Examining Relationships that Matter: A Qualitative Study of Black Women in Doctoral Education

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The purpose of this study was to explore how and why various relationships bolstered the success of Black women doctoral students by contributing to their motivation and persistence in graduate education. Using the voices of 14 Black women doctoral students within the United States and community cultural wealth as a theoretical lens, this qualitative study sought to examine the nature and importance of supportive relationships that existed during their graduate studies. Findings from this study revealed that family served as a motivator for enrollment and degree completion, a sounding board during trying times, and a space for processing the doctoral experience. Friends and professional associations transmitted various forms of social capital, and mentors served as advocates and facilitators of professional socialization. Additionally, social media played a significant role in helping Black women establish networks when there was limited visibility of or access to other Black women in their graduate programs. From this study, academic programs may be able to glean which aspects of these different relationship types (e.g., family, friends, mentors) matter and develop mechanisms for incorporating them into the experiences of Black women (and other minoritized groups) in doctoral programs.

Keywords: Black women, doctoral students, community cultural wealth, student success

Introduction

Since the 1970s, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of doctoral degrees earned by Black women (NCES, 2016). Some research points to relationships inside and outside of the academy as being instrumental in the degree completion of doctoral students (Sweitzer, 2009). Regarding Black women, Patton and Harper (2003) highlighted the vitality of mentoring relationships between these students and administration and faculty. In another study exploring the motivation and persistence of Black women in graduate school, Schwartz, Bower, Rice, and Washington (2003) stated that the interconnectedness of family and friends, the African American community, and expectations of success from family and community were key in persistence. McCallum (2016) also found that family pressure, support networks, and community networks were among the factors that influenced enrollment decisions.

With the exception of the aforementioned studies, the current literature maintains a deficit focus, often citing institutional and individual challenges faced by Black women doctoral students. For example, previous research suggests that women who are mothers and/or spouses are less likely to persist in doctoral education (Nettles & Millett, 2006), though Sweitzer (2009) later determined that marital and parental status—among other roles and responsibilities—were not distractions to degree attainment. In fact, students relied on these external relationships for nurturing, guidance, and support. Consequently, Sweitzer (2009) contended that future research should examine the nuances of these relationships in supporting doctoral degree attainment. As such, the purpose of this study was to understand *how* and *why* various relationships bolster the success of Black women doctoral students by contributing to their persistence and success in graduate education. Two research questions guided this study: (1) How do different relationships influence the persistence of Black women in doctoral programs? and (2) Why do these relationships matter for the academic outcomes of Black women?

Literature Review

This study is situated within extant literature that centers anti-deficit notions about Black women doctoral students and their respective communities. Our article emphasizes the importance of relationships; thus, we highlight studies that explore relationships as contributing factors to the enrollment, persistence, and success of Black women earning their doctoral degrees. When reviewing the literature, we use the authors' chosen term of either "Black" or "African American." In all other places, we use "Black." Given the importance of naming, we opted for the most inclusive term for those of African descent, representing multiple ethnicities.

Relationships with Family, Friends, and Peers

McCallum (2016) uncovered that family involvement for African American families may appear very different due to sociopolitical and sociocultural factors that are not a reality for White families. In a qualitative study employing semi-structured interviews with 41 African American doctoral students from research intensive institutions, participants noted

that going to graduate school resulted from a series of decisions over a lifetime and that family relationships, support, and encouragement were integral to their success (McCallum, 2016). The primary focus of the study was to understand how participants successfully engaged in the doctoral decision-making process and enrolled in doctoral study. While it is important to understand the motivations of Black women's decision-making process to select and enroll in a doctoral program, those are clearly only the initial steps. Hence, research that provides insight into factors that influence persistence and success is also warranted.

As part of a larger phenomenological study of millennial Black women, Apugo (2017) explored peer relationships and mentorship as a sustaining factor among 15 Black graduate women in master's programs at majority White urban universities. Using data drawn from semi-structured interviews, Apugo (2017) found that peer relationships were typically informal, yet they were vital in fostering the sustainability of graduate studies for Black women. Participants also identified their peer relationships as a mechanism to persevere against racial microaggressions by White professors, colleagues, and peers. Additionally, participants pointed out that the lack of emotional and academic support provided by their institutions necessitated the usage of other supportive networks (Apugo, 2017). To this end, peer mentor relationships met their "social, academic, and emotional needs," as described by the participants (Apugo, 2017, p. 359).

Support Networks

While some support networks are not often formally recognized within the academy (Carver, 2017), they serve a multitude of purposes for Black women. In an article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, Carver (2017) insisted that support networks are a critical component of doctoral degree attainment. Black women have been consistently known to support one another, and "sister circles, in particular, have provided sources of strength, purpose, and love where there may have been none" (Carver, 2017, p. 1). These sister circles tend to grow organically, out of necessity, to sustain Black women within academic programs and professional positions. Thus, according to Carver (2017), sister circles become even more critical for Black women's pursuit and successful completion of their doctoral degrees. Other scholars have also noted that peer mentoring is a key component supporting Black women through their transition into and subsequent persistence within the academy (Davis-Maye, Davis, & Jones, 2013). Organizations such as the Sisters of the Academy (SOTA), Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), and the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE) have provided support to Black women throughout their academic careers (Davis-Maye et al., 2013).

In an article designed for higher education practitioners, Davis and Sutherland (2008) described their experience at SOTA's Research BootCamp as "multidimensional, with tremendous academic, professional, and personal benefits" (p. 607). The description of the week-long experience was replete with mentorship and the development of relationships where professional growth and development were key. The authors described a camaraderie

with individuals who not only understood them but also understood the complexities of their existence. Within this experience they found support from a group of women experiencing similar if not the same situation on their campus, which forged lasting relationships.

Having a supportive network increases persistence, combats isolation and invisibility, and prevents feelings of "otherness," which all contribute to declines in Black women doctoral completion (Jordan, 2017; Patterson-Stephens, Lane, & Vital, 2017). Supportive networks provide connections and a caring space for Black women seeking others who can relate not only to their experiences as doctoral students, but also to their lived experiences as Black women in the academy (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Systemic and institutional racial and gender oppression require Black women in academia to explore numerous coping strategies to persist and advance academically and professionally (Henry & Glenn, 2018). Underrepresentation of Black women enrolled and employed within higher education leaves a dearth of opportunity to connect with mentors and establish supportive networks within their respective institutions (Henry & Glenn, 2009; West, 2020). Therefore, some relationships and support networks are not built through traditional pathways but in digital realms to create space for Black women to share their own experiences and challenge the status quo (Hernández, 2015; Williams, 2015). Amid the interlocking systems of oppression fostered by the academy (Collins, 2000), social media provides a space for Black women to seek out support, camaraderie, and mentorship via online networks. For example, forms of cyberfeminism and the usage of hashtags promote gender solidarity, assistance to navigate the academic landscape and the rules and expectations of the doctoral experience, and a way to balance academic and personal life (Hernández, 2015; Williams, 2015).

Mentoring Relationships

Numerous scholars have proposed effective mentoring practices for Black graduate students in general, and Black women graduate students specifically. Brown, Davis, and McClendon (1999) focused their conceptual paper on debunking myths about mentoring and exploring the specific needs of graduate students of color. They also examined several models of mentoring, including those embedded into the structure of the institution, those not embedded, programs that allow for continued opportunities of engagement with faculty and administrators, and those that do not. Subsequently, they advanced a model for mentoring students of color with a three-pronged approach that includes "academic midwifery, role molding, and frientoring" (Brown et al., 1999, p. 113). Within this model, they suggested that mentors aid students in generating new ideas that are cognitively complex, help students apply their scholarly knowledge, and seek opportunities to serve as both friends and mentors to students (Brown et al., 1999). They argued that the intentional application of these mentoring modalities would benefit not only students of color, but also the nation in producing well-prepared academicians.

Grant and Ghee (2015) argued that Black women must work to deconstruct historical tropes and barriers, while also situating a sense of the educated self among an academic

community. These scholars, who are both Black women, took an auto-ethnographic approach to their work, concluding that Black women would benefit from "nuanced approaches [to] promote their upward trajectories" (Grant & Ghee, 2015, p. 759). Using dialogue to link theory to practice, they argued that informal mentoring aids Black women in preparing for careers, reflecting on their roles in the profession, and cultivating positive feelings about their outcomes (Grant & Ghee, 2015).

While there has been an increase in recent years of research and scholarship focusing on Black women in the academy, gaps in the literature persist. The scant literature related to Black women in doctoral education is primarily parceled into a small number of foci. For example, the voices of women persisting in doctoral programs have been relegated to a fraction of the literature produced about Black women. As the number of Black women doctoral students continues to grow, understanding what mechanisms support their success and persistence is key to addressing systemic issues in higher education and beyond.

Additionally, the foundational literature about Black women is primarily written from a deficit perspective. This is a critical observation, as scholarship has historically focused on illuminating negative assumptions impacting Black women in the academy. Deficit perspectives compel Black women in the academy to contend with these ideologies, both professionally and in the literature. Thus, it is key to allow academic space for Black women to highlight what has contributed to their success in doctoral programs in their own voices. These are the gaps that the current research seeks to fill.

Theoretical Framework

Yosso's (2005) framework for community cultural wealth (CCW) informed the data analysis of this study. CCW is comprised of the following six forms of capital: (1) aspirational, (2) navigational, (3) familial, (4) linguistic, (5) resistant, and (6) social. Aspirational capital involves desiring an outcome despite observable difficulties. Navigational capital is the capacity to "maneuver through social institutions," especially those that seek to destabilize the hopes and aspirations of people of color (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Familial capital encompasses the knowledge learned through one's belongingness to a community and the history, traditions, and insight garnered from this community. Familial capital also foregrounds the desire to ensure the well-being of the community. Linguistic capital considers the oral and written communicative traditions, customs, and styles adopted from knowing multiple languages. Resistant capital acknowledges how communities of color use their agency to disrupt power structures while protecting their "bodies, minds, and spirits in the face of race, gender, and class inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). Finally, social capital includes leveraging resources, knowledge, and relationships to traverse institutions as well as transmit goods and services for other marginalized groups. Of note, these forms of capital are not discrete, and many of them intersect to bolster one's overall cultural wealth.

CCW (Yosso, 2005) explores the experiences, talents, and strengths of students of color, which provide a foundation for their success within the academy. More importantly,

CCW reframes what is often highlighted as negative or depleted capital and illuminates the capital created and transmitted by minoritized peoples. While there are many strengths associated with this framework, one critique has emerged regarding Yosso's lack of attention to the field. In an empirical study about undergraduate students of color's promotion of college-going culture, Luedke (2020) noted that, unlike Bourdieu's (1984) social reproduction theory, Yosso's (2005) CCW does not consider the role of the field. She explained that the field is the space in which capital is or is not ascribed a particular value (Luedke, 2020). She argued that, while everyone has some form of capital, capital without a field fails to consider the importance of context in assigning value to one's capital. While this is a valid critique, it was not relevant to our study because we were less concerned about the field itself, but rather about how participants leveraged their cultural wealth to persist in doctoral education. Furthermore, CCW provided an elucidatory lens for the current study to explore and understand the mechanisms of persistence employed by Black women in doctoral education.

Methods

This qualitative study sought to understand how Black women utilize, and make meaning of, various relationships to persist in doctoral education. Qualitative studies operationalize a natural sense for inquiry, where the researcher formulates theory after interpreting data gleaned from observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Our research study drew upon a constructivist worldview. Constructivism suggests that learning is an active process, where learners create knowledge through the lens of their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Understanding the ways respondents constructed knowledge was particularly salient as they were members of a historically underrepresented population within the context of higher education. Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recognized the role of the researcher as an instrument in qualitative research.

Participants

The current study is part of a larger qualitative study seeking to understand the experiences of Black women in doctoral education. We used criterion-based purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants over a two-year period (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria included: (1) self-identifying as a Black woman, (2) currently a student in a doctoral program or having earned a doctoral degree within the previous two years, and (3) studying (or studied) in a U.S. higher education institution. Exclusion criteria eliminated individuals who did not identify as Black, men of all genders, doctoral students studying outside of the United States, and Black women who had earned their degrees more than two years earlier. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we distributed flyers about the study to prospective participants at research conferences, such as the Black Doctoral Network and the International Conference on Urban Education. Additionally, we recruited participants on Facebook and Twitter utilizing networks from the following groups: Black Women PhDs, Black women in higher education, and @sisterphd. We also relied on

snowball sampling to recruit prospective participants lacking exposure to our open calls for respondents. We selected everyone who expressed interest in our study and met the predetermined sampling criteria. As such, 14 participants informed the current study (see Appendix A for participants' demographic information). As indicated in Appendix A, we used pseudonyms in place of actual names.

Data Collection Procedure

We invited participants to complete a one-on-one, semi-structured interview in one of three formats: face-to-face, virtual, or by phone. Once respondents agreed to participate in an interview, we asked them to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A for responses). During interviews, participants were asked to discuss their experiences with pursuing doctoral degrees, including motivating factors, barriers, and sources of support they relied on as they pursued their degrees. Some of the questions included in the interview protocol were: Tell me about your first year transitioning into the program; How would you describe your social life?; How has mentoring influenced your progress, if at all?; Tell me about the relationships (or roles) in your life (e.g., spouse, partner, mother); What kinds of groups or organizations do you belong to, and in what ways do they sustain you? Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 3 hours; length was largely dependent upon the respondents and their willingness to share. We reached data saturation once we were no longer able to obtain additional new information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to data analysis. Our data analysis process began with an initial review of the transcripts to develop general categories around different experiences the participants had while pursuing their doctoral degrees. This process is known as open coding, and it aids researchers in reducing chunks of data into themes (Saldaña, 2015). Next, the research team, consisting of four members, conducted several rounds of axial coding. This phase of the analysis allowed us to identify larger categories and the components that comprised these themes. For example, one such theme was about mentoring. Specifically, we observed an array of insights concerning how participants described the benefits of mentoring as well as the various roles mentors played in their lives (e.g., as advocates).

Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness

The researchers who conducted this study are Black women who have either completed doctoral degrees or hold current student status. Our personal experiences enabled us to understand nuances and themes articulated by the participants. As Black women intellectuals, we could conduct in-depth analyses illuminated by the experiences of Black women and underscoring the unique contours of the lived experiences of Black women. To enhance trustworthiness, we themed the data independently and then we compared our themes as a form of peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These peer reviewing sessions helped to generate sufficient clarity and consensus to make claims.

Findings

Through data analysis, four central themes emerged from this study: (1) family is "everything," (2) reliable friends, (3) holistic mentoring, and (4) support garnered from professional associations and networks. The first theme described how participants viewed the role family members played throughout their doctoral journey, including relatives and partners/spouses. The second theme highlighted participants' relationships with their friends and how their reliance on these friendships provided practical and socio-emotional support. The third theme focused on various types and benefits of mentoring experiences. The final theme showed how forms of cultural wealth emerge from connections with professional associations and support networks. A summary of the themes, definitions, categories, and connections to the theoretical framework can be found in Appendix B.

Family is "Everything"

Familial ties played an integral role in the academic productivity and success of the Black women involved in this study. For these participants, family served as a motivator for enrollment and completion, a sounding board during trying times, and a space for processing the doctoral experience. Although at times tensions existed between family commitments and coursework, each participant established her own unique way of balancing her studies with familial obligations. As a form of aspirational capital, some women came from families in which entry into the postsecondary sector was common, and they modeled their educational aims on observations of their family members. For instance, Lena discussed how she was raised in a family of college-educated individuals:

> My mother, my father, my grandfather, my aunts and uncles, or at least one uncle…they've all kinda pursued…higher education…[my] parents, grandparents, uncles earned advanced degrees beyond the bachelors.

Bonnie shared a similar experience, where her family was predominantly comprised of individuals who elected to serve as teachers and social workers. Bonnie grew up understanding the value of higher education, especially since her father was a school principal. She explained:

> I come from a family…a lot of them are teachers, my dad's a principal…education is highly, highly valued. I am the first in my family to get a PhD; I'm not the first to have…a terminal degree. [We saw] education as a means—that nobody can take from you.

For both of these women, deciding to enroll in a PhD program—and to persist through the program—was directly connected to familial relationships. This illustrates the use of familial capital, as the participants incorporated insight, history, and sense of community into their academic journeys. Their pursuit of a doctoral degree was influenced and encouraged by loved ones who traveled a similar route. Thus, they could rely on their family as a source of strength, information, and understanding.

Many participants also reported that familial sacrifices served as a source of encouragement. Spouses and partners took on more financial responsibilities so that the participants could focus on their studies. Additionally, children were empathetic regarding their parents' requests for ample study time. For example, Brooke shared the ways her husband removed barriers so she could complete her degree:

> Having the support of my husband and him financially supporting our family while I do this has been…huge…I don't feel like if I had maintained a full-time job throughout, I would have been able to devote the time that I could to my family, like I was able to, in addition to school.

Ashlei Renee concurred: "My husband…has been my biggest supporter—from conferences to schools to presentations—and he was like, 'If you wanna go get your PhD, then go get it'." In addition, Gayle—who met her partner in the midst of completing her program—found her relationship was complementary to her aims to complete a doctoral degree:

> My partner has been really supportive. Whether I need to sit in silence or talk through things. He's [also] really good at asking questions. I have to give it to him, because I don't know if I could deal with me if I were him.

Moreover, for the women in this study, social and navigational capital manifested in different ways, from providing consolation and validating their lived experiences, to providing insight into the hidden curriculum and preparing the women for graduate study. Check-ins with family members helped to combat feelings of isolation. Family dynamics also informed how participants selected which institution(s) to enroll in, their field of study, and at times, their research interests. Overall, family proved to be "everything," serving as a primary motivator for completion across participants.

Reliable Friends

The presence of friends served as another form of social capital for the women in this study. For some participants, friendships grew so strong, it was as if their friends were members of their family. Friends were helpful in alleviating feelings of isolation, offered emotional and financial support, and in some cases, were integral in making sense of the doctoral process. Friendship development ranged from relationships established well before entry into the postsecondary sector, to individuals who became close as a result of doctoral studies. For instance, Gayle indicated that she selected her program after connecting with students who were already established in the program she was considering:

> We just clicked really well and created a family and [she] was probably the deterrent and the motivator at the same time. She was like a push-pull. She's an extreme extrovert and I'm the good introvert and she would always email us, like "Are we coming? Are we coming?" So, we had already started to create our own little space of support.

Friends partaking in—or recently graduated from—doctoral study were also instrumental in assisting participants in understanding political situations within departments and the broader academy. This insight was important in building their navigational capital and resistant

capital to manage the perplexing challenges that emerged during their educational experiences. For example, Gayle discussed how she was able to avoid internalizing her advisor's erratic behavior as indicators of her own achievement and worth. Rather, she came to understand that academicians may project their own issues onto students if they are not mindful of boundaries and the impact they can have on their students' course of study. Brooke also found friendships forged through her studies were useful in propelling her research:

> I maintain relationships with others that were [important] to my research… [I have] a friend who's really good at statistics. I get with her when I'm doing my stats because she's really good at helping me to figure that out. I've got another friend [that] completed [her degree], and [I'm] getting her advice on some of the obstacles she encountered.

Some women lost friendships because their friends could not understand how doctoral study can complicate ones' schedule; other women slowly made friends through community involvement, clubs, and associations. The participants received academic and social support from their interactions with other Black women in doctoral programs. Their social interactions allowed them to gain information about how to navigate graduate education, garner feedback in preparation for qualifying exams and dissertation proposals, and practice dissertation defenses.

The participants in this study demonstrated how friendship served different purposes. Where some participants were single and more available to socialize, other participants were balancing family and doctoral study along with their social lives. Some were near home and enjoyed an established circle of friends, while others had relocated and worked to create a community in their new surroundings. Some participants also reported appreciating friendships that were more aligned with their studies and less personal. These differences in relationship types were contingent upon the preferences of the participants.

Holistic Mentoring

Participants discussed the benefits of mentoring in a variety of ways. Overall, they found mentoring to be instrumental to their academic, professional, and personal development. Participants described mentors as advocates and facilitators of their professional socialization. Both aspects were significant to them persisting in their graduate programs and preparing for postgraduate careers.

Mentors as Advocates

The most commonly reported description of mentors was their ability to advocate for the needs of students. Having a mentor to serve in this capacity provided solace amid the many obstacles encountered in their programs. For example, participants mentioned how good mentors "went to bat for you." Bonnie explained:

> I tell all students; you want somebody who will go to bat for you. And that's the most pivotal thing, the most important thing I know without a doubt that my chair did. I mean literally at my defense; he says leave her alone she knows what she's talking about.

Similar to other participants in the study, Bonnie discussed how her chair and mentor were willing to advocate for their proteges, even if it meant having an opinion that differed from their colleagues'. These actions conveyed to students that despite the hardships of doctoral education, they would persevere because mentors were supporting their success. Such experiences were critical to helping participants maintain aspirational capital and develop resistance capital. Because faculty mentors were instrumental in aiding participants in maneuvering unforeseen challenges with committees, participants' hopes of earning doctoral degrees were sustained. Faculty mentors also served as important mechanisms and sources of information to resist institutional and structural barriers.

Mentors as Professional Socializers

Mentors socialized participants for graduate education and postgraduate careers, whether they chose to become professors or work in industry. For example, Bonnie illuminated these socialization processes in her interview:

> He was really good at like here "meet this person." It was one of my mentors [who] told me to have a CV by month. The idea was that each month you should be adding something to your CV. It's really neat, because…it forces [you to] always have something in the pipeline.

Although Bonnie's recounting of her mentor's advice about meeting people, going to conferences, and "always having something in the pipeline" may seem rudimentary, it became apparent that not every participant had access to these forms of social and navigational capital. Some participants noted they did not belong to any professional associations or organizations; they had not presented at conferences, published a paper, or submitted a grant proposal. Additionally, participants who had quality mentoring and coaching experiences like Bonnie differed from participants who had not received the same kind of information and strategies for navigating aspects of the academy and their respective professions. The latter were still trying to figure out their postgraduate plans or felt concerned they had little exposure to mentoring in graduate school.

Participants also expressed the value of mentors at every stage of the process, from applying to graduate programs to degree completion. Gayle explained:

> I wouldn't have applied to the PhD program…learned the difference in writing between showing and telling…[and] really considered issues of power in higher education if it wasn't for my mentors…mentors for me have opened doors. And even more so, I think opened my mind to possibilities.

Gayle unearthed the added value of faculty mentors. Like Bonnie, she had someone encouraging her, as well as sharing information and resources at every critical juncture of the doctoral process. Without such guidance, Gayle may have been in the same predicament as other participants who were struggling with their writing and conceptualization of their ideas.

Support Garnered from Professional Associations and Networks

Nine out of the 14 participants had some involvement with professional organizations and societies. It is also worth noting, where local networks of scholars and researchers did not exist, the participants took it upon themselves to build these organizations. These tendencies speak to the CCW among Black women and their fortitude in developing and actualizing supportive communities. Additionally, social media played a significant role in helping Black women establish networks when there was limited visibility of or access to other Black women in their graduate programs.

Professional Associations

Of the participants who were members of professional organizations and associations, many had received fellowships and grants from these affiliations. They also identified opportunities and ideas for advancing their research and scholarship. For example, Gayle explained how these networks provided her with opportunities to publish:

> And I don't have the same money, resources, connections, etc. [as others] but I've been invited [to work with other researchers, and now] we have a chapter coming out on Black students in community colleges. I learned from Sheryll Lee [pseudonym] the importance of having a national network, so that I can call…and say, "hey, I have a question about this," or saying "hey, do you mind helping me with this manuscript and I will give you second author?" I saw her do that. Literally, I watched her do it, and so then I did it.

Like Gayle, Megan discussed how attending a conference helped her to find other researchers pursuing similar areas of inquiry. She commented:

> I found this association of Christian student development, became a member, and went to this conference last year. I was one of maybe three or four students from a secular institution. The majority of [participants] were [from] Christian institutions, and I got the chance to network with folks, which might be an opportunity for me later on.

Through this experience, Megan realized there was a home for her scholarship. Prior to this opportunity, Megan worked as a "lone wolf" on her research, believing there would be little interest in her work. Professional associations gave Black women access to social capital they would not have had otherwise. Through these forms of involvement, the women were able to expand their networks, generate opportunities to attain fellowships and other funding support, share ideas about their research, and find avenues to disseminate their research through learning strategies for preparing manuscripts for publication and co-authoring.

Establishing Groups and Organizations

Several participants discussed how they established organizations to meet the needs of Black women in doctoral programs. These groups contributed to a greater sense of belonging and fulfilled pragmatic needs such as connecting to like-minded scholars. Gayle explained: "A lot of times we had to forge ways because the university was going through some stuff. [So, I co-founded] a Womyn of Color network."

Other participants mentioned initiating or joining writing and study groups. These groups became especially vital as sources of navigational capital once the coursework phase of their programs ended. For instance, Raelle highlighted how her supervisor initiated one of these groups:

> My supervisor, at the time [I was writing] my dissertation, started a biweekly dissertation group for all of us who were his supervisees to meet together, motivate each other, form bonds, and work with each other on finishing our [dissertations]. My boss let me leave work to go to this group. If he wasn't so amazing, I would not at all been able to do everything I was doing. That's really what helped me. That group definitely helped.

Previous research points out that the phase after completion of coursework may be one of the most challenging times for doctoral students in completing their degrees. Raelle's sentiments seemed to reinforce this view of a common problem, and the group established by her supervisor provided the support she needed during this time.

Social Media

Another emergent theme was the role social media played in helping Black women make connections and establish networks with professionals and students across the country. Lisa explained:

> One of my church members turned me on to four or five different Facebook groups. It's been encouraging me as well because you got people who are just starting, who are in the middle, or who had done it. There are support groups specifically for Black PhDs and Black women so that's been a help to me as well because I've been looking at them like, okay, so this is what I need to do, [or] oh, this is a book I need to read.

The use of social media was especially important for Lisa, who was an online student. In her interview, she discussed how isolating online education can be. Finding community through social media, especially among other Black women, provided inspiration and much-needed tools and resources. Tammy also mentioned the value of Facebook in her interview: "You get words of encouragement and wisdom from others who are in similar positions and have gone through similar stuff. So, I go there to get support." Furthermore, participants revealed that forms of support existed within—and outside of—the academy. Faculty members, graduate school peers, family, and community members played multiple roles in the networks inhabited by these women. Likewise, social media provided additional levels of information-sharing and strategies that participants applied to their circumstances.

Discussion

As in other studies (Apugo, 2017; McCallum, 2016; Schwartz, et al., 2003; Sweitzer, 2009), relationships emerged as a viable factor that contributed to degree completion among the participants in this study. Within the postsecondary sector, knowledge is the greatest, most transactional form of currency. Our findings suggest that relationships are vital for creating conditions under which Black women doctoral students best absorb, make meaning of, and create knowledge and thus enrich their cultural capital. Several relationship types

were illuminated in this study, including family ties, friendships, mentor bonds, and association/group membership. In an environment where independence, isolation, and competition are emphasized as values, the vitality of these connections emphasizes the myriad ways relationships serve as a source of encouragement and persistence for Black women doctoral students. Further still, when analyzing our findings through the lens of CCW, we observed the ways in which participants engaged in various types of relationships that supported different aspects of their cultural capital.

The significance of these relationships showed that aspirational capital was displayed by several participants in the maintenance of a family legacy to complete doctoral education. Navigational and social capital were employed to transcend the nuances of higher education to complete, publish, collaborate, and present research. These women also relied heavily on familial capital to succeed in the academy, where family members not only encouraged participants to pursue a terminal degree, but also offered insight into ways the participants could actively resist oppression. Participants also achieved resistant capital when negotiating institutional and structural barriers such as committee interactions and policies and procedures specific to doctoral education. Several women acknowledged that they found it necessary to actively engage techniques that challenged inequities emergent throughout the process of obtaining a doctoral degree. They frequently mentioned the ways sister circles, mentors, and colleagues in professional associations provided them with examples of oppositional tactics they could implement to offset encounters with bias, exclusion, and aggression (e.g., identifying a new dissertation chair or advisor, filing incident reports/grievances with the institution, etc.). The continued development of the participants' cultural wealth during the course of their studies situated them to advance their agency, and the diversity of their social identities contributed to the diverse ways each woman chose to employ agency.

In alignment with the work published by Schwartz et al. (2003), the participants in this study credited the family unit with having served several functions. Family bonds primarily contributed to participants' understanding of self, culture, and history. The women in this study relied on their families to inform their decisions to pursue a doctoral degree, where family background influenced prospective research interests and institutional/program selection. For these participants, pursuing a doctoral degree was just as communal a process as it was an independent endeavor. The women in this study elected to complete a doctorate to honor their ancestors, grandparents, and parents/guardians, and to positively influence younger family members.

Mentors were found to be essential to the success of Black women doctoral students, especially mentors who shared the same backgrounds as the participants. Among the benefits of mentorship were mentors' attention to the growth, development, and career advancement of the participants (Brown et al., 1999; Jones, Wilder, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). While much past research identified mentorship as a positive indicator in the completion rates of

Black women doctoral students, an important finding that emerged from this study was the value of having mentors who advocated in the presence of other committee members. The entanglements of power and social location are frequently laid bare within committee hierarchies, where Black women are vulnerable to subordination because of their marginalized status in the academy. Mentors advocating in the presence of committee members redistribute power dynamics and validate the intellectual capacity of Black women doctoral students, while upending faculty attempts to suppress the work of Black women. This finding also corresponds with the tenets of CCW, illustrating how mentors transmit navigational capital during the dissertation phase of a doctoral program (Yosso, 2005).

Social networks also emerged as a fundamental resource in advancing the professional identities of Black women within higher education. Nuanced by race and gender, social networks may become more than conduits for information and resources to enable persistence. Largely, social networks attended to the holistic needs of the Black women participating in this study, particularly those networks forged within academic spaces, where students' professional connections with one another blossomed into social relationships. Still, if the development of these networks were not facilitated by Black faculty, staff, or students, they were seldom generated within predominantly White academic spaces. Our findings underscore both the necessity of social networks and the requisite obligation that academic units carry in remaining intentional about providing such spaces to Black women doctoral students, spaces that should effectively reflect culturally significant praxis and pedagogies. While participants were able to leverage national professional organizations, scholars, and social media to establish a community, opportunities for these same connections and collaborations were lacking within most institutional settings.

Within these contexts, it is important to recognize the use of social media in connecting Black women doctoral students with social and support groups, as well as with other Black women in doctoral programs. The operationalization of social media networks created space for community building, which was particularly salient among participants who found difficulty in navigating the political climate of their institutions and/or those geographically located in sparsely populated regions. Finally, the participants in this study also developed "sister doc" groups to mitigate isolation and alienation, as determined in previous studies (Carver, 2017; Jordan, 2017). This study carried previous research further: our findings captured the formation of sister circles in virtual spaces and how they extended the lived experiences of Black women doctoral students beyond physical domains into virtual domains. With advances in internet technologies, our participants highlighted the utility of virtual support networks in providing them with additional opportunities to attain support, guidance, and peer mentorship. These groups served as another space to transfer cultural wealth. With specific regard to progressing through doctoral programs, virtual sister circles offered explicit guidance on ways to maneuver different stages of doctoral study, including

preparing for proposal and dissertation defenses, strengthening research projects, leveraging relationships, and uncovering resources and opportunities.

Essentially, our findings emphasize the ways relationship building and maintenance are integral components of the successful completion of doctoral study among Black women. Therefore, considerations for holistic relationship development should become ingrained within doctoral program curricula. Currently, a focus on professional relationships with mentors, advisors, prospective employers, and collegial networks remain at the core of doctoral student socialization.

Implications

Black women persist in graduate school due to their ability to utilize multiple sources of support to their advantage. For the participants in the current study, many of these forms of support were found outside of university contexts. Therefore, faculty advisors and mentors should encourage such connections, and remain informed about opportunities dedicated to supporting marginalized individuals. For example, organizations such as SOTA, BGSA, and AABHE offer practical and socio-emotional support (Davis-Maye et al., 2013). Advisors should also engage students in conversations about how they are establishing and maintaining critical relationships that may be important to their success. Faculty and student affairs professionals must also become conduits of relationship-building on campus through developing formal mentoring programs and networking opportunities, as well as champions for sustaining relationships with significant connections off campus. Formalizing relationship development processes requires capacity-building programs to ensure faculty and staff are adequately prepared to fulfill mentoring roles. Providing faculty and staff with opportunities to engage in workshops, access literature, and gain awareness of their students' lived experiences will better position them to build rapport and trust, and be culturally responsive to Black women students (Gay, 2018). Understanding that Black women are not monolithic, diversity efforts centering the importance of relationships must inculcate a textured conceptualization of identity that recognizes the differences among communities of Black women. In other words, faculty and staff should work to catalyze relationships between and across difference among, and with, Black women (Patton & Harper, 2003).

Social media offers potentially vital resources for Black women seeking doctoral degrees. The digital presence that centers on Black women and their work is evident in social media spaces such as #CiteASista and #BlackWomenPhDs. As Black women work to carve out a place for themselves within doctoral programs, digital spaces offer an opportunity for them to have their experiences as well as their work validated. Social media provides the opportunity for Black women to solidify their foundation and feel appreciated, and it offers freedom from misogyny as they journey along to the road to a PhD (Hernández, 2015; Williams, 2015). In the absence of Black faculty mentorship, it can be difficult for a Black woman to develop an identity as a future scholar, researcher, and academic (Grant & Ghee, 2015; Jones et al., 2013).

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APPENDIX A

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information (N=14)

Pseudonym	Institution Type (Carnegie Classification)	Discipline/Field of Study	Year in the program	Age	Romantic Relationship status	Number of children
Ashlei Renee'	Mid-size public research university	Educational Leadership	First	33	Married	2
Bonnie	Research university – very high research activity	Nutritional Sciences	Sixth	32	Married	0
Gayle	Research university – very high research activity	Education	Fifth	33	Not in a relationship	0
Lena	Research university – very high research activity	Genetics	Fifth	28	Dating	0
Lisa	Doctoral university with moderate research activity; private/for-profit university	Education	First	35	Single	1
Megan	Doctoral university; higher research activity; public	Educational leadership	Second	48	Widow	1
Olivia	Research university – very high research activity	Psychology	First	23	Dating	0
Penelope	Private, for-profit; Master's college and universities	Organizational Development	Recent graduate	40	Divorced	0
Raelle	Doctoral university; higher research activity; private	Couple and Family Therapy	One-year post-PhD	30	Domestic Partnership	1
Rayna	Private, for-profit	Special Education Administration	Fourth	29	Single	0
S. Mac	Doctoral university; higher research activity; public	Addiction & Rehabilitation studies	Two-years post-PhD	33	Married	1
Simone	Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs; public	Educational Leadership	Two-years Post-PhD	45	Married	5
Tammy	Doctoral university; higher research activity; public	Educational administration	Fourth	42	Dating	0
Taylor	Private not-for-profit; Special Focus Four-Year: Medical Schools & Centers	Molecular Physiology and Biophysics	One-year Post-PhD	31	Dating	0

APPENDIX B

Table 2
Emergent Themes

Theme	Categories	Connection to the Theory (present forms of capital)
"Family is everything" Refers to the wrap-around support provided by familial relationships	motivator for enrollment and degree completion; sounding board during trying times; a space for processing the doctoral experience; source of strength, encouragement, information, and understanding; validate lived experiences; instrumental in graduate program selection; informed research interests; made sacrifices to push participant forward	Aspirational Social Navigational Familial
Reliable friends Indicates friendship groups as trusted and dependable	helpful in alleviating isolation; offered emotional and financial support; integral in making sense of the doctoral process; assists in understanding political situations within departments and the broader academy; garner feedback in preparation for qualifying exams and dissertation proposals; audience for practicing dissertation defenses; provide academic and social support	Social Navigational Resistant
Holistic mentoring Recognizes that mentoring can provide multiple and varied supports; mentoring that addresses academic, professional, and personal needs	advocates; aids advisees in maneuvering unforeseen challenges with graduate committees; facilitates professional socialization; sources of information to resist institutional and structural barriers; provides support at every stage of the doctoral process including application and degree completion; shares information and resources	Aspirational Resistant Social Navigational
Support garnered from professional associations and networks Identifies knowledge, resources, and information transmitted from affiliations with professional associations and networks	provides access to and procurement of fellowships and grants; opportunities and ideas for advancing research and scholarship; identify others researchers pursuing similar areas of inquiry; expand network locally and nationally; receive opportunities and learn strategies for publishing and co-authoring scholarly work; connecting to like-minded scholars; enhances sense of belonging; access to writing and study groups; forge pathways when none exists (e.g., starting new orgs.); social media as a conduit for networks when there is limited visibility of or access to other Black women in their graduate programs; social media networks mitigate isolation for online learners	Social Navigational Resistant