



## Why so much Blackness?: Race in the Dissertation Topics and Research of Black Male Doctoral Students

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While conducting interviews for a phenomenological study on the experiences of Black male doctoral students it became apparent that most of the study's participants sought to understand the workings of race within their degree field. This research brief explores how Black male doctoral students (nine were interviewed in this study) made sense of their decisions to research race in their degree fields and whether there are forces at play that compel them to do so. Selecting a dissertation topic is a major concern for most doctoral students. The dissertation is an original, substantial, and independent academic project. It presents the student with the opportunity to find a narrowly focused niche within the academic field on which they will become an expert. For many, this is the first major independent academic project.

Very little is known about the impact of academic socialization on Black doctoral students (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Despite the fact that research on race in doctoral education has explored many aspects of the doctoral experience, ranging from socialization to parental educational background (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014), no known study focuses on race and its impact on the research and dissertation topics of doctoral students of color. The socialization experiences of Black male doctoral students have not been adequately studied and documented in the literature (Ingram, 2007; Platt, 2015). In addition to the creation of new knowledge, this research has practical application for both higher education and the nation at large as it seeks to illuminate manners in which development of a diverse leadership class may be fostered through the recruitment and retention of Black male doctoral students. Failure to include Black males in doctoral programs places the continuation of the Black male professoriate in peril (Ingram, 2007), as doctoral programs may be considered the anticipatory stage of the professoriate

(Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Gardner, 2007, 2008). Students of color at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels would likely be negatively affected by the absence or continued reduction in Black male faculty, as they often serve as mentors and role models to students of color.

### FINDINGS

#### Obligated by Race

This project unexpectedly emerged from a larger study examining the experiences of Black male doctoral students. Participants were asked directly about their thoughts on race and race-related research. Additionally, they were asked if they felt obligated in any way or by anyone to conduct research related to race. In response to this line of questioning, it was clear that participants had a positive regard for research on race but most were still uncomfortable stating that they felt "obligated" to study it. Whether obligated or compelled, eight of the nine participants in this study chose topics that are either directly related to race or had very strong racial components. It is important to note that every participant felt he had the autonomy to choose the research/dissertation topic of their liking, but the majority were drawn to racialized topics. Most participants argued they were not obligated by race, by community expectations, by a faculty advisor, or by others in the department to specialize in race-work, but nonetheless they gravitated toward race.

#### Blackness as Academic Currency: We are the Gap

[One participant-Peter] reasoned that in addition to being passionate about one's dissertation topic, there must be some practical utility or broader impact of the research as well. He also argued that scholars must be attached to a practical reality, despite the fact that the academic career is commonly perceived as devoting one's self to a life of the mind. Peter's point is similar to Melvin's earlier argument that his research topic extends

into the very core of his existence, and this serves to keep him grounded through a doctoral process that can be marginalizing and dehumanizing for under-represented students of color (Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). It is largely through research with an importance beyond its academic value that Black male doctoral students are able to find purpose and maintain their cultural integrity.

#### Black Male Doctoral Students as Organic Intellectuals

While in their doctoral programs, the participants worked to maintain strong ties to the Black community, placing a high value on community service. All of the participants reported serving in organizations dedicated to Black issues while doctoral students. While in their doctoral programs, the participants worked to maintain strong ties to the Black community, placing a high value on community service. All of the participants reported serving in organizations dedicated to Black issues while doctoral students. As organic intellectuals, several made the point that they have learned more in the community and with their graduate student peers than they have in the classroom.

#### Social, Political, and Cultural Purposes

Nearly all of the nine participants believed that academic research and the university can and should have relevance or a purpose beyond the purely academic. They believe the university should meet the needs of the community, city, state, and nation beyond simply educating students. Similarly, all of the participants agreed it is appropriate that their research seeks to address social, political, economic, and cultural problems or issues in practical ways. While it is certainly true that some scholars have undertaken work that is more grounded in real-world issues than others, they all feel that if research can improve people's lives it will have an important value added.

## CONCLUSION

There are several important implications of this work. First, selecting a dissertation topic is a major challenge for many, if not most, doctoral students. The second major implication of this work is related to the importance of faculty research agendas. Upon entry to the doctoral program most participants had a strong leaning toward race-related research. The third major implication relates to a fear that Black male doctoral students may have around their research topics. The idea of being pigeonholed came up in discussions with several participants. Strengthening the academic pipeline would help Black males and the nation reach their highest potential. In summary, most Black male doctoral students did not initially feel obligated to research race-related topics within

their fields of study, but nonetheless have chosen such dissertation subjects. In many academic fields the dominant perspective is that scholars need distance and a dispassionate interest to deal with social and environmental issues of their discipline, but these students do not fit that particular mold at all. Moreover, they are not interested in simply assimilating into the melting pot of the academy. They would argue that it is not in their assimilation that they add value to the academy, but rather through their diversity. As a result, they find ways to advocate for underserved communities through their scholarship and service activities and find ways in which their personal interests can align with their academic careers to make a difference. Whether concerned with increasing the number of faculty or doctoral students of color, increasing

overall academic achievement, or developing a globally competitive 21st-century workforce, Black and Latino males must be addressed. As the academic outcomes of these groups increase, the economic trajectory of communities, states, and the nation are likely to follow suit.

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