

Equity in Graduate Education Article Summary

Article: “Am I going crazy?!”: A Critical Race Analysis of Doctoral Education

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Summary

This article sheds light on the racialized experiences of Black and Latinx doctoral students, through ethnographic interviews of 22 students within 3 research universities. Looking through the lens of critical race theory at students’ stories of these experiences, the authors argue that the culture of doctoral education can be dehumanizing and marginalizing for Black and Latinx students, who came to question whether they might be “going crazy” when talking about their experiences.

Key Concepts Defined

Narrative

In narrative research, “the truth” involves trying to construct an account of an experience, by focusing on how the event is understood by the person providing the account (Spencer, 1982).

Reconstruct

Within the context of narrative research, the process through which the researcher tries to not only reconstruct the experience of the participant for the reader but to also help the reader understand the emotions and “sense of the reality” the participant was feeling at the time.

Systemic Racism

Since its founding, the U.S. has a long history of dehumanizing and marginalizing groups of people (e.g. African Americans and Native Americans) that has been used to justify genocide, slavery, segregation, incarceration. The messages we all receive about racial hierarchy, both implicit and explicit, have resulted in the perpetuation of social systems that regard and treat people of color, especially Black people, as less than equal participants, regardless of the law. There is a great [set of videos](#) from Race Forward that talks about systemic racism if you want to learn more.

Dominant ideology

Interconnected beliefs, attitudes, values, ideas, and culture of one group/identity (ie. men, white) over another subordinate group (ie. women, Black) which are often used to maintain and reproduce the status quo. Dominant ideologies provide frames that people use to interpret information, and they provide roadmaps for understanding behavior (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Microaggression

Microaggressions are the “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue et al, 2007, p. 278).

Racialization

The extension of “racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice, or group” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p.111).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)


CRT is a theoretical framework that examines issues of race and racism as they related to power and privilege within social institutions, including higher education, and to assess inequities in under-represented communities’ experiences. When using this approach, the early formulations of which were oriented around a series of specific tenets, researchers attempt to understand how recipients of **systemic racism** are affected by others’ cultural perceptions of their race (whether implicit or explicit) and how those recipients are able to represent themselves to counter racism. Specifically, when utilizing CRT, researchers also try to challenge the **dominant ideologies** that exist in institutional systems that support or normalize oppressive conditions in society by telling stories which center the experience of individuals from marginalized communities. In CRT, storytelling is designed in order to get individuals, especially those with privileged identities to rethink and **reconstruct** traditional notions of what “an experience is like.” For further reading on CRT, see Crenshaw, K. (Ed). *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. (1995). United States: New Press.

Key Points

Doctoral education is a socialization process through which “students make sense of the academy and its values, its expectations of them as graduate students, the academy’s conceptions and definitions of success, and the models of professional and personal life that it offers to those aspiring to join the academic ranks” (Austin, 2002, p. 103). For Black and Latinx doctoral students, this experience is complicated by “race, **racialization**, and racism inherent in the social practice of higher education” (Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011, p. 95) which manifests in the form of “failed and insufficient advising and mentoring relationships with faculty, academic and personal invalidation, lack of departmental and institutional support, alienation, and isolation” (p. 96).

In addition, this study provides readers first hand examples of what Black and Latinx doctoral students have identified as racial microaggressions and the consequences of such constant and extended encounters on these students. Examples included:

- Self-censorship
- Questioning ability or worth
- Adjusting their behavior and natural forms of expression to a “protocol of don’ts”



The authors argue that the socialization practices and racialized aggressions that marginalize these underrepresented students provide evidence of a narrative that “dehumanizes students in their journey through doctoral education (p. 110).”

The “Am I Going Crazy?!” Narrative

In this study, this narrative was constructed and expressed through the participants’ personal experiences. For example:

Janet, a Latina doctoral student, described at length an occasion when students in the class for which she worked as the teaching assistant disregarded her contributions to discussion as well as her evaluations of students’ work, instead deferring to the white professor. Expressing the cumulative effect of these types of encounters, Janet shared, “And sometimes I need a confirmation, so I know I’m not going crazy and that I’m not the only one noticing—Is it me being hyper-sensitive? Or, did this really stand out and happen?” She continued to explain how these moments happen regularly in her teaching assistantship, and that, “it depends on the day if I just decide to brush it off or not.