Black doctoral women’s socialization experiences in agricultural science and education departments

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine how intersecting oppressed identities shape the socialization experiences of Black women doctoral candidates in agricultural disciplines at historically white institutions. This paper addresses a gap in literature examining the experiences of Black women within the context of higher agricultural sciences education.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of five Black women doctoral candidates through a set of three interviews per participant.

Findings – Three themes regarding participants’ socialization experiences were identified. Themes are presented according to its site of socialization: lack of trust in advising relationships, departmental belonging and negative interactions with department faculty and isolation and exclusion at conferences.

Originality/value – This study adds to the small body of research on Black women in higher agricultural sciences education. Further, this study contributes to the larger body of socialization research and the minimal research on socialization for marginalized populations in higher agricultural sciences education.

Keywords Mentoring, Graduate education, Doctoral socialization, Black women, Advising, Agricultural sciences

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Marginalized doctoral students need to feel a sense of belonging and mattering to excel in their academic endeavors (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2010). However, Black students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) have reported a diminished sense of belonging. In fact, Black women have reported significantly lower sense of belonging than Black men (Strayhorn, 2011). The STEM climate can contribute to decreased sense of belonging, difficulties socializing into a discipline and/or leaving a discipline altogether (Dortch and Patel, 2017; Seymour and Hewitt, 1997). Positive socialization experiences through mentoring, equitable advising and support from doctoral students’ departments can help enhance sense of belonging and mitigate barriers experienced (Azizova and Felder, 2017).

In addition to diminished sense of belonging, many Black women in doctoral education experience several barriers, including poor socialization, inadequate mentoring, negative campus and departmental climate and gendered racial microaggressions (Jones et al., 2013;...
Agricultural disciplines are not exempt from the challenges Black women experience in other STEM disciplines, especially considering the small numbers of Black women enrolled in agricultural doctoral programs at historically white institutions (HWIs), limiting the availability of support for each other. As more Black women enroll in doctoral programs, it will be essential for agricultural departments to examine and address the factors that influence their retention and graduation rates. However, research on Black women in the context of agriculture and doctoral education in agricultural sciences is relatively unexamined. Further, there is a lack of research regarding professional development experiences of Black women in agricultural sciences. We must continue to examine how doctoral education in agricultural sciences does or does not equitably socialize students into the discipline. Shinn et al. (2008) noted the need to reexamine doctoral student preparation for the profession. However, the study examined the “what” of doctoral agricultural education but not the “how” or “who.” Discussion on “how” and “who” are needed to examine the doctoral process for agricultural students. Examining the process and doctoral student experiences will help to better address retention and inclusion for marginalized doctoral students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how intersecting oppressed identities shape the socialization experiences of Black women doctoral candidates in agricultural disciplines at HWIs.

Literature review

Minoritized graduate students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics

Many AgLS disciplines are STEM-focused (Goecker et al., 2015) and mirror the negative perceptions, climate and norms of STEM education (Esters and Knobloch, 2012). As there is a dearth of research regarding Black women’s socialization, I will focus on minoritized graduate students in STEM. McGee (2020) posits that STEM education was defined for white men who are heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, middle class and above and the resulting culture has created an inhospitable culture for faculty, staff and students who do not hold those identities. Institutions and departments recruit Black students and students of color into STEM programs to show their programs are diverse; however, they often fail to address systemic inequities that shape departmental and campus climate, sense of belonging and socialization (Iverson, 2007). STEM culture often reproduces beliefs that prioritize the needs and wants of white and Asian males (Vakil and Ayers, 2019), while students of color are presumed incompetent and unsuitable for STEM (McGee and Bentley, 2017). The overrepresentation of whiteness within the institution and department creates a space where students of color rarely see other students and faculty who look like them or have had similar experiences (Winkle-Wagner and McCoy, 2018). The lack of faculty and students of color can contribute to feelings of isolation and, consequently, negative campus and departmental climate, poor sense of belonging and a lack of socialization (Zambrana et al., 2015).

Doctoral socialization

Doctoral education is designed to integrate students into the norms and culture of a profession (Golde, 1998; Weidman et al., 2001) and is paramount to students’ academic and career success. Advisors play a crucial role in doctoral students’ education (Nyquist, 2002) and are often the primary source of socialization through research and professional development mentoring (Noy and Ray, 2012; Perez et al., 2019). Strayhorn (2012a) states that socialization begets sense of belonging, and sense of belonging begets success. Furthermore, doctoral student persistence is significantly shaped by the socialization students receive.
within their discipline and department (Golde, 1998) and is heavily influenced by faculty and peer socialization (Lovitts, 2001). Altbach (2011) described the socialization process as being deeply rooted in the foundations and culture of the university. When universities, departments and faculty ignore and/or shy away from conversations that may challenge inequities in the socialization process, they perpetuate the institutional status quo. Consequently, Black women must navigate institutional norms that do not represent or address their intersecting identities. Further, the lack of Black women faculty available in-department to serve as advisors, supervisors and mentors is detrimental to Black agricultural doctoral women’s success. In 2018, Black women represented 3% of full-time faculty nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020) and Harper (2013) asserts that marginalized students must see faculty and administration who share their own demographics. The severe underrepresentation of Black women in a department reinforces the norm and sends the message that they do not belong (Anderson, 2015). Prospective Black women doctoral students have reported the lack of Black women as a deterrent to enrolling in a graduate program at an institution (Croom and Patton Davis, 2012). When Black women do not see themselves as a part of the department and/or institution, they may not go on to pursue graduate degrees. Research indicates the most important relationships doctoral students develop are with their mentors (Felder, 2010) and their advisors (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000). Socialization is essential to establishing a research agenda and identifying a career path, and Black women doctoral students without a formal mentor to assist with socialization are at a disadvantage (Felder, 2010).

Socialization models
Socialization is defined as the process whereby newcomers learn the knowledge, skills, behaviors and values of a specific discipline (Taylor and Antony, 2000; Weidman, 2006). Socialization is one of the leading frameworks in the study of doctoral students (Austin, 2002; Gardner and Mendoza, 2010) and is often discussed as a set of phases or stages. Weidman et al. (2001), Lovitts (2001) and Twale et al. (2016) outlined four developmental stages of socialization:

1. The anticipatory stage, where students become aware of the behaviors, attitudes and expectations of their department and discipline;
2. The formal stage, where students experience mentorship, observe their advisors and other faculty members to learn from them in the classroom and/or laboratory;
3. The informal stage, where students learn from their peers; and
4. The personal stage, where students’ cognitive and behavioral practices reflect those of their discipline.

Gardner’s (2009) doctoral student development model (DSDM) of socialization consists of three phases:

1. Entry, which is described as the time period of admission into a doctoral program until coursework begins;
2. Integration, which is the time period where coursework serves as the main source of social and academic integration for doctoral students’ experience; and
3. Candidacy, where the student has passed comprehensive/preliminary examinations and is engaged in the dissertation process.
Bertrand Jones and colleagues (Bertrand Jones and Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Davis-Maye et al., 2013) have posited that socialization includes three components:

1. academic preparation;
2. mentoring; and
3. professional development.

Doctoral students take courses that lay the foundation for dissertation research and exploration of a research agenda. Mentoring is a relationship in which a more experienced person guides a less experienced person. Mentoring relationships for doctoral student socialization can be between faculty and students, between students and can be formal or informal. Professional development includes formal and informal opportunities that contribute to professional growth. Sites of socialization for doctoral students include attendance at national conferences, working with advisors on publications, internships, the classroom, networking with faculty in and outside of the department and other graduate students.

Scholars have criticized research around socialization due to its monolithic approach to graduate education, failing to address individual, disciplinary or institutional differences (Antony, 2002; Gardner, 2008). For example, Johnson and Strayhorn (2022) noted that developmental relationships with faculty, staff and peers are instrumental in the socialization process. Further, these relationships contribute to how doctoral students learn about the norms and values of their discipline. However, socialization studies are often conducted across disciplines but fail to center the way marginalized identities and their corresponding oppressions (e.g. race and racism) shape minoritized doctoral students socialization experiences (Johnson and Strayhorn, 2022).

Azizova and Felder (2017) used socialization as a theoretical approach to examine racial/ethnic aspects of doctoral socialization and the decision-making processes related to academic success and degree completion in engineering and agricultural sciences. In problematizing and critiquing socialization, they developed four assumptions of doctoral socialization:

1. Socialization is a crucial process in doctoral education;
2. Socialization is a meaning making process which may involve racial/ethnic perspectives essential to the ability to engage in the doctoral process;
3. Socialization is shaped by pre-existing culture and value systems; and
4. Socialization is shaped by structural and historical contexts within culture and value systems.

A critical analysis of the social interactions recognizes the cultural and historical contexts that shape how doctoral students interact with faculty, students and staff within the department. Interaction with faculty is important during the socialization process (Felder, 2010); however, a cultural incongruity exists between Black women doctoral students and the predominantly white agricultural department.

Socialization is important for all students, especially first-generation (doctoral) students. First-generation students comprised 30% of doctoral degree recipients (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, National Science Foundation [NSF], 2020), and Black doctoral women are often first-generation doctoral students (Gardner and Holley, 2011). First-generation status is linked with imposter syndrome and is worsened by negative
experiences with advisors, doctoral committees and departmental faculty. Black doctoral women find themselves navigating uncharted waters with little to no mentoring, guidance or preparation for the doctoral process, which can negatively affect their time to degree or degree attainment (Khan, 2008). Furthermore, the lack of Black faculty women in higher education, and especially agriculture, leaves Black doctoral women to decode the hidden curriculum on their own. The hidden curriculum consists of the institutional norms, cultural cues or major players and gatekeepers involved in the program, department and institution and is ingrained within the institutional structure of higher education (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Margolis and Romero, 1998). Failure to successfully navigate the hidden curriculum can cause a delay in sitting for comprehensive/preliminary examinations, dissertation writing and graduation. While all Black faculty women do not have the same experiences, they most likely have navigated similar ones and may be able to advise and guide Black doctoral women by making the hidden explicit.

Socialization and agricultural departments
While there is a research concerning graduate student socialization in agricultural disciplines (Hammond and Shoemaker, 2014a, 2014b; Mars, 2016), there is a gap in research concerning racially/ethnically marginalized doctoral students and doctoral students who are marginalized in multiple ways. However, researchers have generally found that marginalized students in the agricultural programs struggle to connect with faculty and students, integrate into the classroom and navigate the overrepresentation of whiteness in the discipline (Anderson, 2006; Holmes, 2015; Jordan, 2011; Talbert et al., 1999). For example, Martin and Wesolowski (2018) found that interactions students have within an agricultural department have a strong influence on their decisions and willingness to be involved in activities beyond the classroom. Many connections with other students, faculty and potential employers happen outside the classroom at informal social activities. Black women often do not attend these social activities to avoid being microaggressed and to avoid other uncomfortable situations (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). For example, Solórzano et al. (2000) found through focus group that Black students felt invisible in the classroom; their contributions were ignored and were microaggressed at campus social events. Consequently, they may miss out on new professional connections and job opportunities.

Campus climate consists of the attitudes, values and behaviors of a campus community regarding the acceptance of social issues (Hurtado et al., 1999; Winkle-Wagner and Locks, 2014) and has been viewed as an indicator of campus culture (Miller, 2014) and marginalized student persistence (Strayhorn, 2012b). Of equal, and quite possibly more importance for doctoral students is departmental climate. Departmental climate plays a role in shaping a doctoral student’s sense of belonging within a department, and subsequently, the discipline. The department plays an important role in the socialization process as it is the primary site of doctoral socialization through courses, lab/fieldwork and faculty-student mentoring/advising relationships (Perez et al., 2019). Departments overtly and covertly send messages regarding their stance on the importance of diversity and inclusion. Perez et al. (2019) found that when faculty created inclusive environments, students felt their department and discipline were a good fit. However, those in departments that did not create inclusive environments and felt their identities were unwelcome were unsure of their place in the academy. Research indicates disparities in access to equitable mentoring and advising for women, racially/ethnically marginalized students and first-generation students (Felder et al., 2014; Gardner and Holley, 2011; McCoy et al., 2015; Turner and Thompson, 1993). Classes within the department are also a site of socialization. In fact, Ellis’ (2001) work on Black and white doctoral students enrolled at HWIs found that classroom climate was more important
students must feel a connection with their educational environment to be successful;
however, they often struggle to connect with peers and faculty. Further, faculty dispositions
and their pedagogical methods can heavily influence Black women’s classroom
participation (Johnson, 2006).

Whiteness can be difficult to define and recognize outside of structural whiteness. Whiteness is
a societal structure that marginalizes Black women and privileges white people (Feagin, 2006). Whiteness is malleable in that it continues to change form over time. While whiteness has material effects on Black women and other people of color, it escapes precise
definition due to its malleable nature (Omi and Winant, 1994). Leonardo (2009) described
whiteness as a racial discourse, whereas white people describe a socially constructed
identity based on skin color and notes, “Whiteness is not a culture but a social concept”
(pp. 169–170). According to Cabrera (2009), there are three main components of whiteness:

1. And unwillingness to name systemic racism;
2. The avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or minoritized group; and
3. Minimizing the US history of racism.

Regarding structural whiteness, Black doctoral women would not be severely
underrepresented unless white students were overrepresented (Cabrera et al., 2017).
Whiteness (structural and discourse) can shape the racial climate of an institution (Gusa,
2010), department and discipline. Unfortunately, the overrepresentation of whiteness is often
not discussed in AgLS research.

Theoretical framework: critical race feminism
The theoretical framework that informed this study was critical race feminism (CRF). CRF is
a body of scholarship evolved from the work of women of color in legal academia who were
excluded by their male peers and white feminist scholars (Evans-Winters and Esposito,
2010; Few et al., 2007; Wing, 2003). Informed by scholarship from critical legal studies,
critical race theory and feminism, CRF is an explanatory tool used to understand how race
and racism work with gender and sexism to play dominant roles in the treatment of Black
women (Collins, 1999; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). CRF scholars challenge the notion that there is
one singular Black female experience and assert that every Black woman has a unique
experience due to the multiple facets of their identity (e.g. race, gender, class) (Crenshaw,
1991). Further, CRF explains that any critique of oppressive structures is inadequate if the
intersectional experiences of the oppressed are not addressed. Wing (2003) introduced
the concept of “multiplicative identity,” which suggests that when multiplied together, the
multiple identities of minoritized women become a “holistic One.” Multiplicative identity
also states that minoritized women not only share a negative experience but also a diverse
positive experience. Delgado (2003) noted, “the world of the woman of color is unique; it is
not a combination of the two worlds of Black men and white women, A plus B equals C”
(p. xiv).

As a sibling theory to critical race theory, CRF shares several theoretical commitments
but differs in the addition of intersectionality to address the experiences of Black women.
The tenets include (Delgado and Stafancic, 2001; Parker and Lynn, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989):

- Racism is normal to US society;
- Interest convergence states the marginalized advance only when their interests
  converge with the interests of those in power;
Experiential knowledge of the marginalized is needed to understand, analyze and teach about racial subordination; Whiteness as property is the premise that the assumptions, privileges and benefits of being white are valuable assets white people seek and protect; Critique of liberalism challenges the concepts of objectivity, meritocracy and colorblindness; and Intersectionality occurs when racism intersects with other subordinated identities (e.g., sexism, classism, homophobia, etc.) to influence the lived experiences of the marginalized.

**Methodology**

Narrative inquiry is the study of descriptive experiences that allow the researcher to capture the whole story and illuminate complex social problems (Clandinin and Connelly, 1987). Critical narrative inquiry seeks to question and understand how narratives intersect with power and how individuals situate themselves (Allen and Hardin, 2001). Connecting narrative inquiry with a critical approach strengthens the ability of the researcher to identify and critique the social and cultural character of personal narratives (Squire, 2008). Moreover, the goal of narrative inquiry is to make sense of participants’ personal experiences in relation to the researcher’s research question(s), which are derived from the researcher’s theoretical framework. The researcher collects the participants’ stories, retells them and becomes the narrator, paying special attention to accuracy and interpretation without “writing over” participants’ stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990). Narrative methods are appropriate for exploring marginalized experiences because narratives on identity are “produced at cultural, institutional, organization, and individual levels of social life” (Loseke, 2007, p. 662). Further, narrative inquiry amplifies the voices and stories of silenced and marginalized groups in more conventional modes of inquiry (Bowman, 2006).

**Research setting and participants**

This study is derived from a larger narrative study conducted to explore the experiences of Black doctoral women in agricultural disciplines at HWIs. The purpose of the present study is to examine how intersecting oppressed identities shape the socialization experiences of Black women doctoral candidates in agricultural disciplines at HWIs. Each participant was enrolled at an 1,862 land-grant university. Five Black women who had passed their comprehensive/preliminary examinations in agricultural disciplines participated in this study. Additionally, participants were full-time, domestic students and self-identified as Black women. I recruited doctoral candidates because they would have more graduate experiences to help develop a richer narrative and have a better understanding of departmental norms and climate. Most participants chose their own pseudonyms, and I chose one for those who did not. I did not provide any specific information regarding the location of the participants’ institutions or their academic disciplines to further protect their anonymity. Table 1 presents profiles for the participants. The variation across the participants’ educational training and generation of college student is noteworthy considering their similar doctoral experiences.

**Data collection**

The primary source of data for this study was interviews. I conducted three, 60–120-min semistructured interviews with each participant. Each interview was audio and video...
recorded on Zoom and transcribed via third party transcription service. After interview transcription, I checked for accuracy and then sent the transcripts to the participant to check for accuracy. The interview protocol development was guided by Gardner’s (2009) DSDM. The DSDM is a socialization model that presents doctoral student development in a series of three phases (i.e. Entry, Integration and Candidacy) of challenges and supports. The first interview was designed to build rapport with the participant, learn background information about the participant and learn about their experiences during Phase 1, Entry. The first interview included questions about their transition into their program, beginning coursework and initial relationships with faculty, peers and advisors. The purpose of the second interview was to learn about participants’ experiences of Phase 2, Integration. The second interview included questions about their integration into the doctoral program, coursework and departmental climate. The third interview focused on Phase 3, candidacy, and included questions about their comprehensive/preliminary exam experience, their proposal defense experience, dissertation writing, professional development and being on the job market (if applicable).

Data analysis
To begin analysis, I organized and printed interview data for manual coding. I conducted two cycles of coding. For the first cycle of coding, I used initial, simultaneous and narrative coding. Simultaneous coding allowed me to assign multiple codes to content that may have more than one meaning (Saldaña, 2013). Narrative coding allowed me to explore intra- and inter-personal participant experiences to understand their storied experiences. For the second cycle of coding, I used focused coding to organize data around the most salient categories (Saldaña, 2013). The categories and themes for each narrative were reviewed and compared to other narratives to create a conarration of meanings, themes and descriptions with the participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four criteria for trustworthiness:

1. credibility;
2. confirmability;
3. transferability; and
4. dependability.

To ensure credibility, I used member checking, which involves the researcher sharing information from the study with the participant, who verifies the information for accuracy (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I also sent my participants their transcripts to read and check for accuracy. I used an audit trail to establish confirmability, which involved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>BS</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Year in program</th>
<th>Generation of college student</th>
<th>Generation of doctoral student</th>
<th>Race/gender of advisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nahla</td>
<td>HWI, HBCU&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Black woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebony</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>White man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errica</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>White man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayei</td>
<td>MSI</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Black man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>White woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Nahla started her bachelor’s degree at an HWI and transferred to an HBCU

Source: Created by author
tracking my interpretations back to the raw data and other evidence gathered during data collection. Data and other evidence used for the audit trail included analytic memos, field notes, thematic analysis and member checking (Creswell, 2007). Thick, rich descriptions from the use of three interviews per participant about their experiences will enable other researchers to apply second decision span generalizing (Kennedy, 1979), which places the responsibility of transferability on the researcher attempting to transfer the findings, instead of on the original researcher. Dependability was established through use of an audit trail, which involves diligent maintenance of well-organized written and electronic notes outlining my reasoning for execution during all phases of the study. I used peer reviews to enhance dependability.

Situating myself in the study
As a Black woman scholar, I bring with me my past experiences of growing up in a diverse city; having many Black women teachers/instructors in K-20, undergraduate and graduate education; attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU); and attending an HWI for my doctoral program. I also acknowledge the privilege I have experienced in having a positive relationship with my doctoral advisor; having mentors to help me through the process; and working in a student-driven, majority-minority research group. However, I also recognize the challenges I have experienced, like my participants, that were rooted in white supremacy. Understanding our shared but different experiences forced me to make careful decisions regarding the research process including building rapport with participants, how I analyzed and interpreted the data and how I presented this research to the public. Consequently, I continue to interrogate my own research decisions regarding theory, methods and analysis to make sure I am not (re)producing oppression in my research.

Findings
Three main themes were found during analysis. Each theme is presented according to its site of socialization: advisor-advisee relationships, the agricultural department and agricultural research and professional development conferences. The themes are as follows:

- Lack of trust in advising relationships;
- Departmental belonging and negative interactions with department faculty; and
- Isolation and exclusion at conferences.

Overall, socialization activities consisted of participating in advising relationships; interacting with departmental faculty; and attending conferences for professional development, and to network and present research. Additionally, the bulk of the participants’ socialization experiences occurred in their home departments.

Theme 1: lack of trust in advising relationships
A doctoral student’s advisor may be a mentor, but not all advisors are mentors. For an advisor to be a student’s mentor, a level of trust must be gained, established and maintained between the mentor and the mentee. Establishing trust in cross-race mentorships has been reported as a major issue (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2004). According to Smith (2010), the largest gap in cross-racial trust is between Black and white people. Trust is a vital component in any successful mentoring relationship (Chan et al., 2015; Rademaker et al., 2016). Three of five participants indicated that their advisor was not their mentor. Interestingly, all three of these participants were engaged in cross-race advising
relationships and cited lack of trust as a major reason why their advisor was not their mentor. Errica explained:

When it comes time for me to start applying for jobs [. . .] he will be very helpful in that process. But, one of the things on my mind has been: if I go into academia and become a faculty member, how willing am I to join a department’s faculty and be the only Black faculty? That’s something I would share with a mentor. Not that I couldn’t share that with him, but I don’t want to. What insight can he give me?

One year prior to our interview, Errica’s advisor divulged sensitive personal information to another faculty member in the department. At the time of our interview, Errica had moved past the events that caused her mistrust and sees her advisor as a source of support. However, she mentioned that she still thinks about it often. Similarly, Ebony found out that her advisor had been discussing information from their advising meetings with other faculty. Faculty would see her in the hallway and ask her about something she knew she only discussed with her advisor. In another incident that violated her trust, Ebony found out at a conference that her advisor was presenting research she completed. She explained:

He would ask me to complete assignments and projects, but I then I would hear nothing about it. What really upset me was I went to a conference with him where I was presenting a study related to my dissertation research. When I got there, he had submitted [my] research to the conference [. . .] but didn’t tell me. He put my name on the presentation, but I knew nothing about it. So, he’s doing this whole thing with stuff I taught him, with information I’ve written up and given to him for review. Profiting from my labor without giving me credit.

Karla’s advisor was a junior, tenure-track faculty and is not considered her mentor. Karla described being ignored by her advisor and other departmental faculty at a conference (which will be described in a later section), and it took a long time for their advising relationship to recover.

Jayei and Nahla both consider their advisor to be their mentor, and both are advised by Black faculty. Nahla mentioned feeling understood and trusting her advisor to guide her through the doctoral process. Similarly, when asked about her relationship with her advisor, Jayei stated “I felt protected from white power, privilege, and position. I felt supported. I finally felt understood on this campus [. . .] I felt respected.” Jayei also mentioned that her advisor empowers her through opportunities to collaboratively write papers and op-eds, curriculum vitae review and other forms of career support.

Theme 2: departmental belonging and negative interactions with department faculty

The department is often the main source of socialization for doctoral students. Interactions with faculty, staff, department heads and other students shape how a doctoral student experiences socialization within the department. I asked my participants about their level of feeling included and/or excluded in their departments, as well as how it feels to be a Black woman in their departments. Three of five of my participants reported that they do not feel like a part of their department. This theme is presented in two subthemes: Departmental Belonging and Negative Interactions with Department Faculty.

Subtheme 1: departmental belonging. Karla indicated that she has never felt like part of her department and has had to find psychosocial support from peers and faculty in outside departments and institutions. Specifically, she said, “I feel like I’m more included in my roommate’s department than my own [. . .] I feel like I’m on an island. [College City] is a very lonely place for me.” Additionally, Karla thought the level of support would be similar to what she received at her master’s institution. She elaborated:
I thought I was gonna have that same support here, but it’s very telling that it’s not [...] I’ve experienced a lot of microaggressions in my department, which is new to me. This was my third PWI [Predominantly White Institution], and I didn’t think it was gonna be a different experience. I knew I would be one of the few, or the only one. But I had been so supported [before] [...] and I thought they would want me to succeed [here] but it almost feels like I’ve been set up for failure.

Jayei stated that she does not feel “seen or heard” in her department. In fact, she mentioned feeling “unknown” by others in her department. Relatedly, Ebony said she never felt included in her department and felt like she was “alone in a crowd” when navigating her department. Further, Ebony felt that being a Black woman in her department was like “walking on eggshells.” She also expressed that she wished she had either never attended her doctoral institution, transferred to another institution or changed advisors. She felt pressured to simultaneously be a positive representation for Black people, correct misconceptions white people have about Black people and protect Black students and Black culture. She expressed:

It’s like walking on eggshells [in the department]. You have to speak but you have to be careful with how you say what you say because you don’t want Becky [white women] to get upset about what you said. It’s also mothering because when I see younger Black women coming into the department, making sure they don’t step into the same traps I stepped in. And when I see a young Black man coming into the department, making sure they’re not perceived as any Black male stereotypes [...] making sure if they struggle, white folks don’t see it. It’s minimizing yourself. Trying to make yourself look smaller when you go into the room.

Conversely, for Errica and Nahla, the department has been a place where they have found a sense of belonging. Errica indicated that she “frequently feels like a part of it [the department],” but through her own intentional efforts. Errica participated in departmental activities, volunteered to help host prospective graduate students and served on the department’s graduate committee. She also mentioned not feeling lonely because of the other doctoral students who were women of color. Nahla felt that faculty in her department were “open” and mostly available to help students and indicated that she felt like a part of her department. However, the racial/ethnic makeup of her department was very diverse, which most likely played a role in her departmental belonging. She described the demographic makeup and interactions in her department:

In my department, white numbers are lower. There are a lot of different ethnicities on campus, and I talk to everybody [...] There are a lot of Chinese [people] and people from Brazil in my department [...] [the department] does a lot of things for us to interact with each other. I get to talk to more people, and it helped [me] to get to know [departmental] things and understand [departmental norms]. We’re required to go to these events, and we get to see a lot of things [defenses, presentations] and how they go before we actually do ours.

Subtheme 2: negative interactions with department faculty. Faculty have the potential make students feel welcome and included, serve as a mentor, serve on dissertation committees and be a role model for students within a department. As such, I asked participants specifically about their interactions with faculty in their departments. Jayei, Ebony and Karla spoke specifically about their interactions with white faculty women in their departments. Black women have historically had a complicated relationship with white women. White women have been described as women of color’s “greatest barrier to success” (Kendall, 2012, pg. 17). In times when white women have been in positions to be allies and advocates to Black women, they may choose whiteness and/or to stay silent (Chamblee, 2012). Both options uphold, protect and perpetuate white supremacy (Castagno, 2008).
Jayei indicated that white women in her department were aggressive toward her and dismissive of her. She stated, “I try to stay under the radar. They’ll make life a living hell for you by invoking their power and privilege.” She indicated having very surface-level relationships with other faculty (e.g. “hi and bye”). Further, she felt that:

They [white women faculty] don’t really want a relationship. They’re phony at functions. I find them to be very aggressive. I find them to be very dismissive of Black women. I really have to get to know them before I trust them. I’ve had encounters where there was a power struggle, but of course I don’t back down. I stand my ground. They feel no respect […] They thought they knew more […] and I’ve had encounters where they didn’t want to be bothered […] [did] not want to get friendly.

Like Jayei, Ebony discussed trying to avoid conflict with white women. In an attempt not to upset white women faculty in her department, she minimized herself to seem “non-threatening.”

Karla mentioned that most of the faculty in her department are white women, and that they tend to exude a sense of superiority and privilege. Here, she recalls a conversation she had with her advisor:

My PI [advisor] asked me what I thought about the AAAE conference. And I told her “Well, you know, I dealt with a lot of microaggressions while there.” And she asked if I wanted to talk about it. And I was like, “A lot of it came from this department.” I told her some of the instances and told her, “You were one of those people.” It was uncomfortable initially. She cried and apologized.

Karla later expressed that she was disappointed because “in an academic environment, you should never feel like that with your professors.”

Errica indicated that while she did not have any issues with white women faculty in her department, she did not necessarily trust them. However, she did describe an incident where she was microaggressed by an Asian woman faculty in her department:

There’s an Asian faculty in our department who […] she was raised by white people and identifies with white farming culture. She has many times made comments about Black girls’ hair. Like what is it with you and making comments about hair; I don’t understand. It was raining one day, and a student was wearing a wig and did not have an umbrella. She said to the student, “You don’t even have to worry about not having an umbrella; you got your wig on.” It just happened way to frequently. She also tries to mimic African American vernacular when speaking to us. I had my hair straightened and wrapped one day. I had on a [head] scarf, with a hat over it. She asked me, “Are you protecting your hair or something?” Beyond the hair […] what’s more problematic to me is trying to mimic: “Hey girl.” It’s annoying.

The “model minority” narrative has been used as a tool of white supremacy to reinforce stereotypes of Asian and Asian Americans (Museus and Kiang, 2009) and disparage Black Americans (Johnson, 2007) within society. Despite the monolithic model minority myth and false mask of honorary whiteness, Asian/Asian Americans are not free from racial oppression (Lueck, 2017; Tuan, 1998).

Theme 3: Isolation and exclusion at conferences
Academic and professional development conferences are another site of socialization. Students are able to interact with faculty outside of the classroom environment, are able to engage in scholarly conversations with others in the field and network with other students.

The three conferences most frequented by most of the participants were the Minorities in Agriculture Natural Resources and Related Scientists (MANRRS) conference, the Regional American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) and the North American Colleges
and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA) conference. Unsurprisingly, of the three conferences, the MANRRS conference was reflected upon most favorably. Participants also enjoyed attending the NACTA conference, citing constructive feedback on research, affirmation of research and acceptance of contemporary research as reasons why. What I did not expect were the participants’ reflections on attending the Regional AAAE conferences. The participants were not all located in the same regions but had similar experiences. Each participant who attended Regional AAAE conferences felt they could not be themselves at the conference, and felt they were simultaneously being ignored and surveilled.

Ebony was microaggressed and ignored at her first Regional AAAE conference and did not have any meaningful interactions with faculty. Ebony described her experience:

At the [Regional] conference, myself and two other Black women were the only Black people there [...] It was as if the people at the conference didn’t know how to interact with us, so they just didn’t. Then at the session on diversity and inclusion, on the very last day when most of the people are gone, they proceeded to argue about what is best for Black students and other students of color [...] At the same conference, this [white] lady walks up to me. I had faux locs in at the time. She walks up to me, picks up my hair, and goes, “Oh my god; it’s so clean!”

Karla was ignored by faculty from her department, as well as other conference goers at her Regional AAAE. She recalled:

We [she and her department] went to the [Regional] AAAE conference. I would speak to people in my department, and they wouldn’t speak back to me. I thought maybe they didn’t hear me. And I’d say something again and people would stare at me like they were contemplating if they wanted to speak to me. There was [another] instance when they paid for our drinks [at] a brewery. I don’t really drink beer, but I decided to go be social. So, I went. I was at the bar with one of the master’s students; there was a professor [who] was a student in the department when I got there [and] now she’s faculty and the department head. They were talking to one another but staring at me the whole time and it was very uncomfortable. It was unacceptable.

Errica saw the lack of racial/ethnic representation at AAAE as continued lip service regarding increased DEI efforts with no actual action. To her point, Ebony mentioned, “I don’t think other Black ag faculty go because they know they’re not wanted.” Errica reflected on her Regional AAAE experiences:

I think it’s more of the traditional agriculture [...] You have these people who are in the literature at the conference, but they’re old. They’re old and white; they’ve been doing this since the ’80s and ’90s [...] You will have a little bit of mixing of inclusion and diversity, but I think it’s only because [of] the buzz, and USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] has determined you have to establish initiatives to increase diversity and inclusion in agriculture [...] But I think there is no real kind of action. I don’t know what the actions are to diversify and be inclusive because the environment doesn’t feel very inclusive [...] Dr. [Black Agriculture Professor’s name showed up several times on the program. They [Black agriculture faculty] don’t go to AAAE ‘cause it’s like, why? They will mention HBCUs occasionally, rarely [...] It’s a good representation of trying to have diversity but not being inclusive.

Discussion/recommendations
The purpose of this study was to examine how intersecting oppressed identities shape the socialization experiences of Black women doctoral candidates in agricultural disciplines at HWIs. Participants received the majority of their socialization experiences with their advisors, in their departments and at conferences. Further, study participants encountered similar experiences at each site of socialization based on their identities as Black women.
Reading the participants’ stories can help departments and disciplines analyze, challenge and expose inequitable treatment of Black doctoral women.

Gardner (2009) found advisors to be a critical factor in doctoral students’ success during all points of their program. Further, research indicates the most important relationships doctoral students develop are with their mentors (Felder, 2010) and their advisors (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2000). Advisors can help mitigate challenges for Black women doctoral students by sharing information about graduate school, the academic discipline and the department (Barnes and Austin, 2009). Unfortunately, some participants in my study reported trust issues in their advising relationships, which impeded the progression of the mentoring relationship. My findings align with those from Brown (2016), who found that strong relationships with faculty were key in providing academic support within a discipline, as well as socialization into a department and discipline. Due to the lack of Black women faculty, Black women doctoral students will most likely be engaged in cross-race advising relationships at HWIs. Faculty advisors must make a deliberate effort to learn how to provide culturally competent advising and mentoring. Research has shown advisors and mentors can help to decrease feelings of marginalization and isolation, and negate the effects of negative climate, thus increasing sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012b). Advisors are supposed to help guide their students, serve as role models and make the unspoken rules explicit. If these advisors were able to transition from solely advisors to the mentor role, they may have been able to help mitigate their advisees’ feelings of isolation. It is imperative that advisors work to enhance their understanding and practice of culturally relevant advising and mentoring to help cultivate a positive departmental climate.

Most of the participants’ departmental experiences indicated a poor departmental climate for Black women. Further, findings from this study indicate that practices that are considered the norm of the department shape departmental climate and students’ sense of belonging. Scholarship from Anderson (2006) and Jordan (2011) both indicate that Black students must feel a connection with their educational environment to be successful. Most participants indicated not feeling like a part of the departmental environment. Gardner (2009) asserts that navigating isolation is one of the biggest challenges for doctoral students. Consequently, Black women may experience isolation on many levels: structural isolation as the only Black person or Black woman in a department, isolation from difficulty in finding community outside of the department/university, isolation in conducting independent research and possible isolation due to their research topic focusing on diversity and inclusion. Interactions and relationships with faculty play an important role in the socialization process. Jayei stated that faculty in her department “barely speak to us” and that her relationship with faculty was very surface level. Departments must reevaluate their norms to better understand the doctoral student’s experience in their department. A CRF analysis of the department will force faculty to analyze race and gender and the role they play in (re)producing oppression and shaping socialization. Instead of using their power and privilege to subordinate students, faculty should be using their power and privilege to help enhance students’ experiences.

Nahla felt departmental belonging due to the inclusive practices of her department. Nahla’s department held departmental seminars that graduate students were required to attend. Further, graduate students were required to attend each other’s defenses, which helped build community and serve as an example for those yet to defend. This practice enhanced sense of belonging and improved perceived departmental climate. Research suggests that marginalized students who are minoritized within a department struggle to make connections with others in the department (Gardner, 2008). Moreover, Black students in agricultural disciplines have reported struggling to find peers, faculty and programs they
feel a connection with (Anderson, 2006; Jordan, 2011). Nahla’s department was also very
diverse, with white students and faculty in the minority. The combination of structural
diversity, an advisor with similar cultural characteristics, an advisor she considered a
mentor and inclusive departmental practices have helped to cultivate a positive perceived
departmental climate and enhanced sense of belonging.

Conferences are sites of socialization where students can interact with other faculty, receive
feedback on research and network with other doctoral scholars. Conferences are also sites
where students are socialized into the norms of the discipline regarding disciplinary practices,
research and rules of engagement. Considering most of my participants had poor relationships
with their advisors, their advisors most likely did not help integrate them into the conference
environment. One indication of this is how many of my participants described spending time
isolated and alone during the Regional AAAE conferences. It is not surprising that my
participants had positive experiences at the MANRRS conference; however, the NACTA
conference—which does not cater to marginalized populations—also received positive remarks.
Participants cited a younger population of conference-goers and an acceptance of DEI research
and contemporary research topics and methods as reasons why they had more positive feelings
toward NACTA. Socialization to research practices and meaningful scholarly engagement can
and do happen at conferences. How does socialization at conferences occur if senior scholars
and prospective colleagues ignore and marginalize up-and-coming researchers?

The normalization of whiteness in the department and at conferences diminished participants’
sense of belonging. Harper and Hurtado (2007) assert that a student’s sense of belonging in an
environment is a direct indicator of how inclusive or exclusionary the environment’s racial climate
is. Moreover, “The more exclusionary for students of Color, the more that whiteness is the climate
norm (Harper and Hurtado, 2007). The more that whiteness is the norm, the lower the sense of
belonging (Gusa, 2010)” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 68). The sense of superiority and the privilege to
ignore and exclude shows how whiteness is the norm and at work in the participants’ academic
and conference spaces. This aligns with work from Cabrera et al. (2017) and Gusa (2010), who
concluded that white privilege allows white people to distance themselves from non-white people
and are allowed to continue to be discriminatory and microaggressive toward Black women. The
overrepresentation of whiteness in a space can relay the message to Black women that the space
is exclusive to white people and serves as a deterrent to participation in the discipline and at
conferences. This exclusivity also signals that agriculture is “property” of whiteness and Black
women and other minoritized students can be excluded without consequence. White scholars
must work to dismantle white supremacy within their institutions and organizations. Failing to
address racism and exclusionary practices will lead to Black women’s (and other people of color’s)
attrition from the discipline. Two of the Black women in this study already indicated decreased
attendance at the AAAE conference, Errica pursued an alt-ac career outside of agriculture
postgraduation and Karla pursued a corporate career outside of agriculture postgraduation.
Effective cultural competency training will help white people in colleges of agriculture to think
critically about what it means to be white, the privileges associated with being white and how the
culture of whiteness can shape the experiences for marginalized groups in the college.

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Further reading


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