a critical contributing component to the quality of their experience.  Indeed, perceptions of not Belonging started as early as the first semester and persisted throughout their journey and for some women was felt more intensely during the dissertation stage. For example, Tina who likened her perception of early experience with her department/discipline as having been in the "*twilight zone* echoed forcefully an experience that many women were feeling in their dissertation stage. It is interesting to note that Tina felt she was the only one feeling this way, until she could connect with students from her cohort and learn that in this feeling, s*he was not the only one.* Indeed, the findings indicate that these participants perceived individual elements and influences that agitated their Sense of Belonging very early on in their programs and often persisted to their dissertation stage. Some of these

elements included feelings of alienation; conflicting relationships with an advisor; lack of, or ill-advising; absence of a mentoring culture; cultural incongruence and the consequential lack of respect felt from any of these elements. The women's perception and the ensuing distress it caused, no doubt, made their journey particularly onerous. In a few cases, women's perception of their unfavorable Sense of Belonging would gradually improve especially as relationships with their faculty advisors changed for the better. Yet, even amid seemingly positive change, Tina's portrait brought about the existence of a pernicious structural and cultural feature which continues to impede opportunities for progress for Black/ African American scholars in academe.

During my member checking phase of data analysis, Tina responded candidly to my portrait of her experience. In keeping with the narrative approach of this study and the importance of allowing the voice of participants to come through, I share Tina's verbatim response. Tina's analysis provides an important lens to adding to the overall tapestry of the doctoral experience of this group of scholars in the primary question for this study. Tina asserts:

*I think this [**portrait**] could use some work. It feels as if I "Tina" believe my personality is a problem---then it's because they don't understand that blackness is not monolithic--- and as a result they couldn't support me. I hope, I spoke more about how this feeling is rooted/grounded in systemic oppressions that have plagued the department, versus me just being disappointed that I wasn't accepted for being different… Its deeper than that, and was not an isolated incident. I realized over time via my interpersonal connections with other black graduate students that this was a common experience. While blackness is not monolithic, anti-blackness seemingly is. We all faced oppressions for who we were regardless if, who we were was distinctly different (i.e. class, region, etc.).*

*So, I say all that to say, it wasn't just about them not liking me, but about what my differences were rooted in, and how those differences marred my graduate school experience. Essentially that the quality of my work, the caliber of student that I am wasn't (but is supposed to be) central to my interactions with faculty, other graduate students, and administration. Instead of judging students based on the standard qualities of being a student (i.e. classroom performance, quality of scholarship, grades, etc.) for black*

*students like me they opted to judge my personality. It was as if they had to find a fault because they couldn't accept me being black and a good student; hell, or even being a good graduate student in general… Well, I debunked all those myths, and instead of being praised it was criticized. I hope this makes sense.*

Admittedly, Tina acknowledges that while her department had the best of intentions in enrolling students from diverse backgrounds it did not set up the support systems necessary to allow for student experiences to be developed. She states*:*

*It's one thing to bring these [diverse students]in the door, but if you don't cultivate an environment in which these students can thrive…the likelihood of them being successful in these programs diminishes exponentially after the first year. And you saw it. I think there were eleven of us…now there are 6 of us left…Others have just left, struggled, just really struggled; and I think that part of that was because of my department.*

Tina's coming to terms with this feeling of alienation and being on the margins during her early years and well into her dissertation stage was eased in part by her decision to return home to complete her work. Tina talked of returning to the *"friendlier, more familiar environment she believes to be more conducive to completing her final edits in a healthier, more congenial frame of mind*." It appears that Tina will wrap up and get her doctorate; nevertheless, for many other students these oppressive feelings end in a permanent departure from the institution.

Moreover, the women's experience confirms that students who left were not always Black women or other students of color. As a matter of fact, one piece again established by the women's experiences is that navigating through graduate school in pursuit of a terminal degree is an endeavor of greet challenge for most students, irrespective of gender or race (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005). Doctoral programs would do well to reassess structural properties and practices of their espoused department

culture. Again, this certainly not a new theme nor is it the first call for change in doctoral

programs.

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women
in relation to their perception of Belonging during the dissertation phase?

On the Margins: I'm of you but not of you feeling

Perception influences behavior and this was true in the experience of these

women who lived a scholarly life of intense isolation and alienation all resulting in

heightened stress. Tins, whose experience is captured in part by the " *Twilight Zone*

*Portrait,* shared candidly about her mental health issues which was fueled in this context.

To illustrate, Natalie who described her current relationship with her advisor as one with

which she is now content, says that that relationship has been one marked by ongoing

insecurity. "*I don't think that even though I have this working relationship with my*

*Advisor …I don't leave her [feeling that I am a part of this community—if anything I*

*leave feeling like I'm undermined. I feel like the message I get is you're really not*

*supposed to be here.*

Given what some women saw as the persistent indifference of their respective

departments, many frequently struggled with their decision to pursue a degree. The

experiences of these Black/African American scholars begin and end with the reality of

exclusion that some scholars have noted necessitates being part of a community (e.g.

Etzkowitz et al., 2000). Contributing to this reality of not being part of a community is

what many of these scholars acknowledged as driving their initial feelings of isolation

from the doctoral process itself. This isolation was one of the hardest areas of adjustment

for the women. There was initially little surprise about this finding given its prevalence in

the research (e.g. Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Understandably, given that the goal of the early stages of doctoral work is to prepare the novice student to be independent researchers in the final stage of the doctoral journey. The role of independent researcher during the dissertation phase suggests that the doctoral student will work with a greater level of self-sufficiency --that is, independent of structured classes or, a cohort of other students with whom to work. Thus, the resulting "isolation" that a student is likely to feel is because of the loss of something-- a resource that was both expected and provided.

Nonetheless, the isolation of which these women speak is singularly distinct. Moreover, it's distinction in an academic setting makes it potentially more insidious in nature and more destructive in its practice. This is because, the practice, though often unconscious, appears to be intentional and so common across some disciplines-- the very antithesis of the foundations on which doctoral programs are founded. Indeed, doctoral programs espouse a *community of practice* as central to learning --a theme which is dependent on relationships. In this context, mentoring-- which is a relationship- is provided by a more experienced advisor whose guidance contributes to the overall development of the novice scholar-researcher. Indeed, many of the women's portraits capture the power of this idea and need in their efforts to create a community of practice among their cohort. Even among some women, like Vanessa who was not part of a cohort, they used other resources beyond their department to seek out and build community some manner of a community of practice.

Indeed, the connection between community and education is also not a new one given the need to Belong is both a formidable facilitator of learning and enhances the quality of the learning experience. In the doctoral context, Sense of Belonging and

community have sometimes been used interchangeably and previous research attests to the ubiquitous nature of the term and its broad application (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). For instance, we have a community of learners and learning communities" (Zhao & Kuh, 2004); Colleges as communities and the communities of practice (Tinto, 1998) or Intellectual communities (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel & Hutchings, 2008). Nevertheless, despite its broad application in academia, White and Nonnamaker (2008, p. 351) observe that the idea of "a shared experience among members" is common in to all its definitions and contexts. More importantly, the authors note that the essence of community is intimately linked to the theoretical concept of Belonging and Mattering. And it is this piece that is of great interest in this study.

While this theme of isolation is a recurring one echoed throughout the literature on graduate student experiences, it is especially salient in the experiences of Black women (e.g. Ellis, 2001; Gasman, Hirchfield & Vultaggio, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Again, the most difficult aspects of this journey for these students was not the difficulty of coursework or moving to a new location as it was the environment of the departments. Students described the overall climate of the institution and department as one that does not cater to their academic needs or their values and is often marked by hostility. This finding is consistent with previous research regarding Black students as wells other students from traditionally underrepresented groups (Ellis, 2001, 2003; Gardner, 2008; Gonzalez, 2006).

Hostile and Nurturing Spaces

What practices can mitigate isolation and alienation? Raina's remark that she feels like she could be herself came about in large part because her departments had several built-in activities and structures to bring students together; some organized by faculty and staff, others by students.  Of course, this also included "approachable" and friendly faculty and staff who all shared a concern for the success of *all* their students. Often for some women, like Amanda, Tina and Roslyn, perceptions of disconnection and the resulting isolation that ensued were made unnecessarily more difficult by department culture and what these women saw as deeply entrenched bigotry.  Adja's "*absence of a welcoming environment"* was for women like Roslyn and Tina made to feel *"hostile"*; practices such as these can help to aggravate feelings of low sense of Belonging.

Collectively, the women's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging were first and foremost influenced by their connection to their departments.  In addition to the competitive  and chilly climates that marked graduate departments, some of the women in this study felt that faculty seemed more concerned with furthering their careers than the well-being of students and the department. Indeed, competitive academic departments, where only a few are privileged to resources, are one of the common barriers to facilitating successful integration into the academic and social structures important to Sense of Belonging. Previous research has found that women of color reported less help from faculty with overall guidance that served to build their integration into their departments due in part to individual and institutional racism as well as low numbers of Black female faculty and staff on campus (Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Patton & Harper, 2003).

More positive integration experiences that include opportunities for breaking down of barriers, learning, fun (de-stressing), and easing the ongoing transitions that take place through the different stages lead to a more positive Sense of Belonging. Likewise, they also help scholars to develop very early a confidence not only in their academic abilities but in what they will bring to the academic context.

Nurturing Spaces

Some women emphasized how practices within their departments reinforced their inclusion and their Sense of Belonging.  Examples included monthly potlucks, soccer games and seminars.  It is likely that these social events were successful because they existed in department where relationships were relatively strong and already being built in different ways.  The frequency and way faculty availed themselves to students, as well as how faculty invited students to lead out on and/or support with different department projects and activities also contributed to this positive atmosphere of inclusion.  For example, Natalie collaborated with one of her cohort peers to design and present a successful department-wide conference. This conference came about because of an informal conversation during her cohort's monthly lunch and for Natalie typified a sense of community, care and trust that had been developed with her cohort.

Likewise, Sophia felt that among her challenges of staying motivated to continue her dissertation work was the supportive nature of her department setting-- citing day-to-day interactions, in informal hallway meetings, collaboration of work with other students and conversations with colleagues in more professional settings that make her feel respected, valued and welcomed-- and affirming her view of her department as captured

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in her portrait that "*everyone cares.*"   Equally, Raina's feeling of "*I can be myself"* in

her department did not come without its trials .  Raina is quick to share that her doctoral

journey has not been easy as epitomized in her "*blood sweat and tears*" anthem.

Nevertheless, Raina attributed  practices within her department that nurtured an

environment of friendship and collaboration that certainly served to mitigate these

challenges. Consequently, communities of care, comprised of friendships formed within

cohorts and across other departments with other students and faculty proved vital in

improving the quality of their experience and making progress in their dissertation

writing

3).  How do African American/Black women perceive their background characteristics as impacting their Sense of Belonging?

Entrenched Racism and Sexism?

        This is a good place to return to Tina's question /response to me with regards to

how I captured or, rather, failed to capture her feeling of disconnect from her department.

In short, does her assessment make sense? Yes, it does and she says it best. Interestingly,

though all the women were undoubtedly aware of their background characteristics of race

and gender -- and how these might intersect within this context -- these features were not

the predominant aspects of their selves they set out to put forward.  Rather, these women

wanted to be welcomed and understood first, and foremost, as scholars.  Raina, who, if

you remember, felt like she could be herself, recalls how for the longest time, because of

her feeling of comfort, she did not realize that she was the only Black student in her

department until her parents questioned her about it. Recall what she says:

*I mean, looking at my peers, for me and looking at my classmates, I did not feel like I was*
*lacking in any way.  I felt comfortable.  I felt like I could be myself which it is really what*

*it is for me.*

Nevertheless, some women understood a good deal of the negative experiences of

Belonging they were experiencing were likely tied to an institution with a long-standing

legacy of being oppressive and marginalizing some groups.  Maria's opening portrait of

"*existing on the frontier*s," coupled with Tina's *Twilight Zone* experience encapsulates

this perception that in many ways, Black /African American women academicians still

operate in academia as unwelcomed "*outsiders.*"   And while this may be the experience

of Black /African American women in this study, they are, unfortunately, *not the only*

*ones.*

4). What support systems do African American/ Black women attribute to facilitating
their Sense of Belonging while working on their dissertation?

Advising

It is important to note that although Black/ African American doctoral students

experience immense challenges and oppressive academic integration, that they find

support to survive, persist, and succeed in academia was also evident in the findings.

While several factors were mentioned, the crucial role of the advising/mentoring

relationship was heavily discussed.  For example, conflictual or non-existent advising

relationships marked by a lack of interaction, trust, and intellectual support, contributed

significantly to some women's feeling that they did not Belong. All the women believe

that faculty mentoring and support are/were critical to promoting their scholarship,

research, and career development. Research focused on Black students at the graduate

level suggests not only the importance of encouraging mentoring but also the importance

of institutions being intentional in providing educational climates to support the

cultivation and maintenance of mentoring relationships (Grant & Simmons, 2008).

Broadly, women like Natalie and Sophia saw the advisor relationship not only being

crucial to their efforts to "*survive the doctoral journey*" but as a lifetime relationship.

Consequently, it was important for them to work with an individual whom they felt really

cares, understands them and, to use Sophia's words "*have your back.*"

However, several students, including Natalie, cautioned about the need to be

proactive and patient in learning to build the all-important advising relationship over

time. This piece is particularly important given that the advisor takes such a primary role

in the dissertation phase.  Of her advisor, Natalie says she's very appreciative of the

relationship because she finds that her advisor's feedback is extremely helpful and comes

up with ideas and suggestions about which, Natalie admits, she probably would never

have given thought.   Yet, Natalie is quick to add that her relationship with her advisor

hasn't been always this way-- it has been at times a rocky one.   Fortunately, she learned

to manage her relationship with her advisor; once Natalie realized that her advisor would

not reach out if she did not first do so, she started taking initiative as follows:

*Now that I'm in the writing phase, when I send her a chapter.  I send an email and I say
I'm sending this chapter—usually, she needs a week's notice—and this is what I've
written in this chapter. This was my goal—to find out "A, B, C, D".  As you review this A,
B, C, D—are my goals actually coming out as I intended them…  And then, once I send
that letter, then I set it [ an appointment] she has the google appointment calendar—and
so I will just find a time.*

Natalie adds with some satisfaction:

*And so, I've been doing that the past six year; that has been helpful because I realize that
if I didn't do anything, she wasn't one of those advisors who would send an email and say
"how are you doing?... come and see me" So, it did force me to really take care of my
own business.*

Mentoring

Mentoring -- lamenting the absence of, and need for it, or declaring the joys of being mentored by advisors was another recurrent theme in this study. Again, not immediately surprising, given that mentoring by a faculty is touted as being critical for the experiences of Black women at the graduate level in the few studies that have focused specifically on this group of scholars (Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Nettles, 1990, 2006; Patton & Harper, 2003). In their qualitative study of 25 exemplary advisors, Barnes and Austin's (2009, p.311) found that these advisors displayed "both an intellectual dimension and an affective dimension focused on caring, support, and friendliness". This impression is captured in Sophia's retort about her advisor that "she *cares about me.*" Studies of the graduate experience suggest that student's satisfaction with their faculty advisor has a positive on their persistence (Barnes & Randall, 2012). Often, student advising and mentoring are intertwined so that their terminology is sometimes used interchangeably in the literature (Barnes & Austin, 2009), however, Nettles and Millett (2006) contend that the functions of advising and mentoring are distinct. Mentoring is always seen as going beyond simply what can be the predictable guidance of academic advising. Consistent with previous research, and highlighted in the experiences of these women, is that mentoring by faculty is more intentional in helping students to confidently negotiate and navigate the personal, academic and professional terrains of their programs. Roslyn referred to the absence of mentors on this campus as being "c*riminally nonexistent,"* simultaneously indicating her strong desire to be mentored and her distress in not having access to such a critical resource at the doctoral level.

Patton and Harper (2003) found a strong relationship between mentoring and that the overall satisfaction and success of Black women was strengthened even when confronted by the presence of several other adverse challenges.  In short, what this says is that, even in Roslyn's *"square peg in a role hole" e*xperience of marginalization, having a mentor may have well served to lessen, perhaps even eliminate, that feeling of not Belonging that has permeated her doctoral experience.   In her study of Black women's graduate experiences, Ellis (2001) found Black women scholars had great difficulty locating other women like themselves to mentor them.  Perhaps therefore Patton and Harper (2003), in their study of mentoring relationships among Black graduate students, found that these women, to survive and excel in their graduate programs, created and network with other students to offer peer mentoring and support.

Support Systems: Peers as Friends, Family, and Mentors

While relationships with faculty and experiences in the classroom are undeniably important, the literature suggests that peer interactions are also significant in terms of Black/ African American students' experiences (Ellis, 2001; Golde, 2000; Nettles, 2001). Some scholars assert that peer interactions influence multiple aspects of the Black graduate student experience, from academic achievement to emotional satisfaction (Patton and Harper, 2003).   And this was true of the women in this study. Findings in this study suggest that other doctoral students play an instrumental role in the mentoring relationship and in adding positively to each other's Sense of Belonging, as they pursued their degrees. Quite often, though not always, these peers were other Black/ African American women from other graduate programs throughout the university.

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The findings showed that despite disciplinary differences, women across programs joined together to offer encouragement and support. In most cases, these students were a few years ahead and were instrumental in the direction they encouraged their peers to take. Previous research on mentoring graduate students and Black women has acknowledged the importance of peers in their integration and adjustment (Golde, 2005; Patton & Harper, 2003). Patton and Harper (2003) confirm that Black women often choose to involve and align themselves with cohorts of other women who provide advice and a sense of connectedness. However, in much of the literature, the role of the peers as mentors has been overshadowed by the prominent status given to the faculty role in mentoring.

4). What aspects of African American/Black women's doctoral experiences facilitate their perceptions of their Sense of Belonging?

Funding

Funding, or lack of it, was an issue for many of the women. Another important means of how departments foster a Sense of Belonging is through adequate financial support. Freedom from undue financial stress is critical for all students, and Black / African American women are no exception. Most of my interview participants received adequate financial support through fellowships, teaching/research assistantships and grants, although a few had to work additional jobs and/or take out loans. Though I did not address this directly, I did show the burden of not having funding, particularly in the case of Tina and Butterfly in the student portraits. Alternatively, one of the reasons that Raina says she felt like she Belonged is that she *"was always paid"* and had a combination of fellowships, assistantships, and an additional stipend from her advisor who was the principal investigator for one of her primary projects. Likewise, travel grants supported

presentations at conferences and created opportunities to meet other students with similar research interests.

The Want for Authenticity/Authentic Selves

Everyone needs, and should feel comfortable in their own skin. Tina's sense of not Belonging was perpetuated by the perception that her department was not open to her "differences" as a black woman; a similar feeling for Roslyn made it feel like her department was a space that was closed to her.  For Adja, part of this feeling was tied to her cultural heritage and language differences.  Comparably, the women who shared in this experience all felt that they had to learn their departments ways at the expense or exclusion of their own ways.  Equally, in this context the women's ways of knowing appeared not to be legitimate or valued in their academic setting. Those women who felt they Belonged often always felt that they had that space and freedom to be there true selves.

Summary

In conclusion, this study was a qualitative study of doctoral student perceptions of their Sense of Belonging and the impact of this on their dissertation phase. In this chapter, I discussed the primary themes of the study gathered from the collected data. I collected data through semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve Black/ African American women scholars in the dissertation phase of their doctoral journey.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

## <u>The Power of Perception</u>

Most of us likely know from first-hand experience that perceptions are powerful. How we see gives form to how we experience things. It can also be reasoned that how we experience things is in large part due to how we see things. *Seeing* i*s believing,* goes the familiar adage;. although for others believing is seeing. The two likely complement each other and for these participants what they saw and experienced in the practices of their departments largely shaped their Sense of Belonging during their doctoral experiences. Within the doctoral context, Belonging, broadly signifies the degree to which scholars are fully supported and integrated into the overall academic and social culture of their department and discipline. However, diverse student experiences have shown that a graduate student can have some level of integration and an understanding of the mores of a graduate department and remain in many ways an outsider -- "on the margins" -- in that setting. Essentially, Belonging in the doctoral context, in addition to being about: Do I fit here? Is what I bring valued and supported? Is this a place where I can thrive (emotionally, socially, academically) as a result support and guidance that I receive? ---is about, can I be my authentic self? And, as highlighted in part by the incredibly high doctoral attrition rates, too often this is seldom the case; oftentimes, doctoral students who do not feel a Sense of Belonging are likely not to persist. Attrition rates of students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, such as the women in this study, have been reported at higher rates across disciplines (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005). Nevertheless, for many scholars, including the women in this study -- many of

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whom do not "have the luxury of quitting" -- continue to persist. There is a determination to finish, even if it means "*operating on the margins*", but this decision has not been without a great emotional cost to the individual student. My purpose in this study, however, was not to point to the myriad challenges confronting Black/ African American women pursuing their doctoral degrees as much as to substantiate Sense of Belonging as one potentially powerful resource as it is experienced in the lives of twelve women who are in the advanced stages of their doctoral degrees.

The results of the study highlighted some important aspects of Black/African American women's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging. While the establishment of on-campus support networks through peers, faculty, friends, and the broader academic community is an important resource for Sense of Belonging, the lens through which Sense of Belonging is first experienced is the connection to the faculty advisor and the department. Important to building on this relationship should be efforts to create "welcoming environments" through which departments provide diverse opportunities to help ease the transition of students at various points in the doctoral journey always interspersed with some fun. These departments' levels of nurturance can be seen and felt in programming that foster respect and collaboration among students, faculty, and staff. Whether the women were talking about their experiences with their advisors or other faculty in the university, with their peers and the resulting impact on the relationship with their work, the women articulated the Sense of Belonging they felt when all these relationships were positive. The women's experiences revealed the positive impact that departmental culture had on their experiences as doctoral students. Importantly, the women shared that although gender or race mattered, they were not the single identity

markers influencing their experiences in their doctoral studies. While the women were all Black or of African American descent, their varied diversity ranged greatly -- in terms of ethnicity, heritage and culture, language, class, college going status. They were far from being a monolithic group as the literature so often is likely to group them. Yet, despite the great diversity among these twelve women, a common theme permeated their graduate experiences: The doctoral journey is emotionally difficult and a having a Sense of Belonging is a powerful antidote to counteract the stress and challenges resulting from this journey.

Although the women's fortitude has ostensibly served them well throughout this journey, the often-onerous nature of their experience in the doctoral context would have pushed the less determined and daring student to leave her program in the first years. The desire for a Sense of Belonging, and the lack of it, may prompt some students to abandon either their institutions—or worse—their education (Herzig, 2004) However, for these women, it is not simply about persisting -- although that is important -- but more about the need to have a psychologically and physically richer graduate experience which would in turn help to facilitate greater success among them.

Success at all stages of the doctoral journey requires successful integration into and connection to students' departments and disciplines. For women, and Black/ African American women who have endured a long history of policies intent on restricting their access and integration into academe, building their Sense of Belonging is intimately tied to the quality of their experience and overall long-term success. Accordingly, how well these students are sintegrated into the complex ways of knowing, of doing and of being graduate students are enhanced by programs and departments that act to positively

facilitate this process. While some elements of the academic environment impact all students in some way, many of them affect groups of students in different ways; this means that even among this group of women scholars, differences in experiences will happen. However, I believe that the quality of a doctoral woman's experience -- of any background -- is to a large extent a function of not only how well integrated in the academic department but also in the nature of her relationships. Relationships are important -- how our department/disciplines relate to us, and we in turn are given opportunities to relate to each other. More specifically, interactions with faculty as advisors and mentor, and a mutual commitment of both sides to this relationship remains a crucial element to promoting a strong Sense of Belonging.

## Implications

The findings of this study have two major implications. First, the findings focus on first-hand accounts of Black/African American doctoral women's difficulties in experiencing a Sense of Belonging, and it is critical that practitioners think about the larger departmental and institutional changes that are needed to address these challenges. The study's focus on Sense of Belonging among Black/African American doctoral women offers another lens through which to understand and assess the quality of these women's experiences; this is more urgent since many of these findings are not new but also continue to persist at disturbing levels. Given the growth and range of diversity of the non-traditional student population, the overall success and well-being of students, and of institutions alike, may very well depend on the experiences that they have in this

setting.  Arguably, one of the primary and persistent challenges with which higher education practitioners are confronted is to help more of the increasingly and extraordinarily diverse students who are gaining access to higher education to succeed while having an overall positive academic experience.

The experiences of Adja, Raina, Micheless, Maria, Natalie, Roslyn, Tina, Grey, Butterfly, Anne, Sophia, and Amanda highlight a need for students to not simply persist, but to thrive.  Thus, the quality of experience is even more critical. The findings of this study revealed the importance of a "welcoming" "supportive and caring" department/discipline context as a first step in fostering a Sense of Belonging. Supportive and caring departments appear to be critical in the dissertation stage given it is the stage of the doctoral journey seen as being more unstructured setting and likely a time of heightened stress.

While it is tempting to focus the direction of change on individuals alone, this should not be the case. Demands on faculty time, absence of a critical mass of faculty of color, limited resources, and/or a restrictive department culture, among other challenges, make it almost impossible for faculty to meet the varied needs of students.  Because of this reality, the synergy of collaboration in the role of peers and other individuals in the departments and across campus takes on a more significant place.  Creating a Sense of Belonging is likely to happen for all students (and faculty) when it is infused into the overall culture of the university by overall practices and policies.

In addition to these concerns, perhaps two of the most encouraging insights gained from this study dealt with dispelling the myths around persistence: In short, success should not simply be about persisting to get the Ph.D.; more importantly are

opportunities given to fully engage students in their departments to ensure a better quality of experience while persisting. The second is reaffirming the need to create, or recreate, a mentoring or "apprentice" culture in the doctoral context. Walker, Golde, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2008, p.89) contend that among the most distinct features of doctoral education is the teaching /learning relationship of "apprenticeship between student and faculty."

Equally, faculty mentoring was highlighted as being critical to building these women's Sense of Belonging. Thus, the findings dispel in an important way the myth of mentoring as being old (and irrelevant) -- as I've heard one faculty member refer to it. Moreover, given the current context of doctoral education, which is diverse in all kinds of ways, the need for mentoring -- or finding new and creative ways to mentor -- appears to be even more crucial than it's ever been. Some scholars contend that the traditional apprenticeship model of pairing of two individuals, while important, cannot meet the multifaceted needs of diverse students (e.g. Grant & Simmons, 2008). Instead, a more integrated apprenticeship approach utilizing "multiple mentors" would likely be a more intellectually engaging and successful model (Walker et al. 2008, p. 94). Given how the women in this study went about building communities among their cohorts and other students and individuals beyond their departments, informal mentoring is also highlighted as an important resource by the women and should be included as part of the mentoring culture. Whatever the case, this opens a space for rethinking more realistically and creatively of mutually varied approaches to mentoring across various segments of the academic community. The assumption here is that advisors and mentors, while important

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at every stage of the doctoral journey, will be considerably more present during the dissertation stage.

Finally, the overarching goal of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black/ African American doctoral student's Sense of Belonging in their dissertation phase in the context of one predominantly White institution of higher education.  The theoretical concept of Sense of Belonging served as the lens through study was viewed and the findings were weaved together from first-hand narratives of these women. Consequently, this study provided a space for the participants to reflect on their experiences and provide insight into the doctoral experience through their eyes. Collectively, these scholars perceived Sense of Belonging as being highly dependent on positive relationships; these relationships begin with and are sustained by mutual respect and trust.  While this is only part of the equation, it is a good place from which to start any long term and productive relationship.

## Future Research

Black/ African American women, despite their long and complex history of struggle to be accepted and integrated in higher education, have no doubt made important strides. What can universities and their educational practitioners do to enhance and facilitate the participation and integration of a broad range of students in doctoral programs? One of the vital ways to retain diverse students in doctoral programs is for departments/disciplines to develop ways to help students participate fully and effectively in authentic ways.  Moreover, the need to minimize or eliminate the obstacles these students face in all aspects of the academic environment of their departments and programs is vital.  Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of

Black/African women doctoral scholars in individual disciplines to understand some of the specific structures and practices in place that facilitate or hinder Sense of Belonging among this group.  For example, comparatively, how do scholars in the humanities and education fare relative to those in Engineering or Mathematics?  Although I purposely did not focus on disciplines in this study, disciplines seemed to figure prominently in the experiences of these women.  Frankly, I did not imagine that discipline or rather discipline culture would take such a pivotal role in the women's narratives. Though the women were the individual units of study, their stories revealed that central to their doctoral worlds was their relationship with their department -- and a need to first feel a Sense of Belonging in them.   The experiences of the women suggest that some disciplines/department proved more problematic than others; others seemed more adept at cultivating an academic environment that stimulated Sense of Belonging. Interestingly, the women in this study with a Sense of Belonging shared a similar experience of coming from a certain discipline area; again, perhaps not surprising, given insights gleaned from previous research on departments as the locus of doctoral programs and disciplinary life, and serve as filters through which graduate students make meaning of their experiences (Golde, 2005).  Departments/disciplines then are the first context in which scholars begin to see and understand their Sense of Belonging

## Final Remarks

Portrait 12: Micheless

### *"I don't question my Sense of Belonging, I just know"*

Successfully balancing family life and a full-time job with graduate school takes an undeniable level of resolve and a ----high tolerance for stress?  Definitely. So, says Micheless who admits that high stress has been part and parcel of her doctoral journey.  "I *have a high tolerance for stress and I think that's one of the main skills that has probably helped me so far in this process, because if I really did not have that high tolerance for stress I think I would have probably packed up and left a loooong time ago."*

 Although pursuing a doctorate was important to Micheless, she did not want to do it at the expense of her family.  At the start of her doctoral journey, Micheless recalls spending her entire weekends in the library on "*lock down"* doing school work.  In this mode, she could not meaningfully engage with her family; her two children were getting bigger and needed more attention since they were involved in more activities.  As a mother, she did not want to miss out on those moments in their lives. Micheless reached a point where she felt she was doing her children a disservice and had to answer the question "*Am I going to be an absent mother in my children's life just to finish this program or, am I going to create a better balance... to be able to do my academic work and take care of my kids?*  This challenge forced a shift in her mindset and she eventually made several changes that included giving up her full-time job.

While Micheless has certainly stayed the course*,* she has been able to do this largely by the love and support of her family that keeps her anchored -- her "*very supportive husband"*, himself a Ph.D., and her two children.  She says, I *think, based on my background, a Black woman... [that] I owe it to my kids to tell them, at least their mom has achieved this, so this is something they can do.*" Micheless admits that she "*selfishly tends to bury herself"* a great deal in her family and that much of her Sense of Belonging comes from them. She says her *emotional support, stress, time management support, that sort of stuff I tend to deal with it on a different lens with my family."*

Consequently, Micheless says she is not really reaching out to her department to get that type of support and has found that she has, probably of her own doing, created some distance and disconnection between herself and her department.  Micheless believes that there are still many mitigating factors working against minority women like herself to get to that level of education and there is still a small percentage of women of color in doctoral programs.  Micheless knows that there are many Black women who need more academic and emotional support and *she* doesn't think that they are getting that support.

Nonetheless, she notes "I*n my family- I don't question my Sense of Belonging, I just know...and the reason I feel that way is because I'm not treated any differently from anyone in my family. And at the same time, I feel a sense of support in my family..."*  Micheless ends our conversation wistfully by wishing that the Sense of Belonging that she experiences in her family would be beneficial if it were transferred to the academic world and especially to our doctoral departments.

**Not having to question one's Sense of Belonging…**

Given its importance, Sense of Belonging in the doctoral department is paradoxically most noticeable by its absence, as is underscored by Micheless' portrait. The inevitable distance and disconnection from her department during her dissertation phase was mitigated her Sense of Belonging in the context of her family. She never had to think about it -- she knew that it was there.  Micheless wistfully longed that this feeling of Belonging could be replicated in some ways in the academic context.  It is a theme which was echoed in similar ways among many of the women when describing aspects of Sense of Belonging for themselves. The academic, social, and emotional elements that characterize the complex and complicated doctoral process creates a special need for Belonging.

It was also important for me to think about what is not present in the data. Notably absent in the accounts of Micheless and some of the other women's stories is reasons for intentions to quit -- it was always about finishing what they started. Each of the twelve women came with the expectation of successfully pursuing and getting a Ph.D. Though their experience of not having a Sense of Belonging provided a constant source of anxiety and frustration, it was also, at times, as Maria underscored very early on in her portrait, a place of strength.  These women often took charge of their own learning, found communities in which they could engage productively and creatively, and provided support and guidance for other women coming into their respective programs. Still, the experience of these women suggests that their pursuit of a PH.D. was never an undertaking they could do it alone -- their focus on the relationship with their advisors,

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provision of mentoring, receiving funded, being able to collaborate with others, and take risks and fail and try again all speak to their expectation of engaging in an intellectual community first and foremost at the departmental level. Essentially, these themes speak strongly to the need and importance of and this idea underscores and binds these different themes in the student experiences together. Given this, I find the idea of "Intellectual community" as espoused by Walker and his colleagues (2008) quite compelling.

**Belonging to an Intellectual Community**

In their study of doctoral education, Walker et al. (2008, p. 125) observe that while departments can have varied intellectual communities, they have distinct characteristics. First and foremost, intellectual communities are: committed to help students develop into the best scholars possible; they deliberately seek out a diversity of backgrounds and experiences in their students and faculty; they are flexible and forgiving and respectful and are generous with their time, ideas, and feedback. Such a department allows for risk and failure, which ties back to helping the students contribute to generating knowledge. These are qualities voiced in various ways by the women in this study and were intimately tied to the women's call for a space that would allow them to be their authentic selves as scholar-researchers. Additionally, Walker and his colleagues (2008) caution that creating such communities involves hard work. It is mutual work taken on by both students and faculty and necessitates having activities that foster full engagement of students in the life of the department. Where I diverge from the scholars' use of this concept is where they assert that making knowledge creation should be central to this intellectual community. Instead, I believe that *people* need to be central to this community; knowledge creation then grows out of these relational bonds. The point is

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that the call for community -- one made the Carnegie foundation decades back for the undergraduate community -- remains a relevant call today for the doctoral community especially as this context of scholarship "becomes more diverse in all sorts of ways that matter to learning" (Walker et al, 2008; p.155).   Moreover, it needs to be a community where equitability is practiced in ways that Micheless describes for me:

*It's like "I am here" do I have all the benefits, equality, access, like everybody else in this program?  Do I feel like I am getting the same type of attention, support like everybody else---do you feel that there is a level of equality and access across the board for everyone and you feel good about it and about being there?*

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

**Principal Investigator:** Sabrina V. Durand and Dr. Gretchen Rossman (Dissertation Chair)

**Study Title:** BEYOND ACCESS: SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK WOMENWRITING TO COMPLETE THE PHD

**Sponsor:** N/A

**1. What is this form?**
This form is called a Consent Form. It will provide you with information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participating in this research study.  I encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time.  If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

**2. What is the purpose of this study?**
The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which doctoral women's perceptions of their sense of belonging influence their experiences as scholars during the dissertation phase.

**3. Where will the study take place and how long will it last?**

The study will take place in a semi-private or public setting such as a group study room in the library or in my office on the UMass Amherst campus. Each interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. It is possible participants may be contacted after the first interview (via email or telephone) for a second 30- minute interview to clarify their response to questions. Participants will not be contacted after the study has been completed.

**4. What will I be asked to do in this study?**

If you agree to take part in this study you will be invited to meet with the interviewer Sabrina Durand for an individual interview conversation that will last approximately 60-90 minutes.  You may also be invited to participate in a second 30-minute interview to read and comment on the transcript of your interview to ensure that they accurately depict your thoughts and understandings; however, you may choose to participate in only one interview. If you opt for a single interview you will be asked if you would like to voluntarily read and comment on the findings to ensure that they accurately depict your thoughts and understandings.  If so, a transcript of the interview will be emailed to you.

During the first interview, I will ask you questions about your experiences as a doctoral student and about your understanding and experiences with "belonging". At the second interview, you will review the transcribed notes from the first interview for accuracy and you may be asked more specific questions about "belonging" and practices in your department that facilitate/constrict this perception. The interview will be recorded on a digital audio recorder and later transcribed into a written format.

## 5. What are my benefits of being in this study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study will advance our understanding of how to potentially improve the experience of future doctoral students.

## 6. What are my risks of being in this study?

The researcher believes that there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to participate in the interview conversations. My aim is for you to be comfortable always.  If at any time, you feel that you do not want to answer a question, you don't have to.  You are also welcome to discuss any concerns you have with me along the way and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

## 7. How will my personal information be protected?

To ensure your confidentiality, I will not use your real name in this study.  Each participant will select with the researcher a code name (pseudonym), which will be used throughout the study and in any future publications or presentations. In addition, all digital electronic data will be kept on Box (https://www.umass.edu/it/box) which has been approved by the UMass IT to store most study data.

Printed transcriptions will be stored in a secure location in a locked cabinet in my locked campus office. The data collected in this study will be used toward the completion of a doctoral dissertation study, which will be made publically available upon completion.  The findings may also be presented at meetings or conferences and/or published in an article, journal, or book.  You will not be personally identified in any publications or presentations.

## 8. Will I receive any payment for taking part in the study?

You will not receive any payment for participating in this study.

## 9. What if I have questions?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision.  I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me, Sabrina Durand at svdurand@educ.umass.edu or 413-531-0324 or my dissertation chair, Dr. Gretchen B. Rossman by email at gretchen@educ.umass.edu or 413-545-4377/3610. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

## 10. Can I stop being in the study?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to.  If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time.  There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

## 11. Subject statement of voluntary consent

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. The general purposes and particulars of the study as well as possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

I consent to being audio recorded ().  I do not consent to being audio recorded ()


_____          _____          ____
Participant Signature:               Print Name:                Date:

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.


_____          _____          _____
Signature of Person                  Print Name:                Date:
Obtaining Consent

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Name:                              Pseudonym:                        Date:
Status: FT/ PT                     Phone:                            Program/Discipline:
Ethnic Identity                    # of Years in Program

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Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Discuss the purpose of the study
- Provide informed consent; ask if they  have any questions about the form
- Provide structure of the interview (audio recording, taking notes, and use of pseudonym)
- Ask if they have any questions about the study
- Test audio recording equipment
- SMILE/RELAX-make the participants feel comfortable

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1. I am interested in your academic journey.  Would you tell me a little about how you got to where you are now?

   *Follow-up questions:*
   What led you to pursue a PhD?
   What supports did you have in making the decision to apply for the PhD?
   Who/what has been most instrumental in your decision to pursue a doctoral degree?
   How did this person or events encourage you to pursue the PhD?
   Did this person or events help you feel confident in your pursuit?

   How did your undergraduate or other graduate school experiences shape your expectations for a PhD program? *[probe for sense of support/belonging in previous schooling]*
   Are you among several in your family who's attended school, or are you the first?
   If among the first, to whom did you turn for advice and support?

2. On average in your department, how long does it take to complete the PhD?

   *Follow-up questions:*
   How long have you been in your program?
   What supports did you rely on while you were taking courses?
   While writing the dissertation proposal and conducting the research?
   What supports do you rely on now while writing the dissertation?
   When do you anticipate completing your program?

3. Think about PhD students in your program who you think are successful.  What comes to mind when you think about them?

   *Follow-up questions:*

What stands out as to why they are successful?
What activities have they engaged in?
Who have been their advocates and supporters?

4. Think back to the first year of your doctoral experience, what stands out the most for you?

   *Follow-up questions:*
   Did you come from another area?
   How did you settle in?
   What was the hardest thing for you coming into this program and feeling a part of this program?
   What orientation opportunities did your department provide?  Academic?  Social?
   Did you feel welcomed into the program?
   If not, tell me some details about why not.
   If yes, tell me some specific activities that helped you feel welcomed.
   *[probe for role of faculty, other students, and staff]*

5. Have you experienced specific challenges as a doctoral student and as a woman of color?

   *Follow-up:*
   If yes, please tell me about those challenges.
   Did other students experience them?
   Do you have friendships with other women of color in PhD programs here?
   If so, what have been their challenges?
   Do you believe that there are differences in departments in how women of color are supported and welcomed?
   If yes, please elaborate.

6. How have you seen yourself develop as a person, as a scholar, during your graduate studies?

   *Follow-up:*
   What specific opportunities have helped you develop?  *[probe for working on research with faculty; writing for publication and/or presenting at conferences with faculty or other PhD students; being nominated for fellowships or awards]*
   In terms of your academic work, what makes you feel like "I am a doctoral student, I am very much involved and a part of this [doctoral] community"?  Has this happened? If so, when did it happen, how did it happen?
   Tell me a little about your department—what is your relationship like with your department? *[probe for faculty, other students, staff]*
   Any there any expectations about building a community with your cohort?

7. Who/what has been most instrumental in helping you to continue on your path to completing your degree?

   *Follow-up:*
   Think about where/to whom you turn for support.  Tell me about this.

*Finally, I would like to end with three "big" questions:*

8. What has been the most challenging part about being a doctoral student?

9. What has been the most rewarding part of being doctoral student?

10. What are lessons you have learned thus far that could help women of color engage more meaningfully in the doctoral process?

*Do you have any questions for me?*

*Thank you very much for your time. [Explain next steps and that you might want to follow up for more elaboration.]*

## EMAIL INVITATION/INFORMATION LETTER

Subject: Sense of Belonging among Doctoral Students
From: svdurand@educ.umass.edu

Dear (Student Name),

I am a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am emailing to invite you to participate in a research to explore the ways in which doctoral women's perceptions of their Sense of Belonging impact their experiences as scholars during the dissertation phase. Another student (name of student) recommended that I contact you for the study.)

I am interested in learning about your doctoral experience from your perspective. I am asking you to participate in an interview which will take approximately one hour to one hour and a half of your time. You may also be invited to participate in a second 30-minute interview to read and comment on the transcript of your interview to ensure that they accurately depict your thoughts and understandings; however, you may choose to participate in only one interview. If you opt for a single interview you will be asked if you would like to voluntarily read and comment on the findings to ensure that they accurately depict your thoughts and understandings.  If so, a transcript of the interview will be emailed to you.

The interview will be audio- recorded and will take place in a semi-private or public setting such as a group study room in the library or in my office here on the UMass Amherst campus. During this interview, you will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow you to share your experiences as a doctoral student. Your perspective and experiences will be beneficial to understanding sense of belonging among doctoral students and may better inform practices that will enhance the often-difficult doctoral journey for these women scholars.  Although, you may not directly benefit from this research, we hope that your participation in the study will advance our understanding of how to potentially improve the experience of future doctoral students.

Please be assured that your responses are completely confidential and will be analyzed collectively for themes and patterns. Your consent to participate will be required if you are interested in meeting with me.

Please contact me by email at svdurand@educ.umass.edu or at 413-531-0324 if you have any questions

Sincerely,
Sabrina V. Durand, Doctoral Candidate
College of Education: Educational Policy, Research and Administration
UMass Amherst

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