

Gray Clouds Over Ivory Towers: Struggles Facing Black, First-Generation Social Work Research Doctoral Students

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Abstract: *Black, first-generation doctoral students can be classified as those who belong to the African diaspora and come from families with parents who do not have bachelor's degrees. Data shows that over half of Black doctoral degree recipients, across all fields, have first-generation status, and literature has shown that these students experience several challenges during their doctoral journey that their peers do not. This paper details six of these challenges for Black, first-generation research doctoral students in social work programs. These challenges result in educational disparities disfavoring these students, and, as such, social workers are compelled by our Code of Ethics to work against these forms of social injustice. This conceptual discussion uses Critical Race Theory and Social Capital Theory to explain the continued existence of these challenges, followed by recommendations that social work educators, academic institutions, and educational organizations can use to improve conditions for Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students across the country. If social work educators take this critical issue, its associated challenges, and the proposed recommendations seriously, they can begin to create safe and actively anti-racist and anti-classist academic environments that are conducive to the success of this student population.*

Keywords: *Black, first-generation, doctoral students, challenges, critical race theory, social capital theory, classism*

In 2019, 14.5% of social work PhD graduates identified as Black or African American. This is a decrease from the 16% of graduates that used this racial/ethnic identification in 2017, the next most recent year for which the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) provides detailed racial/ethnic identification data online (CSWE, 2018, 2020). Available data from CSWE shows that the percentage of Black graduates from social work research doctoral programs is usually higher than the 2018 national Black PhD graduation rate of 7% (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2019). However, what someone is least likely to find is reputable, reliable, and accurate data on how many Black graduates were first generation doctoral students who came from families with parents that do not hold bachelor's degrees. This data is virtually non-existent for the discipline of social work, specifically. As a profession that upholds the virtues of diversity and social justice, social work research doctoral programs should invest in initiatives to support Black, first-generation students. These initiatives should be in addition to efforts that ensure school environments are safe and conducive to the success of this population.

This paper will focus on how schools of social work and national social work education organizations should and can support Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students in a way that is actively anti-racist, understanding of cultural and background differences, and supportive of optimal student development and success. First, readers will be provided with an explanation of why this is a critical issue for social work education.

Next, two theoretical frameworks through which to view this challenge will be discussed. This will be followed by a presentation of relevant literature concerning the experiences of Black, first-generation research doctoral students from social work and other disciplines. Lastly, largely influenced by relevant literature, a series of recommendations for how to address this critical issue is offered. For the purposes of this paper, “Black” is defined as any individual belonging to the African diaspora and “first-generation” is used to describe a student whose parents do not hold a bachelor’s degree.

A reader may be asking why this paper focuses on Black first-generation research doctoral students as opposed to first-generation research doctoral students in general, or all first-generation research doctoral students of color. The simple answer to this question is slavery. Regardless of where they hail from, every member of the African diaspora has been touched by the legacy of slavery. Black, first-generation research doctoral students, whether they are domestic or international students, carry the consequences of slavery with them throughout their doctoral journeys. When discussing slavery and its connection to Black, first-generation research doctoral students’ experiences with higher education, there are two important facts to discuss.

First, scholars have found that the legacy of slavery is connected to the educational attainment gap between Blacks and whites to this day (Bertocchi, 2015; Bertocchi & Dimico, 2012, 2014). The cited research only discusses the education gap related to the undergraduate level. However, with, as disclosed earlier, a 2018 Black PhD graduation rate of only 7% (NSF, 2019), it should be safe to assume that the legacy of slavery could be influencing the PhD attainment gap between Blacks and whites as well. Second, many of the institutions where Black, first-generation research doctoral students earn their degrees were built by enslaved Africans and their descendants or benefited from their enslavement (Clarke & Fine, 2010; Reilly, 2017; Smith & Ellis, 2017). When only considering institutions that house social work PhD programs, this list includes schools such as the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Georgia, Rutgers University, Columbia University, Florida State University, the University of Alabama, Louisiana State University, etc. With these two facts in mind, it is the opinion of this author that institutions of higher learning owe it to Black students to be invested in their educational success in a way that is unique to this population.

Why Is This a Critical Issue for Social Work Education?

Over half of 2019 Black doctoral degree recipients across all disciplines met federal criteria for first-generation student status (NSF & National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics [NCSES], 2020). This is the highest rate among any racial group. Data shows that first-generation doctoral graduates face additional hurdles during and after the process of earning their degree. The NSF (2015, 2019) reported that first-generation doctoral graduates take longer to finish their degrees and leave their programs with higher levels of graduate school debt than other graduates. Unfortunately, it appears that the same circumstances are also true for Black doctoral graduates, in general. If both Black and first-generation students, regardless of race, face the same additional hurdles, individually, the

intersection of these two identities may be tragically harmful to Black, first-generation students seeking to earn their doctorates.

Some may consider time spent finishing a doctoral degree and the accumulation of student debt during a doctoral program to be individual attributes. However, when looking through the frames of Critical Race Theory and Social Capital Theory, one quickly realizes that these educational inequities may be an example of anti-Black, systemic, institutional, and interpersonal racism. Thus, eliminating these inequities should be a high priority for social work education leaders and stakeholders. However, if the data alone is not enough to move social work educators into action, they should take note that there have been calls for social work academia to invest in the education of Black social workers, specifically, since the early 20th century.

The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) was founded in 1968 when a group of Black attendees at the National Conference on Social Welfare disengaged from the conference and drafted a position statement detailing their grievances (NABSW, n.d.; Original Steering Committee of the NABSW, 1968). These grievances included a lack of Black representation on the National Conference on Social Welfare board and planning committee, the conferences' perpetuation of white racism through the selection of certain conference awardees, and that white social workers were not involving themselves in solving the problem of white racism. The most relevant demand in the NABSW 1968 position statement to the current work is their demand "that people who speak, write, research, and evaluate the Black community be Black people who are the experts in this area" (Original Steering Committee of the NABSW, 1968, p. 10). This demand echoes a call that was made over 30 years earlier by another social work pioneer.

In "The Need and Education of Negro Social Workers", Forrester B. Washington (1935) explains that Black people were the most impacted by the Great Depression but were benefiting the least from economic recovery programs. He espouses that only social workers were up to the task of providing relief for Black people, during that time, and that the best social workers for the job were Black social workers. He presents several reasons to justify this declaration, including the idea that Black social workers are more knowledgeable of resources in Black communities and that Black social workers are equipped to build better rapport with Black clients because of their shared racial identification and the social consequences of that identification. As mentioned above, when Washington's article was published, the United States was in the throes of the Great Depression. However, the past looks very similar to the present. What the Great Depression was for Washington is what the current COVID-19 pandemic is for today's social workers. As was true nearly 90 years ago, African Americans are disproportionately impacted by this outbreak (Modlin, 2020; Price-Haywood et al., 2020) amid 400-year-old and ever-present racial violence at the hands of law enforcement and white supremacists. With this in mind, Washington's declarations may still be quite relevant today. As such, social work education needs to be invested in ensuring the success of Black social work students as one pathway of achieving racial and social justice for all Black people.

Black social work scholars study several different topics and populations. However, Black social workers have been calling on social work academia to invest in the education

and training of Black students if for no other reason than to work to create a more just society for the Black people that our discipline serves. This ask may seem practice-oriented but, as mentioned earlier, the 1968 position statement from NABSW also called for the recruitment of Black social work researchers, placing the responsibility on the shoulders of social work doctoral programs as well. Regardless of what Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students choose to study, this author believes that it is past time to heed this call.

Theoretical Frameworks

As previewed earlier, the struggles of Black, first-generation research doctoral students in social work academia can be framed using Social Capital Theory and Critical Race Theory. This section of the current work will discuss how these two theoretical frameworks explain the existence of the educational disparities facing this group of students.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), in its simplest terms, says that individuals receive tangible and intangible benefits resulting from membership in a particular group. In his seminal work, Bourdieu (1986) explains that the amount of these benefits that an individual receives is influenced by the size of the network to which they belong. This theory can be used to frame the challenges faced by Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students in one of two ways. The first method of framing is that Black, first-generation research doctoral students do not have a network to provide access to tangible and intangible benefits such as additional financial support, knowledge of the higher education system, and academic and/or professional support because of their first-generation status. The second option for framing this issue is that if a Black, first-generation social work research doctoral student does put together a network for themselves before they begin their PhD program, it may not be large enough to amass as much social capital as their white or legacy peers. This, in part, may explain why simply being a first-generation student makes the journey towards a doctorate more difficult and, sometimes, longer than second, third, or fourth-generation students. However, in addition to a lack of social capital, Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students face increased obstacles in the larger society as well due to anti-Black racism. This phenomenon is best framed using Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory seeks to explain the experience of Black people living in America. It has been used to frame racism in the criminal justice system, health disparities among racial/ethnic minorities, educational inequities among Black youth, etc. The first tenet of Critical Race Theory is often called *the ordinariness of racism*. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (Delgado et al., 2017), this tenet explains that racism is just the way we do business in American society and it “is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged” (p. 8). This concept alone provides an explanation of why Black

doctoral students have a harder time in doctoral programs than their non-Black counterparts. Higher education, like other systems in American society, is rooted in racism and often upholds white supremacy at the expense of Black students. Unfortunately, instead of actively working against this enmeshed racism, academics and educational leaders ignore this reality and pretend that institutional anti-discrimination policies are enough. This attitude is due to white fragility and the desire to avoid hard and frank conversations.

Furthermore, two additional tenets of Critical Race Theory are intersectionality and anti-essentialism and the concept of whiteness as property. The idea of whiteness as property was first presented by Cheryl I. Harris (1993). Harris explains that just possessing white skin affords white people certain privileges that non-white people cannot access. When considering this tenet in addition to knowledge of social capital theory, it would appear to be fair for one to say that just being white provides additional social capital for white social work research doctoral students in general that Black social work research doctoral students will never be able to gain. Regarding intersectionality and anti-essentialism, this tenet espouses that an individual is not just Black, or male, or Christian. We all have multiple identities that intersect, with some providing privilege, and others resulting in marginalization and oppression. Again, Social Capital Theory and Critical Race Theory provide a plausible explanation for why the intersecting identities of being Black and first-generation can result in additional barriers for Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students while they work towards their degrees.

Using these two theoretical frameworks, social work education leaders and stakeholders should consider the support and success of Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students a matter of social justice. Two of the core values of social work are service and social justice. Our Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017) presents ethical principles based on these core values that are intended to guide our practice. The ethical principal related to service is that “social worker’s primary goal is to help people in need and address social problems” (NASW, 2017, Ethical Principles, para. 3). Regarding social justice, all social workers are meant to “challenge social injustice” (NASW, 2017, Ethical Principles, para. 6). As shown here, the educational inequities that Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students face is a prime example of social injustice influenced by racism and historical oppression. As such, all social workers, both in the field and in “ivory towers,” are compelled to do something about it.

Challenges Faced by Black, First-Generation Social Work Research Doctoral Students

After an intense search of several sources, this author found only one piece of scholarly literature that focused on the experience of Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students. Howard (2017) provides a conceptual framework for these students navigating their doctoral programs. However, it is important to note that in this work, Howard’s definition of “Black” is limited to African Americans. Also, her definition of “first-generation doctoral student” is specifically for “students who are the first in their

family to attend a *doctoral* program” (p. 514, emphasis in original). Both definitions are different from the two used in this paper which, again, are inclusive of all people of African ancestry regardless of their country of origin and attribute “first-generation” status to those whose parents do not have bachelor’s degrees.

Underdevelopment of Research Skills

The unique challenge for Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students that Howard presents is that, during their MSW programs, this population of students may overly internalize our professions’ focus on clinical skills at the master’s level. As a result, they may not develop the caliber of research skills needed in order to be successful in a research doctoral program. Their white classmates or those who are not first-generation may also internalize this focus but are more likely to have an external network of academic and professional mentors to provide additional support and opportunities to build these skills, or increased access to build this network. This has the possibility to leave Black, first-generation students at a stark disadvantage as they enter PhD programs. In addition to this unique challenge faced by social work research doctoral students, Howard and scholars from other disciplines have discussed challenges that face Black, first-generation doctoral students, in general, that social work education should be paying attention to and working to counteract.

Feelings of Otherness

First, several scholars have written about how Black, first-generation students encounter feelings of otherness or not belonging in their doctoral programs (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Viaud, 2014). This is often in combination with feelings of isolation due to experiences of being the only Black person or person of color in the room (Vickers, 2014). These scholars report that Black, first-generation doctoral students often find themselves feeling alienated from their classmates as a result of their first-generation status. Students have discussed feeling as if their peers have a leg-up and frame of reference that they do not have because of their backgrounds.

Unfortunately, these feelings of otherness are not limited to the academic setting. These students have expressed feeling disconnected from their family, friends, and communities of origin as a result of their pursuit of a doctorate (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Howard, 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Vickers, 2014). In these settings, Black, first-generation doctoral students feel pressure to watch the language they use in order to ensure their family and friends understand them and to not be accused of being “uppity” by the people they have grown up with. They also acknowledge knowing that while they receive invaluable support from these familial sources, individuals back home do not really understand their school experiences or the doctoral program process. Gardner and Holley (2011) refer to it as living in two worlds, but Howard (2017) frames this issue using W.E.B. DuBois’ (1903/2007) concept of “double consciousness.” Black, first-generation doctoral students are forced into a position where they do not feel totally accepted in their programs and no longer fit in at home.

Imposter Syndrome

“Imposter syndrome” is a term coined by Clance (1985) and is summarized by Brems et al. (1994) as “individuals’ feelings of not being as capable or adequate as others perceive or evaluate them to be.” (pp. 183-184). Black, first-generation doctoral students have detailed struggles with imposter syndrome (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Vickers, 2014). Gardner and Holley (2011) explain that the feelings of guilt or failure that are a component of imposter syndrome result from the internalization of classist assumptions that are made both for and by first-generation doctoral students of color, resulting from their lack of social and financial capital and advantage. These students must fight through these feelings of guilt and failure that have led them to believe they have not earned the right to be in their programs despite knowing that they worked hard to gain admission. They often have an irrational fear that someone will discover that they are a “phony” and are not really good enough to be there despite any high praise they may receive to the contrary.

Financial Concerns

Furthermore, Black, first-generation doctoral students have reported that financial concerns are a major challenge for them while pursuing their degrees (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Howard, 2017; Vickers, 2014). Many Black, first-generation doctoral students come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Their family may depend on them to financially contribute whether they are living with their family or not. On the other hand, students may not be expected to financially contribute but know not to expect substantial financial support from their family as they pursue their doctorate. Restrictions on outside employment in some doctoral programs, less knowledge of sufficient funding sources, and lack of available familial financial support may prolong time to degree for these students or be the reason why they drop out of their programs.

Navigating the System

To continue, Black, first-generation doctoral students often enter their doctoral programs with less knowledge of how to navigate the system (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Howard, 2017; Vickers, 2014). This challenge can be viewed directly through the social capital theoretical framework and connected to the history of obstacles to education for Black people in the United States. As mentioned earlier in this work, the justification behind a singular focus on Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students as opposed to all first-generation students is the negative impact of slavery on the educational attainment of generations of Black people. Yes, the percentage of bachelor’s degrees and doctorates conferred to Black men and Black women have, for the most part, been consistently increasing since the late 1970’s (Snyder et al., 2019), showing that Black people are making progress towards overcoming this history of obstacles to our education. However, over half of Black students who received doctorates

in 2019 were still first-generation doctoral students (NSF & NCSSES, 2020), representing the continued legacy of the historical exclusion of Black people from higher education.

Since these students are the first in their families to complete bachelor's degrees and pursue graduate degrees, they may have to work harder to access information about how the doctoral education system works. They often depend on mentors who have already been through the process to guide them and give them advice to be successful. If they do not gain access to mentors, many Black, first-generation doctoral students resort to trying to learn as they go. While some of these students do well on their own, this can be especially draining because, through interactions in and out of the classroom, they pick up on the fact that some of their peers have knowledge that they do not (Gardner & Holley, 2011). This can lead to increasing feelings of otherness and imposter syndrome.

Acclimating to a Racist Academic Environment

Lastly, but probably most importantly, upon entering their doctoral programs, especially at predominantly white institutions, Black, first-generation students are often forced to acclimate to a Eurocentric, racist, and potentially unsafe environment (Howard, 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Viaud, 2014). Unfortunately, in these environments they experience racism and general disrespect at the hands of white faculty, staff, and classmates (Viaud, 2014; Vickers, 2014). For Black, first-generation students, succeeding in academia requires exhibiting traits and enduring situations that challenge and are, simply, incompatible with their cultural norms. Students who exhibit difficulty or failure to “successfully” assimilate into the “culture of academia” are at risk for harmful consequences. The most harmful of these consequences is attrition. However, these students may also experience negative psychological effects, such as feelings of failure or of dealing with the implicit opinion expressed by academics that the values they may hold as a Black person are not suited for life in academia. This connection between experiences of racism and decreased mental health has been written about by several scholars (Lewis et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2014; Williams, 2018). Their work has shown that exposure to racism and discrimination can lead to increased depressive and anxious symptomatology, isolation, and general psychological distress for Black people in general. In addition to these general consequences, when it comes to Black doctoral students specifically, scholars have reported that racism and discrimination in academia can lead to isolation, feelings of invisibility, and the development of potentially unhelpful defense mechanisms from the emotional harm of racism, etc. (Barker, 2016; Blockett et al., 2016; Collins, 1990; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Haynes et al., 2016; Nagbe, 2019).

Social work doctoral programs are not exempt from being hubs for racism, anti-Blackness, and eurocentrism. The primary theories and ideologies upon which we often build our practice, even with diverse populations, were created by white people. Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students, as part of the academic socialization process, are expected to internalize these theoretical frameworks and are often encouraged to use them to frame their work, even if their research focuses on the experience of non-white populations. Implicit and explicit standards for doctoral student behavior and professionalism in social work programs are often Eurocentric and reinforce white

supremacy. Again, our Code of Ethics calls upon us to “treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.” (NASW, 2017, Ethical Principles, para. 10). This does not always happen in our research doctoral programs for Black, first-generation students, and that fact is unacceptable. Fortunately, there are ways our profession can change things for the better which will be the focus of the final section of this work.

Recommendations for Change

Based on the literature and current understanding of the challenges faced by Black, first-generation doctoral students, this author has several recommendations for what social work educators can do to ensure the success of Black, first-generation research doctoral students in social work PhD programs. However, for the sake of brevity, this work will focus on four recommendations. This sample of recommendations includes:

1. The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE) should modify their current PhD program quality guidelines to explicitly state expectations for the support of students coming from marginalized, oppressed, and underserved backgrounds. An additional modification to the quality guidelines should state explicit standards for the appreciation of diversity and for actively anti-racist and/or anti-classist environments in social work research doctoral programs. One example of these suggested guidelines is the expectation that syllabi for social work research doctoral program classes will be reviewed and, if necessary, revised as a mode of reducing harm to Black students in the classroom. Doctoral student groups in schools of social work have already begun to call for similar modifications and have provided resources to support these endeavors (University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Anti-Racist Doctoral Program Student Committee, 2020).
2. CSWE and/or GADE should create formal supports at the organizational level for Black, first-generation doctoral students and other first-generation doctoral students of color. A beneficial mode of support would be the creation of a national network comprised of current first-generation doctoral students of color and mentors who are former first-generation doctoral students of color. This network would provide students an opportunity to connect with those who are currently sharing their experience and receive mentorship from those who have come before them, opening the door for the building of social capital.
3. Schools of social work that house research doctoral programs should invest financial resources into the creation of scholarship funds for Black, first-generation research doctoral students. Scholarship funds would be dispersed to students once a semester, with the inclusion of summer terms, if necessary, and would not have a work requirement attached. This form of financial support would help mitigate the extra financial burdens that Black, first-generation students often face during the pursuit of their doctorates. In

addition, it could decrease the amount of student loan debt that these students leave their programs with.

4. As highlighted in the section of this article discussing challenges facing Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students, there has been a very small amount of research done on the experiences of this specific population. GADE, CSWE, the Society for Social Work and Research, and any other interested parties should invest in efforts to collect empirical data about the experiences of these students. Surveys of experiences with racism in their institutions, satisfaction with their programs, and other relevant constructs, using validated measures, would substantiate much of the qualitative work on Black and/or first-generation PhD students that has been done in other disciplines as well as potentially serve as a starting point for change in social work academia.

Conclusion

A review of the literature revealed what was already known to most: Black, first-generation doctoral students face significant challenges during their doctoral education and are still at significant disadvantages after they earn their degrees. These include an increased amount of time to earn their degree, higher amounts of student debt upon completion, and negative psychological consequences. The most egregious of these consequences, however, are the instances of racism and disrespect these students experience in the academic environment at the hands of white faculty, staff, and classmates. Unfortunately, social work academia, even with our profession's commitment to social justice and promoting diversity, still contains all these hurdles for Black, first-generation social work research doctoral students. However, the execution of initiatives to address these challenges, like the ones detailed above, can help shift social work doctoral education to be actively anti-racist, safer, and more supportive for this vulnerable group of students.

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