We Deserve to Thrive: Transforming the Social Work Academy to Better Support Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color (BIPOC) Doctoral Students

María Gandarilla Ocampo
Autumn Asher BlackDeer

Abstract: The summer of 2020 saw a racial justice awakening among predominantly white scholars. While this "awakening" or reckoning regarding the long-standing racism in society is welcomed and necessary, we must recognize the stark differences in how this work is felt and ultimately in how the work needs to be done by different groups in society. While BIPOC scholars worked to balance the need to process and recover, self-preserve, and advocate, white peers formed book clubs and posted black squares to their social media sites. This distinction describes the frustrating reality that many BIPOC scholars experience in the work of undoing racism. We bear the unrelenting burdens of being oppressed, fighting racism, and trying to survive in a society that does not value our inherent dignity and worth. For BIPOC doctoral students who simultaneously navigate the roles of being a student, peer, and instructor, these burdens are threefold. We are expected to do the invisible work of mentoring and holding space for fellow BIPOC students while also educating white students and faculty/administrators on racial justice issues and contending with faculty expectations. These burdens are exacerbated as we see anti-racism quickly go in vogue and then fall out of favor soon after. The aftermath: unfulfilled promises and commitments by self-proclaimed anti-racists, leaving BIPOC scholars to pick up the pieces and solely shoulder the never-ending work of anti-racism. There is a continued lack of sustained commitment to achieving racial equity across the board. The steps that have been taken are often characterized by quick fixes that fall short of the real work that will lead to a racially just, equitable and inclusive community. The purpose of this paper is to bring attention to the challenges within the academy experienced by BIPOC social work doctoral students. Drawing upon our experience with creating a BIPOC-centered support group at a predominantly white institution (PWI), we provide insight and recommendations on how colleagues and administrators alike can take action to hold space, bolster, and better support BIPOC doctoral student scholars by creating inclusive educational environments, offering tailored, concrete, and formal supports, and ultimately creating an anti-racist academic culture free from all forms of oppression.

Keywords: Social work doctoral education, BIPOC doctoral students, antiracism

The year 2020 was tumultuous. The COVID-19 pandemic nearly brought the world to a halt as it cast a whirlwind of conflict and despair that brought to bear the fragility of our healthcare, economic, and sociopolitical systems. For racial and ethnic minorities, the impact of COVID-19 was far more pronounced, as the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and created additional burdens that worsened the quality of life and well-being of our communities. Amid this backdrop, there was a burgeoning racial justice awakening, which was re-ignited following the long list of murders of Black community members by police including but not limited to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Atatiana Jefferson.

María Gandarilla Ocampo, MSW, Doctoral Candidate, Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, MO. Autumn Asher BlackDeer, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, Denver, CO.

This awakening brought an increasing public awareness and acknowledgement of the racism that Black people experience on a day-to-day basis. It also called attention to the white supremacy and white privilege that prevails in society but is often ignored as it is considered the default or "normal" way of the world. A societal call was made to dismantle systems of oppression that to this day continue to contribute or cause the inequities experienced by Black community members, as well as by Indigenous people and People of Color.

Among the social work profession, which espouses a value and commitment to social justice, and arguably should include abolishment of anti-Black racism and racism more broadly, "doing the work" of promoting social justice took many forms. For example, several schools of social work released statements announcing their commitment to denounce anti-Blackness and racism more broadly. Some schools held listening circles and hosted webinars, trainings, or conferences centered on marginalized communities. Some universities even announced a commitment to strategic diversity faculty recruitment and an establishment of centers focused on race and/or equity work. Additionally, many Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color (BIPOC) scholars finally began to receive the platform and attention that their work deserved. For part of 2020 and early of 2021, there was a semblance that progress and cultural shifts that would improve the lives of BIPOC people were possible. However, like previous awakenings, the "high" of this awakening did not outlast the pandemic. By March of 2021, public opinion polls demonstrated that trust in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to promote justice and equality had decreased and trust for the police to promote justice and equality had increased (IPSOS, 2021). While there was semblance that institutions of higher learning continued to make efforts to move toward equity, there were also exposés in which BIPOC scholars in the academy began to acknowledge the mistreatment and discrimination they experienced and/or were experiencing by white peers and their institutions. The social work profession was not excluded as schools of social work, the same institutions which are tasked with preparing future social workers to promote social justice and other social work values, were exposed as engaging in blatant injustices, mistreatment, and outright discrimination of Black scholars (Davis, 2021).

The attention to the failings of schools of social work and the profession as a whole to bolster Black scholars and more broadly scholars of color led people to mobilize and discuss ways in which the profession and schools of social work could become anti-racist. For example, The Social Work Coalition for Anti-Racist Educators (SWCAREs), a non-profit with a mission to "dismantle white supremacy in social work education" was created (SWCAREs, n.d., para.1) and began programming, collecting, and disseminating resources. Graduate students circulated a petition to have the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) standards include language that outlined the profession's commitment to anti-racism education in its curriculum (iPetitions, n.d.). Furthermore, doctoral students led efforts, with the support of the Group for the Advancement of Social Work Doctoral Education (GADE) and the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) to understand how anti-racism could be integrated into social work doctoral education (Mendez et al., 2021). Most recently, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) published a

report along with an apology for the profession's role in harming marginalized communities (NASW, 2021).

While this racial justice "awakening" or reckoning by schools of social work and the profession regarding the long-standing racism in society is long overdue, necessary, and welcomed; a broad acknowledgement of the fact that the burden of anti-racism work is not and has not been distributed equally among different communities in society is seldom present. Such an acknowledgement is necessary as there are stark differences in how antiracist work is felt, how the work has been done, and ultimately how the work needs to be done by different groups in society. This current racial awakening provided numerous examples of this reality. For example, while BIPOC scholars did the unavoidable work of processing, self-preserving, recovering, and advocating, many of their white peers engaged in optional activities, such as forming and participating in book clubs, posting black squares to their social media sites, and listening to webinars. At a system level, institutions made hollow acknowledgements of the existence of racism and commitments to becoming anti-racist, however, follow through is yet to fully be seen. Despite this institutional commitment, micro- and macroaggressions, and racism by institutions did not disappear in the academy. This distinction describes the frustrating reality that many BIPOC scholars experience in the work of eradicating racism. BIPOC scholars bear the unrelenting burdens of being oppressed, fighting racism and discrimination, and trying to survive in a society that does not seem to value their inherent dignity and worth. Although BIPOC individuals often have their own community in which they can commiserate and rely on to survive and cope with racism in society, this community is not as often available in higher education due to how few BIPOC scholars are present in the academy (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.)

One often overlooked group under the BIPOC scholars umbrella for which this phenomenon is further compounded but often not as well researched (Chin et al., 2018) or understood is BIPOC doctoral students, many who find themselves simultaneously navigating the roles of student, peer, and instructor. Along with completing a rigorous educational program and advancing their own scholarly work, BIPOC doctoral students are also often doing the invisible labor of mentoring and holding space for fellow BIPOC students, educating students, faculty and/or administration on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, contending with faculty expectations, and participating in unpaid diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) service work. These burdens are often further exacerbated by experiences of micro- and macroaggressions from their institutions and peers, lack of administrative and/or institutional support, and more broadly, the trauma of observing anti-racism quickly go in vogue and then fall out of favor soon after. BIPOC students have recognized that in this anti-racism awakening roller coaster there is often a lack of sustained commitment to achieving racial equity across the board. The steps that have been or are typically taken, such as hollow statements of solidarity or listening sessions and panels, are often characterized by quick fixes that fall short of the real work that will lead to a racially just, equitable, and inclusive community. Not surprisingly, the aftermath of this roller coaster is frequently unfulfilled or half-heartedly met promises and commitments by self-proclaimed anti-racists. Because achieving anti-racism is a matter affecting the well-being and livelihood of BIPOC scholars, they do not have the option to

opt out. They are often left to pick up the pieces and solely shoulder what feels like the never-ending work of anti-racism. This paper aims to bring attention to the BIPOC doctoral student experience in the academy. Drawing upon the authors' lived experience as BIPOC social work doctoral scholars and with creating a BIPOC-centered support group at a predominantly white institution (PWI), the authors provide insight and recommendations on how colleagues and administrators can take action to hold space, bolster, and better support BIPOC student scholars.

The Social Work PhD Program

Before we begin discussing experiences of doctoral BIPOC students, it is important that the reader understand and appreciate the context in which these experiences take place. We focus on social work PhD programs due to the authors' lived experiences in a social work PhD program. While we recognize that not all social work PhD programs are structured in the same way, there is sufficient overlap in PhD program structures and milestones which can contribute to potentially similar experiences of the phenomena described. Additionally, we acknowledge that some of the programmatic differences between PhD Social Work programs and Doctor of Social Work (DSW) programs may lead to a different program culture. While this distinction is made, we hold that the challenges faced by BIPOC doctoral students in PhD social work programs may overlap and be relevant to BIPOC doctoral students in DSW programs, and more broadly to BIPOC doctoral students in other disciplines.

Social work PhD programs are typically housed within schools or departments of social work and may be one of several degree programs (Bachelor of Social Work [BSW], Master of Social Work [MSW], etc.) offered (in person, online, or hybrid) within the school. Being situated within a school that has an undergraduate and/or graduate social work program can impact the doctoral student experience as it may increase the likelihood that a doctoral student is expected to serve as a teaching assistant or an instructor during their doctoral education. This potential expectation has several implications and demands on a student, which we discuss further later. Unlike bachelor's and master's level social work educational programs, social work PhD programs do not fall under the purview of CSWE and its accreditation standards. Instead, social work PhD programs often follow the quality guidelines provided by GADE, an organization whose membership is made up of 80 social work doctoral program directors (GADE, 2022). The GADE quality guidelines are not meant to be proscriptive and instead, doctoral programs' structure vary depending on institutional policies around doctoral education. However, the overall expectation is that doctoral programs will "prepare students to be scholars who function as stewards of the discipline" (GADE, 2013, p. 1). Also, unlike BSW and MSW programs, social work PhD programs do not consistently focus on providing education or training on foundational social work concepts, practice, or ethics (Bradshaw et al., 2021), yet the expectation is that doctoral students will be knowledgeable about the profession, teaching, and research (GADE, 2013). This lack of educational emphasis on foundational social work concepts coupled with the expectation that a social work doctoral student be knowledgeable in these concepts creates a peculiar tension for some students given that not all social work doctoral students have formal foundational education, training, or practice experience in social

work. While most entering doctoral students will have an MSW degree upon entering a doctoral program, few do not (CSWE, 2020). An exact number of students who enter with a master's degree in a discipline other than social work is unknown. Regardless, most social work PhD programs require that students have a master's degree prior to admission, with only a handful of doctoral programs providing an MSW along the way (CSWE, 2020).

The length of time to complete a social work doctoral program varies, however, many PhD programs encourage students to graduate within a 4-to-5-year timeline. Completion time is in part related to the availability of funding, which also varies. Programs might offer partial or full tuition remission, stipends (with or without stipulations), or no funding besides loans. In 2019, 89% of social work PhD programs provided some type of funding to incoming students (Bradshaw et al., 2021). The availability and quality of funding can have a large impact on the doctoral student experience as many students find themselves in financially precarious positions during their doctoral education.

Cohort sizes and structures can vary widely from institution to institution and year to year. GADE reported that in their 2019 survey, out of all responding research doctoral programs, on average cohort sizes of accepted students was 9, with about 6 being the average of first-time enrolled students (Bradshaw et al., 2021). It is important to note that smaller cohort sizes often result in less opportunities for student racial and ethnic diversity. In 2019, the racial and ethnic composition of students enrolled in responding social work research doctoral programs were 46% non-Hispanic white, 22.1% non-Hispanic Black, 11.6% Hispanic/Latinx, 9.9% Asian, 2.8% biracial or multiracial, 0.8% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 6.5% were unknown (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Yet, the racial and ethnic composition in specific programs can be lower or higher for any institution and cohort. It is not uncommon for BIPOC doctoral students to be the only person from their respective community represented in their cohort, as were the authors who entered with a cohort of 9 and 14 students. This lacking diversity can be a source of stress and feelings of isolation for BIPOC doctoral students, which impact the doctoral experience significantly.

Beyond formal coursework and select milestones (qualifying exams, dissertation proposal, dissertation, etc.), many doctoral programs encourage or require students to partake in paid or unpaid research and teaching assistantships, placing students in multiple roles across their programs. In these multiple role situations, doctoral students are first and foremost students, however, they may also serve as teaching assistants or instructors for courses (bachelor's, master, or doctoral level) and research assistants or research coordinators for research projects. In such projects, doctoral students might oversee other students or work as peers with other faculty. This creates a duality of relationships that is particularly important to note because it creates concurrent shifts in the power dynamic between doctoral students and their doctoral peers, other undergraduate or graduate students, faculty, and administration. Further, these dynamics occur in addition to one of the most significant relationships for a student in doctoral education – the advisor/advisee or mentor/mentee relationship.

The importance of the advisor-advisee relationship is best captured by the fact that some consider advisors to be a student's *academic parent*. The relationship with an advisor

is defining to the doctoral experience as the mentoring received "has the power to support effective program navigation, enhance student resilience, and improve a variety of professional outcomes" (Katz et al., 2019, p. 311). An advisor will often play an important role in socializing a student into what Howard (2017) calls the "unique and nuanced culture" (p. 518) of doctoral education. The advisor-advisee or mentor-mentee relationship varies across and within institutions, though typically, students select their advisor based on shared research interests. Due to this shared substantive interest, the advisor tends to be the chair of their students' dissertation committee. Doctoral students may also find themselves working on their advisor's research or collaborating on projects. Ultimately, the advisor role is to support the student in building social capital and knowledge that will help them navigate academia and become an independent social work scholar. Beyond the professional support, some advisors may also provide students with emotional and psychological support, though the quality of such support will vary from one advisor to another. Not surprisingly, the mentoring experience and quality of the relationship between a student and their advisor can also impact a student's mental health (Evans et al., 2018).

The Doctoral Student Experience

Now that we have discussed the social work doctoral student context, in this section we discuss the doctoral student experience broadly, and then center in on the BIPOC doctoral student experience. Research on diversity in social work doctoral education is wanting (Chin et al., 2018). We cite social work doctoral education research when it is available and refer to other BIPOC doctoral student research when social work research is unavailable. Despite the limited research on social work BIPOC doctoral education, we have found that our lived experiences are adequately captured in BIPOC doctoral research.

Being a doctoral student can be a challenging and isolating experience. Throughout a doctoral program, students juggle multiple demands (e.g., completing coursework, engaging in scholarly work and its dissemination, teaching, maintaining their well-being, networking, and maintaining relationships) all while navigating a new cultural environment. Completing a PhD involves milestones and activities that can be distinct from those required for most undergraduate and graduate degree programs so doctoral students may feel like not many other people can understand their experience. In fact, only a small percentage of the general population experientially understand the challenges and demands a doctoral student might face through doctoral study. In 2018, less than 5% of people in the United States held doctoral degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Given the racial and ethnic composition of the academy, the sense of isolation may be further compounded for BIPOC doctoral students, many of which may be first generation college students and who may not have peers or faculty who they identify with in the academy. In 2020, around 40% of the 6,300 full time faculty in social work programs were BIPOC faculty (CSWE, 2020). Historically, white students and in particular, white males have earned the biggest proportion of doctorate degrees across the board (Nietzel, 2019) which suggests that for generations, the culture of academia has been shaped by a white, mainly male lens. This reality has created a culture within the academy that may not feel familiar nor welcoming to BIPOC doctoral students or students with marginalized identities.

Doctoral students often lack a sense of belonging, which can have an adverse impact on their well-being and sense of self. For example, lacking a sense of belonging has been associated with the presence of impostor syndrome (Sverdlik et al., 2020). Imposter Syndrome, a phenomenon where individuals may feel that they are "frauds" or "imposters", attributing any successes or accomplishments to external factors (luck, chance, undeserved opportunities, etc.) instead of internal ones (ability, hard work, etc.) (Clance, 1985) is common among doctoral students and it has been associated with mental and physical health concerns (Sverdlik et al., 2020). Not surprisingly, graduate students, including doctoral students are six times more likely than the general population to experience mental health concerns, specifically depression and anxiety (Evans et al., 2018). BIPOC doctoral students have worse physical and mental health outcomes, in part due to experiences of racism and racial aggressions (micro- and macroaggressions) throughout the course of their doctoral education (Gildersleeve, 2011). Racism has been found to negatively impact physical and mental health (Paradies et al., 2015). Racialized experiences can be a great source of stress to BIPOC doctoral students, and as a result, these scholars often engage in self-censorship to moderate this racialized stress (Gildersleeve, 2011). This self-censorship is not only counterintuitive to the well-being of BIPOC doctoral students, but it can also stifle their voice, sense of self, and creativity, which ultimately negatively impacts the profession.

Beyond an impact on health, experiences of racism can also negatively affect all aspects of BIPOC doctoral students' educational experiences. For example, BIPOC doctoral students "are less likely to receive adequate support for their research, be taken seriously as academic scholars, and be included in collaborative projects with faculty and even their white peers" (Brunsma et al., 2017, p. 8). This differential quality of support and mentorship for BIPOC doctoral students can make it more challenging for BIPOC students to navigate the academy, in large part because mentoring plays an integral role in helping doctoral students socialize into the academy (Katz et al., 2019). Socialization is particularly important for doctoral students to succeed in a "publish or perish" culture that is common in PhD social work programs, especially among those with Carnegie Classifications of R1 (very high research activity) or R2 (high research activity). The "publish or perish" culture, which essentially suggests that a scholar must have a high level of productivity of quality publications to survive and thrive in the academy, adds pressure to doctoral students early on in their educational journey. Germani (2020) found that the highest rated source of stress for participating doctoral students was the pressure to publish in high impact journals. The level of support a doctoral student receives in moderating that pressure to publish and in achieving that expectation is in part closely associated to a student's advisor and/or informal and formal faculty mentors. For example, advisors and faculty mentors can teach students about the publication process and culture, provide opportunities and resources to make publishing attainable, and ensure that students produce high quality work. Because BIPOC students do not receive the same quality of support compared to their white peers, their level of productivity in their program may suffer, which could impact how "competitive" they are perceived to be in the job market.

BIPOC Doctoral Students and Interpersonal Experiences of Racism

As previously mentioned, doctoral students simultaneously hold multiple roles (student, peer, colleague, instructor, supervisor, etc.), some of which can create natural tension. For example, a doctoral student is expected to be in a student/learner role while also in an instructor role in which they have faculty expectations placed on them. While these multiple roles can in general create stress, the stress is further exacerbated for BIPOC doctoral students who might have to contend with racial aggressions from their professors, colleagues, peers, and students in these various roles. Because of the values of the social work profession and its imperative to address racism, oppression, and inequity, discussions around these topics tend to be more prominent within social work education. The presence of these conversations, however, does not mean that these discussions are carried out well or in ways that do not cause harm. For example, predominantly white faculty may not be equipped to handle discussion around anti-racism and might engage in micro and macro aggressions, such as expecting a BIPOC doctoral student to become the spokesperson for their racial or ethnic group. As instructors, BIPOC doctoral students may be responsible and expected to effectively carry out discussions around racism, power, and oppression, while also experiencing microaggressions from students. These racial aggressions can present in many ways, including students questioning the credibility or qualifications of a doctoral student or giving the doctoral student instructor poor evaluations because of the instructor's identity. Previous research has found that scholars of color are more likely to receive lower formal and informal evaluations than their white peers (Chávez & Mitchell, 2020; Reid, 2010). In the peer relationships, racial aggressions may occur in the ways in which white peers evaluate their BIPOC peers' accomplishments and awards. For example, peers might make off handed comments around BIPOC doctoral students receiving preferential treatment in competitive fellowships or even on the job market due to their racial or ethnic identity as opposed to their qualifications and excellence. In a collegial relationship, a colleague might be biased and invalidate or question the qualifications or worth of a doctoral student's ideas and work. This can be a common experience that can contribute to low self-worth (Gildersleeve, 2011). In the advisor-advisee relationships, racialized aggressions can present themselves in advisors providing minimal or unequal support to a BIPOC doctoral student. It can also present themselves in an advisor invalidating or dismissing experiences of racialized aggressions that a student brings to the advisor's attention for support.

A frustrating aspect of these co-occurring dynamics is that it is rarely acknowledged that doctoral students must navigate all these roles and the politics that are associated with this positionality. BIPOC doctoral students seldom have informal or formal spaces in which they can process their experiences and discuss how they navigate and cope with racialized aggressions from their multiple dual relationships or from the institutions of learning. In social work this is especially necessary because it is frustrating and painful for BIPOC doctoral students to experience repeated racialized harm from white individuals who tout themselves as and are elevated as "anti-racists scholars" or "allies". When BIPOC doctoral students might want to address or bring attention to the racialized harm they are experiencing, there are seldom effective systems or supports to address them. While some institutions might have formal bias reporting structures or systems, the nature of racialized

aggressions make it difficult to gather the evidence warranted by these systems to substantiate their experiences. There is also a lack of transparency around how the issue addressed will contribute to overall institutional culture change. These realities force BIPOC doctoral students to make difficult decisions that impact their well-being. A BIPOC doctoral student might decide to zealously advocate and do what is often unpaid structural work to push their school of social work to become anti-racist. A BIPOC doctoral student might decide to simply survive and self-censor to minimize the race related stress they experience. Or simply, a BIPOC doctoral student might decide to quit their doctoral program. While the dropout rate of doctoral education is generally high, it is more pronounced among underrepresented minorities, 36% of which do not complete their programs (Yared, 2016).

Implications for Social Work

As the profession and the academy begin to contend with their roles in upholding white supremacy and harming BIPOC individuals and communities, they must also take important steps to ensure that they are 1) upholding social work values and 2) supporting and bolstering the individuals who will be stewards of the profession. Because racism is antithetical to social justice and to promoting the dignity and worth of a person, any conversation, commitment, or action must move our profession toward becoming anti-racist and anti-oppressive. Anything less than that is a failing of our profession. While we will specifically advocate for and provide a non-exhaustive list of recommendations for how schools of social work can better support BIPOC doctoral students, these recommendations can directly or indirectly benefit all doctoral students and the profession overall.

Practice What We Preach

One of the most well-known and valuable adages within the social work profession is "meet the client where they are at." This adage is incredibly important in social work practice, and highly applicable within academic social work settings. In the doctoral program ecosystem, doctoral students can be considered the clients of schools of social work doctoral programs. Good social work practice would dictate that a social worker do research to have some grounding understanding of what dynamics may be at play given the client's background and circumstances. The social worker would then further inquire and listen to the client to understand what the client prioritizes to understand how to best support them. After synthesizing all this information, the social worker would collaborate with a client to develop a plan that will promote the client's self-determination and well-being. Currently, schools of social work recruit BIPOC doctoral students, yet across the board, it unclear whether schools are collectively researching what might create a supportive environment that will ensure that BIPOC doctoral students have what they need to thrive and not just survive. If such research was done, there would be at least a foundational understanding that BIPOC doctoral students need concrete support to deal with racialized aggressions, and better yet, an understanding that the culture within the academy must change to truly be anti-racist, welcoming, and inclusive of BIPOC doctoral

students. While administration may engage in some of these activities to some degree, we highlight this as a collective task that needs to be carried out by an entire school of social work (faculty, staff, administrators, etc) because 1) doctoral students will interact with all these actors during their doctoral journey and 2) all these actors contribute to the culture of a school and potentially toward racialized aggressions that BIPOC doctoral students may experience.

Questions that schools might want to consider are, does the school collectively know what research says about the needs of BIPOC doctoral students? In what ways are the school and individual actors within the school planning to ensure that those needs are met, and that challenges and barriers are eradicated? If there is resistance within the school, how are administrators engaging and holding those accountable that might not want to engage in this work? What resources is the school making available to ensure that their programs are integrating best practices to support BIPOC doctoral students? By doing this at a minimum, BIPOC doctoral students might be able to enter academic spaces feeling as if there is an intention and potentially a commitment to create a welcoming and nurturing space.

Once that research is done, schools of social work must start where BIPOC doctoral students are. Consider, at any point in the process of welcoming new cohorts, do schools of social work conduct assessments or have conversations to understand what students' understanding is of what a doctoral journey will entail, including the politics and power dynamics? Or do schools understand how a specific student learns and adapts to a new environment best? While many schools assume that these conversations are happening with individual advisors, they may not happen across the board. When the conversations do occur, they are not all handled equally well, leaving it to chance whether the school understands what a student needs to thrive and subsequently, whether a student receives the support needed. It is unacceptable for administrators to assume that these conversations will happen or to leave it to chance that they will happen. Since the quality of mentoring for BIPOC doctoral students is not as adequate as the mentoring received by their white peers (Brunsma et al., 2017), such assumptions can further disadvantage BIPOC doctoral students. A key piece to ensuring that BIPOC doctoral students are supported is intentionality. Doctoral education is often considered to be individualized, at least in terms of research focus and some coursework. It is important that schools of social work recognize that individualization of the education experience extends beyond those domains and that doctoral education needs to be intentionally tailored to each student's needs. This intentional tailoring requires "starting and/or meeting a doctoral student where they are at" and then collaborating with the doctoral student to develop a plan that will optimize their successful integration into and navigation of the academy.

Culture Transformation

One of the largest hurdles toward becoming anti-racist and truly supporting BIPOC doctoral students is transforming the existing culture in academia. Khinduka (2002) argued "How we teach, how we interact with students and with each other, the seriousness of our scholarly work, and our overall comportment as social work academics play a crucial role

in shaping the culture of our schools" (p. 689). Because academia continuously engages in cycles that are counterproductive toward becoming anti-racist and inclusive, anti-racism cannot be achieved in the current academic culture. An example of such a cycle is the difficulty to recruit and retain BIPOC scholars to the academy, which is already lacking in diversity and representation. According to a CSWE survey on social work education, in 2020 full time faculty in responding schools of social work were 59.5% white, 26.8% were African American or Black, 7.8% were Latinx, 2.5% were Asian and 1.4% were biracial or multiracial, 0.8% were Native American, and 0.3% were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (CSWE, 2020). Like BIPOC doctoral students, BIPOC faculty are disproportionately tasked with the onus of doing anti-racism work with minimal support or acknowledgement (Rideau, 2021). BIPOC faculty also face racialized aggressions from students and peers, and they often are the ones holding space for BIPOC students. These realities place undue burden on BIPOC faculty and may impact their ability to achieve tenure and/or desire to remain in the academy (Azhar & McCutcheon, 2021; Garrison-Wade et al., 2012; Rideau, 2021). Low retention or engagement of BIPOC faculty in return can impact BIPOC doctoral students' desire and ability to enter and remain in the academy. Disrupting this seemingly never-ending cycle that limits the advancement toward inclusivity requires that schools of social work become intentional about creating a culture that is anti-racist, safe and welcoming for BIPOC scholars. This can happen in different ways, however, some opportunities involve: acknowledging the racism and systemic oppression that exists within the academy and formalizing mechanisms that will dismantle these in practice and culture on an ongoing basis.

Schools of social work need to invest in faculty development to ensure that they can integrate an anti-racist approach and fully support and mentor BIPOC doctoral students in a non-biased and anti-discriminatory way. Simply put, this is asking social work faculty to engage in the same practice approaches that we teach social work students to do when they practice as social workers. While this can be achieved in many ways, a simple recommendation is preparing faculty to engage with doctoral students in conversations regarding racism, privilege, and oppression. Such preparation involves faculty having the humility of not being an expert on a topic while also having sufficient knowledge to call attention to the dynamics at play in the racialized experiences of BIPOC doctoral students and holding space for them. Additionally, faculty, particularly white faculty, should be willing to leverage their privilege and seniority to step in on behalf of their students when necessary. Leveraging privilege to advocate for BIPOC students should involve conversations with the student to ensure that the faculty member is displaying thoughtfulness around the student's comfort and the potential intended or unintended consequences of said advocacy. The faculty member, as much as possible, should respect a student's self-determination on whether advocacy, if any, should be carried out. It is possible that a BIPOC doctoral student may not want to discuss such experiences with a faculty member. However, knowing that a faculty member is equipped to have those conversations in a manner that is validating and supportive will allow BIPOC doctoral students to feel supported and can allow other faculty to share the burden of anti-racist work that BIPOC scholars tend to heavily shoulder.

An important way to change the academic culture and support BIPOC doctoral students and scholars involves schools being mindful of the seemingly innocuous ways that they burden BIPOC scholars with the responsibility of addressing systemic oppression and racism on their own. For example, the way self-care is preached in schools of social work often fails to recognize the legitimate harm that systemic oppression and racism causes BIPOC scholars. By not acknowledging those power dynamics, we place the responsibility on BIPOC scholars to address factors beyond their control and to be well in spaces that are not conducive to their well-being.

Schools of social work can also formalize supports for BIPOC doctoral students. For example, does the school of social work or institution have support groups or other opportunities for BIPOC doctoral students specifically to process their experiences while being their authentic selves? Schools should invest in such spaces as they are needed and asked for by BIPOC doctoral social work students (Mendez et al., 2021) and because BIPOC only spaces facilitated by skilled individuals can be restorative and can create community. It should be noted that the group participation is optimized by matching facilitators with group membership. For schools that do not have many BIPOC doctoral students, advocating and investing in partnerships among institutions to create such a space can result in opportunities for networking, collaboration, and community building. The co-authors began an informal BIPOC doctoral support group due to their administrations inability to effectively respond to BIPOC doctoral students request for support with racialized experiences and stressors brought up during a town hall. The group became a safe space for BIPOC doctoral students, and it was expanded to include a doctoral student from another school of social work that had no BIPOC peers in their cohort. While this is an example that these spaces can be created, and often do exist, formalizing such supports will demonstrate schools of social works' acknowledgement of and commitment to the needs of BIPOC doctoral students. The formalization of such spaces will also remove some of the unpaid labor that BIPOC doctoral students take on to ensure that doctoral education is survivable.

Another type of formalized support for BIPOC doctoral students is offering payment for the unpaid labor (e.g., committee work, developing DE&I programming, etc.) BIPOC doctoral students typically engage in to promote anti-racism and inclusivity for schools of social work. Schools that are well resourced might want to consider providing DE&I fellowships that provide funding and professional development opportunities.

Finally, schools can support BIPOC doctoral students and move toward a culture of anti-racism by establishing protocols to handle racial aggressions in a way that involves transparency, accountability, and clear communication. While we recognize that employee protections may limit what is disclosed regarding potential incidents of racism and consequences to employees, schools of social work should think about ways in which issues of racism and bias can be addressed more broadly to ensure that the culture of the school does not enable such behavior to occur again. As such, schools should treat incidents of bias or racialized aggressions as opportunities to inform preventative measures so that these or similar incidents do not occur again. Schools might want to consider, what does a particular incident suggest about the culture of the school and its role in enabling this incident to occur? What were the dynamics at play and how might the school address these

to ensure that such incidents do not happen again? Engaging in this reflection allows schools to shift from seeing racism and bias as solely an individual problem to the systemic problem that it is. Schools should follow this reflection with clear steps on how they plan to address potential issues. Engaging in this communication and transparency will demonstrate that the school is committed to anti-racist work. It will also give schools the opportunity to be held accountable to its students and to be in a position in which conversations can lead to growth.

In summary, structural change happens at all levels. It takes individual actors to do their part, but institutions must match with policies, messaging and general commitments that facilitate faculty in doing this work and facilitates cultural change. Table 1 provides identified needs, questions for reflection, and recommendations to address the needs of BIPOC doctoral students.

Table 1. *Needs, Reflection Questions, and Recommendations to Support BIPOC Doctoral Students*

Need	Questions for Reflection	Recommendations
An educational environment that is inclusive, free from racialized & other forms of aggressions	• What is your/your institutions approach/framework to creating an inclusive, anti-racist & anti-oppressive environment? If you do not have one, what needs to happen to adopt one? • Do you & your institution know what the research says about the needs of BIPOC doctoral students, & the barriers faced in navigating the academy & a doctoral education? • In what ways are the school & individual actors within the school planning to ensure that BIPOC doctoral student needs are met, & that challenges & barriers are eradicated? • What resources is the school making available to ensure that their programs are integrating best practices to support BIPOC doctoral students? • If there is resistance within the school, how are administrators engaging & holding those accountable that might not want to engage in this work?	• Adopt an anti-racist, anti-oppressive & decolonial approach. • Ensure faculty & staff understand & apply approaches that promote inclusivity. • Engage in productive discussions to address resistance & provide education/training as needed. • Research & understand the BIPOC doctoral student experience regarding needs & barriers to success. • Invest in resources at the individual, administrative, & institutional level to ensure that BIPOC doctoral student needs are met. • Develop a plan to address identified issues & engage in ongoing quality improvement to ensure that issues are resolved, at the school level, conduct confidential climate assessments,
Tailored support	• Do you or your institution conduct formal assessments or have conversations with incoming students/advisees to assess their understanding of what a doctoral journey will entail, including the politics & power dynamics? • Do you or your institution understand how individual students learn & adapt to a new environment best? • Are there expectations & formalized opportunities to engage students in discussions around how their marginalized identity is impacting their presence in academia.	• Meet students where they are at. • Formalize opportunities (e.g., require individualized goals & plan to achieve the goals for each doctoral student) to ensure students receive individualized support that addresses their needs & barriers. A key piece to ensuring that BIPOC doctoral students are supported is intentionality behind individualization of educational journeys. • Collaborate with doctoral students across the board to develop a plan that will optimize their successful integration & navigation of the academy.

Need	Questions for Reflection	Recommendations
Academic institutions free from all forms of oppression	• What is your/your institutions approach/framework to creating an inclusive, anti-racist & anti-oppressive environment? If you do not have one, what needs to happen to adopt one? • In what ways are you preparing yourself or is your institution preparing faculty to engage with doctoral students in conversations regarding racism, privilege, & oppression? • In what ways are you measuring if your faculty has humility & sufficient knowledge to call attention to the dynamics at play in the racialized experiences of BIPOC doctoral students & holding space for them? • How are faculty, particularly white faculty, leveraging their privilege & seniority to step in on behalf of their students when necessary? • Are faculty members displaying thoughtfulness around the student's comfort & the potential intended or unintended consequences of said advocacy? • What is your school preaching & what are the direct & indirect messages/sentiment/values around addressing systemic oppression & racism within the school? • How do your actions & your institutions actions align with your messages & values regarding addressing systemic oppression & discrimination? • How does your institution handle issues of racism or discrimination? • When issues of bias or discrimination occur, what does a particular incident suggest about the culture of the school & its role in enabling this incident to occur? What were the dynamics at play & how might the school address these to ensure that such incidents do not happen again?	• Be intentional about creating a culture that is anti-racist, safe & welcoming for BIPOC scholars • Acknowledge the racism & systemic oppression that exists within the academy & formalize mechanisms that will dismantle these in practice & culture on an ongoing basis. • Invest in faculty development to ensure that they can integrate an anti-racist approach & fully support • Mentor BIPOC doctoral students in a non-biased & discriminatory way • Faculty members should be displaying thoughtfulness around the student's comfort & the potential intended or unintended consequences of advocacy on behalf of a student. The faculty member, as much as possible, should respect a student's self-determination on whether advocacy, if any, should be carried out. • Be mindful of the seemingly innocuous ways that you or your institution might burden BIPOC scholars with the responsibility of addressing systemic oppression & racism on their own. • Establish protocols to handle racial aggressions in a way that involves transparency accountability, & clear communication. • Institutions should engage in clear & transparent communication, as allowable by privacy laws, when incident of bias or discrimination occurs & provide follow up on how this will be addressed & prevented in the future to demonstrate that the school is committed to anti-racist work.
Concrete and formal supports to navigate the academy and doctoral education	• In what ways does your institution embed formal supports throughout the doctoral student educational journey to help BIPOC doctoral students navigate the academy & build social capital? • Does your institution have support groups or other opportunities for BIPOC doctoral students specifically to process their experiences while being their authentic selves? • If your school does not have many BIPOC doctoral students, how is your institution advocating & investing in partnerships among other institutions to create spaces that can result in opportunities for networking, collaboration, & community building for BIPOC doctoral students. • How is your institution leveraging resources to support students & eradicate barriers to successful learning (financial support, paid service work?).	• Understand what concrete & formal supports students need to thrive. (This information should be available through the literature as well as through early assessments of needs). • If not in place & if identified as needed & beneficial by students, invest in support groups or other opportunities for BIPOC doctoral students to process their experiences while being their authentic selves. These BIPOC only spaces should be facilitated by skilled individuals, ideally with shared understanding of the BIPOC doctoral student experience & should be restorative & create a sense of community. • Offer payment or some benefit for typically unpaid labor (e.g., committee work, developing DE&I programming, etc.).

Conclusion

The social work profession is at a defining moment. Will it continue to be complicit in upholding white supremacy and causing harm to BIPOC communities? Or will it decide to rise to the challenge and embody the code of ethics it espouses? We offered recommendations on how schools of social work can support the doctoral students who will be the future stewards of our profession. While these recommendations are not exhaustive, they provide important first steps that can make a difference in how BIPOC doctoral students navigate the doctoral journey and in how anti-racism work is done in the academy. We hope to impart the message that schools of social work must be ready to invest time and resources to truly create a culture of anti-racism. Quick fixes or band-aids, such as boilerplate statements of support and reactive formation of committees in response to current events, can be temporarily beneficial but these alone will not move schools of social work to the anti-racist praxis and culture that we need to be in. BIPOC doctoral students need sustained commitment, actions, and accountability in order to move beyond merely surviving to thriving.

References

Azhar, S., & McCutcheon, K. P. D. (2021). How racism against BIPOC women faculty operates in social work academia. *Advances in Social Work, 21*(2/3), 396-420. https://doi.org/10.18060/24118

Bradshaw, R., Rhoads, J., Lee, M. Y., Lightfoot, E., LaSala., M., Franklin, C., & Eads, R. (2021). CSWE/GADE report on the current landscape of doctoral education in social work. https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/243de7d7-7877-4e67-9b96-0ba28041fefe/cswe-gade-report-on-the-current-landscape-of-doctoral-education-in-social-work3.pdf/

Brunsma, D. L., Embrick, D. G., & Shin, J. H. (2017). Graduate students of color: Race, racism, and mentoring in the white waters of academia. *Sociology of race and ethnicity, 3*(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649216681565

Chávez, K., & Mitchell, K. M. (2020). Exploring bias in student evaluations: Gender, race, and ethnicity. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 53*(2), 270-274. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519001744

Chin, M., Hawkins, J., Krings, A., Peguero-Spencer, C., & Gutierrez, L. (2018). Investigating diversity in social work doctoral education in the United States. *Journal of Social Work Education, 54*(4), 762-775. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2018.1503127

Clance, P. R. (1985). *The impostor phenomenon: Overcoming the fear that haunts your success*. Peachtree Pub Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1037/t11274-000

Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. (2020). 2020 statistics on social work education in the United States: Summary of the CSWE annual survey of social work programs. https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/726b15ce-6e63-4dcd-abd1-

35d2ea9d9d40/2020-Annual-Statistics-On-Social-Work-Education-in-the-United-States.pdf?lang=en-US

Davis, M. (2021). Anti-Black practices take heavy toll on mental health. *Nature Human Behavior,* 5, 410. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01058-z

Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology, 36*(3), 282-284. https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089

Garrison-Wade, D. F., Diggs, G. A., Estrada, D., & Galindo, R. (2012). Lift every voice and sing: Faculty of color face the challenges of the tenure track. *The Urban Review, 44*(1), 90-112. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-011-0182-1

Germani, F. (2020, October). The mental health of PhD students is at stake: Scientific journals should take the blame. ZME Science. https://www.zmescience.com/other/pieces/journals-to-blame-poor-phd-mental-health-0432/

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

Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work [GADE]. (2013). *Quality guidelines for PhD programs in social work group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE).* http://www.gadephd.org/Portals/0/docs/GADE%20quality%20guidelines%20approved%204%2006%202013%20(2).pdf?ver=Zl_XG2yMrDbTNphddkocag%3d%3d

GADE. (2022). *About GADE.* http://www.gadephd.org/About-Us

Howard, S. (2017). Black first-generation social work doctoral students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 37*(5), 513-527. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2017.1370431

iPetitions. (n.d.). Open letter from social work students, alumnx, staff, faculty, and administrators in support of Black Lives Matter and defunding the police. https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/open-letter-from-social-work-students-alumnx

IPSOS. (2021, March). *Americans' trust in law enforcement, desire to protect law and order on the rise.* https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/americans-trust-law-enforcement-desire-protect-law-and-order-rise

Katz, C. C., Elsaesser, C., Vorhies Klodnik, V., & Khare, A. (2019). Mentoring matters: An innovative approach to infusing mentorship in a social work doctoral program. *Journal of Social Work Education, 55*(2), 306-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2018.1526729

Khinduka, S. (2002). Musings on doctoral education in social work. *Research on Social Work Practice, 12*(5), 684-694. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731502012005007

Mendez, A., Bonds-Grocher, K., Taylor, M., & Washington, D. (2021). Anti-racist pedagogy in social work doctoral education: A compilation of reports. http://www.gadephd.org/Portals/0/docs/Anti-Racist%20Pedagogy/2021%2005%20Anti%20Racist%20Pedagogy%20in%20SW%20Doc%20Ed%20Report%20and%20Presentation.pdf?ver=LjVps6r2EswlFmXQ87XSzg%3D%3D

National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2021). Undoing racism through social work: NASW report to the profession on racial justice priorities and action. https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=29AYH9qAdXc%3D&portalid=0#:~:text=We%20apologize%20for%20supporting%20policies,work%20profession%20and%20in%20society.

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Fast facts: Race/ethnicity of college faculty*. https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61

Nietzel, M. T. (2019, August). Five long-term trends in U.S. research doctorates. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltnietzel/2019/08/06/five-long-term-trends-in-us-research-doctorates/?sh=4c21cad0638d

Paradies Y, Ben J, Denson N, Elias A, Priest N, Pieterse A., Gupta, A., Kelaher, M., & Gee, G. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE 10*(9), 1-48. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138511

Reid, L. D. (2010). The role of perceived race and gender in the evaluation of college teaching on RateMyProfessors. *Journal of Diversity in higher Education, 3*(3), 137-152. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019865

Rideau, R. (2021). "We're just not acknowledged": An examination of the identity taxation of full-time non-tenure-track Women of Color faculty members. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 14*(2), 161-173. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000139

Sverdlik, A., Hall, N. C., & McAlpine, L. (2020). PhD imposter syndrome: Exploring antecedents, consequences, and implications for doctoral well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 15*, 737-758. https://doi.org/10.28945/4670

Social Work Coalition for Anti-Racist Educators [SWCAREs]. (n.d.). About SWCAREs. https://www.swcares.org/about

U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). Annual social and economic supplement to the current population survey. https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html

Yared, L. S. (2016, April). A broken pipeline: Minority students and the pathway to the Ph.D. The Harvard Crimson. https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/4/27/minority-students-PhD-pipeline/#:~:text=Yared-,A%20Broken%20Pipeline%3A%20Minority%20Students%20and%20the%20Pathway%20to%20the,numbers%20and%20experience%20at%20Harvard

Author note: Address correspondence to Autumn Asher BlackDeer, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver. Email: a2blackdeer@gmail.com