"WE DON'T FEEL LIKE WE BELONG": GRADUATE STUDENTS' OF COLOR RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES IN HYBRID HESA GRADUATE PROGRAMS

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Using Critical Race Theory and sense of belonging, we examined the racialized experiences of 17 graduate Students of Color in hybrid higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate preparation programs in the United States to understand how faculty members contribute to their sense of belonging. The experiences of graduate Students of Color in hybrid HESA programs are complex and multi-layered; therefore, this study used a critical phenomenological approach to examine how their racialized experiences influence their experiences in hybrid classrooms. Graduate Students of Color racialized experiences were shaped by three factors, which are illustrated in the findings: *faculty ability to discuss acts of racism, racialized experiences with faculty, and including diverse perspectives in the classroom.* Participants' experiences illuminate the importance of applying culturally conscious approaches to program development, curriculum, advising, and pedagogical practices, especially for graduate Students of Color. Implications and recommendations for hybrid HESA graduate programs coordinators and faculty are described in-depth, including recommendations for how higher education scholars can situate equity and inclusion into hybrid classroom conversations and everyday interactions with graduate Students of Color.

Racial injustice dates back to the United States historical origins and is intertwined across all social-cultural systems including education (Majors & Gordon, 1994), affecting the experiences of Students of Color within classroom environments. In recent years, racial injustices in the United States are becoming more well-known due to the increased use of technology and social media and have caused unprecedented

issues within classroom spaces (Briscoe, 2022; Harris & Linder, 2018, Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015). Students of Color, especially masters' graduate Students of Color, have had to endure what Hubain et al. (2016) describe as pervasive racism and racialized experiences in learning environments. While there is no universally accepted definition of racialized experiences, research on Students of Color enrolled in master's programs associate racialized experiences with racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, loneliness, and being the only one (Briscoe, 2022; Harris & Linder, 2018; Linder et al., 2015). These collective experiences impact how "groups that are commonly understood to be "races" are really racialized groups" (Hochman, 2019, p. 1248), as he further defines as "groups misunderstood to be biological races" (p. 1248). Racialization as highlighted by Burton and colleagues (2010) is the assignment of racial meaning to real, perceived, or ascribed differences among individuals or groups, produces hierarchies of power and privilege among races. Since racialized inequalities and categories are socially constructed, the boundaries dividing the groups shift and vary depending on the situation (i.e., Molina et al., 2019), and have an impact in many areas of United States life, including education.

Higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate preparation programs have moved to what Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) define as hybrid programs, where curriculum combines online and face-to-face instruction simultaneously or sequentially. There are some programs that have adopted social justice agendas to increase the number of racially diverse students (ACPA/NASPA, 2015), while also considering how delivery can be more accessible. Yet, very little research has been done on how racialized experiences manifest in learning spaces, despite the increased use of

technology to create hybrid environments. Course accessibility, reduced travel time, decreased student expenses (Yudko et al., 2008), and combining theory and practice with real-world experiences (Moloney et al., 2007) are some of the benefits of hybrid programs. However, this does not negate critiques of hybrid programs and their intellectual and social stimulating attributes (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011; Mansour & Mupinga, 2007) and shared negative perspectives about learning styles that may cause communication barriers with instructors. While there are numerous benefits and disadvantages to pursuing hybrid education, one notable reason that has yet to be explored and may cause harm to graduate Students of Color in HESA programs is how they make meaning to their racialized identities and experiences, as well as whether faculty influence these experiences, which is our phenomenon of interest.

We seek to offer a nuanced perspective on hybrid learning for graduate Students of Color in master's programs who face racialized challenges. Through this scholarship, we highlight the intersections of belonging and racial differences for graduate Students of Color in hybrid spaces—a timely and necessary contribution to academic programs as we rethink learning in the current global context. Sense of belonging, in the context of this work, is influenced by Hurtado and Carter's (1997) work on Latino[1] students' experiences. Hurtado and Carter (1997) position sense of belonging to "captures the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 327). We adopted their conceptualization of sense of belonging

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[1]We use the term Latin* to be inclusive of the fluidity of gender identities across Latin American diaspora, which we adopt from Salinas (2020), "Latin* invites people to self-identify any way they desire and serves as a placeholder for new emerging terms that gives voice to Latin American people" (p. 164). Participants of this study identified as Latino or Latina. Also, we use the original authors' terminology used to refer to people from Latin America.

to explore how the participants resonated with feelings of belonging in their academic programs. We acknowledge the need to build an understanding of how HESA hybrid programs engage in discriminatory and racist practices that hinder graduate Students of Color's wellbeing. The guiding research question for this critical phenomenological study is: What role do graduate Students of Color racialized experiences with faculty play in their sense of belonging in hybrid HESA graduate preparation programs? This led us to review literature on the following areas: hybrid learning environments, the racialized experiences of graduate Students of Color, and faculty contributions to Students of Color's sense of belonging.

Hybrid Learning Environments

Existing literature positions hybrid learning environments as spaces to facilitate learning, yet limited literature exists on their usefulness. Recent published literature emphasizes the relevance of hybrid learning as a form of education and gives students educational options across many mediums to assist with their own learning (Bennett et al., 2020). As such, Bennett et al. (2020) state, "learning spaces are traditionally personal. Within the learning space—be it physical, institutional or online/virtual—students connect with the engagement strategies they consider to be typically successful for them" (p. 1190). While success is measured individually, hybrid spaces are defined as places where physical, institutional, and virtual teaching approaches are integrated to provide students with both face-to-face and online learning (Bennett et al., 2020; O'Byrne & Pytash, 2015). Student learning is continually reevaluated, updated, and criticized considering changes in our global society to foster student participation in academic environments. Moreover, when students think they can learn in a group

context, this engagement process is most effective (Astin & Astin, 2000). Brookfield (1990) indicated that students commonly cited the sense of community in their classes when they were asked to choose the most crucial factor to support a challenging learning experience. However, the shift to online and hybrid learning creates yet another barrier to a student's feeling of belonging and engagement (Palloff et al., 2001), which can be especially difficult for Students of Color (Ke & Kwak, 2013).

People of Color frequently emphasize the importance of communal relationships (Bordas, 2012); nevertheless, due to racial and ethnic inequities, hybrid learning, and specifically online engagement makes communal relationships challenging for Students of Color (Palloff et al., 2001). Ke and Kwak (2013) highlight Students of Color need a social presence and its importance in communal learning relationships in virtual environments. In conjunction, Wong and Trinidad (2004) note that Students of Color face challenges linked to their understandings of online dialogues arising from cultural disparities inside virtual spaces and the challenge "to find a way to adopt proper pedagogies in the cultural setting" (p. 11) of an online environment. While their scholarship does not advance the conversation about the difficulties that graduate Students of Color face in face-to-face environments due to racism, isolation and tokenism, it does add the difficulty of navigating online spaces without the appropriate pedagogical approaches to account for cultural disparities and virtual environments, which can add additional taxation.

Graduate Students of Color Racialized Experiences

Our attention more broadly to literature on the racialized experiences of graduate Students of Color within predominantly and historically white[2] campus contexts due to the lack of research of Students of Color and additionally, on masters' students in graduate education. Historically, graduate Students of Color perceived predominantly white institutions (PWIs) as being unwelcoming and racially discriminatory (Harris & Linder, 2018; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Moreover, graduate Students of Color often experience racism on individual, institutional, and structural levels (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Harris & Linder, 2018). Discussions on race and racism with white students can be traumatizing for graduate Students of Color, as white students often avoid race-related conversations (Sue et al., 2009). When asked about race, white students rarely reflect on their experiences (Bondi, 2013) and have been known to cry or deflect when their behavior is questioned (Jones & Norwood, 2016; Sue et al., 2009). This deflective behavior causes strife between graduate Students of Color and white students (Bondi, 2013; Jones & Norwood, 2016), which can hinder opportunities for growth in classroom dialogue related to race.

Scholars note that Students of Color at HESA master's programs are frequently mistreated, racialized, and discriminated against (Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015). Furthermore, graduate Students of Color their experiences are invalidated, isolated, racial stereotyped, and burden while educating white peers in racial classroom conversations (Harris & Linder, 2018). Hubain et al. (2016) add to this scholarship by

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[2] We intentionally do not capitalize whiteness to acknowledge it as an ideological concept. Throughout this paper, we focus on the societal consequences of whiteness as a construct of domination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1997).

stating that Students of Color at the master's level feel tokenized, disappointed, frustrated, and angry due to their racial and ethnic identities. These racialized feelings are expanded by faculty who frequently fail to foster discussions about race and racism or intervene when racial microaggressions occur (Linder et al., 2015).

Despite HESA programs frequently offering at least one diversity course (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002), it does not remove the tokenization that graduate Students of Color experience from peers, as well as faculty members who experience discomfort discussing race and diversity issues (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002). Tokenism is defined as when the majority people considers group minority views members of the minority group as symbols highlighting, emphasizing the intergroup differences between groups and reinforcing stereotypes (Kanter, 1977). Moreover, tokenism takes on an additional form when graduate Students of Color are often seen as "diversity experts" and are asked to speak on group experiences when racial and ethnic groups are not monolithic (Kelly & Gayles, 2010, p. 81). Tokenism is exacerbated for Students of Color as they often wrestle with the lived experience being the only or one of the only Person of Color in predominantly white classroom environments (Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Kelly & Gayles, 2010). Racialized experiences coupled with tokenism in academic spaces, can have a negative influence on a person's sense of belonging, academic progress, physical and mental wellbeing (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Tatum, 2007).

Lack of Sense of Belonging for Graduate Students

As previously stated, sense of belonging in collegiate environments emphasizes the importance of the campus climate and how it affects students' co-curricular and curricular experiences (Hurtado et al., 1996; Park, 2020). This is particularly salient in

the experiences of Students of Color, who often find it more challenging to develop a sense of belonging due to marginalized identities (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016) and more specifically, systems of oppression, which influences their experiences (Harris & Linder, 2018). While marginalized identities are important for understanding the issues faced by many of these students on college campuses, oppressive systems shape how these identities are perceived, resulting in privileged and non-privileged groups. This distinction separates the privileged students from the dominant social group, who hold privileged identities, power, resources, and psychological freedoms (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Harris & Linder, 2018). Students from minoritized social identity groups include students from the non-dominant social group, who hold identities, which minimize their agency in situations and institutions due to perpetuation of whiteness (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). The dichotomy of these two groups is further complicated by the foundations of sense of belonging which argue that social acceptance is vital for communities in higher education spaces (Vaccaro et al., 2015), which places Students of Color at a disadvantage due to their minoritized identities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Wallace & Ford, 2021). For Students of Color, positive interactions and support from faculty in academic environments boost students' sense of belonging (Johnson, 2012).

Despite the supporting literature on the experiences of Students of Color, sense of belonging and academic success, issues of racism and tokenism are still prevalent for students across all levels of education, including graduate school. The most cited reason why faculty do not intervene when racialized concerns arise is a lack of training on social justice issues, experience with racialized challenges, and willingness to have difficult dialogues and conversations (Sue et al., 2009; Tatum, 2007). According to

scholars, there is a distinction between why white faculty members and Faculty of Color do not address racial behaviors in classrooms (Pasque et al., 2013; Pérez, 2019; Quaye, 2012). For Faculty of Color, addressing racial incidents can be penalized in their teaching evaluations and this can become laborious for them (Patton & Catching, 2009; Pérez, 2019) and ultimately impact their tenure and promotion as teaching evaluations are often highlighted as hindrance in their tenure and promotion (see Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). When faculty choose to intervene, they increase the likelihood of having moments to educate white students and normalizing the experiences of Students of Color (Pasque et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2009). However, when faculty members do not intervene, Students of Color feel unseen and unheard (Pasque et al., 2013), which could be more daunting for masters Students of Color.

In our examination of current literature on graduate students, we noticed a limited amount of scholarship related to masters graduate Students of Color, HESA programs, and their sense of belonging in hybrid academic spaces. Building on foundational work on graduate students and sense of belonging, this scholarship serves to identify how HESA hybrid faculty can incorporate more socially just practices in learning spaces (Anzaldúa, 1990; hooks, 1994; Tatum, 2007). Moreover, our work further contributes to the literature that provides faculty resources that develop competence in supporting Students of Color in higher education (Bart, 2016). Overall, faculty unwillingness to address these concerns has serious consequences and causes complications for graduate Students of Color in hybrid environments, thus reaffirming the significance of this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as frameworks. Critical Race Theory offers a frame to directly name and examine the pervasiveness of racism that manifests in structures and systems within the United States society, and in this case, within predominantly white classrooms and institutions. Sense of belonging provides a foundation for understanding how students experience both academic and social aspects of their HESA hybrid program.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework that acknowledges that racism is an inherent part of how our society's structures and systems operate (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). CRT recognizes that racism is more than just individual bias, but rather it is embedded in policies, institutions, and laws. CRT recognizes race as a socially constructed concept, which works to maintain the dominance of the white population who constructed it to perpetuate social, economic, and legal inequality and ingrain racism into the foundation of societal structures (Crenshaw et al., 1995). We applied CRT to highlight how Students of Color navigate oppressive structures (i.e., higher education institutions), and how racism impedes on their sense of belonging in HESA hybrid graduate preparation programs. CRT provides a theoretical lens that centers Students of Color life experiences that are different in comparison to their white peers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016).

While there are multiple tenets of CRT, this study focuses on two – the permanence of race and counter-storytelling (Bell, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We

use these two tenets to highlight both graduate Students of Color's lived experiences in the study and how they employ counter-storytelling to resist systems of oppression. The permanence of race and counter-storytelling helped guide our methodology, as it centers the importance of Students of Color naming their own lived experiences (Miller et al., 2020). Counter-storytelling, rather than being dominated by prevailing narratives, is a strategy used by scholars to confront and disprove racist ideologies about minoritized groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling illustrates how there is not just one way to view or interact with the world, but rather opens the possibility of understanding lived experiences and structures in new ways (López, 2001).

We use CRT's tenets on the permanence of racism to recognize the nuanced experiences of Students of Color and critique the systems of oppression in society that inherently suppress them because of their racial identity. Racism is normalized and fixed into everyday society (Bell, 1995). The permanence of racism tenet recognizes that racism controls the political, social, and economic systems of society in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). By examining the permanence of racism, we are able to view the experiences for Students of Color from structural and systemic levels.

Sense of Belonging

Students' sense of belonging includes how they make meaning of their social and academic experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students from minoritized populations are affected by how others white people engage with them, which influences their relationship to higher education (e.g., students' satisfaction, commitment to college). Hurtado and Carter's (1997) work expanded Spady's (1971) definition that students' social integration is simply tied into fitting in on campus. Additionally, Hurtado and

Carter (1997) uncovered that there is more to sense of belonging for Students of Color than what Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) scholarship stated that a "sense of belonging is fundamental to a member's identification with a group and has numerous consequences for behavior" (p. 484). Instead, what is revealed through the complex nature of Hurtado and Carter's (1997) research is that sense of belonging can contain both cognitive and affective elements that influence the ways that an individual's cognitive evaluation is towards individuals and groups.

Undoubtedly, there is an array of affiliations and environmental factors that contribute to Students of Color's sense of belonging. For example, studies have shown how campus climate can impact both their academic and social lives (Hurtado et al., 1996; Park, 2020). In addition, Hurtado and Carter (1997) discovered a strong relationship between students' sense of belonging and how often they interact with faculty outside of class. Racism, discrimination, and interpersonal tensions from white students and faculty can cause Students of Color to be stressed and isolated (Smedley et al., 1993). Faculty interactions contribute to and significantly affect how Students of Color perceive themselves in college. Ultimately, a sense of belonging provides a foundation for understanding how students experience both academic and social aspects of their HESA hybrid program. Taken together, CRT allows us to examine how racism impacts Students of Color's sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is one component of People of Color navigating the racist structures that guide how the country functions.

Methods

This study employed a critical phenomenological approach. Critical phenomenology was grounded of Merleau-Ponty's (1964) intellectualist and classical approaches to phenomenology. He emphasizes the importance of phenomenology intentionally to understand perceptions with ways of knowing and being. Both Merleau-Ponty's (1964) critiques and critical scholars pushing feminist and queer ideologies led to the philosophy and 'restructuring of the world' described as the critical phenomenology (Guenther, 2020). Critical phenomenology has been described as a "reflection on our own situation and those of the people who surround us by the constant confrontation of what unites and separates us, from our body to our most abstract thoughts" (Melançon, 2014, p. 25). A critical phenomenological approach includes theorizing to examine the making meaning of a phenomenon, or a shared situation or experience of a phenomenon. The critical aspect of phenomenology suggests that phenomenology is not solely a method, but also a form of critique that interrogates systems of marginalization, oppression, and power (Guenther, 2020).

Additionally, CRT guided the selection of this methodology critical phenomenology aligns with CRT's permanence of racism and counter storytelling tenets due to its emphasis on critiquing oppressive structures and centering participants' stories as necessary to understanding the phenomenon. Critical phenomenology initially "assumes first-person subjective experience to be both real and investigable— without minimizing the methodological difficulties that such research can sometimes present" (Velmans, 2007, p. 229). Critical phenomenology expands phenomenological principles as it investigates a subject's reports of what they experience. Thus, critical

phenomenology in practice is reflective, noting "phenomenology of another *and* oneself"' (Velmans, 2007, p. 227). Critical phenomenology acknowledges how third-person reports of others are *based*, in the first instance, on their own first-person experiences; therefore, our phenomenon consisted of *what* students experienced and *how* they experienced it (Velmans, 2007). Through in-depth interviews, this methodological approach enables us to understand the role that graduate Students of Color racialized experiences with faculty play in their sense of belonging in hybrid HESA graduate preparation programs.

Sampling and Data Collection

Typically, with critical phenomenology, scholars use criterion sampling, also known as predefined criteria (Velmans, 2007), as a sampling and data collection strategy. One of the primary purposes of criterion sampling is that participants have prior experience with the phenomenon while also maintaining varying characteristics (Velmans, 2007). Thus, we began the recruitment process seeking participants from ACPA and NASPA and invited participants through an email invitation. The first author shared recruitment information with HESA program coordinators to distribute to students who identify as People of Color. We define People and Students of Color as those who identify as Black, Latin*, Asian-American, and/or Native American students (Mikyung, 2008). Within the critical phenomenological process, the primary data should reflect the understanding of subjects (Velmans, 2007). Therefore, we chose to collect demographic data and conduct two, 60-minute, semi-structured interviews with 17 master students, who self-identified as a Person of Color and were either enrolled in or recently completed a hybrid HESA program. CRT tenets on the permanence of race

and counter-storytelling guided both interviews. We aimed to understand the

phenomenon: students' overall impressions of their experiences as students in their

hybrid HESA programs and what people, places, and/or programs contributed to

students' sense of belonging. The first author conducted all interviews, while other team

members participated in other aspects of the data collection and data analysis process

to ensure consistency. Participants self-identified their race and ethnicity, and their

status in their program (see Table 1). All participants were able to choose their own

pseudonym and their institutions were de-identified to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

Critical phenomenology requires that researchers sit with the phenomenon of

interest before engaging in the analysis process (Velmans, 2007). The procedure was

carried out in several ways. First, all research team members listened to the audio

recordings to hear participants' voices within the data. Then, we conducted an initial

read of the transcribed transcripts. During a second read of the de-identified transcripts,

each author memoed to familiarize ourselves with the data. Critical phenomenology

"takes it as read that first- and third-person investigations of the mind can be used

conjointly, triangulating evidence for each other and other instances to inform each

other" (Velmans, 2007, p. 227). Therefore, we started by organizing the data to

understand the patterns of meanings from data, which is also noted in

phenomenological research as thematic analysis of lived experience (Velmans, 2007).

We used Dedoose software to organize the data collected.

Then discussed as a team the phenomenon and our collective participants' lived

experiences using existing literature, CRT and sense of belonging. Next, we selected

primary codes based on our initial and second read and memos and collectively engaged in open coding to summarize their lived experience. Through our analysis and memoing we were able to examine the close connections to sense of belonging, which yielded themes such as 'mattered most in program,' 'mattered least in program', 'positive experiences in program,' and 'negative experiences in program.' CRT as a theoretical framework allowed us to also focus on 'role of racial identity as a central theme of the data. Finally, the team combined the common themes to develop findings that expressed the complexities of participants' phenomenon. Peer debriefing and memoing was a key strategy to ensure trustworthiness.

Researchers' Relationality

In critical phenomenology, relationality must be examined so that the researchers recognize how relational dynamics play a role in how the data is analyzed. In this sense, both conscious and unconscious dynamics must be acknowledged because power structures between the researcher/researched can result in the objectification of those whose experiences we study (Finlay, 2009). This process "directs the energy into the open in a respectful attitude that allows the phenomena to present itself" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 130). By understanding and being aware of those assumptions, the phenomenon could be extracted from the data. We chose as part of the critical phenomenological process to *bridling* during the analysis process as a form of reflexivity. When engaging in bridling, the researchers reflect on the world to see what is happening relationally with the phenomenon throughout the investigation (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Reflexivity and bridling connect deeply with phenomenological research. Both

are situated in broader discussions and commitments of positioning (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Finlay, 2009).

We enter this project recognizing the uniqueness of our research team, as two of the four researchers have directly engaged with hybrid HESA education. The first author received her HESA master's degree from a hybrid program where she took classes synchronously through Blackboard Collaborate, summer residencies that were face-to-face and asynchronous, and traditional face-to-face courses. The second author oversaw a HESA Ed.D.[3] program that was hybrid working with doctoral Students of Color who juggled personal and professional dynamics. Our knowledge of how HESA programs work informed our construction of the data collection process, including the questions we asked participants. Additionally, our research team members, which included four researchers identify as three cisgender Black women and one cisgender Black men participating in academia at varying levels including graduate students and faculty. We acknowledge our collective relation to the nuanced realities of the Communities of Color for whom our scholarship serves to uplift. As researchers, we questioned our pre-understandings and assumptions rather than the difficult and arguably impossible task of *bracketing* them (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2009).

Findings

While this study centered the belonging of Students of Color's in hybrid HESA graduate preparation programs, the participants' perspectives reveal the complexities of the graduate experiences. The findings amplify the participants' resolve to achieve and thrive despite frequent, unwelcome interactions with institutional racism and racialized

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[3]Doctor of Education

experiences in educational spaces. Three central themes are presented, along with interpretations: participants' perceptions of faculty members' ability to discuss racism in the classroom, experiences that participants experience and how this influenced their sense of belonging within hybrid environments, and perspectives of navigating hybrid spaces as graduate Students of Color.

"This is America": Faculty Ability to Discuss Acts of Racism in the Classroom

Most participants described experiences where national racial issues including white supremacy movements, police brutality, and racial discrimination were prevalent in hybrid classrooms. When these situations arose, faculty instructors, as described by the participants, were ill-prepared to address racial and cultural differences of students, which were perceived as faculty being afraid to challenge white students' understandings of race. Faculty members' lack of acknowledgement and willingness to engage in discussions on national racial issues caused several participants to feel frustrated. Melissa shared her views on how race was politicized and polarized in the United States and in her classes via synchronous Zoom session:

> It's part of the experience, race is a thing that I talk about. And because everything is so politicized, right now, and polarized, I feel like a lot of people just want to steer away from that. For me, that's just my reality. I cannot steer away from that. When they see me, they see my race. So, I want to challenge people to talk about those kinds of thing[s].

Melissa felt discomfort during discussions regarding national race issues among her white peers and faculty members, but she recognized how important it was to challenge these ideologies.

Similarly, Xavier noted how racial issues among faculty instructors' dialogue versus lack of action affected his experience:

> I just feel that there are a lot of folks who speak social justice, who can verbalize it, who can facilitate discussions about it, but don't ever practice it. I think that also affected me having my experience and feeling the way that I do in regard to belonging and my overall experience within my time in my program.

Xavier recognized that overall dialogues facilitated by faculty, whether they were face-to-face or through virtual platforms, lacked an equity focus and ability to discuss national incidents of race. Xavier provided another example of the differential language and action that faculty instructors used in the face-to-face classroom:

> 'We're anti-racist' but what are we doing to facilitate and make that happen? A lot of folks [faculty] just want to pull out those words and say a lot of things but it's a lot of hot air and a whole bunch of critics with no credentials.

Although Xavier acknowledged his cohort members were similar with their response to racial issues, he was disappointed by his faculty instructors the most, as "[they] never used their influence to then craft difficult conversations and have folks communicate along differences and to even state that, "Yo, actually that's problematic. Can we have a conversation about that?'" Ultimately, Xavier stated that faculty's lack of response to racial issues, regardless of how the course was delivered, left him feeling negatively about the program and his instructors.

Several participants described how difficult it was to reconcile with national racial incidents and classroom discussions surrounding current events. These incidents influenced instances, particularly when faculty excessively discussed racial occurrences. Matthew, a Latino student, shared how difficult it has been for him to grapple with this especially since his cohort and faculty do not understand how this affects him. He shared,

> I don't think that the majority of our cohort really understands what that's like. I've had this conversation with some of my classmates and my instructor, but it's hard to speak up as a Person of Color because you don't want to be seen as the

> angry Person of Color and you don't want to be seen as being overly sensitive or being the person that throws out the race card every chance you get. I think what people don't understand is that there's so many times throughout the day where comments are made [racially offensive comments], things are said or implied and I have to just brush it off and pretend like that didn't actually happen. It feels like all we're doing is talking about the fact that white supremacy exists, and we don't try and really think about how we support students and how do we help them to cope with those issues with racism?

Several participants echoed Matthew's sentiments, claiming that discussions in virtual and face-to-face classes were exhausting. Similarly, Red noted constant conversations about racism became emotionally taxing. The majority of participants intended for faculty members to move beyond discussions and help students develop meaningful strategies to address racism. While many participants enjoyed having faculty members who openly acknowledged national issues of racism, several wrestled with the burden of these discussions and how, at times, they caused additional trauma and harm to graduate Students of Color.

Experiencing Difference: Racialized Experiences with Faculty

Participants' accounts demonstrated the positive and negative influences of faculty interactions on their sense of belonging. Students attributed the majority of their positive experiences to the Faculty of Color who openly and honestly discussed racism. Subsequently, students felt comfortable sharing their racialized experiences and feelings about sense of belonging. The negative racialized experiences that participants described were often rooted in feelings of mistreatment, alienation, and otherness. In certain cases, participants described negative experiences among faculty members of the same race, while the majority recalled events that occurred among white faculty members.

Positive experiences. There were several key traits that most of the participants referred to when describing positive racialized experiences with faculty. The participants offer examples of resilience and resistance to normative expectations associated with Students of Color in hybrid class spaces. This included faculty members who taught with passion about racism, both online and in face-to-face environments. Danielle described how one faculty method made her think more positively about racial interactions with peers. Danielle's cohort, which was primarily white, often struggled with issues of race during online sessions, so having an instructor who "cared, taught me, took time with all 19 of us [students], it meant a lot. He was passionate about the program, which made us all want to stay." Eventually, Danielle noted that negative racial interaction was minimized because her peers learned from their instructor's teaching how to express themselves despite their differences.

For example, Tyler, described how his instructor and advisor, a Person of Color, would challenge the class to have meaningful conversations about racial issues, which kept the class in asynchronous settings "invigorating". Lawerence also appreciated his engagement and learning from his instructor, who was a Person of Color. However, Lawerence acknowledged how his white peers complained about her giving too much work and talking too frequently about race during synchronous courses. These experiences taught him that white students and Black students needed different things in hybrid settings. Finally, Coffee acknowledged how they appreciated having Faculty of Color, particularly Women of Color, in the classroom. Coffee stated that Women of Color were "very open, candid, and honest," which was something they valued when talking about racial issues. Participants acknowledge the need for faculty members to

discuss racism in the classroom. Several participants noted that Faculty of Color almost always did this labor, yet they received pushback from white students, which complicated graduate Students of Color's racialized experiences.

Negative experiences. Despite participants sharing their positive experiences, several participants had severe, negative racialized and prejudicial experiences with faculty members within hybrid settings. The results of these experiences made students feel alienated and isolated and caused a negative effect on how they viewed their experiences within the program. Camille described her experience with a Black woman faculty. The faculty member told Camille she was not ready to graduate. Camille felt mistreated and ultimately filed a grievance against the faculty member for her actions and for what she believed was "unprofessional." Camille navigated an unsupportive and hostile environment by seeking support and documenting the experience. Without the support of her internship supervisor who "vouched" for her, Camille stated she would have left the program and the university.

Lee described how he felt about some faculty members in his program. Lee stated, "I wouldn't say I felt, like, alienated at all. I connect with some faculty members better than others." However, Lee acknowledged it was difficult being in his program because some of his cohort and faculty members did not believe in social justice and had unspoken attitudes towards Students of Color. Lee shared:

> We had one student leave the class because he felt he was unfairly treated within our first few weeks. It is kind of like a pattern with this instructor. He continuously cut off his students in class, particularly the female students and the student who actually left the class, he's an international student. The student felt very attacked. The first question he was asked was 'What is your country?'

Lee believed this experience was much more disturbing because it happened while on campus. Lee mentioned how his cohort members became collegial and exhibited empathy with international cohort members. Whether students described positive or negative racialized experiences, the participants' accounts demonstrated how faculty instructors influence students' overall sense of belonging, and how these interactions can potentially increase or decrease their sense of belonging.

"Our Opinion Matters": Centering Racially Diverse Perspectives in the Classroom

Instructors incorporated student viewpoints in the classroom through venues, such as face-to-face classes, synchronous courses, and online discussion boards, which were among the main elements contributing to graduate students' racialized experiences. Almost every participant saw the opportunities to share their racially diverse perspectives as it contributed to their feelings of satisfaction with faculty members. Jasmine recalled how a white faculty instructor gave her a chance to express her experiences as a Black student:

> [Faculty] really wanted to hear from me more face-to-face because I was a minority in the classroom. It is kind of, as if they were looking to hear about my experiences, they wanted to hear my feedback, they wanted to hear from me.

Jasmine felt her instructor "did a really good job with making me feel accepted and making sure that I did participate, that I did have a voice and making me feel as though my opinion and everything that I had to say did matter". Ultimately, these experiences left Jasmine feeling as if she was "treated just like all of the other students in the class."

Like Jasmine, Melissa provided an excellent example of how her instructor would ensure that racially diverse perspectives were included in class conversations through

online formats without making her feel alienated as one of the few Students of Color.

She shared the following about her faculty:

> [The faculty] understood the importance of not putting a Student of Color on the spot. So, like, frame it in a different way. They all know I work for a multicultural office. They will be like, "so, Melissa, with the students you work with, what are some perspectives that they have" or like "what experiences do they have?" So, they do not frame it like, "hey Melissa, what do you think about, such and such?"

This approach to teaching, left Melissa and many other participants feeling more comfortable and secure sharing their racially diverse perspectives. Explicitly, when asked by faculty about their racial identity in congruence with personal and professional experience, participants were about to unpack more of their sense of purpose and meaning.

Jake described how he would intentionally bring up issues related to identity during his monthly face-to-face class, prompting his professor to dig deeper into these topics in online discussion platforms. As a result of his professor's response and encouragement to discuss identity topics further, Jake felt "validated." Corbin also felt like his instructor created opportunities inside and outside of the classroom that made him feel as if he belonged. Corbin, who was the only Native American student in his program, acknowledged how he needed a safe space, especially in online settings as the classroom dynamics were different to share his opinions and beliefs with others, which is why he appreciated his faculty members so much for cultivating this level of engagement.

Nicole and Matthew described two different experiences with faculty members who enabled them to discuss their perspectives in class. Nicole noticed how one professor appreciated and created an additional discussion board chat online that

connected readings to further conversations. On the contrary, Matthew described when faculty in his program would have additional discussions in synchronous courses surrounding crucial race topics, his cohort members would later discuss it amongst themselves. Matthew expressed that his sense of belonging came from relationships that he sought out and developed himself. He and other participants described how they engaged in a form of navigational capital, coalition building for the purposes of fostering community and drawing on those communities for support such as engaging with student organizations, practicum experiences, and connecting with faculty, staff, and cohort members of color.

Discussion

In this study, we used CRT and sense of belonging as theoretical lenses (Bell, 1995; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016) to illustrate how graduate Students of Color in HESA programs are racially stereotyped, tokenized, and experience racial microaggressions. Our work examines graduate Students of Color's racialized experiences and the role of HESA faculty instructing in hybrid graduate programs on their sense of belonging. There is a dearth of literature describing graduate Students of Color racialized experiences (Harris & Linder, 2018; Hubain et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2015). While CRT acknowledges how racism is embedded in institutions, scholars have pointed to how PWIs are discriminatory and unwelcoming to Students of Color (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Levin et al., 2013). Thus, our study both added to the body of literature that explores Students of Color's racialized experiences, and added to the literature by centering master's students in hybrid HESA program.

Our findings support previous literature by Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) and Mansour and Mupinga (2007), highlighting the complex nature of hybrid learning. Indeed, participants' experiences demonstrate the barriers and shifts in online and hybrid learning for graduate Students of Color, pointing to how significant belonging and engagement are for them (Ke & Kwak, 2013; Palloff et al., 2001). The racial and ethnic inequities within hybrid spaces added to the lack of communal relationships among faculty and peers (Bordas, 2012; Palloff et al., 2001; Ke & Kwak, 2013). The cultural disparities within hybrid spaces hindered online dialogue in virtual spaces for graduate Students of Color (Wong & Trinidad, 2004). While graduate Students of Color are accustomed to dealing with white students being defensive and deflecting conversations of race and racism (Bondi, 2013; Jones & Norwood, 2016), participants in our study had to live through these combative experiences online, hybrid, and face-to-face settings. As posited by CRT, racism is pervasive and exists in and beyond face-to-face interactions. Racism exists and is perpetuated in the digital world. This increases racial and ethnic tensions, which minimizes participant's sense of belonging and their desire to have formal and informal student interactions (Hurtado, 1994).

Participants detail cases of faculty interactions that affected their racialized experiences in hybrid learning contexts. Pasque et al. (2013), Pérez (2019), and Quaye (2012) described the complexities that exist when faculty members address racism and oppression in the classroom and how they are often not prepared to facilitate these conversations. Moreover, with national unrest at an all-time high, participants expected faculty members to discuss racism openly. Yet, participants' lived experiences demonstrate how faculty inexperience can directly affect and contribute to graduate

Students of Color feeling othered, marginalized, and isolated within hybrid educational spaces.

Most participants articulated how essential faculty are in their perceptions of their hybrid classroom space and in influencing their overall experiences in graduate programs. As recounted by our participants, negative and positive racialized experiences with faculty influenced their engagement in class, sense of self-efficacy, and sense of belonging. Participants' racialized experiences demonstrate a need to renegotiate circumstances like time, place, context, and intent. Having negative experiences with faculty can severely influence their success and vastly affect their interactions with peers. However, this shared experience led to many participants building community with other cohort members of color in their respective hybrid HESA graduate preparation programs. They created their own counterspaces to build and sustain positive spaces for themselves (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Scholarship by Anzaldúa (1990) and Tatum (2007) highlights the importance of incorporating the multiple identities of students into their learning environments, such as race and gender. While other works have enhanced the literature on how to support underrepresented populations (Quaye et al., 2019a) or develop training devoted to advancing faculty skills discussing marginalized identities (Bart, 2016), each resource must offer HESA faculty members with strategies to understand how Students of Color speak back to dominant narratives through counter storytelling (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). This is especially important considering the varied dynamics that occur within hybrid programs, such as having to navigate online spaces. Moreover, these environments may alter due to teaching pedagogies and practices demonstrated

by faculty that often differ between hybrid, face-to-face, online, and synchronous courses. Faculty members must find new strategies to make graduate Students of Color feel like they belong in academic spaces as we move toward a more socially equitable society.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

We note several implications for practice and recommendations for future research based on our study's findings. Our initial implications directly respond to the lived experiences of graduate Students of Color represented in our study. We highlight specific suggestions for faculty who work with hybrid HESA programs. Last, we offer our recommendations for future research to learn more about graduate Students of Color experiences in hybrid HESA programs.

Implications for Practice and Teaching

The findings from this study revealed that faculty members contributed to graduate Students of Color's racialized experiences and sense of belonging in hybrid HESA programs. While there were examples of faculty members asking students to reflect on their own racial identities and racialized experiences, the graduate Students of Color in this study needed faculty to acknowledge their racial and cultural differences directly and address racism in HESA hybrid programs. This work demonstrates the significance of faculty to engage in reflexivity, checking their own biases, racial experiences, and prejudice. The implications of the findings demonstrates that difference and negative experiences can occur with faculty members and students. Thus, graduate Students of Color must receive support from scholar-practitioners such as internship and graduate assistantship supervisors to help them navigate racial

differences. Our findings support the importance of applying the frameworks (Anzaldúa, 1990; Tatum, 2007) highlighted in the sense of belonging literature to the policies and practices used to support graduate Students of Color in hybrid HESA programs. More specifically, using frameworks from sense of belonging and CRT to interrogate what informs the program's policies, student/faculty evaluations, curriculum, training and development for faculty, and support features for Students of Color in their graduate programs. HESA graduate preparatory programs must also challenge faculty to integrate critical theoretical and practical approaches to teaching in racialized and hybrid educational spaces that push graduate Students of Color to think more critically about their own understanding and worldviews (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016).

There are several pedagogical and practical options that serve to enhance the learning experiences of Students of Color in hybrid HESA programs inclusive of using teaching and learning as a liberatory practice (hooks, 1994) to empower students and unearth oppressive educational structures. Faculty and program coordinators can employ critical teaching pedagogical practices to center other cultural perspectives in the instructional techniques and curricular experiences for graduate Students of Color in hybrid learning spaces. For instance, programs should employ resources and frameworks as detailed in the *A Bold Vision Forward: A Framework for the Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization* publication supported by the ACPA: College Student Educators International organization (Quaye et al., 2019b) in their programmatic practices and curricular approaches.

Additionally, hybrid HESA programs can apply decolonial research and methodological approaches to educational research (Patel, 2016) to address the implications of settler colonialism in our American canon of scholarship. For instance, exploring and including CRT and other critical theoretical frameworks could influence program admissions processes and decisions, course design approaches, hybrid program design formats, academic disciplinary processes, classroom racial climate strategies, academic evaluations, program curriculum decisions, and advising practices. Finally, faculty should have more intentional conversation with HESA graduate master's students who are in hybrid programs to explore the specific needs and challenges of their respective student populations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Our work demonstrates a need for more literature on the racialized experiences of graduate Students of Color in HESA hybrid preparation programs. There is an opportunity to foreground the experiences of graduate Students of Color at the intersections of race and other socially constructed identities while in hybrid HESA programs. Researchers should consider exploring how faculty use educational platforms and technology through scholarly inquiry, including how digital spaces may not be equitable and provide graduate Students of Color with opportunities to excel within hybrid HESA programs. Moreover, there is an opportunity to learn more about some of the innovative strategies faculty are using to address equity in hybrid HESA learning spaces. We encourage scholarship that features a sense of belonging in hybrid HESA programs to understand the experiences of graduate Students of Color at the intersections of race, belonging and graduate education in the United States. We

recognize that this study was conducted before COVID-19. More researchers should examine graduate Students of Color's racialized experiences in hybrid spaces during and after the pandemic to provide tangible examples of how universities and hybrid HESA programs, specifically, can serve graduate Students of Color and build inclusive spaces centered in belonging and connectedness.

Conclusion

Faculty instructors play a role in the overall sense of belonging for graduate Students of Color. HESA programs market a commitment to social justice and inclusion, graduate Students of Color shared that when they had faculty instructors that were unwilling to engage in conversations about race, they felt like they did not belong. Graduate Students of Color felt like they belonged the most when faculty members created space to dig deeply into difficult discussions about race and share their personal experiences in the classroom. As universities navigate COVID-19 and continued racial injustice in the United States, this study shares student-centered perspectives about how to create culturally conscious and student-centered learning environments. As many programs move to hybrid models, the findings glean important insights about how universities and faculty can become better equipped to engage in thoughtful, critical dialogue, discuss current events with an understanding of the role that power and oppression plays in student experiences, and to ensure that graduate Students of Color feel a strong sense of belonging.

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