Promoting Change Through the Voices of Black Graduate Students: A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Black Graduate Students in MFT Program

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the diverse experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, various marriage and family therapy (MFT) graduate school programs in the United States. This study uses minority stress theory and critical race theory to explore the lived experiences of Black graduate students at predominately White higher education institutions. The study sample includes 14 individuals (13 female, 1 male) that identify as Black graduate students in MFT programs across the United States. The study sample consists of seven students working towards a master's degree and seven students pursuing a doctoral degree. Results were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. The results indicate there are several barriers Black students in MFT graduate programs including: financial concerns, racism, difficulty practicing self-care, lack of diversity within programs, and lack of support. The results also indicate support measures Black graduate students would have liked to see provided in their programs. These include mentorship, representation, and allyship. Implications based on the results are later discussed.

Keywords: Black graduate students, marriage and family therapy (MFT) programs, barriers and support, racism and tokenism and mentorship and representation

Mental illness is an increasing concern in this country, especially for people of color (POC). According to SAMHSA, 21% of African Americans reported struggling with mental health challenges (2021). Additionally, suicide is the third leading cause of death for African Americans aged 10 to 24 years old, and African American men 25 to 34 years of age (SAMHSA, 2021). Unfortunately, many POC hesitate to seek mental health services because they would prefer to seek help from other POC (Tien & Johnson, 1985. When considering why the number of licensed Black clinicians is so much lower than White clinicians, it may be related to a low rate of Black students enrolled in mental health graduate programs.

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According to Chrzanowski and Poudyal (2018), 40-60% of graduate students do not reach graduation. Experiencing the common stressors of the average graduate student, while also experiencing additional stressors that are associated with being a POC, can be especially challenging. In 2019, it was reported Black students obtained only 7% of all master's degrees and only 5% of all doctoral degrees in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field (Black Students in Higher Education, 2022).

Many POC prefer to seek services from a provider whose cultural background resembles their own and may choose to not engage if a clinician of Color is not available. In 2021, it was reported 21% of the Black population in the US struggle with mental health challenges and only 39% of those identified with mental health challenges received treatment (SAMHSA, 2021). The treatment Black clients receive has also, reportedly, been of less quality than treatment provided to White clients due to the tendency of common behaviors within the Black community to be misconstrued and criminalized by others (Alang, 2019). This mistreatment has ultimately contributed to feelings of mistrust of mental health services within communities of Color (Alang, 2019). More Black therapists are needed to be an effective resource to minority populations, which would require more Black students earning a graduate degree in the mental health field.

Stressors of Graduate Students

Graduate school is a unique experience where students are at risk of experiencing a variety of challenges that can result in increased levels of stress (Mesmer et al, 2024). In fact, a study that examined the decline in the mental well-being of graduate students reported 50% of the sample stated poor mental health, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout (SenthilKumar et al., 2023). Allen and colleagues (2022) findings suggested students in behavioral, social sciences, and social work programs were more likely to report mental health problems and were more likely to engage in higher alcohol consumption and social work students were more likely to experience comorbid substance use and mental health issues (Allen et al., 2022).

Financial stressors are also a common hindrance with graduate school averaging at about $63,000 for a master's degree (Hanson, 2022). Many students rely on student loans and some students maintain full-time or part-time jobs while earning their degree (Elliott & Friedline, 2013). There are no general requirements set in place for graduate programs to provide students financial support aside from tuition support and minimum stipends for students who commit to working for the department in addition to their full-time coursework obligations (Mesmer et al, 2024). Additionally, graduate students perform extensive duties as required by their practicums and internships and many times they are not financially compensated for that work. According to SenthilKumar and colleagues (2023), 85% of graduate students reported feeling concerned they did not have adequate finances for living expenses.

Racism

The racial climate on college campuses has been an ongoing topic of concern for many years. Black students and other students of Color are often the subject of microaggressions at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Studies have shown that microaggressions in educational environments are especially harmful to self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2015). Microaggressions occur in classroom settings and other campus settings by White students, members of faculty, and administrative staff (Carmichael et al., 2024). Victims of microaggressions have reported burnout, symptoms of depression, and suicidal ideation (Richards & Wohlauer, 2021).

Black students are not only dealing with their own direct experiences of racism, but many experience secondary trauma that derives from witnessing several incidents of racism that plague communities through media outlets. When examining the mental health of Black Americans following the tragic death of George Floyd, it was reported there was a significant increase in rates of depression and anxiety within Black Americans (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). To witness those disturbing images and then enter an environment, where those events are being debated to determine the legitimacy of racist acts undoubtedly has detrimental effects on one's mental health. Examining the challenges being faced by Black graduate students and finding ways to resolve those challenges is crucial to improving the overall mental health in the Black community.

Generational Trauma

Black graduate students face the stressors of racial discrimination, and many of them are also experiencing stressors related to being an African American in modern society. Many African Americans experience generational trauma that stem from slavery and the mistreatment of African Americans that continues. The trauma of deriving from ancestors that were enslaved has also shown to be a foundational component in the development of the sense of self for many African Americans, which is not only harmful for one's identity formation, but it also can cause generational conflicts (Lipscomb, 2020; Petion et al., 2023).

Emerging adulthood is a period of an individual's life that begins in the late teens and concludes around the late-20s (Luo et al., 2024; Tolmie, 2024). For many Black students, this presents as a lack of emotional connectedness with families of origin. In a previous study, participants reported experiencing "surface level" communication with family members and the relationships lacked emotional depth which caused them to feel they existed within a family where they did not feel comfortable being authentic (Petion et al., 2023). Generational trauma and generational conflicts experienced by Black graduate students may create additional stress impacting their experience in graduate school.

Code Switching

Code switching is defined as "alternating between languages, or dialects of the same language" (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 6). For many, code switching is used to protect oneself from being judged by the majority who may apply negative connotations to dialect that differs from their own (Robinson, 2000). Emotional code switching is defined as the ability to alter expression of emotions according to standard of the cultural context displayed as altering one's dialect when in a professional environment or hiding emotion expression during minoritized experiences to avoid becoming a victim of racial bias (Lozada et al., 2021). Being a therapist who identifies with the majority population may fail to recognize how shifts in language are relevant to the therapeutic process (Robinson, 2000). The same therapists also may fail to recognize non-verbal cues that are prevalent in certain marginalized communities. Lastly, if a client feels rejected by a therapist due to disparities in language, they may feel the need to overcompensate and educate the therapist which could potentially decrease the effectiveness of treatment (Robinson, 2000).

Lack of Diversity

It has been reported in previous studies that the lack of diversity in higher education has negatively affected students of Color. While the formation of culturally diverse relationships is beneficial, there is significance in connecting with others that have a greater understanding of your individual experiences. According to the social belongingness theory, the formation of meaningful relationships is fundamental to a human's survival (Thelamour et al., 2019). When one feels they belong, they show an increase in motivation and lower suicidal ideation (Thelamour et al., 2019). With graduate students already experiencing a great deal of stress, it is important they feel a sense of community to aid in managing mental health.

Lack of Mentorship

Support is a basic need that all humans share despite our circumstances (Lee & Budwing, 2024; Ozbay et al., 2007). When a student enters a program, they are typically assigned a "mentor" to help guide them through the rough terrain that is graduate school. While the premise of mentorship is meant to be a positive experience, many students, especially Black students, find themselves at the bottom-tier of a power dynamic that can be difficult to navigate. For a Black student, receiving mentorship from a White provider will not always elicit negative outcomes (Thomas et al., 2022). In 2022, it was reported Black faculty represented about 6% of all faculty in higher education in the United States with only 4% representing tenured professors (Conner, 2022). These numbers are concerning as Black students are entering programs with no representation and no guide as to how to effectively navigate the world of graduate school as a Person of Color. Introducing more Black faculty members in higher education positions poses a benefit for promoting inclusivity and providing safe spaces for Black students to feel comfortable entering graduate programs.

Black Mental Health

It was reported that individuals who identify as Black are more likely to only attend one session or terminate services if they are assigned to work with a White therapist (Terrell & Terrell, 1984; Thompson & Cimbolic, 1978). Racial/ethnic matching is preferred by some POC because it may enhance mutual understanding in the therapist/client dynamic and reduce any concerns about being mistreated (Cabral & Smith, 2011). Black individuals who hold middle-class positions have also reported to avoid mental health treatment because they fear experiencing double discrimination based on their racial identity and possibly being diagnosed with a mental disorder (Alang, 2019). The development and retention of Black graduate students in MFT programs is extremely important as they could potentially provide life-changing services to those who would, otherwise, choose not to engage in mental health services.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the diverse experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in various marriage and family therapy (MFT) graduate school programs, or students that recently graduated following the year 2020. This study will also provide an overview of the unique stressors of Black graduate students and assess if any changes can be implemented to help Black graduate students feel more supported. The research questions include:

(1) What barriers and challenges do Black graduate students in MFT programs face?
(2) What are ways that MFT programs can support Black graduate students?

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

The study sample included 14 individuals that identify as Black MFT graduate students currently enrolled, or recently graduated from, a predominantly White institutions (PWI). Participants were predominately recruited via the Minority Fellowship Program (MFP). While most participants were recruited from the MFP network, other participants were recruited using the snowballing effect and posts made via social media. Eligibility for study participation included the following: participants must be at least 18 years of age, currently enrolled in an MFT program, or recently graduated from an MFT program no prior than 2020, and they must identify as Black. This study was approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (#11839). The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report.

Analysis Plan

After the interviews were conducted, the responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and interpreted to develop the results. The first phase of thematic analysis included transcribing the data, reading the data, and making notes of what initially stood out (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase included systematically developing the initial codes from the entire data set. Once this was completed, the data was collated to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third phase included assigning codes to specific themes and gathering all data to those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth phase included reviewing the themes to ensure there was enough data to support them. According to principles of thematic analysis, some themes are to be collapsed into single themes if they are similar while others are separated to create new themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth phase began once a thematic map of the data was established. From this point, the themes were 'defined and refined' to capture their true essence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The sixth and final phase of thematic analysis began when the set of themes was determined. The final analysis of themes occurred in this final phase, as well as completion the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Coding Process

Before the coding process began, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using a professional service. Once the interviews were transcribed the primary researcher read the full transcripts and compared them to the audio recordings to check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial coding was also conducted by the primary researcher at that time. The primary researcher and interviewer for the study is a Black cisgender female therapist, which was the self-reported identity for the majority of the participants. This research has also attended two separate MFT programs at PWIs and participated in the MFP The second coder self-identified as a Mexican-American cisgender female and was then given copies of the transcripts to review and identify codes. This researcher attended a MFT program at a PWI. Lastly, a faculty member who identified as a White cisgender female was asked to review the codes and themes to ensure reliability of the

findings. A conscious decision to recruit a diverse research team was important for the data to be reviewed and produce accurate research findings not rooted in any biases. After the transcripts were coded by both the primary researcher and the second coder, a meeting was scheduled to compare codes for interrater reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the coders agreed upon the identified codes, they began to assign those codes into themes. The themes were then given specific definitions and prepared for analysis.

Results

There was a total of 14 participants who identified as Black or African American. The participants represented either current, or recently graduated, students in both master's and doctorate level programs. The participants of the study included 13 cis-gendered women and one cis-gendered male. All participants were given a unique identification number to protect their identities.

Barriers/Challenges for Black Graduate MFT Students

Financial Concerns

Participants expressed concern with the state of their finances as a student. It was mostly reported that graduate students financed their education by securing student loans. It was also reported that graduate students covered their expenses by maintaining jobs outside of their program (full-time or part-time). While off-campus jobs serve as additional income for students, it is also burdensome because it is an added responsibility. For example, Participant #11 stated:

> *"...the first year I worked overnight three, 12-hour shifts. So, I would get out of school on Wednesday and then go to my shift and then get off Thursday morning. That was horrible".*

Another source of income for at least five of the graduate students who were graduate assistantships. Participants reported their financial obligations were greater than the amount of the assistantship stipend and student loans combined, requiring them to work an additional job to cover the difference. Participant #13 described an awkward interaction with a faculty member who expressed confusion after she disclosed it was necessary for her to maintain a part-time job along with her assistantship to cover housing expenses and pay her tuition:

> *"I don't know if I'm just perceiving this because I'm a Black student or if it's just like a thing, but money is an interesting thing. There seems to be this expectation of like, oh, with what it is that we're giving you should be able to sustain you, and you should be good to go but when I say I have this assistantship and I'm working here and doing this, there's like a shock in the face of like, 'well I guess if you need it' and I'm like uh yeah! This is helpful; however I need to pay for school...and I do need to pay for where I live. I do need to get like, groceries, like I do have other things I need to pay for, but I have not known anyone else that has had that same experience."*

Lack of Diversity

At least 11 participants reported personal experiences of discrimination, as well as feeling isolated, misunderstood, and unsafe because of the color of their skin, or they noticed their peers be discriminated against. When speaking about her experiences Participant #14 expressed feeling as though she was discriminated against because of her racial identity: *"I think for me personally, advocating for myself and what I needed. Didn't come across as advocation, it came across as being difficult or being aggressive. And I don't think that would have been the case if I would have been a White woman."* Historically, African Americans have been perceived to be more impulsive and aggressive by the dominant group (Taylor et al., 2019).

Participant #9 reported noticing behaviors of faculty members possibly behaving in a manner that displayed biases towards certain groups of people: *"...not like on purpose and not because they were going out of their way, but just the, the different things I was hearing about it, it had more to do with like students of color or students of diverse ability status or different things like that."* Biases, stereotypes, and systemic discrimination are directly linked to racism, and they've been shown to be factors that influence educational outcomes (Taylor et al., 2019).

Tokenism

Due to a lack of diversity within these programs, there were also several reports of Black students feeling as though their experiences were tokenized. Participant 14 shared her experience of feeling obligated to teach master's level MFT students about the experiences of Black people from her own personal perspective, and others, because she did not feel confident they would receive those teachings from faculty members. When asked to elaborate on her feelings regarding this matter she provided the following:*"Oh man, I had mixed emotions. I didn't want the master's students to go out in the world and have a very skewed view of Black Americans and therapy. So, I felt like I had a responsibility to give that part of it. Um, frustrating because we have these faculty that are paid really good money to teach future therapists and they're not able to give a full, realistic representation of what therapy looks like in the 'real world' and then still very sad because in 2023, 2022, and 2021 we still aren't putting racial diversity in the forefront."*

In 2020, millions of Americans tearfully watched the footage of the heinous murder of George Floyd. Unfortunately, Black individuals in non-diverse spaces were often looked upon to offer the "Black perspective". During her interview, Participant #13 shared a time when she was asked to speak to the class about her views on the incident solely because of her identity as a Black woman.

> *"I had a professor who I already had a conversation [with]. She already checked in with me about how I was doing, and in class, she let me know beforehand that she was going to do this, but in class she was like I'm aware of the death of George Floyd that took place. I just want to give the space for us to talk through that…This isn't just for our students of color. This isn't just for our black students, but this is for all of you guys in this class. And a student literally unmuted their camera…and was like, oh, well, [participant's name] is black. What do you have to say about it?"*

Clinical Impact of Lack of Diversity

The lack of diversity was not only prevalent in the academic space, but it was also shown to be present in clinical spaces as well. Participant #2 reported feeling overwhelmed because his caseload was typically heavier than others. He stated Black clients would typically request a Black therapist and there was only one other Black student in his cohort, which meant their caseloads would become full much quicker than others. A similar experience was also described by Participant #11, except she reported her caseload filled quickly with White clients specifically requesting a Black therapist. She stated she had previously informed program leadership she was passionate about treating Black clients, but the White clients took precedence on her caseload. Overall, Black graduate students reported their clinical experience was negatively impacted by the lack of diversity in MFT programs. They reported being overworked due to clients expressing a high demand for Black clinicians.

Lack of Diversity in Leadership

It was also expressed by a participant that although her program was progressive in that it consisted of mostly Black students and faculty members, she noticed there were no minority individuals in positions that make final decisions that affect the programs, such as department heads or program directors. This caused her to feel concern for Black faculty members who appeared to be overworked. For example, Participant #10 stated: *"On the micro level, I feel surrounded, I feel seen, I feel supported. But when you start talking about leadership and the decisions that are being made, you can tell the decision makers aren't us…between that and seeing the black faculty it seems like they're worked really hard."*

While some participants reported to have experience with code switching while both in and outside their programs, others reported making intentional decisions to remain authentic to themselves and avoid the use of code switching. Participant #9 reported engaging in code switching behaviors when engaging with faculty members in uncomfortable environments. They stated, *"…if I would talk about my experiences [I would use] more proper English around the faculty but would speak a bit differently around friends and people I was a bit more comfortable with. It almost seemed like they wanted a lot out of us. They wanted us to be honest, but the environment provided wasn't the best to be honest."*. Participant #11 reported noticing favoritism amongst members in her program that did not make for a welcoming environment, but she also did not allow that to cause her to act in an unauthentic manner.

Feeling Isolated (Racially)

Some participants report feeling unable to be fully present for family and friends during their time in graduate school because they are consumed with school obligations. Both master's and doctoral students reported feeling isolated, but the doctoral students reported feeling more isolated because those cohorts are generally smaller in size. For example, Participant #4 stated, *"I felt like I spent more time at the clinic with my cohort than I did with my family for two years."*

Many Black students reported feeling that isolation was exacerbated as a result of their racial identity. This is largely attributed to the fact that these students are required to uphold the same obligation as any other student, but they also must do so in a space where very few people resemble them. For example, Participant #2 explained: *"…I feel like this experience is very isolating and I know they're like, oh well, a PhD program is isolating, but I feel like it's exacerbated*

as a person of color and someone who identifies as Black because when I look around, even at our Black Graduate Caucus, a lot of them are master's [students]. So, for the PhD, we're an even smaller group."

Program Location

Program locations also contributed to the discomfort for some Black students in the study. It was reported by several participants that their programs were based in communities that were not receptive to students of color. Participant #1 explained that although her hybrid-based program is mostly facilitated online, she must travel for intensive courses that were required to be attended in-person. When describing the environment she stated:

> *"...being a Black graduate student in that area is actually a little scary.*
> *I'm more scared about my own personal safety being in that area than I*
> *am anything else although I am familiar with that area, so I just get in and*
> *I get out. I don't linger. You don't linger because people will be keeping an*
> *eye on you because you are a Black person in an affluent White area."*

Participant #5 recalled an incident when she feared for her safety after being pulled over by a police officer: *"...I also didn't feel safe with police there at all. They were very racist and very aggressive. I've been I was pulled over before and, literally, taunted by a White male police officer. So, that impacted my experience because it made me not want to be there..."*

Students reported the location of their program impacted their experience whether they lived in the area full-time or traveled to the main campus at least twice a year to fulfill program requirements. In both cases, students reported feeling unsafe at times and unwelcomed.

Lack of Support

All 14 participants reported a lack of support in some area throughout their studies. The subthemes include connecting students to campus resources, lack of support in research interest, and lack of support from their personal network. Lack of support was a barrier because it caused other Black students to overcompensate for what was lacking. Participant #4 recalled a time when her cohort member had to step up to rectify a stressful situation that occurred in class after a hurtful comment was made by another student:

> *"I did not feel like he should be the one to have to step up. I was just*
> *surprised with her experience that she did not do [things] differently and*
> *she didn't have to chastise [us] but let's go over some ground rules with*
> *some stuff. Let's try to be more respectful...even when we were trying to*
> *explain to the white cohort member why it was offensive. I still feel like as*
> *the instructor/facilitator, like come on...help us out."*

Connecting Graduate Students to Campus Resources

It was also reported that many MFT programs are not effective with acting as a bridge from the secluded walls of the program to university-wide programs. A participant in the current study spoke extremely highly of her program and expressed feeling supported most of the time by faculty, but it was only so much support they were equipped to offer due to a lack of resources. Students were not made aware of additional university-based resources that were not related to academics.

For example, Participant #10 stated: *"...our faculty is limited and has so much on their plate, I don't think that they have the time to really invest in, you know, really preparing us to put ourselves out there. I would say definitely [they shared] academic resources. Other resources, not so much."*

Lack of Support in Research

It was also expressed that Black graduate students felt unsupported in exploring their research interests. They reported that it was difficult to discover their own research identity without having opportunities to develop those skills and pursue those interests. For example, Participant #2 reported: *"My advisor at the time was very quantitative focus in her research. So, that was the expectation for me to [complete] quantitative research as well. So, going through the process of taking these research classes, trying to figure out what type of research identity I wanted to have for myself, and [other] things...was heavily influenced by the advisor." "...there were comments [stating] qualitative research isn't as beneficial, or if you want to be successful you need to be able to quantitative. So, that project took longer because the passion wasn't there. I didn't enjoy the quantitative aspect of it, and I didn't have the support I needed."*

Participant #14 also expressed having a similar experience in her PhD program after making it known she was interested in researching the experiences of other Black women. She stated, *"So, the biggest [barrier] for me was being a part of research because my target was African American women and that's what I wanted to focus on. I hadn't had a lot of support or encouragement to do what I wanted to do. There are no faculty studying it. There are no Black faculty, so it was it was really difficult for me to get the support I felt like I needed to do the research that I wanted to do because no one really cares about studying Black women [except] Black women."*

Lack of Support (Personal Network)

There were also reports of graduate students feeling a lack of support from family and friends, which often caused misunderstandings. For some loved ones, it was difficult to understand, or relate to, all of what a full-time MFT program requires. Due to the high rigor of these programs, graduate students often spend a lot of time away from their support networks, which can lead to more feelings of isolation. For example, Participant #4 stated: *"You have this settled community [and] you have this community of support but nobody understands the demands of school and the MFT program...and the sacrifice you have to show up being this grad student for that program. Nobody understands but your cohort members."*

Ineffectiveness of Diversity Protocols

At least 3 participants reported feeling as though advocacy for all marginalized populations was not made a priority in their graduate program. It was also expressed by some that there seemed to be an emphasis placed on advocating for one particular marginalized community, but the efforts were not matched for other communities. For example, Participant #13 stated: *"At times I feel like certain minority groups are more highlighted than other minority groups and not to say that one is more important than the other, because absolutely not. However, your program has pretty much all of the minority groups in them, so they all would need to be recognized and so I think it's a matter of while they're taking those steps to do better with their diversity and inclusion...just being mindful that they're doing their best to acknowledge all groups and celebrate all groups."*

Several participants found issue with the "diversity statements" made by their programs being nothing more than just words. Some expressed beliefs that the statements were created to simply pacify minority students and little to no action was used to enforce new policies and increase diversity. When asked his opinion regarding his program's efforts to increase diversity, Participant #2 replied: *"Yeah, definitely the action piece of it I feel like is missing sometimes."*

Difficulty Practicing Self-Care

The final barrier identified by two participants in the current study was difficulty practicing self-care. Although MFT programs teach the significance of self-care, they do not leave much time for students to engage in self-care practices. Participant #5 described her experience in graduate school as not being conducive to engaging in self-care. When asked how she practiced self-care during graduate school she replied: "I don't think I did, looking back. I literally would just sleep. I honestly don't even think I took care of myself back then at all. I didn't really have time to take care of myself."

Participant #4 also expressed she did not practice self-care as frequently as she should have while in her graduate program. After recognizing the importance of self-care, she stated she is now being more intentional with self-care practices as she navigates life post-graduate school. She stated: "I don't feel like I did a great job. I'm working on the self-care thing even now." It was reported that self-care was difficult for some Black graduate students to practice.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the experiences of Black graduate students in MFT programs, including barriers they faced and ways MFT programs could help support Black students. Participants reported the primary barriers they experienced were financial concerns, lack of diversity within MFT programs, lack of support, ineffectiveness of diversity protocols, and difficulty practicing self-care. Students also identified the ways they would feel the most supported while in their graduate programs. These supports include mentorship, representation, and allyship.

Financial Concerns

Students reported financial stressors were a major hindrance during their time in graduate school. This is consistent with the findings from the Wilson & Stith article published 30 years ago that reported the biggest struggle for some Black students was a lack of finances (1993). In the current study, several students reported they maintained multiple streams of income to cover their expenses. Assistantships serve as a valuable resource for students because they offer financial and professional benefits, but unfortunately, not all students are not guaranteed to receive an offer (Adekson, 2020).

The amount of financial support MFT programs can offer graduate students is indicative on the amount of funding they receive each year from various sources. If programs are unable to equally fund all MFT students, then a compromise might be to offer priority disbursement of assistantships and financial aid to those with greater financial need, similar to how federal financial aid is disbursed. With this being considered, the disbursement of scholarships, grants, and assistantships should be based not only on merit, but also on need.

Lack of Diversity

To be in accordance with the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE), MFT programs are required to report their program's demographic data annually. In 2022, only 9.9% of the faculty self-identified as African American/African/Black, and 63.8% identified as White/Non-Hispanic (COAMFTE, 2022). 18.1% of the students in MFT programs self-identified as African American/African/Black. 67% of the supervisors identified as White/Non-Hispanic and only 12.4% identified as African American/African/Black (COAMFTE, 2022). At the time of the study, only 3% of students enrolled in master's degree programs and 2.7% of doctoral MFT students were African American (Wilson & Stith, 1993). In 1993, only 4.3% of the full-time faculty were African American, as well as only one clinical supervisor from the programs that responded to the survey at that time (Wilson & Stith, 1993). This suggests that racial diversity among faculty and supervisors has increased in recent years, but they are still underrepresented.

While in graduate school, students may be asked to be extremely transparent and vulnerable in MFT programs to develop a greater sense of self, which can be difficult if an individual feels unable to present as their authentic self. The use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has historically been associated with perceptions of lack of education, lower social class, and unacceptable in professional environments (Rahman, 2008). Participants in the current study believed they cannot utilize AAVE in the educational arena because they may not be taken seriously by others. In order to contradict this belief, MFT programs can promote educational spaces that are welcoming to different vernaculars, asking for clarity, and creating spaces where everyone feels comfortable showing up as their authentic self.

With many MFT graduate programs lacking in diversity, participants in this study felt pressured to educate their White counterparts on their experiences, which felt unfair to them. Many participants expressed frustration with the silence of their White counterparts during those moments and their unwillingness to verbally express empathy or support for marginalized communities. MFT programs can prevent incidents of tokenism by avoiding asking minority students to act as a spokesperson for their identified racial group.

Black students often felt unsafe in the communities where some MFT programs are located due to several incidents of police harassment and racial profiling. Unfortunately, this happens often as POC are often marginalized in communities that are predominately White (Hudson et al., 2021). It is concerning because Black students are expected to suppress their feelings and remain present and support the needs of others (i.e., clients, cohort members, family, etc.), all while lacking support of their own. While program leadership cannot be held responsible for racist acts and discrimination that occurs in the community, they need to support students who experience these acts while in their program.

Lack of Support

Standard MFT programs include requirements that consist of, but not limited to, course work, clinical hours, conducting research, and assistantship responsibilities. Managing these obligations with little to no support can cause students to experience symptoms of extreme burnout (Clark, Murdock, & Koetting, 2009). There were reports of Black students feeling as though they did not receive full support from loved ones and others in their personal network because it may be difficult for some to understand the stress and pressure associated with a MFT graduate program. It is also challenging for loved ones to support graduate students because they are often confined

to graduate school obligations with limited time to engage socially with others outside of the program. The amount of support received by students should be assessed when student evaluations are being completed and resources should be offered for students who report lacking support.

Black graduate students in this study did not feel supported in their research interests. Students need proper guidance and support, as selecting a research advisor is said to be the most important decision for a student researcher (Al-Hadlaq, 2019). If faculty members are unable to support the research needs and interests of prospective students, that should be considered and discussed before offering invitations for those students to join the program. Many students reported they were not made aware of university resources outside of those directly associated with the MFT program. Although faculty should not be expected to encompass all the support graduate students will need, but as leaders they can direct students towards finding additional resources that could assist them during this difficult time.

Diversity Protocols

Many students expressed feeling as though their programs were doing a poor job of implementing effective diversity procedures, and although it is often communicated from MFT programs a desire to promote diversity, it felt like little to no action was being initiated in order for that to take place. When asked about her program's diversity efforts, Participant #9 stated: *"...they talked the talk, but they didn't walk the walk."* This participant, and others, expressed they would have liked to see those in leadership positions make a stronger effort to support minority populations and diversify their program. Suggestions for recruitment will be discussed in greater detail in the implications section of this paper.

Self-Care Concerns

Some participants reported they were unable to practice self-care as their schedules simply would not allow it. This poses a problem because these students are preparing to become mental health professionals, where it is crucial to actively practice self-care to avoid stress and burnout (Posluns & Gall, 2020). While most graduate programs were designed to be rigorous and demanding, those factors are predictors of stress amongst graduate students (Allen et al., 2021). Without the practice of self-care, that stress can increase and, ultimately, impact the students' academic performance and future clinical practices (Sweetman et al., 2022). Lack of self-care is also linked to increased risks of burnout and health status decline, where "self-care is not a luxury but is a clinical and ethical imperative in the mental health professions" (Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 4). MFT programs can assist students with self-care by giving them the space and opportunity for those practices to take place.

Mentorship

Most students reported they did not receive mentorship in their graduate programs. Those that did, report they were responsible for cultivating those connections themselves. The students that participated in that study requested a mentor program that included Black alumni volunteers to support current Black graduate students in MFT programs and integrate Black content into the curriculum (Wilson & Stith, 1993). In most graduate programs, faculty serve in "advisory" roles for students, but that does not always transform to a mentor/mentee dynamic. While all faculty

members, regardless of race, have the ability to provide mentorship, there are difficulties associated with individuals who do not identify as a racial minority to mentor students of color because the lack of diversity may cause discomfort in establishing a close relationship (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Mentorship should be strongly considered when discussing improving the retention and success rates for Black graduate students, as well as promoting diversity for the program (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007).

Increased Representation

Increased representation was also found to be a desire of Black graduate students to help improve their experiences in MFT graduate programs. According to an article published in 2023, representation is mandatory in higher education because "it increases confidence, well-being, and sense of place in terms of where they are and what they can ultimately achieve" (Finn & Kamerlin, p. 1). Previous research suggests all graduate programs should strive for racial parity (Young, Chamley, and Withers, 1990). MFT programs should dedicate more efforts towards the recruitment of Black faculty, students, and supervisors by promoting MFT programs in spaces that are greatly populated with Black individuals. It might also be helpful for MFT programs to develop diversity boards with the sole intent to create initiatives and strategies for the recruitment and retention of racially diverse program members.

Allyship

Racial allyship was also found to be a contributing factor in the support of Black graduate students in MFT programs. The term "racial justice allyship" refers to individuals who are proactively advocating for racial justice (Williams et al., 2023). It is important for White allies to understand White privilege and institutional racism, as well as proactively working with marginalized populations (Williams et al., 2023). The overall mission of any MFT program is the development of future clinicians. If MFT programs promote culturally diverse environments, then allyship, especially from faculty, is imperative in cases of discrimination, microaggressions, and racism towards POC.

Financial Support

Participants in this study reported increased financial support would be helpful in improving their experience in their MFT program. In the current study, most of the participants reported accruing student debt because they had to take out several student loans to support themselves financially and finance their degrees. Some also reported maintaining additional jobs outside of the program, despite being told "it is not recommended" by faculty, but no other alternatives were provided. Graduate students would benefit from consistent assistantships, scholarships, and grants that would prevent them from taking out more student loans. When expressing why the financial status of many MFT graduate students is so bothersome, Participant #7 stated: *"...it's because of the lack of funding that MFT [students] even get...it's like something that bothers me. I know internships [are] about getting the experience, but I also think we're doing so many hours and not getting financial gain from it."* MFT graduate students carry a large amount of responsibility, and they should be adequately compensated for their contributions to MFT programs, universities, and local communities.

Limitations and Future Research

While the current study yielded helpful findings to support Black graduate students in MFT programs, it is important to address the limitations of the current study. This study was limited to only 14 participants, with only one who identified as male. This could potentially limit the generalizability of the study. Future research could benefit from interviewing additional participants, and potentially more male Black graduate students if possible. Another limitation for the study was the methodology that only allowed for one participant interview. This was limited because certain points were unable to be clarified during the qualitative analysis. If this study were to be replicated in the future, it would include an initial interview and at least one follow-up interview to clarify specific details reported by participants. There were also four participants that attended one particular MFT program, which may not represent the experiences of all Black graduate students in MFT programs. In the future, it would be beneficial to have at least one participant from each COMAFTE-accredited MFT program to gain a better perspective of program similarities and differences. It would also be helpful to possibly adapt a longitudinal research and interview students their first year entering the program, once a year during their duration in the program, and finally one year post-completing the program to develop a better understanding of their experiences at multiple times during and after the program.

Further Implications

The findings from this study highlight the urgent need for MFT programs to adopt intentional and sustainable strategies that address the barriers Black graduate students continue to face. Building on the concerns of financial instability, lack of diversity, limited programmatic support, ineffective diversity protocols, and challenges with self-care, it is clear that superficial changes are not enough. Programs must implement structured mentorship opportunities with Black alumni and community clinicians, expand targeted recruitment efforts to increase representation of Black faculty, supervisors, and students, and strengthen financial support through scholarships, assistantships, and grants that prioritize those with the greatest need. In addition, leadership must move beyond performative diversity statements by creating spaces where Black students can show up authentically without fear of tokenism, code-switching, or isolation. Faculty and peers must also engage in active allyship by confronting racism, microaggressions, and inequities within program spaces. These changes would not only improve the educational experiences of Black graduate students but also contribute to diversifying the mental health workforce and expanding access to culturally competent care.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was guided by Minority Stress Theory and Critical Race Theory and contributes to the literature on Black graduate students, specifically in MFT programs. The purpose of this study was to provide Black graduate students with a platform to share their experiences and offer a narrative that is not often included in traditional research. Findings revealed that Black students continue to face systemic barriers such as financial concerns, lack of diversity, lack of support, ineffective diversity protocols, and difficulty practicing self-care. These challenges mirror those documented over thirty years ago by Wilson and Stith (1993), suggesting that while some progress has been made, the experiences of Black students in MFT programs remain marked by

isolation, underrepresentation, and inequities. Students described financial strain, the persistence of tokenism and code-switching, and programmatic failures to translate diversity commitments into meaningful action. The lack of adequate support for research interests and wellness practices further compounded their experiences, leaving many students vulnerable to burnout, stress, and disengagement.

Despite these barriers, participants identified solutions that could transform their experiences and create more equitable learning environments. Mentorship emerged as the most significant request, particularly from Black faculty, alumni, or community clinicians who could provide long-term guidance and advocacy. Students also called for intentional recruitment of Black faculty, supervisors, and students to increase representation and foster belonging. Additionally, allyship from White faculty and peers was deemed essential in addressing racism, discrimination, and microaggressions within program spaces. Together, these findings highlight the urgency for MFT programs to implement structural supports, financial equity, and authentic diversity initiatives that move beyond surface-level commitments. Addressing these needs is not only vital for the success and retention of Black graduate students but also critical for diversifying the mental health field and expanding access to culturally competent care for Black communities and all communities.

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