# DOCTORAL WOMEN OF COLOR COPING WITH RACISM AND SEXISM IN THE ACADEMY

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Delma Ramos* | University of North Carolina at Greensboro, NC, USA | dmramos@uncg.edu |
| Varaxy Yi | California State University, Fresno, CA, USA | varaxy@csufresno.edu |

* Corresponding author

## ABSTRACT

| | |
|---|---|
| Aim/Purpose | This qualitative study examined the racist and sexist experiences of doctoral women of color in the academy. |
| Background | Doctoral women of color (e.g., Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Latina Americans, and Native Americans) continue to experience racism and sexism in academic spaces. While few studies have explored the experiences of doctoral students of color and doctoral women of color, with a larger emphasis on how they respond to racism, our study sought to further the knowledge and discourse surrounding the intersectionality of racism and sexism in academic contexts by examining the intersectionality of race and gender systems that impact the lived realities of doctoral women of color as women and people of color. |
| Methodology | This qualitative study employed multiracial feminism and Mellor's taxonomy of coping styles as theoretical foundations to explore and understand how doctoral women of color experience and navigate racist and sexist incidents. |
| Contribution | The study contributes to research in various areas: (1) it expands our understanding of how doctoral women of color experience racism and sexism, (2) it deepens our perspective about the strategies and methods that they employ to negotiate and overcome these experiences, which can directly inform efforts to support and retain doctoral and other students of color, and (3) it encourages scholars to examine the experiences of doctoral women of color from an anti-deficit approach that acknowledges the social networks, skills, and knowledge that doctoral women of color rely on to disrupt and persist in inequitable contexts as they pursue academic success. |
| Findings | Our findings contribute a classification system that incorporates experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism. Categories in this classification include covert, overt, and physical and material experiences. Our findings also |

present a classification system that represents navigational strategies of doctoral women of color, or the ways they respond to and overcome racist and sexist experiences. Categories in this classification include defensive, controlled, and direct strategies.

**Recommendations for Practitioners**

First, our findings suggest a critical need for administrators and educators to understand the experiences of women of color and recognize the impact these experiences have on their persistence and success in college. Research on doctoral women of color is limited and very little is known about the entirety of their experiences in graduate programs. This study addresses this gap by exploring how doctoral women of color persist despite the intersectionality of racist and sexist alienation and marginalization. It is important that faculty and staff engage in culturally relevant education and training in order to better understand how to support doctoral women of color as they face these situations.

We need more educators who engage in culturally relevant and responsive practices and pedagogy that seek to include their students' whole identities and leverage these identities in the classroom. Additionally, more educators need to be trained in ways to recognize and address racist and sexist incidents in their classrooms and dismantle systems of oppression rather than reinforce them. Specifically, we need to better equip educators to recognize the hard-to-distinguish sexist incidents, which, as our participants suggested, are well concealed within the fabric of our gendered and sexualized society.

Second, this study can benefit those in program and resource development to create effective programming and strategies to engage these acts of resilience that enable women of color to succeed in graduate school. Rather than approaching the support and development of doctoral women of color from a deficit perspective of assisting them through challenges, it is more important to fully-engage with these students to recognize what coping strategies they have used that can better inform successful retention programs. Furthermore, mentorship from faculty was highlighted as an important means for participants to address and cope with their negative experiences. Thus, more mentoring relationships between faculty and the student and across student peer groups should be intentionally engaged. This is a system of support also noted in extant literature. As part of the doctoral socialization process, mentoring has many benefits for doctoral students. Specifically, for doctoral women of color, mentoring relationships can be a critical tool for supporting them in managing negative experiences, especially considering that it can minimize feelings of loneliness and isolation.

**Recommendations for Researchers**

Our research contributes to the literature with emphasis on the ways in which doctoral women of color respond to and cope with racism and sexism. Women in this study recount racist and sexist experiences and describe their decision-making processes about how and whether to respond. There were specific reasons that shaped their responses and coping strategies, which highlight awareness and confidence in their individual abilities.

The study's findings also contribute to and expand Mellor's taxonomy, specifically the incorporation of sexism as a system inherently interlocked with racism. Current literature on doctoral women of color mainly highlights their experience with racism; this gap reinforces our contribution to the literature, specifically, in illuminating predetermined societal roles and expectations for doctoral women of color in academia.

Most importantly, our research highlights the assets and agency that doctoral women of color mobilize in the face of racism and sexism. These assets include long-term goals and aspirations, awareness of interlocking systems of oppression shaping their experience in academic environments, commitment to empowering their communities through education, and the support they find within their personal and academic networks. These assets and agency serve as foundation to challenge longstanding deficit perspectives on doctoral women of color in academic spaces and for faculty and program administrators to consider when developing support services.

Impact on Society    Our findings encourage faculty, program administrators, and researchers to pay attention to racist and sexist issues as intersecting oppressions rather than distinct manifestations of prejudice to be confronted separately. Our findings also highlight the assets doctoral women of color rely on to overcome oppression and marginalization including their long-term goals and aspirations, awareness of interlocking systems of oppression shaping their experience in academic, commitment to empowering their communities through education, and the support they find within their personal and academic networks. Our hope is that this work encourages systems of higher education to create tangible ways to support doctoral women of color as they grapple with the multiple systems of domination that threaten their success in education, which is intertwined with success in other aspects of society.

Future Research    Lastly, future research may explore how the matrix of domination mediates responses of doctoral women of color to racism and sexism. This philosophical inclination is linked to our decision to use Mellor's taxonomy of coping styles as an introductory framework for our work in understanding navigational strategies. To that end, we argue that the taxonomy as it stands characterizes participants' responses based on their immediate approach to incidents. This framing fails to include the timing someone might need to process and decide to how to respond. Mellor's taxonomy positions participants who do not choose to respond immediately as compliant and acquiescent to racialized spaces and events. By doing so, we run the risk of oversimplifying and essentializing the complex processes individuals faced with racism and sexism undertake.

At the same time, future research can examine the connection between responses or coping styles and ways that participants are internally transformed in their abilities and desires to address future incidents. There is an inordinate amount of focus on how individuals interact with oppressive incidents and yet very little is known about the ways that these interactions shape future responses. Additionally, the ways that doctoral women of color navigate situations outside the academy is not explored. For example, some of our participants shared how racist and sexist encounters empowered them or inspired them to address other incidents and to interact with family and community members.

# INTRODUCTION

Doctoral women of color (e.g., Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Latina Americans, and Native Americans) continue to experience racism and sexism in academic spaces. While few studies have explored the experiences of doctoral students of color and doctoral women of color, with a larger emphasis on how they respond to racism, our study sought to further the

knowledge and discourse surrounding the intersectionality of racism and sexism in academic contexts by examining the nexus of race and gender systems that impact the lived realities of doctoral women of color as women and people of color. Thus, the purpose of this study was to emphasize the experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism in academic spaces and to shed light on the ways these women responded to and overcame racist and sexist incidents. Using a subset of data from an unpublished qualitative study that examined the academic aspirations of doctoral women of color, the research questions addressed in this study are: (1) How do doctoral women of color experience racism and sexism in academic environments? and (2) In what ways do doctoral women of color respond to encounters with racism and sexism?

# RELEVANT LITERATURE

## DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN THE ACADEMY

Research on the experiences of doctoral students in the academy is focused on degree completion and understanding challenges students face. Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, and McFarlane (2013) studied the relationship between school, work, and life during the doctoral experience, specifically concerned with doctoral students achieving balance. Martinez and colleagues (2013) learned that doctoral students use the following strategies to stay balanced: prioritize their time, focus on staying mentally and physically healthy, seek support from school and external networks, and make compromises in the different areas of their lives. In a similar study, Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, and Bade (2014) explored academic-family integration in relation to doctoral student persistence. Rockinson-Szapkiw and colleagues found that family represents a great source of support for doctoral student success and is a key factor in students' decision to continue or withdraw from doctoral studies. Similar sentiments were echoed in the work of Tharp Byers and colleagues (2014), who asserted that competing responsibilities represent a challenge in the persistence of doctoral students. Their findings suggest that support from family, friends, and colleagues empowered them to continue pursuing a doctoral degree. Also emphasizing the importance of relationships in doctoral studies, Zahl (2015) asserted that community and relationships play an important role in the persistence of doctoral students. Specifically, Zahl (2015) found that study participants found the motivation to persist in positive relationships with faculty and colleagues as these groups were an important component of how they defined community within their academic departments. This finding points to the importance of academic departments in shaping the doctoral student experience. With relation to first-generation doctoral students, Gardner and Holley (2011) argued that students find themselves living in two worlds: the academic world and their personal/upbringing world. Living in two worlds brings unique challenges to first-generation doctoral students as the two worlds present conflicting demands between academic and personal life.

## DOCTORAL STUDENTS OF COLOR IN THE ACADEMY

There is a growing body of literature that broadly examines the racialized experiences of doctoral students of color in graduate programs (e.g., Felder, 2010, Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Much of this work centers on elements of the socialization process. Specifically, some research focuses on the intersection of race and faculty advising (Felder et al., 2014) and interest convergence in doctoral advising (Felder & Barker, 2013), specifically referring to the alignment of interests and expectations of students of color and their faculty advisors. Other research looks at faculty mentoring in supporting doctoral student of color success (Felder, 2010) and recruitment and retention of doctoral students of color (Herzig, 2004; Lundy-Wagner, Vultaggio, & Gasman, 2013). However, while this work explores the racialized experiences of students of color in doctoral programs, it does not always emphasize how other intersecting identities such as gender (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1990; Wing, 2003) impact the doctoral student experience. Thus, we turned to a body of literature that specifically elevates the experiences of women of color in doctoral programs to set the foundation for this study.

## THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS: RACE AND GENDER

Turner and Thompson (1993) examined the socialization of minoritized women doctoral students and found that women of color in doctoral programs received fewer opportunities to participate in professional development activities. These activities include academic fellowships, apprenticeships, and writing collaborations with faculty. Turner and Thompson also found that women of color in their study described gender discrimination at higher rates than race-related discrimination. Similarly, Ellis (2001) studied the impact of race and gender on degree completion, socialization, and satisfaction with academic programs among Black and White doctoral women. Ellis found that Black women were highly marginalized in the academy and experienced isolation and unsupportive relationships with their academic advisors who did not share similar racial/ethnic backgrounds. These findings are further supported by Hassouneh-Phillips and Beckett (2003), who found that racism was pervasive against women of color in a doctoral program, though these perspectives were often ignored by White faculty and students in the program. Elements of the oppressive experience of women of color in this study included being tokenized and stereotyped as a woman of color, being discouraged to engage with topics related to race, and having to challenge policies that paid lip service to diversity and inclusion but worked to maintain the status quo.

Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) further underscored the pervasiveness of racism and sexism in the academy as they narrated how they supported each other's success as African American women in the academy through a close student-faculty relationship that they held onto for years to come. In this piece, Kelly asserted that Fries-Britt modeled for her how to deal with racism and sexism and other strategies to navigate the academy. Their experience embodied elements of a practice proposed by Jones, Wilder, and Osborne-Lampkin (2013) who suggest advising Black doctoral women from a Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1998) perspective. This approach calls for advising that pays attention to the intersection of race and gender as Black women face racism, sexism, and other intersecting oppressions in the academy.

Also centering on the intersection of racism and sexism in the academy, Carlone and Johnson (2007) learned that women of color pursuing careers in science encountered a double bind, for being a woman and a person of color. This double bind threatened to disrupt their success as women of color in science (Turner, 2002). Specifically, some women faced discouragement and delegitimization from their professors who failed to recognize their potential. Nonetheless, these women succeeded in science despite discrimination. Similarly, Ong, Wright, Espinosa, and Orfield (2011) asserted that graduate women of color face a multitude of microaggressions in everyday practice in STEM and many internalize the deficits that their professors and peers articulate, especially when women of color pursue doctoral studies at predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

## WOMEN OF COLOR RESPONSES TO HOSTILE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS

Though the research presented in the section above offers an overview of what doctoral women of color experience in the academy, its primary focus and emphasis is on participants' experiences while little is known about the ways doctoral women of color respond to marginalization. Few studies have specifically examined how women of color cope in racist academic environments (Espino, 2014; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; González, 2006). This work highlights coping strategies that include asserting their place within their program and adopting an attitude to challenge stereotypes and prejudice against their group (Espino, 2014; González, 2006), giving in to stereotypes and self-questioning their ability (Gildersleeve et al., 2011), disengaging from academics and isolating themselves from oppressors and their peers (González, 2006), relying on social networks for support (Espino, 2014; Gildersleeve et al., 2011), and wearing an academic mask (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Most recently, other scholars turned to exploring the ways women of color created spaces of resistance against marginalization. For example, Squire and McCann (2018) outlined spaces of resistance for women of color who hold critical perspectives (being aware of structures and systems of marginalization and power and how these structures impact their lives) in doctoral education programs. They defined spaces of resistance as contexts and opportunities that allowed doctoral women of color to thrive in academic spaces dominated by racist and sexist systems and ideologies (Squire & McCann, 2018). These spaces were characterized by interactions and environments that challenged marginalizing practices and beliefs: tokenism, racial stereotypes of women of color, poor mentoring, and exclusion from learning about academic norms and culture of graduate school and where students felt valued. Squire and McCann identified the following spaces of resistance: relationships with faculty, relationships with peers, and connections with external support systems.

Although the literature outlines how women of color respond to racist environments, it pays less attention to how they navigate sexist contexts. For example, Truong and Museus (2012) developed an inventory, informed by Mellor's (2004) taxonomy of coping styles among doctoral students of color, which categorized the ways the students responded to racist experiences. However, we have a limited understanding of the ways racism and sexism together influence these experiences. This intersectionality produces a complex and complicated unit for analysis as these constructs cannot be easily separated or distinguished (Crenshaw, 1990; Zinn & Dill, 1996). They work together in concert and are part of a web of oppression that requires further focus and analysis. This gap in the literature makes the current inquiry a critical addition to the study of strategies and coping mechanisms that women of color in doctoral programs employ to survive and thrive.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

## *MULTIRACIAL FEMINISM AND MELLOR'S TAXONOMY OF COPING STYLES*

In order to understand the experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism, and their responses to such marginalizing encounters, we drew upon the framework of multiracial feminism (Zinn & Dill, 1996) and a taxonomy of coping styles (Mellor, 2004). We selected these two theories because they allowed us to better understand participants' experiences with racism and sexism and to more clearly document how they responded and overcame these experiences. Specifically, multiracial feminism accounts for the intersectionality of race and gender as societal systems that uniquely shape the experiences of doctoral women of color, and Mellor's taxonomy complemented multiracial feminism as it offers a foundation to characterize the manner in which our participants responded to incidents. Combined, multiracial feminism and Mellor's taxonomy allowed us to emphasize participants' experiences by centering their mobilization of agency in hostile academic spaces. These two theoretical framings are discussed in more detail below.

Multiracial feminism as a framework is useful as it allows us to focus on the diversity that exists within women of color and explore domination as it relates to the social construction of race and gender. In other words, the multiracial feminism framework does not emerge from a singular feminism but from a body of knowledge that recognizes that women are placed within multiple systems of domination (Zinn & Dill, 1996). Race, as a system of power, is central to multiracial feminism, as the interaction between this system and other systems of inequity shape gender (Zinn & Dill, 1996). Women's experiences are based on their position within society, a concept also known as a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990), where identities of women of color are shaped by systems that interact simultaneously to oppress them. Thus, disadvantages for women of color are created by the intersectionality of race, gender, and class structures. Nonetheless, considering how systems disadvantage women of color, multiracial feminism highlights ways women of color activate their agency and can move beyond barriers to create viable lives for themselves and their loved ones.

Additionally, Mellor's (2004) taxonomy of coping styles offers a complementary perspective to multiracial feminism as it describes the various ways participants from marginalized groups cope with racist incidents. Mellor's taxonomy proposes a continuum of responses that are tailored to participants' efforts to preserve the self, control their responses, or respond to racism directly. In more detail, responses for self-preservation involve individuals' tolerance of incidents, such as fearing if they reacted the situation could worsen and increase their suffering, avoidance of both settings where incidents tend to occur, as well as avoidance of perpetrators of racism, also, reinterpreting the situation to reaffirm their identity and sense of self, giving less power to the psychological impact of the racist encounter, and ascribing racism to stereotypes of their group. Responses under this category also involved participants seeking social support from their community to overcome racism by sharing the trauma of racism.

Mellor (2004) also defines responses where individuals strove for self-control as conscious choices to "turn off" (p. 68) the incident and move on with life. Similarly, controlled responses included cases in which individuals recognized racism and were angered or frustrated by racist incidents but chose to contain their feelings. It is important to consider that participants who elect controlled responses are fully aware of racism and, instead of tolerating racism as those who choose responses to protect the self, make the conscious decision to ignore the event. Specific responses under this category included blocking or ignoring the event to keep racism from bothering them, containing the desire to respond to racism immediately (a response that requires a significant amount of energy to stop the urge to address racism on the spot) and role playing possible ways of responding to the incident after the event occurred. In contrast, the third category of responses recounted actively addressing incidents. In other words, individuals decided to educate the oppressor, take control of the situation, assert their rights and identity, seek revenge, and/or request assistance from external networks to provide an immediate response. Mellor found that participants who chose to educate their oppressors confronted them with questions about their assumptions and about how their racist perceptions might have developed. Those who decided to regain control of the situation attempted to convince perpetrators of racism that they were wrong, specially applying ethnic stereotypes uniformly to all members of a racial group. Other participants chose to demand equal and fair treatment when they felt they were being treated unfairly, while others opted for taking pride in their indigenous identity and their belonging in lands occupied by settlers. See Table 1 for responses included under each category.

The application of multiracial feminism and Mellor's taxonomy of coping styles in this study is suitable for the following reasons. First, both theories were derived from the experiences of marginalized groups including women of color and Indigenous communities, respectively. Second, both theories acknowledge that systems of domination work in concert to further marginalize those people who are less advantaged, which allowed us to examine the experiences of our participants holistically through the lens of their identities (ranging from being a woman to being a student of color in academia) as shaped by intersecting racist and sexist systems. Third, multiracial feminism and Mellor's taxonomy of coping styles recognize empowerment of women of color within their struggle to overcome challenges that emerge in racist and sexist environments. Although Mellor's taxonomy emerged from Indigenous Australians' experiences with racism and its applicability might not fully encapsulate the approaches doctoral women of color take to respond to encounters with racism, it remains useful for understanding the various responses. Specifically, the addition of the experiences of doctoral women of color with sexism may expand future understandings of the taxonomy. Thus, given that the purpose of this study was to emphasize the experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism in academic spaces and to shed light on the ways in which these women responded and overcame racist and sexist incidents, the use of these two theoretical framings was suitable.

**Table 1. Mellor's (2004) Approaches to coping from racism**

| Protecting the self | Self-control | Confronting racism |
|---|---|---|
| (1) Displaying acceptance Withdrawal/escape Resignation to fate Avoidance of further contact | (1) Ignoring | (1) Teaching–educating the perpetrator |
| (2) Engaging in cognitive reinterpretation of events | (2) Contained responses | (2) Contesting the racism |
| (3) Using social support | (3) Imagined responses | (3) Asserting one's rights |
| (4) Denying identity | | (4) Asserting Koori(ethnic) identity |
| (5) Attempting to achieve | | (5) Taking control |
| (6) Attempting to make children strong | | (6) Using external supports-authorities to address racism |
| | | (7) Seeking revenge |

# METHODS

This study used a subset of data from an unpublished qualitative study that examined the academic aspirations of doctoral women of color. The original study was concerned with understanding how racism and sexism shaped the academic aspirations of doctoral women of color throughout their lives. In contrast, this study highlights the experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism in doctoral programs and sheds light on the ways in which these women responded to and overcame racist and sexist incidents. General qualitative methods were utilized in this study. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative inquiry "seeks to discover and describe what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them" (p. 36). Thus, the use of qualitative inquiry in this study allowed us to explore the experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism and their responses to these incidents thoroughly. Ultimately, we attempted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the strategies that participants employed to successfully navigate racialized and sexualized academic environments.

## STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Our study included women of color who identified racially as African American, Latina American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and/or Native American and were enrolled in a doctoral program. Recruitment for the study was contained to the Mountain region of the United States, as this was the area where the researchers were located at the time of the study, and this decision also allowed us to meet participants in person as they all were located within driving distance. To achieve variation in our sample (Patton, 2002) and to reach as many participants as possible, we recruited participants from three institutions in the Mountain region, one private and two public flagships, and utilized purposeful sampling techniques to identify potential participants. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants needed to identify as a woman of color and be enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of the study. We disseminated information about the study via email to departments and graduate student networks at each research site. The final participant sample consisted of 11 doctoral women of color who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study, see Table 2 for participant demographics. Participant names listed in the table are pseudonyms.

Table 2. Participant demographics

| Participant | Racial/Ethnic Identity | Program |
|---|---|---|
| Davina | Asian American | Education |
| Carissa | Asian American | Health & Behavioral Sciences |
| Gina | African American and Pacific Islander | Education |
| Alex | Latina American | Education |
| Tasha | Native American and Pacific Islander | Counseling Psychology |
| Maria | Latina American | Education |
| Reyna | Latina American | Communication |
| Judy | Native American | Urban Ecology |
| Sarah | Latina American | Education |
| Andrea | African American | Education |
| Rose | Latina American | Education |

## DATA COLLECTION

We collected data through in-person semi-structured interviews with participants (Warren, 2002). Semi-structured interviews allowed us to collect comparable and reliable data by offering some structure for prompts while allowing participants to express their perspectives openly (Bernard, 1988; Warren, 2002); each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. Multiracial feminism shaped open-ended questions in our interview protocol, which sought to explore how identities of participants played out within intersecting systems of oppression. Other questions encouraged participants to narrate specific experiences related to race and gender; thus, the data enabled us to identify strategies participants employed to negotiate their academic process and spaces. Example interview questions include: Can you share a moment or moments in which you experienced a racist incident? How did you identify the incident and how did that go for you? When you look at your career path, do you think that racism and sexism had any influence on the path that you chose to follow?

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Analysis of participants' experiences with racism and sexism

We documented our insights from participant interviews in analytical memos throughout the data collection stage and met every other week to discuss emerging patterns in our data. These conversations allowed us to come to an agreement about consistent patterns each of us identified. Our discus-

sions about participants' experiences with racism and sexism led us to identify key participant statements, which we coded to build the classification for the different types of experiences doctoral women of color faced presented in Table 3. For example, the following statement made by Alex, "Well I think there is been key events through all of my post-secondary education. At [Institution] I was called just really horrific things. I was called on campus a dirty Mexican," was coded as *being called racist names*. In contrast, the following statement shared by Sarah was coded as *sexist prejudice:*

> One of the faculty in my department made the assumption that he knew my story and my background, and because of the age I was, he said, "You're probably going to want to take time off to have children, huh?" I've never wanted children for me to have. I want children in my life, but not my own. I explained to him, "No, that's actually not part of my plan."

These two experiences participants relayed occurred due to assumptions others made about their race/ethnicity and gender. As we completed coding key statements about participants' experiences with racism and sexism, we then proceeded to group these codes into the categories we present in Table 3 to convey the different experiences participants shared. The three categories were decided upon based on the nature of the incidents and are *overt, covert,* and *material and physical* to convey the magnitude of the incident from seemingly innocuous messaging to messaging that translated into racist and sexist actions against our participants. The two codes presented above (*being called racist names* and *sexist prejudice*) were grouped under the *overt* category of our classification because they included incidents with explicit hostile messages, which were neither covert nor translated into physical manifestations of racism and sexism.

## Analysis of participants' responses to racist and sexist incidents

This part of our analysis was guided by Mellor's taxonomy of coping styles. We used the taxonomy and its categories as *a priori* codes (Creswell, 2012), which served as our foundation to begin classifying participant responses while remaining open to additional emerging categories. We arrived at this decision as our conversations about the ways in which our participants responded to racism and sexism led us to survey extant literature to determine if salient pieces reflected in participants' experiences were part of the scholarly discourse on doctoral women of color. Our literature search uncovered Mellor's (2004) work on examining Aboriginal Australians' responses to racism and work by Truong and Museus (2012), who studied how doctoral students of color coped with racism. This work resonated with salient themes in our participant interviews but was missing something, a focus on sexism as a system of marginalization inherently intersecting with racism. Therefore, we used Mellor's (2004) taxonomy of coping styles as the foundation for this portion of our data analysis and to build upon the work of Truong and Museus (2012) by expanding the current discourse to include doctoral women of color at the crossroads of racism and sexism in academic spaces.

The list of *a priori* categories are *defensive, controlled,* and *direct* responses. Using Mellor's (2004) conceptualization of each of the three categories, we proceeded to code participant key statements related to responses to racism and sexism under each category. For example, Mellor defined responses as *defensive* when individuals did not promptly protest to incidents. This approach was greatly influenced by participants' needs to preserve the self. In order to survive in marginalizing spaces, they opted to not respond externally due to potential negative consequences associated with addressing these incidents directly. Using this definition in the context of our data we classified the following statement made by Alex as *defensive*:

> But at the time I didn't know even how to react. I need to work here both for my paycheck and at the time I was getting my master's degree, so I felt very connected, and he was my boss major like supervisor and also in a high-level position. So, I felt if I challenged him that would put me in a risk for repercussions, and I ended up even not too long after that pursuing another opportunity.

To facilitate the data analysis process, we uploaded our coding scheme, which consisted of emerging codes developed to characterize participants' experiences with racism and sexism and a priori codes, which we applied to classify participant responses to NVIVO Qualitative Research Software package (QSR International, Cambridge MA). Meeting frequently during the data analysis/coding process allowed for reliability and consistency within the coding process and to strengthen the trustworthiness of our findings (Creswell, 2012; Shenton, 2004).

## RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

We are women researchers of color. The first author identifies as a Mexican immigrant woman and first-generation college student. The second author identifies as a Khmer American woman, child of refugees, and first-generation college student. We conducted this study as doctoral students but have since transitioned into tenure-track faculty roles. We are passionately dedicated to supporting women of color as they advance through the doctoral pipeline into faculty positions in higher education. Also, despite having experienced racism and sexism in various contexts in our own doctoral experiences, we were supported by our cohort of women doctoral students, faculty of color, and an inclusive learning environment, which ultimately impacted our successful transition into academia. Our commitment to this study stems from our knowledge and understanding of the ways we learned to navigate academia while resisting marginalization as doctoral women of color. We also want to note that while we are deeply familiar with and aware of racism and sexism in academic spaces, we were careful not to impose our experiences and understanding of these issues on our participants' narratives. We accomplished this goal by journaling as to remain cognizant of our understanding and familiarity with the topics at hand during the study.

## LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations to our study. There was limited variability within the academic disciplines of our participants as most of them were enrolled in education programs. Having participants from programs other than education would have further diversified the perspectives represented. Also, given the small sample size and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds of participants, group differences were not explored in detail and findings were presented collectively. Lastly, Latina doctoral women were more prominent in our study, nonetheless, we do not consider this a limitation as we do not intend our findings to be representative of all doctoral women of color.

# FINDINGS

In this two-part section, we first describe participants' experiences with racism and sexism and then discuss the ways they employed different coping and navigational strategies for responding to these incidents.

## EXPERIENCES WITH RACISM AND SEXISM

We provide an overview of the types of experiences with racism and sexism as reported by participants. First, it is important to note that all the participants had little trouble identifying racist incidents they experienced in academia or in the workplace. They readily identified significant moments in which their racial identities were marginalized. However, when asked to share their experiences with sexism, many participants indicated that it was more difficult to identify specific sexist incidents despite later sharing many examples of ways they have experienced sexism. Tasha, a Native American and Pacific Islander woman, noted, "It's taking me more energy to think about the gender stuff than the race stuff because I've only known what it's like to be a woman. I don't know any different." Tasha's comment highlights an important aspect of gendered environments as a system of oppression that is so powerfully ubiquitous (Zinn & Dill, 1996) that participants had much more difficulty identifying its symptoms.

We present racist and sexist experiences, specific to academia and the professional work environment, into three categories: *covert messages, overt messages, and material and physical manifestations of oppression.* We specifically focus on messaging because the participants often described incidents in which they identified specific messages they interpreted as about their identities as women of color. Table 3 presents examples of incidents under each of these three categories.

### Table 3. Experiences with racism and sexism

| Covert Messages | Overt Messages | Material & Physical Manifestations |
|---|---|---|
| Seemingly innocuous messages <br><br> (1) Low academic expectations as informed by one's race and gender <br><br> (2) Tokenism | Directly and explicitly racist or sexist messages; doctoral women of color are the target of these comments <br><br> (1) Being called offensive racially charged names <br><br> (2) Expectations informed by traditional gender roles | Covert and overt messages translate into actions that shape our daily lives and/or result in discrimination against women of color <br><br> (1) Choosing to wear specific clothes to avoid sexual harassment <br><br> (2) Being expected to do research with one's own community without compensation |

### Covert messages

Participants experienced subtle or covert messaging about race and gender, as they were targets of microaggressive or dismissive comments about their ability and belonging in the academic environment. While these messages were seemingly innocuous, the participants indicated that they made them feel dismissed and othered. Rose, a Latina American woman, noted a specific experience with an instructor that she recognized as racialized:

> We had to write a paper as it related to education or something and I chose to do dropout rates. I was talking to my instructor and --- I was doing dropout rates of Latinos in high school---- She said, "Your subject is good, and it seems like ... I'm sure you have plenty of firsthand knowledge about this subject.

The covert messaging behind the instructor's comments implied that Rose's racial/ethnic identity as Latina made her an expert on issues that Latino/a students face in higher education. Similarly, Sarah, a Latina American woman, described an experience where her colleagues assumed she was conditionally admitted into graduate school because of her identity as a woman of color:

> In one of my graduate classes in my master's, we were talking about things, and I realized that some of the classmates had heard that there was a couple people who were conditionally admitted, and they had thought it was the four people in the room who, myself included, were either Latino or identified as Black. It was actually some white classmates who had been conditionally admitted, and so that got me very much aware that other people looked, and they saw your ethnicity and your race as whether you belong there or not. That painful experience, I think, carried with me for a while, that, I just always doubted, "Am I smart enough to be here?"

Some participants also reported experiences of being tokenized as the only person of color and exoticized as a woman of color. Alex, a Latina American woman, spoke about this:

> I mean sometimes is just a small example of kind of microaggression, also this is intersectionality between sexism and racism, but I was also referred to as the exotic, the exotic person in the office for people to be like enticing. And I mean that's both sexist and making me that exotic foreign it was such an unusual experience and it's hard to articulate but I mean I didn't feel good. So it was, I felt reduced to my image that I was at the time the youngest on the staff and we were hoping to reach out to younger alumni rather than being maybe from my ideas or ways to create and engaging climate that alumni may want to participate in. I was this image that was really due to my gender and related to being this exotic figure.

The messaging being conveyed to Alex was that she was useful to her department because of her appearance as a young woman of color and not because she was a competent member of their team. The narratives participants shared communicated subtle but painful messaging that reflects how participants were being perceived by their colleagues in academic and workspaces. Their stories are prime examples of the dismissive ways women of color are excluded in academia.

## Overt messages

Overt incidents involved messages that were directly and explicitly racist or sexist. Participants indicated that they had been the target of explicitly racist comments toward their ethnic and racial group. Alex shared one of her first experiences with overt racism, "Well I think there is been key events through all of my post-secondary education. At [Institution] I was called just really horrific things. I was called on campus a dirty Mexican." This type of messaging was not limited to Latina women on campus but was also experienced by other women of color. Sena, a Native American woman, shared:

> And this group of white students walked across to the dormitory. They're walking to their dormitory, which is directly across from ours. And they shouted at us and they said, "why don't you go back to where you came from?" And that was--I mean, it doesn't sound that harsh of words but go back to where you came from? And we're a bunch of Native American people, who came from here.

Some sexist or gendered messages were uniquely shaped coming from other women rather than men as most of our participants were pursuing degrees in fields where women were overrepresented. These messages were described as judgmental questioning of how participants dared to pursue an advanced degree while raising children. Maria, a Latina American woman, noted:

> Interestingly enough, sexism, less so. But I work in a field where it's predominately women. And I work in a field where the sexism comes from other women. So, it isn't sexism from men. Its other women thinking what am I. You know, kind of what's your place. What are you doing? I've had somebody tell me, well what about your kids? --and they go-I feel like, I wouldn't be able to spend so much time away from my kids and miss their soccer games because I was talking to some of the other moms on my son's soccer team and some other people through --associated through work--but they're like, I wouldn't be able to sacrifice not being there for my kid's games. And I said, you know, there are a lot of sacrifices and it's really hard not to be there for every game, but I know when he gets older, he will [understand]. I'm trying to take the high road!

Sexist messages that came from men were also aligned with gender norms. Sarah noted:

> One of the faculty in my department made the assumption that he knew my story and my background, and because of the age I was, he said, "You're probably going to want to take time off to have children, huh?" I've never wanted children for me to have. I want children in my life, but not my own. I explained to him, "No, that's actually not part of my plan."

As with covert messaging, overt messages were deeply rooted within stock narratives constructed for participants. Others' perceptions of participants' goals and plans were influenced by faculty and

peers' beliefs about race and gender roles. Consequently, the overt messages relayed resulted in participants feeling demeaned, misrepresented, and minimized.

## Material and physical manifestations

Material and physical manifestations of racism and sexism refer to specific circumstances where covert and overt messages translated into participants being explicitly treated differently than their peers or where these messages translated into actions that shaped how participants carried themselves. For example, Tasha narrated an experience where she was expected to work on a research project involving her community without compensation while another research assistant on the project, who did not belong to her community, was being compensated:

> Of course, being identified by the race would you be interested in this project because we are identifying these people who are your people. I was like sure I'm interested I was really excited like my culture identity and research at the same time. It could be like you know beneficial and financially it could help me out on a grant and good on my resume. This could be great and then there was like covert racism. I feel like it was probably more like not being aware what happened. He talked to a student who was not from our culture and she decided to work on the project too and it was fine with me because I really liked her to but the thing that was so weird is that he wanted to pay her for being the research assistant on the grant and didn't want to pay us, the two students who were the minorities which was at kind of- I don't know if you realize if this is happening or like does he realize that he wanted us to work on the project because we have a personal investment in it and we can provide this perspective. You know minority should be interested in these issues like this assumption like you are going to work for free.

Tasha pointed out the unfairness and inequality of treatment and rejected the assumption that she should work for free while another colleague benefited. This situation highlighted the material consequences of inequitable treatment.

Regarding material and physical manifestations of sexism, participants described situations where they were ignored in favor of their male peers in class or meetings and were treated and assessed differently in employment reviews. For example, Gina, an African American and Pacific Islander woman, narrated that her male professor did not call on her in class and never remembered her name though she attended office hours frequently. Similarly, Alex, shared that she received feedback at work that labeled her with five harsh negative adjectives for attempting to challenge normative ways of doing work in the office. Alex wondered "if that feedback would have been given so candidly and harshly to men who have the same opinions or did the same work."

Additionally, these experiences directly impacted the ways some participants presented themselves in academic spaces. For example, Reyna, a Latina American woman, shared how perceptions of her as being "oversexed as a Latina" translated into her outfit choices in academia:

> So, you know, that already being oversexed as a Latina. And looked at in different ways. A lot of raced sexual harassment, you know. People making comments like "ooh you look very spicy today" or "ooh your boobs--" you know little things that --yeah--very raced sexism. With teaching I think I'm very protective of that. I think I dress very masculine. Blazers, slacks, things to cover my body. And really in ways that I shouldn't and I think I'm coming to terms with, you know, being --because it--you know, being a very sexualized--I guess it's taught me to be very careful, right?

In Reyna's case, she identified raced sexism as an oppressive system that caused her to police her own appearance as a defense mechanism.

The above covert, overt, and material and physical manifestations of racist and sexist incidents describe the circumstances that impact doctoral women of color experiences. These situations produce

a climate that consistently targets doctoral women of color as they must contend with marginalization from different directions. These experiences are critical for understanding how messaging about race and gender manifest into actions that produce specific and direct outcomes. These outcomes negatively impact doctoral women of color internally and emotionally and can affect their academic and professional trajectories. Yet, doctoral women of color are not simply passive recipients or victims of this messaging. Rather, participants respond and engage with this messaging in critical ways. The section that follows provides an overview of doctoral women of color responses to encounters with racism and sexism.

## NAVIGATIONAL STRATEGIES

Using Mellor's (2004) taxonomy of coping styles to guide our analysis allows us to build upon this work and the work of Truong and Museus (2012) by adding perspectives on sexism which are closely intertwined with the racialized experiences of doctoral women of color in the academy. Navigational strategies are categorized into three groups based on the ways participants responded to racist and sexist incidents. These categories are *defensive, controlled,* and *direct.* Table 4 offers an overview of these responses.

**Table 4. Doctoral women of color navigational strategies**

| Defensive strategies | Controlled strategies | Direct strategies |
| --- | --- | --- |
| (1) Do not offer an immediate response to incident | (1) Engage consciousness to decide how to address situation | (1) Need to regain control of the situation |
| (2) Avoiding immediate consequences of an external response | (2) Consider the benefits of a controlled response | (2) Educate their oppressors and assert their place and rights at the time of the incident |
| (3) Move away from space and incident | (3) Challenge system of oppression gradually | |
| (4) Indirectly challenge oppressors | | |

### Defensive

Participants' strategies were classified as defensive when they did not promptly protest to incidents (Mellor, 2004). This approach was greatly influenced by participants' needs to preserve the self. In order to survive in oppressive spaces, they opted to not respond externally due to potential negative consequences associated with addressing these incidents directly. In some cases, defensive responses included moving away from oppressive spaces. Alex shared her response to the experience we shared earlier where Alex was being tokenized and exoticized in her job for being a young woman of color:

> But at the time I didn't know even how to react. I need to work here both for my paycheck and at the time I was getting my master's degree, so I felt very connected, and he was my boss major like supervisor and also in a high-level position. So, I felt if I challenged him that would put me in a risk for repercussions, and I ended up even not too long after that pursuing another opportunity.

Alex's approach to being tokenized for her race and gender was to prioritize her survival and continuity in her job and program over choosing to directly address the issue. She knew the risks of directly responding and instead chose to pick her battles; ultimately, she pursued a new job and position. In many ways, participants were cognizant of power dynamics in academia and workspaces, which influenced the ways they edited their reactions and responses to racism and sexism.

Another defensive approach was to indirectly challenge their oppressors' assumptions and beliefs by achieving, excelling, and paving the way for future generations to come. As Gina explained, "When I think about the individual empowerment that has always been important to me. But also, that sense of, you think I'm less than whatever? I'm going to show you. I am not though." Gina may not have directly challenged these thoughts but instead focused on proving that she could succeed. Participants acknowledged the importance of succeeding, not just for their own sake but for others who would come after. Likewise, Sarah stated:

> Originally, I wanted a dissertation to help me able to advance in my career, move up different levels, and give me a little bit more strength of being asked to the table, so I can share my voice. I will say a big factor, that has nothing to do with career aspirations or anything like that, is to be a Latina woman with a Ph.D., and inspire the first and second year students that come from very diverse backgrounds that I work with, that they, too, could do it if they wanted to.

Thus, participants acknowledge that there may be more at stake when deciding whether to directly or indirectly respond to racism and sexism. These narratives depict participants' desires to challenge their oppressors and the assumptions made about their groups and place in society and express their hopes for a better future for those to come. Through education, they strive to set a powerful example for future generations about the possibility of success despite the endemic nature of racism and sexism in our society. They are normalizing advanced education and the persistence of historically marginalized communities in college.

Overall, participants' defensive navigational strategies focused on improving conditions and challenging incidents tactfully; however, there were occasions in which racism and sexism were responded to by rationalizing these experiences as part of their daily lives. As shared by Andrea, an African American woman:

> It's happened with my just everyday experiences with people. This is what their expectations, lack of positive expectations, and like I said, it's a fascinating thing, but you just roll with the punches and do what you need to do, and a lot of it. You were asking about feelings … you get frustrated and you get shocked, but it's so much a part of your life that you just keep, keeping on.

Andrea's sentiments are those of someone who has come to expect these situations and treatment and consider them as everyday occurrences. The frequency of experiences like these influenced how the participants made sense of their perceived abilities to fight back and whether to fight back. As Zinn and Dill (1996) and Collins (1990) assert, in order for oppression to be perpetuated, there needs to be an element of "normality" where the oppressed accepts the reality that was created for them by those in power who, in turn, continuously divest the underserved from the privilege to create their own reality within society. Like Andrea, marginalized populations find themselves trapped within multiple systems of oppression and within realities created that function to maintain the status quo. However, their coping strategies vary given the situation.

## Controlled

Although all navigational strategies participants adopted require some level of consciousness and awareness, controlled responses to oppressive situations demand a more structured, deliberative process to determine how to address incidents. While emotional reactions are experienced deeply and marginalized individuals consider responding more directly, they choose not to. Reasons for doing so often go beyond survival, which is common to defensive strategies (Mellor, 2004). Individuals who choose to regulate the self in response to oppression decide to contain their reactions. As stated by Sarah:

> I actually had a very kind faculty member said, you could spend your whole life going against the grain, but you won't get your doctorate. You are still right. When you're still right, I

won't get it, because I won't do the things I need to do to be able to get it. I think, for me, I went from, I don't want to do this, to now I feel like I have to. To just be one more voice, because if enough of us do it, we can take it over. We can so saturate it, that it will become like Miami. So many Latinos moved to Miami, and then we took it over.

Sarah acknowledged the inefficiency of openly going against oppressive systems and made a very conscious decision to continue working toward her degree, as the outcome of this choice will be more beneficial in the long run. Similarly, Davina, an Asian American woman, suggested:

And it's just boring [to react immediately to racist and sexist incidents]. So, this is the fourth or fifth project I'm on and I know enough to be patient. I wait for the first few weeks for them to say, "oh she actually knows her stuff." Because I dress pretty traditionally. I'm not always in pants. I pretty often wear my Indian outfits. It's just--it's exhausting and boring. And I kind of build in that time for every project. I know the first six-seven weeks I'm just going to be patient. I'm not going to say anything to anyone. I won't be angry [displaying anger]. I'm going to take deep breaths.

This navigational strategy alludes to Davina's conscious decision to allow those making deficit assumptions about her knowledge and abilities to learn that they are wrong by their own means as opposed to her acting upon her anger and frustration and creating undesired consequences for herself. Participants who preferred to enact controlled responses are not doing so because they are indifferent to the issue or because they have internalized oppression, they make such choices strategically, to break through systemic oppression gradually. The following quote from Judy, a Native American woman, highlights this understanding:

You can sit around and complain and piss and moan and be angry your whole life and get nothing done. Or you can take that energy that comes from that anger and change things. Even if it's little by little, one family by one family, by one school by one school. You can change things. And if you're not working towards change, you're just pissing and moaning. And I've never been good at pissing and moaning. And so, it has changed the way I fight.

Strategic controlled navigation was not only seen as more efficient but also more effective. Gina, who works closely with students shared similar sentiments:

And so, in a lot of ways, I kind of help my students deal with the consequences of a racist system. And it's the experience that I have had and so it gives me the insight to know, we can overcome this. And even if we are not tearing down the system, we can break a hole so you can get through. And making that connection has been really important.

It is important to recognize that controlled responses are energy-intensive and force marginalized individuals to deal with an internal struggle of wanting to respond to incidents but choosing not to do so for a variety of reasons including implications of immediate active responses and positive change long-term.

## Direct

Direct responses to racism and sexism among participants are fueled by desire to regain control of the situation. Participants navigated oppressive encounters directly by educating their oppressors and asserting their place and rights in a timely manner (Mellor, 2004). For instance, when Tasha's faculty expected her to serve on a research project without compensation, she chose a direct response:

And we kind of agree me and the other girls who were working on the [research] project and also minority students that we would have to address this because if I knew I would have decided not to work with it [the project] kind of like not communicating with them but we had to talk about it. It was so f'd up. So, we did we talk to him about it. We pointed out that he asked us to because you're not being paid for it because of our minority status. And he was

> like no, no, no, no I meant like you know I hope you guys didn't feel that way. He was really apologetic. I consented that maybe he didn't make those connections.

Tasha's decision to go to her oppressor and address the way she was feeling about the situation demonstrates both assertiveness and efficiency in taking control of the issue. While she gracefully acknowledges that the faculty member did not recognize the connotations, her direct response both highlighted the problematic nature of the request and produced a positive outcome. Likewise, Sarah who also opted to address a situation directly shared:

> One time, somebody said something stupid, and I can't remember what it was, it was just so offensive. My professor, one of my favorite professors, she looked at me, and she raised her eyebrow, and I raised my eyebrow back at her, like, oh, I've got this. I went for it, not to tear the people apart, but I said, 'What made you choose that word to describe it?' They have to explain, and it strips [them] open.

Sarah's narrative shows a high level of confidence in her ability to address the incident in the moment. Examples like this reflect empowerment as participants call out oppression, reclaim spaces, and challenge their oppressors. Despite experiencing racism and sexism, participants developed resilient ways of coping and understanding different ways to engage. Andrea modeled this standard clearly:

> I felt when you have that foundation [awareness of oppression and awareness of self], you just can't let people treat you any kind of way, so I was raised that if you don't see my value that's your issue, it's not mine. But I put the boundaries on how you treat me.

In this example, Andrea explained the powerful influence of having critical awareness of oppression and the self in addressing incidents directly. In this study, participants chose either indirect, controlled, or direct responses to experiencing racism and sexism in academia. The powerful ways participants chose to act, regardless of category, indicate a strong self-awareness and experience with multiple oppressive systems. The participants exemplify an awareness of common or frequent experiences of oppression across myriad identities and expressions of women of color. Their decision-making processes are clearly indicated as they explain the reasons why they chose specific (re)actions in various situations. This indicates that coping responses of doctoral women of color include a variety of skills, knowledge, and awareness of oppression's functions and an understanding of the risks associated with their chosen responses.

## DISCUSSION

The research questions addressed in this study are (1) How do doctoral women of color experience racism and sexism in academic environments? And (2) In what ways do doctoral women of color respond to encounters with racism and sexism? Our findings reveal that the experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism are primarily framed around messages – both implicit and explicit – geared toward study participants. These messages ranged from seemingly unharmful commentary to comments that were explicitly demeaning to our participants and messaging that translated directly into actions that led our participants to experience unequal treatment. Participants' narratives allowed us to create a categorization for their experiences with racism and sexism which included covert, overt, and material and physical manifestations. Participants' experiences with covert racism and sexism consisted of aggressions that contested participants' belonging in academia, assumed them less capable of academic success, and exoticized and tokenized them. Participants' experiences align with research on doctoral women of color that asserts that doctoral women of color encounter unsupportive academic environments (Ellis, 2001; Turner & Thompson, 1993) that further marginalize them (Espino, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Participants' experiences with overt racist and sexist messages, some of which translated into material and physical manifestations of racism and sexism, included being called offensive slurs and being the targets of xenophobic comments or

reprimanded for not abiding to traditional gender norms and expected to fulfill gendered roles, such as having children.

There is literature the supports the claim that doctoral women of color may experience racist and sexist incidents with their own academic advisors (Ellis, 2001; Felder, et al., 2014) especially when their advisors do not share similar backgrounds. This was the case for one of our participants whose advisor assumed that they would take longer to complete their degree because the participant would want to have children. There is also research that argues that faculty and administrators who do not share similar backgrounds as doctoral women of color may tend to ignore, minimize, or dismiss participants experiences with racism and sexism (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Overall, our findings of how doctoral women of color encounter racism and sexism in academic spaces resonate with literature on doctoral women of color, primarily work that illuminates the marginalizing experiences that this group faces in academic spaces (Jones et al., 2013; Ong et al., 2011; Shavers & Moore, 2014). When examining the experiences of our participants in comparison with experiences reported in literature on doctoral students, the intersectionality of racism and sexism contribute to a more marginalizing experience for doctoral women of color (Crenshaw, 1990). Literature on doctoral students that does not study the complexity of race and gender focuses on examining doctoral students' barriers to graduation. Some of the challenges identified in this work include balancing life, work, and school (Martinez et al., 2013), finding community within academic programs (Tharp Byers et al., 2014; Zhal, 2015), and managing competing responsibilities (Gardner & Holley, 2011). While these issues experienced by doctoral students are significant on their own, when we consider race and gender participants' experiences highlight additional layers of complexity that can result in further marginalization.

Shifting our discussion to the ways in which doctoral women of color responded to racism and sexism, our findings suggested a range of responses informed by Mellor's (2004) taxonomy of coping styles that included defensive, controlled, and direct responses. Participants' responses were characterized by internal reflection and strategy development that shaped both their decision to and how to respond. Defensive responses involved participants fearing consequences of a direct response to the incident, rationalizing the oppressive encounter as part of their daily lives, and challenging oppression by countering deficit assumptions of their academic ability. Our findings confirm the work of Espino (2014) and González (2006) who found doctoral women of color in their studies chose to challenge stereotypes as a way of empowerment. Additionally, the work of Gildersleeve and colleagues (2011) aligns with our findings that a defensive strategy of participants was to question their academic ability by giving into deficit assumptions others made about them. Controlled and direct participant responses alluded to more active engagement addressing racist and sexist incidents. These responses are reflected in extant literature on doctoral women of color, specifically the work of Shavers and Moore (2014) where participants chose to wear an academic mask to overcome racist expectations and assumptions others made of them. Wearing an academic mask meant that doctoral women of color suppressed important dimensions of their identities and placed a greater emphasis on fulfilling and exceeding academic expectations. However, Shavers and Moore (2014) warn us about the negative implications of engaging this strategy as it can be detrimental to the well-being of doctoral women of color. In our study we learned participants engaged similar strategies including letting their oppressors prove themselves wrong by excelling academically and professionally and focusing on the end goal of empowering future generations. The focus on community was at the center of participant's controlled and direct responses, specifically as it relates to social networks. This finding is supported in literature (Espino, 2014) that states that doctoral women of color navigate academia by creating spaces of resistance (Squire & McCann, 2018).

# IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## RESEARCH

Our research contributes to the literature with emphasis on the ways in which doctoral women of color respond to and cope with racism and sexism. Women in this study recount racist and sexist experiences and describe their decision-making processes as to how and whether to respond. There were specific reasons that shaped their responses and coping strategies, which highlight awareness and confidence in their individual abilities.

Study findings also contribute to and expand Mellor's (2004) taxonomy, specifically the incorporation of sexism as a system inherently interlocked with racism. Current literature on doctoral women of color mainly highlights their experience with racism, our contribution addresses this gap in the literature, specifically, in illuminating predetermined societal roles and expectations for doctoral women of color in academia.

Most importantly, our research highlights the assets and agency that doctoral women of color mobilize in the face of racism and sexism. These assets include long-term goals and aspirations, awareness of interlocking systems of oppression shaping their experience in academic spaces, commitment to empowering their communities through education, and the support they find within their personal and academic networks. These assets and agency serve as foundation to challenge longstanding deficit perspectives on doctoral women of color in academic spaces and for faculty and program administrators to consider when developing support services.

Lastly, future research may explore how the matrix of domination (Collins, 1990) mediates responses of doctoral women of color to racism and sexism. This philosophical inclination is linked to our decision to use Mellor's (2004) taxonomy of coping styles as an introductory framework for our work in understanding navigational strategies. To that end, we argue that the taxonomy, as it stands, characterizes participants' responses based on their immediate approach to incidents. This framing fails to include the timing someone might need to process and decide to how to respond. Mellor's taxonomy positions participants who do not choose to respond immediately as compliant and acquiescent to racialized spaces and events. By doing so, we run the risk of oversimplifying and essentializing the complex processes individuals faced with racism and sexism undertake.

At the same time, future research can examine the connection between responses or copying styles and ways that participants are internally transformed in their abilities and desires to address future incidents. There is an inordinate amount of focus on how individuals interact with oppressive incidents and yet very little is known about the ways that these interactions shape future responses. Additionally, the ways that doctoral women of color navigate situations outside the academy is not explored. For example, some of our participants shared how these experiences enabled them or inspired them to address other incidents and to interact with family and community members.

## PRACTICE

First, our findings suggest a critical need for administrators and educators to understand the experiences of women of color and recognize the impact these experiences have on their persistence and success in college. Research on doctoral women of color is limited and very little is known about the entirety of their experiences in graduate programs. This study addresses this gap by exploring how doctoral women of color persist despite the intersectionality of racist and sexist alienation and marginalization. It is important that faculty and staff engage in culturally relevant education and training in order to better understand how to support doctoral women of color as they face these situations.

We need more educators who engage in culturally relevant and responsive practices and pedagogy that seeks to include their students' whole identities and leverage these identities in the classroom.

Additionally, more educators need to be trained in ways to recognize and address racist and sexist incidents in their classrooms that dismantle systems of oppression rather than reinforce them. Specifically, we need to better equip educators to recognize the hard to distinguish sexist incidents, which, as our participants suggested, are well concealed within the fabric of our gendered and sexualized society.

Second, this study can benefit those in program and resource development to create effective programming and strategies to engage these acts of resilience that enable women of color to succeed in graduate school. Rather than approaching the support and development of doctoral women of color from a deficit perspective of assisting them through challenges, it is more important to engage fully with these students to understand what strategies they have used that can better inform successful retention programs. Furthermore, mentorship from faculty was highlighted as an important means for participants to address and cope with their negative experiences. Thus, more mentoring relationships between faculty and the student and across student peer groups should be intentionally engaged. This is a system of support also noted in extant literature (Felder, 2010). As part of the doctoral socialization process, mentoring has many benefits for doctoral students. Specifically, for doctoral women of color, mentoring relationships can be a critical tool for supporting them in managing negative experiences, especially considering that it can minimize feelings of loneliness and isolation.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative study examined experiences of doctoral women of color with racism and sexism in academic spaces and sought to identify ways in which they navigate educational settings through their responses to racism and sexism. The research questions addressed in this study are (1) How do doctoral women of color experience racism and sexism in academic environments? and (2) In what ways do doctoral women of color respond to encounters with racism and sexism? Participants' experiences with racism and sexism included perceptions as deficient and incapable of succeeding in the academy, judgments for not adhering to gendered norms and expectations, and expectations to fulfill gendered norms and roles, to labor without compensation, and to accept sexualization, exoticization, and tokenization as a woman of color in the academy. Their responses to these incidents ranged from defensive to controlled to direct. Doctoral women of color responses to racism and sexism were informed by seeking to preserve the self, considering the implications of different responses long term, and selecting the best course of action. Their responses were greatly informed by their awareness of oppressive systems and the agency within themselves and their communities of support.

Our findings encourage faculty, program administrators, and researchers to pay attention to racist and sexist issues as intersecting oppressions rather than distinct manifestations of prejudice to be confronted separately. Our findings also highlight the assets doctoral women of color rely on to overcome oppression and marginalization including their long-term goals and aspirations, awareness of interlocking systems of oppression shaping their experience in academic spaces, commitment to empowering their communities through education, and the support they find within their personal and academic networks. Our hope is that this work encourages systems of higher education to create tangible ways to support doctoral women of color as they grapple with the multiple systems of domination that threaten their success in education, which is intertwined with success in other aspects of society.

## REFERENCES

Bernard, H. R. (1988). *Research methods in cultural anthropology*. Sage Publications.

Carlone, H. B., & Johnson, A. (2007). Understanding the science experiences of successful women of color: Science identity as an analytic lens. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 44*(8), 1187–1218. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20237

Collins, P.H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (pp. 221–238). Unwin Hyman. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900055

Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. University of Minnesota Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43,* 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publishing.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative research*. (5th ed.). SAGE.

Ellis, E.M. (2001). The impact of race and gender on graduate school socialization, satisfaction with doctoral study, and commitment to degree completion. *Western Journal of Black Studies, 25*(1), 30–45.

Espino, M. M. (2014). Exploring the role of community cultural wealth in graduate school access and persistence for Mexican American PhDs. *American Journal of Education, 120*(4), 545–574. https://doi.org/10.1086/676911

Felder, P. P. (2010). On doctoral student development: Exploring faculty mentoring in the shaping of African American doctoral student success. *Qualitative Report, 15*(2), 455–474.

Felder, P. P., & Barker, M. J. (2013). Extending Bell's concept of interest convergence: A framework for understanding the African American doctoral student experience. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *8*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.28945/1754

Felder, P. P., Stevenson, H. C., & Gasman, M. (2014). Understanding race in doctoral student socialization. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *9*, 21–42. https://doi.org/10.28945/1947

Fries-Britt, S., & Kelly, B. T. (2005). Retaining each other: Narratives of two African American women in the academy. *The Urban Review, 37*(3), 221–242. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-005-0006-2

Gardner, S. K., & Holley, K. A. (2011). "Those invisible barriers are real": The progression of first-generation students through doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 44*(1), 77–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.529791

Gildersleeve, R. E., Croom, N. N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). "Am I going crazy?!": A critical race analysis of doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *44*(1), 93–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.539472

González, J. C. (2006). Academic socialization experiences of Latina doctoral students: A qualitative understanding of support systems that aid and challenges that hinder the process. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, *5*(4), 347–365. https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192706291141

Hassouneh-Phillips, D., & Beckett, A. (2003). An education in racism. *Journal of Nursing Education, 42*(6), 258–265.

Herzig, A. H. (2004). Becoming mathematicians: Women and students of color choosing and leaving doctoral mathematics. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(2), 171–214. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074002171

Jones, T. B., Wilder, J., & Osborne-Lampkin, L. (2013). Employing a Black feminist approach to doctoral advising: Preparing Black women for the professoriate. *Journal of Negro Education, 82*(3)*,* 326–338. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.82.3.0326

Lundy-Wagner, V., Vultaggio, J., & Gasman, M. (2013). Preparing underrepresented students of color for doctoral success: The role of undergraduate institutions. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 8*, 151–172. https://doi.org/10.28945/1901

Martinez, E., Ordu, C., Della Sala, M. R., & McFarlane, A. (2013). Striving to obtain a school-work-life balance: The full-time doctoral student. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 8, 39–59. https://doi.org/10.28945/1765

Mellor, D. (2004). Responses to racism: A taxonomy of coping styles used by aboriginal Australians. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 74*(1), 56–71. http://doi.org/dcxrh3

Ong, M., Wright, C., Espinosa, L., & Orfield, G. (2011). Inside the double bind: A synthesis of empirical research on undergraduate and graduate women of color in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(2), 172–208. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.81.2.t022245n7x4752v2

Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative Social Work, 1*(3), 261–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325002001003636

Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Spaulding, L. S., & Bade, B. (2014). Completion of educational doctorates: How universities can foster persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *9*, 293–308. https://doi.org/10.28945/2072

Shavers, M. C., & Moore, J. L., III. (2014). Black female voices: Self-presentation strategies in doctoral programs at predominately White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 55(4), 391–407. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2014.0040

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, *22*(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3233/efi-2004-22201

Squire, D. D., & McCann, K. (2018). Women of Color with critical worldviews constructing Spaces of resistance in education doctoral programs. *Journal of College Student Development, 59*(4), 404–420. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0039

Tharp Byers, V., Smith, R. N., Hwang, E., Angrove, K. E., Chandler, J. I., Christian, K. M., … Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2014). Survival strategies: Doctoral students' perceptions of challenges and coping methods. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *9*, 109–136. https://doi.org/10.28945/2034

Truong, K. A., & Museus, S. D. (2012). Responding to racism and racial trauma in doctoral study: An inventory for coping and mediating relationships. *Harvard Educational Review, 82*(2), 226–254. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.82.2.u54154j787323302

Turner, C. S. V. (2002). Women of color in academe: Living with multiple marginality. *Journal of Higher Education, 73*(1), 74–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2002.11777131

Turner, C. S. V., & Thompson, J. R. (1993). Socializing women doctoral students: Minority and majority experiences. *The Review of Higher Education, 16*(3), 355–370. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1993.0017

Warren, C. A. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In J. F. Bubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. (pp.83-201). https://doi.org./10.4135/9781412973588

Wing, A. K. (Ed.). (2003). *Critical race feminism: A reader* (2nd ed.). New York University Press.

Zahl, S. B. (2015). The impact of community for part-time doctoral students: How relationships in the academic department affect student persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 10,* 301–321. https://doi.org/10.28945/2297

Zinn, M. B., & Dill, B. T. (1996). Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism. *Feminist Studies, 22*(2), 321–331. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178416

# BIOGRAPHIES

**Delma Ramos** is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the Teacher Education and Higher Education department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research examines the experiences of minoritized populations in college and is primarily concerned with shedding light on and identifying tools to disrupt structures that perpetuate inequity in education. She holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education with a concentration in Research Methods and Statistics from the University of Denver, a Master's of Science in Student Affairs in Higher Education, and Bachelors of Social Work from Colorado State University.

**Varaxy Yi** is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at the Kremen School of Education and Human Development at California State University, Fresno. She conducts research to advance equity, access, and opportunity for historically underserved communities, such as racially minoritized, Southeast Asian American, and refugee populations. Her dissertation was a phenomenological exploration of the racialized experiences of Southeast Asian American community college students. She earned her doctorate in Higher Education from the University of Denver.