

Article 92

Supporting African American Females in Doctoral Counseling Programs at Predominantly White Institutions

Christine Suniti Bhat, Yegan Pillay, and Denita N. Hudson

Bhat, Christine Suniti, is an Associate Professor in Counselor Education at Ohio University. She has international experience as a counselor and educator. Her research interests include diversity in counselor education and supervision, and cyberbullying.

Pillay, Yegan, is an Associate Professor in Counselor Education at Ohio University. His research examines the intersection of power, discrimination and oppression and its relation to psychological health.

Hudson, Denita N., is a Contributing Faculty member at Walden University. She has over 6 years of experience as a Counselor Educator and over 11 years of experience as a mental health counselor. Her research interests include multicultural issues in counseling and supervision.

The authors thank Shannon Evans for conducting some of the interviews for this research study.

African Americans comprise nearly 13% of the population in the United States of America (USA), but the country is a long way from racial parity in the number of African Americans being awarded doctoral degrees (“Doctoral,” 2006). In 2009, there were a total of 49,562 doctorate recipients in all disciplines in the USA (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2009a). Of this figure, only 4.5% were Black; 55% were White, 25% were Asian, 5.6% were Hispanic, 0.31% were American Indian (NSF, 2009a). More African American women (1,605) earned doctorates in 2009 (NSF, 2009c) than African American men (1094; NSF, 2009b).

Of the total number of doctorate recipients in 2009, 235 earned a doctorate in Counseling Education or Counseling and Guidance (48 males, 187 females), and 420 earned a doctorate in Counseling Psychology (104 males, 316 females; NSF, 2009d). In both of these subfields more females than males were doctorate recipients. In 2008, African Americans were the minority group that earned the highest number of doctorates in both Counseling Education or Counseling and Guidance (33 out of 205, or 16%) and in Counseling Psychology (41 out of 420, or 9.7%; NSF, 2009e).

Despite an increase in the number of African Americans obtaining doctoral degrees in some fields, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in general at colleges and universities (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). Moreover, counselor education programs experience difficulty in recruiting and retaining African American female faculty (Bradley, 2005). While there are some studies focusing on African

American doctoral students in disciplines other than counselor education, there are no studies focusing on African Americans specifically in counselor education. A review of the literature revealed two studies that focused on doctoral students in general in counselor education. Race and biological sex were not explored separately in either of these studies.

Hughes and Kleist (2005) conducted a qualitative inquiry with first-year doctoral students in counselor education by interviewing four participants at three points in time during their first year of doctoral study. Three of the four participants were female, three were White, and one was an international student. Although the study was limited by the small sample, findings suggest that participant's experiences ranged from stress and self-doubt to receiving internal and external validation that they were experiencing success.

Protivnak and Foss (2009) examined positive and negative influences reported by 141 counselor education doctoral students (74.5% women, 70.9% White students, and 12.1% African American students). Themes included departmental culture, mentoring, academics, support systems, and personal issues, with participants reporting both negative and positive aspects with these themes. However, these researchers did not study the intersection of race or biological sex with the positive or negative aspects of themes reported.

It is unknown from the aforementioned studies whether the experiences of doctoral students in counselor education are influenced by race or biological sex. The purpose of the current study is to address this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of African American females in counselor education and counseling psychology doctoral programs at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The research can help inform effective support mechanisms for African American females in counselor education programs.

Method

The study is a retrospective reflection of the experiences of participants with the goal of describing the perceptions, experiences, and feelings of African American female doctoral students in counselor education and counseling psychology programs at PWIs. Through structured interviews, participants described their phenomenological experiences without being prompted for causal explanations for these experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1961).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used by the researchers to facilitate the selection of information rich cases so that the experiences of female African American doctoral students could be understood in depth (Patton, 2002). Female African American students who were in counselor education or counseling psychology programs at PWIs and those who had graduated from PWIs less than three years prior to data collection were invited to participate via counseling listservs and by word of mouth. Twelve respondents who self-identified as being African American females, and who were currently in, or recent graduates from, counselor education or counseling psychology programs at PWIs were accepted as participants in the study.

Data were collected from 12 African American female participants. Eleven were enrolled in doctoral programs: seven in counselor education and four in counseling psychology programs. The twelfth participant had recently completed her doctorate in counselor education and was employed as an assistant professor. She was also unable to participate in an interview and sent in her responses by email. Data from this twelfth participant was excluded to preserve the homogeneity of data (Patton, 2002). Participants were affiliated with doctoral programs in states representing the west and east coasts, the south, and the mid-west.

Researchers

The researchers are all counselor educators of color. As members of visible racial or ethnic minorities in the USA we have all experienced being treated differently because of how we look, or have had times when we noticed our “difference” from our white peers. Our common interest in diversity issues and in supporting students of color in counseling doctoral programs led us to work together on this project. Each of us has a different perspective on which we elaborate in the paragraphs below.

Researcher One: I was born and raised in India and have professional experience in India, Australia, and the USA. My interest in discrimination and prejudice experienced by women expanded to include the issue of race as I became aware of the experiences of discrimination of women of color in academia.

Researcher Two: I am a person of color who belongs to one of the racial groups in South Africa that was disadvantaged by the institutionalized system of racism. I am interested in understanding the experiences of female African American doctoral students through my lenses that have been influenced by socio-political factors such as enforced segregation and discrimination, patriarchy, and marginality.

Researcher Three: I am an African American female and a first generation college graduate. I wanted to learn more about the experiences of other women of color as they attempted to navigate a doctoral program.

Data Collection

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, data were collected through telephone interviews. These interviews were conducted by the two female researchers in this study and by another female African American doctoral student in counselor education. Questions for inclusion in the interview were drawn from prior research conducted by Ellis (2001) and Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith (2004). To ensure consistency of questions asked of all respondents, the interviewers followed an interview protocol.

The telephone interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and were taped. Telephone interviews were transcribed by the interviewers and an assistant. In cases where interviews were transcribed by the assistant, the interviewer checked the transcription for accuracy. Participants were invited to contact the researchers if they wished to supplement their responses.

Data Analysis

A salient characteristic of qualitative research is the role of the researcher as the data collection instrument. The validity of the data collected depends on the skills,

training experience, competence and the thoroughness of the researcher, as well as what Guba and Lincoln (2005) refer to as reflexivity, defined as “reflecting critically on the self as a researcher” (p. 210). These factors influence how the phenomena in this study, the experiences of African American female doctoral students, are processed. To ensure that the data were credible, trustworthy, balanced, and authentic, several steps were taken to reduce researcher bias and to strengthen the confidence of conclusions drawn.

Investigator triangulation (using more than one interviewer to observe and collect the data) and analyst triangulation (using multiple analysts to review the data) were employed (Patton, 2002). The interviewers in this study were female doctoral students of color. Researcher number two was added to the research team to enhance the objectivity of the data analysis. In addition a systematic data analysis model—the transcendental phenomenological model—as delineated by Patton (2002) and Moustakas (1994) was followed to analyze the data. The steps that were followed specific to this model of phenomenological inquiry included adhering to the principle of *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, categorization of themes, and an audit process to enhance objectivity (Patton, 2002). The following is a detailed explanation of the steps that were followed so as to understand the data in a systematic manner.

The principle of *epoche* according to Patton (2002) is the deliberate attempt by the researcher “...to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 485). In order to address this principle the researchers in this study discussed their prejudices and biases and how these might affect their interpretation of participants’ experiences. Researcher one explored the effects of privilege based on caste and socio-economic status in her formative years. Researcher two discussed his male privilege growing up in a patriarchal environment and the role of generalized stereotypes about women. Researcher number three explored how being African American, female, and a graduate from a PWI may influence her objectivity when reviewing the data. Each of the data analysts agreed to point out perceptions of subjective bias on their part or by any of the researchers throughout the data analysis process.

Each of the researchers who were involved in the data analysis first reviewed the transcriptions of all the participants independently. The researchers then communicated face-to-face and telephonically to share their general ideas of what they saw unfolding in the data. In situations where one researcher identified an issue that the others had not picked up on, discussion was entered into through a consensual process to determine whether the issue ought to be carried on to the next phase—which was to systematically reduce the data and distill it to its pure form through the use of *bracketing* (Denzin, 1989).

The main premise of bracketing or phenomenological reduction is to examine the data in its pure form, that is, contain it in a bracket and exclude extraneous variables that may contaminate the data. The researchers examined each transcription for statements made by the participants during the interview that related to their experiences as doctoral students. The researchers independently interpreted the comments of the participants. There were times when the researchers consulted with each other when the comments were not clear and a determination had to be made whether to include or exclude the comment. The criteria for inclusion or exclusion were based on how relevant the data was to the questions that were asked by the interviewer and to the general experiences of

the participant in their doctoral studies. All relevant comments were included during this phase in preparation for the next phase during which the data were distilled further.

After bracketing, the data were given equal value or were “horizontalized” as described by Patton (2002). The researchers organized the data in a tabular form to identify and remove statements that overlapped or were repeated. Through this process, the data that remained were the essence of what all participants shared. The next step involved examining the data and placing the data that went together in groups or clusters. The researchers examined them for what Patton refers to as internal homogeneity, that is, the extent to which the data went together in a significant way. This was the preliminary stages of an inductive open coding process to identify the various categories or themes that encapsulated the experiences of African American female doctoral students. The next phase involved judging the categories for external heterogeneity. External heterogeneity, also referred to as axial coding in qualitative research, identifies the distinction among the categories.

During the final phase the analysts audited each others’ coding system to reach consensus as to which themes were most salient. If one of the researchers asserted that a comment or statement did not belong in a specific category or if there was not unanimous agreement regarding a category, the researchers went back to reading the transcripts again until consensus was reached to include or exclude a statement or comment or to move it to another category. The same principle applied to determining the final list of categories. The following categories emerged from this inductive process: impetus to commence doctoral study; adjustment to doctoral study; interactions with professors and peers; discrimination and prejudice; financial and non-financial support; and persistence, success, and failures. The section that follows summarizes the data pertaining to the aforementioned categories.

Results

Interviews from 11 African American female doctoral students were analyzed to explore themes related to their experiences in Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology doctoral programs. Themes revealed included: (a) impetus to commence doctoral study, (b) adjustment to doctoral study, (c) interactions with professors and peers, (d) discrimination and prejudice, (e) financial and non-financial support, and (f) persistence, success, and failures. Each theme is described in described in further detail below.

Impetus to Commence Doctoral Study

Several participants noted that their desire to work toward a doctoral degree started at a young age, often based on observations of family or community members who had succeeded in academia or other careers requiring higher education degrees. Comments such as the following illustrate this point.

I knew I was going to get my doctorate in the 2nd or 3rd grade—when I was in the 2nd grade, my teacher’s husband was a psychiatrist, and that’s when I was thinking, wow, I want to be a psychiatrist.

I have an aunt who is a professor in the college of education at a university...my aunt has always been a huge inspiration to me...it has always been a lifelong dream of mine.

Undergraduate or master's level professors or mentors appeared to play a crucial role in many of the participants' decisions to commence doctoral programs. For the majority of participants, professors were a positive influence, illustrated by comments such as:

I had a black female professor with a Ph.D. in my master's program. And I think that just her being in that position was a model for me....It allowed me to think, 'wow, I see someone like me doing this'—so that's where it first started, in my master's program, with that particular professor.

...the professors I had in the master's program were very supportive of my going to a doctoral program. But somewhere in the back of my mind I kind of knew all along that I was going to keep going.

In one instance, a negative experience with a professor provided the impetus to do better.

I can think of a negative experience I had with an instructor that would definitely do it...I decided for sure then that it's like I'm going to have to go on, because, you know, everybody can't run into people like that and still go on in school. Because it is tearing a lot of black students from pursuing anything beyond a bachelor's degree and many drop their major in that [particular] program. So, I was the one who stuck it out.

One participant reported how participation in a program to encourage African American students to proceed with graduate study was very influential in her decision to commence a doctoral program.

...when I was an undergraduate, I was selected to participate in the program [Ronald E. McNair post baccalaureate program]...I had two mentors, both in undergrad...they became great mentors and it really helped to have people who were African Americans encourage me to apply and help me fill out applications.

In addition to the importance of internal “drive” to pursue doctoral work, the participants' responses indicated the importance of role models at an early age to allow individuals to see a future with a doctoral degree. They pointed out the vital role that undergraduate and master's level professors, mentors, and specific programs can play in helping an African American female to progress toward entering a doctoral program. And having visible and successful African American women role models in academia allowed participants to see a future for them in academia.

Adjustment to Doctoral Study

Initial adjustment to doctoral programs posed a challenge to eight of the participants. Factors such as isolation, difficulties in understanding the culture of the department, responsibilities of graduate or teaching assistantships, and a lack of mentoring and advising contributed to a sense of physical and psychological pressure.

There was an additional layer of stress for some participants who also had to adjust to moving from one state to another. Words such as “intense” and “overwhelming” were used by participants. Although academic challenges were cited by some, it appeared that non-academic stressors were more salient.

The isolation of being at PWIs comes through poignantly in these responses.

...it felt isolating...it's not that I needed someone to hold my hand—I just needed an explanation. I felt like I was dumped in the middle of a forest. I had to find my own path to maneuver through the trees on my own.

I'm the only Black person...it's very cliquish, and so I've kind of been an outsider on the clique.

Participants reported that a lack of knowledge about the culture and climate within the department contributed to difficulties in adjusting in their first year of doctoral work. These comments illustrate this issue.

I think that departments have a certain lingo, a certain culture...certain professors host events or socials at their house...I guess understanding what is expected and what to expect as a first year student...

I remember the program being very political. I quickly realized that it was not about what you know, but how well you could work through the politics. I felt clueless, I was ill-prepared [for this part of the process].

Some participant expectations of the first year of doctoral work were met, such as hard work, smaller class sizes, and greater contact with faculty, while for others, not knowing what to expect and therefore not knowing what to ask created adjustment difficulties. Many of the sources of stress described by participants in this section are likely to be experienced by all doctoral students. These include factors such as having to deal with the adjustment of teaching responsibilities and learning the culture and politics of departments. Experiences that were more unique to African American females were related to the isolation of being at a PWI and in one instance being the only Black person amongst faculty and peers.

Interactions with Professors and Peers

Some participants reported supportive interactions with their advisors, but most reported limited or poor interaction with other professors. The lack of mentoring or advising, and in some instances a perceived lack of helpfulness, contributed to difficulties in adjusting. Participants discussed how professors tended not to initiate interaction, and that participants as new doctoral students did not know how to initiate such interaction. Comments illustrative of this point follow.

Well, mostly positive. I have only had one professor who seemed culturally insensitive. I can't really complain...I guess it's the interaction I haven't had that bothers me...like not being invited to work on research projects or presentations with them, finding out about associateships or funding from other students. I don't know if it is racial at all—it could be not knowing the right questions to ask.

My relationship with my advisor was good and my interactions with her went really well. But as for the others...I did what I was meant to do. I went to class—I treated it like this is business, I did what I was meant to do, and I went home.

One participant discussed problems related to being paired with an advisor on the basis of racial similarity. *“I was automatically placed with the one African American faculty member and we didn’t hit it off...”* This response was atypical. Four participants spoke of how they appreciated support they received from African American faculty members.

Mentors and professors, African American and non-African American, played a crucial role as evidenced by this comment, *“...my co-chair, who is an African American woman...we have a strong bond...I have been able to tell her any problems or concerns that I may have about any professors, anything in my program;”* and, *“there are two faculty members inside my department that are a strong sense of support for me...and I will say that neither of them are African American.”*

There appeared to be a higher level of satisfaction with interaction with advisors and mentors than there was with interaction with peers. Six participants reported limited or no interaction with peers while one participant reported negative interactions with peers. Participants reported feeling excluded or not part of the peer group, or they reported difficulties in getting close for reasons such as having to work full time. Comments that illustrate this point follow.

With peers I have had positive experiences, I have been able to develop good relationships with a few...but again, they get together and decide to do projects and I feel like I am on my own at times...

One thing that is different is that I am taking six credits a semester. I work on the outside and my cohort is going to school full time.

The important role played by advisors and mentors, African American and White was emphasized. Participants appreciated these types of supportive relationships. However one participant related that being paired with an African American professor was not beneficial. Overall, participants seemed more satisfied with their interactions with faculty than they were with interactions with peers. Participants reported that they had limited interactions with peers either due to their own schedules or because their peers excluded them.

Discrimination and Prejudice

Interview data suggest that the respondents experienced both race and gender based prejudice and discrimination. Gender based discrimination was reported by four participants, attributed in part due to the over-representation of males in academia. However, reported incidents of perceived racial discrimination from peers in the doctoral cohort and undergraduate students in the classroom featured more prominently than gender. Five participants reported specific instances of race based discrimination including comments such as the following.

...I found myself still dispelling the myths about African Americans being from the ghetto, [having] lower IQ, and [being] overly sensitive to issues of race.

I spent time legitimizing myself because sometimes they [undergraduate students being taught by the doctoral student] looked at me as if [asking] what does she know?

One participant discussed the challenge of being called upon to be the sole representative of her race.

Since I was the only African American in my cohort whenever an issue came up I was the spokesperson for all African Americans, the entire group. It was hard to get people to understand that my perspective is one of many as an African American. That was difficult.

Another voiced the pressure of being the “token” person of color.

Being the only African American in my class was hard. A comment was made by a member of my cohort... he said, ‘I guess I am the token male’ and I kind of said to myself, where does that leave me?

Four of the participants alluded to “having to work two or three times harder” or “being held to a different standard” than their peers who were from the dominant culture. In addition, participants commented on the lack of opportunities for African American students to collaborate with professors professionally. One participant commented, “I don’t think it’s deliberate, I think it has to do with the department having a history of accepting few minorities and not really knowing how they fit in the program.” This comment speaks to a factor that may contribute to the marginal experiences of African American females in doctoral counseling programs.

Experiences of discrimination based on gender and race were reported by participants but race was a more salient factor. Participants reported having to prove to others that they were capable and belonged in a doctoral program. They reported experiences of having to be the “spokesperson” for African Americans, and having their credentials and capabilities doubted by peers and students they taught. There were also reports of faculty in some programs not really knowing how to work with African American females.

Financial and Non-Financial Support

The participants examined their doctoral experience relative to support from three primary perspectives: financial support such as scholarships or loans; support from professors, mentors, family, student organizations, and friends; and the supportive role of spirituality. Participants expressed appreciation for financial support which was provided during the early stages of their studies, but expressed frustration with the lack of support during the latter stages of their doctoral study. This resulted in participants having to obtain loans or seek fulltime employment during a crucial stage of their program. One participant made the assertion: “I think the faculty isn’t aware of challenges that African Americans face. I have a responsibility to assist my parents and siblings. I can’t be just a student like my counterparts,” alluding to a perception that faculty treated all students

as a homogenous group when in fact the experiences of African American students were different.

Participants shared that they were bolstered by family and friends during difficult times. Family and friends often provided encouragement and served as sounding boards. However, the lack of understanding of the doctoral experience by family and friends sometimes undermined their ability to help as reflected by the comment, *“well, personally my family was very supportive but they don’t have any idea what graduate school or a doctoral program is like. They don’t understand the work involved.”* Four participants noted that advisors or mentors were a great source of support because they understood what participants needed to accomplish.

Spirituality was a common thread that ran through many of the participants’ statements with four participants endorsing this aspect as being very important to them. *“Prayer”* and *“faith in God”* contributed significantly to being a successful doctoral student.

Participants expressed appreciation for supportive people in their lives including family, friends, and advisors. At the same time they expressed difficulties with having family or friends truly understand the pressures of a doctoral program. Spirituality was a source of support for some of the participants. The lack of financial support in the latter phase of the doctoral program was perceived as a challenge.

Persistence, Success, and Failures

Nine participants attributed their success to their inner drive to succeed and their unwillingness to give up. Four participants attributed their success to the strong relationships that they had with advisors and mentors. One participant described a professor who provided guidance and support from the beginning of the program as *“probably the person who got me through.”* Others expressed appreciation for faculty members who provided mentorship and the opportunity for students to improve their research and teaching skills. Four participants referred to faith that helped them succeed as exemplified by this comment, *“The main thing that contributed to my success was prayer and my faith in God.”* Persistence, determination, tenacity, asking questions, and having good social skills were some personal characteristics that participants alluded to as factors that contributed to their success. As one participant put it, *“Hard work and dedication has helped. I’m not the type of person who gives up or quits when things get hard.”*

Personal difficulties with time management and procrastination were expressed by some. Failure was seen by one participant as not speaking up to dispel misconceptions about African Americans. *“I should have probably spoken up a lot sooner in terms of creating awareness for other people because I really believe that people sometimes knew no better.”* Overall, participants believed that they had more successes than failures and these failures were minor.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Counselor Education Programs

This research highlights the importance of advisor-advisee relationships: some participants reported difficulties finding mentors, not having fruitful relationships with advisors, or not understanding the culture of the department. This suggests that faculty

within counselor education programs (e.g., advisors, program coordinators, and chair persons) ought to be deliberate in facilitating opportunities for mentorship, and in providing training to faculty in effective mentoring. Faculty also should be cognizant of the power dynamics that are prevalent in the student–advisor relationship and be sensitive to students who may be hesitant to change advisors or committee members for fear of repercussions. It is recommended that students ought to be made aware of the protocols for an advisor or committee member change at the outset the program rather than as a reaction to a situation that evolves.

The results suggest that African American females in counselor education programs at PWIs face challenges related to social adjustment. Some participants reported having limited interaction with peers or in some cases being excluded by peers. If program faculty and administrators are more aware of the sense of isolation that some female African American students may experience, they could take proactive measures to address this with new students. Providing timely help that is tailored to individual needs, and fostering a sense of community among African American students across campus are possible strategies to employ. Programs that link new doctoral students with African American students who may be at the internship or dissertation phase of their program could be beneficial. In addition, intentional efforts to facilitate the socialization of African American students with minority and non-minority peers are helpful and could take place through organizations such as Chi Sigma Iota or through regular social gatherings.

Many of the participants voiced difficulties stemming from unclear expectations during the first year of doctoral work. This is similar to the concerns voiced by counselor education doctoral students in prior research (Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). This issue could be addressed by more detailed orientation and support programs. Confusion regarding program requirements and expectations required of students could be avoided with clear written materials and frequent interaction with advisors, faculty, and advanced students.

Creating a culture of support through mentoring by professors and advisors is important for the success of African American female students in counselor education and for all students. While increasing the number of faculty of color is recommended, Rentz (2003) has pointed out that cross-cultural mentoring is necessary due to low numbers of African American faculty. Faculty who are not African American females could make an effort to understand the background of their students and ask specifically for what types of assistance they might need. Faculty could also enhance efforts to reach out to African American students. Students who are new to the doctoral program may be intimidated to initiate a relationship with a faculty member who is not assigned as their advisor. By being open and welcoming, faculty can help initiate helpful relationships with all students.

The findings indicated that financial stressors were significant. Unlike doctoral programs in other fields, counselor education programs require the completion of internship hours in addition to the dissertation, placing further pressure on students. Participants in the current study reported difficulties with continuing with their doctoral work once funding ended. Financial support during the internship and dissertation phases of the program would be helpful in retention of students, as would the identification of paid internship opportunities.

The results of this study indicate that it is important to accept and validate African American female students' experiences of discrimination and prejudice, and provide a forum to process such experiences. Informing students of how to utilize university mechanisms to combat discrimination such as working through the Ombuds Office or the Office of Institutional Equity could provide a sense of empowerment.

Finally, counselor education programs wishing to recruit and retain female African American doctoral students would benefit from harnessing their intrinsic motivation from an early age. Participants in the current study reported that role models and mentors as early as grade school, as well as during bachelor's and master's programs were powerful forces in shaping their educational aspirations. Conducting information sessions for African American female students in bachelor's and master's programs so that they learn about doctoral programs in counselor education could be one way of fostering interest in doctoral degrees. Formalized programs, such as the Ronald E. McNair program and the Holmes Scholars program could provide avenues to mentor and support students to gain entry into graduate programs—and succeed once they are admitted.

Limitations and Future Research

The retrospective nature of the research required participants to reflect on their first year of doctoral study. Their recall of events may have been influenced by the passage of time. Future researchers may wish to interview students about their current experience at various important points in the doctoral program such as during the first year, just before or after comprehensive examinations, and just before or after the dissertation. This could provide details of challenges characteristic of different stages of the doctoral journey, and provide information on how to reduce attrition.

Researcher bias is another limitation that is particularly pertinent to qualitative research. It is possible that other researchers might have identified different themes. Since the interviews were conducted telephonically, subtle nuances or body language usually discernible during face-to-face interviews could not be collected to support or refute verbalizations. Future researchers may wish to conduct face-to-face interviews.

Finally, future researchers can study unique needs of African American female doctoral students in counselor education by collecting comparative data from other subgroups of students identified by race and gender such as White, Asian, and Hispanic male and female doctoral students. African American females are achieving success in counseling doctoral programs, but they do experience several challenges. Some of these challenges are shared by all doctoral students. However some challenges, including isolation and discrimination, may be more unique to African American female students. Findings from this research could help identify ways in which the success and persistence of African American female students in doctoral programs in counselor education may be enhanced with adequate interpersonal and programmatic supports.

References

- Bradley, C., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2004). African American counselor educators: Their experiences, challenges, and recommendations. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 43*(4), 258–273.
- Bradley, C. (2005). The career experiences of African American women faculty: Implications for counselor education programs. *College Student Journal, 39*(3), 518-527.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretative interactionism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Doctoral degree awards to African Americans reach another all-time high. (January 01, 2006). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 50*, 6-10. Retrieved from http://www.jbhe.com/news_views/50_black_doctoraldegrees.html
- Ellis, E. M. (2001). The impact of race and gender on graduate school socialization, satisfaction with doctoral study, and commitment to degree completion. *The Western Journal of Black Studies, 25*(1), 30–45.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 191-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hughes, F. R., & Kleist, M. (2005). First-semester experiences of counselor education doctoral students. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 45*(2), 97-108.
- Lewis, C. W., Ginsberg, R., Davies, T., & Smith, K. (2004). The experiences of African American Ph.D. students at predominantly white Carnegie I research institutions. *College Student Journal, 38*(2), 231–245.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1961). *The phenomenology of perception* (translated C. Smith). New York, NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- National Science Foundation (2009a). In NSF/NIH/USED/USDA/NEH/NASA: 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates. *Table 17: Doctorate recipients race/ethnicity and citizenship: 1999-2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/appendix/pdf/tab17.pdf>
- National Science Foundation (2009b). In NSF/NIH/USED/USDA/NEH/NASA: 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates. *Table 19: Female doctorate recipients by race/ethnicity and citizenship: 1999-2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/appendix/pdf/tab19.pdf>
- National Science Foundation. (2009c). In NSF/NIH/USED/USDA/NEH/NASA: 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates. *Table 18: Male doctorate recipients by race/ethnicity and citizenship: 1999-2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/appendix/pdf/tab18.pdf>
- National Science Foundation. (2009d). In NSF/NIH/USED/USDA/NEH/NASA: 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates. *Table 15: Doctorate recipients by sex and subfield of study: 2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/appendix/pdf/tab15.pdf>

- National Science Foundation. (2009e). In NSF/NIH/USED/USDA/NEH/NASA: 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates. *Table 20: Doctorate recipients by citizenship, race/ethnicity, and subfield of study: 2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf11306/appendix/pdf/tab20.pdf>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Protivnak, J. J., & Foss, L. (2009). An exploration of themes that influence the counselor education doctoral student experience. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 48(4), 239-256.
- Rentz, T. (2003). The role of mentorship in developing African American students and professionals within the academy. In A. L. Green & L. V. Scott (Eds.), *Journey to the Ph.D.: How to navigate the process as African Americans*. (pp. 224–237). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm