

## General

# Exploring the Experiences of Students of Color in United States Counseling Psychology Doctoral Programs: A Qualitative Investigation

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The current study utilizes a qualitative inquiry to examine the experiences of a sample of students of Color in counseling psychology doctoral programs within the United States (US). Although the counseling psychology field has been successful in recruiting and retaining students of Color, less is known about the experiences of these students within their doctoral programs. Participants were 49 students of Color (81.6% female), identifying as Black (34.7%), Asian (30.6%), Latinx (22.4%), Arab or Middle Eastern (6.1%), and Multiracial (6.1%). Students' open-ended descriptions of their experiences were analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research – Modified. Six categories emerged from responses: support, racial discrimination, marginalization, lack of representation, hypocrisy, and positive changes/attempts. The results demonstrate that these students' experiences range from feeling supported and seeing positive changes made in their program, to feeling isolated and discriminated against within them. Considerations for ongoing support of doctoral students of Color in counseling psychology programs are discussed, and approaches to developing anti-racist program culture are presented.

### Article Highlights

Within counseling psychology training programs within the US, students of Color remain under-represented and report experiences of racial discrimination

Students of Color appear to benefit from the presence of other students of Color of Faculty of Color

Students of Color identify some positive developments by programs in extending support and recognizing their unique experiences of, however also report hypocrisy within the profession, where programs do not adhere to their own rhetoric around multiculturalism and social justice

Programs are encouraged to routinely assess the needs of Students of Color and to increase efforts to secure racial diversity among both faculty and student bodies

Subspecialties in Professional Psychology (CRSSPP) (APA, 2023a). As such Counseling Psychology is viewed as a distinct branch of psychology, and has been described as a “generalist health service specialty in professional psychology that uses a broad range of culturally-informed and culturally-sensitive practices to help people improve their well-being, prevent and alleviated distress and maladjustment, resolve crises and increase their ability to function better in their lives” (APA, 2023b). Training in counseling psychology primarily occurs at the doctoral level with all accredited programs following the scientist-practitioner model (Scheel et al., 2018). Training to be a counseling psychologist typically takes place over four to six years and includes a year of supervised practice referred to as an internship. The licensing of psychologists occurs at the state level, with each state outlining their own criteria for licensure. Irrespective of the specialty field in which training occurs (e.g., school psychology, clinical psychology, community psychology, counseling psychology etc.) upon fulfillment of all requirements the professional designation is that of Licensed Psychologist (Siegel & DeMers, 2016). Recent changes introduced by APA's Council of Accreditation (COA), resulted in the adoption of the term Health Service Psychology in order to represent both the scope of and sequence of training consistent with accreditation of psychology training within the US (Bell et al., 2017). Counseling Psychology therefore, while falling under the umbrella of Health Service Psychology, is also a specialty and is known for its attention to environmental/contextual factors (e.g., race, culture, gender, social class, sexual orientation, abil-

Within the United States (US), Counseling Psychology is recognized as a specialty within the larger field of psychology, having been first given this designation in 1998 by the Commission for the Recognition of Specialties and

ity, sociopolitical), that impact human development and psychological functioning (APA, 2023a).

Given the socio-political history of the US, and the manner which psychology has been developed from a Eurocentric framework (Guthrie, 2004), scholars have consistently identified the need for the field of psychology to be more representative of the racial demographics that exist within the US census (Quintana & Bernal, 1995; Soto et al., 2018). Counseling psychology as a subdiscipline has included racial and cultural inclusivity and a focus on social justice as core values of the discipline (Scheel et al., 2018). As such counseling psychology training programs have committed to recruiting and retaining a more diverse student body (Ding et al., 2021), and there appears to have been some success in this area. The most recent data from the American Psychological Association indicates that 44% of doctoral students in counseling psychology identified as either multiethnic (4%), Native American/Alaska Native (.8%), Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (0.2%), Hispanic/Latinx (11%), Asian (13%), or Black/African American (15%) (Assefa et al., 2023).

However, training programs in the U.S. exist within a social structure that continues to struggle with racial inequality (Feagin & Ducey, 2018), and despite programs' efforts, doctoral students of Color in professional psychology have higher than average attrition rates (Callahan et al., 2018). Factors such as racial climate, racial identity, and quality of program support influence the retention of students of Color in psychology graduate programs (Trent et al., 2021). This study gathers data about student experiences and hopes to contribute to the toolbox available to program directors and faculty as they seek to build more racially inclusive and affirming training environments.

### Socialization to Graduate Training

One factor that has been identified as important in the overall experience of graduate students of Color is *socialization*, which has been described as the phenomenon of "a newcomer [being] made a member of a community — in the case of graduate students, the community of an academic department in a particular discipline" (Golde, 1998, p. 56). As such, graduate school socialization is an extended and continuous process by which a student feels connected to the larger program environment. It has been connected to program attrition rates (Gardner, 2008) and to successful facilitation of students' professional identities and professional engagement (Langrehr et al., 2017). The process of graduate student socialization can be difficult for students of Color, with findings identifying experiences of marginalization (Blockett et al., 2016), isolation and lack of support (Twale et al., 2016), and discrimination (Brunsma et al., 2017).

Mentorship, defined as the provision of professional and personal "guidance and support delivered from a mentor to a protégé" (Thomas et al., 2007, p. 179), is understood to be a key aspect of graduate training and a vehicle of graduate socialization across disciplines. Accordingly, it is an important factor in the recruitment and retention of students of Color (Brunsma et al., 2017). Benefits of same-race

mentoring for students of Color include feelings of satisfaction and experiences of both psychosocial and instrumental support (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). However, faculty of Color are underrepresented in higher education, including in psychology doctoral programs, and cross-racial mentorship between White faculty and students of Color is commonplace (Thomas et al., 2007). It is important to note that cross-racial mentorship can indeed be productive and rewarding; students who felt supported both in their professional concerns and in their racial identity experienced mentorship as helpful regardless of the mentor's race (Felder et al., 2014). Yet faculty members may lack the cultural sensitivity requisite for productive cross-racial mentorships, whether due to their own racial-identity statuses or lack of comfort with, or understanding of, racial issues; White mentors' competence and experience with cross-racial mentorship is particularly inconsistent (Thomas et al., 2007). The fact that many students of Color have sought mentors outside of their programs indicates an unmet need for culturally sensitive mentoring within these programs (Thomas et al., 2007).

### Personal Experiences and Perceptions of Discrimination

Students of Color at predominantly White institutions may experience racial discrimination (Brunsma et al., 2017), tokenization and isolation (Haskins et al., 2013), and imposter syndrome (Bernard et al., 2018). Qualitative studies have been particularly helpful in understanding what graduate study is like for students of Color in various fields. In the disciplines of counselor education and social work, students of Color have expressed feeling disconnected from peers (Henfield et al., 2013), isolated, underprepared, and underrepresented in academia (Tijerina & Deepak, 2014; Zeligman et al., 2015). Students also reported negative interactions with peers and faculty (Henfield et al., 2013), low academic self-image (Tijerina & Deepak, 2014), and heightened visibility of and awareness of their race (Zeligman et al., 2015). The finding that graduate students of Color are less likely to pursue academic careers may be reflective of the experiences that they have within the academy (Brunsma et al., 2017).

### Current Study

Building on the aforementioned research into the experiences of graduate students of Color, the current study focuses specifically on doctoral students in counseling psychology. The study aims to provide descriptive information that will assist counseling psychology doctoral programs whose stated commitments include building "inclusiveness and respect for intersecting identities" within their programs (Scheel et al., 2018, p. 11).

### Method

#### Participants

There were 81 initial responses to the participant survey. Of those, 31 could not be analyzed because the participant

did not respond to the open-ended prompt, and 1 because they were not enrolled in doctoral study. The final set of participants consisted of 49 students of Color currently enrolled in counseling psychology doctoral programs across the United States. Participants hailed from various regions, with the majority from the Midwest (40.8%) and the Northeast (24.5%). They ranged in age from 23 to 44, with an average age of 28.27. They represented a range of racial groups: 17 (34.7%) identifying as Black or African American, 15 (30.6%) identifying as Asian (including South Asian, East Indian, and Malaysian Indian), 11 (22.4%) identifying as Latinx (including Mestizo and Indigenous Mexican), 3 (6.1%) identifying as Arab or Middle Eastern, and 3 (6.1%) identifying as Multiracial. Of the participants, 40 (81.6%) identified as female, 6 (12.2%) identified as male, 1 identified as transgender, 1 identified as genderfluid, and 2 did not disclose their genders. Participants' year in program ranged from 1 to 6, with an even distribution of participants in their first four years of study ( $n = 43$ ), and a few in their fifth ( $n = 4$ ) and sixth years ( $n = 2$ ).

## Procedure

Survey participants were recruited via emails to APA-accredited counseling psychology doctoral programs' training directors, requesting distribution to their students. After approval by the authors' Institutional Review Board, data was collected in the 2017–2018 academic year. The online survey consisted of a demographic questionnaire and a single open-ended prompt stating: "We are very interested in your experiences as a student of Color in your program. Please take some time to share what your experience has been/is. Take as much space as you like."

Survey responses were analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research — Modified (CQR-M; Spangler et al., 2012). We chose CQR-M because the methodology is considered well suited to the exploration of new areas of research and the analysis of brief qualitative responses, and therefore to our data, given the open-ended nature of the survey prompt and the limitations associated with conducting qualitative research online in an setting that prohibits interaction with subjects (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Although auditing is not required in CQR-M, it was utilized in this study to increase trustworthiness (Spangler et al., 2012; Williams & Morrow, 2009).

## Data Analysis

CQR-M, unlike traditional CQR (Hill et al., 1997), calls for coders to derive categories and codes from the data, and then to code without forming core ideas (Spangler et al., 2012). Consensus-reaching is the preferred way to resolve coding discrepancies (Spangler et al., 2012). In the current study, two coders separately identified categories and then discussed discrepancies and overlap, reaching consensus on the final categories to be used. Similarly, they coded each survey response separately and met to resolve discrepancies through consensus.

CQR-M calls for each response to get one code (Spangler et al., 2012), but the prompt's broad nature elicited re-

sponses that were dense, lengthy, and often inclusive of multiple categories. Therefore, we did not limit ourselves to one code per response, concluding that it would likely cause the loss of important data and constitute the further erasure of an already-marginalized group's experience. We also found the complexity of the responses, which spoke to multiple aspects of student experience in deep and layered ways, sufficient to warrant an audit (conducted by the principal investigator) to check the work of the primary team. As such, the auditor advised the study development (e.g., conceptualization and questionnaire), but was not connected to the coding process until receiving all participants' responses and the primary team's coding of them during the audit. As a result of the audit, one adjustment was made to the coding categories, and suggestions for clarifying category labels were given.

## Researchers' Positionality

Two second-year doctoral students in counseling psychology at a large public university (a cisgender White female and a cisgender Biracial Black/Hispanic female) served as coders, and a counseling psychology faculty member (a cisgender Black male) served as auditor. As is customary before and during CQR (Hill et al., 1997), the team discussed their assumptions and biases to create transparency surrounding potential influences on the research process.

One identified bias was the tendency to view racial issues in a Black–White context, perhaps a reflection of the same tendency in literature on U.S. racial dynamics. As such, the coding team noted the importance of attending to the experiences of all people of Color represented in the sample, which may differ from what has been shown within this dichotomy. The team also discussed their expectations, as researchers with experience studying negative racial encounters, that participants would identify negative experiences more frequently and consider them more salient than positive ones. As such, they noted the importance of attending to the positive experiences described in responses. Given these considerations, and consistent with inquiry in CQR (Hill et al., 1997; Spangler et al., 2012), the research prompt was framed as an open-ended and non-directive question to elicit the experiences most salient to the participant.

The coders' ongoing discussions helped them consistently attend to how researcher biases might shape the categories drawn from the data, thus facilitating greater trustworthiness of the data (Morrow, 2005). The use of an auditor was also intended to increase the accuracy of category generation and thus improve trustworthiness of the data (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

## Results

In response to the closed-ended questions at the end of the survey answered by all 49 participants, 18% ( $n=9$ ) reported satisfaction with the racial diversity of the faculty; 51% ( $n=25$ ) endorsed inappropriate racial interactions with fellow students; and 55% ( $n=27$ ) endorsed inappropriate racial interactions with faculty. CQR-M analysis of the

open-ended question uncovered six prominent categories: *support*, *racial discrimination*, *marginalization*, *lack of representation*, *hypocrisy*, and *positive changes/attempts*. Per CQR-M methodology, frequencies are denoted as proportions (i.e., percentages) rather than with the labels “general, typical, variant” used in traditional CQR (Spangler et al., 2012). Since we chose to allow the use of multiple codes within one response, the proportions reported in our results are not cumulative but instead represent the proportion of responses in which the category was identified.

## Support

For the purposes of this study, *support* was defined as evidence of assistance, guidance, and willingness to help from faculty and/or peers. As the most frequently noted category, occurring in 61.2% of responses, three subcategories emerged: *positive support*, *inconsistent support*, and *lack of support*. Of the responses in the category, 14.3% reported support from faculty, 18.4% reported support from other students, 12.2% reported support from both, and 4% reported feeling both supported and unsupported by the same faculty member.

*Positive support* (18.4%) encompassed descriptions of “safe” environments with peers, faculty, or both in which the respondent felt understood, cared for, and accepted. Several respondents identified factors contributing to a supportive environment. One self-identified Asian student ascribed their overall positive experiences as a doctoral student of Color to “the safe space my professors and cohort members have provided” and the presence of “very accepting, open-minded White students who identify as allies, and with whom I have felt safe expressing my concerns and experiences.” This student identified the ability to freely express both their experiences and concerns as a key factor of a supportive environment. A self-identified African American student noted feeling understood as a major factor, saying about her advisor, “Within our advising relationship, she often discussed my intersecting identities and understood my experiences as a cultural being. I felt cared for and comfortable in her presence.”

While some students noted feeling supported by the larger environment, others noted that support came primarily from other students of Color with whom they felt they had shared experiences. One self-identified Asian student stated, “When I am with other Asian students, I feel more comfortable to share whatever I experienced and get support from them,” while a self-identified Black student shared, “I am very appreciative that the students of Color ahead of me took the time to reach out and serve as peer mentors.” For these students, a representative community allowed for mentorship, support, and a sense of safety. Some responses also noted the presence of faculty of Color as a source of support.

*Inconsistent support* (30.6%) encompassed responses noting both a presence and a lack of support, whether in the same or different contexts. One self-identified Asian student wrote:

In moments when a professor said things that were microaggressive, when faculty were not supporting a change that meant a lot to me as a student of Color, I find myself wanting to process and seek support from my other friends of Color in the program, because they are more likely to understand and share the pain and anger. In other times, other students of Color have reached out to me to talk about the oppressive forces in the program (esp. faculty and academia as a structure of power). I have felt the obligation and responsibility to validate, support, and brainstorm strategies.

A self-identified Multiracial student also noted experiences of inconsistent support, writing, “While I have felt a good degree of support from those with the program, especially the other students, I do not feel comfortable in the town or university as a whole.”

*No support* (12.2%), the third subcategory, encompassed responses that noted only a lack of support, without qualification. One self-identified Multiracial Latinx student stated:

The faculty are ill-prepared to mentor students that do not identify as White, upper-middle class, or have the same worldviews and perspectives of the majority. Little effort is also done to negotiate these differences and tailor mentorship to meet the needs of students of Color.

In opposition to those who named feeling understood as a critical aspect of support, this student’s frustration stems from a perceived lack of effort to understand students’ perspectives and needs.

## Racial Discrimination

*Racial discrimination* (49%) was characterized by unequal treatment, unequal expectations, and microaggressions within programs, whether in interpersonal interactions, evaluations, or overall program dynamics. One self-identified Asian student stated that the few students of Color were “often scrutinized by the faculty more often than White students,” citing the example of students of Color who did not pass comprehensive exams when a White student who “explicitly said [they] did not fulfill all the requirements” did pass. A self-identified Black student noted experiencing racial discrimination not from the faculty or program, but from their peers, describing their experience as “filled with microaggressions and overt racism by the White girls in my cohort.” Without identifying specific factors or perpetrators, another self-identified Black student described the environment as “hostile and problematic,” stating, “There is definitely a hierarchy of race in our program.” In general, students in this category reported feeling that their environments were hostile, their work was evaluated differently than White students’, and their positions in their programs were questioned.

## Marginalization

Distinct from endorsements of racial discrimination, which focused on unequal treatment, experiences of *mar-*

ginalization (42.9%) were characterized by feelings of devaluation, tokenization, and erasure — that is, experiences of emotional disconnection, separation or insignificance. One self-identified African American student shared feeling “as if I am placed in the program to fill a quota or to stand as one who adds diversity to the program numbers,” with the accompanying experience that “In class, I often feel that my perspective is not understood or appreciated.” This student described feeling “limited” in regard to speaking up about issues that concern them since “it comes off as being disruptive” and “not warranted,” and “the conversation would not lead to action.” This student’s experience is one in which they were allowed into their program physically, but not allowed to participate in a meaningful manner. Their perspectives and contributions were ignored or seen as a disturbance. Similarly, a self-identified Asian student reported, “I feel like I was admitted to this program to highlight how ‘diverse’ it is, but not given the tools, support, or resources to thrive in White academia.” Feeling allowed in but without the means to succeed contributes to this student’s feeling of tokenization.

Students also described being dismissed when bringing up difficulties they face. A self-identified Multiracial Latinx student reported that students of Color’s “suggestions are talked about as divisive and our struggles are cast off as ‘niche’ and not representative of what other students (i.e., White students) struggle with and therefore not something that the program prioritizes.” This student’s experience is one in which their needs are being ignored and deprioritized due to representing a smaller proportion of the student body. Overall, students who reported experiences of marginalization found their programs to ignore their needs and/or voices.

### Lack of Representation

*Lack of representation* (38.8%) was characterized by the lack of visible students and faculty of Color within the program. Students who endorsed this experience expressed differing reactions to it, including loneliness. A self-identified Black student stated:

My research group is all White with the exception of me. I also live in an all-White neighborhood. I will go weeks without seeing someone who looks like me. . . . All of these things combined make the program seem more isolating at times.

This student notes that lack of representation in multiple spheres of their life compounds and furthers the feeling of isolation. A self-identified Latinx student notes that a certain academic pressure is part of the experience, writing, “I would say that there’s not enough representation, so it does get pretty lonely looking around and not seeing people like me. It can be discouraging and maybe a little bit more of the pressure to perform.” A self-identified South-East Asian student reported feeling “very uncomfortable and surprised I was the only person of Color in my cohort,” noting this impact of the lack of representation: “It has been difficult for me to connect with my cohort members

and I have really only started to feel less conscious about myself around them.”

In addition to its influence on their emotional experiences, students noted that a lack of representation impacted their training experiences as well. Several noted the residual effect of faculty representation on the research focuses of their program, which limited their ability to be trained regarding their populations of interest. A self-identified multiracial student noted that few of their professors or peers had research topics relating to race and ethnicity, writing, “I am anticipating having trouble finding a professor who understands and can adequately help me learn and grow when my dissertation topic will be focusing on biracial/multiracial individuals.”

Some respondents noted the lack of representation of specific racial groups; one self-identified African American student stated, “Although there is racial diversity within the department, unfortunately we do not have any African-American faculty members. As a result, there has been limited research focused on African-American participants.”

### Hypocrisy

The category of *hypocrisy* (20.4%) encompassed responses that explicitly noted a perceived disconnect between a program’s expressed values and the program’s practices and actions. (Responses that discussed discriminatory behavior without explicitly linking it to the program’s stated values were not coded as hypocrisy.) One self-identified Asian student described this disconnect with both appreciation and disappointment:

I feel like the field of Counseling Psychology is making progress in terms of researching multiculturalism and social justice issues. I am grateful to be in a program that values such research, but I feel like there is a gap between researching such issues and advocating for marginalized populations. I feel like many of the White students and faculty in my program like the buzzword of multiculturalism and social justice, but don’t follow through when it comes to showing up for these communities.

Another self-identified Asian student expressed anger about the inconsistency, noting:

While my program advertises on paper and provides lip service that they hold social justice highly, I notice areas where they fall short. I feel angry towards my White departmental faculty who talk the talk (and get rewarded via publications and other recognitions) but do not walk the walk.

While some students reported hypocrisy in a program’s lack of action, others perceived that specific actions contradicted the stated values. A self-identified Multiracial Latinx student wrote:

The experiences of students of Color are seen as methods by which White students in the program can learn more about the experiences of students of Color, while [White students’] comfort is centered and prioritized over . . . [that] of students of Color. Our program strug-

gles with moving past the theoretical understanding of racism and power and does very little more than discuss . . . how difficult it is for students of Color while no effort is made to actually change the climate and dynamics of the department.

Overall, students who discussed hypocrisy saw their programs as not taking actions aligned with expressed values, or as doing so in a manner that did not actually benefit marginalized people.

### Positive Changes and Attempts

Responses in this category (18.4%) noted attempts of the program or student body to improve the program's racial climate as far as representation, support, or general progress.

Some noted an overall negative environment in which safety and support for students of Color were bolstered by students themselves. A self-identified Black participant stated, "In response to the program climate . . . [we] have started a women of Color support group. It has been helpful to share and connect, but everyday racism from other counseling psychology trainees is hard." A self-identified Asian student noted successes of students working with faculty: "A lot of exciting changes have happened in our program since I joined, and they are mainly the efforts of senior students of Color and the support of faculty of Color in the program."

Other responses credited the overall program with taking steps to improve the racial climate. A self-identified Multiracial student wrote, "My program has made it a point to increase [its] diversity as of late so there has been more representation and support offered among us students of Color." As a self-identified Asian student stated, "It is happening, though slowly":

"The program does value diverse representation in its students, and the faculty is slowly becoming more diverse as well. However, change is slow when it comes to becoming more social justice oriented, and incorporating multiculturalism and social justice into the curriculum and more broadly the program. It is happening, though slowly."

Overall, students who reported positive changes and attempts noted both individual and program-level efforts. While some efforts focused on creating a separate but safe student space, others focused on addressing systemic issues within the program.

### Discussion

The current investigation sought to examine the experiences of doctoral students of Color in US counseling psychology programs, in order to provide qualitative information to programs in the field that seek to build on their stated commitments to diversity, inclusion, social justice, and respect for intersecting identities (Scheel et al., 2018).

The most frequently occurring categories that emerged in the analysis of our data echo themes prevalent in previous studies of graduate students of Color across disciplines,

including marginalization (Blockett et al., 2016), isolation and lack of support (Haskins et al., 2013; Twale et al., 2016), discrimination and imposter syndrome (Bernard et al., 2018), and lack of racial group representation in mentors (Blockett et al., 2016; Henfield et al., 2013). Some similarity in racialized experiences is unsurprising given that counseling psychology programs exist within the larger social structure. However, counseling psychology differs from some other disciplines in that it has explicitly committed to multiculturalism and attending to the needs of persons of Color (Scheel et al., 2018). As such, the fact that some students of Color in counseling psychology report experiences similar to those of students in other disciplines indicates a gap between our rhetoric and the realities present in our programs. Accordingly, a discipline-specific category emerging from our sample is that of hypocrisy, in which respondents specifically noted, often with frustration or hurt, the perceived disconnect between a program's expressed social-justice values and program- or individual-level practices and behaviors.

A second important finding in the current sample is that support for some students of Color seems to come in the form of having access to other people of Color, whether in the faculty, cohort, campus, or neighborhood, while not having access increases isolation. Given the under-representation of faculty of Color within counseling psychology training programs, we consider it concerning that the well-being of some students of Color depends to a degree on the presence of other individuals of Color. This phenomenon may contribute to undue stress and dissatisfaction among faculty of Color, who are often assigned additional work relating to issues of diversity without accompanying support or compensation (Reddick et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2008). While there is a need for more racial diversity among faculty, this finding also poses the questions of how programs can facilitate supportive, inclusive experiences for students of Color in the absence of, or without reliance on, other individuals of Color.

It is encouraging that participants also reported aspects of positive change. Although this category received the lowest percentage of endorsement, it indicates that some programs have been able to demonstrate an ability to be flexible, responsive, and sensitive to the specific needs of students of Color as they arise.

A final important observation for programs looking to increase racial and ethnic diversity is that respondents framed the experience of being supported through recognition and understanding of their identity as a person of Color and their experiences within the program as a student of Color. It was that recognition which conveyed a sense of acceptance and inclusion.

While these student experiences are contextually defined by participation in counseling psychology doctoral programs in the United States, the underlying messages about what minoritized students need may also be generalizable to student experiences in other countries. In a recent thesis study, Seifert (2022) found that students of Color at a Dutch university reported largely positive experiences, but noted experiencing negative emotions when lacking a sense

of belonging. This message is consistent with our study and highlights that students of Color may experience marginalization, lack of representation, and lack of support outside of the context of the United States. As such, it is critical to create a sense of belonging within graduate programs, which can be done through multiple avenues.

Advisor support is one vehicle through which students' sense of belonging can be bolstered. Advisors serve a core function of socializing a student to the field, helping them to feel a sense of connection within the department, and bolstering their confidence (Curtin et al., 2013). Research has demonstrated the profound effect of advisor support on doctoral student satisfaction and success, as well as on program completion (Curtin et al., 2013). Advisors are uniquely situated in positions to support students of Color as they acclimate to their program culture and seek connection and belonging.

Furthermore, cultural shifts within programs can support a sense of belonging across underrepresented students. Rattan and colleagues (2018) found that communicating the belief that 'most students have high scientific aptitude' contributed to a higher sense of belonging and lowered perception of faculty as biased. Creating a narrative within a program that all admitted students are perceived as capable and intelligent may provide the environmental context necessary for students to have positive perceptions of faculty beliefs.

## Limitations

A potential limitation to the current study's findings relates to self-selection bias. Despite the open-ended and non-directive survey prompt, students with negative racial experiences may have been more likely to respond to the request for participation. A second potential limitation pertains to the research instrument and mode of data collection, which precluded follow-up questions that might have elicited important details and context. While we recognize these limitations and that we cannot generalize our findings, we do believe our findings can inform future efforts to better meet the needs of students of Color in counseling psychology programs.

## Implications of Research, Teaching and Practice

The current study suggests that counseling psychology training programs can improve by engaging in greater advocacy around the specific issues reported most frequently in our data: inconsistent levels of support, marginalization, and racial discrimination. In light of the psychological costs associated with experiences of racism (Carter & Pieterse, 2020), programs should institute policies to meet students' needs for support, equity, safety, and belonging.

First, programs should more systematically train and assess faculty in mentoring and engaging students of Color, both to serve students and to reduce the apparent over-reliance on faculty of Color. In particular, programs can help White faculty improve their ability to affirm and address students' unique challenges in negotiating White spaces (Dancy et al., 2018). Hiring and ongoing assessment

processes for core and adjunct faculty should attend to individuals' understanding of their racial identity status, levels of implicit bias, and practice of cultural humility. As in Davidson and Foster-Johnson's (2001) framework, this may include actions at the departmental level (e.g., adopting a departmental model of cultural identity and training faculty in it) and at the faculty level (e.g., having professors create personal policies toward diversity to guide themselves; promoting the examination of race within research and teaching). University of California – San Francisco offers a model of a systemic and institutional approach through its Differences Matter initiative, which seeks to enhance cross-cultural communication, address bias in summative faculty assessments, and build stronger ties to communities of Color (Diaz et al., 2020). Existing scholarship also highlights the potential helpfulness of training White faculty to interrogate and confront their own cultural worldviews and implicit bias; to not exclusively rely on Westernized or Eurocentric curricula; to exert a greater willingness and ability to engage race-related dialogues in open, supportive and empathic ways; and to actively engage White students in developing an anti-racist identity and employing anti-racist practice (Akamine Phillips et al., 2019; Legha & Miranda, 2020). We believe that adoption of some of these strategies could facilitate the creation of more inclusive, equitable, and empowered spaces for students of Color within counseling psychology training programs.

Secondly, programs need to examine how Whiteness (Grzanka et al., 2019) is enacted and sustained in all aspects of training, including curricula requirements, practicum opportunities in psychotherapy and assessment, research methodologies, and the program's social climate. Intentional and deliberate attempts to disrupt Whiteness, which are critical in addressing racial inequality (Arday, 2019), may include incorporating indigenous approaches to healing; broadening the lens of human development beyond the Western/Eurocentric perspective; identifying aspects of scientific racism that continue to exist within the profession; consistently critiquing and interrogating the White experience as normative; and revising the history of psychology to extend beyond European borders and include ways of understanding psychological functioning that emanate from non-Western cultures and Indigenous peoples.

Thirdly, programs need to articulate and maintain robust support for students who have negative racial experiences. Metivier (2020) suggests the creation of university-wide systems for reporting bias and hate incidents in order to increase accountability and inform policy.

Lastly, research is needed to more clearly identify the types of training that help faculty build environments in which students of Color feel fully seen, have their experiences validated, and feel a sense of belonging, especially in the absence of other individuals of Color. Measuring the success of any of the strategies mentioned above constitutes a topic for further research.

To conclude, the finding that some students of Color in US counseling psychology training programs experience marginalization, isolation, and race-related negativity is

not terribly surprising, given the larger and ongoing racial dynamics that exist within the US (Liu et al., 2023). We are hopeful, however, that the voices of the current sample provide a window for program-level reflection and consideration of initiatives that moves the field closer to a more vigorous enactment of counseling psychology's stated values.

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