

African American Doctoral Students at For-Profit Universities: A Narrative Explanation

Jodi K. Hall, Ed.D, MSW
Assistant Professor
North Carolina State University
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Social Work
Campus Box 7639
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695, USA

Abstract

Much of what is known about the factors that influence African Americans decisions to choose for-profit universities (FPUs) for doctoral studies is a theoretical. This qualitative study, grounded in critical race theory, contributes to the limited existing body of knowledge through the use of rich narrative data. The study explores the experiences of doctoral students and identifies factors that influence their decisions to enroll in FPUs. An analysis of narrative data revealed concerns about micro aggressions at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Moreover, African American students are willing to pay a high tuition cost at FPUs, than they might pay at PWIs, for convenience and the probability that they will escape micro aggressions. The findings suggests that universities that are not-for-profit and have low enrollment of African American doctoral students, should consider targeting these highly motivated African Americans to enrich the diversity that many PWIs seek to achieve. Moreover, an increase in the number of diverse students may result in an increase in the number of diverse faculty members that would be attracted to the institution of higher education as well.

Keywords: For-Profit Colleges, African American doctoral students, Critical Race Theory, Race, Micro aggressions.

1. Introduction

For more than two decades, African Americans have been choosing for-profit universities (FPUs) to pursue their doctoral studies (Anderson & Hrabowski, 1977; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). Little is known about the factors that influence their decisions. The dearth of empirical literature focused on African American doctoral students adds to the importance of this study. This current study is among the few to address lived experiences of doctoral students at FPUs. Though the literature on African American doctoral students is sparse, there have been studies that examined the negative impact of race and racism on enrollment and retention (Anderson & Hrabowski, 1977; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988) and campus experiences (Chance, Ginsberg, Davies & Smith, 2004; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Solórzano, 1995;).

In addressing attrition and race, Golde (2005) concluded that less than 40 percent of African American doctoral students finish the process. Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) found that African American students experienced more difficulties in graduate school than their white counterparts. They further suggested that negative experiences around race shape those experiences. Specifically, they found that African American graduate students reported overt acts of racism and experienced feelings of being out of place. These findings were consistent with King and Chepyator-Thomas, (1996) and are similar to findings in this current study.

1. Literature Review

The most comprehensive data on earned doctorates is compiled annually by the federal government and is reported in the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED). There were more doctoral degrees awarded in the U.S. in 2014 than any other year. However, with just 2,649 doctorates awarded to African Americans, this represents just 4.9 percent of all earned doctorates (SED, 2014).

The largest number of doctorates earned by African Americans in 2014 was in life sciences, education and social sciences. One hundred seventy-eight doctorates in physical science and 167 in engineering were earned by African Americans. Most of the literature on African American doctoral students comes from a small number of research studies, focused primarily on experiences at conventional universities. These previous studies (Solórzano, et al., 2000; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996) found that African American doctoral students frequently experience feelings of being out of place and nearly half reported incidents of “overt acts of racism at their doctoral programs. While King and Chepyator-Thomson (1996) were most interested in enrollment and persistence factors, their findings were framed through the lens of critical race theory and provide a foundation for further study of African American doctoral students. Additionally, Allen (1992) argued that attempts to understand and examine African American college students must “consider the broader context of issues confronting blacks as a discriminated minority” (p. 42) or such efforts are “doomed to fail” (p. 42).

The purpose of the current study was to explore how social and academic experiences shape the decision of African American doctoral students to enroll in (FPUs). The research seeks to understand the academic experiences that shaped the decision of African American doctoral students to enroll in FPUs and the social experiences that shaped the decision of African American doctoral students to enroll in FPUs.

2. Theoretical Frame

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is useful in exploring the inter sectionality of race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998) within educational experiences of African American doctoral students enrolled in FPUs. It has been argued that FPUs are viewed less favorably than brick and mortar institutions. CRT suggests that the social construction of race and racism (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, & Stefancic, 2001). Is important to consider when analyzing the disproportionate access of African American doctoral students at (FPUs).

Using the CRT framework, researchers (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) have found racial climate on campuses have a negative impact on the academic performance of African American students. These research findings raise concerns about conventional university’s claims of objectivity without due consideration of institutionalized racism. Subtle forms of racism, as well as discrimination and isolation, have often been reported by African American graduate students at conventional universities (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cevero, & Bowles, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

African American students have reported that their presence on campuses of PWIs was viewed as unearned (Johnson-Bailey, et al., 2009). In this study, CRT provides an understanding of how such experiences factor into the decisions, experiences and perceptions of African American doctoral students that enroll in educational programs at FPUs. The qualitative nature of this current study recognizes the importance of narrative data in exploring and documenting experiences in higher education that, to date, have not been fully understood.

CRT framework provides a foundation to uncover the experiences of African American doctoral students enrolled in predominantly online academic programs. The narratives of these students offer important insight. When the voices of marginalized groups are absent in research literature, a dominant narrative, put forth as objective truth, fails to recognize the values of strength, resilience, pride, perseverance and more. Furthermore, racism as a research construct offers a different lens through which to view and understand decisions about what type of conditions are optimal for learning. Therefore, this study explores race as a potential factors that influences outcomes. For the purposes of this exploration, racism is defined as a set of ideologies, values, beliefs, policies or rhetoric that consciously or unconsciously lead to the unfair treatment of people based on color, whether or not individual persons of the marginalized group recognize it as racism (Hall, 2010). The ability to uncover a phenomenon that involves issues of race requires an exploratory approach that allows the voices of those most impacted to be documented and analyzed.

3. Methodology

4.1 Sample selection

The participants in these studies were African American doctoral students enrolled in or recent graduates of FPU. Purposeful selection (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002) was used to select persons “deliberately” to yield information that “cannot be gotten from other sources” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Any students that were not self-identified as African American and enrolled in doctoral program at a FPU were excluded from this study.

This method allowed the participant sample to yield only those that met the participant criteria. Qualitative research is exemplified by rich thick data, which is generated by carefully selected, information rich participants that possess specific knowledge and experiences needed for the research study (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is a tool that anchors the “assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Maxwell (2005) argued that “there are few circumstances in which random sampling can be useful in a small-scale qualitative study” (p. 89). Patton (2002) supported purposeful selection to generate rich thick data. Other studies that explored African American graduate students’ experiences (Chance, Ginsberg, Davis, & Smith, 2004; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000) used purposeful selection specifically to capture the experiences of students of color.

Snowballing (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Neuman, 1997) which is purposive and non-random, but not “accidental or haphazard” (Neuman, 1997, p. 205) was used to generate participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) posit that a purposive method like snowballing allows the researcher to narrow the scope to the theoretical framework of the research. This process has proven successful in identifying and recruiting “hard-to-reach” populations (Bullock, Crawford, & Tennstedt, 2003; Bullock & McGraw, 2006). Therefore, once a research completed the interview, each was asked to identify another potential participant to be follow up with. Study participants provided contact information of other African American doctoral students. The process continued until the research had reached saturation for the purposes of achieving a generalizable sample. Participants were recruited through social media, flyers and other participants. Consistent with the online delivery system, participants are located all over the country, and thus the researcher could not use campus locations for recruiting. The researcher met face-to-face with participants in their cities of residence and at the location of their choice.

4.2 Participants

For this research study, twelve participants were interviewed. All participants self-identified as African American. Their ages ranged from 28 to 53 years old, with a mean age of 36 years. A slight majority of the participants were male. There were seven males and five females. Only two of the twelve participants had children in the home. The participants were as likely to be married as unmarried. There were seven single participants and seven married participants. One participant was divorced. Three of the participants attended a historically black college or university (HBCU) and of those, one attended as an HBCU as a graduate student after attending a predominately white institution for undergraduate studies. Four of the twelve participants were first generation college students when they entered undergraduate school. The majority of the participants had parents with college degrees. Eight of the participants reported personal incomes of more than \$50,000 annually, including three with incomes of \$80,000 to \$100,000 annually. One participant was unemployed. All participants, except one, had student loan debt. The participant with zero debt had an employer funded tuition benefit. Participants reported their anticipated student loan debt at the conclusion of their doctoral studies. For those with student loans, the anticipated loan ranged from \$20,000 to \$150,000. Seven participants reported student loan debt above \$80,000. Five reported approximately \$50,000 and only one reported student loan debt under \$20,000. Of those that had graduated, all had accrued student loan debt at or above \$50,000.

4. Data collection

Data were collected using face-to-face interviews primarily (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This narrative inquiry was a qualitative investigation of participants’ experiences through the use of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Diaute & Lightfoot, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Participants answered structured questions and were given opportunities to elaborate or expound upon answers. Narrative prompts, field notes, observation, FPU websites, FPU printed advertisements and other FPU literature were also employed to broaden the understanding of the FPU. These methods aided in the formation of questions.

5.1 Interviews

Open ended semi-structured interview questions that were predetermined, but flexible in nature. Open-ended questions are more likely to lead to rich data than other types of questions. Open-ended questions are consistent with narrative inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Artifacts, documents and observation were also used. Electronic government databases from Survey of Earned Doctorates, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) provides national enrollment data and contributes to this study by providing quantitative data on FPU enrollment and degrees awarded.

5. Data Analysis

This study employed rigorous narrative analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004; Larson, 1997) which relied on stories of participants, using their own words at their own pace (Mishler, 1986). These methods resulted in twelve interviews with twelve participants each lasting an average of 120 minutes. The study generated 26 hours of recorded data, resulting in 309 pages of transcribed data. Each participant's transcript was examined and coded independently by coders. Each coder focused on the participants' experiences and not the structure of speech or language style that the participant used (Mishler, 1999; Riessman, 2008). The in-code management tool, Atlas.ti (Franzosi, 2010), was used to aid in code management to enhance to the accuracy of the coding process. With the assistance of the software, the research used both open and in-vivo coding (Franzosi, 2010) which assisted in uncovering themes. Study rigor was obtained using dependability, conformability, credibility, verification, triangulation, inter-rater reliability, member checking, outlier checking, prolonged engagement, persistent observation and audit trail (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Onwuegbuzie, 2003). Participants were given sufficient time to report their stories and the researcher used sufficient time to obtain an adequate representation of the voice under study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Participants provided rich thick descriptions which provided detail verbatim data. Participants were not encouraged or discouraged as they narrated their stories. However, they were prompted to provide more information or clarifying information as needed to fully understand the phenomena in question.

Findings

7.1 Themes

Constant comparative analyses lead to three emerging themes, which were pervasive throughout the narrative data. 1) Previous social and academic experiences with race and racism in academic settings causes lasting pain that lasts for years; 2) The negative perception by others leads to self-doubt; 3) Hiding racial identity brings sense of protection and security

Theme 1: Previous social and academic experiences with race and racism in academic settings causes lasting pain that lasts for years

The participants in this study expected that they would go to college. They talked about their academic excellence in their pre-college years and how, in some ways, it prepared them for feelings of isolation in predominately white environments at conventional universities. Ten of the twelve participants talked of being in honors and or AP courses in middle and high school. However, they tended to mention the social cost for African American students in these classes. Their frustration with intersection of academics and race came long before considering a doctorate. The interview began with an open ended question: Tell me about your academic experiences.

Frances, a 33-year-old stay at home mother with a husband that owns a family business recalls her conflict in the choice she feared she would have to make by taking honors courses in high school. She paused for a long time before moving on with the story, as if she had long ago buried the feelings.

I had to take these AP courses. It was a struggle just to get work done because I just felt out of place. I remember clearly thinking twice about taking AP classes because I was thinking; I will not ever see my friends, most of whom were Black. I won't get to eat lunch with my friends if I take this class. I probably did not take an honors class or two for that reason. Shaking her head back and forth, Frances said, It was a tough time. It was tough.

Alma, a 34-year-old public school teacher, remembered that she did not see other African Americans in her honors classes and it bothered her. She stated, *I took mostly AP classes, so in almost all of my classes I was the only African-American and maybe... sometimes it was me and one other, but a lot of times it was just me. College was not much different. Most of my classmates were white.*

When asked if she felt like she fit in more in college she said "sometimes yes, but sometimes no." She said it could sometimes depend on the subject matter. If it was a class with a lot of political or race topics then it was not good at all, she stated Justine is a 28-year-old female had attended a highly ranked predominately white university as undergraduate. She comes from an educated family that is prestigious in their community. Justine was identified very early as academically gifted and was one of few African American students in her classes. She stated that she knew she felt different and somewhat out of place, but as a young child could not really identify the feelings. However, when she got to high school she experienced it as isolation. Justine recalled that some folks would make little comments, such as "Oh you seem angry today."

It was as if they were saying “*There’s that angry black girl again.*” She recalled times in high school where they would watch movies in class that would depict African Americans in stereotypical ways, which was uncomfortable for her. Justine stated that the atmosphere got worse for her when she voiced her opinions. Justine commented on an experience from high school this way;

One of my substitute teachers asked a question one day. I think it might have been tenth grade. He asked, “Do you feel like race relations have changed in this country?” He just asked the whole class and I said, “I don’t think so.” Everyone else said, “Oh yeah, I don’t think there are any real racial issues anymore because slavery is over.” I said, well I don’t feel that way. I really felt like because I voiced my opinion, that it isolated me even further in class. It was clear that the white students did not understand what it is like to be Black. I felt so alone and they seemed angry at me. I think back on it now and wonder if those experiences are why I am reluctant to discuss race in my doctoral program. I had never thought that connection before.

Cameron, a 38-year-old public university administrator, specifically identified incidents of racism or discrimination from his high school experiences. Although, when he was initially asked about experiences with racism, he indicated that he could not recall any such experiences. It was only later in his story that he stated that he felt that

“the white teachers did not like the black students” Cameron said, *“I mean when you walked past some white teachers, you could just see it. It was a look of disdain like ‘God, I wish you were out of this school.’ You could just see the look.”*

Speaking of his college academic experience Tony, an engineer that completed his undergraduate studies at a rural predominately white university, recalls a sense that white students had advantages that black students did not have on his predominately white college campus. This is how Tony recalls the racial divide during college.

It just seemed like the white students had more resources - financial resources. I remember white students could buy the HP 41 CV calculator, which is Hewlett Packard’s top [emphasis added] calculator and it’s got all this stuff in it. Black students, we had to get the \$21 Sharp [laughs]. And the white students, some of them would put the formulas in the calculator. The black students would have to memorize the formula. [Imitates attempting to memorize a formula and forgetting it.] White students just had it right there on their calculators... just another little advantage that the white student had. I never saw a black student with an HD 41 CV calculator. But I did see white students with them. And I was, at the time, I didn’t even know that they could do, until this guy told me “yea I just put the formula in the calculator, man, I don’t have to learn that.” So I said, OK, just another advantage... So there are a lot of little things... I don’t know... It slowly might get better as our society moves forward. It was one more thing to make us feel like outsiders...like not part of the whole college. It was not a good feeling and made me insecure about my abilities.

Tony further talks exasperatedly about his view of how white students get ahead. From his experience, white students have contacts and connections that directly impacts grades. Here is how he details his thoughts and experiences:

Here’s one thing about college that I found out - it’s hard to succeed by yourself. If everybody is doing the homework and tests and everything individually - without help, then it would be cool. I’m an individual, and this guy’s an individual...but Joe, generic white student, has a connection of people and friends that already took the courses. Black students, well when we go into that class, we go in there by ourselves. I found that white students shared copies of old exams and they used this advantage to work together. I recalled I asked this guy on my dorm floor, ‘how did you guys do this homework?’ He’d get on the phone and call his buddies, they’d call somebody else, and pretty soon somebody would have the answer. But I studied more [emphasis added] than they did. I didn’t have anybody to go to. I felt that I was in it by myself. Even if I studied with another black student we just did not have the history of resources like old exams. You could try to go to the professor, and sometimes that works. Some professors...just...aren’t helpful. Some white professors talked harshly to black students. I wonder if that is why some left. I stuck it out. But it was damaging.

Critical race scholars have examined micro aggressions and their influence in the collegiate racial environment (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000). As the researcher, it took me by surprise to hear the passion and hurt as participants recounted their experiences. Micro aggressions are “subtle and often unconscious racist acts that cumulatively add stress to the experiences of people of color” (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 511).

These acts manifest as daily grinding insults that chip away at the emotional and psychological well-being of African Americans and result from stereotyped expectations (Guinier, 2003; Solórzano (1997)). It was clear that these participants were negatively impacted by the intersection of academics and race and that they carry the wounds with them for years. It is interesting that Cameron detailed explicit racist encounters, but brushed them off as routine. When pressed further, Cameron stated that he chose not to let it bother him.

Theme 2: Being negatively perceived by others leads to self-doubt in academic setting

While the participants expressed self-confidence, their words made it clear that sometimes the conventional standards used to determine academic ability, caused self-doubt. Justine expressed how the perceptions of African Americans and standardized exams made her feel. *“I asked myself, am I supposed to be here? I don’t know. Maybe I’m just here to make [university name omitted] look good, to fill the quota.”* Justine commented on an experience, all the way back to the SAT. She indicated that self-doubt, as a black student, persisted even though she excelled in high school AP and honors courses and scored well on the SAT exam. This is how Justine retold of the encounter:

I remember the first day of undergraduate classes. This lady was there with another lady and she was talking about her son and she said to me, “My son made 1350 on the SAT and” you know, “he wasn’t granted admittance to [university name omitted].” I didn’t know what to say at that time. But, I think I questioned myself like “okay am I supposed to be here? I know I’m talented. I know I’m smart. But am I supposed to be here?” I really, really struggled with that, just, trying to find my place in a school so large and so white. At my [FPU name omitted] I do not have to confront these conversations or accusations.

Tyler, who had attended a prestigious graduate school, realized that his name allowed him to be *“under the radar”*. He stated that while he deplores discrimination and fights against it, a person is still going to be impacted by the way they are viewed by others. Tyler emphasized that he has been successful academically, but feeling judged by others can make you question your own intelligence. Tyler stated that he wants to be part of changing the perceptions people have of African American males. He stated that *“It is a shame that the same people that respect me online might not respect me in person. We have to change that.”*

Theme 3: Perception that being racially invisible is believed to increase the likelihood of fair treatment

The theme of invisibility as a protective factor in the classroom was the most salient and most disturbing. These individuals reported that they chose to attend a FPU with the understanding that doing so would lead to a substantial amount of debt, without any guarantee of career advancement. According to these participants, the online nature of the FPU coupled with its uncomplicated admission process, opened the door to an academic opportunity less burdened by stereotype threats and micro aggressions. Participants view the anonymity of the online environment offered by the for-profit university to be an advantage. Andrea, a 40-year-old female participant and adjunct instructor, stated that perhaps because the relationships were established online prior to face-to-face encounters, and she had proved herself to be strong academically, the professors could not incorrectly pre-judge her ability. As more conventional institutions gravitate toward online degree programs, it will be important to gather data to determine if similar conditions and experiences emerge when profit is not the predominate motive of the institution. Given that critical race theory calls upon researchers to gaze a more critical eye on institutions that impact people of color, one would want to examine the dependence that FPUs may have on African American students. Possibly, they cannot afford to engage in open acts of discrimination, because they would lose students and thus revenue.

Tyler, a 40-year-old pharmaceutical executive, completed undergraduate and graduate degrees at prestigious predominately white research universities, saw enrolling at a FPU as a real opportunity to be judged solely by his work. Although Tyler had experienced success in his corporate career, he stated that he was often subjected to racist comments and passed over for promotions because he voiced concern over the racist incidents to superiors. He saw getting a PhD from an online university to be a chance to present himself as a serious doctoral student without the stress of stereotypes.

I’ve had to justify why I was qualified for a certain position, why I wanted participate in particular executive programs or why I wanted to go into this particular field. For the program at [FPU] I didn’t feel that was necessary because it was based strictly on what I provided to them in terms of grades, writing and my accomplishments.

It had absolutely nothing to do with who I was as being an African American male. I felt like that was one of the major reasons as to why I decided to go with [FPU]. You know, we have to constantly fight this battle and here was an opportunity presented before me where I didn't have to fight that battle. I just had to show them what I was capable of, and it was not about my color or the professor's judgment getting in the way.

Justine stated that because of previous racist academic experiences, the FPU gave her an opportunity to basically hide her racial identity. While she was clear that she is proud of her heritage she explained it this way:

I have been very hesitant to identify myself as African American in the online classes. Not that I'm not proud of my heritage, I love it, but I've been hesitant to discuss issues of race in the online discussions thus far. I just feel life is easier - safer sometimes- to not discuss race or identify. Just earn my grade and go. Not that I feel the professor[at the FPU]would hinder me, but some people just don't handle discussions on diversity or race issues very well, including professors. Gender stuff we talk about all the time. I do not feel that discussing gender issues would be a problem because people handle that better. But, people don't deal with discussions of race very well. They revert back to those stereotypes so sometimes I'm just like, you know what - Let me get my grade and move on without my racial identity causing a problem.

Although participants discussed their racial invisibility in FPU's online programs, as an advantage, they also discussed that they would be interested in attending a conventional university, if the racial climate was positive and if the conventional university catered more to adults that cannot stop their lives to go to school full-time. The participants in this study were those that excelled academically in high school and college. Most earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from well-known predominately white institutions. Their past experiences with racism shaped their appreciation of the online environment at the FPU where they could be racially invisible. Sentiments reported by participants in this study, portend that FPU's produce an academic environment free of racism. Were it so, it would be a monumental finding and accomplishment indeed. CRT asserts that race and racism are central and prevalent in US society (Yosso, 2005) and thus it is unlikely that the advent of FPU itself could eradicate racism from university setting. As racism is endemic in this society (Solórzano, 2000) any assertions of an environment free from racism calls for further critical analysis. When racism results in overt acts, like lynching or dragging an individual behind a pickup truck, or shooting African Americans during prayer service, it is much easier to identify and critique. However, failure to identify an act or institution, as racist does not mean that racism is not present or influential (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). If the only way to assure a discrimination-free environment is to hide your race it is not a discrimination-free environment.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that conventional institutions may be able to attract talented African American doctoral students by making changes in campus and classroom environments. Students of color should not have to pay two to three times as much in tuition cost for institutions that have not been proven to have positive cost-benefit return. Conventional institutions could attract more black doctoral students by fostering welcoming environments that recognize the dignity and ability of black students. Although flexibility was important to the study participants, it was less salient than the desire to be judged by their ability and performance. In sum, the experiences of these study participants point to the importance of the examination of experiences of African American graduate students in academic settings. Racial invisibility at FPU's was an option chosen by these African American doctoral students. This study's findings focus the notion that African American students believe they must be invisible in order to receive favorable treatment equal to that of their White peers. The financial cost of attending FPU's, sometimes two to three time more than public universities, reveal that African American that chose the FPU option pay a very high price for this race invisibility. The experiences of the study participants provide voice for improved understanding of the presence or absence of micro aggressions within the context of the online learning environment at FPU's versus conventional academic institutions.

Professors must be mindful of how stereotypes may negatively factor into the grades and opportunities of African Americans seeking doctorates. Professors need specific continuing education to address and eradicate the hostile environment that African American students encounter in the classroom, while administrators must address the overall campus racial climate. There are conventional institutions, including HBCUs that offer the flexibility and convenience of distance education. Further study is needed to determine if African American doctoral students choose FPU's over online programs at conventional universities.

FPU have been successful, in part, by spending vast sums on advertisement to attract African American students and to convince them that FPU could meet their needs. Perhaps conventional universities could adopt similar recruitment strategies. The participants in this study were accomplished professionals that had attended and successfully completed degrees at conventional universities. It seems that conventional (brick and mortar) universities that struggle to attract African American doctoral students could benefit from implementing strategies to reduce micro aggressions and attract more students of color. Most importantly, universities must understand the damage created by hostile campus environments and classroom rife with micro aggressions and stereotypes. Regardless of how covert it may seem, racism must always be critiqued and dismantled. The experiences reported by study participants are believed to be endemic of larger issues and consistent with findings of numerous studies of African American graduate students. The experiences that study participants had in conventional academic settings were impactful enough to lead them to hide their racial identity in the online setting in exchange for the hope of fair academic treatment.

7. Implications for Further Study

This study adds to the body of knowledge for critical race theory and its use in higher education disparities. These findings can assist higher education administrators, FPU, adult educators, course developers, education policy makers, and potential African American doctoral students in their recruitment and retention efforts among African Americans. The current study pointed to several replicable conditions at FPU that African American doctoral students found attractive. However, African American doctoral students at FPU may be potential victims of what amounts to predatory lending in order to complete these doctoral degrees that may lack acceptability in the workforce. They graduate with significantly more debt than their peers at conventional institutions and have less certainty of degree acceptability (Hall, 2010). More research is needed to examine the prevalence of FPU doctorates in the workforce. It is alarming that African American students, in this study, chose racial invisibility as a strategy for achieving their educational goals. For these accomplished, intelligent, and motivated African American students, racial invisibility was a high price to pay to avoid anticipated micro aggressions. Because FPU tend to have higher costs than conventional universities, a social justice framework for understanding the additional burden that students experience when they choose these educational options is warranted. Further study is recommended to determine whether FPU graduates achieve what they hoped to gain, which is a doctoral degree that leads to positive career outcomes.

References

- Allen, W. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominately white and historically black colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1), 26-44.
- Anderson, E., & Hrabowski, F. (1977). Graduate school success of black students from white colleges and black colleges. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 48(3), 294-303.
- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Pearson Education International.
- Bullock, K., Crawford, S.L., & Tennstedt, S.L. (2003). Employment and care giving: An exploration of African American caregivers. *Social Work*, 48(2), 150-162.
- Bullock, K., & McGraw, S.A. (2006). A community capacity. *Health and Social Work*, 31(1), 16-25.
- Chance, L., Ginsberg, R., Davis, T., & Smith, K. (2004). The experiences of African American ph. D. students at a predominately white Carnegie I-research institution. *College Student Journal*, 38(2), 231.
- Clandinin, D., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Connelly, F.M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Crabtree, B.F., & Miller, W. (1992). *Doing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J.W., & Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- DeCuir, J.T., & Dixson, A.D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 26.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

- Deil-Amen, R., & Rosenbaum, J. (2003). The social prerequisites of success: Can college structure reduce the need for social know-how? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 586 (120), 120-143.
- Franzosi, R. (2010) Quantitative narrative analysis. Sage Publications Inc, Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, 162:200.
- Girves, J. E., & Wemmerus, V. (1988). Developing models of graduate student degree progress. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 59(2), 163-189.
- Guinier, L. (2003). Admissions rituals as political acts: Guardians at the gates of our democratic ideals. *Harvard Law Review*, 117, 113.
- Hall, J.K. 2010. *African-American doctoral students at for-profit colleges and universities: A critical race theory exploration*. Doctoral Dissertation, North Carolina State University.
<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/resolver/1840.16/6211>
- Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cevero, R., & Bowles, T. (2009). Project MUSE journals the journal of higher education volume 80, number 2, March/April 2009 rooted in the soil: The social experiences of black graduate students at a southern research university. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(2), 178 - 187.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., & Cevero, R. (2004). Mentoring in black and white: The intricacies of cross-cultural mentoring. *Mentoring and Tutoring for Partnership in Learning*, 12(1), 7-21.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G.B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, J.A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mishler, E. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mishler, E. (1999). *Storylines: Craftartists' narratives of identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- National Science Foundation (2014) *Survey of earned doctorates*. Retrieved from
<http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates/>
- National Center for Education Statistics (2014) Data Sources. Retrieved from:
<https://ncesdata.nsf.gov/webcaspar/>
- Neuman, W.L. (1997). *Social research methods. Qualitative and quantitative approaches, 3rd edition*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2003). Effect sizes in qualitative research: A prolegomenon. *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology*, 37, 393–409.
- Onwuegbuzie, A.J., & Leech, N.L. (2007). Validity and qualitative research: An oxymoron? *Quality and Quantity: International Journal of Methodology*, 41(2), 233-249.
- Pasque, P.A., Chesler, M.A., Charbeneau, J., & Carlson, C. (2013). Pedagogical approaches to student racial conflict in the classroom. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 6(1), 1–16. doi:10.1037/a0031695
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1, 261-283.
- Riessman, C.K. (2008). *Narrative methods in the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial micro aggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69 (1/2), 60-73.
- Solórzano, D. G. (1995). The doctorate production and baccalaureate origins of African Americans in the sciences and engineering. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 64(1), 15-32.
- Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Orellana-Damacela, L., Portillo, N., & Andrews-Guillen, C. (2003). Experiences of differential treatment among college students of color. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74(4), 428-444.
- Tate, W. (1997). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education*, 22, 195-247.
- Tyson, C. (1998). Coloring epistemologies: A response. *Educational Researcher*, 27(9), 21-22.
- Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Yosso, T.J., Parker, L., Solórzano, D.G., & Lynn, M. (2004). From Jim Crow to affirmative action and back again: A critical race discussion of racialized rationales and access to higher education. *Review of Research in Education*, 28, 1-26.