Understanding Programmatic Support of Doctoral Student Socialization via Social Media

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This work explores and addresses the programmatic support of doctoral student socialization via social media.

The Commission for the Future of Graduate Education, the Council of Graduate Schools, and the Educational Testing Service have deemed the study of historically marginalized students as being critical to address vulnerabilities with our approach to supporting these learners and strengthening our national capacity for innovation (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service 2010; Sowell, Allum, & Okahana, 2015). There are many milestones to celebrate regarding the experiences of marginalized students including the increase of racial and cultural diversity among doctoral students and degree completers, and the various programmatic efforts supporting them. Remarkably, the Survey of Earned Doctorates reports that African American doctoral degree attainment has increased 70% between 1993 and 2013 (National Science Foundation, 2015). However, there is a paucity of literature qualitatively evaluating these students' experiences as well as ways to engage programmatic efforts to critically manage the doctoral process. Empirical evidence-based strategies are needed to examine marginalized doctoral student perceptions of their engagement with these programs as well as their usefulness in supporting degree attainment nationally. This commentary aims to identify and explore programmatic efforts supporting the socialization of historically marginalized students with an emphasis on the Black student experience via social media. Its purpose is to understand the ways the marginalized doctoral student experience is influenced by social movements and the issues being addressed within the context of social media.

BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

To understand the marginalized doctoral student experience within the context of social media, it is important to consider programmatic efforts using a social justice lens and identify social media sites where marginalized doctoral students interact with scholarly communities and engage in social justice issues. This includes the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, justice initiatives for Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland, the merciless shooting of nine church members in Charleston, South Carolina, and many other cases of victimization involving historically marginalized communities.

The Black Lives Matter movement, referred to as #BlackLivesMatter in social media, is an ideological and political intervention in a world where it is believed "black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" (Garza, 2014). Its goals and demands are shared via social media, including websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and through protest matches and stand-ins. Black Lives Matter was established in 2012 after an African American teenager named Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman. Martin was posthumously tried for his own death while Zimmerman was found not guilty of murder. The resulting outrage across the country was profound and research showed that similar acts were rampant all over the U.S. The Black Lives Matter Movement hopes to foster Black pride, power, and liberation via social awareness of poverty, incarceration, assault, undocumented immigrants, and the unethical targeting and mistreatment of Black people.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

A transformational leadership philosophy can be associated with #BlackLivesMatter. This youth-led movement attempts to plant "an infrastructure that can propel structural change" (Taylor, 2014, p. 2). Transformational leaders display high standards of conscientious citizenship and a sense of belongingness to their communities with social responsibility. Transformational leaders have a holistic manner in which they look after their followers' needs. They go beyond mere give-and-take relationships to a deeper sense of responsibility from within. This creates loyalty and friendship between leaders and followers even under the most trying circumstances (Bangari, 2014). The transformational leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower to turn individual attention toward larger causes such as political reform, revolution, national defense, etc. As a result, this converts self-interest into collective concerns, thereby striving to transform social inequities into social justice. Transformational leadership is depicted in Freire's quote below:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (1970, p. 34)

Programmatic efforts developed to support doctoral student socialization should understand how to reach students at their most basic level and location. Tissington and Senior (2011) argue that 21st century students exist as digital natives, meaning they have been socialized in environments that have always had technology. Tissington and Senior also assert that social networking adds to feelings of connectedness and support that participants derive from an effective community of practice. This idea seems to run counter to the understanding of some researchers in previous years, who appeared to conclude that when students retreat into a digital world they are decreasing their ability to interact with peers in real, tangible ways (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007). This exemplifies that researchers need to continually assess the ways students are communicating within digital spaces.

Social media support of doctoral students often promotes the leadership of the Black Lives Matter movement. Given the pervasiveness of racial discrimination associated with these national issues and observations of literature on race and socialization regarding how doctoral students respond to pressure associated with racial victimization (Ellis, 2001; Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011), understanding how social media sites/groups address leadership within social media communities is critical to understanding how these sites support or hinder doctoral student socialization. Several sites address these critical issues including The Black Doctoral Network, The Black Graduate Student Association, institutionally based support groups, and Black Doctorates Matter.

The Black Doctoral Network promotes fellowship and scholarship among persons of African descent currently pursuing, or who have already been conferred, a doctoral degree within the U.S. The network hosts an annual conference where attendees connect with other scholars to develop relationships across disciplines and geographic space. The organization also engages scholars in social media through Facebook and Twitter.

Similarly, The National Black Graduate Student Association serves current graduate and professional students at all levels (e.g., masters, doctoral, etc.). This organization provides social support for graduate and professional students, and encourages undergraduate students to pursue graduate or professional education.

Institutionally based support groups take the form of student-governed Black graduate student associations/councils. Many colleges and universities have graduate student associations to rally support for their needs and uniquely shared experiences. Emory University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and University of California Los Angeles all have Black graduate student associations. MIT's Black Graduate Student Union prioritizes "a place where African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean graduate students are encouraged to express ideas, concepts, and frustrations without rebuke" (MIT BGSA, 2015). These institution specific organizations intend to provide community for Black graduate students on historically and predominantly White campuses.

Finally, Black Doctorates Matter developed in 2014 as an evidenced-based social media site dedicated to discussing research focused on the doctoral experience that emphasizes the racial and cultural experiences of historically marginalized students. Its underlying goal is to make connections between this research and the psycho-social issues doctoral students face in their academic programs. This site makes an effort to identify these issues to facilitate conversation about the ways students experience them, and to address how these issues support and/or hinder academic success and degree completion.

Social media has enhanced the ways students perceive the doctoral process, and their individual and collective identities as graduate students. Hashtags like #PhDGrind, #OnMyWayToDr, #MovingPhorwarD, #PhinisheD, etc. have emerged as ways to create and maintain connections with personal and collective goals associated with academic success and degree completion. Doctoral students can find reinforcement, mentorship, camaraderie, affirmation, and relief through the exchange of ideas and experiences in these social media spaces. Marginalized students can find a safe space through social media that may not be available to them at their home institution. Social media users can provide qualitative data about the doctoral process that demystify the application process and academic journey for prospective students although these experiences will vary depending on person, program, and institution.

Conversely, with the rise of racially driven incidents occurring—and still being reported—around the nation, social media can sometimes hinder and dishearten doctoral students. Many Black doctoral students experience feelings of hopelessness, confusion, and enervation. Tragic incidents saturate social media and can subsequently have emotional consequences for marginalized doctoral students, specifically Black doctoral students. As social media becomes increasingly relevant in providing local, national, and world news, as well as channels for phenomenological data, there is a need for graduate programs to support social media engagement and become aware of Internet-mediated spaces that can enhance the doctoral socialization process.

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