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Doctoral Students

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# Why So Much Blackness? Race in the Dissertation Topics and Research of Black Male Doctoral Students

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**C. Spencer Platt and Adriel Hilton**

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the perspectives of Black male doctoral students around selecting dissertation and research topics. In addition to the challenges that all doctoral students face when selecting a dissertation topic, Black male doctoral students also have had to come to terms with how much or how little race matters in their research agendas. In doing so, the authors find that they possess a unique academic currency that enables them to diversify the literature and connects the needs of the community to the resources of the university.

## INTRODUCTION

While conducting interviews for a phenomenological study on the experiences of Black male doctoral students it became apparent that most of the study's participants sought to understand the workings of race within their degree field. This article explores how Black male doctoral students made sense of their decisions to research race in their degree fields and whether there are forces at play that compel them to do so.

Selecting a dissertation topic is a major concern for most doctoral students. The dissertation is an original, substantial, and independent academic project. It presents the student with the opportunity to find a narrowly focused niche within

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the academic field on which they will become an expert. For many, this is the first major independent academic project. The dissertation is different from other academic papers written by doctoral students in four important ways. First, there is no assigned topic; students must find their own. Second, there is no due date; students often must manage the project without the deadlines and external accountability they have grown to expect. Additionally, the breadth and depth of the project is significantly greater than any other project the typical student has been involved in to that point. Finally, both the proposal and the final product must typically be defended orally before a group of scholars. It is through this research project, designing, conducting, and managing it from start to finish, that students prove themselves worthy of the PhD. One participant noted the process of selecting his dissertation topic and associated research questions as being similar to that of an undeclared undergraduate looking to find a major, only with much tighter parameters. The dissertation also sets a trajectory for one's career, as it shapes the early career research agenda of those who go on to faculty roles. If the doctoral student has yet to identify with any research topic, the dissertation will serve that purpose. Those pursuing faculty careers generally use data from their dissertation for the research presentation portion of on-campus job interviews.

Black doctoral students have all of the angst that other doctoral students have around choosing a dissertation topic. However, they must also figure out how to navigate race in their research. That is not to suggest that Black doctoral students must choose to study or address race explicitly in their research but it does suggest that Black doctoral students must come to terms with how much or how little race or Blackness matters to their research interests.

## PURPOSE

Very little is known about the impact of academic socialization on Black doctoral students (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Despite the fact that research on race in doctoral education has explored many aspects of the doctoral experience, ranging from socialization to parental educational background (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014), no known study focuses on race and its impact on the research and dissertation topics of doctoral students of color.

The socialization experiences of Black male doctoral students have not been adequately studied and documented in the literature (Ingram, 2007; Platt, 2015). In addition to the creation of new knowledge, this research has practical application for both higher education and the nation at large as it seeks to illuminate manners in which development of a diverse leadership class may be fostered through the recruitment and retention of Black male doctoral students. Failure to include Black males in doctoral programs places the continuation of the Black male professoriate

in peril (Ingram, 2007), as doctoral programs may be considered the anticipatory stage of the professoriate (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Gardner, 2007, 2008). Students of color at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels would likely be negatively affected by the absence or continued reduction in Black male faculty, as they often serve as mentors and role models to students of color.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The struggles of Black males at various stages, from their entry into the school system through their undergraduate experience, are well documented (Cuyjet, 1997; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Harper, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). Problematically, over 65% of Black males who enter college do not graduate within six years (Harper, 2008). With large percentages of Black male students not graduating at the high school and collegiate levels, the eligible pool of potential Black male doctoral students (BMDs) has decreased.

It is in graduate school that doctoral students are introduced to the roles and expectations of academia by faculty and advisors. Faculty mentorship plays a significant role in doctoral students' academic life and career preparation (Platt, 2012; Platt, Maher, & Davis, 2014). In Nettles and Millet's 2006 study of 9,036 doctoral students, they found that academic interaction with faculty was an area where race and discipline mattered. Blacks and Hispanics reported different experiences in doctoral programs than their White colleagues. Blacks and Hispanics were found to be less likely to graduate and less likely to have strong faculty mentors aid in their development. These findings suggest that more research is needed to understand the experiences of Black males and other minorities in doctoral programs.

Doctoral student socialization activities and experiences are often those that both acquaint doctoral students with their formal roles and responsibilities as well as the hidden expectations of their advisors, department, and university. This includes activities and experiences that aid in their development as a future faculty member and professional. Examples of these activities and experiences are interactions with faculty, peer interactions, faculty mentorship, research and publishing opportunities, fellowships, teaching assistantships, and research assistantships (Gardner, 2007; Golde, 1998; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001). Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) argue that success is predicated not only on successful management and completion of academic demands, but also on the student's ability to recognize many of the informal and subtle attitudes, values, and politics of faculty and peers in their program. It is through the socialization process that students acquire not only their new roles, but also the values, attitudes, interests, skills, knowledge, and culture of the group into which they are earning admission (Golde, 2005; Golde & Walker, 2006).

Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) agree that socialization theories have been normed on a White male standard, making them unreliable in understanding the experiences of students of color. They wrote: "Because socialization and training norms revolve around a White male standard, out-group members (in this case women and minorities) may well regard their instruction and expectations as unrealistic by comparison" (p. 45). It is important to examine and analyze how students from diverse backgrounds are socialized. As such, recent models have made efforts to take into account that higher education is increasingly diverse, but they fail to deeply address the socialization of underrepresented students or norm socialization models on diverse groups of students by including them in studies in significant numbers.

The underrepresentation (Gardner & Holley, 2011) and marginalization (Noy & Ray, 2012) of scholars of color in the academy is well documented. Noy and Ray (2012) argue that scholars of color, including Asians, have their academic identities devalued. While it is often argued that doctoral students undergo a double socialization, being simultaneously socialized into their discipline and their graduate student roles. It appears that doctoral students of color have an additional layer of socialization or a triple socialization. This third layer of socialization pertains to navigating issues of race within the discipline and department (Platt, Maher, & Davis, 2014).

The attrition or departure rate from doctoral education is notoriously high, approximately 57% across disciplines (King, 2008), and academic socialization is at least partly to blame (Gay, 2004; Gonzales, 2007; Gopaul, 2011). Critical scholars have argued that academic socialization is done systematically and covertly to challenge the cultural foundations of student lives, which is particularly impactful to students of color (Gay, 2004; Gonzales, 2007; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Gonzales (2006) found that Latinas felt conflicted about doctoral socialization and often resisted it. Some were successful at resisting and others were not. Successful resistance to academic socialization often necessitated finding alternative sources of support and community, becoming more assertive and in some cases becoming more activist oriented in their research agendas. Unsuccessful resistance often resulted in isolation and marginalization. Students who successfully resisted were able to find their own academic voice and this process in and of itself served as a form of doctoral socialization (Anthony, 2002). However, those who unsuccessfully resist socialization reported a severe loss of academic confidence, academic voice, and an increased likelihood of attrition.

## METHODS

This qualitative study reports on individual interviews with nine Black male doctoral students at a predominantly White university, named for this study,

Research University (which serves as a pseudonym). A qualitative research method was selected to better understand the experiences and social and intellectual processes within doctoral programs in education and the social sciences for Black males. This approach allowed for an in-depth investigation of the unique lived realities of Black male doctoral students through their individual voices.

Advantages of qualitative work include the ability to study individuals in their own setting and to give voice to the marginalized. The in-depth interview is the favorite “digging tool” of the social scientist (Benny & Hughes, 1970), the strengths of which include its flexibility and dynamic qualities (Taylor & Bogden, 1998)

### *Description of Participants*

Research University consistently ranks among the nation’s leading producers of doctoral degree earners (NCES, 2008). At the time of the study, there were over 5,000 doctoral students enrolled but only 167 or 3.25% of whom were Black. The nine participants in this study made up 16% of all enrolled Black male doctoral students at the time and they ranged from roughly 25 to 40 years of age.

The life experiences of participants prior to their doctoral study varied widely in significant areas such as family structure, academic performance in school, family’s educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and demographic make-up of the communities in which they lived. For example, five of the nine hailed from two parent households, and four of those five families consisted of both biological parents. Single parents raised three participants and one participant’s parents had joint custody. Participants hail from the West Coast, East Coast, and the areas in between. There are first generation college students while others come from families with multiple generations of college graduates and likewise, they hail from low-income backgrounds as well as more affluent origins. In their undergraduate studies, they attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as well as predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and one attended a community college. Participants in many ways reflect the diversity that exists within the Black community, which is often not very well understood by society at large.

Nearly all of the participants spent large portions of their lives growing up in predominantly Black neighborhoods. However, by high school many had moved to more diverse neighborhoods. It is particularly interesting to note that despite their varied backgrounds, none of them attended schools that could be considered high-poverty, high-minority high schools. Even those who lived in high-minority, high-poverty neighborhoods by some twist of fate, wound up attending diverse high schools or predominantly White schools rather than the neighborhood schools in which they would have been zoned.

**Table 1.1: Descriptives of Respondents**

Name	K-12		Traditional		College	Marital Status	Children	Region
	Neighborhood	Schooling	Student	Doctoral				
Cedric	Diverse	Diverse	No	No	College of Education	Single	No	South Atlantic
Corey	Black	Diverse	No	No	College of Education	Married	Yes	WSC
Earnest	Diverse	Diverse	No	No	College of Education	Married	Yes	WSC
Elijah	Black	PWS	No	No	Liberal Arts	Single	No	WSC
Jamaal	Black	PWS	Yes	Yes	Liberal Arts	Single	No	Mid-Atlantic
Melvin	White	PWS	No	No	College of Communications	Domestic Partnership	No	Pacific
Peter	White	PWS	Yes	Yes	College of Communications	Single	No	South Atlantic
Reggie	Black	PWS	No	No	College of Education	Married	Yes	Pacific
Terrence	White	PWS	No	No	College of Education	Married	No	Pacific

**Notes:**

PWS= Predominately White K-12 school(s)

Neighborhood: Neighborhood(s) during high school years

Official US regions designated by Census Bureau:

South Atlantic: Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida

Pacific: Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Hawaii

WSC (West South Central): Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas

Participants in this study were earning their doctoral degrees in a variety of academic programs in social science and liberal arts fields. No two students were in the same program. In fact, they each were the only Black male doctoral student in their program at the time. Despite the fact that all of the participants are Black males, there is a large degree of difference within this group. Participants in this study are not homogenous and several were not necessarily high academic achievers prior to their undergraduate degree programs, only becoming fully engaged academically as college students. In fact several took very circuitous, nontraditional routes to the doctorate. The next section will explore the findings from this research.

### *Participant Selection*

Participants were identified through department chairpersons, program coordinators, and the Black Graduate Student Association. Individual, semi-structured interviews took between 90 and 120 minutes each. Each of the nine participants was interviewed twice and additional follow-up interviews took place as needed. All of the participants in this study were currently enrolled and in good standing with their programs at Research University, a public, predominantly White, research I university. Participants came from a wide variety of fields and disciplines and varied widely in terms of background characteristics outside of racial categorization.

Participants were identified through criterion sampling (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). The following criterion was used to identify participants:

1. Are pursuing the PhD (not other doctorates)
2. Are enrolled in their third year of doctoral study or beyond
3. Are full-time students
4. Entered their PhD programs with aspirations to become faculty members.

### *Data Collection and the Interview Process*

Nine Black male doctoral students agreed to participate in two in-depth, semi-structured interviews and possible follow-up interviews via telephone. However, two participants were living or conducting research in other parts of the country, for those participants interviews were conducted via telephone. Homogenous sampling methods were employed to interview individuals based on membership in a subgroup that has distinct characteristics (Creswell, 2005). Participants in the study completed a profile sheet, including background

information on home and family structures, both current and of their family of origin, socioeconomic status, educational history, relationship status, and organizational affiliations. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of all participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

There is a very limited population of Black male doctoral students at Research University; therefore, degree areas are clustered when discussing results to preserve the anonymity of participants. Sense-making and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) were done through follow-up meetings with individual participants and small groups of participants. Additional follow-up phone calls also served this purpose.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) prescribed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure methodological and procedural rigor for qualitative studies. The following measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of this study: informal observations, follow-up interviews, peer briefings, and member checking. To ensure credibility, feedback was solicited from faculty and doctoral students who are experienced qualitative researchers with familiarity with Black men's issues or with doctoral student issues. We also used peer debriefing or "exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 308).

### *Data Analysis*

Once participants verified the accuracy of their interview transcript, each was qualitatively analyzed using the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2009). In this method, each transcript was read twice to gain holistic familiarity before an attempt to identify important themes and establish categories was made. Then, data analysis took place by looking for word repetition, key terms, and keywords in context. This emergent process allowed for themes and constructs to be incorporated as the analysis of the interview data progressed.

### *Disclosure of Personal Interest—Positionality*

The lead author at the time was a Black male doctoral student. Both authors are former members of the executive boards of a campus-based and a national organization that advocates for Black graduate students. Currently both authors are faculty members at PWIs and therefore have insider knowledge on this topic in many ways.

## FINDINGS

For participants in this study, connecting their research agendas to the needs of the community was of vital importance. Addressing racial components of their broader topic was viewed as critical and necessary for these scholars. However, this type of research is not always well received. When it is not well received or supported the doctoral student encounters an even higher degree of challenge in navigating the doctoral program.

### *Obligated by Race*

This project unexpectedly emerged from a larger study examining the experiences of Black male doctoral students. Participants were asked directly about their thoughts on race and race-related research. Additionally, they were asked if they felt obligated in any way or by anyone to conduct research related to race. In response to this line of questioning, it was clear that participants had a positive regard for research on race but most were still uncomfortable stating that they felt “obligated” to study it.

Eight of the nine BMDs in this study research racialized aspects of their fields; more specifically they study African American or Black aspects of their respective fields as their dissertation topic. This begs several questions, most importantly: Why is race, particularly Blackness, so central to the research of Black male doctoral students? What compels BMDs to study Blackness? Do they feel obligated in some way to study issues of race? Do they fear being pigeonholed as “race scholars” thereby limiting the growth potential of their careers? For these participants, often these questions were answered by reflecting on what initially drew them to graduate school in the first place. Corey for example, had the following to say:

I was an assistant principal seeing a lot of achievement disparity between White majority students and our minority students. I was really concerned about why our children weren't achieving at higher rates. I really wasn't in a position to make the kind of impact I wanted to make on these children. On a day-to-day basis and on an individual basis, I could take the children that were called into my office. I could take the kids I see on a day-to-day basis and try to intervene on their behalf and try to mentor them. But there were so many of them and I felt like it was a systemic issue. I couldn't put the blame on any particular group; I can't say it's the fault of the teachers. I couldn't say it's the fault of the parents, I couldn't say it's the fault of the community. I couldn't say it was the fault of the students, and I couldn't say it's the fault of the administrators but what I found was that it was often policy that drove these outcomes. With that being said, I was still lost at figuring out how to fix the issues. I've

always been taught that if you don't know how to do something, then you go learn how. So I signed up, brought my family along, and here I am back in school. I found a problem and haven't yet found a solution and I hope that by graduation I do have solutions. But if I don't, then that's what my career is for; I will keep on working at it.

For Corey and others there were concrete problems that needed to be addressed but the racial elements of these issues were particularly interesting. The desire to make a difference by changing the way issues are spoken about and thought about motivates most of them. Whether obligated or compelled, eight of the nine participants in this study chose topics that are either directly related to race or had very strong racial components. It is important to note that every participant felt he had the autonomy to choose the research/dissertation topic of their liking, but the majority were drawn to racialized topics.

Six of the nine BMD participants have Black advisors; all of the participants who had Black advisors also had dissertation topics that had strong race components. Of the six BMDs with Black advisors, four of the six had Black males as advisors. All of the Black advisors also research race-related topics. However, none of the participants felt led or directed by their advisors toward race-related research but found it relieving and liberating to have Black faculty advisors who do research that is similar to their interests. Two of the three BMDs with White advisors also researched race-related topics. The three participants with White dissertation advisors agreed that they never felt faculty pressure to pursue or avoid race in their research. One participant noted that he was initially paired with a White male advisor who researched an interesting topic. The doctoral student worked with him for a while but ultimately came to the realization that he wanted to do a different type of scholarship, with race being a more central issue.

Most participants argued they were not obligated by race, by community expectations, by a faculty advisor, or by others in the department to specialize in race-work, but nonetheless they gravitated toward race. If it is true, how can the prominence of Blackness in their research interests be explained? Melvin, a communications student, explained that he felt that much of his reason for being in a doctoral program was to try to solve some of the issues and problems of his community through his research.

I don't know if my race obligates me to serve the community through my research but I do feel that's partly why I am here. It's my life experience, and the experience of the people who have helped me along the way; it has shaped who I am. I see a very distinct difference between why people of color do research and why White researchers do research. A lot of White researchers do it because

it is an interesting topic or that's what's hot in the field but what I see with a lot of researchers of color is that it is something that is meaningful to themselves, it's a part of who they are and I know that's true of my own research. I know that this field and how it works has shaped my own identity. So it's interesting, it's beyond interesting, to see how it shapes Black men as a collective. It's hard for me to divvy out what is personal and what's academic because it's very much tied together.

He was arguing that to the Black academic there is a connection with the research that cuts to the core of who he is. It is intellectually and academically interesting but there is an undeniably personal connection to the research topic.

Corey agreed with Melvin's assessment of the meaningful, personal connection BMDs have with their research topics. However, unlike most other participants, he argued that he is indeed obligated to study race. It was the plight of Black and Brown students in the K–12 educational system that originally drove him to pursue his doctorate. Therefore, choosing to study anything other than issues of race in the school system would constitute a betrayal of the students that he left behind in the school system as well as a betrayal of his own desire to give back to underserved, racial minority communities. He stated:

I feel very much obligated to study race. We have to go back to what brings me to my work. It may not be true for everyone but it is for me because I gave up a lot to come here. If that was my goal in coming here (finding ways to combat the achievement gap) then I think I need to hold true to that goal. Or else all the things I gave up to come here would have been in vain because I sacrificed a lot to come here.

It is this desire to make a meaningful contribution to a topic that is both personally and academically interesting and important that keeps BMDs motivated through the lonely and winding journey of writing the dissertation. It also connects scholars and the university to the needs of underserved communities. While participants disagree about whether they were in any way "obligated" to research race, as this may overstate the case, they clearly feel strongly compelled toward it.

### *Blackness as Academic Currency: We Are the Gap*

As previously stated, for Black male doctoral students, the personal and academic are very much tied together. Ernest argued that all doctoral students are trained to find the "gaps in the literature" but it is often true that Black issues are often left largely unexplored. This makes research on Black topics economically beneficial

to Black scholars. This is also a large part of why there is so much Blackness in the academic interests of Black scholars.

I think it's more complex than just simply saying I'm Black and so have to write about Black things. But I do think we are conditioned and we feel a responsibility to study issues that affect Black people because the literature is still so sparse in regards to the things that make us who we are. So I might be interested in history and I will look and see there is already research done and then I think well, what about Black kids? What about Black history? So in many ways it is economically beneficial for us to do "Black research" because that's often a gap in the literature. But when we find a gap in the literature sometimes it is hard to believe that this is what's missing. Sometimes it's hard to believe that in this day and age nobody's done this kind of work. First of all, it is economically beneficial and then second, we see that gap and can't believe it's not being done and it kind of sets up our research agenda for the future. So I guess in a sense I am saying that we are obligated to do research about Black folks because if we don't do it who is going to do it? So I think our experiences may be different from other persons but that is the way we diversify the academy and broaden the literature.

There are several things going on in Ernest's statement. Ernest started out stating that Black scholars should not feel obligated to study race but in the middle of his explanation, he changed course to say that Black scholars in some ways are obligated to study race. As noted earlier, there was some reluctance on the part of some participants to state that there is an obligation to study topics related to race. He suggested that Black doctoral students may not necessarily come into doctoral programs with the intention of studying racial aspects of their academic fields but it happens largely as a combination of academic training along with an absence or inadequacy of prior research in the area. In areas where the academic literature on the Black experience is underdeveloped Black scholars may be in a prime position to address this as their personal and academic interests align.

There was one participant in this study who does not research race in his dissertation and does not ever intend to research it. Reggie believes that by being Black he brings a unique perspective to almost any topic he researches. For that reason, he decided to study a topic that was not related to race.

I will always be Black and that won't change. I don't necessarily need that to be a part of my research because it will always be a part of my research just based on who I am. I don't have to research Black people, or any multicultural topic. I mean, I'm Black. I see things from a different perspective than perhaps most people. It is important to me but I thought about that when I was considering my research interests, I thought about not wanting to be pigeonholed as a Black scholar or as a scholar who only looks at Black history, Black this or Black that.

Reggie chose to research a topic that is not related to race in an effort to keep from being pigeonholed as a “Black” scholar. However, as a BMD it may be more difficult to avoid the “Black” scholar label than simply avoiding race-related research.

Peter does have a race-related topic, but did not feel obligated to research such a subject within his field. He maintains, however, that whatever the topic of study, doctoral students must be passionate about the topic.

There should be a passion for whatever you do. These people don't love what they do and as a result they are getting very unhealthy, you see them gaining a lot of weight or they have psychological issues. A lot of them study Black issues, issues that could be of some importance, but they don't do anything with it, they are out there detached from reality.

Peter reasoned that in addition to being passionate about one's dissertation topic, there must be some practical utility or broader impact of the research as well. He also argued that scholars must be attached to a practical reality, despite the fact that the academic career is commonly perceived as devoting one's self to a life of the mind. Peter's point is similar to Melvin's earlier argument that his research topic extends into the very core of his existence, and this serves to keep him grounded through a doctoral process that can be marginalizing and dehumanizing for under-represented students of color (Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). It is largely through research with an importance beyond its academic value that Black male doctoral students are able to find purpose and maintain their cultural integrity.

### *Black Male Doctoral Students as Organic Intellectuals*

All of the nine participants in the study report having always had close ties to the Black family and the Black community, in many instances even after their families moved away from the community. For example, although Terrence went to private, nearly all White schools, his parents made sure they visited family in different parts of the country, regularly attended Black churches, and were involved in civic organizations. While in their doctoral programs, the participants worked to maintain strong ties to the Black community, placing a high value on community service. All of the participants reported serving in organizations dedicated to Black issues while doctoral students. Several were actively involved with on-campus Black student organizations, two participants started professional organizations for Black graduate students in their college, one participant has started his own charter school, and most are involved in a variety of civic organizations that are centered in the African American community.

As organic intellectuals, several made the point that they have learned more in the community and with their graduate student peers than they have in the classroom. Jamaal illustrated how peers and community involvement spurred his intellectual development as a doctoral student.

Most of my intellectual development came from outside of the program or indirectly from the program. It was in the books we're reading, but it was the way my peers were interpreting the books that told me more. It was peers or often just me and Elijah, working with a high school-based organization for Black and Latino youth or following current events, or debating with people outside of the classroom, that was actually where most of the development came from.

Jamaal's statement underscores both the sense of community among Black male doctoral students and the intellectual growth that often occurs through interaction with peers. The broader, more communal intellectual foundation that these Black male doctoral students developed in some ways demanded of them practical and socially relevant academic work. Common themes for Black male doctoral students' interests include working to solve problems faced by communities of color; examining the experiences, attitudes, and values of people of color; and telling the stories of subaltern people.

### *Social, Political, and Cultural Purposes*

Nearly all of the nine participants believed that academic research and the university can and should have relevance or a purpose beyond the purely academic. They believe the university should meet the needs of the community, city, state, and nation beyond simply educating students. Similarly, all of the participants agreed it is appropriate that their research seeks to address social, political, economic, and cultural problems or issues in practical ways. While it is certainly true that some scholars have undertaken work that is more grounded in real-world issues than others, they all feel that if research can improve people's lives it will have an important value added. Elijah insists that he is earning his PhD as much for the Black community as he is for himself. He had this to say:

People ask me why I am getting my PhD. I say that I am studying for the people! I could have been trying to succeed at a job just to have a job for myself. I say, "No! I want a job in Louisiana" and I am going to build a school and if I can't get a job here, then my school will be my job. I am going to make some money doing something. Just being a professor is not what I hold really dear to me. Don't get me wrong, I love it, being in front of students and watching that light bulb go off and engaging them in conversations about things they never

thought about. That is a beautiful thing. My focus is not simply that, my focus is to teach in general, I will teach in my own house, I will teach in my own school.

In addition to his passion for the Black communities of Louisiana, Elijah makes it clear that his desire to help communities in his home state supersedes his desire to be an academic in the traditional sense.

Upon his return to America after studying abroad in Africa, Jamaal began to understand that he could make the type of difference that he was hoping to make through scholarship.

I understood more than ever the importance of us telling our own stories, and I realized that scholarship is such an important avenue for us. If you have these other people telling us what happened they can say whatever they want, we need to tell our own stories for ourselves. So I was in Ghana for 3 ½ months, and I was back in the States for a month when I remember deciding that scholarship was going to be the avenue. Before that I had never thought about being a professor, PhD, or anything. I was really just using research as a means to travel up to that point.

Jamaal finds the practical application of his research to be a priority of the highest order. However, he sees many personal benefits as well. As an avid traveler he sees his life as an academic as one that marries his passions of working on the problems facing people of the African diaspora with international travel and rigorous scholarship. He believes that the faculty role lends itself well to his interests and talents. "Telling our own stories" and giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of marginalized people is an important aspect of the Black scholar's research. It is also a core tenet of Critical Race Theory (Solórzano, 1998; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). He has this to say:

The end goal of the PhD means that I can live anywhere in the world with an American PhD, so for me it was more about the time that the program offered me. The time to be able to think about these ideas, to research, because if I was working a 9–5, I wouldn't have been able to do a quarter of the things I've been able to do. I am able to figure out tangible action steps on how we can improve the quality of life for Black people all over the world. To me the actual degree is like an added bonus.

The participants of this study are BMDs from a wide range of academic fields. However, none of the participants are from STEM-related fields. It is unknown whether scholars in STEM fields also interrogate race in their research to the same degree, or for similar reasons. BMDs in STEM fields and business may not share the same sentiments regarding the centrality of race in their research. Then again, they

may find ways to incorporate their interests in those degree fields in many of the same ways as the participants of this study.

## DISCUSSION

The prevalence of race in Black male doctoral students' choice of dissertation topics is further evidence that they experience doctoral education very differently than their White counterparts. There were four themes listed in the findings, each of which is important in understanding how these participants understood their research decisions. They were (1) compelled but not obligated to research race, which suggests that they, of their own volition, decided on their topics. Their identities as (2) organic intellectuals, with deep ties and loyalties to communities, are linked with (3) social, cultural, and political purposes they find in research. The Gramscian organic intellectual's knowledge base is not limited to the academy; the organic intellectual's knowledge base includes the academy, the family, community, and culture (Fischman & McLaren, 2005). Their identities and experiences often provide them with unique insights and access to racially sensitive topics that serve as (4) academic currency, which they are careful not to squander.

Media and cinema studies professor Ronald Jackson (2000) argues, "The goal of any and all scholarship, regardless of racial, political, or socioeconomic conditions, should be the enhancement of the human predicament" (p. 51). For the BMDs in this study, research and writing on Black issues and issues that affect communities of color were areas they felt were in the greatest need. Jackson (1999, 2000) also contends that White scholars often have not thoroughly examined how their identities influence their academic work, largely because their identities are not preoccupied with difference and devaluation in the same ways that Black scholars are. This suggests that the subaltern position of Blacks in America and their continued struggles for respect, equality, and social justice combine in the research interests of the Black academic. This is eerily reminiscent of the "American Hunger" that Richard Wright (1945) wrote of in *Black Boy*, which drove him to move out of the South, eventually out of America, and fueled his writing.

### *Academic Currency*

Despite claims early in Obama's presidency that America had become a post-racial society, race and inequality remain prominent in American life. Discussions about race and race-related research remain a sensitive area in American life and even in the academy. There is often anxiety in interracial groups when race-related discussions take place, as Whites often fear appearing racist (Trawalter & Richeson,

2008). Trawalter and Richeson (2008) argue that relative to Whites, Blacks are experts in race-related discussions, as they are more comfortable with race as a topic, and speak in greater depth about race than Whites. Race can be seen as one of the most central and defining elements of American life since this nation's inception. Therefore, those who are able to deal with the politically charged complexities of race do indeed have a special academic currency in many disciplines. Given this, Blackness can be viewed as a form of academic currency, as it allows Black scholars a unique insider access to "hot" and critical issues within their degree fields. This is not to suggest that White scholars cannot, should not, and do not effectively interrogate race, there are many examples of those who excel in that regard. However, because racial groups experience race differently in American life based largely on physical appearance, experiencing contemporary American life as a Black person, dealing with racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and various other racialized elements on a regular basis adds perspective that others do not often have. This perspective may be particularly salient when attempting to understand the experiences and/or perspectives of Black people, and other marginalized groups, particularly in the liberal arts, social sciences, and applied fields like law and education. Similarly, other identities may provide insider perspectives that allow unique access and more candid information from data sources.

## IMPLICATIONS

There are several important implications of this work. First, selecting a dissertation topic is a major challenge for many, if not most, doctoral students. Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) refer to selecting a dissertation topic as "the most difficult part of the degree program" (p. 67), particularly for students who are not involved with ongoing research projects with faculty. Participants did not indicate that they found it to be among the most difficult challenges of their doctoral program; however, it was one that required tremendous care. Perhaps it is rated less challenging by BMDs than doctoral students in general because BMDs are often dealing with isolation, marginalization, and the experience of being "an outsider" within the academy.

The second major implication of this work is related to the importance of faculty research agendas. Upon entry to the doctoral program most participants had a strong leaning toward race-related research. Several chose programs based on the faculty housed within the program, who invariably studied race in some regard. Access to faculty who research topics that are similar to their own interests lends credibility and legitimacy to their ideas and gives them confidence in their thoughts. Participants expressed uncertainty about how to present sensitive subjects related

to race and faculty were often able to assist in navigating this. Having faculty in the department who research areas close to their own also potentially allows BMDs to gain valuable experience in working closely with faculty members on publications and presentations.

The third major implication relates to a fear that Black male doctoral students may have around their research topics. The idea of being pigeonholed came up in discussions with several participants. One participant was adamant that he did not wish to be limited or pigeonholed as a race scholar. For the most part, the other participants believed that as Black faculty all of the “race stuff” was likely to come to them whether they specialized in it or not, in which case, it is better to be prepared and expecting it. In other words, whether they decided to study race or not, they felt that as Black faculty they would inherit the role of being an advocate for diversity.

Participants confessed that they had been warned by Black faculty that they would have expectations placed on them that others may not have. More specifically they may be expected to serve on certain committees, appear at certain events, and serve as mentors and allies for underserved populations. Fulfilling these expectations placed on Black faculty by the department, student body, and community at large will certainly take time and commitment, adding another layer to the task of earning tenure.

Finally, strengthening the academic pipeline would help Black males and the nation reach their highest potential. The fact that Black males are underrepresented in doctoral programs is no mystery, as the drop-out rates and academic difficulties of Black males at earlier stages in the academic pipeline thin the ranks of those eligible to proceed past each level (Cuyjet, 1997; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Jackson, 2007; Ingram, 2006). Whether concerned with increasing the number of faculty or doctoral students of color, increasing overall academic achievement, or developing a globally competitive 21st-century workforce, Black and Latino males must be addressed. As the academic outcomes of these groups increase, the economic trajectory of communities, states, and the nation are likely to follow suit.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHT

In summary, most Black male doctoral students did not initially feel obligated to research race-related topics within their fields of study, but nonetheless have chosen such dissertation subjects. This can be largely explained by a number of factors. Most importantly, the participants are Black males who identify cultural integrity or personally maintaining a Black cultural identity as very important to their lives. In many academic fields the dominant perspective is that scholars need distance

and a dispassionate interest to deal with social and environmental issues of their discipline, but these students do not fit that particular mold at all. Moreover, they are not interested in simply assimilating into the melting pot of the academy. They would argue that it is not in their assimilation that they add value to the academy, but rather through their diversity. As a result, they find ways to advocate for underserved communities through their scholarship and service activities and find ways in which their personal interests can align with their academic careers to make a difference.

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