NOTHING LEFT UNFINISHED: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY ON THE

PERSISTENCE OF BLACK WOMEN IN DISTANCE EDUCATION DOCTORAL

PROGRAMS

by

Sherrita Yolande Rogers

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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**ABSTRACT**

Black women are earning doctoral degrees in the field of education at a rate higher than any other demographic group; however, their overall degree obtainment is increasing at a slower rate than other minority groups. In addition, median degree completion rates in the field of education are higher than any other measured field of study. At the same time, enrollment in distance education doctoral programs is increasing at exponential rates, while doctoral attrition rates continue to hover around 50%. There is a significant amount of research examining persistence for both distance education doctoral programs and Black women; however, there is a gap in the literature regarding the doctoral persistence of Black women enrolled in distance education programs. The purpose of this study was to give voice to the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs, in the field of education. This research study utilized critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and Tinto's (1975, 1993, & 2012) theory of student integration as theoretical frameworks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, letters, and life timelines. Qualitative analysis indicated that Black women in distance education doctoral programs attributed the personal factors of grit, serving as a role model, and status, as well as social factors of mentoring and peer, family, and social group relationships, as important to their persistence experiences. Data analysis further indicated that institutional factors such as faculty support, program structure, university commitment to diversity, and perceived racial anonymity in distance education environments, all contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs.

*Keywords*: doctoral student persistence, Black women, attrition, distance education, online doctoral programs

**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to Black women everywhere.  To those who came before me and

paved the way, to those who walk alongside me as we journey on, and to those who will come

after me and carry the torch further.  The world will not always see or appreciate your light and

contributions, nevertheless, just like the women of this study, you can persist.  Continue to be the

light and the change you want to see in the world.

**Don't Quit**

by
John Greenleaf Whittier

When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all up hill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is strange with its twists and turns,
As everyone of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When [s]he might have won had [s]he stuck it out;
Don't give up though the pace seems slow--
You may succeed with another blow.

Success is failure turned inside out--
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are.
It may be near when it seems so far.
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit--
It's when things seem worst that you must not quit

## Acknowledgments

I give thanks and praise to my heavenly Father who is a constant source of strength and support in my life.  After completing this process, I am even more confident that He who began a good work in me, will carry it on to completion. . . (Philippians 1:6)

I acknowledge my husband and partner in life, love, and ministry, Andrew.  Thank you for your support and sacrifices, both seen and unseen, throughout this process.

To my three gifts from above, Simone, Caleb, and Aaron:  thank you for supporting me, believing in me, and sharing my time and attention with this body of work.  I look forward to having you call me "Dr. Mommy."

To Dr. Cindi Spaulding, my dissertation committee chair: you believed in me and validated my research interests from the first day we met.  I am so grateful for your support and expertise in this process.  I literally could not have completed this without you!  I had to persist to the program at LU so that God's divine plan of connecting us would come into fruition.  I appreciate you more than I could ever express.  I am also humbled by the dedication and contributions of my committee members, Dr. Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw and Dr. Elizabeth Ricks.  Thank you for offering your time, support, and expertise to my study.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my "sister tribe", including my mother, grandmother, aunts, sisters, friends, spiritual mentors, and the women of Michigan Park Christian Church. This work would not be possible without your support, prayers, and guidance.  I am eternally grateful.  *Ubuntu~* (I am who I am because of who we all are).

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## List of Abbreviations

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Distance Education (DE)

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Historically Black College and University (HBCU)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Questioning (LGBTQ)

Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

**Overview**

For decades, Black women have attempted to pursue their educational goals despite having to overcome institutional racism and the aftermath of a history of enslavement and indoctrination of inferior beliefs about their ability to be successful (Collins, 2001; Woodson, 2010).  Historically marginalized groups such as women and Black people have trailed behind majority and some minority groups when it comes to the attainment of the doctoral degree, the pinnacle of educational obtainment (Ryu, 2010).  The National Science Foundation (2017) reported that from 2005 to 2015, the proportion of doctorates earned by Black people rose from 6.2% to 6.5%, while the proportion of doctorate degrees awarded to Hispanics or Latinos grew from 5.1% to 7.0% (National Science Foundation, 2017).  Moreover, in 2014, of the 54,070 doctorate degrees earned, 24,857 (46%) were awarded to women and of that 24,857, only 1,501 (2.7%) were awarded to women who identified as Black/African American.  This number represented the smallest number of any other minority group captured.  Furthermore, Okahana, Feaster, and Allum (2016) reported that in the year 2015 women earned almost 52% of all doctorate degrees; however, only 11% of those awarded degrees were for individuals who identify as Black/African American.

When field of doctoral study is considered, the National Science Foundation (2018) reported that for women, the field of education has seen an 86% enrollment increase over the last 10 years.  In addition, Black women continue to be the largest minority group of awarded doctorates in the field of education, at a rate of 15%; however; the proportion of doctorates earned by Black students is still lower than other minority groups (National Science Foundation, 2017).  With that, the time to degree completion in the field of education remains one of the

highest (11.7 years for education versus 6.7-9.2 years in other fields; National Science Foundation, 2014).  This information, along with data from the distance education enrollment studies that indicates enrollment in online courses has steadily increased, yet the attrition rates for online programs, particularly doctoral programs, continues to hover around 30 to 70% (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Jones, 2013) provided the impetus for the current study.

This research study explored the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs in the field of education.  Distance education is an educational program in which instruction takes place at a distance, utilizes technology, and does not typically require face-to-face meetings (Hawkins, 2012).  Distance education has various subtypes; however, for the purposes of this research, distance education programs were divided into two categories: exclusively distance education and some, but not all distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2017).  Exclusive distance education is defined as a course of study where all courses are taken via distance education, while some, but not all distance education indicates that students were enrolled in some distance education courses, but other modalities such as required residencies, were also utilized by their program (Allen & Seaman, 2017).  The distance education doctoral programs of this study were also differentiated by whether they utilized a cohort versus a non-cohort model.  A cohort model is a model in which students go through a program of study together, proceed together through experiences in the context of the program, and graduate at approximately the same time from the program (Bista & Cox, 2014, p. 4).

## Background

Despite the historic denial of education to Black people in the United States, coupled with the historic view of Black women as the caregivers and burden bearers of their families, many Black women have been able to successfully persist to completion of a doctoral degree.

To understand the persistence journey of Black women, it is first important to understand the history of Black women and the role of education in their lives, particularly in the United States.

**History of Education of Black Women**

In the United States, prior to the Civil War, it was illegal for Black people to receive an education and those who wished to be become literate had to do so in secret (Collins, 2001, p. 31). After the Civil War, many Black women were taught by missionaries, who taught Black people according to their standards and socialization practices. These religious groups focused on Black women because they believed Black women could be the change agents of their race in a postslavery America (Collins, 2001, p.33). However, particularly in southern states, traditional schools were still segregated and Black women were not allowed to enroll in the predominantly White institutions that granted professional degrees (Rogers, 2006). In response to this, Black women's colleges, which were later known as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). In addition to increased enrollment in Black women colleges, the years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, college enrollment of Black woman continued to increase (Felder, 2015). These two pieces of legislation ended separate but equal schools and outlawed segregation of public facilities and institutions, such as colleges and universities. After this time, Black women were finally allowed access to doctorate granting institutions where they were previously denied access. Consequently, the number of bachelor and graduate degrees awarded to Blacks increased (Collins, 2001).

Within these new educational environments and as Black women's educational experiences expanded, they experienced what W.E.B. DuBois, a Black scholar, coined as double consciousness. In his seminal work first published in 1903, *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois is

quoted as saying:

>It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness . . . two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keep it from being torn asunder. (p. 5)

In other words, double consciousness refers to the inverse effect of knowing the value and importance of self, while living in a society that constantly minimizes your worth and importance (Cannon & Morton, 2015). As Black women continued to pursue their education, they endured curricular challenges, peer support difficulties, lack of role models, and difficulties with the culture of acceptance in academia (Collins, 2001). In some environments, particularly predominantly White institutions (PWIs), Black women equated their success to a double-edged sword (Shavers & Moore, 2014). The double-edged sword concept meant that as the women achieved academic success, they often experienced this success at the expense of their overall well-being, in part due to the racial climate of their PWI (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 23). Some of these factors were mitigated if Black women chose to attend a HBCU (Rogers, 2006). Despite these difficulties, Black women continued to pursue higher education.

**Social Significance of Black Educational Persistence**

The social aspects of learning and overall social support has always been an important part of educational experiences of students of color (Twale, Weidman & Bethea, 2016). When Black slaves were emancipated in the United States, it was the women who were chosen to be educated and socialized. This was done because those teaching in the schools, often White missionaries, believed that Black women could "save" and "uplift" their community (Collins,

2001, p.32).  The schools established for Black women after slavery were at times referred to as grooming schools and focused on social and cultural refinement.  These schools would eventually turn into historically Black colleges for women, such as Spelman College and Bennett College, who would nurture Black women while educating them and produce some of the most successful Black women professionals (Collins, 2001, p. 32).  These environments provided social and cultural support for Black women to pursue their educational goals.

Throughout the literature, social support is associated with educational persistence for Black women attending residential doctoral programs.  In particular, having a supportive community of other Black women doctoral students is important for the educational persistence of Black women doctoral students (Acosta et al., 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014).  Moreover, supportive and accepting relationships with faculty mentors is also important to doctoral persistence (Acosta et al., 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014).  While research has demonstrated that support is vital to women's doctoral persistence in residential programs, no studies have addressed the factors that lead to persistence in distance education doctoral programs.  Distance education programs by their nature often have limited social components, compared to those found in a traditional degree program (Radda & Mandernach, 2012).  In part, due to this limited social component of distance education doctoral programs and the heavy reliance on the social component for Black women doctoral students in previous research, this research study aimed to explore the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs.

**Theoretical Significance of Black Educational Persistence**

Theories of doctoral persistence explore the factors that contribute to the persistence of doctoral students.  Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) theory of student integration posits that it is the combination of social and academics that influence student integration and ultimately,

persistence. These factors include peer and faculty interactions, as well as actual and perceived academic competencies (Tinto, 1993, p. 236). Along with social and academic integration, Tinto's theory includes the tenets of goal commitment and membership in external communities as factors of persistence.

In addition to Tinto's theory and to build upon the specific gender and racial contexts of this study, critical race theory of education by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) was explored. Critical race theory of education examines how institutional racism and the culture it breeds influences the educational success of Black students. The basic premise of critical race theory of education is that racism continues to permeate through institutions of education and directly impacts the educational experiences of Black students (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

**Situation to Self**

I became interested in the doctoral persistence of Black women, particularly those in distance education doctoral programs, for several reasons. In the spring of 2016, I completed two interviews with women who were both Black as a class assignment in my doctoral program. As I transcribed these interviews, I noticed similarities between the experiences of the two women. Both women discussed the loneliness they experienced throughout their doctoral journeys and the emotions involved in the process of obtaining a doctorate degree. The women also shared that they were motivated by serving as a role model for future generations and for other Black women to see that earning a doctorate degree was possible. Lastly, both women shared their experiences with racism and finding their place as Black women within the culture of their institutions. To help negate the difficulties in these areas, they both started support

groups with other Black doctoral students. These groups served to negate the social and academic pressures of the process.

After looking at these women's experiences, I examined my own experiences as a Black woman doctoral student. Throughout my doctoral journey, I left two different programs prior to persisting to candidacy in my third doctoral program. There were several reasons why I left my previous programs; however, many of them stemmed from difficulties with balancing school, work, and family, lack of program funding, and family obligations that caused me to have to relocate in an area away from my residential program. In addition, I experienced the cultural differences of attending both a predominantly White university as a Black woman and a historically Black university. Through these experiences, I can reflect on the reasons for my attrition and the eventual experiences that led to my persistence. I realized that there were aspects of a distance education program that assisted me in persisting to the point of candidacy. Also, because I have persisted over eight years in three different programs as a Black woman, I was able to understand and relate to other Black women who chose to persist against the odds and obtain their doctorate degree. I believe that their stories must be given voice to encourage other Black doctoral students along their journey and to support their own healing on what can sometimes be an emotional experience, even postgraduation.

Moreover, by having the participants share their various experiences, this study gave voice to the ontological idea of multiple realities. Each research participant had her own reality that impacts how she experienced the pursuit of the doctoral degree and this was woven into the results of the study. Although I hold a postpositive view on research and believe in following logical steps in conducting research and gathering various methods of data from participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 24), I also utilized critical race theory to give voice to Black women whose

voices have traditionally been marginalized and to give light to their experiences. Lastly, the philosophical assumptions I hold as a researcher informed my methodological decisions as I sought to construct knowledge via the lens and words of the participants. While I attempted to become as close to the participants as possible to gather the reality of the participants' experiences, I also utilized bracketing to ensure that the voice of the participants was heard above my own. In addition, direct quotes from the participants were utilized to continue to share the voice of the participants.

**Problem Statement**

In the year 2014, there were 24,857 doctorate degrees conferred to women candidates in the United States (National Science Foundation, 2014). Of this number, approximately 6% (1,501) were awarded to women candidates who identify as Black. This number represents the highest rate in history for Black women doctoral degree conferments. While Black women are earning doctoral degrees at the highest rate in history, their enrollment rates and growth trends continue to be disproportionately lower than that of White women college enrollment (National Science Foundation, 2104: Ryu, 2010). At the same time, the attrition rate for minority women doctoral students in traditional programs hovers near 33% (Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015) and it is known that attrition rates for distance education programs are typically 10 to 20% higher than that of traditional programs (Jones, 2013; Terrell, Snyder, Dringus, & Maddrey, 2012).

The study of attrition and persistence of doctoral students is understood by the term doctoral persistence, generally defined as continued progress towards completion of a doctoral degree (Bair,1999). Doctoral persistence has been studied from various perspectives, including persistence in specific programs like educational leadership and school psychology (Proctor & Truscott, 2012; Stallone, 2011), as well as program type such as part-time programs,

asynchronous, or limited residency programs (Duckett, 2014; Hart, 2012; Spaulding &

Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).  Moreover, the factors that influence doctoral persistence have been

found to vary based on not only program format, but racial and economic group identification

(Lundy-Wagner, Vultaggio, & Gasman, 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2014; Rogers, 2006).

Despite these findings, there is currently a gap in the literature giving voice to the lived

experiences of Black women who enrolled and persisted in obtaining doctorate degrees in the

education field through distance education doctoral programs.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the

persistence experiences of Black women in distance doctoral programs in the field of education.

For this study, doctoral persistence in a distance education doctoral program is defined as "a

multi-faceted phenomenon that leads to completion of an online program of study" (Hart, 2012,

p. 29).  The theories guiding this study were Tinto's (1975,1993, 2012) theory of student

integration and critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).  These theories

provide a framework for exploring the processes of student integration in educational

environments and for understanding how racial marginalization and systemic racism impacts

Black people in educational environments.

## Significance of the Study

The current study has empirical significance in that the persistence experiences of Black

women enrolled in distance education programs were previously unknown.  What was known is

that for distance education doctoral programs, factors such as relationship with faculty,

relationship with other students, program structure (organization and flexibility), motivation and

time management skills (Ivankova, & Stick, 2007; Terrell, et al., 2012) influenced persistence.

Moreover, previous research indicated that for Black women doctoral students in residential programs, institutional factors such as supportive mentors, sense of belonging/welcoming culture, support of research agenda, and personal factors such as social support, sense of obligation to community and work ethic/motivation (Jones, Wilder, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001) all influence persistence. This study gave voice to Black women and the experiences that led to their persistence in distance education doctoral programs in the field of education.

Theoretically, this research study explored theories of student integration and critical race theory of education. While theories of doctoral student attrition and retention (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012) are present in the literature; there is no theory that looks specifically at Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs. Critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) was also utilized, as it explores institutional racism and utilizes a critical lens to understand the experiences of Black women in educational environments.

Practically, this research study provides information to distance education doctoral programs to help retain and foster persistence in Black women. Distance education doctoral programs may better understand the types of programming and supports that aid Black women to persist to completion of a doctorate degree. The research findings will also assist Black women interested in pursuing a doctoral degree in a distance education program. This group of students may better understand what personal, social, and institutional factors will lead to their successful completion of a distance education doctoral programs. Lastly, if there is a significant increase in the number of Black women completing doctoral programs, there will presumably be a larger pool of Black candidates for faculty positions in academia. This increased pool will not only provide a more diverse culture in academia, but it will assist in providing a more conducive

academic environment for Black women students and provide mentors and support for future Black women doctoral students.

## Research Questions

The research questions for this study were grounded in the literature on persistence in doctoral students, as previous research established that factors of social and personal support, as well as institutional support, are significant in the persistence of doctoral students (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lovitts, 2001).

### Central Research Question

What are the experiences of Black women who persist in distance education doctoral programs?

**Sub-Question 1.** What personal factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

Personal factors such as motivation to finish the degree or achieve the goal of obtaining a doctoral degree, as well as time management skills have been found to influence doctoral persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Wyman, 2012). For Black doctoral students, the personal factor of self-beliefs and persisting despite challenges influences the doctoral persistence experience (Joseph, 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Moreover, cultural factors of race and family origins, as well as the intersectionality of being both an adult learner, woman and Black also influences the persistence of Black women doctoral students (Bonner, Marbley, Evans, & Robinson, 2015; Brooks, 2015; Jones, 2017; McCallum, 2017).

**Sub-Question 2.** What social factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

Social support has been found to be an important factor in persistence of doctoral students (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lovitts, 2001).  In particular, social support in terms of support from family members, faculty members, and academic friends have been found to influence the persistence of doctoral students (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).  Also, for Black doctoral students, support groups and relationships with other Black doctoral students are important aspects of persistence (Acosta, Duggins, Moore, Adams & Johnson, 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014), as well as mentorship from Black women professors (Grant, 2012).

**Sub-Question 3.** What institutional factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

Institutional factors are defined as those that are inherent to the institution and include factors such as the structure of the program, including organization and flexibility of the program and course schedules (Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Moreover, for Black doctoral students, faculty who support their research agenda and a supportive and inclusive institutional culture significantly impact their ability to persist in doctoral programs (Acosta et.al, 2015; Jones, et al., 2013).

### Definitions

There are several terms that are prevalent in the literature on doctoral student persistence. Those that are relevant to this study are defined as follows.

1. *Academic Integration* — integration into academic systems, which includes academic competencies, and faculty interactions based on perceived competencies (Tinto, 1993, p. 236).

2. *Black* — individuals who self-identify as Black and/or African-American (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 75).

3. *Asynchronous Learning* — learning that takes place when there is an interaction between instructors and students with an intermittent time delay. This type of self-paced learning may include eLearning tools such as email, discussion boards, and social networks (Ishtaiwa & Abulibdeh, 2012).

4. *Attrition* — a student's decision to leave an educational institution before graduating (Little, 2014).

5. *Cohort Model* — a model in which students go through a program of study together, proceed together through experiences in the context of the program and graduate at approximately the same time from the program (Bista & Cox, 2014, p. 4).

6. *Distance Education* — instruction that takes place at a distance, utilizing technology, and does not require face-to-face meetings (Hawkins, 2012).

7. *Doctoral Persistence* — defined as "a multi-faceted phenomenon that leads to completion of an online program of study" (Hart, 2012, p. 29).

8. *Economic Integration* — defined as "the extent to which a student's financial needs are met while pursuing the doctorate" (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011, p. 117).

9. *Exclusively Distance Education* — all course enrollments are through distance education courses (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

10. *Intersectionality* — defined as "the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation" (McCall, 2005, p.1771).

11. *Limited Residency* — limited residency is a degree program that is offered primarily online, but requires students to participate on campus for extended weekend or week courses at various points in the program (Terrell, et al., 2012). Typically, in these programs, 30 to 79% of course content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

12. *Online Education* — education where at least 80% or more of the instruction is delivered on-line and there is typically no face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

13. *Retention* — making normal progress towards a degree of study and enrolling each semester until graduation, which usually takes about four years (College Student Retention, 2012).

14. *Social Integration* — integration into social systems of the academic environment, including peer-group and faculty interactions (Tinto, 1993, p. 236).

15. *Some but not all Distance Education* — course enrollment is mixed and includes some distance education courses (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

**Summary**

In summary, while Black women are achieving their highest rates of degree attainment in history, these numbers continue to trail behind that of their non-Black peers. Black women also have the highest doctoral degree obtainment rates in the field of education, while the median years to degree completion in education are the largest of any other researched field. While previous research demonstrated that institutional factors such as climate of support and availability of mentors and role models, and social factors such as support from other Black doctoral students played a vital role in the persistence of Black women who have earned doctoral degrees in residential settings, there was no previous research giving voice to Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs. This research study gives voice to this population of doctoral students and can assist universities in fostering persistence and success for Black women, as well as provides recommendations and assistance to Black women who desire to obtain a doctoral degree from a distance education program in the future.

**CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Overview**

The study of the doctoral experience and doctoral student persistence has become a new and developing field of study within the last 40 years (Jones, 2013). As the doctoral degree represents the pinnacle of education in the United States, many universities have become invested in the success of doctoral students and the causes of their attrition and persistence. Doctoral persistence is best defined as "a multi-faceted phenomenon that leads to completion of a program of study" (Hart, 2012, p. 29). The study of doctoral persistence is significant because it is estimated that anywhere from 33 to 70% of doctoral students do not continue their studies after the first year (Jones, 2013, p. 84). The 33 to 70% of students who depart from their doctoral studies experience a significant disruption in their life activities, plans, and goals, all defined by the lack of the attainment of the doctoral degree (Lovitts, 2001, p. 193). These negative experiences are compounded in distance education (DE) programs due to higher rates of attrition, as it is estimated that the attrition rate in DE programs is 10 to 20% higher than in traditional programs (Bawa, 2016).

While the aforementioned statistics are staggering, it is also true that over 50% of doctoral students do persist to completion (Lovitts, 2001), thus it is important to know what experiences influence an individual's ability to persist to completion in a doctoral program. Doctoral persistence has been studied from many perspectives, including persistence in specific programs like educational leadership (Stallone, 2011), and school psychology (Proctor & Truscott, 2012), as well as program type such as part time programs, asynchronous, or limited residency programs (Duckett, 2014; Hart, 2012). Moreover, some researchers have looked at doctoral student persistence from a cultural view and researched factors that influence the

persistence of a particular racial or economic group (Lundy-Wagner, et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2014; Rogers, 2006).

Previous research on doctoral student persistence establishes the significance of social support, institutional support, and personal support as contributors to doctoral persistence (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lovitts, 2001). However, when doctoral students are divided into subgroups such as program format or racial group, the specific factors that influence their persistence varies. For example, when Gardner and Gopaul (2012) explored doctoral persistence in part-time doctoral students they found that while social support and institutional support were sub-factors in the success of this group of students, other specific themes emerged as more prominent. These themes included the ability to balance between home and school environments, assistance with at-home duties, and supportive and flexible work environments. Also, when women distance education degree students were asked about their ability to persist, they indicated that the factors needed to persist were more inclusive of outside resources such as family support and assistance with childcare, as well as their identity as women and the balancing act or intersection of their multiple identities (Arric, et al., 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Lunde, 2017; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). When the doctoral persistence of Black women in residential programs was explored, the aforementioned themes, along with the themes of supportive mentors, sense of belonging/welcoming culture, support of research agenda, and personal factors such as social support and work ethic/motivation emerged (Grant, 2012; Jones, et al., 2013; Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001).

Since it is already known that the factors that influence doctoral persistence vary based on program format and racial group, what is currently lacking in the literature is research on the lived experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education programs and their doctoral

persistence experiences. This chapter addresses this issue by exploring doctoral persistence as it relates to distance education doctoral programs, women, and individuals who identify as Black. Critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) theory of student integration provide a theoretical framework for the study of doctoral student persistence of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs.

## Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, the theoretical framework informs the problem or topic of the study. The theoretical framework provides a lens by which the research questions are developed and by which data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Creswell, 2013, p. 35). The two theories that frame this research study are the theory of student integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012) and critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)

### Tinto's Theory of Student Integration

In 1975, Vincent Tinto developed a theory of student early departure from higher education. This theory was based on a culmination of previous research on student suicide, persistence, and attrition initially theorized by Emile Durkheim (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's original model purported that a student's level of commitment to finishing school, defined as goal commitment, was a result of his or her personal attributes such as personality traits and family background. Once a student was committed to the goal, it was the interaction of the student's academic environment, along with their social environment that allowed for a level of integration into the system (Tinto, 1975, p. 43). It was through this social and academic integration that Tinto theorized students were less likely to drop out.

Since the development of this original model, Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) and many others (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Grice & Grice, 2007; Tierney, 1999) built upon his theory and

suggested the need to explore doctoral student persistence in terms of institutional settings (two-year versus four-year, online versus traditional), as well as in terms of cultural background (minority racial membership, first generation college students, etc.). Some researchers such as Bean and Metzner (1985) and Tierney (1999) argued that on its own, Tinto's theory of integration is not an effective model for studying the experiences of nontraditional students like adult learners or minority college students. Tierney indicated that under Tinto's model, minority students must assimilate into the predominant culture to be successful. He believed that the academic and social integration that Tinto references causes minority students to abandon their own cultural values and beliefs. When research has been conducted with Black participants, the results have refuted Tinto's model. Support from parents and other family members, as well as the affirmation of their own cultural identities has increased the graduation rates of this group of students (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Tierney, 1999). Furthermore, the historical context of educating Black people and the history of racism and marginalization of minorities in the United States must be recognized when studying the retention and persistence of minority students. This type of acknowledgement is addressed in critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Others have explored Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) theory through a cultural lens (Grice & Grice, 2007). Grice and Grice tested Tinto's theory from the cultural perspective of first generation, working class students. The study utilized White males who were the first in their immediate families to attend college. After their first year, all of the participants departed from school due to family illness or academic probation/dismissal. When interviewed, all students shared that they had not had any outside of the classroom contact with faculty members, and felt as though they were on their own or that they should not bother faculty outside of the classroom.

They viewed faculty as "gatekeepers" and had difficulty forming relationships with them out of fear and the risk that the faculty would think that they did not belong at the university. The authors suggested that the students made frequent references to their faculty supports or lack thereof and thus this supported Tinto's theory that faculty relationships matter to students, particularly those who are within a minority group within their environment.

Isolation and perceived lack of support was also seen in Lee, Donlan, and Brown's (2011) study with American Indian/Alaskan Native undergraduate students who attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The authors wanted to test Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of college student departure and when they interviewed this group of students, particularly those who had departed the university, several themes emerged. Amongst these themes, the top two were financial difficulties (lack of money, lack of family support, lack of financial aid), and family obligations (ailing parents or family members, difficulty balancing school with home life). Also, a large majority of the students (73%) found balancing school and family responsibilities difficult. They also did not feel that the university was sensitive to family needs and that it lacked cultural sensitivity toward American Indians. The authors suggested that Tinto's theory and universities acknowledge the cultural self-identity of minority groups versus mainstream students in predominantly White institutions and that it be integrated into Tinto's model of student departure and used by institutions to increase retention.

Taking these critiques into account, in 2012 Tinto took his theory of early departure, now called the theory of student integration, a step further and discussed factors such as cultural differences of students and the impact on student retention, as well as institutional factors such as community, residential, and distance education. Tinto also looked at student retention through the lens of other disciplines such as economics and sociology, not just the original psychology

perspective. Moreover, and most central to the current study, Tinto's revised theory posits that a person's external commitments can influence their persistence to graduation either directly or indirectly. Tinto (2012) posited that the communities a person is a part of outside of school, as well as commitments to family and community agencies can greatly influence an individual's ability to persist to completion of a doctoral degree program. An additional part of Tinto's revised work is his recognition that it is not enough to simply know why students depart, but it is important to know what factors cause students to stay, thus it is valuable to look at students through a retention model (Tinto, 2007, p. 6). Tinto's model provides a framework for student integration overall, but does not explicitly address the unique experiences of Black individuals in education settings. To address this area, critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) was also utilized as a theoretical framework for this study.

**Critical Race Theory of Education**

The educational experiences and cultural challenges of Black individuals in educational settings is best understood through critical race theory (CRT) of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate posited that CRT in education is an attempt to understand how racism has marginalized Black people in various institutions in America and to understand and counteract systemic racism. CRT is a way of disrupting the dominant narrative of success stories that are told by larger, more dominant populations in the United States (Parker & Villanpando, 2007). The basic premise of critical race theory in education is that race and racism are tightly woven into the fabric of the United States educational system and are endemic in nature (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This holds true for Black individuals and the quality of their educational experiences, even when class and gender are accounted for (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical race theory is based on the five tenets of counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Hiraldo (2010) explored each of these tenets within the higher education setting. The first tenet of counter-storytelling allows students of color to tell their stories, which will often contain marginalized experiences, and help shed light on the university climate and experiences of people of color. Counter-storytelling has been used as a tool for recounting the experiences and perspective of socially and racially marginalized groups (Smith et al., 2007, p. 565). It is through this story telling that universities can become more inclusive and make changes to the campus environment beyond simply increasing the number of students of color as a diversity initiative (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54).

The second tenet of CRT is the permanence of racism that implies that racism continues to permeate the political, social and economic realms of the United States (Hiraldo, 2010). This tenet stresses the importance of universities acknowledging and analyzing the impact of such a foundation on students of color from a systemic view point. If the permanence of racism is not considered when drafting policies of diversity and inclusion and when programming is set, then these policies may unintentionally promote racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The third tenet of CRT is whiteness as a property (Capper, 2015; Hiraldo, 2010). When whiteness is regarded as a property, it operates on many levels such as the rights of possession and exclusion. This idea has historical significance and can date back to enslavement when African men, women, and children were the property of White people and "owned" by them. This contributes to the notion of a system of White supremacy because only White individuals can benefit (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 55). Some say that in higher education this can be seen through the division between student affairs and academic affairs because research indicates that the

majority of Blacks who pursue their doctorate earn the doctorate of education (Ed.D.) and continue to work as practitioners, rather than earning the more research based doctor of philosophy degree (Ph.D.) and work as university faculty (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasmon, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This division between student affairs and academic affairs is significant because Blacks continue to share that when they aim to advance in the academy or change from student affairs to academic affairs they are met with opposition and are reminded that they continue to experience exclusion and racism (Lepeau, 2015; Scott, 2016). In many cases, faculty are seen as the driving forces in education because they design courses and curriculum based on their experiences, mostly majority experiences, which continue to negatively impact students of color and keep the institutional power in the hands of the majority. Ultimately, this does not help build a diverse and inclusive higher education environment and it continues to support the hierarchical racist paradigms that already exist in United States society (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 55).

The fourth tenet of CRT is interest conversion (Capper, 2015; Hiraldo, 2010). This tenet applies to the idea that policies that were meant to assist people of color, such as civil rights policies like affirmative action and recruitment policies of PWI's, mostly benefit the majority and not the marginalized groups they were meant to assist. For example, affirmative action is said to have more benefit to White women, thus assisting the White families they tend to belong to more than people of color (Hiraldo, 2010). Moreover, when PWI's recruit international students, who often do not qualify for financial aid, they are recruiting students who can pay their tuition costs out of pocket. This recruitment causes universities to claim more diversity and perhaps see higher rankings at the expense of the international students (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 56).

The fifth tenet of CRT is a critique of liberalism (Capper, 2015). Many universities indicate that they have policies of color blindness, which is often seen as a way for people to

ignore policies that perpetuate social inequity and racism. Ignoring race as a part of the institution does not serve marginalized groups, as opposed to engaging in courageous conversations about race and making sure the dialogue is a part of the curriculum and student activities (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 56). Attempts of multicultural education are often seen as too liberal and do not serve to address the historical issues of racism in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Moreover, many universities claim that they are objective, neutral, equal opportunity, color blind institutions of higher learning for all students; however, CRT in higher education's goal is to challenge this claim (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). These authors indicate that color blind and race neutrality ideology only serve as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in American society. In fact, when students of color are compared to White students in terms of campus racial harassment and profiling, students of color indicate that these incidents have disproportionately impacted them and their ability to persist through the university (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2007). The students also indicated that barriers in the areas of financial aid, hostile professors and teaching assistants, and experiences with campus police all contributed to this sense of cumulative discrimination, which negatively impacted their ability to matriculate through the university.

Race alone does not impact a student's educational experience, but race intersects with many other dimensions of one's identity such as gender, language, sexuality and class, and for people of color each of these dimensions has the ability to uplift or oppress them in educational settings (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). When considering the journey of Black women doctoral students, it is likely that their experiences are influenced by the culture of the institution they attend and both direct or indirect racism. This is why it is necessary to explore the experiences

of Black women doctoral students through the lens of CRT in education as a framework for understanding the role that racism and the intersectionality of race and gender play in these students' doctoral persistence.

## Related Literature

In 2014, there were over 54,000 students who received doctorate degrees in the United States (National Science Foundation, 2014), yet attrition rates for doctoral programs have been estimated to be between 30 and 70% (Jones, 2013). The study of factors that contribute to the persistence of doctoral students reveals several themes, including institutional factors such as relationships with faculty and fit between student and program, personal factors such as motivation and commitment to dissertation to topic, as well as social factors such as family and social support (Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2014). These factors are pertinent to the study of the persistence of residential doctoral students; however, it is also important to explore the experiences that contribute to the persistence of students enrolled in distance education doctoral programs, as distance education programs are growing at an exponential rate, yet their attrition rates are higher than that of residential doctoral programs (Bawa, 2016; Hart, 2012).

### Doctoral Student Persistence in Distance Education Doctoral Programs

The enrollment of students in distance education classes and programs has increased significantly in the last decade; however, the persistence or completion rates of these students have not (Hart, 2012). While attrition rates for traditional programs continue to hover around 50%, attrition rates in DE programs are estimated to be 10 to 15% higher (Kennedy, Terrell, & Lohle, 2015). Despite these attrition numbers, those doctoral students who do persist in DE programs give several reasons for their ability to persist. These reasons include effective time

management skills, a commitment to the goal of graduating, flexible course schedules, social connectedness, and emotional support from family and peers (Hart, 2012; Scarpena, 2016). For women graduate students in particular, the factors needed to persist appear to be more inclusive of outside resources such as family support and assistance with childcare, as well as their identity as women and the intersection of their multiple identities (Arric, Young, Harris & Farrow, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2017; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Moreover, in studies specifically examining the persistence of doctoral students in DE programs, themes that emerged were relationship with faculty, relationship with other students, program structure (organization and flexibility), motivation and time management skills and for women in particular, identify as both a woman (wife or mother) and scholar (Ivankova, & Stick, 2007; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2017; Terrell, et al., 2012).

     **Social factors.** Relationships with professors is a factor students in DE doctoral programs indicate is important to their persistence **(**Terrell et al., 2012). Students identify the importance of having open communication with faculty members during the dissertation process to allow them to persist to completion. This communication includes timely and quality feedback on submitted papers and proposals (Terrell et al., 2012). Due to the use of online learning platforms, such as Blackboard or special dissertation portals, faculty members have a certain amount of time to respond to students and provide feedback; however, many students have found this waiting process frustrating and prefer shorter wait times for feedback. Moreover, students indicated that having a personal relationship with faculty members or receiving encouraging messages from them is helpful in aiding persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). When students do not have this support, or do not have a positive relationship with their advisors/dissertation Chair, they are more likely to depart (Lovitts, 2001; Wyman, 2012). This

relationship and support is not always solely between the dissertation Chair and student, but faculty members also serve as mentors to students and impact their sense of connection and desire to persist in their doctoral studies.

Peer relationships are another important aspect of the doctoral student experience for students enrolled in DE programs. The ability to share personal stories, commensurate over challenges, and receive assistance with difficult assignments was found to be particularly beneficial to students enrolled in DE doctoral programs (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Doctoral students also appear to depend on support from other students in the program and forming working groups of other doctoral students (Terrell et al., 2012). This theme is further supported, as the lack of social integration is often a reason students give for dropping out of DE doctorate programs (Wyman, 2012). These peer and faculty relationships are what Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) suggested as social integration. This research indicates that when doctoral students do not have the social relationships in DE programs, they are more likely not to persist.

**Institutional factors.** Along with social relationships impacting doctoral persistence in DE doctoral programs, there are several factors inherent to the institution that impact doctoral persistence. One such factor is the structure of the program. Program structure is defined as the nature and arrangement of curriculum tasks and resources (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). As many distance education students maintain full-time employment and have family obligations, along with their doctoral coursework, they share that the ability to attend classes online and study at their own pace positively impacts their ability to persist (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Convenience and the ability to balance work and family obligations are also major factors in their ability to persist. These features are inherent in most DE doctoral programs; however, there are many students enrolled in DE programs who are also enrolled part-time and in programs that

utilize a cohort model. The structure of these types of DE programs also appear to have a significant impact on student persistence.

Structurally, students enrolled as part-time doctoral students shared that the proximity to the university and faculty impacted their ability to persist and be successful. If they were only on campus for class and many of the faculty, programming, and research opportunities were offered during the day, then it was difficult for them to form relationships and take advantage of the opportunities offered to full-time doctoral students (Zahl, 2015, p. 311). Students also find it helpful if programs have clear rubrics, assignment guidelines and a structured program of study. When these factors are not in place, students become frustrated with the process and are more likely to quit (Wyman, 2012), lending further support for the role of program structure in persistence.

Specifically, when part-time doctoral students were surveyed about their experiences, they shared that in order to persist they had to feel connected to the academic department (Zahl, 2015). This connection was not always through a personal relationship with peers or faculty as described in the social relationships factor described earlier, but it could be felt in the atmosphere of the hallways or by observing how individuals interact with each other; in essence the culture of the organization or department (Zahl, 2015, p. 306). Thus, program structure in regard to a welcoming environment was also important to students' ability to persist.

Considering specific program models, a cohort model has been found to support doctoral persistence. A cohort model is described as students who go through a program of study together, proceed together through experiences in the context of the program and graduate at approximately the same time from the program (Bista & Cox, 2014, p. 4). Specifically, when students who completed an Ed.D. cohort program were surveyed, they indicated that the way the

program was structured such as having classes on the same evening of every night and utilizing the cohort model were said to contribute to the persistence of the doctoral students (Bista & Cox, 2014). In addition, having faculty who were good instructors, easily accessible, and approachable all contributed to success in the program (Bista & Cox, 2014, p. 12).

**Personal factors**. Personal factors are another area that influences the persistence of distance education doctoral students. Personal factors are defined as those factors that are intrinsic to the person (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Many students enrolled in DE doctoral programs indicate that they knew it would not be easy to complete a doctoral degree online, but they were motivated to finish (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Many doctoral students are able to maintain motivation and persist because obtaining a doctorate is a personal goal they are committed to achieving. As such, they maintain a level of discipline and commitment to finishing the doctoral work (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Santicola, 2013). Santicola (2013) found that students had to possess the ability to stay the course without outside support from other persons. In other words, the students needed to be intrinsically motivated. In some cases, a sense of responsibility to their peers due to some interactive features of the online environment also serves as a motivating factor (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

Graduate students also indicated attitudes and self-perception as a learner impacted their persistence. Specifically, adult learners indicated that finishing a doctoral degree was difficult and there were many moments of self-doubt and fatigue, as well as a general lack of confidence in their ability to successfully complete the program (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Zahl, 2015); however, when students felt valued and appreciated by others in their community, their ability to persist and complete the program increased.

**Doctoral Persistence and Women**

One of the primary identities for women in a DE doctoral programs is that of female, comprised of identities as both wife and mother (Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2017). However, this role is often coupled with tension and conflict. Not only are many women mothers who are attempting to balance family life, but the doctoral journey can have a significant impact on the marriage relationship (Collins, 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Women often experience role conflict regarding being pulled between the roles of doctoral student, wife, and mother. They also feel significant anxiety over the work family balance and making time for their children, domestic responsibilities, and their studies (Brown & Watson, 2010, p. 395). The ability to successfully function in multiple roles has recently been documented in research on work-family enrichment. Work-family enrichment is formally defined as the experience of one role improving the quality of life in another role (Bhowon, 2016). It can be bi-directional in that work can improve family life (work-family enrichment) or family can enrich work life (family-work enrichment; Bhowon, 2016). Work-family enrichment moves beyond the previous paradigm of work-family conflict and focuses on the positive outcomes that negotiating multiple roles can have, particularly for women (Thomas, 2015).

For Black women, this type of enrichment philosophy is seen as they manage to cross between work and family. Instead of looking at the difficulties or conflicts serving in multiple roles may bring, Black women see their roles in multiple environments as a way to best serve themselves and their family (Terry & Meiskins, 2006). Black mothers in academic areas, such as counselor education, further indicated that while it was difficult to balance these multiple roles, working in academia had its benefits such as pride in accomplishment of serving their family, reaching their academic goals, and serving as a role model for other Black mothers who want to

have a career in academia (Haskins et al., 2016).  These experiences were also true for them when they were doctoral students and professionals.  Black women also acknowledge that this success would not have been possible without the support of other Black women who mentored them (Haskins et al., 2016).

**Mother.**  The role of mother for women doctoral students has a significant impact on the persistence of doctoral students.  Many women doctoral students indicate that being a mom influenced their decision to begin doctoral studies (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).  This includes the ages of their children and whether they were a single parent (Brown & Watson, 2010).  Mothers also have concerns regarding whether they are spending enough time with their children, if they will be judged because they are mothers, or if their dedication to their school work will be questioned (Brown & Watson, 2010; Eisenbach, 2013).  This type of conflict takes an emotional toll on mothers, creating increased anxiety and depression (Eisenbach, 2013).

However, some women doctoral students indicated that motherhood did not always have a negative impact on their persistence.  Some students who are single parents indicated that being a single parent allowed them the freedom to work on their doctoral work in the evenings after their children went to bed, without the guilt or pressure to have to spend time with a spouse or significant other (Brown & Watson, 2010).  Other women doctoral students indicated that being a mother caused them to work on completing assignments early and planning ahead because of the unpredictability of motherhood such as sick children or unexpected lack of childcare (Eisenbach, 2013).

**Spousal relationships**.  Many doctoral students sacrifice time with family in order to engage in their studies.  Many women doctoral students, in particular, often feel that they have to choose between their spouses and their doctoral work (Lovitts, 2001, p.177).  Due to these

difficulties, data suggest that men are more likely to complete a doctoral program than women (Collins, 2015). This sacrifice of time and relationship stress can have a negative impact on doctoral study and persistence. In fact, when surveyed on reasons for leaving doctoral programs, 23% of students indicated personal reasons such as family pressures and relationship related difficulties (Lovitts, 2001). The decision to depart is due in part to the strain that doctoral work places on a marriage and family dynamics. During the doctoral journey, spousal roles may change, with one spouse picking up more household responsibilities, financial strain may occur, and the doctoral student may form a closer bond with classmates and faculty members than their family (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Knight, 2015). Many women doctoral students share that while their family and spouses want to be supportive, because they have not been exposed to the curriculum or do not fully understand the requirements of obtaining a doctoral degree, they are not able to fully support them or understand the sacrifice of time needed to persist to completion of a doctoral degree (Collins, 2015).

For women doctoral students, in DE doctoral programs, this difficulty also relates to work family border theory (Clark, 2000). Clark shared that as people attempt to cross the borders of various domains in their life, such as home and work, there are people in each of these domains who play a role in how successful the border crossers are in maintaining balance. Border crossers require the support of their domain members to assist them in maintaining their overall well-being, avoiding work/family conflict, and achieving some level of work family balance (Clark, 2000, p. 763). The spouses of doctoral students can serve as one of the border keepers to assist doctoral students in completing their doctoral work. This is particularly true for DE doctoral program attendees. The borders of these students are more arbitrary in nature, as they complete classwork and dissertations at home or in some other space, rather than physically

attending a building or classroom setting. This arbitrary border makes it more difficult for spouses and other family members to assist students in maintaining proper borders.

**Doctoral Persistence and Black Doctoral Students**

Educational persistence is not a new concept for Black women, as Black people have been fighting and persisting to obtain their education since those rights were not freely given to them as they were to majority racial groups. Prior research established that doctoral persistence takes a special set of characteristics, as the attrition rates for doctoral students can range from 30 to 70%, indicating that most students who begin a doctoral degree will not finish (Jones, 2013). As a result, it is important to consider what factors influence students in this demographic group to persist. Prior research further indicates that for Black women, the factors that lead to doctoral persistence include institutional factors such as sense of belonging/welcoming culture, and support of research agenda, personal factors such as sense of obligation to community and work ethic/motivation, and social factors such as faculty mentor relationships and family and social relationships support (Cannon & Morton, 2015; Jones, et al., 2013; Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001). These themes, addressed under the factors of personal, social, and institutional, are discussed in the following sections.

**Institutional factors.** Institutional factors are factors the university has control over (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). These factors can include departmental culture, policies, and advising or faculty relationships.

***Department culture***. When asked about their overall doctoral student experiences and ability to persist, Black doctoral students consistently indicated that the culture of the institution, as well as the particular department they were a part of were very important to their overall experience (Acosta et al., 2015). The culture of the institution is especially important since most

minority students perceive their institutions as being inherently racially discriminatory (Nettles, 1990). Black students desire an open culture where racial equality is interwoven into the culture of the academic environment, and not just an afterthought or specialized programs or events that focus on diversity issues. These types of programs result in feelings of isolation and do not aid doctoral student persistence (Acosta et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the experiences of Black students at universities are impacted by whether the university is a predominantly White institution (PWI) or historically Black college or university (HBCU), which inadvertently impacts the departmental culture (Coleman-Hunter, 2014; Constantine & Wyatt, 2002). Blacks who attend colleges that are predominantly White are more apt to experience differences between the values of their environment and their own personal values (Constantine & Wyatt, 2002). It has been found that racial and ethnic minorities face greater stress and challenges as they enter college settings and they particularly feel marginalized as they enter PWIs (Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). On the campus of PWIs, racial and ethnic minority students are more aware of their differences and how they are perceived on campus (Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). Women in particular often seek connection and a sense of belonging within their department, but do not always find this in a PWI. They may also be afraid to ask questions or seek out information for fear of going against the status quo (Coleman-Hunter, 2014). Furthermore, Black doctoral students who attended PWIs stated that they experienced feelings of isolation and discrimination, which impacted their emotional well-being and ability to persist (Coleman Hunter, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2012). In the PWI setting, Black women were found to operate in this dichotomous environment in which experiencing academic success appeared to be at the expense of their overall well-being (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 23).

These challenges are unique to doctoral students in PWIs, because Black doctoral students who attend HBCUs find support ingrained in the culture of the HBCU. HBCUs were formed as a way of educational attainment for Black students (Mawhinney, 2012). The three main goals of HBCUs when they were formed were to (a) provide education to freed slaves, (b) deliver educational experiences consistent with the values of Black families, and (c) to provide a service to the Black community through developing leaders and provide overall community service (Jean-Marie, 2006). HBCUs are further known for providing educational opportunities for many Black women students who want to seek advanced degrees (Joseph, 2012). As such, HBCUs inherently provide Black students with the support and sense of community they long for in a university setting.

*Faculty relationships*. For Black women in particular, not only are faculty relationships important, but it is also important that faculty members support the research agenda of Black women (Collins, 2001). Black women tend to be interested in research areas that are personal to them and significant to their backgrounds, such as issues regarding race, class, and gender (Woods, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), only 6% of university faculty identify as Black/African American, which poses a challenge for Black women doctoral students. This lack of diversity of university faculty makes it difficult for Black women to find faculty members who are interested in, or at the very least, can validate their research interests. The ability to establish relationships with faculty members is important to the Black doctoral student. Faculty not only serve in the role of advisors and dissertation Chairs that help validate the student's area of interest, but they also serve as the student's advocate and help the Black student navigate and understand the academic environment (Jones, et al., 2013).

*Relationship with committee members*.  Relationships with dissertation committee members also have a significant impact on the persistence of Black doctoral students.  Black students indicate that although all students experience some level of difficulty with their committee members in regard to responsiveness, this group of students felt that their concerns regarding responsiveness, identifying professors who wanted to work with them and their topic, and who took the time to provide comments on their dissertation was particularly challenging and a hindrance to their ability to persist (Coleman Hunter, 2012).  Black women doctoral students also share that at times, the expectations of their committee members were unclear, or they perceived an underlying attitude of racism or inferiority that they could not accomplish the dissertation, thus, they did not receive the support expected from committee members (Dortch, 2016).

**Social factors**.  For Black women students, social support is generally found to be an invaluable component of doctoral persistence.  Many Black women doctoral students indicate that building community in their program and making connections with other students was important to their success and persistence (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

*Peer relationships.*  Social support for Black students appears to be most valuable when it comes from other Blacks (Acosta et al., 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014).  Black women doctoral students typically attempt to form community, particularly in environments where they feel isolated, and form relationships with other Black students in their programs (Acosta et al., 2015), as well as with other Black doctoral students who may have been enrolled at other universities (Coleman Hunter, 2014).  Black doctoral students note this type of support to be vital to their ability to earn their doctorate (Coleman Hunter, 2014).  The building of this type of community and support helps alleviate some of the feelings of isolation that contribute to doctoral student

attrition, helps build a community of support, and lays a foundation for future Black women doctoral students (Acosta et al., 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014; Dortch, 2016).

Black woman doctoral students also often indicate that they were a part of a "sister circle" at their institutions as a means of extra support and sometimes in the absence of a Black woman mentor within the department (Grant, 2012, p. 112). This sister circle has also been noted to be related to the concept of *other mothering*. Other mothering is a concept within the Black community in which extended community members take on the role of mothering (Collins, 2000; Mawhinney 2012). Other mothering is deeply rooted in the Black community and has its roots in slavery when small children were taken away from their families, or their parents were sold to different families, thus "other mothers" or community members stepped in to care for the children (Collins, 2000; Mawhinney, 2012). Black doctoral students seek out this type of support in their educational environments when they find themselves separated from their own families and when they do not have the support of the community to which they are accustomed (Coleman Hunter, 2014). In essence, those in the sister circle become other mothers to provide support and assistance in the educational persistence journey of Black doctoral students.

*Mentoring*. Social support is also received through the process of mentoring for Black women doctoral students. Mentoring is a different type of support than that provided by peers. Mentoring is defined as a unique relationship between individuals that is a reciprocal learning partnership where growth occurs and knowledge is acquired by the person being mentored, as well as the mentor (Grant, 2012). For Black women, it appears this theme is a critical aspect of their ability to persist to completion in doctoral programs. When it comes to mentoring, Black doctoral students shared that is it important to their personal success as a student, and their

overall well-being to have a mentoring relationship with someone who not only looks like them, but who has similar personal, professional, and scholarly interests (Grant, 2012, p. 105). When Black professors who had completed their doctorates at PWIs were interviewed, they indicated that not only was mentoring important to their identity as a doctoral student wanting to go into the professoriate, but that it was important that their mentor was matched on both gender and race (Grant, 2012). The presence and influence of Black professors served as a source of encouragement to students in their doctoral journey. Cannon and Morton (2015) also expressed that for Black doctoral students in particular, having strong, Black women mentors is particularly helpful. This type of relationship provides a mentor who can give advice through the shared experience of going through a doctoral program as a person of color and provide a safe space for doctoral students to share the challenges they face in pursuing their degrees.

Mentoring is further seen as a tool for helping students with the various levels of support they need in order to be successful in academia and life (Cannon & Morton, 2015). The ability to have someone who they can seek out for assistance, who is interested in their research agenda, and who understands their plight as a student has been found to have a positive impact on the overall student experience for Blacks (Felder, 2010; Rogers, 2006; Woods, 2001). Moreover, not only is it important that these relationships be supportive, but they must be authentic, meaning that Black students must feel that they are able to bring their whole selves into the relationship and that the professors understand the position of Black students in what is sometimes called the *ivory tower* of academia (Acosta, et al., 2015).

*Family support.* Understanding the role of the Black family is pivotal to understanding the Black doctoral student experience, as family culture is significant to this group of students and the discipline of education is deeply rooted in Black culture (Felder, et al., 2014). Education

has often been seen as a way out of oppression and Black families place a strong emphasis on work and ambition, such as that required to pursue higher education (Hill, 2003).

The role of family has been found to support overall academic persistence in Black college students (Brooks, 2015). The concept of family for Black students is rooted in the idea of collectivism, in which the needs of a group or others is put over the needs of the individual (McCallum, 2017). Based on this orientation, for many Black students, the idea of pursuing education is seen as a way of giving back to their community and to serve as a role model to other Black individuals (Brooks, 2015; McCallum, 2017). Along with collectivism, "family" is defined by Black individuals in different ways and can include parents, grandparents, siblings and extended relatives, with many Black college students indicating that support from cousins, grandparents, and other extended family members impacted their persistence (Brooks, 2015). The support given by these individuals includes financial support, emotional support and communication, as well as involvement in the college activities of the student (Brooks, 2015).

For doctoral students in particular, family support can come from spouses, children, or other family members. When interviewed about the personal factors that influence their doctoral persistence, Black doctoral students indicated that the expectation that they would pursue the degree from their family members helped to foster persistence (Little, 2014). This expectation is said to have roots from a very early age and serves as a motivating factor for Black students throughout their educational careers (Brooks, 2015). This type of support appears to take on a more practical meaning when doctoral students discuss the ways in which their families provide support. Black women doctoral students in particular have noted that financial, emotional, and childcare support from family members were vital components in their doctoral persistence (Patterson-Stephens, Lane, & Vital, 2017). Spouses of Black doctoral women students also

indicated that while the doctoral process presents itself with challenges such as lack of time and intimacy and financial challenges, support in the form of emotional support and performing household chores was important to the doctoral persistence of their spouses (Jones, 2017).

**Personal factors**. Personal factors are those factors that are inherent to the person (Wao &Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Examples of these type of characteristics include gender, race, and motivation.

*Race*. Overall, Black women face significant challenges within the university setting (Robinson, 2013). Along with the typical pressures of graduate school, Black women, particularly those who are older than 22 and considered nontraditional, indicate that they have a unique lived experience in that their status as a minority, woman, and nontraditional student impacts their educational experiences (Bonner, et al., 2015). Along with this, it is difficult to dissect which traits (race or gender) impact their experiences. The intersection of race and gender are not easily extractible, with many Black women sharing that any issue concerning their gender is always connected to race because they find the two inseparable. This concept of the intersectionality of race and gender for Black women has found a home in womanist theory. Womanist theory was originally coined by Alice Walker in 1981. Womanism was originally a response to traditional feminism and is also coined *Black feminism* (Collins, 2000). Traditional feminism was largely interpreted as a movement for White women, thus, womanism was designed to offer women of color a space to address their needs and distinct culture (Izgargan & Markov, 2012). Womanism has been used as the backdrop for studies on the role of race socialization of Blacks in doctoral programs, as well as in the academic journeys of Black women in higher education as a way to classify the unique experiences of Black doctoral students (Felder, et al., 2014; Scott, 2016).

Black doctoral students indicate that their ability to persist is not only interwoven in their racial identity, but they often see themselves as representing their race, particularly when they are the only Black woman in their environment (Robinson, 2013). Many doctoral students indicate that while it is often difficult to be the only or one of the few Black women in a class or on campus, they are able to utilize coping strategies to overcome the "oneness" and persist to completion (Dortch, 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Race further impacts the educational experiences and persistence of Black women because there are concerns that women who choose graduate degrees will forget about the Black community, being labeled a *sell-out* or only attending the university due to being an affirmative action recipient (Robinson, 2013). These pressures impact Black woman doctoral students in that they feel that they must prove those who speak against them wrong. They also feel pressure to succeed in spite of any negative experiences or beliefs about their ability to succeed (Coleman Hunter, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014).

The role of race is also understood for the Black doctoral student through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality is defined as "the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation" (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). Intersectionality refers to the interlocking of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nationality amongst other factors (Cannon & Morton, 2015). For some Black women, the intersection of work and family is found to be both complementary and conflicting (Dean, Marsh, & Landry, 2013). While some Black women note that the conflict between work and family causes significant stress, others report that the integration of work and family contributes to their identity as Black women (Cole & Secret, 2012). Work family relationships have often been studied in the context of the workplace. For Black women specifically, the intersection of race, class, and racial bias or

workplace environment, significantly influenced the work-family relationship (Cole & Secret, 2012).  While work-family relationships have been studied in regard to Black women and work family integration (Cole & Secret, 2012; Dean, et al., 2013) and in doctoral students in programs such as counselor education (Haskins et al., 2016), it has not been studied in relationship to Black women doctoral students in distance programs in the field of education.

*Motivation.*  Race also impacts the persistence of Black doctoral students, as many Black students have been able to persist due to their belief that education is about something bigger than themselves (Shavers & Moore, 2014).  Education has been regarded as an obligation to community, a way to uplift a community and to pave the ways for others. When Black women doctoral students ($N = 15$) were interviewed regarding their ability to persist, their responses were very similar to this theme of community uplifting (Shavers & Moore, 2014).  They indicated that they wanted to continue to show the younger generation of Black women that their dreams were obtainable and that they wanted to serve as a role model to support other doctoral students in their educational quests (Grant, 2012, p.113).  Others persisted so as not to disappoint their family and friends, even when faced with challenges, bias, and difficulties in their academic programs that would have otherwise caused them to give up (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 26).

Black women doctoral students also indicated that the ability to persist was based on their cultural identity and that they believed they were paving the way for future scholars, while others shared this same sentiment of an emancipatory ideology, in which their suffering now would help emancipate future generations of Black scholars (Acosta et al., 2015).  Further, Black doctoral students indicated that they are able to persist because they are focused, hardworking, and worked against their own standards as a means to success (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 28). In Shavers and Moore's study many of the participants shared what they perceived as the image

of "the strong Black women" in which they kept pushing themselves, and were independent and focused on seeing the task through, in this case the doctoral degree, no matter the negative impact on their social and emotional well-being. This type of thinking is also related to culture and racial identity, but serves as a motivating factor for persistence in the doctoral journey for Black women.

　　　*Self-beliefs.* Along with motivation, self-beliefs, composed of self-efficacy and self-esteem, have been found to influence the persistence of Black doctoral students. These beliefs are composed of one's global attitude about one's self and a self-evaluation of one's ability to succeed in a specific domain (Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). Along these lines, self-efficacy specifically has been found to contribute to the pursuit of a graduate degree and ultimately career choices for Black doctoral students (Martin, 2014). Black doctoral students indicated that the sheer belief in themselves and their ability to persist to completion of a doctoral degree is what saw them through their doctoral experience (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Black doctoral students also indicated that when they find themselves in areas where they were the only or one of a few Black students, such as at PWIs or in the STEM field, that they have to believe in themselves (Joseph, 2012). These environments are often seen as not supportive due to the double-edged sword of being both a woman and Black and the feelings of inferiority and racism that result because of their status (Joseph, 2012). To combat these challenges, many Black students indicated that they have to simply believe in themselves, pull out their inner strength, and persist to completion of a doctoral degree (Joseph, 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Many students attribute their persistence to their growing up and hearing the phrase "You have to work twice as hard for half as much," meaning that they would have to work harder than their non-Black peers to obtain only half of what their peers achieved (Shavers & Moore, 2014). This phrase and

philosophy serves as a motivating factor toward their self-belief and persistence in educational environments.

**Summary**

The study of doctoral persistence has increased over the last few decades and has yielded areas of significant influence for students who are enrolled in both traditional and distance education programs.  Specifically, for students enrolled in distance education doctoral programs, areas that influence persistence include institutional factors such as program structure, whether students attend part-time or are in a cohort model, and the consistency and accessibility of instruction (Bista & Cox, 2014; Wyman, 2012; Zahl, 2015).  Other areas that impact distance education students include personal factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and social factors such as relationships with peers and mentoring from faculty members (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Terrell, et al., 2012).

When Black doctoral students and their persistence journeys are explored, these same factors of institutional, social, and personal emerge; however, the specific experiences of each factor vary for Black doctoral students.  Black doctoral students indicate that the culture of the department, including perceived racism or whether the institution is a PWI or HBCU (Acosta et.al, 2015; Coleman-Hunter, 2014; Constantine &Wyatt, 2002), as well as faculty relationships (Collins, 2001; Woods 2001) all impact persistence.  In addition to institutional factors, personal factors such as race, family, and the intersectionality of race and gender, and social factors such as peer support and mentoring (Brooks, 2015; Collins, 2000; Grant, 2012; Little, 2014; Mawhinney, 2012) all influence the persistence experiences of Black doctoral students.  These factors do not include the specific influences of othermothering and spousal relationships, which also have a significant impact on the persistence journeys of women doctoral students.  These

social, personal, and institutional experiences of Black women in DE doctoral programs in the field of education were explored in this research study.  Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) theory of student integration and critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) provided the theoretical framework for understanding how Black women experience this phenomenon.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to give voice to the experiences of Black women who persisted in distance education doctoral programs in education. This chapter provides a description of the methods that were utilized to conduct the study. It also provides information on the research design, data collection and analysis, as well as methods for establishing trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

## Design

Qualitative inquiry is a method that utilizes an emergent design and focuses on the experiences and meanings of the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 46). Qualitative research requires researcher reflexivity, in which the researcher is positioned in the research. One reason for conducting qualitative research is to give voice to silenced voices (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). I chose a qualitative research design because I wanted to give voice to the persistence experiences of Black women who attended a distance education (DE) doctoral program in education.

The qualitative design chosen for this research study was phenomenology. Phenomenology refers to knowledge at the conscious level and describes how one perceives, senses, and knows an experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Moustakas refers to the work of the German philosopher, Edmond Husserl, in stating that it is not possible to have knowledge without inner evidence. He also indicated that what appears in the consciousness is the actual phenomenon and through the study of the phenomenon, meaning and the essence of knowledge are discovered (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). I chose phenomenology for this research study to give voice to the persistence experiences of Black women who attended a DE doctoral program in education. I acquired knowledge of the phenomenon through using multiple methods of data

collection and gave thick, rich descriptions of the experienced phenomenon in my analysis.

Phenomenology allowed me to describe commonalities between the participants as they

experienced the shared phenomenon and revealed the true essence of the phenomenon (Creswell,

2013, p. 76).

Specifically, transcendental phenomenology was utilized in this research study.

According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology is "a scientific study of the

appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in

consciousness" (p. 49). Transcendental means that the study of the phenomena moves beyond

what is seen in the everyday and to the inner ego in which everything is perceived with a fresh

lens, as if looking at it for the first time (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). In transcendental

phenomenology, the concept of epoche is used to assist in this process. Epoche is defined as

"refraining from judgment, to abstain or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of

perceiving things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Transcendental phenomenology further requires

the researcher to "abstain from making suppositions and focus on a specific topic freshly and

naively, in a wide-open sense" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). I chose transcendental phenomenology

because I wanted to set aside my own experiences with the study phenomenon. Due to my

experiences with the phenomenon, I did not want my experiences to cloud my interpretation of

the data, rather, I wanted to look at the phenomenon with fresh eyes, as if experiencing it for the

first time. I also believed that it was important that the voices of the participants, whose voices

are often silenced, are heard above all. Furthermore, I was interested in the "what" and "how" of

the participants' experiences. I wanted to know what the participants experienced through

textural descriptions and how they experienced the phenomenon through structural descriptions

(Creswell, 2013, p. 80). The structural essence of the phenomenon was developed through the

process of imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) stated that imaginative variation allows for the differentiation of various possibilities of the phenomena in question to be explored and synthesized so that the structural description of the essence can be obtained, while the textural description is what the participants experienced and is supported by verbatim statements from their experiences.

<div align="center">**Research Questions**</div>

**Central Question:** What are the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

**Sub-Question 1:** What personal factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

**Sub-Question 2**: What social factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

**Sub-Question 3:** What institutional factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?

<div align="center">**Setting**</div>

As participants were primarily obtained through convenience sampling initially and then through snowball sampling, a specific site was not used; however, all participants successfully completed a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.) in an accredited distance education program within the field of education. Programs attended by the participants varied in geographic location with seven schools located in southern states, three schools in the western part of the United States and two schools located in the northeastern United States. Additionally, all schools had obtained accreditation through national accrediting bodies that are recognized by the United States

Department of Education.  Participants were asked to give their school name on the demographic survey and university accreditation was verified.

## Participants

In order to fully describe the essence of the phenomenon, only women who identified as Black and who lived the experience of persisting to completion of a doctoral degree in a DE program in education within the last five years were selected for participation in the study.  The primary method of sampling was purposive sampling.  Purposive sampling is a type of sampling in which information rich cases are chosen because the researcher can learn a lot about the phenomenon under study by selecting these cases (Patton, 2015, p. 53).  Specifically, the type of purposive sampling that was utilized was convenience sampling and recruitment through personal, professional, and institutional contacts, as well as social media platforms.  From this initial sample, snowball sampling was then utilized and participants were asked if they knew of any additional participants who met the selection criteria and would be interested in participating in the research study.

Regarding sample size, Creswell (2013) shared that sample size in phenomenology can range from 3-15 participants (p. 78).  For the purposes of this study, 10 participants were initially selected, and then an additional two interviews were conducted to confirm thematic saturation. After the interviewing of the 12th participant, no new themes were added to the data analysis after reviewing and coding subsequent transcripts, thus data collection was deemed complete.

In terms of variation, participants varied in their demographic regions, school settings, years-to-degree completion rates, and marital and familial statuses.  Variation also occurred in the types of distance education programs, with participants completing some DE and exclusively DE programs, cohort and noncohort model programs, as well as one participant who completed

her program at an HBCU.  Pseudonyms were given to all participants and sites to protect their

identity. A description of participants, their pseudonyms, and their demographic data follows.

Table 1

*Description of Participants*

| Pseudonym | Age Range | Marital Status | Number of Children | Degree Type | Program Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Angel | 50-59 | Married | Two | Ed.D. | Some, but not all DE, Cohort |
| Brenda | 30-39 | Divorced | Three | Ed.D. | Exclusively DE, Cohort |
| Crystal | 30-39 | Married | Zero | Ed.D. | Some, but not all DE, Cohort |
| Denise | 40-49 | Married | Zero | Ph.D. | Exclusively DE, Cohort |
| Erica | 30-39 | Married | Two | Ph.D. | Some, but not all DE, Noncohort |
| Fannie | 30-39 | Divorced | Three | Ed.D. | Exclusively DE, Noncohort |
| Gloria | 40-49 | Divorced | One | Ed.D. | Some but not all DE, Noncohort, |
| Heaven | 40-49 | Single | One | Ed.D. | Exclusively DE, Cohort |
| India | 50-59 | Single | Zero | Ed.D. | Some but not all DE, Cohort |
| Jamie | 40-49 | Divorced | One | Ed.D. | Exclusively DE, cohort |
| Karen | 40-49 | Married | One | Ed.D. | Some but not all DE, Noncohort |
| Laura | 30-39 | Married | Three | Ed.D. | Some but not all DE, Noncohort |

**Procedures**

The first step in conducting this research study was to apply and receive permission to

conduct the study through the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix

A).  Once IRB approval was obtained, participants were elicited through word of mouth, social

media posts, my dissertation Chair and committee members' contacts, and personal connections. Once participants were elicited, the demographic survey link was sent to each participant to confirm they met the study selection criteria. After confirming they met the selection criteria, participants were emailed the consent form, the timeline completion protocol, and an interview time was selected. In all, four types of data were collected from the participants. The first method of data collection was the completion of a demographic survey to gather background and demographic information from the participants. In the second method, participants were asked to complete a timeline of their personal, social, and academic experiences that contributed to their educational journey as a Black woman. After completing the timeline, participants participated in a semi-structured interview according to the interview protocol listed in Appendix E. The interviews were recorded and recordings were transcribed by an independent transcription service. Lastly, participants were asked to write letters of advice to Black women pursuing doctoral degrees in distance education programs as a fourth point of data collection.

## The Researcher's Role

As the human instrument, the one collecting data, examining documents, and conducting interviews with participants in this study (Creswell, 2013), it was important that I recognized and articulated my own biases and assumptions regarding the phenomenon. I initially became interested in the topic of doctoral persistence as I began to metacognitively evaluate my own experiences with this phenomenon. I am a Black woman, married with three children, and enrolled in a DE doctoral program. I have attempted to complete my doctoral studies through three different doctoral programs. The first two experiences were at residential schools and I had to quit the programs due to my husband receiving a job out of state during my first program and

lack of funding in my second program. After these experiences with residential schools, I decided to enroll in a DE doctoral program.

There were many factors that led to my decision to enroll in a DE program. Like much of the research surrounding limited residency programs, my factors for persistence best fit into the categories of social, personal, and institutional. Regarding the social factors that led to my enrollment and persistence in a distance education program, I have a supportive spouse who could assist me with childcare for our children on evening and weekends when I needed to complete school assignments. I also have a group of Black women in my life who have either completed a doctoral degree and understand the dedication and sacrifice it takes to persist to completion or for those who have not completed a doctoral degree, they value education and the importance of pursuing higher education. Regardless, this group of women pray for and with me, take care of my children when needed, and provide words of encouragement, affirmation, and support that contributed to my ability to persist.

Next, personal factors that led to my enrollment and persistence in a DE doctoral program were that I am very intrinsically motivated. I do not require a lot of feedback and direction from outside sources to work towards a goal, but rather I have an inherent ability to focus on and accomplish goals. I am also well organized and an efficient time manager. These skills have contributed to my successful persistence in a DE program.

In terms of institutional factors, my DE program offered a substantial tuition discount for veterans and their families. As a spouse of a veteran, I was able to take advantage of this discount and it assisted in making my doctoral degree affordable. Also, my institution offered classes in eight-week sessions with all assignments due on Sunday evenings. This model allowed me to work full-time during the week, take care of my family obligations, and work on

school assignments in the evenings and on weekends, as needed. The flexibility to complete coursework around my family schedule significantly contributed to my persistence in a DE doctoral program.

Lastly, my doctoral program held required residencies on weekends and week-long sessions over spring, summer, and winter breaks. As a public school employee, I was able to take the required residency courses during my breaks from work, which also contributed to my persistence. In sum, it was the total of these factors and experiences that led to my own persistence as a Black woman enrolled in a DE doctoral program. As I conducted this research study, I brought into my consciousness any experiences, biases and assumptions that I have regarding the phenomenon through journaling and bracketing. I also utilized memoing throughout the data collection process to help eliminate my bias, decrease my own voice and experiences, and increase the voice of the participants.

## Data Collection

Prior to data collection, approval was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University. Data were initially collected via a demographic survey (Appendix C) to determine if participants met the research study criteria. Once it was confirmed that the potential participant met the research study criteria, individuals were invited to participate in the research study. Informed consent documents and the timeline protocol were contained in the invitation to participate email. Data for those who chose to participate were collected via the completion of personal timelines, semi-structured interviews, and letters.

### Demographic Survey

Once individuals were recommended via personal, social, professional, and institutional contacts, they were sent a link to complete the demographic survey. The purpose of the

demographic survey was to gain demographic data to ensure that the potential participants met the research study criteria.  Potential participants were asked questions regarding the type of degree program they completed, the type of degree received, and their racial group identification. Moreover, data regarding their age, marital status, and number of children were gathered for descriptive statistics purposes (see Table 1).

**Timelines**

After it was determined that participants met the research study criteria by their selections on the demographic survey, they were invited to participate in the next phase of the study.  When they elected to participate, an email with the informed consent and the attached timeline template was sent out.  The writing prompt and timeline reporting template are found in Appendix D.  For this first method of data collection, participants were asked to complete timelines of personal, professional, and academic events.  The purpose of these timelines was for participants to reflect on their life journey and identify any critical incidents in their own experiences that contributed to their decision making and educational persistence.  Patton (2015) shared that writing as a part of the data collection process is another way in which participants can be reflective about their experiences and identify any critical incidents in their own experiences (p. 485). This method was chosen as a first point of data collection because the reflective practice of writing about their educational development and history allowed for a starting point for interviewees as they moved into the second form of data collection, semi-structured interviews.  Seven of the 12 study participants completed this method of data collection.  Several attempts were made to secure the remaining five timelines; however, these attempts were unsuccessful.

**Interviews**

According to Patton (2015), interviews are a type of qualitative data in which open-ended questions can produce in-depth responses that tell about people's experiences, perceptions, knowledge, feelings, and opinions (p. 14). This type of data collection is the primary mode of data collection for phenomenology. Interview data were useful in the current research study because it allowed participants to tell about their experiences with the phenomenon under study. The interview data yielded quotes that allowed for context and interpretation (Patton, 2015, p. 14). All interviews were conducted via phone and were recorded via a personal recording device for later transcription and analysis. All 12 participants participated in an individual interview. Following is the standardized open-ended interview protocol, followed by supporting research for each question. These questions are also listed in Appendix E. The standardized open-ended interview was chosen because respondents were able to respond in an open manner, yet all respondents were asked the same questions. This method also allowed for reduced interview effects and bias and helped facilitate the organization and analysis of data (Patton, 2015, p. 438).

1. Please tell me about yourself. Let's start with where you are from and your current family situation, like who lives at home with you?

2. How about your occupation? Tell me what you do for a living and how long have you held that position? Did you hold any other professional positions prior to your current occupation? Please tell me about them.

3. Let's talk about your timeline a little. Please walk me through the timeline and the events you shared.

4. When you review this timeline, what sticks out to you or seems significant in your educational journey?

5.  Let's move into your pursuit of a doctoral degree. What was your motivation or reasoning for pursuing the doctorate?

6.  When you think about being a Black female, why was obtaining the doctorate as a Black female important to you?

7.  You completed your doctorate in a distance education program. What was it about this format in general that attracted you or made you want to attend?

8.  How did attending a distance education program versus a traditional program contribute to your ability to complete your degree?

9.  Was there anything that was unique to your program, that influenced your decision to attend that particular university?

10. As you think about being a Black female in your program, describe that experience and how it was being a Black female in your doctorate program?

11. Were there any situations you can think of that make you feel more or less welcomed in your department?

12. Let's talk about your relationships at the university. Let's start with your faculty members at your institution. How would you describe your relationships with them?

13. Tell me about your experiences with your dissertation committee members. How about your dissertation chair? Were there any specific traits or actions these individuals took to help you succeed in your doctoral program?  Anything you would have changed in your relationship with them to help you be more successful in your program?

14. As you think about these institutional relationships further, how did your status as a Black female influence these relationships?

15. How about your peers/colleagues within your program or institution? What specific traits or actions did these individuals take to help you succeed in your doctoral program? Was there a difference in the coursework phase of the program versus the dissertation phase?

16. Now, let's talk about life outside of the university as a doctoral student. Let's start with family. What role did your family play in supporting your doctoral journey?

17. Were there other social groups that you were a part of church, community organizations, etc. that impacted your doctoral journey?

18. How about relationships outside of school. Let's talk about those relationships in your home. How did your spouse (or children) influence your doctoral journey? Were there specific traits about those relationships that impacted your journey?

19. How about relationships outside of school and your family? Were there any other significant relationships that contributed toward your doctoral journey?

20. When you think on these significant social relationships, particularly your peer relationships, were the individuals Black? If so, do you think that race mattered? If so, how?

21. As we prepare to close, let's think about your doctoral journey as a whole. A lot of research would suggest that obtaining the doctorate is challenging, what would you say motivated you to continue on those days when it was the hardest to continue?

22. Was there something you always told yourself or reminded yourself as you went through the doctoral program that helped you succeed?

23. Some of the other data I explored, indicated that not many Black females obtain the doctorate. What was different for you or why were you able to succeed when many other Black females do not?

24. We've covered a lot of ground in our conversation and I appreciate the time you've given

to this. One final question, was there anything missing from your experiences that you

believe would have helped you finish sooner or made the journey easier?

Questions one and two are demographic/background questions and are meant to further

identify characteristics of the person being interviewed. These two questions were meant to

provide the researcher with information on how the participant perceives themselves and their

background (Patton, 2015, p. 445). Questions three and four are knowledge questions. Patton

shared that knowledge questions tell about information that the participants know (p. 444). As

the participants had already completed their timelines, these knowledge questions served as

rapport-building opportunities between the participants and the researcher. They also served as a

foundation to build on for further interviewing. Question five served as an experience question

specifically geared towards the motivation to pursue the doctoral degree.

This study was geared towards the experiences of Black women and their doctoral

experiences, thus it was important to ask questions that pertained to these factors. Moreover, we

know that educational experiences can be shaped by demographic features such as race and

gender (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As such, question six probed towards the doctoral

experience and the influences of gender and race. Moreover, questions seven through 24 were

designed to provoke the participants to think more deeply about their experiences and the factors

that contributed to their experience. Several researchers who have explored the educational

journeys of Black women and doctoral persistence of this group have concluded that a mix of

institutional, social, and personal factors have contributed to their success (Jones, et al., 2013;

Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001). Thus, questions seven through 23 were

designed to probe the participants to discuss these factors as they relate to their own doctoral

persistence in a distance education program. Lastly, question 24 served as one-shot question in which the participants shared any information that they did not have opportunity to share in the previous questions.  This question also served as a closing question to finish the interview process (Patton, 2015, p. 470).  The interview protocol and supporting literature are also listed in Appendix F.

**Letters**

For the last method of data collection, after the interviews were completed, participants were asked to write a letter of advice to another Black woman who is enrolled or is considering enrolling in a DE doctoral program.  Participants were asked to type this letter and email it to the researcher within one week of the interview.  The prompt given to participants was:

> Now that you have talked about and reflected on your own doctoral student experience, imagine that you have been asked to write a letter of advice to another Black woman who is enrolled or is considering enrolling in a distance education doctoral program.  What would you share with this individual about the doctoral experiences of a Black woman in a distance education doctoral program?  What specific advice would you give to this individual as she pursues her degree in a distance education doctoral program?

This data collection was an additional method for participants to reflect on their own experiences and identify factors that were critical to their ability to persist in distance education doctoral programs.  All 12 participants wrote an advice letter and the letters were analyzed via the same data analysis steps utilized for the interview transcripts.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the steps for transcendental phenomenology and phenomenological reduction as described by Moustakas (1994).  The same steps for analysis

were utilized for all three data collection methods, interviews, timelines, and letters. The first step in this process was the *epoche* in which all my preconceived judgments, perceptions and ideas were set aside (p. 86). This was done through journaling and bracketing of my own experiences throughout the research process. From this point, phenomenological reduction took place by utilizing the steps listed next.

After bracketing, the next step of data analysis was horizonalization. In this process, every statement was treated as if it has the same value, and significant statements were identified to tell how participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). To accomplish this, I printed out each interview transcript, read them, and highlighted significant statements. From these highlighted statements, I tested each expression against the requirements listed by Moustakas for reduction and elimination to determine invariant constituents. Moustakas recommended testing if each statement contains a moment of the experience that is necessary for understanding the experience and testing if is it possible to abstract and label the statement; if so it is considered an invariant constituent. This process was followed and invariant constituents were used in the analysis of the data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120). Statements that were vague, repetitive, or overlapping were eliminated. This process left me with only horizons, or the textural meanings of the phenomenon. I then took the horizons and developed clusters of meanings or themes. The process of developing clusters and themes from the horizons is displayed in Appendices K and L. From these themes and clusters, I wrote the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. Textural descriptions refer to the thoughts, feelings, examples, and situations that comprise an experience, while structural descriptions refer to the process of structuring what was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). This structural description was done through the process of imaginative variation. In imaginative variation, the textural themes

are placed into structures where various possibilities of time, space, causality, and relationship to self are explored by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).  In essence, it is how the person experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).  As recommended by Moustakas, this process was done for each participant and then developed into a composite description describing the *essence* of the phenomenon for the entire group (p. 121). This process was not done through qualitative data analysis software, rather it was done through the primary researcher linking responses to appropriate research questions and literature and describing the phenomenon through these means.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is important to lend credibility to the findings and interpretations (Patton, 2015, p. 685).  The four areas addressed to lend trustworthiness to this study are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the confidence in the reality or truth of the findings.  Credibility helps ensure that the researcher's representation of the data accurately reflects the participants' views (Patton, 2015, p. 658).  The methods that were used to ensure credibility were data triangulation, in which data were collected from multiple sources (letters, timelines, and semi-structured interviews) to provide corroborating evidence.  Another method for increasing credibility was member checks.  In this method, I took the transcripts and preliminary data analysis back to the participants and asked them to review the findings to determine if the data accurately depicted their experiences and responses to interview questions (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).  The last method of credibility that was employed was peer debriefing.  For this process, I

elicited the assistance of a fellow researcher with an earned doctorate degree in education and experience with qualitative research methods to review my data collection and findings to assist in making sure they had fidelity and were not biased.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability in a qualitative study focuses on the process of the research study and making sure that the process is logical and consistent and that the data are reliable (Patton, 2015, p. 658). Dependability was addressed through an audit trail. In the audit trail detailed and transparent information was shared regarding the steps taken throughout the research study. This information is placed in the appendices regarding researcher memos and excerpts from the interview transcripts (see Appendices G, H, I, J & K). To further address confirmability, the use of an external auditor was employed. In this case, a researcher external to the research study was asked to review the process of the current study and the product to ensure that the findings were supported by the data (Cohen, 2006).

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the issue of whether the findings of the study may be generalized to other studies, sites or participants (Patton, 2015, p. 385). Transferability was addressed in this research study using thick, rich descriptions. By providing the reader with a thick and rich description of the settings, participants, data, and overall phenomenon, the reader is able to ascertain to which settings the findings can be generalized (Cohen, 2006). Transferability was also addressed through maximum variation sampling techniques. Sites and participants were selected due to their variation to increase the chances that the findings would reflect these differences (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). When sampling for the research study I looked for variation in the type of DE programs the participants attended, such as exclusively or some

distance education, and cohort versus noncohort, as well as variation in geographic locations and religious affiliation. I also looked for variation in the participants themselves, in terms of age, background, and family composition.

## Ethical Considerations

For this study, there were several ethical considerations to address. The first consideration was that the participants shared personal information. To protect their identity, the participants and sites were given pseudonyms. Furthermore, to protect the transcripts and ensure confidentiality, they were limited to myself and the external auditors and peer reviewers. The printed transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet and the electronic copies were password protected to limit access.

Another ethical consideration was the potential for conflicts of interest. As a human instrument and someone who had experienced the phenomenon under study, I was mindful about how much information I shared about my own personal experiences. While this close relationship to the participants could be viewed as a negative characteristic, it has been found that when a Black woman interviews another Black woman, it is beneficial and intimate because there are fewer boundaries to overcome (Johnson-Bailey, 1999). It was important that I balanced establishing rapport and minimizing my influence on the data. I participated in memoing to limit any potential conflicts of interest throughout the data collection process.

## Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods that were used to conduct the current research study. Data were collected via a transcendental phenomenological approach to capture the true essence of the phenomenon and to give voice to the doctoral persistence experiences of Black women in DE doctoral programs. Measures were taken to ensure that data were collected

from several sources, that there was maximum variation in sites and participants, and that analysis followed the structure of phenomenological reduction. Measures of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were also employed. The following chapters provide a summary of the research results, implications and suggestions for universities and future doctoral students, as well as suggestions for further research.

**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the persistence experiences of Black women in DE doctoral programs.  The central research question was**:** What are the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?  The sub-questions were: Sub-Question 1: What personal factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs? Sub-Question 2: What social factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?  Sub-Question 3: What institutional factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?  This chapter begins with a brief description of the 12 participants. Participants were initially recruited through convenience sampling and then snowball sampling. Data from the participants were collected via the completion of personal timelines, semi-structured interviews, and advice letters to future Black women doctoral students.  The remainder of the chapter focuses on the analysis of the research data and significant findings.

**Participants**

This study's participants were all women who identified as Black and completed their doctoral degrees via distance education.  The participants ranged in age from 30-59 years. Eleven of the 12 participants completed their doctoral degrees at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and one participant completed her degree at a historically Black college/university (HBCU).  Ten of the participants completed Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degrees, while two participants completed Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees.  All degrees were housed in the school of education and 11 of the 12 participants held previous or current

employment in the field of education.  Participants, all of whom were given pseudonyms, are described in the following sections.

**Angel**

Angel is a 50-59 year old Black female who completed her Ed.D. in a some, but not all DE (Allen & Seaman, 2017) cohort program.  Angel is married and has two grown children.  She works full time as an educator in a K-12 environment and is actively involved in church ministry as a Pastor's wife and in her sorority.  Angel completed her degree in five years and had previously attended a residential doctoral program when her children were younger, but quit that program due to sexual harassment from a faculty member and difficulty with balancing school and young children.  Angel describes the elatedness of the title of "doctor" and the absence of other Black females who had obtained doctorates as motivating factors in her doctoral journey.

**Brenda**

Brenda is a Black female, in the 30-39 age group, who completed her Ed.D. in a some, but not all DE cohort program, with once per month residencies.  Brenda is a divorced mother of three children ages 19, 15, and 10.  Brenda completed her program in four years from the date of her first class.  Brenda was medically retired from the military and opted to use the last two years she would have spent in the military to complete her doctoral degree.  Brenda describes serving as a role model for her children and financial independence as motivating factors for completing her degree.

**Crystal**

Crystal is in the 30-39 age group and identifies as both Black and lesbian, gay, bilingual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ).  She is married and does not currently have children. Crystal works in student services in a university setting.  She completed her Ed.D. degree in a

some, but not all DE, cohort program. Crystal described her experiences as being impacted by her status of being both Black and LGBTQ. Crystal was motivated to pursue her degree because she has always been hardworking and wanted to achieve "more." She was also motivated to make her father, who died when she was pursuing her undergraduate degree, proud.

**Denise**

Denise is in the 40-49 age group and is married, with no children. Denise currently works in administration at a university. She completed her Ph.D. in an exclusive DE cohort program at a HBCU. Denise was the only participant who completed her degree at an HBCU. Denise pursued the doctoral degree because she believed it would give her credibility and aid her professional goals. Denise completed her degree in five years. Denise has a strong network of Black females who earned doctoral degrees. She indicated that support and shared experiences of this network positively contributed to her doctoral journey.

**Erica**

Erica is in the 30-39 age group and is married with two children, ages 10 and 14. Erica obtained her Ph.D. in a some, but not all DE non-cohort program. She is currently a K-12 principal in a high school. Erica took eight years to complete her degree from the time of her first class. She described overcoming personal health challenges to persist to completion. Erica is also one of few participants who described institutional racism as impacting her journey, and she persisted by advocating for her research interests and connecting specifically with her dissertation Chair, who was a Black female.

**Fannie**

Fannie is in the 30-39 age group and is a divorced mother of three children ages 19, eight, and seven. She completed her Ed.D. in an exclusively DE non-cohort program. Fannie currently

works for her local government on education initiatives. Fannie viewed the doctorate as a way up and out of her poverty-stricken background. She previously attended another distance education program, 11 years before completing her Ed.D. She dropped out due to personal reasons. Fannie completed her degree in three years and attributed the strong working relationships she established with her ex-husband and dissertation Chair as critical to her ability to persist to completion.

**Gloria**

Gloria is a divorced mother of one child, age 15, and is in the 40-49 age group. Gloria completed her degree in a some, but not all DE non-cohort program. She currently works as a high school teacher and teaches distance education college courses. Gloria completed her degree in eight years and indicated that her program underwent significant restructuring that she had to navigate to persist. Gloria's motivation for completing the doctoral degree was to increase her salary as a teacher and to motivate other teachers and educational leaders.

**Heaven**

Heaven is in the 40-49 age group and is a single mother of one child, age 16. Heaven completed her Ed.D. degree in an exclusive DE cohort model program. She currently works in the field of adult education at the postsecondary level. Heaven's experience was unique in that while she took her courses on-line, she had an assistantship in the physical department of her program, thus she was able to make face-to-face connections with students and faculty on a daily basis. Heaven described these connections, as well as the connections she made with other doctoral students and one student who shared similar life status with her, as vital to her persistence journey. Heaven completed her degree in four years.

**India**

India is a single woman, aged 50-59, with no children.  India completed her Ed.D. in four years, via a some, but not all DE cohort program, including an overseas residency.  She currently works as a college professor for an online university.  India's family of origin played a significant role in her doctoral persistence.  Although all her immediate family members were deceased when she was completing her doctoral degree, India credits them with instilling the value of education in her and that as a Black woman she would need to be better than average to be recognized.  India completed her degree in four years and attributes some of her success to organizational goals and setting deadlines and working backwards from the deadline to meet her goals.

**Jamie**

Jamie is a divorced mother of a 25-year-old daughter with an autism spectrum disorder who lives with her.  Jamie is in the 40-49 age group and completed her Ed.D. in four years via a some, but not all DE cohort program.  She currently works as an educational coach while pursuing other career opportunities.  Jamie chose her program in part because it was a Christian based program.  She attributes her success to her ability to seek out information and not being afraid to ask questions when she did not understand what was expected of her during the doctoral process.  Jamie was motivated to pursue the doctorate due to military tuition benefits that she did not want to go to "waste."

**Karen**

Karen is a married female in the 40-49 age group.  Karen attended a some, but not all DE noncohort Christian university.  She completed her degree within four years and when in her program, she did not have any children and experienced a divorce.  Karen is now remarried and a

step-mother to three adult children. She currently works as an administrator for a university.

Karen attributes most of her doctoral persistence to the support she received during her journey.

Karen's family deeply values education and encouraged her, and she also received support from

colleagues who completed doctoral programs. She also had an extraordinarily supportive

dissertation Chair.

**Laura**

Laura is a married female in the 30-39 age group. Laura attended a some, but not all DE

non cohort, Christian university. Laura has three children ages 19, 10, and four. She completed

her degree within four years and currently works as an adjunct professor at several universities.

Laura indicated that during her doctoral journey she had immeasurable support from her spouse

and family. She also often relied on her faith and the mantra "I can do all things through Christ

who strengthens me" to get her through her doctoral journey.

<div align="center">

**Results**

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This study was guided by one central research question and three sub-questions to

describe the persistence experiences of Black females in distance education doctoral programs.

Participants completed demographic surveys, shared their personal timelines, participated in

semi-structured interviews, and wrote letters of advice to future Black female doctoral students

in distance education programs. The salient themes of their shared experiences, as they relate to

the sub research questions are presented as follows.

**Sub-Question 1: What personal factors contributed to the persistence experiences of**

**Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?**

Several interview questions, along with analysis of the personal timelines and advice

letters, were utilized to ascertain the personal factors that contributed to persistence experiences

of the participants.  Several themes emerged under this question including what is best described as grit, serving as a role model, and the status, and subsequent respect of being a doctor.

**Grit**

One of the most salient personal factors that contributed to the persistence of many participants was the concept of grit.  Grit is defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007).  Grit involves working towards challenges and maintaining effort levels and interests, across time, regardless of failure, plateaus in progress, and adversity.  For many, this describes the doctoral process.  Ten of the 12 participants, including Angel, Brenda, Crystal, Denise, Erica, Fannie, Gloria, Jamie, Karen, and Laura, described "not giving up" as a factor associated with their persistence.  These 10 participants noted that they "don't quit" and could not leave the dissertation process unfinished.  Erica shared that even when she wanted to quit she didn't because "that's how I was raised, you start something, you finish it. I just was like, I can't quit."  Denise shared similar sentiments when asked what motivated her to continue, "I'm internally motivated. I'm a driven person. . .  I just never understood why people would quit.  You've gotten this far, why would you quit?"  Karen also indicated that she felt as if she quit on the doctorate, she would be quitting on herself.  Even when faced with difficult life circumstances, participants continued to persist.  Brenda shared how her brother was murdered during her doctoral process.  She wanted to quit, but she determined to move forward.  "It's like you are giving it everything you have, there's no more left to give because everything in your life that can go wrong, sometimes does go wrong. It all depends on your strength and tenacity."

Along the idea of grit, many participants recognized the need to take a "mental break" from the rigor of the doctoral process.  Other participants shared that while they recognized at

some point during the process they needed to take a break for their own self-care and preservation, they did not always do so. Heaven shared:

> I did not want to quit. . . maybe pause, but not quit. I thought about pausing but I felt like pausing would be the path to quit, so I didn't even pause. That's just me, if I decide I'm doing it, I just do it.

Other participants were encouraged by their committee members to take breaks or slow down their process, but they were determined to move forward. India was encouraged to slow down her timeline for completion, but she did not. "I just dug my heels in and said. I got to get finished, and I got to get finished the way I want to get finished. Which means when I'm walking at graduation, I didn't want anything else to have to do."

Crystal also described a conversation with her Chair where she was encouraged to slow down and her response was,

> I would tell him I want to accomplish this, this and this and sometimes
>
> he was like, "Okay, I see you and you are really running but you need to slow down, and
>
> I was like "I don't have time to slow down, so these are the deadlines that we are going to
>
> push for and I'd like to get this done.

The concept of grit was further developed in these participants, as many of them experienced significant traumatic events either right before beginning their doctorates or during their doctorate programs. These events included divorce, death, and health challenges. Laura and Brenda both experienced a divorce prior to starting their doctorate degrees and were consequently single mothers throughout their process. They both shared that they were motivated to pursue and finish their degrees because they felt the need to be independent for their children, both financially and vocationally. They felt as though they could not quit because they

did not have anyone else to lean on.  Erica, who almost died during childbirth while completing her doctoral coursework, shared this same type of grit and overcoming that trauma to persist,

> It is traumatic [the doctoral process] . . . I think this is kind of part of what we do [as Black women in the United States.] I think because we always come against challenges, the challenges in the doctoral program are not new to us, they're just new situations, but the work you have to put in and how you have to show your value and worth are things that's not new to us. We always have to do that.

Other participants, including Erica, Karen, and Fannie, all underwent major surgeries during their dissertation work.  They indicated that they either completed work while in the hospital or took very limited time off from their studies during recovery, mainly because they were committed to completing the doctoral process.

McGee and Stovall (2015), suggested that academically successful Black students who exhibit grit may do so to the detriment of their mental health.  This can be due to lack of self-care and ignoring mental health concerns.  The participants of this study utilized grit to succeed, but they did not place emphasis on their self-care during the program.  In fact, only one participant, Jamie, discussed actively participating in self-care during the doctoral process; however, several of the participants in their advice letters gave advice for self-care.  In her letter, India wrote, "Self-care is vital, such as sleep, massages, nights out with family and friends. Quiet time when you reset your mind is also of great value.  This will be a long journey so you must take care of yourself."  Fannie also advised, "Take time to tend to your personal needs; self-preservation is vital," in her advice letter.

**Role Model**

Another personal factor that contributed to the persistence journey of the participants was motivation to serve as a role model. Some participants spoke of being a role model to their own children, while others spoke of being a role model for other Black women. However, eight of the 12 participants stated this was significant in their persistence journey. For those who indicated that serving as a role model for their children was significant, not only did they not want their children to witness them giving up on a goal, but they also wanted to encourage their children to pursue their goals and dreams. Angel described her degree completion as "giving her children something to look forward to" and shared that one of her sons is currently pursuing his doctorate after seeing Angel obtain hers. Also, Brenda shared a conversation with her ex-husband in which he encouraged her to finish her degree and indicated, "How can you expect our sons to go ahead and achieve greater and earn advanced degrees, if you haven't done it?" Brenda indicated that she understood that she would be hypocritical and not setting a good example for her children if she did not pursue her goals. She described that it was at that point she decided to continue to pursue her doctoral degree.

Other participants provided more examples of how leaving a legacy and serving as a role model contributed to their persistence. Fannie wanted to quit at times; however, her motivation to serve as an inspiration to her children assisted her in persisting. She noted, "Just letting them know and letting them see that if you work hard, you can achieve whatever it is you want to achieve. I thought that was important."

For participants who did not have children, the concept of serving as a role model for others was also a factor in their persistence. Crystal was recently married with no children, but when describing her motivation to continue to persist:

I didn't really have an example. I just knew that I needed to be the representation for another young woman that was going to need that encouragement, or who would encounter me in some area of the university and I wanted to be able to say, "This is how we excel." We are just as intelligent, we are able to bring something to the table . . . there needs to be more Black women like myself who can inspire more Black women.

Karen, who also did not have biological children at the time of her doctoral journey shared that obtaining a doctorate was important for her because she was raised in the South where there "were not many people who looked like me who had one [a doctorate degree]," so it was important for her to achieve the doctorate to show others that it could be done and to set an example.

**Status**

The status of achieving a terminal degree and the subsequent respect that comes from having the title of "doctor" and finishing the process as a Black female was a major persistence factor for seven of the 12 participants. Angel, Brenda Crystal, Denise, Gloria, Heaven, and Jamie all indicated this theme. For example, when discussing why she continued to pursue the doctorate when others told her she did not need a doctorate for her career goals, Crystal indicated "I want to be able to speak and have that authority behind my name." Denise also indicated that she believed that because of her status as a Black woman in America she needed a Ph.D.:

> . . . like you have to strive more, be more, do more. And it gives you credibility, to be quite honest. When I walk into that room and I'm "Dr. Denise," it gives me more clout than if I was just "Denise," with a master's degree. And I think that, unfortunately, for African Americans in general, to have credibility, you have to go through the highest level of education.

Heaven shared similar sentiments,

> . . . I think just obtaining the degree and becoming an expert, and also realizing along the
>
> way that my voice and having a terminal degree will help me be louder, I think. Because
>
> I'm a woman and because I'm Black, I think that I need that weight behind me.

In addition, when Heaven gave advice in her letter she encouraged the future Black woman to remember that at the end of the journey they would be "an expert and with an earned degree, people will be required to call you doctor."

Brenda and Jamie both also expressed the sentiment that as Black women, they needed the degree to increase their standing in society or as another way to set themselves apart to achieve a higher status.

For others, the respect was found simply in the title of "doctor." Angel shared, "I did not know very many Black women who had gotten doctorate degrees. So, I wanted to be one of the elite. Like I said I wanted people to call me doctor..." Gloria also indicated that looking forward to being called "doctor" motivated her and that at the beginning of every school year, students in her class would call her "Dr. Gloria," which motivated her to continue. Crystal shared that being "Dr. Crystal" was something that was important to her and an important part of her new identity and validation and motivation to finish. Furthermore, Fannie's advice in her letter appeared to support the need for the respect of the title, as she wrote, "You might experience imposter syndrome or feel that you are incompetent or inadequate," and further encouraged potential doctoral students to push past these feelings and to remember that they are deserving of a doctoral degree.

**Sub-Question 2**: **What social factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?**

The themes of significant peer, family, and mentoring relationships were salient social factors in the persistence of study participants.

**Peer Relationships**

The theme of peer relationships was salient for all 12 participants. The participants discussed these relationships as support from both established relationships prior to doctoral study and relationships formed during their doctoral programs. Particularly, the themes of support from other Black doctoral students, a significant best friend relationship, which was often another Black female, and social group support, such as from sorority affiliations or military groups were most prominent within the research results.

**Support from other Black doctoral students.** One of the most salient factors for this group of participants was support from other Black doctoral students. Nine of the 12 participants indicated that support from other Black doctoral students was key in their persistence journey. In most cases, the support was from another Black woman. In some cases, support was provided by Black male doctoral students. Jamie, Angel, Laura, and Gloria all described attending their first residencies and connecting with other Black students who naturally cliqued and decided that they would keep in touch and hold each other accountable during the doctoral process. Fannie also described naturally forming a connection with other Black doctoral students,

> We would have these different online sessions and we noticed it was only a few of us, Black people. So, we knew from the jump we had to support each other, because we knew many of us, we were coming from environments in which many of our friends and family had not gone through this process. So, we knew that we did not have outside people outside of ourselves that would be able to support us in the way that we needed.

India shared the sentiments of other participants when describing her first residency: "I felt that immediate connection because I had people in the classroom who looked like me, and I knew that from the beginning [we would connect]." India indicated that these relationships further developed over time and assisted in her persistence journey.

Denise, who was the only participant to attend an HBCU, spoke of these relationships in a unique way:

Going to an HBCU was good. . . it felt like a sense of belonging and it was great to be amongst other people pursuing their Ph.D.'s as African Americans. After our defense, we all went out to dinner, and it was about ten of us. And so that was the first time that I had ever been around ten other Black people with Ph.D.'s and it was so powerful . . . I knew we were all going to be a family forever, because of that experience.

Erica, Denise, and Karen all shared that they had friends, Black women, who were present at various points in their doctoral journeys and they were all able to encourage and help each other through the journey. These friends were not in their same programs or cohorts of the participants, but these relationships were important aspects of their doctoral persistence journeys in terms of support and encouragement.

**Significant best friend relationship.** In addition to support from Black doctoral students, seven of the 12 participants spoke of a significant relationship with a Black female, whom they often called their best friend, as playing an important role in their persistence journey. In some cases, they met these individuals while in school; but, in other cases the relationship formed outside of school. The significance of the relationships was that they were formed with another Black female who provided encouragement and support on the persistence journey. Jamie described meeting another student who was Black and a single mother at her first

residency and shared, "From the first residency on, her and I were lock, step, key, we're running; we're like sisters now…I call her my dissertation battle buddy." Denise also shared a significant best friend relationship, who also happened to be a sorority sister and indicated that "She had gotten her doctoral degree in 2012 and really definitely helped me through. I talked to her every day about what I was going through and I stayed with her when I went to my residencies. She would just be moral support and comfort me through." Karen had a relationship similar to Denise's in which her friend, who was a Black female, had just completed her dissertation and Karen shared that this friend "was able to clue me in on some of the things and the lessons that she learned along the way," which assisted Karen in finishing her dissertation. Laura also described a significant relationship with another Black female whom she met during a residency at her institution, whom she spoke with every day and they supported each other through the doctoral process until graduation.

For others, while their best friends had not been through a doctoral program, they were able to provide support in very tangible ways. Heaven, who subsisted on a graduate assistantship stipend during her studies and is a single mom, indicated that her "bestie" helped her provide extras for her daughter while she was in school. Angel also shared that she and her best friend would talk every day and she was there for the times when she was "hating life" and the doctoral process. Angel's best friend provided support to her during this time and Angel wrote a special acknowledgement to her in her dissertation acknowledgements. Erica, Gloria, India, and Heaven also supported this theme in their advice letters by encouraging future Black women doctoral students to find at least one significant person who will support them throughout their doctoral programs.

**Social group support.** Seven of the 12 participants indicated that social support received from sorority affiliations and other group memberships such as former military members, positively impacted their degree completion. India indicated that she had one sorority sister who she would call and they would "literally be crying and praying on the phone" on the days when the journey was most difficult. Angel shared an experience where she connected with two Black women in her cohort and they immediately connected because they were all part of Black Greek letter organizations (sororities). They would hold each other accountable and ". . . it got to a point where we would call each other at one, two, three o'clock in the morning and say, hey, I'm in the middle of doing this paper. What are you doing? Get Up!" Crystal, who coincidentally was in the same cohort as Angel, also described this same experience with Angel and another Black female in their cohort. She indicated that the three bonded because they had several things in common, including being Black females, in education, who were in Greek letter organizations. Crystal shared "That support system was instrumental in making sure that everyone, well the three of us, felt accountable for one another. That really helped me to get through, even to completion." Crystal also had support from sorority sisters, all Black females, who were not in her cohort. She described her sorority sisters rallying around her for her data collection and helped her receive 90 dissertation survey responses in four days, due in part to sharing it amongst her sorority network. When she asked for assistance, she indicated the response from this group was "Crystal needs our help . . . this is our sister, we have to help her."

Brenda, who was retired from the military, shared that her soldier friends helped her to attend her residencies by watching her children. She described this support as automatic and that as soon as she said "Hey, I'm leaving. I gotta go to school this weekend," it would be nothing for soldier friends to say, "I got the boys, don't worry about it, I have them." Heaven described that

she was able to travel to her residencies and know that her children were being taken care of and watched over due to this support. Lastly for Karen, it was her church community who assisted her in a very tangible way. This community assisted Karen in obtaining dissertation participants, which she described as very supportive during her dissertation phase.

**Familial Support**

The majority of participants indicated that family support was significant to their persistence. Participants shared that their families' emphasis on education and value of education as a way "up and out" significantly contributed to their persistence. This support was found in family of origin (parents), spouses, and older children above the age of 10.

**Family of origin support.** The majority of study participants indicated that support from their family of origin, particularly their parents, was significant to their ability to successfully complete their doctoral programs. For 10 of the 12 participants, this support was received from their family of origin, such as their parents, in tangible ways throughout their doctoral programs. Angel shared that her parents were her biggest cheerleaders and consistently asked her about her grades, how many classes she had left, and when her graduation would occur. Jamie also shared that her mother lived with her and provided support by watching her adult daughter with a disability, while she traveled to residencies and when she needed time to write. Jamie's mother also provided her with encouragement and would say "Wow, you're going to be the first doctor in the family." Angel indicated that while her father was deceased, her mother always demonstrated that she was proud of her and happy with her success and for completing the doctoral degree. Laura received support from both her mother and her grandmother who would babysit her children for hours at a time to provide her with uninterrupted writing time, which was significant when she was writing her dissertation. India, whose parents and grandparents were

deceased when she began her doctoral program, discussed a conversation with her grandmother that encouraged her to pursue higher education. She stated that at her master's degree graduation ceremony her grandmother asked her, "Are you satisfied?" It was this question and subsequent soul searching that caused India to move towards completing her doctoral degree.

*Value of education*. Still for others, including two participants whose parents were deceased, family of origin support was received in valuable, less tangible ways. Many participants indicated that their family's value of education and hard work encouraged them to persist in their doctoral programs. When speaking of their motivation to persist, Angel and Karen both described that their mothers were educators and strong advocates for education. Angel shared, "She instilled in us [Angel and her siblings], the need and importance of education. . . and that stuck with me forever." Karen also discussed that many of her paternal family members, who had received advanced degrees, provided additional support and encouragement. Fannie, who grew up in poverty and on government assistance, was taught and believed, "Education was a key factor in helping to lift people out of poverty." This belief was engrained in her at a young age and served as motivation to finish her doctoral degree. Erica had a similar experience when asked about the support she received from her family of origin throughout her doctoral process: "My mom was just excited that I was pursuing a doctorate, because I think she comes from that generation where the more education you obtained, the higher your status seems, but she didn't really help me with anything." Through this, Erica implied that while her mother did not provide tangible support, her mother valued the process of obtaining higher education and thus, provided support and encouragement.

*Lack of knowledge*. Significant to the theme of family of origin support was that many participants indicated that their parents did not fully understand what they were doing or how to

support them, but they attempted to support the participants in the best way they knew how. For Gloria, her mother did not always understand what she was going through or what it meant when she passed certain milestones, like the proposal defense. She had a conversation with her mom after her proposal defense in which her mom asked, "Oh, are you finished?" to which she responded, "No, mom. I'm just finished with this stage." This same conversation would ensue after she hit every milestone within her program. Fannie shared similar sentiments in that her family was supportive but shared, "They didn't understand what I was doing and how to support me." Brenda also shared stories of her mother not understanding higher education but recognizing that the doctoral pursuit was important to her and therefore supported her in very tangible way such as bringing her food, offering childcare, and riding with her for her dissertation defense and calming her nerves. Karen reported a similar theme in that while education was important for both of her parents and they, along with her siblings, were supportive of her doctoral journey, many of her other family members did not quite understand what she was doing, but they did their best to support and encourage her while she completed her doctoral degree.

**Older children support.** In addition to family of origin support, the participants who had children over the age of 10 indicated their children were supportive and understanding throughout their doctoral work. Erica shared that her children, ages 14 and 10, were supportive in that they "knew how to behave and weren't attention seeking." This made it easier for her to complete her work and she used phrases like "Mommy has homework too" to connect with her children when she needed quiet time to work on her studies. Gloria indicated this same type of support from her daughter, age 15:

There were a lot of times when I would be in front of my computer. She'd just get a coloring book or get a book and sit next to me and just do her thing, or pull a sleeping bag up and just sit next to me, lay down next to me while I was at my desk.

Brenda's oldest son, who is currently 19, would support her verbally by asking about her writing and assisting her when she fell asleep typing. He would also take his younger siblings out of the house so Brenda could focus on completing her work. Heaven, a single mom of a 15-year old daughter, shared that her daughter mostly "rolled with" her doctoral process and she found this very beneficial to her progress. She shared that her daughter also supported her in tangible ways:

When she started making meals for me, and she really stepped up and helped out around the house and she cooked and she did as much as she could to help me because she was older and she could understand the process that I was going through, you know?

This overall support of older children appeared significant for all participants with children in this age group. None of the participants with older children indicated that their children were not helpful in their doctoral persistence.

**Spousal support**. Ten of the 12 participants were currently married or previously married and despite their current status, eight participants shared that their current spouses or ex-husbands all played a critical role in providing support during their doctoral journey. This support was both in tangible ways such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, as well as words of encouragement and motivation to finish the journey. Crystal indicated that one of the biggest ways her spouse assisted was that she fed her because she did not have time to cook. Angel also shared that her spouse provided for her physical needs so that she could focus on her school work. He was also the one to encourage her to go back to school and pursue her doctorate

degree.  He provided support by telling her, "Look, while you're in school, you don't have to do anything . . . you worry about school."  Angel shared that she went to work and completed her school work but did not have to worry about housing cleaning, washing dishes, and laundry, which was instrumental to her completing her doctoral studies.  For Laura, during her coursework phase, she and her husband were both in school and they took turns with chores and housework and often completed assignments together after putting their young son to bed.  Once Laura's husband graduated, he gave her full support to complete her doctorate and would often encourage her to leave the house to complete her work.  She shared he would say, "Just go, we will be fine, go write," which was a big support to her in the dissertation completion process.  Denise and Erica's spouses were both supportive and instrumental to their success, in particular at the dissertation phase.  Denise, who married her husband at the beginning of her dissertation phase, indicated that her spouse gave her the support he needed.  Denise shared that although her husband did not always understand the dissertation process, he knew it was important to her and encouraged and supported her in her pursuit.  Erica further indicated that her spouse encouraged her to "Get this done," referring to the dissertation because it had begun to take a toll on their social, financial, and intimate life due to the time and energy required to finish the dissertation.

Brenda, a divorced participant, indicated that it was actually her ex-husband who had a conversation with her after they divorced and persuaded her to pursue her doctoral degree, since it was something she always talked about during their previous marriage.  This type of support from ex-spouses was also seen in other participants who were divorced.  Gloria, who was divorced and her ex-husband was currently deceased, spoke of his support, both when they married and after their divorce.  Gloria indicated that her ex-husband developed a system in which they would put a Post-It note on the door of the room where she was working and her

daughter would know that when the Post-It note was on the door she was working, and that when the Post-It was removed, her daughter would be able to come in.  She also indicated that even after their divorce, her ex-husband was "always encouraging and being the biggest cheerleader and calling me doctor before I became a doctor.  That was always just a wonderful support mechanism for me to know that if anything happened, he was there."  Fannie was also divorced from her husband but they continued to co-parent and he provided support on her journey.  Fannie indicated that her ex-husband was very supportive and made sure she had time to complete the assignments she needed.  He also arranged childcare with his family members when he was not able to relieve Fannie of her childcare responsibilities personally.  Fannie's ex-husband also provided moral support by way of asking her where she was in the process, encouraging her, and taking an interest in her research by indicating the desire to read her dissertation upon its completion.

**Mentorship**

Eight of the 12 participants spoke of support and mentorship received from other Black individuals who had earned their doctorate degrees and wanted to provide mentoring and support to other Black students pursuing their doctoral degrees.  These individuals were often Black faculty members who were either affiliated with the student's current university or were introduced to the participants through previous academic or community affiliations.  Denise shared that her professors at her HBCU were very hard but at that time they were trying to help them through the program and "make sure they were good enough to get into the club," meaning the world of academia.  Crystal described a relationship with a Black female professor, who she had at the beginning of her coursework, but stayed in contact with during her coursework and was instrumental in assisting her throughout the dissertation process:

She was instrumental in providing me resources. . . at the very end, I would call, just

being able to call and email her and have that one-on-one and even though I was no

longer her student, and she was still saying, 'If you need me, call me, if you need to meet,

what do you need from me?'

Karen also shared that one of her committee members, who was a Black female at

another university, went above and beyond to make sure Karen felt supported and that she

completed the process. Karen shared "Because not many Black females get their Ed.D., I think

from her perspective. . . it impacted the level of effort that she put into it to make sure that I was

supported." In addition, of all her professors, Angel developed the best relationship with a Black

male professor with whom she shared many commonalities and was able to discuss topics that

she was not able to speak to other professors about, such as urban education.

India also had the experience of mentoring from a Black faculty member, who was not on

her committee and she did not have this person as a professor. Rather, she met the faculty

member at her second residency and the faculty member provided support and motivation as she

progressed through her program. India did not have an established relationship with this

professor, but her presence and willingness to assist her, was motivating and had a personal

impact on her persistence. India shared "She pulled us aside, the African American students,

male and female and said. . . if there's anything you need, here's my phone number, here's my

email, contact me." Fannie was another participant who received support and mentoring from

two Black female professors who were not on her committee:

I had two Black women for a couple of my courses and they were so supportive. It was

like, I am going to help you out. I am going to mentor you if you need it. I am going to

provide you with the resources that you need because I want to see you make it.

These participants all indicated that the presence of these individuals and the guidance and mentoring they offered, positively influenced their persistence.

**Sub-Question 3: What institutional factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?**

Institutional factors are defined as those that are inherent to the university. The participants indicated that program structure, faculty support, commitment to diversity, and the racial anonymity that a distance education environment provided, were the most salient institutional factors in their doctoral persistence journeys.

**Anonymity**

One of the most salient institutional factors, as described by 11 of the 12 participants was the theme of anonymity as it relates to race and minority status. Racial discrimination and racism in educational environments has been well documented (Ladson-Billings & Tate,1995; Robinson, 2013); however, the majority of research participants indicated that they did not experience racism or perceive any discrimination in their doctoral programs. When asked specifically about their experiences regarding racism and discrimination, the participants shared that they did not experience racism, as the distance education courses were mostly "color blind," or when they attended classes on campus, their classmates were of varied races and ethnicities, thus they appeared to fit in with their peers. For example, when asked about her experiences as a Black female in a distance education program, India stated,

> Because we never met each other, we didn't really know ... unless you could pick up
> some clues, which is very hard to do online in terms of discussion board posts or
> something like that. We did a few web conferencing in terms of group work and then we

got to physically see each other, but then you still can't make assumptions on an

individual's facial characteristics or hairstyles and decide what their ethnic background is.

Jamie also said that race was not a factor in her educational experiences in a distance education

program. She stated,

> . . . because online they don't know your race. You know what I mean? I don't think
>
> anybody taking online classes, they really don't know your race unless you went to
>
> residency and then once we went to residency, there were all kinds of people there,
>
> Black, White, people from Africa, so I really don't think that race came into play at all
>
> with my online experience.

Laura and Karen, who both attended the same distance education program, had different

experiences once on campus, as they both shared that during their residencies they noticed that

they were in the minority, but they were not made to feel uncomfortable or that they were a

minority.  Karen went further to indicate that because she noticed she was in the minority as a

Black female on campus "I think that made me work even harder and want it even more."

**Program Structure**

The inherent structure and flexibility of the distance education program, in that most

programs of the participants offered all classes online and either had a few required residencies

or residencies once per month, was important to all 12 participants.  In particular, for this group

of female participants, the ability to balance work, life, and school work was critical to their

success and ability to complete their doctoral studies.

**Flexibility**.  For every participant in this study, the ability to work full-time, care for

children if they were parents, engage in community activities, and complete their coursework in

a flexible, convenient format was paramount to their success in completing their doctoral degrees

via distance education. For some participants, it was the ability to work from home at their own pace and own time, like Gloria, who shared that she worked during the week and utilized the weekends for schoolwork. Denise revealed that she was hesitant to enroll in a distance education program initially, because she had taken an online class for her master's degree and did not like it; however, after enrolling in her program, she felt:

> I think the online piece was easier, because you were able to do your work and get it in by midnight, that kind of thing. And I just liked the way it was set up, and scheduled. . . it really fit into my work life.

Brenda, who was a captain in the army when she started her degree, also shared that the distance education format worked for her because,

> I was a company commander to over 250 soldiers, reporting to work at 5 a.m., usually leaving at 7 or 8 p.m. at night. I really did not have time or the wherewithal to sit in a classroom, in a traditional setting.

> For others, it was the ability to care for children and complete their doctoral studies that assisted them in persisting in a distance education doctoral program. Fannie appreciated the flexibility of being able to attend classes online and support her young children at that time, ages three and four, which impacted her persistence. For Angel, she had attempted a residential doctoral program years earlier, when her children were younger and she recalled not being able to spend much time with them throughout that process, thus she chose online as a way to counteract that previous experience. Heaven also identified "Being online was a benefit because I did not have to rush off to class in the evening or worry about childcare." This idea of not having to worry about childcare was important for Jamie as well. As a single parent to a child

with special needs, the ability to not have to go sit in a classroom and being able to do it on her own time, without worrying about care for her daughter was beneficial in her persistence.

**Faculty Support**

All 12 participants indicated that the support they received from faculty members, and committee Chairpersons in particular, was a significant aspect in their persistence. This support was most impactful when participants perceived that the faculty members were interested in their overall well-being and went "above and beyond" simply providing academic support, to supporting them personally and providing mentorship. Laura shared that it was the support of her research consultant who guided her through the process of conducting research and designing her dissertation study that significantly impacted her persistence. Laura indicated that she continues to seek advice and support from this individual, although she has graduated and is no longer directly affiliated with her institution.

Denise had a unique experience in this area because she completed her doctorate degree at an HBCU and they are historically known to provide support and nurture to Black students. Denise shared that she felt like her program was "family" and compared to her friends who she spoke with who completed degrees at PWIs, she knew her situation was unique because of the HBCU status. When speaking of her dissertation committee members;

> My committee members really, really encouraged me to do better. I had a few committee
> members, in particular, that I would call and sort of lean on and ask for advice and they
> were very supportive. They would call us 'doc' all the time. . . to put in our minds that
> we would be doctors. . . and so that was motivation.

Jamie spoke of her professor at her residency going above and beyond and saying, "Hey when you guys get back home, you work on your stuff, you have questions, you want me to read

over your stuff, send it to me." Jamie shared that she took advantage of this support and incorporated this professor's feedback to help her complete her dissertation. Brenda discussed a relationship with her instructor, who was also the program's coordinator, who tended to the personal needs of students, which assisted in persistence: ". . . we would go to her behind the scenes when there were issues with families, there was issues with work, there was issues within the program. . . " Brenda suffered the tragic loss of her brother during her coursework phase and she was going to quit, but it was this professor who encouraged her to keep going with these words,

> You not returning back to the program is not going to bring your brother back, and you
> have dreams and goals and some dreams and goals only come once in a lifetime, some
> opportunities only come once in a lifetime, . . . And this may be it. I strongly suggest you
> finish. You have more behind you than you have ahead of you. . . just show up.

Brenda shared that this made the difference between her quitting and persisting in the program, and she chose to stay and finish her doctoral studies.

**Chair support**. Nine of the 12 participants indicated that in addition to faculty support, support from their Chair helped them to persist and complete their doctoral degrees. When describing support from her Chair, Heaven indicated, "She was very much a mentor to me." Heaven and her Chair continue to write and conduct research together now that she has graduated. Angel, India, and Jamie all indicated that in particular, at the end of their journey as they were working on their dissertation, their Chair's support was imperative to their success. India and her Chair had a standing phone call every Friday throughout her dissertation process, while Angel and her Chair spoke every day and she would provide her with samples from her former students for Angel to use as references. Jamie's Chair said, "Okay, we're almost at that

finish line, so when you send me something, I'm going to get it back to you quickly because you're a priority. . . . and that really, really meant a lot, as well to encourage me." In addition, Karen, who was going through a divorce and medical concerns while writing her dissertation, shared that her Chair's support and concern regarding her personal well-being during this time was critical to her ability to persist,

> She was very supportive in prayer, giving immediate and detailed feedback, supportive in helping me understand the steps and the process…she also called to check in on me to make sure that I was okay. It wasn't just an email, but it was a phone call just to chat and to see if I needed anything. It wasn't just about the study . . . it was about me.

Gloria, who changed Chairs during her dissertation phase due to illness of her first Chair, spoke of specific encouragement that her second Chair gave her. She described a stagnant process with her first Chair and then a process that gained significant momentum under her second Chair. Specifically, Gloria indicated,

> . . . he would remind us of what we should be working on, the two or three of us that would be in that group. He would remind us of where we should be, what we should be working on, and I want something by the end of the week. And he would really hold us to the fire, like 'I don't want you just sitting there, constantly be progressing and adding, even if it's just 15 minutes a night, do something.'

For others, they felt that not only was the support from their Chair significant, but it was also important to note that their Chairpersons were Black females. The participants indicated that this shared identity impacted the relationship and support they received from their Chairpersons. Fannie, whose Chair was a Black female, shared that she had a great working relationship with her Chair, which allowed her to be the first person out of her small support

group to finish.  Fannie noted that other students did not have the same type of relationship with her Chair, but her Chair seemed to respond positively to Fannie's level of commitment and responsibility.  She shared, "I felt like once we kind of had that relationship going and she was able to see that I was serious, I wanted to move forward, that her responses were timelier and she was more on track to the way I wanted to be."  Erica, whose Chair was also a Black female, provided extra support outside of the academic program and she considered her a friend.  Erica's Chair provided her personal number to Erica and they talked on a regular basis.

> It [her relationship with her Chair] was more like I have your back, whatever you need, we're going to do it, but she was hard on me too, because she kept saying that you want your research to stand. . .  we really connected. . .  she even flew in to see me graduate and hug me.

**Commitment to diversity.**  Lastly, for seven out of the 12 participants in this group of Black female doctoral students, their respective university's commitment to diversity, defined by the participants as the opportunity for students of color to be their authentic selves, and creating environments where students could discuss and research issues that were important to them and reflective of their culture was a salient theme in their persistence.

When discussing her research interests and the desire to study HBCUs and the Black experience, Brenda indicated that although her professors were White they supported her research agenda and provided support throughout the dissertation process:

> Over the years of their professional careers, they worked out the kinks of race…they were training me and teaching me in a lot of areas on how to conduct research about a people that they did not belong to their group.

Erica shared an experience where she wanted to use Black social theorists such as W.E.B. DuBois or Dr. Michael Eric Dyson in her paper and her White male professor would not approve of her utilizing these theorists. She indicated that "When I questioned him he never had a response, but I knew that he wanted me to use some old White guy." It was this type of situation that helped Erica persist because she indicated that she knew as a Black woman there were people who didn't think she should have a doctorate due to her blackness. After this experience, Erica was given a new research mentor who helped her process her experience, as the previous mentor had similar negative experiences with other black students. Erica was able to move forward with the assistance of a new mentor. She indicated that being able to process the previous experience and the university's commitment to fixing the situation allowed her to move forward with her research and persist to completion. Also, in her advice letter Erica stated that candidates should remember:

> As a Black woman, every time you speak or lead, someone will be critiquing you. Be firm and confident in the education that you have sought and earned. If a school experience doesn't provide you with that foundation. . . it is not the program for you.

Crystal also indicated that the ability to "be herself" in how she handled her research and the topics she wanted to research as a Black woman, assisted her in completing her doctoral work: "There was no policing of my perseverance…. they never said let's try it my way instead…everyone let me say exactly what I wanted to say." For Fannie, it was more the overall support that the faculty and university provided to her, that she felt was instrumental in her success:

. . . by me attending a PWI, and the education department is a predominantly White

faculty and staff there. I felt like these particular professors, they were really invested in

my success. They really wanted to see me make it, and I really valued their feedback.

Others also shared that seeing other Black students at events, noticing that the university

admitted other Black students and even that their Chairs advised other students of color, assisted

them in feeling more comfortable and that they could complete their programs successfully.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a description of the research results depicting the personal, social,

and institutional factors influencing the persistence of 12 Black women in distance education

doctoral programs in education.  The results were presented as they addressed the overarching

research question of what persistence factors influenced the persistence of Black women in

distance education doctoral programs in education.  An analysis of data collected via personal

timelines, interviews, and advice letters indicated that there were several personal, social, and

institutional factors that influenced the persistence journeys of this group of participants.

Personally, the participants of this study all exhibited an inner drive and motivation to

complete their goal of obtaining a doctoral degree, even in the face of life events, distractions,

and traumatic events.  This persistence was best defined as grit, the ability to work towards a

long-term goal despite delays, distractions, and negative life circumstances (Duckworth, et al.,

2007).  The participants also shared the experience of wanting to serve as role models for their

children and other Black women. They also shared that they believed that having the title of

"doctor" would give them more status and respect in society, thus it served as a motivating factor

to complete their doctoral degrees.

Socially, participants described the shared experience of social support from peer, family, and mentoring relationships as paramount to their persistence journeys in distance education doctoral programs. This support came from family of origin, spouses, older children, significant best friends, other Black doctoral students, as well as social group membership such as military and sorority groups.

Lastly, in regard to institutional factors influencing their persistence, most salient for 11 of the 12 participants was the racial anonymity and perceived lack of racism and discrimination that the distance education environment provided. The participants expressed that faculty support, including Chair support, and the flexible format of the distance education environment were critical to their successful program completion. The university's commitment to diversity, defined as supporting their research agendas and creating an environment where Black females could freely be and express themselves were shared as important factors in their overall persistence in completing distance education doctoral programs.

**CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the persistence experiences of Black women who completed doctoral degrees in distance education programs. Prior research indicated that for Black women doctoral students, factors such as supportive mentors, social support, a welcoming institutional environment, and motivation all contributed to persistence (Felder, et al., 2014; Jones, et al., 2013; Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001); however, these factors were revealed in traditional, residential programs. There was an existing gap in the literature regarding the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs. This research study attempted to fill this gap to explore the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs. The study was further delimited to the field of education as Black women doctoral students are most represented in the field of education (National Science Foundation, 2018). A review of the findings, discussion, implications, and recommendations for future research are discussed in the following sections.

**Summary of Findings**

The first research question of this study asked, "What personal factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?" As discussed in Chapter Four, 10 of the 12 participants of this study demonstrated grit in working towards their goals. They were able to persist to completion although they experienced trauma and setbacks during their doctoral studies. The participants were also largely motivated by serving as a role model both for their children and for other Black women to see that achieving a doctoral degree as a Black woman was possible. Lastly, in the area of personal factors, the

participants indicated that the status of becoming a doctor, along with the subsequent respect and expert status of being called doctor, contributed to their persistence.

The second question of this research study asked, "What social factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs?" All 12 participants revealed that family, peer, and social relationships, along with mentoring from other Black persons who had earned doctorates were important to their persistence. Nine of 12 participants indicated that support from other Black doctoral students was a salient factor in their persistence. Others shared that support from a best friend, who was also often a Black female, in addition to membership in groups such as various branches of the Armed Forces, church, and Black Greek letter organizations (sororities), were all paramount to their successful doctoral degree persistence and completion. Moreover, for 10 of 12 participants, support from family of origin, spouse and older children, were all indicated as significant to doctoral persistence. The support came in many forms such as motivating words, encouragement, and assistance in practical ways such as providing childcare, and household duties such as cooking meals and cleaning.

Lastly, the third research question of this study asked, "What institutional factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education programs?" For all participants, the flexibility of the doctoral program and the ability to balance work, school, and home life was salient in their ability to persist. Also, all 12 participants indicated that faculty support significantly contributed to their persistence. This support was found in the relationships they formed with their Chairs and the Chair's ability to go above and beyond in taking an interest in their well-being and lives outside of the dissertation process. The support of other faculty members and committee persons also had a significant impact on their

persistence.  The university's commitment to diversity as it related to supporting the specific research interests of Black women doctoral students and the presence of other students of color within the institution and under their Chair's advisement, all contributed to their persistence. Lastly, 11 of the 12 participants shared that the distance education environment provided them with a level of anonymity that allowed them to persist without perceived feelings of discrimination and racism.

## Discussion

Doctoral persistence is an area that has recently gained attention in the body of research literature (Jones, 2013).  For individuals who choose to enroll in distance education doctoral programs, prior research indicated that relationships with peers and faculty members (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Terrell, et al., 2012; Wyman 2012), as well as program structure (Bista & Cox, 2014; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) and personal factors of intrinsic motivation for completing the doctorate (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Santicola, 2013) all contributed to doctoral persistence.  Women doctoral students have also indicated that their role as a mother and spouse influenced their ability to both begin and persist in doctoral programs **(**Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2017).  Specifically, for Black women, the factors of the culture of the university, mentoring relationships, overall social support, and work ethic/motivation were all important components of their persistence (Cannon & Morton, 2015; Jones, et al., 2013; Rogers, 2006; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Woods, 2001).  This research study contributed to the existing body of literature by exploring persistence experiences when a doctoral student is both a Black woman and is enrolled in a distance education doctoral program.

**Discussion Related to Research Questions**

The first research question explored personal factors contributing to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education programs. The results of this research study built upon previous research, which indicated that intrinsic motivation and self-beliefs were important factors in the doctoral persistence of Black women (Martin, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014). This study revealed that in addition to maintaining motivation and believing in one's ability, it was also important for Black women doctoral students to maintain their level of effort and commitment towards reaching their goal despite adversity and plateaus in progress. This perseverance and passion for long term goals is defined as grit (Duckworth, et al., 2007). Grit encompasses a deeper goal commitment and indicates that one has to be willing to push forward despite negative circumstances and situations that present themselves. Grit is what the Black women of this research study demonstrated and revealed as significant in their persistence. Many of the participants experienced loss, feelings of self-doubt, and health challenges during the doctoral process, but they continued to move forward and did not let anything stop them from pursuing their goals. They did not allow the opinions of others, such as faculty members telling them to slow down their timeline, deter them from reaching their goals. This commitment towards the goal of completion and its role in persistence is also related to Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) theory of student integration in which he indicates that a student's level of commitment to finishing school, as well as other factors (personality traits, family background, etc.) allow students to integrate and persist to completion. In addition, many of the participants indicated that they were able to persist and demonstrate grit because they did not believe in quitting or leaving anything "unfinished."

While it was not a part of the questions asked in this research study, many of the women also indicated that after the doctoral process and the effort or grit that they put into completing the process, they experienced a sort of posttraumatic stress disorder, in which they found themselves depressed and feeling "lost" after the completion of the degree.  McGee and Stovall (2015) spoke of this type of trauma in high achieving Black students.  The authors shared that grit and perseverance are typically ways that historically marginalized groups function in educational environments, but that more emphasis needs to be placed on the mental health and trauma experienced by these groups in educational environments.  The current study would support this notion, as only one of the 12 participants mentioned self-care as a part of their personal progress through the doctoral program; however, the majority of the participants encouraged future Black women to value self-care and make time for it during their own personal doctoral journeys.  Self-care and mental health are related constructs and previous research on Black women doctoral students has demonstrated that Black woman feel they need to display "a strong Black woman" image in order to be successful, and will often push themselves at the detriment of their own self-care (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

In addition to grit, serving as a role model was significant to the participants.  This concept of serving as a role model confirmed previous research conducted with Black doctoral students, which suggested that for Black scholars it was important to serve as a role model for other Black women (Grant, 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014).  The results of the current study furthered this concept, as the participants of this study also shared that serving as a role model to their children was a motivating factor in their persistence.  This factor was not found in previous research for Black doctoral female students; however, it is possible that this factor was unique to the participants of this study, as they tended to be older students who were integrating their

family, work and career roles, thus setting an example to their children. This may have been more of a motivation towards persistence.

Lastly, the status of being a doctor and the consequent respect that comes from having the title were important personal factors in the persistence of Black women in distance education programs. The participants of this study indicated that they believed in order to earn their seat at the table, to be taken seriously, and given respect when they enter work environments, they had to have the title of doctor or obtain the highest level of academic achievement. This feeling of Black women that they have to be the best or achieve the most to garner respect has been supported in previous research. When Black women doctoral students were surveyed about their persistence in residential programs, they felt as though they had something to prove regarding their ability to succeed and complete the doctoral process as Black women (Robinson, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014).

The second research question examined social factors that contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education programs. The social factors that led to persistence of Black women in distance education doctoral programs was found to be consistent with what other researchers have found for all doctoral students, including Black women. Social support from peers, faculty members, and family members assisted in the persistence of doctoral students in previous research (Hart, 2012; Scarpena, 2016). In addition, the women of this study found support from Black individuals, both peer doctoral students and best friends, to be significant to their persistence as well. The participants found support from non-Black students and faculty as well, but much like previous research (Acosta et al., 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014), they found the relationships between individuals who were Black to be most valuable. The Black women doctoral students found this support to be important and they

connected with these individuals on a very personal level and felt that they could discuss topics and situations with them in a different manner, as there was a shared group experience. This result was consistent with previous research on Black students, indicating that social support in any form is valuable, but it is most valuable when it comes from other Black persons (Acosta et.al, 2015; Coleman Hunter 2014). However, even if the relationships were not with other Black persons, the Black women doctoral students still found others to build relationship with, as a way of persisting. This is similar to previous findings, indicating that social support by way of relationships with peers and faculty members, was significant in persistence for all doctoral students (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Terrell, et al., 2012).

Social support by way of family of origin and spouses was also found to be a significant social factor for Black women enrolled in distance education programs. The participants of this study indicated that family supported them, although at times it appeared that they did not fully understand what the doctoral process required. However, family members recognized that the students were working towards a goal and wanted to support them toward goal attainment. The participants also shared that education was significantly valued in their family of origin and these values were instilled in the participants from a young age. These results are consistent with other research with Black students, in that family support in any form and the value placed on education, is important to the academic persistence of Black students (Brooks, 2015; Felder, et al., 2014; Hill, 2003; McCallum, 2017).

Particularly, the support of spouses was significant to the participants of this research study. Spouses played an important role in supporting their doctoral student wives in ways such as cleaning, cooking, providing time to write, assisting with childcare, and providing words of encouragement. This support is consistent with previous research conducted with all doctoral

students and does not appear to be specific to Black females.  Previous research indicates that spousal relationships by way of providing support, performing household chores, and lending emotional support are significant to the doctoral persistence of doctoral students (Jones, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2015).  Of particular interest to this research study and what was not indicated in previous research studies, is that for two of the research participants, even when spouses had divorced prior to the doctoral journey, the ex-spouse continued to provide support by way of encouragement and childcare responsibilities. Black woman doctoral students in distance education programs found this support significant in their ability to persist.  This may indicate that the impact on persistence has more to do with the connections made with individuals, regardless of current relationship status.  This level of support and connectedness across cultural groups and with family and spousal support also aligns with the theoretical framework of this study, Tinto's (2012) theory of student integration. This theory was revised from its original form to include the support of family and community groups as playing a role in a student's integration and ability to persist to degree completion.

Of particular interest, when considering Black women doctoral students in distance education, many of the participants of this study shared that the support of other Black persons with earned doctorate degrees was significant to their persistence.  In many cases, these individuals were not members of their committees, but were former professors or otherwise affiliated with the university.  While the participants did not specifically name these persons as mentors, in essence they served as mentors to the research participants, in that they motivated the individuals, provided support, and offered resources for completing the doctoral process, as well as serving as overall role models for goal attainment.  The Black professors provided students their contact information, helped them in their dissertation process, and shared words of

encouragement and advice as needed.  This concept of mentoring from Black faculty members, particularly Black females, has been revealed in previous research with Black doctoral students and is a significant factor in their success (Cannon & Morton, 2015; Grant, 2012).

Lastly, the third research question examined institutional factors that contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education programs.  Previous research indicated that for women doctoral students, the ability to manage their various roles including that of mother, wife, employee, and student were important factors in their persistence (Brown & Watson, 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).  For distance education students, it was also important for them to be able to maintain proper boundaries between school, home, and work (Terrell, et al., 2012).  The results of this research study corroborated previous findings for both women doctoral students and distance education students.  The participants of this study revealed that one institutional factor that influenced their ability to persist was that by completing their studies via distance education they did not have to travel to sit in class after a long day of work, take off time from work to attend classes, or arrange for childcare in order to attend class. A distance education program provided them with the flexible format needed to integrate their work and family lives.  These results did not appear to differ based on ethnicity, but rather on the ability to balance work, life, and school.  This factor appears to be significant regardless of race and likely attributable to dual status as a woman and a doctoral student.

Another significant institutional factor was the support of faculty members.  In prior research for doctoral students, regardless of race, format, or gender, the support of faculty, in particular the Chairperson, was a significant persistence factor (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Terrell, et al., 2012).  This research study confirms that this is also true for Black women who completed doctoral programs via distance education.  The Black women of this study revealed that the

commitment and support of their Chairperson was paramount to their success in persisting. The participants experienced this support in many ways, including the fact that Chairpersons went above what is typically expected of a Chairperson. The participants shared that Chairpersons shared personal phone numbers, had standing appointments with them, provided words of encouragement, and were interested in their overall well-being outside of the doctoral process.

Lastly, while most participants of this study revealed that they did not experience overt racism while progressing through their doctoral program, a few participants did experience difficult relationships with various faculty members that they believed were racially motivated. This experience is related to one of the theoretical frameworks of this study, critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which purports that there is an inherent system of racism in higher education environments that Black students must overcome and universities must address in order for Black students to achieve educational success. The participants of this study, by and large, when asked about their racial experiences shared that they did not feel racism or experiences they could definitively say were related to race. Many participants shared that the distance education environment appeared to provide them a level of anonymity and freedom from perceived discrimination they had not experienced in other environments. The exceptions to this were two participants who indicated that they were not allowed to use Black theorists in their theoretical framework or one participant who had to switch Chairpersons due to the non-responsiveness of her initial Chair. It was later revealed that the Chairperson had had similar experiences with many other students of color. These instances may be reflective of the racism in institutions of higher education purported in critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); however, the fact that most of the participants did not experience racism

in a distance education program lends support and hope that distance education programs can in part, provide a supportive barrier to the ill effects of institutional racism in educational settings.

Regardless of their experiences, the participants of this study revealed through their experiences that it was important that their universities appeared to be committed to diversity. This was specifically noted for the 11 participants who attended PWIs. The participants defined this commitment to diversity in different ways; however, examples of this included allowing discussions around race and being comfortable with the discussions in the classroom setting (during residencies); allowing the students to research topics of interest to them, typically involving marginalized groups; and supporting their research interests and theoretical frameworks. It was also important to the Black women in this study that they were allowed to be free to share their experiences and perspectives both in their writing and verbally and that they would be supported. Several participants shared that they appreciated that their voice was not "silenced" during the dissertation process specifically. The presence of students of color at the university and in their classes, as well as the presence of faculty members of color who the students felt they could relate to were all significant in their ability to persist. These findings corroborate previous findings on Black doctoral students, both male and female and in residential settings, which indicate that for Black students, the culture of the university and department is significant in helping them feel more comfortable and in combatting feelings of isolation (Acosta et.al, 2015; Coleman-Hunter, 2014). However, for distance education students, since they are not physically on campus full-time and may not be able to ascertain the departmental culture, they looked for the university's commitment to diversity in ways that could be accessed from a distance, such as support of their personal research agenda and presence of faculty members of color.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The findings from the current research study reveal several implications for doctoral students, families, and universities.  These implications are discussed in the following section, along with recommendations for each group.

**Implications for Students**

This research study revealed implications for Black women doctoral students in distance education programs in the areas of personal, social, and institutional experiences.  Personally, Black women doctoral students should understand that life circumstances will occur while they are enrolled in their doctoral program, but just like many before them, they should push themselves to persist.  However, through this persistence they should also practice self-care and recognize that taking care of themselves is also a positive way to be a role model for their children and others.  Many Black women feel as though they must keep on going, even when they are tired or feel like quitting.  Black women are encouraged to take breaks as needed, talk to a trusted friend or counselor, and ask for assistance throughout the doctoral journey.  This will not only lead to their persistence, but they will ultimately emerge as a healthier version of themselves at the end of the doctoral experience.  This will also help mitigate some of the post experience trauma that many of the participants shared they experienced after degree completion.

Socially, it will be important for future Black women doctoral students to have support from various sources.  This support appears to be most impactful when it comes from individuals who are of a similar race and gender, meaning Black females.  However, even in the absence of support and connections with Black females, support from any person who encourages the student, believes in their goals, and is willing to support them through the doctoral journey is most important.  This system of social support can be accomplished in several ways, including

black women doctoral students forming their own support groups with other students of similar backgrounds, utilizing already established online support groups such as those on social media sites, or seeking out local support systems such as other doctoral students in their community to meet with on a regular basis. Black women doctoral students would also benefit from informing their peers, colleagues, and those with whom they have direct daily contact that they are pursuing their doctoral degree; in that way those persons can provide support and encouragement.

The support of family is also an important aspect of success within a doctoral program. Black women doctoral students are encouraged to involve their families in the process, share what they are experiencing in their doctoral programs, and educate their families on the process of obtaining a doctoral degree. Explicitly stating what they will need from family members to complete their programs successfully is also a recommendation. If families better understand the process, they will likely be in a better position to provide the social support that Black women doctoral students need to persist to completion of their doctoral programs. This type of education would also be helpful for spouses and ex-spouses of Black women doctoral students. Often the spouse is one of the closest family members to the doctoral student as they go through the doctoral program, thus it is not only important that spouses are educated on the doctoral process, but that they are aware of the specific ways they can be of support. This support includes providing their spouse with uninterrupted time to write, preparing meals, performing household chores, and caring for children. In this research study, ex-spouses also provided support by way of providing childcare and encouraging students to achieve their preestablished goal of obtaining a doctoral degree. Ex-spouses of future doctoral students should provide this same type of support in tangible ways (i.e., caring for children) and by encouraging students to persist to completion of their degree.

Institutionally, Black women doctoral students should choose programs that are committed to diversity and will be supportive of their personal journeys as doctoral students.  A university's commitment to diversity may not be overtly noticeable, but potential students should ask questions of the admissions office and research facts about the university such as their attrition data, the number of Black or minority students who enroll and persist to completion, the number of faculty of color, and the research interests of all faculty in their potential department. Researching this information prior to enrolling in programs will allow potential students to have knowledge of the university's commitment to diversity and how they might fit into the culture of the university.

For Black women who plan to work full-time or find themselves balancing career, school, and family while pursuing their doctorate degree, it is important to note several key factors: (a) required residencies and costs involved, (b) physical location of the university, (c) pacing of the courses (d) nature of the distance education program (i.e., synchronous or asynchronous), (e) flexibility of class log-in, (f) requirements for assignment completion.  This information will allow potential students to determine, prior to enrollment, if the program will be a good fit for them.  They should also ask the university questions such as what supports they have in place to support students of color who will be at a distance or ask to speak to students of color who are completing coursework at a distance to gain feedback and insight from their experiences.

**Implications for Families**

Research on Black women doctoral students, whether via residential or distance education, has indicated that family support plays a crucial role in the success of doctoral students (Brooks, 2015).  For those who choose the distance education route, it is paramount that

families understand the doctoral process.  Many participants of this study shared that although their families provided them with support, they did not always understand the steps needed to obtain a doctoral degree.  If family members would like to support their doctoral students, and the student is not always able to articulate their needs or the process fully, they may find it beneficial to do their own research on the doctoral process.

Participants of this study also shared that spouses and older children were helpful in their persistence.  For example, children and spouses can support doctoral students by providing for their basic needs such as cooking meals or helping with household chores like laundry and cleaning. Providing childcare and a specified time away to write, particularly during the dissertation phase, are also ways in which spouses can assist their wives throughout the process. Not only is tangible assistance helpful, but words of encouragement and support are also beneficial to Black women doctoral students in distance education programs. Spouses should encourage their wives to continue when they feel like quitting and remind them of why they started the journey and reaffirm their belief in their ability to complete the process. Lastly, spouses can be understanding about the stress their wives are experiencing and how their moods may fluctuate throughout the process and thus provide extra emotional support.

**Implications for Universities**

Universities play a pivotal role in the success and persistence of Black women doctoral students in distance education programs.  The research findings of the current study suggested that Black women found success in universities through organic means, meaning that they found a person who was interested in supporting their research topic or they found students of color and naturally connected with them, or Black faculty members reached out to them on their own to support these women.  While this has proven beneficial to many students, it cannot be assumed

that these factors will be present for all Black women in all universities. Because of this, it is important for universities to direct resources to these areas. One way that this can be accomplished is through faculty training. All faculty members should be trained on the persistence factors and obstacles that doctoral students face, but they should also be trained on the unique experiences of various ethnic and gender groups, including Black women doctoral students. Universities may also find it helpful to support doctoral study groups and support sessions, with an emphasis on shared experiences. For example, they may sponsor a minority doctoral student support group where students of color will feel comfortable joining and sharing their experiences.

For Black doctoral students, when universities have orientation programs, whether face-to-face or online, it would be helpful if they had training modules for families explaining the doctoral process and some of the typical needs of doctoral students during their study. They may also wish to publish a guide for families explaining the doctoral progress and the steps involved in the journey. This will assist families of doctoral students in better understanding the process and ways in which they can support their doctoral students. A support group for families and spouses of doctoral students would also be beneficial to this group. Ultimately, universities should pay close attention to their recruitment practices, ensuring that faculty and students reflect the diversity found outside the university walls. For potential Black women students, seeing color represented in the student body and faculty provides a visual representation that the university is committed to the success and elevation of all students, including those of minority background.

Along with university-wide recommendations, faculty members can play a significant role in the persistence of black women doctoral students in distance education programs. The

participants of this research study indicated that their professors went above and beyond the normal duties and took an interest in their personal lives outside of the doctoral process, which was significant in their persistence. Faculty members at institutions can take note of this information and make attempts to connect with students on a personal level, inquiring about their background, their family, and in general asking if there are ways they can support the student. The accessibility of faculty members in distance education programs also appears significant. Faculty members may consider providing specific times they can be reached by students, having standing check-in appointments during the dissertation phase, and as they are able, providing personal and contact information. This is especially significant for dissertation Chairpersons. The aforementioned approaches are useful for all faculty members, regardless of ethnicity; however, the behaviors of Black faculty in support of Black female doctoral students in distance education programs was found to be especially valuable. Black faculty may consider several factors that would better support the persistence of black women in distance education programs: (a) forming support groups with Black doctoral students, (b) sharing their own experiences in academia with other faculty members via round tables or brown bag discussions, and (c) conducting research on the persistence of black women doctoral students in distance education programs and disseminating the results. In addition, Black faculty members can support Black doctoral students, regardless of their status at the student's university or whether they serve on the student's dissertation committee. The mentorship and status as a role model of Black faculty to Black doctoral students is vital to their persistence, regardless of university affiliation.

<div align="center">**Delimitations and Limitations**</div>

This study was delimited to Black women who earned doctorate degrees in the field of education via distance education programs. This group was selected because there was a gap in

the literature discussing the experiences of Black women in distance education programs. The field of education was chosen because Black women doctoral students are the largest minority represented in the field of education (National Science Foundation, 2018).

With these delimitations stated, there were several limitations of the current study. One major limitation of the study was the variation within the programs that the participants attended. Seven out of 12 of the participants' doctoral programs were housed in schools located in the southern part of the United States. The findings would be more generalizable if schools were located in various regions of the United States to provide more confidence that the results are not region specific. Another limitation was that 11 of the 12 schools were PWIs, while one was an HBCU. Thus, there was not significant variation in the type of program. Since this study was delimited to individuals in the field of education, the results are only generalizable to individuals in education and not in other fields of study. Additional limitations are noted in the data collection, as not all participants completed personal timelines. During the interviews, the researcher did not always ask follow-up questions when the participants spoke about the impact of their family of origin on their doctoral persistence. It is possible that there were additional significant results or themes in the participants' backgrounds that impacted their persistence that were not revealed due to this lack of information.

## Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research based on the findings of this research study. The first recommendation is that future studies should focus on Black male students to determine if the persistence factors and overall experiences in distance education programs differ based on male status. In addition, Black persons are not the only group of students of color who warrant research into their specific persistence factors, but other minority

groups such as Asians, Native Americans, and persons of Hispanic descent, as well as international or non-American students should also be allowed the opportunity to have their voices heard and to describe their persistence experiences in distance education programs.

Many of the participants shared that education was valued in their family from a young age. Some participants shared that this was because others in their family had earned college degrees, while others shared that it was because many in their families, particularly their parents, had not earned a degree. Future research should delimit to the study of Black women first generation college students in distance education programs to explore the persistence factors of this group of individuals. Additional research should also be conducted in various fields of study, as this research study was delimited to the field of education.

Moreover, as social connectedness and support from other doctoral students was found to be a significant social factor in the persistence of Black women in distance education doctoral programs and the individuals of this study were in both cohort and non-cohort programs, it would be useful to conduct further qualitative research studies to explore both the characteristics of cohort-based programs and non-cohort-based programs. These studies could be further delimited by exploring specific program structures within distance education such as asynchronous, limited residency, and online, as well as program type such as predominantly White institutions (PWIs) versus historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This research would provide insight into the specific experiences of Black women doctoral students' persistence in these programs and how the program structure influences persistence.

Lastly, future research studies can specifically explore the role of grit in the persistence of Black women doctoral students in distance education programs. Related to this recommendation, many of the Black women in this study indicated that they experienced some

level of posttrauma disorder after going through the doctoral experience. This was not a focus of the current research study; however, future research should focus on the mental health of Black women doctoral students both during and after degree completion to determine what services and supports can be put into place to assist these women in maintaining their mental health throughout and after the doctoral process.

**Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study gave voice to the persistence experiences of Black women who completed doctoral degrees in the field of education through distance education programs. This was achieved by asking what institutional, personal, and social factors contributed to the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs. Through interviews, life timelines, and advice letters, the experiences of the participants were described. Results of this study indicate that institutional factors such as anonymity of the distance education environment and perceived lack of discrimination and racism, faculty support, the university's commitment to diversity and flexible programming, as well as social factors such as mentoring from other Black persons with doctorates and family, peer, and social relationships all assisted in persistence. Participants of this study also revealed that personal factors such as grit in achieving their goal despite difficulties, serving as a role model for their children and other Black women, and the respect of the title of doctor were all important factors in their persistence.

These results add to the body of research in sharing the persistence experiences of Black women in distance education doctoral programs. The findings indicate that Black women who are considering enrolling in distance education programs should ensure that their selected university is committed to their goal attainment and that they have the proper social and personal

supports in place, or have plans in place to develop connections with other students, and garner family support.  Future students should have a strategy for meeting their personal goals, practicing self-care, and tending to the needs of their family and outside commitments.  The results of this study further implore universities to provide support to Black women students by revisiting their faculty and student recruitment staff to ensure diversity representativeness, provide training and resources to faculty on supporting Black women doctoral students, as well as provide support, training and resources to Black women and their families to aid in doctoral persistence.  Lastly, the findings of this research study further suggest that distance education programs can assist Black female students in earning their doctoral degrees in environments that provide lessened racist and discriminatory educational experiences.  The distance education environment appears to provide a level of racial anonymity that overshadows the previously perceived institutionally racist environments of traditional education settings.

Future research should focus on other students of color and various fields of study within distance education to explore the doctoral persistence experiences of these groups.  This research can also be delimited to various types of distance education programs such as limited residency and cohort-based programs.  Overall, these research results and future research conducted will assist students and universities to ensure that the needs of all doctoral students are considered and that universities, classrooms, and future academic environments reflect the richness of the diversity of the world at large.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**

## LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 8, 2018

Sherrita Rogers
IRB Approval 3164.030818: I Just Can't Give Up Now: A Transcendental Phenomenological
Study of the Persistence of Black Women in Distance Education Doctoral Programs

Dear Sherrita Rogers,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB.
This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol
number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as
it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms
for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

~~Dr. Michele Baker, M.A., CIP~~
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*
**The Graduate School**

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## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT FORM

I Just Can't Give Up Now: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Persistence of
Black Women in Distance Education Doctoral Programs
Sherrita Rogers
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on the doctoral experiences of black women in distance education doctoral programs. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a black female who completed a doctoral program in a distance education program within the last 5 years and you are 18 years of age or older. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Sherrita Rogers, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to explore the persistence experiences of black women who completed doctoral degrees in distance education programs.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Allow the researcher to use your responses to the demographic screening survey in her research.
2. Complete a personal timeline of significant life events that influenced your doctoral journey. This activity will take approximately 15 minutes.
3. Participate in an interview, lasting approximately one hour, either in person or via a videoconferencing system. The interviews will be audio recorded to allow for later transcription and analysis.
4. Write a letter of advice to a future black female doctoral student who wishes to attend a distance education program. This activity will take approximately 15 minutes.
5. After interviews have been transcribed, you will be asked to read the interviews for accuracy. This task will take approximately 25 minutes.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. This study is expected to benefit society by helping society better understand the process of obtaining a doctoral degree by black females. Also, more black females will know the process of obtaining a doctoral degree and factors that contribute to persistence, thus increasing the diversity of academia's workforce.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Sherrita Rogers. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████████████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, at Lsspaulding@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____                          _____
Signature of Participant                                                                              Date


_____                          _____
Signature of Investigator                                                                             Date

**APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

1. Please indicate your gender.
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. Please indicate your ethnicity.
   a. Black
   b. Asian
   c. Caucasian
   d. Hispanic
   e. American Indian
   f. Other (please specify)
3. Please indicate the number of years that have passed since you completed your doctoral degree.
   a. 0-5
   b. 6-10
   c. more than 10

(Participants must select female, Black, and "a" for the third question in order to move forward. If they do not select this sequence, at the end of the third question, they will receive a message stating "thank you for your participation").

4. Please indicate your age range.
   a. 20-29
   b. 30-39
   c. 40-49
   d. 50-59
   e. 60-69
   f. 70-79
   g. 80 or older
5. Please indicate your marital status.
   a. Single
   b. Married
   c. Divorced
   d. Widowed
6. How many children do you have?
   a. 0
   b. 1
   c. 2
   d. 3
   e. 4
   f. 5

    g.  6

    h.  Other (please specify)

7. Please list the name of your University and the type of degree obtained.
8. What type of university did you attend?
   a. Predominately White University(PWI)
   b. Historically Black College or University (HBCU)
9. Did you attend more than one university during your doctoral pursuit?
   a. Yes
   b. No
10. If you answered yes to number 8, how many universities did you attend?
    a. 2
    b. 3
    c. 4+
11. How many years did it take for you to complete your doctoral degree from the year of the first class to your final defense?
    a. 3
    b. 4
    c. 5
    d. 6
    e. 7
    f. 8
    g. 9
    h. 10+

# APPENDIX D: TIMELINE PROTOCOL

Pivotal social, academic, and personal experiences can influence a person's identity in terms of race and gender, as well as the pursuit of goals such as a doctoral degree. You are being asked to think about and document critical events that shaped who you are as a Black woman who persisted to completion of a doctoral degree. Please think specifically about events that may have influenced your decision to pursue a doctoral degree in a distance education doctoral program.

You may document your events in table format, for which a template is provided below. As you document your events, please think about the following questions:

> *What events shaped your identity as a Black woman?*
> *What events influenced your decision to pursue a doctoral degree in Education and your doctoral persistence?*
> *What events influenced your decision to attend a* distance education *doctoral program?*

| DATE | EVENT/EXPERIENCE | SIGNIFICANCE (reason for including) |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
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|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

(you may add lines for additional events as you need them)

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me about yourself. Let's start with where you are from and your current family situation, like who lives at home with you?

2. How about your occupation? Tell me what you do for a living and how long have you held that position? Did you hold any other professional positions prior to your current occupation? Please tell me about them.

3. Let's talk about your timeline a little. Please walk me through the timeline and the events you shared.

4. When you review this timeline, what sticks out to you or seems significant in your educational journey?

5. Let's move into your pursuit of a doctoral degree. What was your motivation or reasoning for pursuing the doctorate?

6. When you think about being a Black female, why was obtaining the doctorate as a Black female important to you?

7. You completed your doctorate in a distance education program. What was it about the online program in general that attracted you or made you want to attend?

8. How did attending an online program versus a traditional program contribute to your ability to complete your degree?

9. Was there anything that was unique to your program, that influenced your decision to attend that particular university?

10. As you think about being a Black female in your program, describe that experience and how it was being a Black female in your doctorate program?

11. Were there any situations you can think of that make you feel more or less welcomed in your department?

12. Let's talk about your relationships at the university. Let's start with your faculty members at your institution. How would you describe your relationships with them?

13. Tell me about your experiences with your dissertation committee members. How about your dissertation chair? Were there any specific traits or actions these individuals took to help you succeed in your doctoral program? Anything you would have changed in your relationship with them to help you be more successful in your program?

14. As you think about these institutional relationships further, how did your status as a Black female influence these relationships?

15. How about your peers/colleagues within your program or institution? What specific traits or actions did these individuals take to help you succeed in your doctoral program? Was there a difference in the coursework phase of the program versus the dissertation phase?

16. Now, let's talk about life outside of the university as a doctoral student. Let's start with family. What role did your family play in supporting your doctoral journey?

17. Were there other social groups that you were a part of church, community organizations, etc. that impacted your doctoral journey?

18. How about relationships outside of school. Let's talk about those relationships in your home. How did your spouse (or children) influence your doctoral journey? Were there specific traits about those relationships that impacted your journey?

19. How about relationships outside of school and your family? Were there any other significant relationships that contributed toward your doctoral journey?

20. When you think on these significant social relationships, particularly your peer relationships, were the individuals Black? If so, do you think that race mattered? If so, how?

21. As we prepare to close, let's think about your doctoral journey as a whole. A lot of research would suggest that obtaining the doctorate is challenging, what would you say motivated you to continue on those days when it was the hardest to continue?

22. Was there something you always told yourself or reminded yourself as you went through the doctoral program that helped you succeed?

23. Some of the other data I explored, indicated that not many Black females obtain the doctorate. What was different for you or why were you able to succeed when many other Black females do not?

24. We've covered a lot of ground in our conversation and I appreciate the time you've given to this. One final question, was there anything missing from your experiences that you believe would have helped you finish sooner or made the journey easier?

**APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH SUPPORTING LITERATURE**

| Research Question | Supporting Interview Question | Literature Support |
|---|---|---|
| What **institutional** factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs? | 1. You completed your doctorate in a distance education program. What was it about the distance education program in general that attracted you or made you want to attend? | -Program structure of distance education programs (Bista & Cox, 2014; Wao& Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Zahl, 2015) |
| | 2. How did attending a distance education program versus a traditional program contribute to your ability to complete your degree? | |
| | 3. Was there anything that was unique to your program, that influenced your decision to attend that university? | |
| | | - Departmental culture (Acosta et al., 2015) |
| | 4. As you think about being a Black female in your program, describe that experience and how it was being a Black female in your doctorate program? Were there any situations you can think of that make you feel more or less welcomed in your department? | -Faculty relationships (Collins, 2001, Jones, et al., 2013, Woods, 200l, |
| | 5. Let's talk about your relationships at the university. Let's start with your faculty members at your institution. How would you describe your relationships with them? | -Relationships with committee members (Coleman Hunter, 2012; Dortch, 2016) |
| | 6. Tell me about your experiences with your dissertation committee members. How about your dissertation chair? Please describe your experiences with your dissertation chair? Were | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | there any specific traits or actions these individuals took to help you succeed in your doctoral program? | -Critical Race Theory of Education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); Departmental culture (Acosta et al., 2015) |
| | 7. As you think about these institutional relationships further, how did your status as a Black female influence these relationships? | |
| What **social** factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs? | 8. Please describe the role that your peers/colleagues played as you completed your coursework phase in your program. | Social support from peers (Acosta et al, 2015; Coleman Hunter, 2014; Tinto (1975,1993,2012). |
| | 9. Please describe the role that your peers/colleagues played as you completed the dissertation phase in your program. Were there any specific traits or actions these individuals took to help you succeed in your doctoral program? | |
| | 10. Now, let's talk about life outside of the university as a doctoral student. Please identify all the support systems that you believe contributed to your persistence and completion of a doctoral degree in a distance education program?  Let's start with family. What role did your family play in supporting your doctoral journey? | -Family support ((Brooks, 2015; Jones, 2017; Little, 2014; McCallum, 2017).

-Other social support, other mothering, mentoring (Cannon & Morton, 2015; Felder, 2010; Grant, 2012; Mawhinney, 2012; Rogers, 2006; Woods, 2001) |
| | 11. Were there other social groups that you were a part of church, community organizations, etc. that impacted your doctoral journey? | |
| | 12. How about relationships outside of school. Let's talk about those | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | relationships in your home. How did your spouse (or children) influence your doctoral journey? Were there specific traits about those relationships that impacted your journey?<br><br>13. How about relationships outside of school and your family? Were there any other significant relationships that contributed toward your doctoral journey?<br><br>14. When you think on these significant social relationships, particularly your peer relationships, were the individuals Black? If so, do you think that race mattered? If so, how? | - Roles as Mother and wife (Brown & Watson, 2010; Eisenbach, 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2017<br><br>- Other social support, other mothering, mentoring (Cannon & Morton, 2015; Felder, 2010; Grant, 2012; Mawhinney, 2012; Rogers, 2006; Woods, 2001)<br><br>-Support from other Black females as important (Collins, 2000; Grant, 2012; Mawhinney, 2012) |
| What **personal** factors contribute to the persistence experiences of Black women enrolled in distance education doctoral programs? | 15. Please tell me about yourself. Let's start with where you are from and your current family situation, like who lives at home with you?<br><br>16. How about your occupation? Tell me what you do for a living and how long have you held that position? Did you hold any other professional positions prior to your current occupation? Please tell me about them.<br><br>17. Let's talk about your timeline a little. Please walk me through the timeline and the events you shared.<br><br>18. When you review this timeline, what sticks out to you or seems significant in your educational journey? | -Personal information/ background questions<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>-Motivation (Grant, 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 19. What was your motivation or reasoning for pursuing the doctorate? | -Racial Identity (Bonner, et al., 2015; Dortch, 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2014) |
| | 20. When you think about being a Back female, why was obtaining the doctorate as a black female important to you? | |
| | 21. A lot of research would suggest that obtaining the doctorate is challenging, what would you say motivated you to continue on those days when it was the hardest to continue? | -Self-Beliefs/Self-Efficacy (Martin, 2014; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013) |
| | 22. Was there something you always told yourself or reminded yourself as you went through the doctoral program that helped you succeed? | |
| | 23. Some of the other data I explored, indicated that not many Black females obtain the doctorate. What was different for you or why were you able to succeed when many other Black females do not? | |
| | 24. We've covered a lot of ground in our conversation and I appreciate the time you've given to this. One final question, was there anything missing from your experiences that you believe would have helped you finish sooner or made the journey easier? | |

**APPENDIX G: SAMPLE PROCEDURAL LOG (ANGEL)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 3/8/18 | Received IRB Approval |
| 3/21/18 | Emailed potential participants |
| 3/25/18 | Angel responded her willingness to participate |
| 3/26/18 | Angel completed screening survey |
| 3/26/18 | Contacted Angel to scheduled interview |
| 3/29/18 | Received Angel's timeline |
| 3/29/18 | Conducted Angel's interview |
| 3/29/18 | Received letter of advice from Angel |
| 4/15/18 | Sent audio recording to Rev. come for transcription |
| 4/17/18 | Read electronic transcripts for errors/first read through |
| 5/1/18 | Printed transcript and placed in locked cabinet with other transcripts |
| 5/3/18 | Sent electronic transcript to participant for review and to correct any information |
| 5/9/18-5/15/18 | Began reading and coding of transcript, letter, and timeline and highlighting of significant statements |

**APPENDIX H: SAMPLE TIME LINE**

| DATE (can be year & month only) | EVENT/EXPERIENCE | SIGNIFICANCE (reason for including) |
|---|---|---|
| Fall, 1995 | Admitted to a doctoral program at the same university where I received my Master's degree. | I started at the age of 28. I've wanted a doctorate degree for many years |
| End of spring term, 1997 | Was being sexually harassed by my chair. Because of my refusal, I was blackballed. | I left the doctorate program and refused to look at another program. |
| August, 2009 | Married my current husband who holds an MBA and is a pastor of a church. | He pestered me until I finally gave in and returned to school. |
| May, 2012 | I started school all over again from the beginning at a different university. | New course work, new student loans, had to make time to study. |
| September, 2014 | My husband became the lead pastor of a church. | I became a $1^{st}$ Lady as well as a very active member of my sorority, and another org. I was overwhelmed. |
| January, 2015 | I took a semester off from school. It was my intention to quit the program again. | It was a time for reflection and reevaluation of the important things in my life. |
| May, 2015 | I returned to school rejuvenated and ready to take on the last of my coursework. | |

**APPENDIX I: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Speaker 1:    Here we go. Awesome. All right. Just to start off, if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself like where you're from and your current living situation, kind of who lives at home with you.

Speaker 2:    Sure. I am from XXX, and I still do reside in XXX. Right now, I live at home with my 19-year-old son, my seven-year-old son, and my eight-year-old son, so I am a divorced mother of three sons.

Speaker 1:    Busy, wow.

Speaker 2:    Yes. As far as my career, if you wanted to know about that.

Speaker 1:    Yes.

Speaker 2:    I currently work at the mayor's office of education. I'm working on a new initiative that we have for our city. It's a locally-funded pre-k program. It's very new. It's only been in operation for a bit over a year, so I've been working with the mayor in helping to implement this program. Additionally, I am an adjunct professor in an early childhood education program, and I've been doing that for five years.

Prior to coming to the mayor's office, I've always been in education in positions such as teacher, assistant principal. I owned and operated my own early learning center, which catered to kids between the ages of birth to five years old. My whole career has been within education.

Speaker 1:    Awesome. Awesome. All right. Let's jump right into your pursuit of the doctoral degree. Tell me a little bit about what was your motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree.

Speaker 2:    Well, actually my first attempt at pursuing a doctoral degree happened, I want to say, about 11 years ago. I was in my late 20s. I was married. I only had my oldest child at the time, and the primary reason that I wanted to pursue is because I wanted to ... both for career reasons. I knew that I didn't always want to stay in the classroom.

At that time, 11 years ago, I was teaching sixth grade at that time, so I knew I wanted to expand, I knew I wanted to do more, and I knew of many of the things that I wanted to pursue in the future that I probably would need a terminal degree or at least advance in my skills and knowledge. I would say that was my primary reason for starting the program, and this was 11 years ago, but I did not finish that particular program.

I only took about four or five classes and said, "You know what? Let me take a break, handle some family situations, and I'll go back to the program." Well, I never went back to that program. The program that I recently, well the one that I recently finished, is a program that I started in 2015. What prompted me to go back for that program is because I don't like leaving things undone. I knew I still wanted to do things in the future, I knew I wanted to progress in my career, so I felt like it was something that was left unfinished.

I really like to work hard. I think if anyone were to describe me, they would definitely use the word "hardworking." I wanted to finish something that I left off, even though this was a totally different program, totally different school. It was still one of my goals.

I will also add that I was really influenced by ... I don't want to say what I had in my upbringing, but the lack of what I had in my upbringing. I was the first person within my immediate family to graduate from high school. I live in XXX, so I live in the inner city where there's a lot of poverty. If I'm not mistaken, XXXs like one of the largest, poorest cities in the country, so I grew up with modest means, lived in public housing. My mother was on welfare. We lived with extended family members, so I always lived with family with aunts, uncles, cousins all lived together.

I lived in a neighborhood where the environment wasn't the best. I also experienced a lot of death in my family, including my younger brother was killed, so I experienced a lot, and I knew that I wanted better for myself, as well as my three sons. I always believed that education was a key factor in helping to lift people out of poverty.

Speaker 1:    Yeah, that's good. I think you alluded to this a little bit, but when you think about being a Black female specifically, why was obtaining the doctorate important to you, if it was important to you as a Black female, I guess?

Speaker 2:    I believe it was important for many reasons. As a Black woman who grew up in an environment around a lot of women ... My mom was one of eight children, and most are women, so I grew up with a lot of aunts and female cousins. I felt like statistically, the odds were against me, and I also had my oldest in my second year of college, so I just felt like not only for myself, but for my family, my friends, and the people in my environment, I had to ... It's almost like I had to prove-

Speaker 1:    Right.

Speaker 2:    -that I could do well. I don't want to say that people didn't think that I couldn't, like my family and friends, but I just felt like society as a whole, I was already just a statistic because of my background.

Speaker 1:     Exactly. Yeah, that makes sense. Yeah. Your first program, the first doctoral 11 years ago, was it a residential program, like a brick and mortar, or was it online?

Speaker 2:     That program was actually at XXX University.

Speaker 1:     Okay. All right. Awesome. Tell me a little bit about the program at XXX. What attracted you to a distance education program?

Speaker 2:     Well, there were a couple of reasons why I wanted to do online. As I said, I have three boys, and at that time, my younger boys were ... They were four and three years old, so they were quite young. I needed a program that offered flexibility, and the XXX program was ... They have two different programs for the doctorate of education. One was completely online, and the other program was a hybrid.

               I felt like online programs allow the flexibility that I really needed a ... At that point, I was divorced, so being a divorced mother of three children, and also working a full-time job and a part-time job. I needed something that offered that flexibility.

Speaker 1:     Yeah, definitely. Was there anything specific to the XXX program that attracted you to it?

Speaker 2:     I would say ... XXX is well-known in the area, so I wanted to be attached to a program that was well-known for its academics and its rigor, and XXX, I felt like, offered that. When reading a lot of the information about their courses, I felt like their courses were embedded with practical experience that you were able to really connect what you were learning to your actual job. I thought that practical learning was really important for me in order to really advance and be a scholar practitioner where I can actually implement what I was learning and make some changes.

Speaker 1:     How about being a Black ... Was your program totally online? Did you do the hybrid, or did you do the totally online program?

Speaker 2:     I did the totally online program.

Speaker 1:     You didn't have any residential components? Any required residencies or anything like that?

Speaker 2:     No. My particular program did not.

Speaker 1:     Okay.

Speaker 2:     But I believe for other concentrations they may have had internships or residencies, but I just know for my specific concentration, I did not.

Speaker 1:     As you think about being a Black female in your program, you recall that I'm studying persistence for Black females, describe your experiences being a Black female in your program. Is there any situations that made you feel more or less welcomed as a Black female?

Speaker 2:     From the perspective of like working with the faculty members, or-

Speaker 1:     Well, yeah. Because I'll get into specifics with faculty and your peers, but just in general, yeah I guess. That's why I asked if you had residencies, because sometimes if it's all online, the racial factor, you can't really sense it, you know, online. But sometimes people have said stuff like they noticed maybe in grading or comments.

Speaker 2:     You know what? I'm going to point out that of my professors, I had two Black women for a couple of my courses, and they were so supportive. It was like, "I am going to help you out. I am going to mentor you if you need it. I am going to provide you with the resources that you need because I want to see you make it." That's how I felt with these two particular professors of color.

                Being at an institution ... XXX is a predominantly white institution, and the education department is a predominantly white faculty and staff there. I felt like these particular professors, they were really invested in my success. They really wanted to see me make it, and I really value their feedback.

Speaker 1:     Okay. Was there anything they did in particular like allowing you to talk to them outside of class or being involved in what's going on with you personally? Anything that they did in particular that made you feel supported?

Speaker 2:     Anything in particular?

Speaker 1:     Or it was just more like the motivation like, "Come on, you can do it," and, "I believe in you"? More like verbal affirmation, or ...?

Speaker 2:     It was definitely verbal affirmation. I felt like when I was given feedback on my different assignments, it was, "You may want to look at this to make this stronger."

Speaker 1:     Got you.

Speaker 2:     I almost felt like they wanted to make sure I was the best of the best.

Speaker 1:     Got you. Got you.

Speaker 2:     It's almost like I represented a piece of them, so they wanted to make sure that when it was time to conduct my research and just move forward with my dissertation process that I was among the best, not just-

Speaker 1:     Got you. Yeah.

Speaker 2:     -another Black female who's just barely making it through the program. They wanted to make sure I represented the best of myself. They also ... They gave me information on how I can increase my knowledge. For example, one of my professors would say, "You know, this conference is coming up, and you may want to think about going to this," or, "Here's a website," or, "You may want to join this." I felt like they were always pointing out various resources.

Speaker 1:     Got you. Yeah. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but just to clarify. You do feel like those relationships were impacted by the fact that you were also a Black female and that you guys share that commonality.

Speaker 2:     Oh definitely.

Speaker 1:     Got you. All right. Awesome. Tell me, I don't know if either one of those individuals were on your dissertation committee, but can we talk a little bit about your relationship with your dissertation committee and your chair? Anything they did to kind of help you through the process or just your experience with them?

Speaker 2:     Okay. The two professors, they were not on my dissertation committee. I really wanted them to be on my dissertation committee. They were highly sought after by-

Speaker 1:     Everybody?

Speaker 2:     -the Black students. They were highly sought after by the Black students in the program, but no I did not have them. As far as my committee, first, the person who was assigned to be my chair, she was new to the university, and her primary function at that time was to chair various committees. I would say that she was very overwhelmed because they gave her a lot of students. I want to say that at least in the beginning, her responsiveness wasn't as timely as I would have liked, and I understood why. I understood that ...

               I believe that the university gave her way too many students, but I felt like once we kind of had that relationship going and she was able to see that I was serious, I wanted to move forward, that her responses were more timely, the more on track to the way I wanted it to be. I felt like I was always able to reach out and ask a question, ask for suggestions, and she would give me her opinion and advice on various things.

               I think we had a great working relationship. I know there were other students who had her and did not have the same relationship that I had with her, but I want to add that because of the relationship that I had with her, I was one ... not one of. I was the first person out of the small group that I formed, you know the

relationship that you kind of form with some of your fellow students, I was the first to successfully finish.

Speaker 1:    Got you.

Speaker 2:    I really think it was due to the relationship that I had with her. She saw my persistence. She saw that if she gave me something to do, I did it, and I got it back to her very quickly. It was a great standard. I think I was just as timely as she was. If she expected something back within a week, I gave it back to her within three days, so she was able to see my persistence-

Speaker 1:    Yeah, that's good.

Speaker 2:    -and hard work.

Speaker 1:    It sounds like she raised to that level, right? You guys had a good working relationship.

Speaker 2:    Yes.

Speaker 1:    Anything that you would have changed in your relationship with your chair, or I don't know if you had other committee members, to help you be more successful?

Speaker 2:    I did have two other committee members, but their responsibilities weren't the same as my chair. If I could have done anything to make my relationship better with my chair, I don't think I could have done anything differently. Like I said, I was the first person to finish within my small little group that we formed, and actually one of the very few who actually finished on time. I think I really put my best foot forward and gave good work and gave it in a timely fashion.

Speaker 1:    Awesome. Talking about the group that you say you formed, tell me a little bit about your relationships with your colleagues in the program and if there were any actions that you guys took to support each other through the process. Oh, I'm sorry. Before you answer that, was your chair a white female or another ethnicity?

Speaker 2:    She was a white female.

Speaker 1:    Okay, got you. Perfect. Thank you. All right, so colleagues in the program. I heard you say you formed a group.

Speaker 2:    Yes. When we first started, we were one big group of about, I want to say, 24, 25, 26 people. There was a lot of us who started, and we would have these different sessions, online sessions, with our professors, so you kind of get to see everyone who's in the class, and we noticed it was only a few of us, Black people. So, we knew from the jump we had to support each other because we knew, many of us, we were coming from environments in which many of our friends and family had

not gone through this process. So, we knew that we did not have outside people outside of ourselves that would be able to support us in the way that we needed.

For our classes ... We always had a group project for our classes, and for some of our classes, we were able to select our group members. For other classes, we were just assigned. When we were able to select our group members, we made sure that at least a few of us were within that group. It just so happened when we were assigned by the professor, we always had at least one of us in the group with us. That experience brought about a bond.

We would email each other. We would be on text messages, which we still do. Even though I finished my program and I'm done, all of my other small group members, they have not. So, we still text each other, you know, "Did you do your assignment? What support do you need? How can I help you? Don't forget this is due on this day." It was a lot of support and holding all of us accountable for whatever it is that we needed to do.

Speaker 1:    That's so beautiful, and you know, that's what the research says. As Black people earning doctorates, we just do that naturally. We just naturally look for people that are like us, and we just kind of group together and support each other through, and it's one of the major factors of our success, actually. It's amazing how that just happens. It's beautiful.

Let's talk a little bit about life outside of the university when you were a doctoral student. Let's start with your family. Not your kids right now, but what role, if any, and this varies for adult students, but what role did your family play in supporting your doctoral journey?

Speaker 2:    I would start by saying my ex-husband was fabulous.

Speaker 1:    That's great.

Speaker 2:    I mean, he was very supportive in all the steps. He made sure that I had time to complete whatever assignments that I needed to complete. Not that he understood what I was doing, but he was very supportive through the whole entire process. Wanted to know what I was working on and how much longer it was going to take. He actually wants to read my dissertation. I haven't given it to him yet, but he wants to read it. He was very supportive.

My other family members, they were supportive in a way where ... I don't know. They weren't as supportive as him. I don't think it was because they didn't want to be supportive but because they didn't understand what I was doing and how to support me.

Speaker 1:    Right, right. Yeah.

Speaker 2:     I would say that they were happy and proud of what I was doing but didn't quite understand everything that it took for me to do everything that I was doing.

Speaker 1:     Got you. Yeah. You know, I see that a lot. That makes a lot of sense. I just want to clarify. When you say that your ex-husband was support, you guys were divorced, but he was still supporting you and also helping with the kids and that sort of thing.

Speaker 2:     Yes.

Speaker 1:     Okay. Perfect. I just wanted to clarify that. That's awesome. Any other social groups that you were a part of like church, community organizations, sorority, anything like that that you feel like impacted your doctoral journey?

Speaker 2:     I would say that about a little less than a year ago probably is when I joined the online support group, and I think that was impactful as far as motivating me to want to continue meeting my deadlines, making sure I'm doing all that I could do in order to finish the program. So, I think that was impactful and inspiring, but outside of that, I was not a part of any type of other group, any type of social group, be it a sorority or a group or anything else.

Speaker 1:     Got you. The online group, was that one of the Facebook groups?

Speaker 2:     Yes.

Speaker 1:     Okay. Was it only for Black PhDs, or was it for any PhDs?

Speaker 2:     The support group?

Speaker 1:     Yeah, the online group. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2:     I believe ... I'm in just a few groups, but I believe for all of the groups, it's for anyone who is pursuing any type of doctorate.

Speaker 1:     Got you. All right. Tell me a little bit about your ... I don't know how you did it being a single mom. I have three kids, and I don't know how you did it. But tell me a little bit about being a mom in the program and balancing your children and what that looked like and what support they gave you through the process.

Speaker 2:     I would say that it was the hardest thing I've ever done. It was the hardest thing. In addition to being a student, of course I had to make sure that my children still engaged in their extracurricular activities. I didn't want to forego the things that we were doing before, but balancing ... Let me just remind you that I worked two jobs. So, it wasn't just my full-time day job. I worked in the evening. Balancing all that was very difficult. I mean, there were days where I would only get maybe three or four hours of sleep literally, in between my first job and getting off of

work to go pick my kid up from school, get them from school to home, do homework with them, and to get to my next job. All of that happened within the span of a couple of hours. It was mentally and emotionally draining.

Speaker 1:     Yeah.

Speaker 2:     I mean, there were nights when I would come home after my evening teaching position and I didn't even know how I would get up the next morning to do it all over again.

Speaker 1:     Yeah.

Speaker 2:     I would say that I've always been a praying woman, but I don't think I prayed more in my life than I did-

Speaker 1:     I know that's right.

Speaker 2:     -than I did during those years. I mean, I prayed for less stress.

Speaker 1:     Yeah.

Speaker 2:     I prayed for sanity.

Speaker 1:     Yeah.

Speaker 2:     You know, it was extremely difficult.

Speaker 1:     Yeah, yeah. Anything that your children did that kind of helped you? Whether it was just like they understood when Mommy had to work, like whatever?

Speaker 2:     I would say that they tried to understand what I needed to do. For example, on weekends, if they wanted to go out somewhere and I was working on a paper and I said, "Oh no, we can't go out today because Mommy is working," they understood that, but they weren't always happy about it.

Speaker 1:     Sure, sure. They're still kids.

Speaker 2:     Yeah, yeah. They're still kids, and they weren't always happy about that, but whenever I could, I would always make it up. If that meant okay, I need to put my work to the side for four hours and do whatever it is that they want to do, that's what I'm going to do. If that means I need to stay up an extra four hours tonight and don't get much of any sleep, then that's what I'm going to do.

There were times when I was scheduled to teach at my evening job and I would just give the class up. I would just tell my program director "I'm sorry, I can't teach this quarter."

Speaker 1:    Yeah, yeah. That makes sense. Trying to figure out what to let go of. Any other relationships outside of school or in your family that we didn't talk about that you feel like we're really important to you and really helped you through the journey? Like, I don't know, best friends or any type of-

Speaker 2:    Yeah, yeah. I would say my mother-in-law was very instrumental during this time, at least in the beginning. In the very beginning, she would ... For example, when I had to do my comprehensive exam, she had them that weekend, or if she knew I really had a lot to do on a particular weekend, she would say, "Hey, send the kids down here to me." A lot of the times, I didn't want to ask her, because in my mind, I have to be Superwoman. It's like I have to do everything, and I'm going to get everything done.

              My ex-husband, it's his mother, he would ask me, "So what do you need to do this weekend?" And he would sometimes ask his mom, "Mom, can the kids come down? XXX has something that she needs to do this weekend." And she was always willing to take them. I would say that was really important. As long as she knew that I needed the assistance, she would be there.

Speaker 1:    That's beautiful. That's a gift. We're winding down, but a lot of research, and we know this for a fact, would suggest that obtaining the doctorate is challenging. What would you say motivated you to continue on those days when it was the hardest to continue?

Speaker 2:    I would say wanting to be an inspiration to my children.

Speaker 1:    Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, that's good.

Speaker 2:    Just letting them know, and letting them see, that if you work hard, you can achieve whatever it is you want to achieve. I thought that was important.

Speaker 1:    Yeah. Yeah, that is really good. Was there something you always told yourself? For some people, it's a mantra or a saying. As you went through, just to kind of keep your mind going and keep you focused and persisting?

Speaker 2:    Yeah, I would always tell myself, "You've come too far to only come this far."

Speaker 1:    That's good. Yeah.

Speaker 2:    It was like you've put in too much work to just let it all go.

Speaker 1:    Yeah. That's good. That's actually the title of my ... I find people say that a lot. That's actually the title of my dissertation: "I Just Can't Give Up Now."

Speaker 2:    Oh okay.

Speaker 1:   I have come too far. All right. Two more questions. You know, Black females have some of the lowest doctoral degree attainment rates. Tell me, why was it different for you? Why when so many other Black females maybe aren't as successful, why were you able to succeed and finish?

Speaker 2:   I think a lot of it is due to my personal characteristics. I would say a lot of what it takes to complete a doctoral program revolves around grit, perseverance, being able to follow through, and I felt like all of those things are things that had been embedded within me since I was a child. So, I don't think it's something that just happened in my adult years. I feel like all throughout my life, I've always persevered, worked hard, followed through, set goals. That's been my way of life ever since I can remember, so I think ... I think I have a set of traits that were just natural to me that just so happened to be key skills and key traits that you need in order to be successful in a doctoral program.

Speaker 1:   Got you. Yeah. What role did motivation play? Would you consider yourself intrinsically motivated, or ...?

Speaker 2:   I am definitely intrinsically motivated.

Speaker 1:   Okay. Yeah.

Speaker 2:   That has been a key trait of mine through my whole academic journey. Even things that aren't academically related, intrinsic motivation's always the key thing that gets me going.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, that's good. One final question. Was there anything missing from your experience that you think would have helped you finish sooner or made the journey easier for you?

Speaker 2:   Something missing?

Speaker 1:   Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2:   I would add that even though my ex-husband was very supportive, I think if I weren't divorced and was in a two-parent household, I think that definitely would have made things easier.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, yeah. Would you say something like sharing the household and parent responsibilities? That sort of thing?

Speaker 2:   Yeah, I would definitely say sharing the household and family responsibilities would have been something that would have made the journey easier.

Speaker 1:   A little bit easier, yeah. But you did it! My goodness.

Speaker 2:     I did it.

Speaker 1:     And you did it quickly. That's amazing.

Speaker 2:     I did. I did it within the guidelines that were set. You know those guidelines can fluctuate, but I did it within those guidelines, and when I tell you I've cried every single day since I finished, that is the truth.

Speaker 1:     Is that right? I've heard of this whole postPhD trauma. I didn't really understand until I started collecting my data and I'm like oh, this is a thing. Everybody goes through this. Okay.

Speaker 2:     No, I cry out of happiness.

Speaker 1:     Oh okay.

Speaker 2:     Yeah. I cry like, "Oh my goodness. I did this." Over my three years, I've gone through a lot. I've been in hospital rooms typing papers. I've gone through a lot in addition to what we've talked about, so it's amazing that I finished, finished in the allotted time, and I'm just a little bit crazy. Not too much, just a little.

Speaker 1:     I'm sure you're getting your sanity back day by day. We all-

Speaker 2:     Just go with that. Go with that.

Speaker 1:     That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story. It's just always inspiring to hear different people's journeys and what they had to go through in order to make it.

**APPENDIX J: SAMPLE ADVICE LETTER**

Dear Black Women who are seeking a distance education doctoral degree,

Before you begin your educational search on where you should study, you should first think about what your career goals are. Do you need this degree? How will you pay for the degree? Think about your family, who will support you emotionally while going through this journey? Do you have family members or mentors that you can discuss your journey along the way? Please know that people who do not have doctoral degrees don't understand the process or what you are going through (Please don't get frustrated, they don't understand).

If you want to become a professor, think about getting your degree in the discipline that you want to teach. Make sure that you are attending conferences to network with other professionals in the field. Find mentors in the field in which you want to write your research. Think about how the research will propel your career or your passion.

If you are in a cohort model, continue to assist and guide your cohort members through the process, but know after classes finish and the dissertation process begins, it will be a lonely process. Your cohort members will be embarrassed and will not speak with you because they might not be where you are. Find one or two people from your cohort that will support you no matter what happens. Know that you will feel inadequate and maybe even depressed, please persist and keep going, there is light at the end of the tunnel and you will make it.

Make sure that you pick a strong dissertation chair that will get you through the process. Pick your committee from the institution, do not get outside people. Pick people that that get along and don't have issues with each other. Do not pick a friend, because they might not be your friend at the end of the process. When you finish your degree, it might be difficult to find a job and or a career but know that you are worthy and that God didn't bring you this far to turn you around. Be humble and stay strong. YOU GOT THIS my sister.

With Love,

XXX, PhD

## APPENDIX K: PRELIMINARY CODE LIST

**Personal Factors Codes**

- Can't Quit
- Career Goals-Professor
- Career Goals-Research
- Connection to dissertation topic
- Death
- Depression
- Distracted by life
- Doctorate Role Models
- Don't leave unfinished
- Early educational value
- Education as career
- Education as a way out
- External motivation
- Faith
- Finances
  - Return on investment
- Financial Freedom
- Humility /Take criticism
- Independence
- Inner thoughts on race
- Internal Motivation
- Long term goal
- Overcome negative background
- Make others pout
- Mental Health
  - Losing mind
  - Postdoctorate stress
- Mother role balance
- Part of Elite Group
- Prayer life
- Quiet space for writing
- Quitting
- Role as caretaker
- Role Model for Kids
- Role model for other black females
- Self-Advocacy
- Self-Care
- Self Determination
- Teaching as a career
- Title of doctor

- Trauma

**Social Factors Codes**

- Accountability partner
- Isolation
- Represent race
- Sibling support
- Social Support
  - Best friend relationship
- Social media support group
- Spousal support
  - Household chores
  - Words of encouragement
  - Ex husband
- Support from Black female doctoral students
- Support from Black female doc students
  - Shared experiences/camaraderie
  - exchange of info
  - shared resources
- Support from military
  - Financial
  - Helping with family
- Support from black female role model
- Support from family
- Support from family
  - Time to write
- Support from parent
- Support from older children
- Support from others
  - Words of encouragement
- Support from sorority
- Support from spouse
- Support from work students
- Work family integration

**Institutional Factors Codes**

- Didn't silence voice
- Chair support
  - Accessibility
  - Motivate
  - Above and beyond
- Christian values

- Institutional racism
- Ivory Tower breakthrough
- Presence of other black students
- Professor Support
    - Nurture
    - Supportive
    - Commitment to diversity issues
- Program structure
    - All inclusive
    - Convenience
    - Course offerings
    - Dissertation integration
    - Work family balance
    - Positive reputation
    - Practitioner model
    - Cohort model
- PWI v. HBCU
- Support from Black professor
    - Cannot fail
- Support from other committee members
    - motivate
- Support from other staff
    - Admissions counselor outreach
    - Connectedness
    - Accessibility

**APPENDIX L: CODE TO CLUSTER LIST**

| Institutional Factors | Social Factors | Personal Factors |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| **Program Support** | **Spousal Support** | **External Motivation** |
| • support | • Motivate/Encourage | • Role model for children |
| • Commitment to Diversity Issues | • Time to write | • Finances |
| • Black Professor Support | • Time with children | • Title of doctor |
| • Allowed student authenticity | • Household duties | • Career goals |
| | | • Role model for black females |
| **Program Structure** | **Other social support** | |
| • All Inclusive Residencies | • Military relationships | **Internal Motivation** |
| • Work life balance | • Sorority sisterhood | • Independence |
| • Positive reputation | • Significant best friend relationship | • Self-determination |
| • Cohort Model | • Work Students | • Grit |
| • Convenience | • | • Persistence |
| • Flexibility | • Family Support | • Faith |
| • Practitioner Model | • Encouraging words | • Represent race |
| • Dissertation integration | • Value education | |
| • Residency Offerings | • Time to write | |
| | • Older children support | |
| **Other Institutional Support** | | |
| • Admissions office outreach | **Black Doctoral Students** | |
| • Staff connectedness | • Accountability partner | |
| • Nonacademic dept. accessibility | • Social media groups | |
| • Presence of other black students | • Shared experiences | |
| • Christian values | • Exchange of information | |
| | | |
| **Chair support** | | |
| • Accessibility | | |
| • Motivator | | |
| • Above and beyond | | |
| | | |
| **Institutional Racism** | | |
| • Ivory tower breakthrough | | |
| • Overt racism in feedback | | |