

Everyday Oppression: The Challenges of Belonging for Underrepresented Doctoral
Students at a Predominantly White Institution

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This dissertation is the culmination of many years of hard work and the support of family, friends, and colleagues. In my first years at the University of Minnesota, I found myself thinking that I wasn't even going to finish my undergraduate degree, let alone complete a doctoral degree. Those days, although in the distant past, will never be forgotten. I do this work because of my struggle to find a place in academia where I felt I belonged and my desire to help the next generation of minority students be successful in their own educational journeys.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother who sacrificed so much to instill in me the love for learning. I thank you for taking the risk of moving our family to this country so that I could have a good education. I hope that someday I can be as brave as you.

ABSTRACT

The attrition of doctoral students in U.S. higher education, especially those who are underrepresented, is an understudied problem. This study examines how underrepresented minority doctoral students experience belonging at a predominantly White institution in the Midwest to identify factors that lead to attrition. The study used a mixed methods approach to examine students' experiences of sense of belonging via a survey and semi-structured interviews. Findings from a regression analysis indicate that underrepresented students score lower in measures of sense of belonging as compared to White students. The interview data suggest that students of color frequently experience microaggressions and a racialized campus climate. Furthermore, students of color internalize these experiences to the detriment of their psychological and emotional well-being. Interview data also suggest that students who build a strong sense of community in their academic discipline have a stronger overall sense of belonging.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The United States higher education system has experienced a steady increase in enrollment in the last decade from undergraduate and post-graduate students. This increase in enrollment is a welcomed change for African Americans, American Indians, and Latinx people who have historically been underrepresented in higher education¹ (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). Between 1998 and 2008 enrollment in higher education increased by a record 32% with the majority of the enrollment gains coming from minority students² (Kim, 2011). White student enrollment rates have increased at lower rates such that in 1998 White students encompassed 67% of the total enrollment (undergraduate and post-graduate) in higher education whereas in 2012, White student enrollment constituted only 55% of total enrollment (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2014; Kim, 2011). Moreover, in the period between 2003, and 2013 first-time graduate student enrollment gains were greater for African Americans (5.4%) and Latinx (6.9%) than Whites (1.1%) (Allum, 2014).

At first glance, the increasing enrollment of traditionally underrepresented students suggests that there is an increase in educational attainment for all students; however, this may not be the case. The overall educational attainment of

¹ Asian/Pacific Islander students constitute about 4.2 percent of the population according to the U.S. Census (2010) but constitute about 6.2 percent of the undergraduate enrollment and 7.6 percent of post baccalaureate enrollment. As such, I do not generally consider the Asian/Pacific Islander student grouping to be an underrepresented group in this study. However, within the Asian/Pacific Islander grouping, there are underrepresented subgroups who will be included.

² While this paper focuses on students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, to include African American, American Indian, and Latinx students, some of the research cited will also include Asian American students because the majority of data obtained includes all racial categories other than White under “minority” students.

underrepresented students is still lower than that of Whites. For example, the percentage of Whites with at least a bachelor's degree in 2015 was 36.2% compared to 22.5% for African Americans and 15.5% for Latinx (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Although increased enrollment shows a positive change, to more fully understand the state of underrepresented students in higher education, it is imperative to look more closely at degree completion rates.

Completion rates for underrepresented students are still not comparable to those of White students (Kim, 2011). For students entering in 2006, the six-year completion rate for students seeking a bachelor's degree from public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit institutions was 62.5% for White students, 40.2% for African American students, 51.9% for Latinx students, and 40.2% for American Indian students (Kena et al., 2015). Similarly, the completion rate for doctorate degrees is much lower for underrepresented students (Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008). The Ph.D. Completion Project, a study conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools, followed a cohort of students in doctoral programs across 21 universities. The study estimated that after seven years, the completion rate across all fields of study for African Americans was only 34%, 39% for Latinx, and 43% for Whites.

Attrition³ in education, which is measured by the numbers of students who do not complete their degree programs, is a problem that is not widely understood at the graduate level. To this point, much of the existing attrition research has focused

³ Attrition can be defined as the reduction in the number of students at an institution because of low student retention (Hagedorn, 2005). Even more broadly it can be defined as a student leaving education prior to completion of degree and in the absence of reenrollment at a different institution or coming back to school at a different time (Delta Cost Project, 2012).

primarily on undergraduate students with comparatively little research on graduate students, especially those entering doctoral programs (Gardner, 2007, 2008; Golde, 2005; Swail, 2003; Tinto 1987, 2006). The lack of research on attrition rates of doctoral students, including underrepresented students, contributes to the dearth of understanding about why a disproportionately high number of students withdraw from their graduate education.

While underrepresented minorities constitute 28% of the American population and approximately one third of individuals 25-40 years of age - the range within which most graduate students fall - only 11.9% of all doctoral degree recipients in 2006 were awarded to underrepresented minority students. (Griffin, Muniz, & Espinosa, 2012, p. 535)

Scholars posit that attrition in graduate education is not widely examined in part because of the lack of comprehensive theories and/or models addressing graduate persistence⁴ as compared to theories/models focused on undergraduate education (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, Bair and Haworth (2004) suggest that because most colleges and universities keep records on graduate students at a program or departmental level rather than at a central institutional location, records on system-wide attrition are often not easily available. The result of this lack of centrality in record keeping among colleges

⁴ Persistence, often used interchangeably with the word retention, describes students who enroll in higher education and remain enrolled until graduation. Nonpersister is the opposite, referring to a student who leaves school and never returns. Persistence is often considered as a student measure while retention is an institutional measure (Hagedorn, 2005).

and universities contributes to the lack of national data on graduate student attrition rates⁵.

Since no national data on doctoral student attrition exist, many scholars estimate that U.S. doctoral student attrition rates range from 40% to 70% depending on the academic discipline (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2010; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Smallwood, 2004). Studies suggest that graduate student attrition is particularly high in the Social Science and Humanities compared to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields (Allum, 2014; Lovitts, 2001). For example, some reports estimate that attrition in biomedical and behavioral sciences is as low as 24% but as high as 67% in humanities and social sciences (Gardner, 2010). This difference in attrition between fields of study is likely related to the differences in time-to-degree between the STEM and Social Sciences and Humanities fields (Benkin, 1984; Lovitts, 2001). For example, the seven-year completion rate of engineering students is around 57% while it is only 29% for students in the humanities (Sowell, Bell, & Zhang, 2008). Other variables, such as funding, teaching and research opportunities, and faculty interactions, add to the complexity of time-to-degree and completion rates between STEM and non-STEM fields.

It is imperative to analyze graduate student attrition because of the implications on the economic and social wellbeing of generations to come (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Census data suggest that the U.S. workforce will see an influx of minorities in the next 15 years. Moreover, U.S. Census Bureau (2014) data suggest that

⁵ Note that in this paper, student persistence and retention will be used interchangeably. Attrition will be used to refer to those students who left higher education because of poor persistence/retention.

the largest predicted growth in population will be in the Latinx community, which is predicted to grow to 22% by the year 2030 from the current 18%, while the White population is projected to decrease from 62% currently to about 54% in 2030.

Furthermore, economic projections suggest that the U.S. economy will have a shortage of skilled workers because of the retirements of the “baby-boomer” generation unless strategies are implemented to meet the workforce demand (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008).

An examination of the literature on the experiences of underrepresented students suggests that positive interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and other areas of the institution contribute to the likelihood of whether students will complete their degree or drop out (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jayakumar et al., 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Research from K-12 education and undergraduate education has concluded that sense of belonging is a catalyst for building positive relationships on campus, increased engagement, and increased retention (Stebbleton, Huesman, Jr., & Kuzhabekova, 2010; Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). Positive interactions with members of the school community have a direct connection with increased sense of belonging. This evidence led me to hypothesize that these positive outcomes may also be found in doctoral education; that is, students with a strong sense of belonging will have higher persistence.

Sense of belonging (or not belonging) is also something that I have experienced in my own educational life and have observed impacting the lives of students of color around me. When I was an undergraduate student, I did not feel a sense of belonging in my academic institution and that disconnectedness almost led me to drop out.

Eventually, I found spaces, people, and relationships on campus that increased my sense of belonging, and I was able to persist in my program and graduate. In my doctoral program, the same pattern has repeated all over again. In the early stages of my program, I never really felt like I belonged, but I eventually found avenues through which I could get a respite from these feelings and that made all the difference in my persistence with my program.

Based on the literature and my own experiences, I believe that underrepresented students' sense of belonging to their institutions affects their academic success and degree completion. That being said, not feeling a strong sense of belonging to a department/institution does not automatically mean that a student will not persist in a given degree program but rather that the student may have more difficulty doing so because of the lack of connectedness. This dissertation aims to address how the sense of belonging of underrepresented doctoral students within their departments and institutions at large affects students' decisions to stay in or leave their graduate programs.

Previous scholarly work about undergraduate college student experiences (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Swail, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993) has identified four primary influences that can be used to explain student attrition: social integration (socialization), campus climate, academic preparation, and financial aid. These four factors leading to undergraduate attrition can also be used to describe the attrition of graduate students. For the purpose of this dissertation, the distinction will be made that some of the previously mentioned categories are part of students' pre-enrollment experiences (academic preparation and financial aid), while others primarily occur post-enrollment (social

integration and campus climate)⁶. All the categories mentioned above are intertwined as a student navigates the graduate school process and, therefore, affect degree completion and attrition. This study however, focuses more closely on social integration and campus climate because of their impact on students' experiences once they have made a choice to start graduate school. I also explore three other factors, student identity, student deficits, and internalized oppression, which are often excluded from scholarly discourse when discussing the attrition of graduate students. For the purposes of this dissertation, student identity will encompass students' internalized attitudes about their identity in the context of graduate school education. Perceived student deficits will focus on labels, attitudes, and beliefs that are often associated with underrepresented students. Examining how underrepresented students are categorized as having deficits and how those deficits are then internalized is critical in the understanding of attrition and degree completion. Lastly, this dissertation will look at how the internalization of oppression by underrepresented and minoritized students affects their sense of belonging to their institutions.

Researcher Positionality

I came to the University of Minnesota without much self-awareness about my ethnic or socioeconomic background. I grew up in Colombia, South America until the sixth grade. I began my seventh grade at Minneapolis Public Schools. During my time in Colombia and while living in the United States, I had always lived in very urban areas, attending multi-culturally diverse schools. When I arrived at the University, I

⁶ Although I recognize that financial aid is an ongoing issue that students have to deal with (at all levels of education) and which deeply affects their school experience, it is outside the scope of this study.

experienced a culture shock—immediately becoming aware of my racial identity at the predominantly White school. I was also shocked in realizing my high school did not prepare me for the academic rigor of college. My first two years were rocky. I was struggling with my schoolwork while simultaneously struggling to “fit in.” Up until that point, I had planned to be a medical doctor, but, after those two years, I started questioning whether I even belonged in an undergraduate program. At first, I felt like it was solely my own wrongdoing, that it was a personal failing that I was struggling in school and, therefore, diminishing my capacity to achieve my dream of becoming a doctor. This belief led me to take a break from school, during which time I traveled back to Colombia. Being in Colombia heightened my awareness that education is truly a privilege. I realized that if I had stayed in Colombia, I likely would not have been able to attend college because of my low socioeconomic status. With this realization on my mind, I returned to the U.S. and was excited to enrolled in a university outside of Minnesota and return to school once again. A few days before classes started, I received a call from the financial aid office and was told that I could not start school until my tuition was paid. I tried to advocate for myself to inform the person that I had completed the financial aid application late and explained that it was still being processed, but I was not successful in getting through to him. What he said next has remained with me ever since. He said, “If you don’t have the money, why are you trying to go to college?” That sentence was the catalyst in finding my drive to eventually be in a place where I could help improve educational access and outcomes for those traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Eventually, I came back to Minnesota, registered at the University of Minnesota, and enrolled in classes with education-related content. At that point, not only did I have a renewed interest in school, but I also knew then that I was starting down the right path, finding my “calling.” As I reflected on my personal experiences throughout college, I found myself wishing that I could connect with others with like experiences, who looked like me, and who overcame similar challenges as I faced. Not finding these connections, my interest in learning more about the powerful impact that having faculty of color can have on students was sparked. As I began learning more, I thought to myself that if I had a faculty who “looked like me” to mentor me along the way, it may have been possible that I would have done things differently and had more immediate success in school. I never came across such a person, and, so, I knew then that this was where I could really make a difference. Soon after, I told my academic advisor that I wanted to go to graduate school, and I was told that because my GPA was low at that point, I should consider other alternatives. He underestimated my drive and determination, however, and I did get accepted into a master’s program and eventually a doctorate program.

My path to education came in a roundabout way, and yet I see all the challenges that preceded me—being an immigrant student, graduating from an urban high school, attending a predominantly White institution, struggling with identity and capacity for post-secondary education—as a motivating force that drives me to this day. I say this because all these things combined have informed my views on education and my aspirations to contribute to research about the topic and to encourage students from all backgrounds to achieve their educational goals through my teaching, my research, and my own example.

Now, I use my graduate student experiences to inform my research on how students “belong” in their graduate studies. This is partly because I never felt like I truly belonged in my program. Often times, I have felt like an outsider looking in, and understanding the impact this scenario has on the success of other traditionally underrepresented students is not only a research interest but a true life’s calling.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to better understand underrepresented doctoral students’ sense of belonging and to investigate the extent to which sense of belonging affects their decisions to stay or leave their graduate programs. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the differences and similarities in how majority and underrepresented doctoral students experience a sense of belonging?
 - a. In what ways, if at all, do students’ racial identities influence their sense of belonging to their programs/departments/institutions?
 - b. In what ways, if at all, do students’ perceptions of sense of belonging influence their socialization to their program, department, institution?
2. How, if at all, are underrepresented doctoral students’ perceptions of their sense of belonging mediated by their racial identities, socialization, campus climate, and perceived deficit discourses in their program, department, institution?

In this dissertation, I review the relevant literature on student identities, socialization, campus climate, perceived student deficits, internalized oppression, and sense of belonging. The literature review is followed by a discussion of the methods used in the study. The methods section is divided into quantitative and qualitative sections to

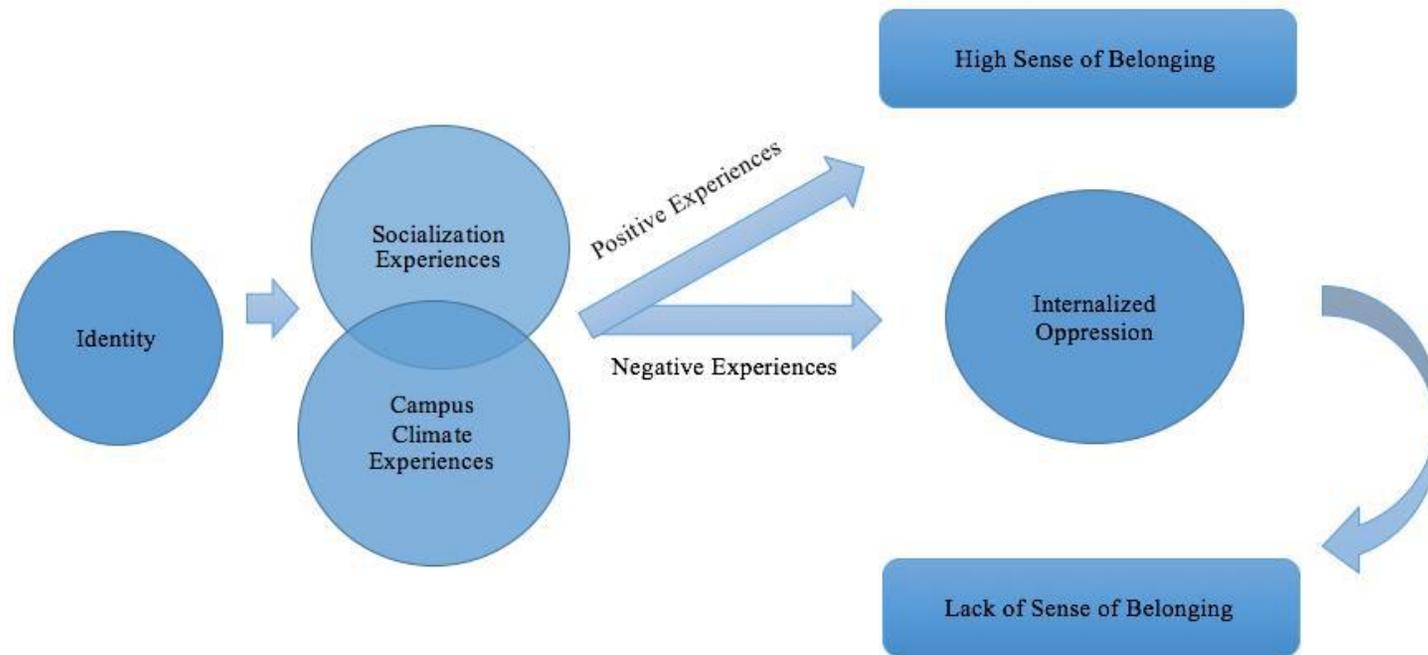
reflect the mixed methods used in this dissertation. Next, I discuss the quantitative findings. The quantitative data suggest differences in how White and minority students perceive their sense of belonging and how race impacts the perceptions of socialization and belonging. These findings are important because they serve to inform practitioners and policy makers about the differences in experiences between minority and White students. Following the quantitative chapter, I discuss the qualitative findings and explore the themes of Whiteness, internalized oppression, and a sense of community that arose from the interviews of underrepresented doctoral students. These findings suggest that students of color are having profoundly problematic experiences in their doctoral programs. These negative experiences need to be further evaluated as practitioners and policy makers review best practices in graduate education. I end the dissertation with a conclusion in which I make sense of the findings and their importance and include recommendations for further studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the existing literature on graduate and undergraduate student persistence. I include undergraduate student persistence literature because the majority of scholarly work on this topic has been focused on undergraduate students, which has created a foundation for understanding graduate student persistence. Additionally, when investigating doctoral student persistence, the amount of scholarly work specifically focusing on underrepresented students is small, thus, this review benefits from the inclusion of undergraduate literature. Since this study will focus on the experiences and sense of belonging of underrepresented students in doctoral education, this literature review addresses current theories and key contributions of scholarly work on student identity, socialization, campus climate, perceived student deficits, internalized oppression, and, ultimately, sense of belonging itself. I chose these clusters because they have been identified by researchers as having an impact on the sense of belonging of students in academia at all levels. In Figure 1, I use these literature clusters to delineate a theory of belonging. This model suggests that a student of color's identity will inform and shape the student's perceptions and experiences with socialization and campus climate. When experiences with socialization and campus climate are negative, the model suggests that students of color internalize the oppression experienced, resulting in a lack of belonging. Conversely, if a student of color has positive experiences with socialization and campus climate, the model suggests the result will be a high sense of belonging. Therefore, I posit that these areas of literature serve to explain the experiences of underrepresented students and shed light onto students' sense of belonging

and how experiences of belonging or not belonging impact motivation to complete a doctoral degree.

Figure 1. Theory of Sense of Belonging with Literature Clusters



Student Identities

To understand the experiences of underrepresented students, I examine how students see themselves and their multiple identities in the context of their school environments. Based on the literature, I suggest that underrepresented students have poor completion rates in doctoral programs at least in part because they do not fully feel like they belong in these educational settings. The concept of social identity provides a lens by which to understand those experiences of “outsiderness” and not belonging.

Social identity refers to aspects of a person that are defined in terms of their group memberships. Although most people are members of many different groups, some group identities are more salient to one’s self-definitions (Deaux, 2001). Henri Tajfel first introduced the concept of social identity in the 1970s. His work on how social contexts influenced intergroup relations began with experiments in which he and his colleagues assigned study participants to groups based on an arbitrary criteria, such as whether participants overestimated or underestimated the number of dots on a piece of paper or simply by flipping a coin (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). After participants were assigned to groups, their task was to allocate points (arbitrarily) to members of their own group (ingroup) and to members of the other groups (outgroup). The allocation of points had no positive or negative effects on or consequences for the participants themselves, and although there was no history among participants, no interaction between them, and no gain to participants based on the allocation of points, participants generally gave more points to members of their own group versus members of the other groups. From these experiments, Tajfel et al. (1971) theorized that human interaction ranged on a spectrum of purely interpersonal on one side to exclusively

intergroup on the other. A purely interpersonal interaction means relating to people entirely as individuals without the notion of social categories, which Tajfel et al. (1971) felt was very rare. Conversely, an intergroup interaction is one in which people relate to each other as representatives of their own groups and in which individual characteristics are overwhelmed by one's group membership (Hornsey, 2008). Tajfel et al. (1971) argued that as individuals slide from the interpersonal side to the intergroup side of the spectrum, changes occur in how individuals see themselves and how they see others.

Tajfel et al. (1971) theorized that creating "us versus them" distinctions changes how people view each other. "When category distinctions are salient, people perceptually enhance similarities with the group (we're all much the same) and enhance differences among the group (we're different from them)" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 206). Categorization also changes how people see themselves: at the interpersonal end of the spectrum, categorization changes people's personal identity (attitudes, behaviors, and emotions that make someone who they are), and, at the opposite intergroup spectrum, categorization changes one's self-image based on the social categories that are appropriated upon birth and to which one belongs to because of the group memberships. Furthermore, Tajfel et al. (1971) theorized that the underlying motivation towards intergroup behaviors is the need for individuals to have a positive self-concept. People want to feel good about themselves; subsequently, they need to feel that their group memberships are inherently good. Group memberships are also dependent on the comparisons that are drawn between the group one belongs to and the "other groups;" a group's value is dependent on the contrast that it can draw from other groups.

How people become members of groups is a complicated process because there are many types of social identities, some of which people choose and some of which are chosen for them. Deaux (2001) identified five types of different identities which are common and which reflect the ways in which people connect to groups and to social categories. The types of social identities are: ethnicity and religion, political affiliation, vocations and avocations, relationships, and stigmatized identities. While some identities are central to defining who a person is, such as in the case of ethnicity and/or religion, other identities are generic and not necessarily tied to the individual but to the group he or she belongs to. Additionally, I would add racial identity to Deaux's (2001) social identities because I would argue that in the United States racial identity is as central to individuals as ethnic identity.

The complexity of social identities continues in the work of Simon, Aufderheide, and Kampmeier (2004) and their emphasis on the minority-majority contexts of identity and group membership. Minority and majority groups can be defined in two ways, whether by numbers (in that groups with fewer numbers of membership are minorities and groups with larger numbers are majorities) or in terms of relative power and social status (low power or low social status would be considered minority while high power, high social status groups would be in the majority). Using the second definition, Simon et al. (2004) asserted that often oppressed groups are minority groups and dominant groups are in the majority and that these positions can be true regardless of numerical representation. For example, "during apartheid in South Africa, Whites would have been considered a majority and Blacks a minority, even though the former group was numerically smaller than the latter" (Tajfel, 1978, cited in Simon et al., 2004, p. 278).

Furthermore, it is important to note that social identities can fluctuate and be negotiated over time. “Identity negotiation,” as described by Deaux (2001), can be shaped by a multitude of factors, namely “the repertoire and importance of social identities a person has, the setting in which one is located, and the actions and influence of other people in those settings” (p. 9). Of special interest, particularly in the context of this study, is the environment or setting in which the person is located and the impact it has on ethnic and racial identities. For example, being the only African American, Latinx, or American Indian student in a classroom full of White students may lead minority students (minority both numerically and in terms of power and possibly social status) to have their ethnic and racial identities feel more salient.

It is also important to consider the effects that minority and majority group memberships have on the well-being of individuals. For example, memberships in minority groups, even when defined purely in numerical terms, are associated with less positive feelings than those of majority groups (Simon et al., 2004). There is also evidence that minority group members typically find themselves in what Simon et al. (2004) called a “cognitive-affective crossfire,” meaning they usually cannot forget or ignore their membership (in their minority group) because their environment is constantly reminding them of it. For instance, when minority students are part of a department where they are one of a handful of racial minorities, their membership in the minority group becomes central to their daily interactions and experiences in that department. This saliency of their minority group membership cannot be turned off, and it is something that is rarely experienced by members of majority groups. Given this

“cognitive-affective crossfire,” minority group membership comes with risks and stressors that are absent from majority groups.

Continuing to address the difficulties of minority group membership, it is also important to consider how these memberships can be applied to underrepresented doctoral students in predominantly White institutions. A study by Sherman and his colleagues (2013) addressed the role of identity threat in academic settings. Identity threat occurs when an individual’s self-view or self-concept is challenged. This is a form of stereotype threat (which will be defined more in-depth later in this study) as described by Steele (1997, 2010) in which one’s identity such as ethnic or racial identity is devalued. Examples of identity threats include “discrimination, exclusion, marginalization, and underrepresentation due to minority status” (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 592). All of these examples of identity threat can contribute to academic underperformance and harm one’s psychological well-being. Additionally, worrying about being judged negatively because of stereotypes or feeling a lack of belonging have been shown to undermine performance (Aronson, 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Identity threat is a “chronic stressor” that little by little undermines the academic ability of a student.

As Tajfel et al. (1971) highlighted, people have a tendency to gravitate to intergroups as a way to maintain high self-concept, and, as a member of these groups, regardless of whether membership was chosen or given, this marks the beginning of the “us versus them” dichotomy. Social identity is a fluid and complex process; social identities have the capacity for change, a process which Deaux (2001) calls identity negotiation. There are social identities that are central to how students define themselves,

more so than other identities. Such is the case with ethnic and racial identities, contrasted with something like vocational identities (athletes, painters, gamer) in which membership is not tied to the individual but rather to the generic group. The social identities of students are complicated by the majority/minority group memberships that individuals might have. Scholarly work (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008; Demerath, 2000; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) supports that idea that minority group membership can be taxing on individuals because of the stressors it adds to an individual as their environment is constantly reminding the individual of their minority group membership.

Moreover, for many underrepresented minority students (at all levels) there is a recurring balancing act that takes place between a student's school and home identities (I use the term home to encapsulate the identities outside of academia such as in a student's community, place of living, with family and friends, and so on). This discontinuity of identities, which Willie (2003) addresses in her book *Acting Black: College identity and the performance of race*, often results in the performance of race in which students are "consciously negotiating their identities, even when there is little room to do so" (p. 5). In this performance a minority student may appear to their peers as "acting extra" (Demerath, 2000) or "acting White" in order to fit in and succeed in formal educational structures such as schools. On the other hand, majority students are likely not to have as big of a conflict between their student identities and the identities that they may live at home because the school structures are likely to closely resemble their own in-group expectations. Scholars (Altschul et al., 2008; Ogbu, 1978; Steele, 1997) suggest that the discontinuity between student and home identities for minority students arise from a belief that school success is a characteristic closely associated with majority groups.

Furthermore, scholars (Altschul et al., 2008; Ogbu, 1978; Steele, 1997) argue that because of the impact that schooling can have on students at all levels, the incongruence of identities for minority students often affects their academic aspirations and ultimately their academic outcomes. These difficulties help illuminate the internal struggle many minority doctoral students have as they constantly question whether they belong and/or are qualified to be in their doctoral programs.

Identity is a complicated and fluctuating dimension of personhood and one which is especially challenging to navigate for students. Minority students often have to negotiate their identities while in school because, for many, the norms associated with school more closely align with students from the majority groups. Schooling and, in particular, doctoral education is an environment that brings racial/ethnic identity to the forefront of one's consciousness. There are many stressors associated with the multiple identities of minority students which are largely absent from majority groups. For minority students, identity threat is something often experienced by students and these threats can seriously impact the psychological well-being of students and lead to academic underperformance. Moreover, being from a racial/ethnic minority group likely means that an individual holds a low power and low status ranking as compared to majority group members. Ultimately, this literature points to the unique position that underrepresented students are in while in their doctoral programs and illuminates the difficulty of students fully belonging to a place in which they are likely to feel like outsiders.

Socialization

One factor that contributes to the overall college student experience is how well students are socialized into their academic communities. Socialization is defined as “the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors that make them effective members of a particular department, school and/or professional field to which they belong” (Brim, 1966, cited in Strayhorn, 2012, p. 93). In the case of doctoral students, the academic community includes but is not limited to, the college or university they attend, and their academic departments, academic disciplines, cohorts, and classes.

Socialization is important to understand because, as Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) suggest, individuals gain valuable “knowledge, skills, and values” which are needed for “successful entry into a professional career” (p. iii). Socialization is a key determinant of school success; that is, well-socialized students tend to complete their degrees at higher rates (Lovitts, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). It is also important to note that positive socialization results in students having a strong sense of belonging to their cohort, program area, department, and institution. In order to understand the relationship between sense of belonging and socialization and their relationship to student persistence, I turn now to theories of socialization.

A fundamental theory of socialization in academic settings derives from the work of Golde (1996, 1998) who was one of the first scholars to address the relationship between socialization and attrition in graduate education. Golde conducted a study examining the first-year socialization process of doctoral students and attrition at a research university. The study focused on 58 participants from four distinct departments

(Geology, Biology, History, and English) who had withdrawn from their doctoral programs between 1984 and 1993. Interviews were used to gain an understanding of students' experiences with socialization and why students withdrew from their doctoral education. From this research, Golde (1998) concluded that although there were personal reasons students left their doctoral programs, there was also evidence that "disciplinary norms and department structures" (p. 62) influenced attrition. Using socialization theory frameworks from Baird (1990), Corcoran and Clack (1984), Egan (1978), and Turner and Thomas (1992), Golde (1998) hypothesized that the socialization of doctoral students takes place in distinct stages or tasks which she labeled as: (a) intellectual mastery, (b) learning the reality of a graduate student's life, (c) learning the profession, and (d) integration of self into the department. The first of Golde's (1998) tasks, intellectual mastery, refers to the process by which students begin to take on coursework and develop their "intellectual competence" (p. 56). As students begin to socialize in this stage, it is common for them to ask themselves "Can I do this?" The question "Do I want to be a graduate student?" marks the second stage and is indicative of the internal conflict students wrestle with as they contemplate whether graduate school is worth the financial expenditure, time commitment, and personal sacrifice it requires. Learning about the profession marks the third stage in which students begin to question if they have chosen the right field of study or occupation, and often leads students to ask if they indeed are committed to the work long term or "Was it the right choice?" (Golde, 1998, p. 56). The fourth and final task is the integration of oneself into the department. Much like Tinto (1993), Golde (1998) posits that doctoral students must ask themselves "Do I belong here?" Along with this question students must make judgments about the perceived

relationships with peers, faculty and staff in their departments and use that information to assess their sense of belonging.

Alongside Golde's (1998) tasks for graduate student socialization, Weidman et al. (2001), building on the work of Baird (1993), theorized that graduate student socialization occurs in four developmental stages: (a) Anticipatory, (b) Formal, (c) Informal, and (d) Personal. In the Anticipatory stage, students begin to learn "new roles, procedures, and agendas to be followed" thus becoming aware of "behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive expectations" (Gardner, 2007, p. 727) from others. During the formal stage, students learn about role expectations from those who are already socialized to the environment. Students in this stage are primarily concerned with tasks and communications drawn from course materials, perceived expectations, and student and faculty interactions (Weidman et al., 2001). The informal stage is comprised of students receiving and accepting behavioral cues from those around them and forming subsequent appropriate responses and reactions. Students in this stage begin to feel more "student-like and professional" (Gardner, 2007, p. 728). In the personal stage, students are expected to assimilate to the social structures in which they are immersed. By the time students have reached the personal stage, students have fully internalized their social roles and are have fully assimilated (fully conformed to the customs and norms of the majority or dominant group at the expense of students' own cultural norms and values) to the field.

Another way to understand the complex process of socialization is by examining the theory of organizational socialization developed by Van Maanen and Shein (1979). This theory provides the framework necessary to understand the intricacies of

socialization in academic settings by suggesting that people (students specifically) must adhere to an organizational role and that individuals have to acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume such roles. As part of this learning process, members must adjust to dual roles as professionals in training and graduate students, which takes time and is often marked with periods of anxiety (Golde, 2000). Furthermore, Golde argues that doctoral education is part of an “induction stage” in which students become accustomed to and are socialized to “think and act like scholars by watching faculty, conducting research on their own, attending professional meetings” (p. 2). Scholars suggest that the problematic nature of socializing into an institution or organization (such as a doctoral program) arises from problems with an individual’s level of integration (Tinto, 1993). A lack of full integration to an organization is often the result of incongruence and isolation (Tinto, 1993). The experience of incongruence is the result of “a mismatch between the student and the institution” which can, in part, be the result of different cultural values (Tinto, 1993). Isolation reflects the lack of successful “integrating experiences” such as feeling that one does not belong in one’s academic department, which is the epicenter of the graduate student community (Golde, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Socialization and the need for integration is particularly important for graduate students because of the dual roles students play as academics and future professionals in training, but, at a more basic level, it is important because of the intrinsic need of students to feel like they belong to a place (Golde, 1998; Tinto, 1993).

Feeling a sense of belonging to a physical place, a community, and the people within that space is important because research suggests that, in education, when students feel connected to their environments, they are more likely to succeed academically

(Golde, 1998; Ostrove, Steward & Curtin, 2011; Weidman et al., 2001). This is perhaps a fundamental omission in the theories presented by Golde (1998) and Weidman et al. (2001) about how students from underrepresented minorities are socialized. The theories do not address the unique characteristics of underrepresented students, thus implying that students from all backgrounds start at a level playing field or more accurately on the same field. In fact, students who belong to majority ethnic groups are also socialized in an environment that is more familiar and in line with their previous experiences and their personal identities, while underrepresented students are not. During the process of socializing within their environments, underrepresented students are more likely to experience discriminatory practices as part of their daily lives, either through policies or personal interactions which ultimately act to disadvantage them (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Some of these discriminatory practices include “alienation, lack of support, low expectations from faculty based on racial and ethnic discrimination as well as linguistic bias, and discouragement from using culturally appropriate epistemologies, theories, and frameworks” (Gildersleeve et al., 2011, p. 95-96). While some of these practices also affect White students, they are most profound in the daily lives of underrepresented students. Gildersleeve et al. (2011) posit that it is the nature of doctoral education to be racialized, meaning that the processes and interactions in school ascribe ethnic and racial identities to those processes or relationships, and it is expected by the department and the institution that to successfully socialize, underrepresented students must adjust their ways of being—fully committing, with unquestioning and uncompromising devotion to their work. Consequently, attrition for underrepresented students is “more directly related to

who these students are as raced individuals as opposed to what they are capable of academically” (Gildersleeve et al., 2011, p. 96). In short, the process of socializing can be at odds with the identities that minority students may have outside of the school setting.

Doctoral education can be a dehumanizing experience for underrepresented graduate students because of the demands that trying to socialize to the school environment can place on a student’s psyche which ultimately contributes to the dilemma that underrepresented students face as they contemplate whether they belong in academia. As Smith (1993, cited in Ostrove et al., 2011) explained, “most of us [underrepresented students], I think, carry a sense of not fully belonging, of being pretenders to a kingdom not ours by birthright” (p. 749). White students bring their own unique attributes and experiences to doctoral educational settings, no doubt, but underrepresented students carry an extra burden—such as being the only person of color in a class or being the only one in a family or social group in post-secondary education—that is likely to be heightened by previous educational experiences.

Some theories of graduate student socialization are at odds with those about the socialization of underrepresented students because the tasks and levels are described as happening in sequential order. As such, they leave no room to explore what happens if a student is stuck in the same stage for longer than prescribed or moves back and forth between the tasks and levels. If an underrepresented student is experiencing belonging uncertainty from the onset of their doctoral program, the theories do not address how this may hurt a student’s chances of moving through the sequential order that is expected. The theories of Golde (1998, 2000) and Gardner (2007) fail to account for the impact of

self-doubts and second thoughts about the student's ability and/or institutional/departmental fit and how these interactions (successful or not) may prevent underrepresented students from moving from the anticipatory stage to the formal one. Much of the literature on doctoral education suggests that the process, from enrollment to degree completion, is riddled with ambiguity and mixed messages (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Lovitts, 2001), and if this is the case, it is conceivable that because underrepresented students often lack the same social currency of their White counterparts, their movement through the stages or tasks of socialization may not be the same.

Currently, the levels or tasks in the theories of graduate student socialization insufficiently explain how the relationship between the student and the degree program impacts socialization. Research into the completion rate of doctoral students suggests that students' chosen fields of study are critically important and strongly correlated with completion rates (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). For example, doctoral students in Science, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields typically have higher completion rates (60%) than students in the Social Sciences and Humanities (52%) after 10 years (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Thus, further research is needed in order to understand the relationship between these sequential steps to socialization, how they interact with the degree sought, and the impact for underrepresented students in different disciplines.

The current socialization literature on underrepresented students in doctoral education does not fully answer the question "Who do I have to become to belong here?" This is partly because not enough is known about what prevents underrepresented students from truly belonging to doctoral education institutions and because the depth of

research does not yet exist to provide answers to this question. This key question will be revisited in light of the study findings in the concluding chapter.

Campus Climate

Campus climate, another determinant of student experience, can generally be described as the result of interactions between individuals and the environment, and is influenced by issues such as diversity (perceived and actual), cultural factors, and environmental factors, along with others (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Campus climate is often described as warm (hospitable) or chilly (hostile), but in reality it is more complex.

Campus climate can shape student experience because individuals make observations about their environments and make judgments about how they should participate based on those observations (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Similarly, campus climate can refer to programs and activities that, in sum, affect students' progress towards degree completion (Lewis, Ginsberg, & Davies, 2004). Campus climate is multifaceted and includes many perspectives, encompassing areas of physical space, human characteristics such as culture and identity, and organizational and institutional factors (Laird & Niskode-Dossett, 2010). Although an increasing amount of literature focuses on the needs of doctoral students, particularly those from underrepresented minority groups, much of the work on campus climate has been and continues to be dominated by research on undergraduate students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Jayakumar et al., 2009; Laird & Niskode-Dossett, 2010; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). In this section, the literature on campus climate will be analyzed

using the two areas in which the majority of the research lies: racial climates and the relationships between underrepresented students and peers, faculty, and staff.

Much of the literature at the undergraduate and graduate level, on campus racial climate asserts that the culture of doctoral education is riddled with examples of individual and institutional racism (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Jayakumar et al., 2009; Laird & Niskode-Dossett, 2010; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). These acts of racism at both individual and institutional levels systematically impede the progress of underrepresented students by creating feelings of isolation, which lead students to question their academic worth and ability much in the same way that a lack of socialization does (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Laird & Niskode-Dossett, 2010). Studies have shown that underrepresented students often experience prejudice, discrimination, harassment, hostile or intimidating behavior, cultural isolation, expectations to represent one's racial or ethnic group (tokenism), lack of mentoring, alienation, low academic expectations, and linguistic bias (Ehrenberg, Jakubson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Gonzalez, 2007; Harper, 2009; Lewis et al., 2004; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Furthermore, much undergraduate research on campus climates suggest that many underrepresented students feel they do not belong in academia because of the racial climate and racial tensions in their institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Hurtado, 1992; Laird & Niskode-Dossett, 2010; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

In a study conducted by Hurtado (1992) using data from a four-year longitudinal survey and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program follow up survey, 4,672

undergraduates were surveyed across 116 predominantly White institutions, and results showed that African American students were more likely to perceive higher levels of racial tension and lower levels of institutional commitment to diversity. Conversely, the study found that White students were less likely than African American or Latinx students to perceive their campus as having racial tension and most believed that racism was no longer a problem in society. Furthermore, Hurtado (1992) concluded that racial tensions were probable in environments where there is little concern for individual students, which is often the case in predominantly White institutions with large student bodies. Studies by Hurtado (1992), Harper and Hurtado (2007), and Miller and Sujitparapitaya (2010) also found that often perceptions about the racial climate vary widely by race.

Rankin and Reason (2005), in their work on campus climate, found that racial/ethnic minorities perceived campus climates as more racist and less accepting than White students. Their study of 15,356 students (both undergraduate and graduate), which aimed to assess the campus climate for underrepresented student populations across ten institutions that were geographically diverse, found that 33% of students of color had personally experienced harassment on campus compared to 22% of White students. The study also found that a significant proportion of students of color perceived their campus climate as racist, hostile, and disrespectful, while a majority of White students viewed the campus climate as nonracist, friendly, and respectful.

Research also suggests that underrepresented students often feel isolated, alienated, and stereotyped especially when they are on campuses where they are not the majority. In Harper and Hurtado's (2007) meta-analysis of research on campus climates

post-1992, they found that racial/ethnic minority students often experienced “racial conflict and racial-laden accusations of intellectual inferiority” (p. 13) while attending highly selective universities and that this experience was often more pronounced among African Americans. Furthermore, underrepresented students may have difficulties adjusting to climates where they perceive that White students think most minority students are admitted by a means other than merit.

Minority students often experience “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are putdowns [of minorities] by offenders” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60) or what many scholars refer to as microaggressions. Sue (2010) defines microaggressions as “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, where intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (para. 2). Microaggressions are thought to appear in three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are defined as verbal and nonverbal attacks through “name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Microinsults are “characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Microinvalidations are acts that exclude, negate or invalidate the thoughts, feelings, or lived experiences of a person of color (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are examples of the racialization of campus climates and why many underrepresented students never fully feel like they belong in academia (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In all, a racialized climate may prevent students from feeling connected to their peers, program areas, departments, and the institution at large.

Research has shown that these feelings of disconnection “negatively influence the adjustment, sense of belonging, institutional attachment and persistence” of underrepresented students (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008, p. 110). Furthermore, racialized climates can lead students to feel what scholars often call “impostor syndrome” in which student feel like they do not belong, they are outliers, and their presence in graduate school is by mistake (Graham, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2010).

Many higher education institutions have created support systems for underrepresented students in areas of academics, social adjustment, and assistance with individual and/or institutional racism, but these programs are not always effective (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Scholars contend that many institutions still abide by “colorblind” policies, which ignore ethnic, racial, cultural, and learning differences between students of color and White students (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). As Rankin and Reason (2005) suggest, students of color are more likely to experience harassment and campus climates that are not adequately accepting of their racial differences. Academic institutions often lack the focused and intentional multicultural services that aim to mediate such interactions, thus creating ineffective support systems that contribute to student attrition. Moreover, it is likely that underrepresented students do not always have access to culturally competent curricula, pedagogies and classrooms, the absence of which can lead students to feel as though they do not belong in their graduate program (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

Advising, mentoring and peer relationships. Another widely researched area of campus climate suggests that providing positive mentoring and peer relationships, support from faculty and staff, and positive interactions with faculty, staff, and peers will

positively affect how students experience the institution (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Lewis et al., 2004; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Positive relationships, mentoring and otherwise, help students acculturate to the academic setting and raise degree completion rates (Cheatham & Phelps, 1995; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Unfortunately, for many underrepresented doctoral students, positive mentoring relationships are not always attained (Swail, 2003; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Much research on campus climates and on students who do not finish their degrees has shown that student attrition is commonly related to a lack of such relationships (Harper, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). Because of the nature of the work and the fact that doctoral students are expected to work with faculty to prepare for their future professional work (a normalization process of socialization), if students cannot form nurturing mentoring relationships that support their personal and academic endeavors, they will have a lowered overall satisfaction with their graduate program (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2004). A lack of satisfaction with the graduate program has been linked to increased anxiety and ambivalence about the student's professional path and, when this dissatisfaction goes unchecked, it often leads to attrition (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Finding success in doctoral education is closely dependent on the relationship between the student and his/her adviser; this is particularly true for underrepresented students because of the impact that those relationships can have on feelings of belonging. Not surprisingly, scholars have found that underrepresented students have a hard time forming these mentoring relationships (Ellis, 2001; Lewis et al., 2004; Rankin & Reason, 2005). The literature cites having few, if any, faculty of color and low enrollments of students of color as factors that contribute to the lack of relationship building (Harper &

Hurtado, 2007). Studies on campus climates posit that students are more likely to form bonds with people who are like them culturally and ethnically (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jayakumar et al., 2009; Ellis, 2001; Lewis et al., 2004; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Higher education, however, lacks equal representation by minority faculty and staff (Jayakumar et al., 2009), which ultimately negatively impacts underrepresented students.

Additionally, many faculty, staff and mentors lack the intercultural competence to work with students from diverse, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Gay (2002) refers to this lack of competence as “Critical Cultural Consciousness” and suggests that many faculty and staff lack the critical consciousness of their own socialization and how it affects their attitudes and behaviors toward cultural groups that are different from their own (p. 619).

Perceived Student Deficits

A third body of literature focused on understanding the experiences of underrepresented minority students offers a critique of the perceived deficits of those students. Often, the academic discourse characterizing underrepresented students portrays them as unqualified, underprepared, unfit, and/or lacking cultural, social, and intellectual capacity to succeed in academia (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2005; Brayboy, 2003; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2009; Harris & Harper, 2008). In student attrition literature, underrepresented students are often referred to as lacking skills and/or capital (social, economic, cultural) and described as having deficiencies that lead to their attrition. This framing exonerates colleges and universities for their part in students’ attrition (Tinto, 1993).

Harper (2009) provides an example of this deficit discourse as he points out the frequent assumptions underlying research on African American males. In his assessment, derived from a study of 143 participants at 30 predominantly White institutions across the U.S., he used counter-storytelling, a “method of telling stories of people who are often overlooked in the literature, and as a means by which to examine, critique, and counter majoritarian stories composed about people of color” (p. 701). Harper found the experiences of African American students he studied were often overshadowed by the master narrative which amplifies “black male underachievement, disengagement, and attrition” (p. 708). Furthermore, he suggests that literature on Black male college students often portrays them as troubled and as having bleak futures. On the contrary, Harper’s (2009) research indicates that there is an overlooked population of African Americans in college campuses who are academic achievers and leaders who thrive inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Bartlett and Brayboy (2006) assert that when discussing academic racial achievement gaps in academic and public discourse, people of color are referred to as having “intellectual deficits, cultural deficits, cultural difference, resistance” (p. 362). Indeed, when talking about underrepresented students, the question often asked by scholars is “What is wrong with those students?” Though these characterizations are based primarily on research related to undergraduate students, they are nevertheless relevant for understanding the attrition of underrepresented students in doctoral programs. Furthermore, Steele (1997) defines these characterizations of inferiority of students of color as a social-psychological concept known as “stereotype threat,” a predicament of internalizing widely-known negative stereotypes about one’s own racial group. Steele and Aronson (1995) suggest that stereotype threat is a self-

evaluative threat that besets people of which negative stereotypes exists (p. 797). This phenomenon, scholars suggest, undermines the academic performance of students and creates a hostile climate (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Lovitts (2001) suggests that leaders and scholars commonly believe that student attrition has more to do with students than the school. Contrary to this belief, Lovitts' study of 816 doctoral students (305 of them who left their programs) in nine departments at two universities (one rural and one urban university) illustrates that student attrition has a discernible pattern across graduate systems. Lovitts' research, which included surveys, interviews with students and staff, and faculty and departmental observations, indicated that much of the burden of student departure is placed on the students who leave or withdraw from their programs with little or no blame placed on the graduate programs. Furthermore, Lovitts argues that this persistent focus on student attributes of departure is counterproductive because attention is taken away from the organizational culture of graduate school, along with the structure and process of graduate school itself.

A further exploration of this discourse can be achieved through the actor-observer model of attribution theory used in social psychology (Jones & Nisbitt, 1971). The theory suggests that actors and observers perceive situations differently. Actors tend to focus on the context of the situation and observers focus on the actor's outlook of the same events. Specifically, "there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions" (Jones & Nesbitt, 1971, p. 80). An example of this type of view point is presented in Harper's (2010) Anti-Deficit Framework Achievement Framework for Research on Students of Color in STEM, in which he highlights how an

article in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled “Federal Panel Seeks Cause of Minority Students’ Poor Science Performance” makes a point to mention that the failure of students in STEM programs arise from students’ lack of preparation and open access to schools via affirmative action policies. Harper (2010) points out that “most empirical studies amplify minority student failure and deficits instead of achievement” (p. 64). This emphasizes that responsibility is often placed primarily on the students for their lack of persistence and institutions are seen as having very little responsibility for students’ success.

In a similar line of thinking, Lovitts (2001) found that when college administrators, faculty, and staff were asked to name reasons for student attrition, most listed reasons such as lack of intellectual ability to do the work or that the student lacked motivation, furthering the myth that attrition is mostly related to students being underprepared. Consequently, colleges and universities have tried over the past decades to increase the profile of the students being admitted to doctoral programs. Academic institutions began recruiting students who had higher academic GPAs under the premise that this would decrease the attrition rate. The rationale was that since attrition is the reflection of poorly academically trained students, admitting students with higher GPAs and higher standardized test scores would therefore decrease attrition. As Lovitts (2001) points out, this is not the case—attrition levels are nearly the same for students on both ends of the GPA scale, “students with less than a 3.0 GPA were just as likely to complete the doctorate as any group” (p. 6).

The examples given reflect the academic deficit discourse that is prevalent in higher education at all levels. In this model, attrition is narrowly examined by focusing

on what the students are lacking in order to explain their attrition. Unfortunately, the conversation about the role of the systems in which students are failing is still insufficient.

Internalized Oppression

Oppression broadly defined can be described as “a system that maintains advantage and disadvantage based on social group memberships and operates intentionally and unintentionally, on the individual, institutional and cultural levels” (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007, p. 58). Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) posit that oppression occurs at many different levels such as intrapersonal (internalized oppression), interpersonal (inferiority and devaluation), social group (collective inferiority), state (systemic structural discrimination), and international (exploitative economic systems). In this dissertation and for the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the individual level of oppression: internalized oppression.

Internalized oppression theory. Internalized oppression can be defined as:

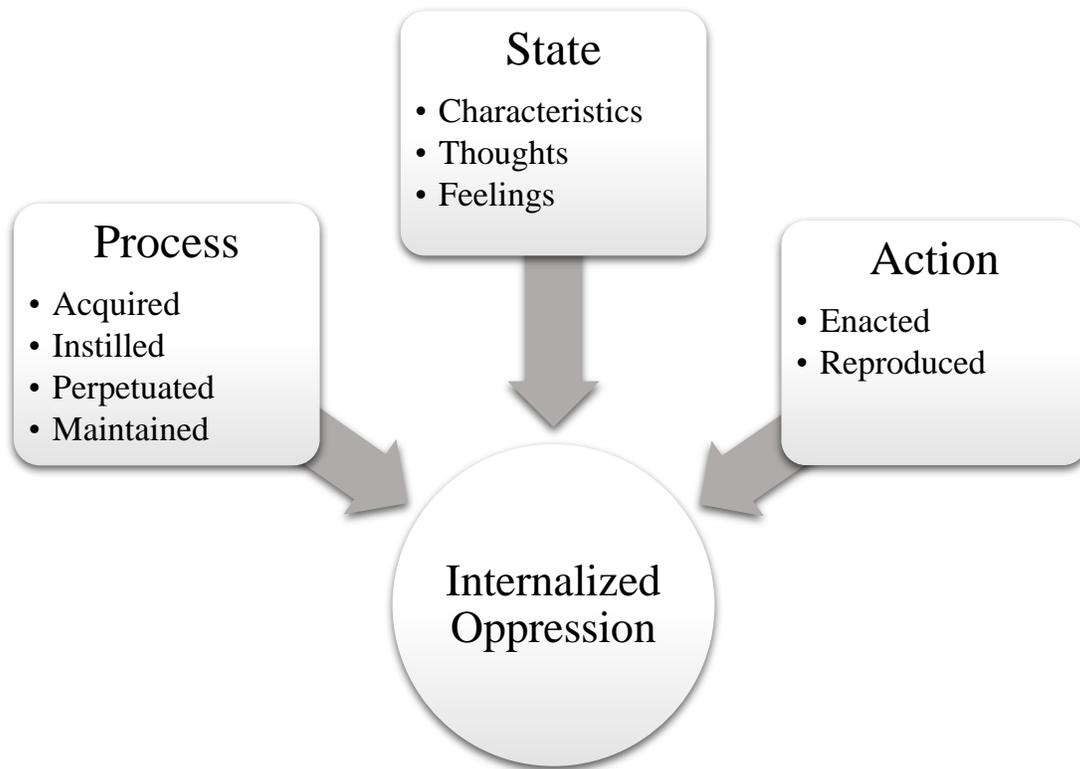
The fundamental mechanisms through which oppressive systems maintain their existence in society. It is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is present and reproduced through the everyday behavior, actions, and functioning of both dominant and subordinate groups. (Williams, 2012, p. 152)

Focusing specifically on the internalized oppression of students of color or subordinate groups, internalized oppression is defined as having three components: Process, State, and Action (Figure 2). Process is how subordinate groups incorporate the dominant negative beliefs and stereotypes of an oppressive system, which can occur both consciously and subconsciously (Williams, 2012). Williams (2012) identifies four

processes of internalized oppression: internalization (external values and beliefs that become part of the psyche of the subordinate), socialization (the learning of rules and expectations of society placed on the subordinate), intergenerational transmission (the passing of internalized oppression from one generation to another), and acceptance (the conscious or unconscious ways in which subordinate groups concede to the beliefs, values, and prescribed roles assigned by the oppressive system). The second component of internalized oppression, State, refers to the “consistent presence of qualities, traits, and characteristics within a subordinate group that are attributable to or that have developed as a result of being targeted by systems of oppression” (Williams, 2012, p. 153). Williams (2012) conceptualizes internalized oppression as having two states: the psychological state and the spiritual state. The psychological state incorporates characteristics, emotions, and patterns of mental functioning of oppressed groups who are impacted by experiences of oppression and which serve to maintain the oppressive system. The spiritual state of internalized oppression is the condition produced when wounds caused by the experiences of oppression become deeply rooted and serve to reproduce the oppression. Furthermore, Williams (2012) asserts that the spiritual state of internalized oppression “impacts the individual soul of subordinate groups, the religious and spiritual communities of subordinate groups as well as individual and communal relationships with the Divine” (p. 154). The last component of internalized oppression is Action. Action is defined as the daily practices and behaviors of subordinate groups that “consciously or subconsciously support, reproduce, collude with, and perpetuate systems of oppression” (Williams, 2010, p. 154). Essentially, as subordinate groups engage and

respond to experiences of oppression, the repetitive nature of the trauma leads to the development of internalized oppression.

Figure 2. Theory of Internalized Oppression



Psychological state of internalized oppression. The State component of Williams' internalized oppression model is of importance to this study because of its application to the understanding of the experiences of underrepresented students in predominantly White institutions. In particular, this merits a deeper exploration of the Psychological State component of internalized oppression. Further research into the

psychological state of internalized oppression by Moane (1999) identified four areas that are of primary concern for subordinate groups: self and identity, emotions, interpersonal relationships, and mental health. These four areas work collectively in subordinated individuals to maintain and perpetuate the systems of oppression and contribute to the instilling of internalized oppression. As Williams (2012) suggests, “when ‘subordinate groups’ knowledge of themselves is non-existent, limited in scope, and/or predicated on the beliefs, desires, and needs of the dominant group, they are easier to control and oppress” (p. 80).

Self and identity. In the psychological state of self and identity, subordinated individuals are encouraged, by various mechanisms, to exist within limited boundaries defined by those in the dominant group. Subordinated individuals are forced, both passively and actively, to think, act, behave, and exhibit traits which are agreeable to the dominant group and which exist within the systems of oppression. Essentially, the system of oppression forces individuals from the subordinate group to internalize their experience of oppression. Some of the traits internalized by subordinate individuals are lack of agency, feelings of insecurity, failure, inferiority, helplessness, hopelessness, and self-hate (Freire, 1970; Moane, 1999; Pharr, 1997; Williams, 2012). Within the psychological state of internalized oppression that is concerned with self and identity also lies the oppressive construction of self. Oppressed individuals from subordinate groups often lack self-knowledge and are stripped away from the opportunity to develop their self-knowledge because they are instead learning about who they are and who they should be from the lens or perspective of the oppressor (Miller, 1986; Williams, 2012).

In all, the identity development of subordinate individuals is marked by oppression which interrupts and manipulates psychological functioning.

Emotions. The second area within the psychological state of internalized oppression, emotions, is concerned with chronic and/or intermittent feelings that are a direct result or influenced by experiences of oppression (Williams, 2012). Some examples of the feelings that result from internalized oppression are emotional repression and shame. Emotional repression is defined as “the intentional or unintentional inhibition, interruption, or minimization of the awareness, experience, or expression of emotion in targeted groups that occurs either consciously or unconsciously as a result of their experience of oppression” (Williams, 2012, p. 89). Historically, emotional repression has been central to the survival of people of color and, in particular, to that of African Americans. In the U.S., for example, oppressive environments created the need for subordinated individuals to repress their emotions as a “matter of safety and survival” (Williams, 2012, p. 90). Similarly, shame is central to the internalized oppression experienced by subordinated individuals. Shame is the “ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy or not fully valid as a human being” (Fossum & Mason, 1986, p. 5). Shame is also the feeling of being exposed to self and others and can be experienced alone or with others. Kaufman (1992) suggests that as shame becomes internalized, it is also “bound” to other emotions, creating triggers as shame is bound to experiences. In turn, shame strikes at the very notion of who we are as individuals. Shame is present in the psychological conditions of depression, alienation, isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem, inferiority, self-doubt, sense of inadequacy, and failure (Kaufman, 1992; Williams, 2012).

Interpersonal relationships. The third psychological state of internalized oppression is interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships focus on ways in which subordinate groups connect and interact with members of the same social identity, other subordinate individuals, and members of the dominant group. Internalized oppression in interpersonal relationships can occur in areas of horizontal hostility, ambivalent relationships, and dissimulation. In horizontal hostility, subordinate individuals target members of their own social identities because of the beliefs, assumptions, and ideology internalized from the interactions with the oppressor. Ambivalent relationships are marked by dual feelings of “love and hate, admiration and contempt, attraction and repulsion” (Moane, 1999, p. 84) and can occur in relationships with subordinate individuals or members of the dominant group. Finally, the third example of interpersonal relationships can be seen in the use of dissimulation or the concealment of one’s feelings and thoughts. At the heart of dissimulation is the process by which systems of oppression force subordinate individuals to lie and deceive to survive. Dissimulation is a barrier to the development of healthy relationships as it normalizes the behavior as part of the survival of subordinate individuals (Hooks, 2005).

Mental Health. The fourth and final psychological state of internalized oppression is mental health. Broadly, mental health is concerned with the effects of oppression on the psychological well-being of subordinate individuals (Williams, 2012). Research has shown that ongoing experiences of oppression produce, aggravate, encourage, and/or create subordinate individuals more susceptible to various forms of mental illness (Duran, 2006; Kaufman & Raphael, 1996; Williams, 2012). Subordinated individuals who show signs of mental health because of internalized oppression often

refuse to seek psychological assistance, may experience substance abuse and addiction, and may dissociate from oppressive and traumatic events. Fundamental to interrupting the pattern of internalized oppression is noticing and acknowledging that the oppression is present and that one has been negatively impacted by it. Ironically, it is common for oppressed individuals to deny that they been hurt by the oppression, and, often, there may be resistance to help in overcoming the psychological hurt (Hooks, 2005). Similarly, at the heart of substance abuse and addiction is internalized oppression. Often, substance abuse and addiction are associated with alcohol and drugs, but, as in the general population, oppressed individuals may also be vulnerable to addictions to a wide array of substances and behaviors, such as food, sex, gambling, caffeine, shopping, sugar, and work (Kaufman, 1992; Williams, 2012). Substance abuse and addiction and internalized oppression are connected by the idea of codependency. As Kasl (1986) suggests, codependency is a euphemism of internalized oppression in that it includes traits of passivity, compliance, and powerlessness. Finally, dissociation involves disconnecting or detaching experiences and feelings from one's consciousness to cope with the aftermath of oppression (Moane, 1999). Dissociation, consciously or unconsciously, is a practical response to an oppressive environment and serves to aid and preserve aspects of oneself that are somehow deemed unacceptable or inappropriate by the dominant culture.

Internalized oppression is the product of oppressing forces from people, social groups, and state agencies. In students, interpersonal oppression is brought on as minority students are exposed to an innumerable amount of "devaluing encounters" eventually leading to the internalization of the negative images projected onto them by a system of oppression (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996; Holmes, Facemire, & DaFonseca,

2016). It is important to point out that internalized oppression is not a fault of the individual but rather the sum of countless experiences that one by one erode the psychological wellbeing of individuals.

Sense of Belonging

A critical non-cognitive factor that encompasses all of the previously mentioned clusters of literature and which influences a student's decision to stay in school is sense of belonging. Again, much of the literature on sense of belonging comes from studies of undergraduate students and K-12 education; nevertheless, sense of belonging has been shown to positively affect academic domains, such as academic achievement and time to degree, at all levels of education.

A strong sense of belonging encourages students to establish positive relationships with faculty and peers. In turn, these positive relationships increase the level of interest and engagement of students, which includes psychological and behavioral components of student investment in learning both in and out of the classroom, meaningful involvements with peers, faculty, staff and the learning environment, extra-curricular activities, and more. Additionally, studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between belonging, student persistence and retention (Stebbleton, Huesman, Jr., & Kuzhabekova, 2010; Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). Strayhorn (2012) provides a comprehensive definition of sense of belonging:

Sense of belonging is a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' 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). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response of behavior. (p. 3)

Sense of belonging differs from the traditional concepts of integration proposed by scholars such as Tinto (1993) and Tierney (1992) largely because integration places little value on culturally specific alternatives to school participation in favor of "mainstream" activities (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon, & Longerbeam, 2007). In contrast, sense of belonging is a more holistic approach to student integration because it takes into account the students' multiple identities and how they interact with the people and environment around them.

One of the earliest investigations connecting sense of belonging with college outcomes was conducted by Hurtado and Carter (1997), using the work of Bollen and Hoyle (1990) as the foundation for their work. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) used the concept of cohesion, which is derived from work in sociology and psychology, to identify sense of belonging as a category of importance in college going populations. Bollen and Hoyle defined "perceived cohesion" as "encompassing an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings or morale associated with membership in the group" (1990, p. 482). The authors write that sense of belonging has both cognitive and affective elements. Cognitively, people make judgments about belonging from experiences with groups and group members. As an affective element, judgments about belonging are made from feelings that stem from the experiences in groups and with group members. Because of these two elements, a sense of belonging can provide individuals with information and motivation regarding their interactions. Also key to

their assertions about sense of belonging is the fact that “if individuals do not perceive themselves to be members of a group, it is difficult to understand how group norms, values, and other characteristics are likely to affect them” (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 484). Aside from their contribution to the discourse on sense of belonging, Bollen and Hoyle contributed to the field by introducing the Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS). The SBS scale is often used to test and assess which forms of social interactions (academic or social) enhance students’ relationships and identities with their schools (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997)

Hurtado and Carter (1997) used the SBS scale to conduct one of the first studies on sense of belonging among Latinx students. Their study, which used four sources of data from the National Survey of Hispanic Students, was sent out to 493 students who were members of the fall 1990 cohort of college students. Of those 493 students, 287 students from 127 colleges responded to the survey (58.1% female, 41.9% male). Of the students who responded, 43.4% were Chicanos, 22.4% were Puerto Ricans, and 34.2% were other Latinx (Cubans and Central and South Americans). From the results, the authors concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between sense of belonging and students who reported having conversations about school work outside the classroom with other students, those who participated in tutoring, and students who talked to faculty outside the classroom. These findings suggest, according to the authors, that merging academic and social interaction positively contributed to students’ sense of belonging in college. Furthermore, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who belong to college social-community organizations were significantly associated with a higher sense of belonging. Clear from the results described in the previous study, students who are

connected with their schools and who feel supported have a strong sense of belonging. Essentially, as Hurtado and Carter (1997) write, sense of belonging “captures the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (p. 327). This inclusion needs to be genuine for students to feel like they belong. In a study of first-generation college students, Jehangir (2010) writes that students “were acutely aware of occasions when they were welcomed but not in their own terms” (p. 119). Moreover, sense of belonging is about “mattering.” Students need to feel that they are part of a community in which they are noticed by others, in which others care what they think, in which people care about their successes and failures, and in which they feel valued (Johnson et al., 2007; Schlossberg, 1981).

Not feeling a sense of belonging can lead a student to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, like an outsider, or like an impostor (Strayhorn, 2012). As Jehangir (2010) describes, “understanding what it means to have a sense of belonging is to know what it is to be alone” (p. 129). Many underrepresented minority students, whether at a graduate or undergraduate level, at some point start to feel lonely, invisible, and isolated. Given that underrepresented students may be minoritized both numerically and in relation to access to power structures rooted in dominant cultures and representations of oneself in the curriculum and among one’s faculty and peers, being a minority student in a predominantly White campus and/or being the only doctoral student of color in one’s cohort, class, department, or college may diminish a student’s sense of belonging.

In summary, underrepresented doctoral students’ sense of belonging encompasses a multitude of judgments about their day-to-day, formal and informal interactions with faculty, staff and peers, along with the feelings associated with those interactions. The

sum of these interactions relay important information to students about whether this place in which they are spending much of their time is a place where they feel valued, safe and included. Essentially, students come away from the experiences feeling that they matter or that they do not. In order to understand the complex process of belonging, especially among underrepresented doctoral students, it is imperative to explore how students' social identities relate to a sense of belonging, how students are socialized into graduate education, and how campus climate and perceived student deficits impact students' sense that they belong in academia and the profession.

Summary

The attrition of underrepresented students in doctoral degree programs is a continuing problem that requires further study. The literature on attrition of this particular group of students to date is scarce. No national data set exists on attrition rates of doctoral students of any groups. The fact that the time to degree completion for doctoral programs ranges from a few years to ten or more further complicates the issue such in the case of doctoral students in the social sciences and humanities who often take longer to attain their degree when compared to math and science students (Lovitts, 2001). Nevertheless, best estimates suggest that anywhere from 40% to 70% of doctoral students never attain a degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nettles & Millet, 2006; Smallwood, 2004). Attrition is problematic because it is a waste of time, money, and talent for the student, and it wastes school resources as well. University of Notre Dame officials calculated that if doctoral attrition were reduced by 10% at their school, the University would save about a million dollars a year (Smallwood, 2004).

This study frames the attrition of underrepresented doctoral students with existing literature on student identity, socialization, campus climate, perceived student deficit models, internalized oppression and sense of belonging. Working under the assumption that attrition is closely related to a student's sense of belonging in an academic department or university, the relevant literature was analyzed for consistencies among the clusters mentioned above. Students and their identities, the first cluster discussed, set a stage to understanding the complex nature of the multiple identities that students bring with them to school. Underrepresented students bring important racial/ethnic identities that situate them in intergroup relations with those who are similar and simultaneously can create an "us versus them" dichotomy that is part of the power and structures associated with minority and majority statuses in the U.S. The nature of doctoral education often creates situations in which minority students are singled out because they are one of few minority students in class, are not well represented in the curriculum or pedagogy, and are expected to be highly engaged with their racial/ethnic communities. These situations, in turn, can lead to a greater saliency of a student's racial and ethnic identity. Often, in order for students to successfully navigate the complexities of doctoral education, there has to be a performance of race which at times conflicts with their own personal identities but which is deemed necessary in order to be successful. These incongruences are stressors, which ultimately can harm students both psychologically and academically. Exploring socialization was useful to understand how students see themselves fitting into the doctoral education structure. The literature posits that high integration, which delineates successful socialization, is essential for students if they are to succeed in doctoral degree programs. The consequence of not integrating is isolation,

which can be detrimental to the success of students and contributes to attrition. Stages and tasks were described as part of the socialization models. The literature, however, does not explain in depth how underrepresented students experience this process. Scholarly research assumes that students generally have the same starting points and progress in the same sequential order. This poses a challenge to understanding the complexity of underrepresented student experiences and too many questions remain unanswered.

Similarly, literature addressing campus climate was explored to understand why interpersonal relationships, institutional structures, and policies affect the attrition of doctoral students. Underrepresented doctoral students have to face the brunt of institutional and individual racism (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harper, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lewis et al., 2004). Research also suggests that underrepresented students do not have enough programs to help deal with these racialized climates, and the stress associated with the inability to cope contributes to high attrition rates. The literature on the perceived student deficit discourse was analyzed, and it presents a case about the ongoing framing of underrepresented students lacking skills or dispositions. Much of the scholarly work on underrepresented students in higher education portrays them as lacking certain academic, cultural, personal, or family attributes that make for successful students; this portrayal may be largely because few studies exist featuring successful underrepresented students and their attributes. Although not much of the literature on student deficits focuses on doctoral students, connections can be drawn from the existing undergraduate works. Ultimately, some in higher education institutions view

the student as the problem, and, thus, no changes to the structure of doctoral programs can be made, resulting in continuously high attrition rates.

Literature on internalized oppression was also discussed as it frames how oppressive acts are acquired, internalized, and reproduced. Internalized oppression is the result of the ongoing oppression that people of color endure while having memberships in subordinate groups in society. The process of internalizing oppression is not a linear but rather a complex back-and-forth between the stages of process, state, and action. Internalized oppression is furthermore relevant in spaces such as predominantly White institutions because of the subordinate status that students have as minorities in these campuses. Moreover, because PWIs exist within a larger societal context, they serve to replicate and perpetuate the oppression of subordinate groups.

Sense of belonging, the last literature cluster, speaks to the feeling of mattering by students. Unlike much of the scholarly work on integration, which assumes all students want to be a part of the “mainstream,” sense of belonging assumes that students need culturally specific ways of integrating to their environments. In order for students to feel like they belong, core elements of their identity need to be recognized, along with recognizing that because underrepresented students are not the same as majority group students, they will socialize differently, and, as such, they require socialization strategies that speak to their unique needs. Moreover, sense of belonging is about experiencing a feeling of belonging to one’s environment. For many underrepresented students the climate at their institutions is often chilly, leaving them to feel a greater sense of loneliness and isolation, which acts as a stressor that ultimately may lead to adverse psychological effects and poor academic performance.

It is important to recognize that student identities, socialization, campus climates, student deficits and internalized oppression do not work independently of one another. On the contrary, these five components are interconnected and are, to a degree, dependent on one another. Socialization and integration are dependent on the environment and the campus climate. Likewise, student deficit perspectives operate under social circumstances intermingled with the social climate of the institution. Lastly, student identities and internalized oppression are intermingled with every step of the socialization process; they influence and are influenced by campus climate and have a reciprocal relationship with the perceived deficits that students might encounter. I posit that these components and their interconnections ultimately influence sense of belonging. Much work needs to be done to fully understand sense of belonging experiences and how they impact underrepresented doctoral students' decisions to complete or leave their programs.

Chapter 3: Methods

Design

This study was informed by interpretivism, and, as such, it examined how participants constructed meaning of their educational experiences as doctoral students. This departure from the common approaches of positivism and post-positivism and their heavily experimental, data-driven discourse was done purposefully. Because positivism is bound by an “observe and measure” approach in which searching for the one “truth” is central and the purpose is to control and/or predict behavior, it was not appropriate for this study (Hovorka & Lee 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Weber, 2004). Similarly, post-positivism and its assumption of a singular reality did not serve well to capture the experiences of a diverse group of students. Furthermore, both positivism and post-positivism’s dualistic, objectivist epistemologies and their assumptions that researchers are absent or separate from the subjects, data, and findings are contradictory to the nature of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Weber, 2004).

In contrast, an interpretivist paradigm assumes that the researcher and the subjects are interactively linked, and, in this case, my own experiences informed the study and were similar to the experiences of the research participants (Weber, 2004). Furthermore, this dissertation proceeded under the assumption that the research participant experiences were shaped by diverse socio-cultural and ethnic perspectives that inevitably influenced them and, in turn, this dissertation. Methodologically, this dissertation focused on the dialogic method because the bulk of the research was comprised of interviews with participants, and, during these interviews, back and forth interaction between the interviewees and myself took place. That is, this study aimed to understand the

experiences of underrepresented students in doctoral education, and, in order to understand those experiences, a conversation had to occur between myself and the subjects.

Given the interpretivist approach of this research, I used a mixed method research design to investigate my research questions. The aim of using this mixed method approach was to understand the meaning that individuals construct around certain phenomena (Creswell, 2003). This was achieved by administering a survey to identify relevant characteristics of the population studied and by creating focused themes that informed the second part of the research, the open-ended interviews with participants (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). A grounded theory approach was used during the qualitative phase because of its inductive nature to understand the “essence” of the experiences of underrepresented minority doctoral students. A grounded theory approach allowed me to understand the experiences of participants by comparing data from the surveys with categories derived from the interviews conducted. Furthermore, a grounded theory inquiry allowed me to develop general theories about the phenomena which the study participants described experiencing (Creswell, 2003).

Setting

This dissertation was conducted at a large, urban, land grant, research driven, public university located in the Midwest. The University has about 47,000 students enrolled in the 2014-2015 academic year with about 29,000 of those being undergraduates, and 12,000 graduate students. About 5,500 of the 12,000 graduate students are doctoral level students (Office of Institutional Research, n.d.). The University is also much like many large public universities in that it is a predominantly

White institution (“U.S. News & World Report,” n.d.) with about 67% of the students being White or Caucasian.

Quantitative Methods

Participants. For the survey portion of this dissertation, I collected the email addresses of all doctoral students who did not have information suppression on their record at the University. There were 5,597 registered doctoral students at the University with about 1,600 of those listed as minority doctoral students, according to the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) (n.d.). The OIR provided a list of 3,142 students who were registered doctoral students and who did not have an information suppression listed on their student accounts. The list of students did not have any racial categories because the OIR is prohibited from sharing that information. While this study was focused on traditionally underrepresented and minoritized racial and ethnic identities, the quantitative data could only be reduced to White and non-White/minority students. Therefore, the count of minority students included an Asian American category, which included ethnic and racial identities that are often overrepresented in higher education such as Chinese American students.

Data collection. In the fall of 2015, I emailed 3,142 students inviting them to participate in a short survey (see Appendix B) regarding their experiences as doctoral students at the University. The email contained a summary of the goals of the study along with a unique link to an online Qualtrics survey. As part of the email and at the beginning of the survey, an informed consent statement was listed so that participants were aware of the kinds of information that was being asked prior to engaging in the survey. The survey was scheduled to run for two weeks; however, at the end of week

two, the response rate was low (about 15 percent), and so I extended the survey for another week to address the low participation rate. I sent out three email reminders to participate in the survey: one reminder went out a week into the survey, the next reminder at the end of week two, and the final reminder was sent two days before the survey was scheduled to end. At the conclusion of week three, the final survey response rate was 23%, or 735 survey responses. Of those responses, 626 survey responses were usable; however, only 505 survey responses were used because they met the criteria of identifying as White, African American, Latinx, American Indian, or Asian American.

The survey included questions regarding the areas described in the literature review clusters that I hypothesized contributed to students' sense of belong in their doctoral programs. The survey questions also contained demographic information that provided an insight into the students' lives, such as self-identified racial/ethnic identity, age, gender, primary language spoken at home, what level of funding they received for their doctoral education, current employment status, their last degree completed, and educational attainment of their parents. The questions regarding identity, campus climate, socialization and perceived student deficits were designed to address what previous scholars have concluded to be best practices in each area (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Tinto, 1993). For example, one question asked in the survey was (using a Likert scale): "my advisor and I share a similar ethnic background." Additionally, survey questions regarding sense of belonging, campus climate, student socialization, and advising and mentoring relationships were adapted from survey instruments used to ascertain graduate student satisfaction at Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

University of Colorado Boulder, and Princeton University. I drew on the Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS) and the Perceived Cohesion Scale developed by Bollen and Hoyle (1990) to ascertain students' perceptions of their sense of belonging. I used the SBS because it has been validated (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and replicated successfully in other surveys of graduate student experiences administered at the University of Colorado Boulder, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Florida State University.

Approach to data analysis. Once the data from the survey were gathered, I used SPSS for the analytic process. First, I began with obtaining descriptive statistics to ascertain a general pattern of the survey responses, especially how each ethnic group responded to the survey. As part of this process, I analyzed the central tendencies of the distributions (mean, median, and mode) by ethnic group. I then compared and contrasted the different ethnic groups to see if there were any obvious differences that appeared immediately. I also reviewed the standard deviation of the responses by ethnic group. As part of the descriptive statistics process, I created a boxplot to determine if the data had any outliers. Cases that were found to be outliers were scrutinized to determine if there were mistakes that might require those cases to be omitted from the analysis. After obtaining descriptive statistics, I computed a Cronbach's Alpha statistic to measure the "fit" of the questions in each cluster. Using Cronbach's Alpha, I shifted some questions to different clusters to ensure the mean scores had reliability scores equal to or greater than .7. After obtaining the clusters of questions that "fit" together, I created mean scores using SPSS for sense of belonging, campus climate, socialization, and student deficits. The mean scores allowed for comparisons to be analyzed between the different clusters of questions.

After obtaining descriptive statistics, I conducted an independent sample t-test to compare the sense of belonging mean between White students and minority students. Then, I ran a Pearson correlation analysis between sense of belonging and socialization means to see if there was a correlation between socialization and sense of belonging. Next, I prepared the data for a regression analysis and created dummy variables to test racial categories against White students. I conducted the regression using campus climate, socialization, and the racial categories of Asian American, African American, and Latinx. The student deficit cluster was removed because it did not have a significant contribution to the regression analysis. Similarly, the American Indian racial category was removed because it did not contribute to the regression analysis. After the quantitative analyses had been completed, I had a clearer understanding of emerging themes in the data, which informed the questions for the interview portion of the study. A draft of the survey instrument is included in Appendix A.

Qualitative Methods

Emerging research questions. The research questions for this dissertation were reevaluated and evolved as the interviews began and patterns started to emerge. At the onset of this study, my focus was to provide new insights into the phenomena of sense of belonging among underrepresented and minoritized doctoral students at a PWI. Because there are few theories that address doctoral student attrition, I developed a hypothesis that focused on examining the ways in which socialization, campus climate, racial identity and deficit discourse experiences impacted sense of belonging. Qualitative research provided a lens through which to test the assumptions made based on the literature, but, as I started to analyze the data, it became clear that I needed to realign my research

questions and be responsive to the direction in which the data was leading me. As Ragin, Nagel, and White (2004) suggest, it is the nature of qualitative research to discover emerging phenomena, which can often be outside the scope of existing theories. As such, as I began to code the interviews, my research questions shifted giving rise to the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent does negotiating a hostile campus climate impact sense of belonging?
- 2) To what extent do experiences of oppression impact sense of belonging?
- 3) To what extent does sense of community impact sense of belonging?

Participants. To solicit participants for the qualitative portion of this study, at the end of the survey (described above) there was a statement asking if the participant would volunteer to be interviewed as a continuation of the research. The statement described the purpose of the interviews along with the proposed timeline of when the interviews were to take place. After the statement, there was a field for participants to enter an email address if they chose to participate in the interviews. The initial statement also informed participants that by volunteering to be interviewed, they would be entered in a drawing for a chance to win one of four \$50 gift cards to Target (four gift cards were given away and participants could only win once). Out of the 102 respondents who identified as belonging to a minority group, 69 volunteered to participate in the follow-up interview.

Participants who volunteered to be a part of the interviews were emailed soon after to thank them for their willingness to participate and inform them that I would be in touch with them about participating in the interviews. I gathered the surveys that

contained email addresses and compiled a list containing their demographic information and their departments. I filtered and removed participants who self-identified as White. I then filtered the remaining names by those who belonged to departments in STEM, Social Science/Humanities, and professional fields. Those volunteers who did not fit the criteria above were not interviewed. Those who were not included in the interviews received an email thanking them and explaining that they were not selected to be interviewed.

Participant selection and data collection. From the pool of volunteers who were from underrepresented minority groups, two to three participants were selected for each broad field of study (STEM, Social Sciences/Humanities, and professional fields) for a maximum total of 10 students to be interviewed. I began to schedule interviews in February of 2016. I conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants throughout February, March, and April (see Appendix C for interview protocol). I conducted follow-up interviews with participants if there was any subject or area that needed to be clarified (follow up interviews were conducted via phone calls). During interviews, I asked students questions about their experiences on a predominantly White campus as doctoral students from minority backgrounds. I also asked students about their first impressions upon arriving to campus and their specific departments. I asked them to describe their relationships with faculty, staff, and other students in their departments. I asked if there were other people in their departments who shared similar cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds with them and asked if they would recommend their departments to other students and why or why not. All interviews were audio recorded and later

transcribed. Notes on visual observations from participants while in session were taken in an interview journal.

Approach to data analysis. A theoretical sampling approach was used to develop and test theoretical constructs about sense of belonging and student experiences that help or hinder a student's decision to leave a graduate program. For example, students in STEM fields have a higher completion rate than students in Social Sciences; so theoretically, selecting students to interview who represent those two fields should provide fruitful insights into differences in the experiences of both groups. For this process, I used a sequential Quan-Qual analysis as described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998). I used the quantitative data to form groups by selecting students who identified as being from an underrepresented group and who belonged to STEM, Social Sciences/Humanities, or a professional field. I used a typology development strategy (Caracelli & Greene, 1993) to then compare those groups. Specifically, I grouped students based on the how they answered questions on the survey and where their responses lie. For example, obtaining a cluster mean score for socialization, I sought to interview students who answered questions on the low-end and high-end of the socialization mean score. Using this technique, I was able to consider how students answered the questions on the survey along with what their broad field of study was to be invited to the interview. Moreover, after the comparisons were created, I had better protocols for the line of questioning during the interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, I used NVivo software to organize the transcript information, explore emerging themes and patterns in the transcribed interviews, and, finally, to code the transcripts. My coding strategy for this study was to first do a line-by-line coding

looking for particular themes such as negative experiences or family of origin stories. Those codes were then categorized into families of codes. In my second coding pass, I looked for thematic big picture ideas to group. Using the families of codes that I had created from the first line-by-line coding, I read the interviews keeping those code groups in mind and selected larger narratives that could be used to tell a story about a particular theme found. I then merged similar themes to generate interpretations about the experiences of students in their doctoral programs.

Study Timeline

Phase one: mid-October through early December, 2015. I sent an email that informed potential participants that a survey would be sent and described the purpose of the study and timeline for participation. This email explained that the objective of the research was to better understand their experiences in their doctoral programs, including their sense of belonging to their departments and the University at large. Included in the email was an explanation that information gathered would be used to benefit the graduate student community at large and future generations of graduate students. The intent to focus on underrepresented doctoral students was intentionally excluded from the email as to not alienate anyone and because of the desire to get a high number of responses from majority students in addition to the underrepresented students. Two days after the initial contact via email, the survey was sent electronically. The email contained a link to participate in the survey. The survey was open for three weeks, and reminder emails were sent every week to ask students who had not yet completed the survey to participate.

Phase two: late December, 2015 through late January, 2016. Survey results were analyzed to identify emerging themes. Questions for the interviews were formulated based on preliminary survey results.

Phase three: February, 2016. Interviews were scheduled with participants who met the criteria for the interview phase of the study.

Phase four: March and April, 2016. Interviews continued and preliminary data analysis was conducted on initial interview data, identifying emergent themes, negative cases, and follow-up questions.

Phase five: May through August, 2016. Follow up interviews were conducted with participants. Data analysis and interpretation of the findings was completed.

Phase six: September, 2016 through April, 2017. Final analysis and writing of the dissertation was completed.

Trustworthiness

For the quantitative portion of this study, the survey, trustworthiness was assessed by the processes of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1990). Addressing the internal validity of the study, I verified that the instrument measured what it was designed to measure (experiences and perceptions of belonging, racial identity, advising and mentoring relationships, and degree fields). I determined the validity of the instrument by doing a test run with five doctoral student volunteers to check for accuracy and possible shortcomings. Their feedback on the general flow of the survey, the readability of the questions, and the grammar used was useful as I edited the survey several times based on the feedback. The external validity came from doing a convenience sampling that included all available doctoral students at

this PWI. Because the overall population of doctoral students was around 5,000 students and a convenience sample of 3,142 was available from that population, the results of this survey are likely to be generalizable to the entire group. Another check of validity was conducted by having several doctoral students pre-test the sample survey to ensure questions in the instrument were accurate, clear, and that the general flow and length of the survey was appropriate. Lastly, I had content experts check the validity of the survey before it was sent to participants.

Regarding the trustworthiness of the qualitative portion of this study, criteria developed by Guba (1981), Guba and Lincoln (1985), and Shenton (2004) was used. I conducted member checks, detailed descriptions, and external auditing. Member checks were carried out by sharing some of the findings from the qualitative analysis with participants so they could respond to those findings and comment on their accuracy. The member checks were a useful tool to assess whether I was capturing the stories shared by students adequately. The member checks were also useful in framing some of the follow-up questions for the second-round interviews. Secondly, I included substantial quotes and wrote detailed descriptions of context in an effort to best illustrate the perspectives of participants to ensure readers are accurately informed thus allowing readers to make their own conclusions about the transferability of the findings. Lastly, I consulted with peers and faculty who were familiar with qualitative research to audit the study near its completion to check accuracy and reliability of the findings. I did this by sharing thematic findings with my advisor and discussing possible explanations and outcomes to ensure I was interpreting the results as accurately as possible and staying close to the narratives shared by participants. In truth, this provided an avenue to check my own

assumptions about the interpretations of the stories that were shared with me. There were times that I was unsure if the connections being made were accurate and speaking to my faculty advisor helped me solidify my interpretations. Ultimately, this allowed for a stronger understanding of how the narratives could be used to tell a story about the experiences of underrepresented students in a PWI.

Triangulation was also used to strengthen any possible shortcomings from the interview data. The interviews and research were informed by quantitative data from the survey, background documents (such as departmental websites, program information brochures, resources to new and current students from a multitude of departments, welcoming documents, information from department offices, and bulletin boards), and observations. Student participants were given opportunities to refuse participation in the study, thus ensuring that those who participated were genuinely interested in taking part in the study. Also, advisors, committee members, peers, and participants had opportunities to scrutinize the study at various phases and to provide “member checks” (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) to check for accuracy. Lastly, I kept a reflective journal to monitor my own positionality and subjectivity throughout the course of the study. The journal was a useful tool to take notes on some of the data that were not captured by the audio recordings, such as how interviewees appeared to respond physically to questions and some of the emotions that I perceived were present during the interviews. As I began to code the interviews, I looked back on my journal and put some of the codes in context with the mood of the interview. For example, in retelling stories of negative experiences, the mood of some interviewees changed and some became visibly upset. The reflective

journal also proved useful as I began to think about the second-round questions, which were tailored to each individual participant.

Limitations

Although every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings, there are some important limitations that need to be considered. First, the sampling technique and small sample of participants limits the overall generalizability of the findings to a scope beyond the University in which the study was conducted. However, this dissertation generated rich explanations and insights into the experiences of underrepresented students in doctoral programs, and, as such, this study relied heavily on the narratives of students who volunteered to be interviewed. Although I cannot generalize my findings beyond this University, the findings may be used to inform studies conducted in similar settings. Secondly, my own positionality as an emerging researcher created limitations both in the technical sense because this is my first study and in my probability of bias. Technically, this was a learning process for me and my expertise with quantitative data analysis is in its infancy, thus, I relied heavily on external audits to make sure the analysis was done correctly and the appropriate interpretations were made. Moreover, I was aware throughout the entire process that my interpretation of the data was framed by my positionality and was based on the lens through which I see the world. As such, I was open to alternate interpretations and perspectives that arose from the data. Similarly, in the qualitative realm, I made sure that my interviews were done in a way that created sufficient comfortableness for the interviewees that they were willing to share their experiences with me. Being able to make students comfortable enough to share deeply personal stories was, I think, one of my greatest strengths

throughout this process. Because the students interviewed and I shared some of the same experiences as students of color in a predominantly White campus, I believe there was a sense of understanding and empathy that may not have been present with a White interviewer. Along those lines, there were often times during the student narratives that a student would mention a feeling associated with a negative experience, and there was a sense of camaraderie because I had an immediate understanding because of my own experiences and feelings. This connectedness to the students and the subject was a strength of the study. Keeping these strengths in mind I also had to be aware of how my own subjectivity could impact the interpretation of the narratives of the participants.

Chapter 4: Quantitative Findings

Quantitative Results

This chapter summarizes the quantitative findings from the survey portion of the study. The survey was sent out to 3,141 students who were identified as being doctoral students at a Midwest, research-driven, public, urban university. Of the 3,141 students who were identified, 735 responded to the survey, and 505 of those students completed the survey in its entirety. A total of 102 students of the 505 who completed the survey identified as being non-White/minority. Because this survey was intended to compare the experiences of sense of belonging between White students and minority students, the quantitative results are split between the two groups, and the terms White or non-minority and non-White or minority will be used interchangeably (Asian Americans were included in the minority group). The analysis of the survey suggests that the experiences of sense of belonging and socialization were significantly different for White and minority students.

Demographics. The 505 students (403 White and 102 minority) who participated in this study appeared to have very similar characteristics based on the initial survey results. Because this study sought to find the differences in experiences of sense of belonging among White and underrepresented minority students, most of the demographic information was parceled into two groups (White students and minority students) to find broad commonalities and differences between those groups. When looking at the gender distribution of the sample, results showed an almost identical distribution with 63% of respondents identifying as female for both White and minority

populations (63% and 62.7% respectively) and 35% of Whites and 37% of minority respondents identifying as male (Table 1).

The age range of the respondents was similar as well with 73% of White doctoral students having an age range between 22 and 34 years of age and 76.5% of minority doctoral students belonging to the same range. Seventy-four percent of White survey participants reported being the first in their immediate family to attend a doctoral program compared to 78% of minority participants. When participants were asked about the highest level of educational attainment of their parents/guardians, 85% of White respondents reported having a parent or guardian with a post-secondary degree (associates, bachelors, master's, Ph.D., or professional), and 68% of minority respondents reported having a parent or guardian with a post-secondary degree. Interestingly, the percentage of students who reported that neither parent had a high school diploma was significantly larger for minority students at 14.7% versus 2.4% for White students (Table 1).

Table 1

<i>Demographics of Survey Participants</i>		
	Minority	White
Between 22-34 years of age	76.5	73.0
First in the family to attend a doctoral program	77.5	73.9
Highest level of education completed by parent or guardian		
Neither parent has a high school diploma	14.7	2.5
High school diploma	17.6	12.4
Associate's	6.9	10.9
Bachelor's	24.5	27.3
Master's	21.6	27.8
Ph.D. or professional	14.7	19.1
Gender identity		
Male	37.3	35
Female	62.7	63

Numbers shown reflect percentages.

Interestingly, minority students reported receiving more funding when they entered their doctoral program than White students (81.4% versus 74.4%). When a follow-up question about the type of funding received was asked to those who responded positively, minority students had more funding across most categories except for teaching assistantships and grant or loans (Table 2). Why minority students reported having less funding coming from teaching assistantships is not known and more information is needed to make any assertions from these results. The results of the funding questions on the survey challenge the notion that financial aid is a major contributor to doctoral students' attrition for underrepresented students. Unfortunately, not enough is known about the students who took the survey to make that assertion. For example, school

funding is only one part of the overall financial burden that doctoral students have while in school, and the survey did not ask about other financial matters in the students' lives.

Table 2

<i>Funding Responses from Survey</i>			
Research Question		Minority	White
Funding received upon entering doctoral program	Yes	81.4	74.4
Type of funding			
	Research Assistantship	43.1	32.5
	Teaching Assistantship	26.5	32.3
	Fellowship	37.3	28
Outside Academic Fellowship		3.9	1.5
	Grants or Loans	5.9	10.7
	Scholarships	19.6	11.4

Numbers shown reflect percentages.

When students were asked if they had to start their academic careers again would they attend the same University, White students said yes at a higher percentage (65.3%) than minority students. A little more than half the minority students said they would choose the University if they had to start again (55.9%) (Table 3). Although the survey does not provide enough information about why there was a difference in how minority and White students answered this question, perhaps the cluster of questions on sense of belonging would provide clues to this difference. When I created mean scores for the clusters of questions on campus climate, socialization, student deficits, and sense of belonging, I conducted a T-test on those clusters by minority and non-minority status.

There was no significant difference between the mean scores of Whites and minorities on campus climate, socialization, and student deficits. Sense of belonging did have a difference that was statistically significant ($p = 0$) between minority ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .64$) and White students ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .55$), $t(503) = -5.136$. These findings suggest that White students had a higher sense of belonging than minority students.

Table 3

<i>Starting Academic Career Again</i>			
		Minority	White
If you were to start your graduate career again, would you attend the University?			
	Yes	55.9	65.3
	No	7.8	6
	Maybe	35.3	28.3
If you were to start you graduate career again, would you select the same field of study?			
	Yes	62.7	67.8
	No	11.8	7.7
	Maybe	24.5	24.4

Numbers shown reflect percentages.

Research questions. The first research question posed was: “In what ways, if at all, do students’ racial identities influence their sense of belonging to their program, department, and institution?” Using the response data, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare sense of belonging between minority students and White students. The test showed there was a significant difference in the sense of belonging between

White ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .55$) and minority ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .63$) students; $t(503) = 5.13$, $p = .00$. These results suggest that a student's racial identity is associated with their perception of sense of belonging and show that White students reported higher levels of sense of belonging to their programs, departments, and the institution at large compared to minority students. The independent sample t-test was also conducted separately comparing Whites to African Americans, Latinx and Asian American students (American Indian students were not compared because there were only four cases to draw from) in how they responded to sense of belonging questions. Each test yielded a similar significant difference between the experiences of belonging as compared to White students (p-values ranged from .001 for African American and Asian American to .003 for Latinx). These results, however, do not show how that influence was manifested and to what degree. This is perhaps a limitation of quantitative data. Results that further extrapolate how racial identity influenced sense of belonging are included in the qualitative chapter of this dissertation.

The second research question posed was: "In what ways, if at all, do students' perceptions of 'sense of belonging' influence their socialization to their programs/departments/institutions?" Based on the results of the survey, a student's sense of belonging was strongly correlated to socialization (Table 4). The correlation appears to be a stronger ($r = .696$) for White students versus minority students ($r = .650$). In both cases, the correlations are statistically significant ($p = 0$). These results suggest that students who have a strong sense of belonging to their program/department/institution will likely be well-socialized.

Table 4

<i>Correlations</i>			SB_Mean	Soc_Mean
.00	SB_Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	.696**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	403	403
	Soc_Mean	Pearson Correlation	.696**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	403	403
1.00	SB_Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	.659**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	102	102
	Soc_Mean	Pearson Correlation	.659**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	102	102

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The third research question posed was: “To what extent are underrepresented doctoral students’ perceptions of their sense of belonging impacted by their racial identity, socialization, campus climate, and perceived deficit discourses in their program, department, and institution?” A multiple regression was needed to answer this question, but, before the regression was conducted, a Cronbach’s Alpha statistic was used to ensure that the mean scores of the subject clusters (sense of belonging, campus climate, socialization, and deficit discourse) were reliable enough to be used for the regression. Along with the reliability scores, the Alpha test was useful to ensure that the group clusters contained questions that “fit” together. An Alpha score greater than .7 suggests good reliability between the groupings of the questions (Table 5).

Table 5

<i>Question Clusters with Alpha Statistic</i>		
	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Sense of Belonging Cluster	0.835	13
Student Characteristics Cluster	0.721	4
Campus Climate Cluster	0.839	12
Socialization Cluster	0.65	6

Note. Although Socialization was $<.7$ it was still close enough to be used in analysis.

To examine the impact of racial identity, dummy variables for African American, Latinx and Asian American were used to predict the impact of each race on sense of belonging as compared to White students. Because the survey only had four people who identified as American Indian, that racial category was excluded from the regression, as the number was too small to have an impact of the regression equation. The mean score for student characteristics was also removed from the final regression equation because its contribution to the equation was not statistically significant ($p >.05$).

A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict how well racial identity, socialization, and campus climate could predict perceptions of sense of belonging. The regression equation adjusted R-square indicates that approximately 55% of the variance in sense of belonging can be explained by the campus climate, socialization, and racial identity of students ($F(5,494) = 121.76, p <.000$). The regression produced the following

equation: sense of belonging = 1.30 +.46 (socialization) + .27 (campus climate) - .27 (Asian American) - .41 (African American) - .28 (Latinx).

The regression equation suggests that when controlling for race, the socialization mean scores have the greatest impact on the regression equation. A standard deviation unit of socialization mean is associated with a .475 standard deviation (SD) increase in sense of belonging. In contrast, one SD unit of campus climate only increases the sense of belong of a student by .297 SD. When comparing the impact of racial identity on sense of belonging, the regression equation suggests that Asian Americans and Latinx students perceived sense of belonging experiences below White students (-.27 and -.28 respectively), when controlling for socialization and campus climate (see Table 6). On the other hand, the average African American student scored .41 below on sense of belonging as compared to White students when controlling for socialization and campus climate. The findings suggest that students who identified as African American had lower perceptions of sense of belonging than Asian Americans or Latinx students and much lower than White students.

Table 6

<i>Regression Equation</i>			
	B	SE B	β
SB Mean	1.296	.114	
Soc Mean	.455	.039	.475
CC Mean	.266	.036	.297
Asian A.	-.271	.062	-.131
African A.	-.414	.093	-.136
Latinx	-.281	.070	-.121

Note. $R^2 = .55$ ($p. < .00$)

Summary

As noted above, the demographic profiles of the students in this survey were quite similar. The age range of students and their gender profile was almost identical. The students in both groups reported having funding opportunities at nearly the same rate, with minority students receiving slightly more funding than White students. The only significant difference between White students and minority students was in the reporting of their parents' or guardians' levels of education. Regarding the statistical analysis of racial identity and perceptions of sense of belonging, the t-test results suggest that indeed White students reported experiencing a higher sense of belonging than minority students. A Pearson Correlation showed that sense of belonging is highly correlated (.674) with socialization. This can be interpreted as students who report having high socialization to their campus environment will be likely to have a higher sense of belonging. Finally, the regression analysis results suggest that 55% of the variance in the sample can be explained by the regression analysis which is a high variance for this type of quantitative study. Often quantitative social science studies have a low variance in the results that can be explained by the regression equation. The regression also showed that indeed socialization and campus climate can be used to predict sense of belonging. Also of importance are the racial categories and their contribution to the overall regression equation. Controlling for campus climate and socialization, the regression equation presents evidence that African American, Latinx, and Asian American students perceived experiences of sense of belonging at lower rates than White students. This was particularly true of the African Americans students surveyed who scored lower than all other racial groups. As the regression suggests, if campus climate and socialization

conditions are the same for all students, there is a likelihood that African American students will have lower perceptions of their sense of belonging.

Chapter 5: Qualitative Findings

In this chapter, I will present the findings of the qualitative portion of this dissertation. As explained earlier, this chapter is primarily focused on the research questions that emerged from the themes found in the interview data. As such, this chapter begins with addressing the ideas of Whiteness and microaggressions on campus and how student experiences were shaped by these forms of oppression. Next, I present evidence on the internalized oppression that appeared to be widespread among the students interviewed. Finally, I will discuss a more positive theme of community that emerged from the voices of student participants. Although the research questions in this dissertation evolved over the course of the study, the overall focus on understanding the experiences of sense of belonging of underrepresented and minoritized students remained. As the findings are presented, the themes of Whiteness, microaggressions, and oppression are examined in the context of how those experiences helped or hindered a student's sense of belonging.

This chapter is made possible by the interviews of ten students who bravely shared their stories with me during the Spring semester of 2016. These students came from many different fields of studies and from all over the country, but all had in common the willingness to share their stories of struggles as students of color in a PWI campus. Table seven outlines the 10 individuals who participated (names are pseudonyms) and provides some background information about them.

Table 7

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Broad Field of Study	Background information
Sara	African American	Female	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First-year student - Native of the Southern U.S. - Cohort of five students - Came straight from undergraduate
Ramon	Latinx	Male	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First-year students - Native of the Southwestern U.S. - Cohort of four students - Involved in social justice initiatives on campus - Is a parent - First-generation college student
Mona	Southwest Asian	Female	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Works at the University full-time - Switched academic concentration a couple years into doctorate - Is a parent

Jennifer	Latinx	Female	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Completed a master's and undergraduate degrees at same University - Native of the Southwestern U.S. - Started doctorate work as part-time student - Works full-time at the University - Is a parent
Donovan	African American	Male	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Worked full-time at University - From the Midwestern U.S. - At the time of first-interview, he was preparing to defend dissertation - First-generation college student - Large entering academic cohort
Dawn	Southeast Asian	Female	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Came back to get doctorate after years working in a professional field - Originally from the rural Midwest - First-year student - Is a parent
Blue	African American	Female	Humanities/Social Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Originally from the Southwest U.S. - Works full-time for the University - Third-year student - Has a master's degree - First-generation student - Large entering academic cohort

Cara	African American	Female	STEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Originally from the Midwestern U.S. - Came straight from undergraduate - First-year student - Full-time student - Academic discipline has large cohort
Kami	African American	Female	Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Originally from the Southeastern U.S. - Commutes a great distance for school - Is a parent - At time of first interview was getting ready to defend dissertation
Mary	Southeast Asian	Female	Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has an undergraduate degree from same University - First-year student - Originally from the Midwest - First-generation student - Comes from a large family - Has a small academic cohort

Negotiating Whiteness

A prominent theme around what could be called “negotiating Whiteness” emerged from interviewing underrepresented minority doctoral students. Many of the students interviewed expressed the sentiment that, in order to be a successful student and scholar, they had to learn how to negotiate the ethos of Whiteness that as one student put it, “permeates everything around us.” The idea of permeating Whiteness has been previously explored by Lee (2004) in K-12 school settings but not in higher education. Nevertheless, this concept is applicable to this study as it demonstrates a similar pattern of “racial ideologies [that] shape and constrain students’ academic experiences and identities” (p. 121). The theme of Whiteness and how it was brought up took many different shapes and meant different things for different students. Some of the specific examples that will be shared in this chapter are directly related to student experiences with racism, perceptions of a racist campus climate, experiences of invisibility, exclusion, and isolation, students feeling like they had to assimilate, and microaggressions, all of which impede the successful socialization of students and create a hostile, “chilly” campus climate for students of color.

Discomfort with Whiteness. Throughout the interviews, students were asked to describe the faculty, students, and staff in their departments and to share their perspectives on the climate of their programs, departments, and the institution. Students were also asked for their perceptions of the diversity in their departments and, without any further definition of diversity provided, students quickly began to describe the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in their departments and the institution. It is within these conversations that the theme of Whiteness came to light.

Kami, a STEM student, responded to the question about diversity by saying, “I have not seen a Brown person teach any of my classes.” When asked about the staff working in the department, Kami continued honing in on the lack of racial diversity, “I haven’t seen anybody. I haven’t seen anybody Brown.” She again expressed a lack of racial diversity in the student population in her program, stating, “None in my program.” Kami’s emphatic and blunt responses made clear that the lack of faculty, staff, and students of color in her program was something she had recognized, as she continued unprompted to quickly list off the individual people of color who she interacts with on a daily basis. Kami’s interactions with other people of color in her program had been so scarce and notable that she could readily identify each person. Kami’s responses are suggestive of the isolation and singularity that may be felt being one of few or, in Kami’s case, the only student of color in a program. Kami continued her assessment of her program’s diversity by addressing the drawbacks that such lack of racial and ethnic diversity has on the program:

[This place is] kind of White. Until you go into areas that seem kind of Black. In many places there’s that divide...it’s not something that I appreciate...there’s a tendency for everyone [in the department] to sort of operate from the same place and not to challenge one another...I mean there’s room for improvement just to demonstrate that the program is including other perspectives and other faces.

Kami’s initial reaction to her department’s lack of racial and ethnic diversity seemed to be at odds with the mission of the program that she had briefly described. She felt that the “overwhelming Whiteness” of her program and lack of diversity left the

department shortsighted and unable to see how their work could impact the lives of people of color. She continued with a specific example:

Even in my [admissions] interview, I was asked why it seemed that African Americans were not that interested in self-care or their health or well-being. I said, “Well I certainly can’t answer for all African Americans, my experiences are not like all African Americans, so I can’t speak for them.”

Kami went on to explain that her academic program, which has expressed the value of working towards diversity in their field, has done little to recruit students, faculty, or staff of color. As scholars suggest, the implementation of diversity in theory instead of practice is a common experience for underrepresented students at PWIs and perpetuates a hostile and discriminatory climate that leads students to feel culturally isolated, alienated and devalued (Ehrenberg et al., 2007; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Gonzalez, 2007; Harper, 2009; Lewis et al., 2004; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Kami’s experience also highlights the disjunction of the department expressing a value in diversity, while simultaneously referring to African Americans from a deficit point of view. Kami’s experience serves as a reminder of the experience of tokenism or the expectation to represent one’s racial or ethnic group that students of color are often subject to through while navigating predominantly White spaces.

The prevailing Whiteness on campus seemed perhaps more acutely felt by students who were not originally from the Midwestern U.S. For many of the students interviewed, Whiteness was not just a descriptor of the majority race on campus, it was also an explanation of the culture and ethos that was different and, often, seemed at odds with the cultures of origin of the students of color interviewed. One concept that was

brought forward as distinct from students' own cultures was "Midwestern nice," the idea that people from the Midwest are stereotypically courteous, mild-mannered, polite and friendly, but only at surface level—sometimes masking their true feelings. During the interviews with students, the idea of Midwestern nice was often brought up as students shared their experiences of being on campus and experiencing first-hand what it meant to be in an environment in which Midwestern nice felt ubiquitous. Sara, a first-year, African American doctoral student in Social Sciences, explained how she understood the idea of Midwestern nice by saying:

I think it means being fake. I first heard it from two Midwest natives...they were like it means that they'll [Midwesterners] give you directions to every place, everywhere but their own house....so, they're being fake. They don't really trust you. Maybe I need to get to a phone, and it's at your house, [and the response is] "Well, no you can't use that phone, but I can show you where to get to this and this and this one."

Sara who grew up in the Southeastern U.S. continued:

But it's funny because I might be more rude to you overtly in the south, but at least you know how I genuinely feel about you. Here, it just seems pretty phony. I don't want people to be rude to me or anybody or anything like that, but it's like you're not being genuine in how you feel, but you're being nice about it, and I guess that's ok because we're all being nice to each other on the outside, typically. I think this is what Midwestern nice is: it's fake nice.

For Sara, like many of the students interviewed, their ideas and perceptions of Midwestern nice highlight the problematic nature of the dominant culture at PWIs in the

Midwest; that is, students of color must learn to negotiate daily interactions with colleagues, faculty and staff, often not knowing if the person across from them is genuinely being helpful and interested in their success or if they are being “Midwestern nice.” As Gildersleeve et al. (2011), Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005), and Laird and Niskode-Dossett (2010) suggest, the taxing nature of having to decipher the interactions between themselves and their White counterparts has a detrimental effect on the psyche of students of color and impedes their academic and socialization progress. Of course, this is not to say that all interactions are marked this way or that White students do not do some of the same type of analysis, but the impact is likely more profound for students of color in a PWI because of their underrepresented, minority status, and the historical context of racism that comes along with being part of a subordinated group.

The reality of such low representation of people of color in a predominantly White campus can also be problematic because of the conscious and subconscious messages it sends students about their place in the institution. Mary, a first-year, Hmong doctoral student in the Social Sciences, shares her feelings about the predominantly White campus by saying:

I think sometimes it's kind of hard to be in a space where you're not really reflected. Or I don't know, sometimes it's hard to be in a space where you're the only student of color, and that's already happened to me.

Mary, who earned her undergraduate degree at the same institution, pointed out how this lack of minority representation is particularly felt as a graduate student, especially regarding the spaces doctoral students occupy on campus. This sentiment was echoed by several other students. Cara, an African American, second-year doctoral student in

STEM, spoke to the experiences of being the only Black person in her academic program by saying:

I've always had insecurities about being here [in graduate school]...when you start in your undergraduate classes, you see some Black people or Hispanics or just like non-White men or non-White women. But, as you rise up through, as the classes get harder, people start to drop out, and it started to become normal for me to be the only Black person, but that was always uncomfortable to me.

The experiences that Cara and Mary describe evoke a sense of cultural isolation. Those experiences also help to explain why it may be difficult for underrepresented students to feel a strong sense of belonging in their academic environment and serve to support an assertion made by Smith (1993, cited in Ostrove et al., 2011) that higher education, including graduate education, is “a kingdom not ours [people of color] by birthright” (p. 749).

Racist climate. As described earlier in this chapter, the students interviewed were keenly aware of the predominant racial group that occupied campus, and this was difficult for some students because it negatively impacted their approach to their work and how they saw themselves in the context of the institution. The prevailing Whiteness on campus also served to create a racist climate for the underrepresented doctoral students interviewed. Mary suggested that sometimes the climate of the institution makes it difficult to be a student of color in a predominantly White space. She said:

I do really love the University, but there's a lot of awful, awful problems going on, especially in regards to students of color...I'm just thinking about how multicultural services programs [are] always on the cutting board.

Mary went on to tell the story of recent events taking place at the University in which dedicated space for student organizations, including many culturally or racially specific student groups, was significantly changed:

Also, I'm thinking about when they [the University] changed the second floor of the [student center] that was for a long time the home of a lot of student organizations for students of color. Now, it's so awful. It's very sterile. It's just supposed to be a student area.

The dedicated space for these student groups was, for many, a safe space on campus where students could meet and interact with other students who shared the same cultural, racial and ethnic identity who may feel they have no other place on campus where they could be themselves. With the significant changes that took place, some of those cultural centers no longer have a presence in the student center and others were asked to move to smaller spaces. Mary went on to explain her understanding of why these changes occurred:

Two White students who said that they were being discriminated because they felt like they deserved some space up there, too, so they brought it to the student senate. It was a whole year of arguments, and they [the student senate] finally decided to just turn it into some student area, and it's so different from the way it was before. Even the beautiful murals were painted over. So that happened.

As Mary's response suggests, the departure from having dedicated spaces for students of color was a move that was troubling for many students on campus.

Ultimately, the decision by the student senate to take away the dedicated spaces from students of color in the campus union was felt by many as degrading to the institutional

climate for students of color on campus. Moreover, the act of complaining about the existence of the cultural spaces for students of color and the subsequent approval by the student senate to reassign these spaces can be interpreted as a return to a “colorblind” approach, which Gildersleeve et al. (2011) posits ignores the ethnic, racial, and cultural differences between students of color and White students and acts to erode the safety and campus climate for these students.

Microaggressions. An important theme that emerged out of the interviews with underrepresented students was the frequent microaggressions students reported enduring while on campus. These microaggressions came in the form of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations and from students, staff, and faculty on campus. Interestingly, when students were asked pointedly early in the interview if they could recall any negative experiences on campus, many initially said that they could not. However, as the interview continued many of the students went on to share stories about negative experiences, many of which I classified as microaggressions due to their nature as subtle, indirect, and/or unintentional discriminatory actions against students with marginalized identities. Many of the stories about negative experiences came to light when discussing whether the student felt that their department was a welcoming place for *others*. Table 8 illustrates the types of microaggressions and provides examples from this study.

Table 8

Typology of Microaggressions

Type of Microaggression	Manifestation*	Key Terms (from interviews)	Examples
Microassault	Verbal or non-verbal attacks, likely to be conscious and deliberate actions	Condescending tones toward students of color Questioning the nature of a student's presence in a space Resistance to students' physical presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Barista at a campus coffee shop counter saying to an African American student "Can I get your name? Never mind I probably can't spell it" (Sara) - A condescending comment in class by a White student towards a Latinx student (Jennifer)
Microinsult/Micro Under-estimation	Communications that articulate insensitivity and rudeness towards heritage or identity Snubs that convey a hidden derogatory message to the recipient	Tokenism Assumptions made towards students of color Assumption about a student's academic knowledge Cultural ignorance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A White student/coworker towards an African American student "Be careful not to be overeducated" (Donovan) - An admissions interview asking an African American student "Why don't African American's care about their health?" (Kami) - Saying to an African American doctoral student "You must be a master's student" (Cara)

Microinvalidation	Communications that exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, and reality of people of color	Minimizing the experiences of student of color Interruption/cutting off a difficult conversation Undervaluing diversity Sweeping issues of diversity “under the rug”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students questioning a Latinx doctoral teaching assistant’s ability to teach anything outside of Chicano Studies (Ramon) - Classmates’ ignorance of the racism Asian Americans experience (Mary) - After spending substantial time on orientation policies staff skipping over Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity clauses by saying “look over it [on your own] when you can” (Sara)
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*Adapted from Sue et al., (2004).

Microassaults. Microassaults are microaggressions in the form of derogatory verbal and non-verbal attacks, which may be explicitly racist, conscious, and/or deliberate. During my interviews several students shared negative experiences that could be classified as this kind of microaggression, some of which I will share with you in the following paragraphs.

My first example of a microinsult came during Sara's interview, in which she shared a negative experience at a campus coffee shop. This example by Sara highlights how students of color may encounter microaggressions throughout their academic environments:

We have a Starbucks in the building, and everybody knows about Starbucks—they ask your name when they're taking your order. I walk up and I was like, "Can I get this?" And she [the person behind the counter] was like, "What did you say? Can you give me your name?" I was about to say it, and she was like, "Actually just give me your initials because I probably can't spell it anyway." And I [thought], my name could be Amy. So that totally just took me aback because I just think that it's funny because she's White, and I was like, y'all have no problem spelling names like Schwarzenegger and Galifianakis, but what if my name was like Teresa... You [the barista] automatically assume... just give me your initials because I probably can't spell your name anyway.

As the story shared by Sara demonstrates, even a seemingly mundane act like getting a cup of coffee on campus has the potential to become a racialized, negative experience. As Sara told her story, her demeanor changed, and she became upset as she told the story,

seeming as if recalling the memory had triggered something in her. Unfortunately, this type of negative experience was not unique to Sara. In fact, Sara's experience exemplified a sentiment expressed by several participants of having to be guarded while on campus in anticipation of potential negative experiences around race. Being guarded for many students of color is a coping mechanism to deal with the blatant or subtle acts of racism that can happen in a PWI.

Ramon, a first-year, Latinx student, also shared a story about his classmate that highlights how microassaults can come at any time and from anybody. The following examples share a theme of microassaults experienced by students coming from staff on campus. Ramon explained:

My classmate, a Black woman, was going to the office to go get supplies, and she was approached by one the staff, and she was asked “[in a hostile tone] What are you doing here, can I help you?”...I remember her calling me right after that experience.... she said “What do I do with this? It’s clear that I represent something that is threatening to folks.” The staff, they’re all great, but one thing I’ve noticed is the disconnect between faculty and staff... [it] can create an environment that’s hostile [for students]. That [experience] really bugged her for a long time and was one of the reasons why she ultimately decided this place wasn’t going to be healthy for her to be in.

Although Ramon's story is not directly about him, his classmate's experience had an impact on him and how he viewed his department. Ramon reflected that this experience was particularly troubling to him because of the larger racial climate and tension locally

and nationally, in particular how a “Black body” may be seen as threatening in predominantly White contexts.

Sara shared a similar story during her interview:

We had been getting emails from [staff] about setting up payroll, and, so, I go talk to whoever was sending the emails. I remember the first time I walked in someone was like, “[in a hostile tone] Who are you?” And I was like, “Sara”... “You don’t remember me?” And then she was like, “Oh! Hey!” I don’t know if it was because I was so early, and they [staff] weren’t ready to start working on things, but it seemed that people were kind of annoyed with me just being around in their space when they were trying to get ready.

Much like Ramon’s classmate, Sara was confronted with having to justify her presence in the space that staff were occupying. In assessing the situations in the stories, it appeared that both Sara and Ramon’s classmate presented a threat that was met with questions about their intentions and their need to be in the same environment as the staff. Sadly, Ramon explained, this experience with microaggressions, among many other experiences, led his classmate to take a leave of absence after her first semester from which she never returned.

Microinsults or Micro Under-estimations. When asked if she recalled any negative experiences on campus, Cara, an African American, second-year student in STEM, said:

I haven’t really experienced anything blatantly...but when I talk to other people [on campus] they never assume I’m a Ph.D. student. They always assume I’m an

undergrad student. And if I say I am a graduate student, they assume I am a master's student. That's maybe something that's stuck with me.

It appears that on a campus as large as this University, there are so few African American doctoral students, that it is assumed that when someone meets an African American student, the student must be an undergraduate. While, statistically, students of color are present at a higher rate in undergraduate programs, this assumption Cara has repeatedly encountered can also be seen as a microaggression, speaking to the conscious or subconscious categorization that occurs based on preconceived notions of what a doctoral student looks like or, in this case, does not look like. Specifically, this experience could be categorized as a microinsult, an interaction that acts as a subtle snub, insult, or to convey a hidden meaning intended to demean. Similarly, many of the microaggressions in this section can be classified as micro under-estimations in which students of color are underestimated in their capacity to exist within the confines of doctoral education. Cara's initial downplaying of her negative experience could be interpreted as a result of the nature of microaggressions, and the experience demonstrates how people under-estimate her level of education, perhaps because of her ethnic identity. Because microaggressions are experienced with frequency, repetition, and often appear subtle or unintentional, these negative experiences can become normalized. However, Cara's recollection of the repeated experience of being automatically thought of as an undergraduate student as a negative experience shows that it has impacted her, despite this type of normalization.

As a contrast to Cara's story which shows the capacity for microinsults to be perceived as subtle and even normalized, Donovan, a fourth-year, African American

student in Social Sciences shared a story that highlights how microinsults might appear in more blatant and jarring ways:

I had a supervisor who was also in the doctoral program or trying to return to the doctoral program after our break and just made comments like “You know be careful not to be overeducated.” Okay, what do you mean overeducated? Let’s unpack that. And this is a White man telling me this, and, so, I’m kind of triggered in that, historically, my population of folks had not had access to education, [so] for you to tell me to be careful not to be overeducated, I need you to think about that more before you say that. Think about the historical context of that...it was in bad taste in my opinion.

Donovan’s story not only presents a disconcerting example of a negative experience but also provides insights into the type of consequences that microinsults may have on a person of color. Donovan articulates that this microinsult “triggered” thoughts of historical racism and restrictive educational opportunities. Donovan’s story also highlights that microaggressions can come from people students know well and interact with regularly, which in Donovan’s case was his supervisor and classmate, thus, potentially creating a complicated relationship moving forward.

Microinvalidations. A third type of microaggression that arose from the student interviews was microinvalidations. Microinvalidations are acts that exclude, negate, or invalidate the thoughts, feelings, or lived experiences of people of color. Mary shared a story relating microinvalidations experienced on campus, explaining:

I took a course where we did some research specifically about Asian Americans in public schools...I guess overall it was a pretty diverse class, but I was the only

Asian American student in there. It was kind of interesting to see some of the conversations about race and Asian Americans' positioning in racial justice and racism and Whiteness...I kind of feel like, that's my lived experience, and I was [in class] often having to be like, this is what it's really like...I had to [speak about] the Asian American experience often in that class. I mean that was a class of doctoral students. I was kind of surprised to see people [in class] questioning that Asian Americans actually experience discrimination or not or experience racism...I'm kind of always thinking about issues of race and my own positionality as an Asian American, [so] it was kind of hard to be in a class setting where I had to explain all of that stuff all over again.

Mary's story highlights a common misconception that happens during racial discourse in predominantly White spaces such as PWIs. Discussions about race in these spaces often take the form of a Black and White dichotomy and, in doing so, neglect other people of color who are still affected by discrimination, further perpetuating an either-or identification that has its roots in sociohistorical frames of racism (Jones, 2015; Roberts, 2003). Mary's story also highlights the taxing campus environment created when one must speak about the experience of an entire ethnic or racial group, very similar to the experiences Kami reported.

For students of color, teaching at a PWI may add another layer to the academic experience and comes with its own unique set of challenges as microinvalidations may come from students and be directed at one's teaching ability. Ramon relayed his experience teaching as a person of color in an introductory history course. He explained

that students often questioned his ability to teach subjects within the discipline outside of Chicano studies. Ramon says:

There's a little bit of suspicion [from students] as to why I'm qualified to do that [teach non-Chicano subjects]. So I find myself having to prove that I'm qualified that I know what I'm talking about, that I could talk about more than just the knowledge that I'm assumed to carry.

Ramon's example describes a common attitude experienced by teachers of color. Studies suggest that ethnic minority faculty and instructors face more frequent incidents of negative attitudes and behaviors from students, negative evaluations of teaching, and challenging of authority and expertise (Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta & Frey, 2009; Stanley et al., 2003). Ramon's example demonstrates the embedded racism that is found at PWIs and that doctoral underrepresented students must carry with them and navigate throughout the entirety of their educational process.

Many of the students I interviewed also expressed experiencing microinvalidations from faculty in the classroom. Jennifer, a third-year, Latinx, doctoral student described her experience:

I don't always think that having a critical lens that you see things through is always appreciated in the way that I think it could be. Because there are a lot of people here who kind of see things through that critical lens. But, as a woman of color, when I sit in a class, and I say something and someone disagrees with me, I'm not given an opportunity to respond because [faculty] are busy protecting me. I don't need protection. I need you [faculty] to leave the space the way it is...I don't think that I'm given enough space to work out with my peers what is going

through my head and what is going through their head and how this would kind of academically come together.

Jennifer expressed that when instructors intervene in an effort to “protect” students of color, they interrupt potential dialogue, which takes away from making this a place that feels productive for her as a person of color. She continued:

I think that who you are interrupting matters. And so, if something comes up, and I have something to say and I’m interrupted or I’m stopped or you shut me off from the conversation, it means something different than if you were to shut off a White woman in a conversation. And I don’t think that faculty always recognize that that’s what they’re doing.

Jennifer’s example brings forward the idea that when faculty interrupt students of color, they may be taking away the agency of students to talk about, confront, and challenge the biases of White students. Graduate school poses difficulties addressing this, however, because of the close relationships between graduate students and faculty, especially at a doctoral level. Donovan describes the difficulties in the relationships between faculty and students:

The biggest challenge is that there’s a lot of excitement coming into the department and a lot of excitement coming into a new stage for students and the faculty are very open and engaging and they want you to succeed and it’s a very genuine and authentic thing. And you get into a classroom with one of those faculty members or a different faculty member and you might feel micro-aggressed. And then it’s like, “Okay, well I just got this very warm welcome from the department but then I get into the classroom and then I feel a micro-aggression

[such as] a topic comes up in class [or] comments that other students are making aren't being addressed."... You know, insert student with privileged identity that says something problematic let's say around race or gender and you know if there's another male teacher, or the instructor is male and not really recognizing that what they're saying is problematic, and I'm in this space where I need to say something...but then because it's a power environment, oh my advisor is teaching this class so do I [say something]?...The nature of graduate work is that it can be sometimes a very hard environment to critique or challenge, especially in the classroom.

As this last example shared by Donovan presents, the negative consequences of microaggressions are not confined to the singular moment the negative experience itself occurs. Instead, microaggressions, in the form of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations, have the capacity to have ongoing, compounding impacts for students of color throughout their academic environments and relationships.

Summary. As the stories in this section suggest, there was an overwhelming attitude by the students interviewed that the Whiteness that permeated the campus posed many difficulties for them. For some, it was a question of dealing with the loneliness that comes with being isolated as the only person of color in their department. For others, the isolation was compounded by the misguided attempts to ask the students to speak for an entire race of people. Many of the students interviewed also shared personal stories about the day in, day out microaggressive behaviors that were experienced on campus. From the mundane like getting coffee at a coffee shop to being in a classroom and experiencing dismissal or ignorance of the microaggressions taking place, students of

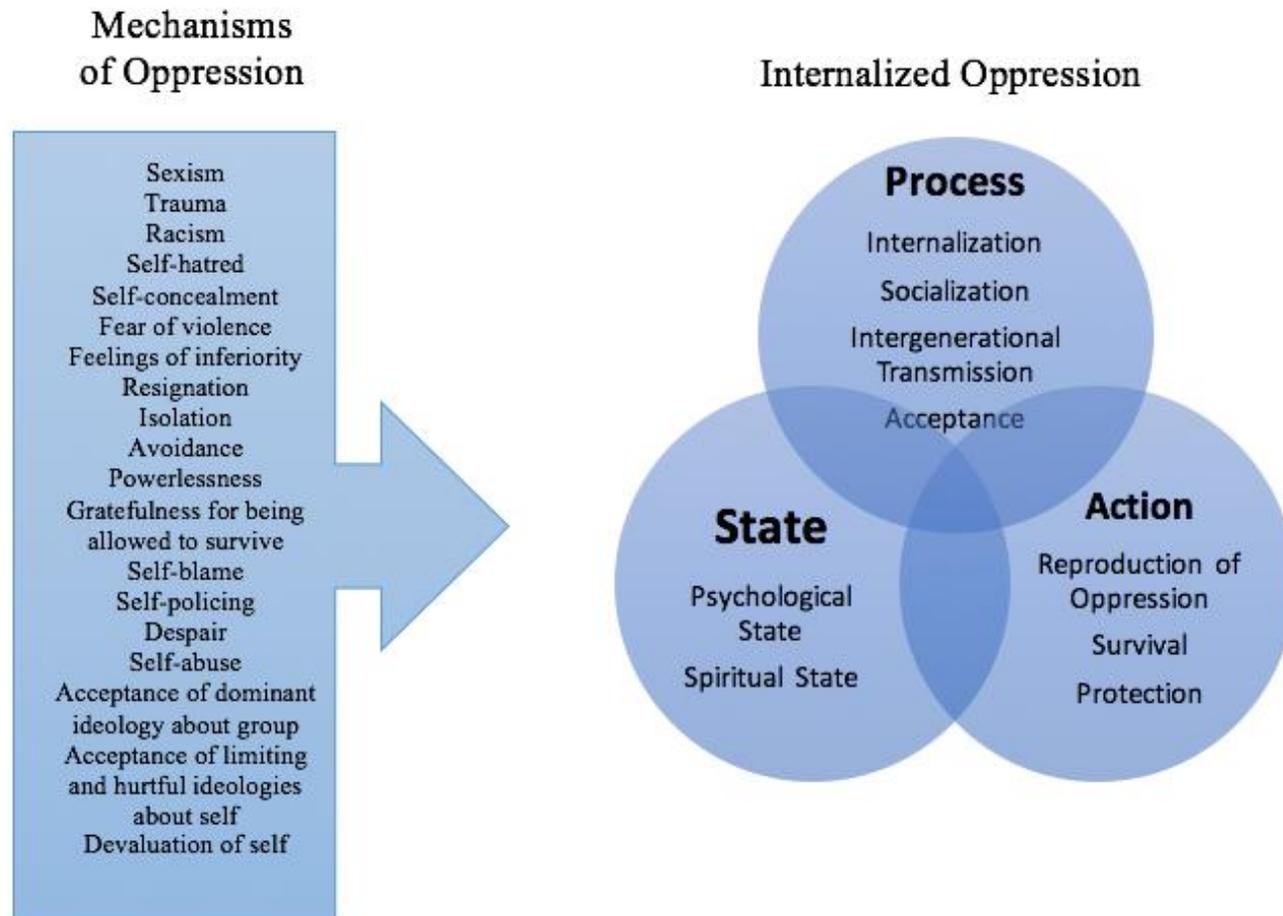
color have to deal with this subtle degradation every day. Knowing that barriers that may be imposed on students of color while at a PWI, it is not surprising that many students spoke of being guarded and were weary of the interactions that took place between them and White students, staff, and faculty on campus. In sum, all of these incidents of racism, isolation, tokenism, and microaggressions erode the sense of belonging of students.

Internalized Oppression

Throughout the interviews, the underrepresented doctoral students expressed their experiences and perceptions of belonging through storytelling and reflection. Many of these stories were suggestive of a tendency to personally take responsibility for a lack of sense of belonging rather than attributing responsibility to larger systems and dynamics at play. Williams' (2012) theory of internalized oppression provides a lens through which one can begin to interpret and understand the forces that may be influencing these responses. Williams' (2012) model of internalized oppression examines the means through which internalized oppression is perpetuated not only through the actions and beliefs of dominant groups but because of the pervasive and powerful influence oppressive systems have on the psyche of the subordinate. In students' telling of their own stories, they often not only shared the facts relating to a situation but also communicated a narrative that expressed the meaning-making that resulted from their interpretation of the events. Unfortunately, many of the students' responses appeared to share a theme of underlying internalized oppression. Students both consciously and subconsciously seem to make meaning of the situations by internalizing the responsibility for their negative experiences rather than fully acknowledging the systems and cultures of oppression present. In this section, I present evidence using the students' personal stories

that suggests students of color are internalizing the experiences of oppression while at PWIs. Figure 3 depicts some of mechanisms which lead to the internalization of oppression. Some of the mechanisms of oppression listed coincide with the mechanisms mentioned by interview participants in this study.

Figure 3. Mechanisms of Oppression



Psychological state of internalized oppression. Most of the students interviewed expressed ideas that could be interpreted as a struggle with the psychological state of internalized oppression, which manifested as conflicts with self and identity, emotions, interpersonal relationships and mental health. Internalized oppression is likely a barrier for underrepresented students to feeling a strong sense of belonging to their program, department, and the campus-wide community.

Self-blaming. During the interviews, many participants appeared to place blame on themselves when encountering microaggressions or other forms of oppressive behavior. Similarly, some participants also engaged in self-deprecation (belittling or undervaluing oneself) when experiencing oppressive acts. These types of responses could be indicative of the emotional repression that is part of the psychological state of internalized oppression as described by Williams (2012). Emotional repression consists of minimizing experiences of oppression either consciously or subconsciously as a result of the ongoing experiences of oppression itself (Williams, 2012). Jennifer, a third-year, Social Science, Latinx doctoral student, provides an example which is suggestive of this phenomenon. Jennifer worked and went to school at the University on a part-time basis. When asked if she felt like she belonged in her program, she replied, “I think when I was a part-time student I didn’t feel like I necessarily belonged here. I think some of it was me.” Jennifer went on to attribute her lack of belonging to her own limited understanding of the career paths available, mentioning the department’s responsibility to guide a student regardless of path or full-time/part-time status but, ultimately, redirecting the responsibility back to herself. Jennifer’s framing of her story about a lack of sense of belonging could be interpreted in multiple ways. Jennifer may simply have chosen not to

belong, for any number of reasons. Her telling of the story may be indicating a sense of agency in her educational experience. However, another interpretation of the story based on Jennifer's emphasis on her own responsibility in her lack of belonging suggests that she may be minimizing the program's responsibility to all students to create an inclusive and supportive environment. While, in theory, a student, whether part-time or full-time or on a specific career path or not, should have the capacity to belong, Jennifer's telling of her story suggests that she may have internalized her feelings of not belonging, which could be indicative of emotional repression.

This sense of individual responsibility for not belonging appeared multiple times during interviews. When asked if she felt like she belongs at the University, Blue, an African American student in the Social Sciences, similarly honed in on her own actions:

I'm a very open-minded person where I feel like it's a two-way street, you got to at least try, even if there is resistance for you not to be here. And I think that's just the way I orientate myself to see the world, and so at this point, I don't want to try to fit in anymore. I don't.

When asked if she felt any resistance to her presence at the University, Blue's response brought to mind Williams' (2012) discussion of the process component of internalized oppression. More specifically, it evokes the internalization and socialization processes that impact an oppressed individual and perpetuate the oppression itself. Blue explained:

I feel like...[I] want to blend in, and, at home, I can blend in easily. There's more diversity there within the system [in my home state]...Here I'm just tired of one person not being unique [discussing a lack of diversity]. When you think about the University, you're just thinking about one mind, one group of people. When I

think about home...it's so different. There are so many differences in culture. And I don't want to be a part of that Midwestern nice, that default group.

Blue, like Jennifer, acknowledged that there were larger forces at play in the experiences that have influenced her sense of belonging in her academic environment. When asked if she had encountered resistance to her presence on campus, Blue described instances of hostility, microaggressions, and unwelcoming behaviors which she experienced as resistance to her presence, but she also concludes her storytelling by explaining that, ultimately, the resistance she has encountered relates to her own not wanting to belong. In the context of the internalized oppression model, Blue's response begins to call to mind dissociation, part of the mental health psychological state in which an oppressed person has a practical response to the stressors of an oppressive environment and begins to disconnect as a defense mechanism (Williams, 2012).

In both Jennifer's and Blue's responses, there is a sense of internalized oppression in which a lack of a sense of belonging to the broad campus community becomes focused inward, on their own actions and contributions to their belonging status. In both cases, that internal conflict is being resolved by placing blame on themselves or by circumventing the idea of belonging by essentially saying that to belong one must try to belong, and, in Blue's case, she alluded to being "done trying."

No time for racism – avoidance. Continuing with the pattern of internalized oppression, another theme that arose among study participants was that of avoiding oppression in order to cope. The following example is that of Kami who moved more clearly in the direction of avoidance by disregarding acts of oppression in what may also

be a coping mechanism. Kami is a fourth-year, African American student in STEM, who told her personal story about negative experiences she has had on campus:

I think I'm a little bit different in the sense that I don't make people's issues my issues. So, I think I probably interpret things a little bit differently than a person who really wants to feel included. I don't have any urge to be included in ignorance [around race], so I don't strive to include myself in it, and I have other relationships that I feel supported [in], and those are the ones that I focus on.

While Kami's response may be indicative of a kind of survival strategy, it is also suggestive of dissociation in the mental health psychological state or internalized oppression, serving to preserve aspects of oneself which may otherwise prevent normal functioning. Specifically, in Kami's narrative, she acknowledged the impact that negative experiences and, importantly, "ignorance" has had on her, but concluded the thought by explaining that she does not have the need to feel included anymore and, in essence, isolates herself from the relationships from which those negative experiences are produced. Unfortunately, in the context of Kami's interview, the relationships she was speaking of are broadly synonymous with those she has in the academic environment of the institution. This explanation speaks to a state of dissociation in which patterns of exclusion or other oppressive influences conditions one to no longer seek or want inclusion in environments which may reinforce a minoritized social identity. At a surface level, then, it may seem that any lack of sense of belonging felt by Kami would be a result of her own actions, but in deepening one's understanding of the impacts of oppressive systems on subordinate populations, that notion becomes problematized.

Kami expressed a resiliency and ability to reframe the situation and be supported by an external community, and lack of an internal academic community may not present any major barriers to Kami being successful in her program. She has a unique situation in which much of her work is done online, and she only comes to campus for a month or two per semester. However, more broadly, inclusion and the need to be a part of something is a basic human need and certainly deeply linked to feeling a strong sense of belonging (Shore, et al., 2011). Ultimately, for most underrepresented doctoral students, lowering expectations around inclusion and isolating oneself is not a reasonable solution to dealing with oppressive behaviors from within the academic environment.

Managing personal identity. Another feeling shared among many of the study participants was that of having to be guarded, self-censoring, and sometimes suppressing their identities and expressive practices while they are on campus. I asked Blue if she felt that being on campus was taxing on her psychologically or her well-being. She responded:

I feel if I let my guard down, yeah it has the potential [to be psychologically taxing], but I feel like I said before, I'm a unique person where I don't go down easily. I make great effort, to be sociable, but it is taxing to always try at it.

While many students spoke directly to this feeling of being guarded, others spoke in terms of having to “adjust” who they were while on campus. This “adjustment” looked different for everyone in how it was presented and how extreme it was. Blue provided a vivid example of how she adjusts her outward expression of identity and self. From her mannerisms to her persona to the beliefs she shares, expressing that she must, in her

words, “manage [her] “Blackness” while on campus. When I asked her what she mean by “managing her Blackness” she said:

[I] make sure that when I’m laughing that I don’t do my big wide mouth real laugh that I would do with you know with people at home... You know, when I’m in school, it’s more than just making sure I’m professional. It’s making sure that people are comfortable enough to come up to me and have a conversation, especially you know for, I think, White people [who] don’t know what your spectrum is. If you’re the advocate or if you’re the complete sell out. There’s a spectrum there, and sometimes we [Blacks] have to walk that line of you know where should I stand with this group of people to make this group of people comfortable enough to hear what I have to say.

The detail in which Blue described having to “manage [her] blackness” in order to ensure others are comfortable with her and accepting of her presence made clear that she feels she routinely suppresses important pieces of her identity in order to assimilate to the dominant culture in her academic environment. Blue’s struggle can be encapsulated by Fordham (1993) who wrote about the implications of being a female academic and gender “passing,” describing the constant struggle of African American women in academia to move away from the perception of being the “loud Black girl” to be taken seriously. In viewing the way in which she described her experience through the lens of internalized oppression, it could be argued that she is providing an example of how internalized oppression can occur as someone from a minoritized group has to assimilate and be socialized to the dominant group, assuming the dominant group’s rules and expectations and imposing them on oneself.

Donovan provided another example of the “management” of personal identity by saying:

[Being in school] it’s been good training. You know even in learning how to navigate my identity in a lot of these spaces, it’s been good training because those are things are that I imagine I will have to do, so part of [being] a young Black man in this space, and I think what has really helped me to understand how to navigate those identities in that space I don’t think I would feel as confident as I do going into other higher education spaces that might be more White than here, or more problematic in different ways than here.

Feeling like an impostor. An alarming and recurring theme from the interviews was underrepresented students’ statements about how they feel or have felt like impostors. Every single student interviewed expressed feeling like an impostor at some point during her/his doctoral student career. This phenomenon of feeling like a fraud or undeserving of one’s place in academia is commonly referred to as imposter syndrome (Clance, 1985; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Feeling like an impostor is a sentiment that many doctoral students experience regardless of racial identity (Clance, 1985), but, because minority students have compounded negative experiences such as feelings of outsidership, microaggressions, and racism, feeling like an imposter may be particularly common. Cara, a second-year, African American student in the STEM field, expressed some of her fears of feeling underqualified to be a student:

I’ve always had these ideas in my head and just experiences when I was younger about the ideas surrounding Black people and their work ethic. And when I wasn’t getting things, I was concerned about what other people would think...Everyone in lab had basically come straight from undergrad, but here a lot

of people had worked in industry or had done some other job before going into graduate school, and, so, that should have made me feel better that I wasn't getting the techniques [in lab] as fast, but it made me feel worse cause I felt under qualified because they're going to discover they made some type of mistake or something.

The mechanisms that perpetuate internalized oppression may, in fact, be creating the psychological conditions causing students to experience imposter syndrome. The internalized oppression students of color face impacts self and identity which may lead students to believe they do not "deserve" to be in their programs. Mary, a first-year, Hmong student in Social Sciences, discussed not only her initial feelings around impostor syndrome but feeling concerned that others viewed her as an imposter. Mary described her thinking around the topic:

The imposter syndrome, yeah, that happens here. I think I kind of just felt like when we first started I didn't really know what I had gotten myself into, [which] I guess was what I was feeling. I think I was getting used to the reading course load, but sometimes I felt like I didn't know how to talk about the topics and talk in the discussions...I struggled with public speaking in general, but I guess I also felt like I was really young, and that maybe people thought that I didn't deserve to be there.

Both Cara and Mary pointed out characteristics they have that they worry others may interpret as being deficits in their academic ability.

Making sense of microaggressions. As mentioned above, it was clear that dealing with microaggressions were a part of the everyday life of students. Because the

students interviewed were underrepresented minorities on a predominantly White campus, hearing that they had experiences with microaggressions was not very surprising. What was less expected, however, was that many students could sense they were being microaggressed and yet the negative experiences were either downplayed or ignored perhaps in an attempt to disassociate from them and continue moving forward in their academic programs. This phenomenon can be better understood through an internalized oppression lens, which identifies minimization of oppression as an emotional psychological response (Williams, 2012). Cara provided an example of this when she said:

I think people don't connect Black and Ph.D. And it's kind of reinforced with there not being a lot of Black students. My other theory is that I dress like my age, so I just look more like an undergrad...So I don't know, I'm not going to sit here and say it's just racism because I don't know and that's kind of the nature of this [intersectionality].

Quickly moving beyond a profound observation that “people don't connect Black and Ph.D.,” Cara sought to rationalize the nature of the microaggressions by suggesting the catalyst to these thoughts might be, in fact, her responsibility because of the way in which she dresses. Students' attempts to explain microaggressions experienced on campus by reflecting that they may have played a role in the issue may suggest that they are asserting agency in their own experiences; however, these explanations also paint a powerful and troubling picture of the considerable amount of internalized oppression that may be occurring.

Summary. This section discussed the impact that internalized oppression may have in influencing students' sense of belonging in their academic environments. While students of color experiencing microaggressions or feelings of exclusion in PWIs is not a new development, what is new to this discussion is the additional barrier to sense of belonging that comes from the internalized oppression that results from prolonged exposure to oppressive acts and living in an oppressive environment. This ongoing exposure results in students taking on responsibility for a lack of sense of belonging to the campus community. As seen in the examples above, students often told their stories in ways which minimized or discounted their experiences and reactions to those experiences. This section also produces examples in which students try to cope with racism and microaggressions by avoidance or justifying the acts and taking the blame away from the oppressor and internalizing it. Students' narratives around having to manage their own identities in order to be accepted or make others comfortable expressed a sense that they cannot truly be themselves.

Sense of Community

During the interviews, many of the students expressed their need to find people who they were comfortable with and places where they felt like they could be themselves. This section is broadly about the desire expressed by students to belong to supportive academic communities and the outcomes of not finding them. A community can be defined as a group of people who share similar characteristics or share common spaces (Jones, 2012), and it also encompasses aspects of culture, emotions, acceptance, sense of belonging and trust that serve to empower people to be a part of something important. For the purposes of this discussion, the focus will be on student academic

communities or the communities found in the students' degree programs. Academic communities are often discipline specific but may have boundaries that are fluid and vague. These communities serve to provide students with a place for academic discourse, support, dialogue, and friendships (Jones, 2012). In the interviews, there were themes that clearly stood out about students' sense of community or lack thereof. The interviews revealed that approximately half of the students felt they had a strong sense of community in their programs and the other half did not. This section describes the two distinct groups that emerged from the interviews and discusses the characteristics that differentiated the two groups. It then addresses the possible outcomes that the lack of community could have on students.

About half of the students interviewed described having a strong academic community. Sara, Ramon, Mary, and Kami all reported forming bonds with people in their departments that began in their academic program and extended outside of school, making the relationships both academic and social. These students reported social experiences such as having classmates over for dinner or movies at their homes, going to happy hours together, going to movies together, and having each other's families over for dinner. They also reported having collegial friendships at school, low competitiveness with other students, sharing of resources, and an overall supportive environment in their programs. Sara provided insights into her experience with sense of community:

My group [the other doctoral students in her program] is very close, not just my cohort. I feel like my office mate and myself are really close...everybody is really close...we go to happy hours, we go the movies, we chill out at each other

houses, and some of us do projects together so [we're] very interconnected, I would say...academically and socially.

Ramon similarly spoke of his positive experience with other doctoral students in his program:

It's incredible. One of the first-year students was deciding between a few different programs, and she was coming from [another university], which is kind of a big-name [in our field]. She came here specifically because of the relationships and collegial atmosphere of the grad students in this program. We all go to each other's stuff. We all make a big deal out of it when somebody does something great. There [are] grad students [who] will print out the readings for a seminar or scan them and make them available to everybody else. It's an incredibly supportive environment where we're all trying to help each other.

On the other hand, Jennifer, Mona, Donovan, Blue and Cara reported having little, if any, interactions with classmates in and out of their academic environments. While in school, these students reported having relationships with other students in their programs that could be described as collegial but somewhat superficial relationships.

Speaking about the sense of community in her program, Mona told me:

I think a lot of what keeps people engaged is friendships and community building and that's not a real strength [in the department]...maybe over time that will develop more. I also think a lot of it is [having] a cohort model...right now in [another department] there's one particular student who I have formed a friendship with, and she's so good at hosting dinners and building community and organizing happy hours. So they have a really nice group of students that have

really diverse backgrounds not just students of color but the White students also. They're always doing stuff together, and it seems so beautiful and attractive.

[Student takes a long pause] we don't have that experience [sounding dejected].

These students also described a highly competitive environment for resources within the department, low morale among the students, and futile attempts to build community in the department. When discussing the relationships Cara and other students in her program have with one another saying, she paused momentarily and took a deep breath before explaining, "It's not hostile, but there's not really, I don't know, anything there." Similarly, when Blue was asked about friendships in her program she explained, "I don't necessarily have an ally on campus." She went on to say:

It would have been nice to have someone check in on me on campus to make sure that you know, I was maintaining my sanity but I didn't have those things, I think those things something would have been nice.

Strong sense of community. The interview data showed that all the people who reported having strong communities were part of programs that had six or fewer doctoral students as part of their entering academic cohort and belonged to programs in the Social Sciences and professional fields. These programs with low numbers in their entering classes were likely small enough for students at all levels of the program to get to know each other, and students reported that the programs were intentional about these relationships. The students in programs with strong communities also reported having faculty and students involved in the selection of new students. Students reported having programs that carefully screened applicants and considerations were made not only on the applicants' academic merits but also how they could "fit in" with the other students

already in the program. The “strong community” students also took classes together as a cohort for at least for the first year in their programs. Most of these students reported taking the same classes and bonding together over the difficulties in the class content. For example, one student mentioned taking a statistics class with her cohort and having to spend time together doing the coursework and struggling to do the assignments. She reported this was a bonding experience with her classmates. These students were also full-time students and none had professional careers outside of school, which may have contributed to their willingness to engage more deeply with others in their programs.

Importantly, all the students in who had a strong sense of community reported having a strong sense of belonging in their academic programs. However, some students made the distinction that, even though they felt strongly connected to the people in their programs and felt a strong sense of belonging there, the same could not be said for the rest of the campus or the department. In fact, three of the four students in this group said specifically that they felt a sense of belonging to their program but not to their department or the University at large. Mary, for example, voiced her sense of belonging to her program, or “track,” but was not sure if the same could be said for the department: “I think in my track specifically I feel like I belong. I really like my track and faculty and the other students. [But] I think overall, in [my department], I’m not too sure [if I belong].”

Weak sense of community. Conversely, the group of students who did not have a strong sense of community belonged to programs that had incoming academic cohorts of 12 or more students and usually were part of larger departments in the Social Sciences and STEM fields. The students in this “low sense of community” group reported that

they did not take classes as part of a cohort. Although some of the students in this group reported liking the freedom they had to take the classes in the order they wanted, there comments indicated that this created a sense of disharmony among the students and their classmates.

Many students in this group reported having little knowledge of who was in their program because they rarely saw one another or had multiple classes together. Most students in this group also occupied roles as staff members elsewhere within the University. The students in this group reported liking the flexibility that their programs created as they were busy professionals who needed more control over the class sequence they took. These students reported having a low sense of belonging to their academic programs, the department, and to the University. It is important to mention that three out of the five people in this group reported having strong relationships with other people on campus but not within their academic programs or department.

Outlier. In the group of students interviewed, Dawn, a first-year student of Southeast Asian descent from the Midwest, was an outlier when it came to sense of community. Dawn, who was part of a program with eight incoming students (including her), reported having a strong sense of community within her program even though she did not take classes with her cohort. She also reported having a strong sense of belonging to her program and department. Interestingly, Dawn's responses in general were often different from the other students interviewed in that she did not report having any negative experiences on campus, she did not feel that her experiences were different because of her race, she felt welcomed, and she did not report experiencing any microaggressions. Dawn also felt that she was unique in that she did not see herself as a

“typical minority.” She reported having a privileged upbringing and did not, in her own words, “face many challenges growing up in the Midwest.” It is possible that Dawn’s privileged upbringing in the rural Midwest contributed to her unique perspective and experiences. Dawn’s experience at the University was unlike anyone else who was interviewed, and she was overall very positive about her experience as a doctoral student.

Summary. Considering all the program-related commonalities described by students who had a stronger sense of community, it still may be difficult to ascertain with certainty which factors promoted a sense of community, resulted from a sense of community, or were just shared by chance. However, based on the student voices presented here it is probable that programs with smaller numbers of students result in better connections between students and contribute to feelings of supportiveness, sharing of resources, and low competitiveness. Because of the numbers of students enrolled in those smaller programs, it may be easier to accommodate cohorts in which students take classes together which may contribute to relationships forming between students. Because the students who reported having a strong sense of community came from across the selected disciplines, Social Sciences, Humanities, and STEM fields, no conclusions can be attributed to academic discipline.

As a small cohort of incoming students into a program contributed to a strong sense of community, the opposite was true for programs with larger number of incoming students: they had a low sense of community. The larger incoming classes and bigger departments led to more competitiveness between students, and competition may contribute to less significant relationships between students. Students who had a low sense of community generally participated less in department or campus events than their

high sense of community counterparts. Many students in this group were also working and the associated time commitments may have impeded their ability to pursue relationships with other students in their programs. Regardless, students in this group all expressed wanting more in the forms of relationships and community within their programs and they expressed their willingness to help in community building as in the case of Donovan:

For me it is about community, so sometimes it's as simple as having other folks from similar backgrounds and experiences to do work with or to complain about work with or to ask questions or to be a resource for. So, I think it's kind of that community aspect, not just the other pieces it's just that especially...when I was in my second and third year when there were newer students of color that were coming in [I volunteered] to be a resource for them so they won't have to experience, isolation coming in or transitioning from other cities and schools and so part of it was also to be an advocate for newer students of color that were coming into the program by reaching out.

Unfortunately, much is still unknown about both groups and additional research is needed to ascertain what variables contribute to a high sense of community among students. This topic merits further research because students who do not have a strong sense of community within their programs will likely eventually fill that void with others outside of their academic community, and, while external communities are valuable, they may make becoming disconnected from academic environments easier.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the findings that emerged from the interviews with underrepresented minority doctoral students. The chapter began with the theme of negotiating Whiteness. In this section students presented evidence of their ongoing uncomfortableness with the Whiteness that is inescapable in a PWI. Students confronted the idea of Midwestern nice and how it is perceived by some to be an excuse for Whites to be unauthentic and “fake.” The students interviewed also spoke to the racist climate of the institution in which microaggressions were part of their everyday lives. From the microassault at the coffee shop to the microinsult of having a coworker and colleague say, “be careful not to be too educated” to the outright microinvalidation of having someone ask if “Asian Americans experience racism,” the microaggressions were everyday occurrences and often inescapable.

The next theme addressed in this chapter was the internalization of oppressive experiences by students of color. The interviews with participants provided examples of students self-blaming, avoiding, having to manage their identity, and feeling like impostors as part of the cycle of internalized oppression that is a result of the constant oppressive experiences to which students of color are subjected. Finally, the last theme addressed in this chapter focused on the sense of community that emerged from talking to students. The interview data suggested that regardless of negative experiences felt by student in the campus at large having small communities in their academic programs was a powerful positive influence for students that translated into a greater sense of belonging among these students.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation was guided, early on, by two key questions. The first of which was: what are the differences/similarities between the sense of belonging experiences of White and underrepresented minority students? This question was then broken down into two parts, a) in what ways, if at all, do students' racial identities influence their sense of belonging to their program, department, institution, and b) in what ways, if at all, do students' perceptions of sense of belonging influence their socialization to their program, department, institution. The second key question posed in this dissertation was: to what extent are underrepresented doctoral students' perceptions of their sense of belonging mediated by their racial identity, socialization, campus climate, and perceived deficit discourses in their program, department, institution?

In Chapter Four, data from the survey was used to address these questions and illustrate some of the differences and similarities between the experiences of belonging of White and minority students. Data showed that racial identity influences how sense of belonging is perceived. There were some differences within the individual minority racial groups as African American students had lower perceptions of sense of belonging than Latinx and Asian American students. There was also a stark difference in how minorities as a group perceived their sense of belonging as compared to White students. The interviews with underrepresented doctoral students further confirmed this assertion. When asked questions related to their subordinated status as students of color in a PWI, the individuals interviewed shared stories of negative experiences like perceiving tokenism, feeling isolated, and encountering microaggressions. This evidence supports the assertion that race and racialized experiences do, in fact, impact sense of belonging

experiences. Not surprisingly, results also showed that sense of belonging has a strong correlation with socialization experiences. These experiences of sense of belonging were similarly strongly correlated for both minority and White students.

To ascertain how sense of belonging was impacted by racial identity, socialization, campus climate, and perceived deficit discourses, a regression analysis on the survey data was conducted. The regression analysis showed that campus climate and socialization experiences were good indicators of perceptions of sense of belonging; that is, they had a significant impact on sense of belonging. Furthermore, racial identity was also shown to have a significant impact on perceptions of belonging. This was especially true for African American students who tended to rate their perceptions of belonging lower than Asian Americans and Latinx students and much lower than White students.

As indicated earlier, as the qualitative data was being gathered there were emerging questions that arose from the interviews and which shifted the focus of this dissertation. The first question that emerged focused on to what extent a hostile campus climate impacted sense of belonging. This question and the corresponding data were addressed in Chapter Five. The qualitative data from the interviews suggested that a hostile climate in which students experienced racism and microaggressions eroded a student's sense of belonging. Generally, the students interviewed reported that having negative experiences on campus was impactful in their lives and that those negative experiences created the need for many students to avoid having relationships or even limit their time at the University. The student participants shared stories of discomfort with the Whiteness that permeated the campus and reported how their everyday lives were negatively impacted by the racial climate of the institution. Interestingly, with the

exception of one student, Dawn, all the other students reported having negative experiences on campus, regardless of whether they had a strong sense of community or not. This may be because the strong sense of community was mostly confined to the students' academic programs. Also, eight out of the ten students interviewed shared examples of the daily microaggressions that they were subjected to by students, faculty, and staff while on campus.

Sense of belonging was further impacted by the internalization of oppression by underrepresented doctoral students at this PWI. The students interviewed showed conscious and unconscious internalization of oppressive experiences. That internalization often got in the way of forming meaningful relationships and impacted students' sense of belonging. As students experienced the mechanisms by which oppression is manifested and perpetuated (racism, self-hatred, self-blaming, feelings of inferiority, isolation, avoidance, powerlessness, and so on), many showed signs of taking on personal blame, perhaps out of agency but also with the possibility that the self-blame was misplaced.

A positive finding that emerged from the qualitative data was the impact that student communities have on sense of belonging. Students who were part of academic programs with strong student communities tended to report a higher sense of belonging. However, the sense of community in their programs did not prevent the students from having negative experiences everywhere else on campus. In fact, the students interviewed often pointed out the differences in experiences from their academic units to the campus at large. While those students with a strong sense of community reported having collegial, friendly, and supportive relationships in their programs, they often could

not say the same for their experiences with other units within the same department, college, or the institution at large.

In spite of the difficulties posed by attending a PWI, some underrepresented student participants showed resilience and flexibility in navigating their academic worlds. While some of the students interviewed reported having supportive student communities who helped them make the most of their doctoral experience, even the students who did not have a high sense of community in their academic lives still found people to connect with outside of their immediate academic community who could be supportive. While these external relationships are likely important and positive in their own right, they may also take the place of relationships which could tie students closer to their academic programs and provide a different type of support and understanding. In sum, this dissertation shows that this PWI University, like many in the United States, remain “a kingdom not ours” for students of color. The fact that students reported not having an “ally” on campus and that people on campus did not connect a student's ethnicity with “Ph.D.” is extremely troubling and shows that there remains a great deal of work to be done in order to make PWI campus environments supportive for all students.

Recommendations

Research. Internalized oppression and how it is exhibited and manifested in students is a persistent problem in American higher education that needs further study. This study brought to light the theme of students internalizing the oppression they experience. It also served, in part, to apply the lens of internalized oppression to students' sense of belonging, but additional research is needed to quantify how and to what extent students are impacted by these findings. Moreover, the ways in which

having a sense of community impacts students and their sense of belonging experiences requires further examination to more fully understand the affect student communities have on sense of belonging and program persistence. Related to this, it is likely that there are still unidentified factors that contribute to a strong sense of community within academic environments that need to be discovered. Both these ideas are in their infancy and would benefit from further scholarly inquiry.

This study also challenges the previous frameworks of graduate student socialization by Golde (1998) and Weidman et al. (2001) in which socialization is central to the physical and mental well-being of students. Although socialization is no doubt an important concept to understand related to the student experience, the theories as they currently exist do not take into account the differences in socialization experiences between students of color and White students. Students of color have a harder time socializing to their academic environments because of the oppression that they are likely to face while attending a PWI. Furthermore, Golde's (1998) stages of socialization has integration and the idea of belonging as the last stage of its model. I would argue based on the results of this study that initiatives related to socialization and belonging need to be deliberately and strategically engaged much earlier in the academic career of a student in order to best situate the student to be successful.

This study attempted to uncover some of the factors that impacted sense of belonging for underrepresented students, and, to that end, it was successful, but more work is needed. More foundational work establishing theories that explain how students of color perceive belonging and community at PWIs is needed. The theoretical framework for the success of graduate students of color is still elusive and in need of

researchers willing to do the hard work exploring the everyday lives of students of color in predominantly White spaces.

Practice. Higher education practitioners should take into account that the experiences of belonging for students of color may be different from those of White students. As the findings from this study showed, students of color have lower sense of belonging, and the higher education community should be responsible for providing spaces in which all students can feel welcomed and like valued members of the academic community. This focus on supporting students' sense of belonging, I posit, may have a strong impact in ensuring students do not feel like outsiders in these spaces. The higher education community should purposefully create spaces (physical and not) in which students can be themselves and where they can build authentic community connections, being careful not to essentialize students' ethnic identities.

Moreover, practitioners should be aware of their positionality in predominantly White spaces, considering their roles in perpetuating the White ethos on campus and, conversely, in challenging those norms. It will take an effort from the entire White campus community to disrupt the norms to create a climate that is conducive to the success of students of color. I focus specifically on the White campus community because I believe that this study showed that underrepresented students are already being disruptors by attending a PWI, studying there, working there, living there, and interweaving their beings into the lives of those from the majority race.

It is also important for the entire campus community to engage in efforts to make educational institutions places in which underrepresented students feel a sense of belonging. The narrative around diversity is dominated by faculty, students, and

administrators, but other campus staff need to be involved in those conversations. As many of the students in this study suggested, their first interactions with people in the institution was with staff in their departments or programs. Often these were department office staff who had important roles in setting up and maintaining essential functions outside of academics (for example, scholarships, fellowships, or job functions). Unfortunately, for many students these first interactions were not positive. Several students described interactions that were not welcoming and made the students feel uneasy about their start in school.

As the results from this study suggest, underrepresented doctoral students in predominantly White institutions face negative experiences which make feeling a sense of belonging on campus challenging. While students showed resilience, it is imperative that White faculty, administrators, staff, and students become allies to continue moving forward the agenda of inclusivity and belonging in predominantly White institutions.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Q1 What type of degree are you pursuing?

- Master Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Non-Degree Student

Socialization	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel I am an important part of my department					
I have become more aware of my own racial identity while in my doctoral program.					
I have had the opportunity to read/study work from individuals who share my own racial identity while in my doctoral program.					
I have questioned my ability to complete the process of getting my doctoral degree while in my doctoral program.					
I feel safe on campus.					
My peers value my research/scholarship.					
I have to work harder than some of my peers to be perceived as a legitimate scholar.					
My racial identity has shaped my socialization experience within my department.					

Campus Climate	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have been subjected to inappropriate or disrespectful language while in my doctoral program.					
While I have been a doctoral student, I have felt insulted or threatened based on my social identity (e.g., sex, race, national origin, sexual orientation, religion or values).					
I have witnessed someone else being insulted or threatened based on some aspect of that individual's social identity.					
I have felt out of place or that I just did not fit in on campus.					
I am an accepted member of my graduate department.					
In my program, there are other people with ethnic backgrounds similar to my own.					
I feel out of place among my peers.					
I feel comfortable discussing my academic program or career plans with my adviser.					
I feel that my adviser is easily approachable.					
I have frequent interactions with my adviser.					
I have a good rapport with my adviser.					
I can relate to my adviser on a personal level.					
I have faculty mentor/s in my degree program.					
My adviser and I shared a similar ethnic background.					

Student Deficits	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
When I started graduate school, I felt unqualified academically.					
When I started graduate school, I felt others saw me as unqualified academically.					
I feel that other students in my graduate program had preconceived expectations of me because of my race/ethnicity.					
I feel that faculty in my graduate program had preconceived expectations of me because of my ethnicity					

Sense of Belonging	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel a sense of belonging to my department.					
I feel that I am a member of my department community.					
I see myself as part of the university community.					
I am enthusiastic about my doctorate program.					
I am happy to be at the University of Minnesota.					
A doctoral degree from the University of Minnesota will set me up for success in the future.					
I am satisfied with the level of support from peers during my time in my doctoral program.					
I am satisfied with the level of support from faculty during my time in my doctoral program.					
I am satisfied with the level of support from staff during my time in my doctoral program.					
I am part of a cohort of students that started at the same time in my doctoral program.					

Q7 What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Another gender identity
- Prefer not to answer

Q8 What is your primary racial/ethnic identity?

- American Indian/ Alaska Native
- Asian American
- African American
- Latinx or Hispanic
- White or Caucasian
- Multiracial
- Other

Q9 What is your last degree completed?

- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Professional Degree
- Other

Q10 What is your age?

- 21 and Under
- 22-24
- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35-39
- 40-49
- 50 and Over

Q11 What is your first language?

- English
- Spanish
- Arabic
- Somali
- Hmong
- Other

Q12 Did you receive any type of funding when entering to do your doctoral program?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q13 If you answered yes to the previous question, what type of funding did you receive when entering your doctoral degree? (Mark all that apply)

- Research Assistantship
- Teaching Assistantship
- Fellowship
- Outside Academic Fellowship
- Grant or Loans
- Scholarships
- I did not receive funding
- Other

Q14 Are you the first in your immediate family to attend a doctoral program?

- Yes
- No

Q15 What is the highest level of education completed by your parents/guardians?

- Ph.D. or Professional Degree
- Master's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Associate's Degree
- High School Diploma
- Neither parent has a high school diploma

Q16 If you were to start your graduate career again, would you attend the University of Minnesota?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q17 If you were to start your graduate career again, would you select the same field of study?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q18 Would you recommend the University of Minnesota to someone considering your field of study? Why? Why not?

Q19 Would you like to participate in a follow up interview regarding sense of belonging in your graduate program? If so, please enter your contact information here.

Appendix B

Interview Schedule. I am conducting a research project on the experiences of doctoral students from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in higher education programs. Thank you for allowing me to interview you regarding this topic. I handed you an informed consent statement, please review it at this time, and let me know if you have any questions. Also, you have the right to end this interview at any point. If you want to make that choice, please let me know. There is no consequence for not wanting to participate. Do you have any questions at this time?

Lastly, before we begin I would like to ask you if you would like to choose a pseudonym that I can use to refer to you during the research project. This is done to keep your identity completely confidential.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why did you decide to attend school here?
3. What were your initial thoughts when you first arrived at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities/your department?
4. Did you know many people when you first arrived here? Why? Why not? Tell me about them?
5. Did you have an orientation in your department? If so, what do you remember about those initial interactions?
6. Do you have an advisor in your department? Tell me about him/her. What is your relationship like? Has the relationship changed from when you first started meeting to the present time? If so, how? Did you have a role in choosing him/her?
7. Do you have a mentor in your department? Tell me about him/her? How was he/she assigned to you?

8. How is the relationship with other students in your program?
9. Do you have much contact with students in your program outside of the immediate school environment?
10. Are there other students who share a similar cultural, racial, ethnic background as you in your department? How do you feel about that?
11. Are there faculty or staff that share a similar cultural, racial, ethnic background as you in your department? How do you feel about that?
12. Do you feel like your department is a welcoming place? Why or why not?
13. Have you ever had a negative experience in your doctoral program that was based on your cultural, racial, ethnic identity? Tell me about it?
14. Would you recommend your program/department to other students who share a similar cultural, ethnic or racial background as you? Why or why not?
15. Do you feel your degree program is a good fit for you? Why or why not?
16. Do you feel like you belong to the University/program/department?

Appendix C

Email Soliciting Interview Participants

Subject: Study of Doctoral Student Experiences

Hello, (name of volunteer)

I am writing to you because you completed a survey in December about graduate student experiences at the University of Minnesota and expressed your willingness at that time to participate in the second phase of the study, a follow-up interview. I am very appreciative of you taking the time to complete the survey and volunteering to participate in the interview portion of the study. Now, I would like to formally invite you to participate in an in-person interview. By participating in an interview, you will be providing valuable insights into your experience at the University, and your name will also be entered in a drawing to win one of four \$50 Target gift cards.

The interviews should take about an hour and will be scheduled in the coming weeks. I have set aside Mondays, Thursday afternoons, and Fridays for interviews. If you are still interested in participating, please respond to this email with your general availability on those days. If you cannot meet any of those days, please let me know as well and we can schedule an alternative time. Again, I am very appreciative of your participation, and I look forward to your contribution to this study.

Thank you,
Alex Hermida

Appendix D

Reminder Email

Subject: Reminder Study of Doctoral Student Experiences

Hello (name),

I am writing to you again because you completed a survey in December about graduate student experiences at the University of Minnesota and expressed your willingness at that time to participate in the second phase of the study, a follow-up interview. I am very appreciative of you taking the time to complete the survey and volunteering to participate in the interview portion of the study. At this time, I would like to formally invite you to participate in an in-person interview. By participating in an interview, you will be providing valuable insights into your experience at the University, and your name will also be entered in a drawing to win one of four \$50 Target gift cards.

The interviews should take about an hour and will be scheduled in the coming weeks. I have set aside Mondays, Thursday afternoons, and Fridays for interviews. If you are still interested in participating, please respond to this email with your general availability on those days. If you cannot meet any of those days, please let me know as well and we can schedule an alternative time. Again, I am very appreciative of your participation, and I look forward to your contribution to this study.

Best,

Alex Hermida