Toward a Framework for Black Male Professional Identity

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Abstract—The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand how Black male doctoral degree recipients make sense of their professional identity. Three major research questions guided our analysis: (a) How do Black male doctoral degree recipients define their professional identity? (b) What factors do Black male doctoral recipients attribute to the development of their professional identity? (c) What is the role of race in the development of Black male doctoral degree recipients’ professional identity? Three major themes were identified. Implications for research, theory, policy and several campus constituencies, including graduate faculty and mentors/advisors are noted.

Key Terms—Black Men, Higher Education, Professional Identity

One of the consummate goals of doctoral education is to train individuals for highly technical and scientific professions that specialize in knowledge production, research development, and technology, to name a few. For instance, Jules LaPidus, former president of the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) headquartered in Washington, DC noted, “The role of doctoral education is to produce chemists, historians, mathematicians, and individuals in a host of other disciplines…” (1995, p. 34). Indeed, doctoral education is a training ground of sorts for those who enter specialized professions in society.

Not all people who earn a doctoral degree, however, perform well in the profession they enter. For instance, approximately 267,087 individuals pursued doctoral degrees in the United States (U.S.) in 2011. Yet, we’ve known for years that upwards of 50% of doctoral students fail to complete their degrees and attrition rates can be higher for historically underrepresented students such as Black men. For instance, in 2009, Black men represented less than 35% of all doctorate degrees awarded Blacks that year (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). And, many of them report difficulty in their professional role or unreadiness for professional practice (Niemi, 1997).

One factor that has been shown to be related to the career success of recent doctoral recipients is professional identity. Professional identity refers to “the formation of an attitude of personal responsibility regarding one’s role in the profession, a commitment to behave ethically and morally, and the development of feelings of pride for the profession” (Bruss & Kopala, 1993, p. 686). It has been examined in a number of ways—such as teachers’ professional identity (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000)—but more recent studies focus on professional identity as a function of doctoral students’ socialization to a professional role (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). And while we know that professional
identity is associated in part with one’s educational context (Colbeck, 2008; Sweitzer, 2008), we know comparatively little about (a) the role race plays in students’ professional identity generally and (b) factors Black male doctoral recipients attribute to the development of their professional identity specifically. These are the gaps addressed by our study.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand how Black male doctoral degree recipients make sense of their professional identity. Three major research questions guided our analysis: (a) How do Black male doctoral degree recipients define their professional identity? (b) What factors do Black male doctoral recipients attribute to the development of their professional identity? (c) What is the role of race in the development of Black male doctoral degree recipients’ professional identity? Before describing the methods we employed to answer these questions, we review the literature related to this topic.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To conduct this study, it was necessary to review the literature in three areas. First, we sought information, from research, about doctoral education broadly. Then, we recognized the need for information about doctoral socialization and finally, racial and sex differences in doctoral socialization. The literature review is organized around these major themes.

Doctoral Education

To date, there has been a good deal written on the purpose and nature of graduate education (Berelson, 1960; Bowen, Rudenstine, Sosa, 1992; Golde, 2005, 2006; LaPides, 1995). Indeed, graduate education is “…an integral part of higher education, providing not only the next generation of scholars but also the creation and transmission of knowledge to constituencies both inside and outside of academia” (Gardner & Barnes, 2007, p. 370). And while much has been written about its nature and purpose, we know considerably less about the role that doctoral education plays in preparing students to assume careers upon graduation (LaPides, 1995). Other research related to doctoral education focuses on student attrition and retention.

Upwards of 50% of doctoral students in the United States do not complete their degrees (Berelson, 1960; Bowen, Rudenstine, Sosa, 1992; Noble, 1994; Tinto, 1993). Doctoral student attrition can be associated with a myriad of factors: financial stability, time to degree, time to career, dissatisfaction with the degree program, fit in the department, lack of mentorship, and connectedness with community (Gardner 2008; Golde & Walker, 2006; Lovitts, 2001). To date, there are no comprehensive national statistics available on doctoral attrition, as it is difficult to accurately measure, given the variation in ones’ time-to-degree, program structure and transfers. Consequently, doctoral attrition has been often described as “the invisible problem” (Lovitts, 2001).

Prior research suggests that formal and informal socialization experiences such as faculty collaborations, peer mentoring, and even orientation activities promote graduate students’ (i.e., doctoral and professional) readiness to assume the roles of the profession to which they aspire. For instance, doctoral students’ relationship with their faculty advisor/mentor has been identified as the single most important factor in determining satisfaction and subsequent attrition decisions (Lovitts; Tinto, 1993). Relationships influence other aspects of doctoral training; this is discussed further in the next section.

Doctoral Students’ Socialization

Researchers in a wide range of disciplinary traditions have directed scholarly attention to graduate student socialization—that
is, the process through which students acquire the skills, values, disposition, and knowledge necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced degree (Brim, 1966; Gardner, 2010; Tierney & Bensimon, Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001). For instance, Gardner (2010) identifies a three-phase model for doctoral student socialization including: (a) pre-/early entry, (b) entry up to candidacy, and (c) candidacy and beyond. Within each phase of the model, Gardner underscores the role and importance of interpersonal relationships to the students’ success.

Indeed, meaningful relationships and purposeful engagement with faculty and peers are important to socializing doctoral students to the norms, attitudes and values of their professional community (Baird, 1995; Barnes & Austin, 2009; Weidman et al., 2001). For example, scholars document the significance of peer collaborations (Golde, 2005), graduate student involvement in professional organizations and associations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007), and the relationship between students and their faculty advisor/mentor in fostering healthy socialization experiences. For doctoral students specifically, their faculty advisor/mentor has been identified as the most important socializing agent. It is important to note that these roles (i.e., faculty advisor and mentor) are not necessarily interchangeable or occupied by the same person. While “advisor” typically refers to a contractual obligation of faculty members, Crosby (1993) defined mentor as “a trusted and experienced supervisor or advisor who by mutual consent takes an active interest in the development and education of a younger less experienced individual” (p. 13).

Mentors who provide both psychosocial and career development are most effective in the socialization of doctoral students (Gardner, 2010; Kram, 1985). Psychosocial development refers the emotional and mental support that mentors might provide by caring for a student both personally and professionally (e.g., encouraging and affirming guidance). Career development refers to ones’ ability to offer professionally beneficial opportunities to engage—that is, opportunities for students to conduct/publish research and present at national conferences, to name a few. One conceptualization of these factors has been posited by scholars who study graduate and professional student socialization.

**Weidman Graduate and Professional Student Socialization Model.** As an extension of Weidman’s (1989) model for undergraduate socialization, Weidman, Twale and Stein, (2001) highlight the role of the individual and institution in the socialization of graduate students. For instance, the institutional level of socialization refers to the acquisition of the norms, attitudes and values of the professional community, however the individual also plays an important role in changing and “reformulating normative expectations” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 35).

The socialization process for doctoral students is chiefly responsible for acquainting them with the formal and informal roles, responsibilities, and expectations of their advisors, department, and career field. Accordingly, ones’ success is dependent on their ability to successfully manage and meet the demands of their academics while also recognizing varied, informal and subtle attitudes, values, interests, skill, knowledge and culture of the group (or field) they aspire to join (Merton, Reader & Kendall, 1957).

There are two important characteristics of socialization: (a) that socialization is a developmental process, and (b) that certain core elements are associated with the development of role identity and commitment (Stein, 1992; Thornton & Naradi, 1975). Four stages have been identified in the socialization process: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. Each stage is reflective of the “different levels of understanding and commitment to the professional roles for which graduate
students are being prepared” (Weidman et al., 2001, p. 5).

Within the anticipatory stage, the student becomes aware of the expectations (e.g., behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive) that are held for the role. This stage takes place prior to the student entering a program, and is informed by stereotypes and preconceived expectations. The formal stage however refers to the role expectations the student receives via formal instruction from their school and department. Within the informal stage, expectations are transmitted through interactions with others who presently occupy the desired role. And in the personal stage, “individuals and social roles, personalities and social structures become fused” (Thornton & Nardi, 1975, p. 880).

There are also core elements of socialization that are critical for ones’ identification with and commitment to a professional role. These include: knowledge acquisition, investment and involvement. Knowledge acquisition refers to both cognitive and affective knowledge and skills necessary to perform in their professional role. The latter, affective knowledge, includes ones’ awareness of dominant values and expectations of the profession, a personal assessment of their ability to meet the demands of professional successfully, and an awareness of the confidence others might have of their capacity to carry out their roles.

Investment refers to ones’ commitment to some aspect of a professional role or preparation for it (e.g., time). For example, investment of time in learning a particular skill or specialized area reflects an investment in the profession, particularly as these skills are not typically transferable to other areas. Third, involvement, relates to ones’ participation in activities related to their professional aspirations and goals. For instance, involvement with teachers might expose one to profession ideology, motives and attitudes (Weidman et al., 2001).

Taken together, faculty and peers are important socializing agents for graduate and professional students. Indeed, well-socialized doctoral students understand the values and beliefs of their field (Bragg, 1976); report higher levels of satisfaction (Gardner, 2008); and sense of belonging in their program and field (Strayhorn, 2012). Ones’ socialization however may be affected by a myriad of other factors like race/ethnicity and sex.

Racial and Sex Differences in Doctoral Student Socialization

Graduate education in the United States has historically and disproportionately served white men (Berelson, 1960), resulting in a lack of diversity. This is a growing concern in the United States, particularly given its efforts to strengthen global competitiveness. Subsequently, programs aimed at recruiting and retaining women and students of color have spawned across many disciplines in order to diversify the academy. More scholarly attention has been devoted in recent years to understanding the experiences of underrepresented populations in graduate education (Ellis, 2001; Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Strayhorn, 2009).

Historically, Blacks have been sorely underrepresented among graduate students and doctoral degree recipients in the United States. For instance, while in 1985 Blacks represented approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population, they represented only 3.1 percent of earned doctorates (Solórzano, 2005). While moderate progress can be noted, in 2010 Blacks comprised only about 7% of all earned doctorates, in comparison to their white counterparts who made up approximately 78% (Aud et al., 2012). Race is a salient factor in the experiences of doctoral students.

Black doctoral students report more difficulty than whites in identifying supportive academic advisors and mentors, leading to lower levels of satisfaction with doctoral study (Ellis, 2001). They also receive fewer
teaching and research assistantships than their White counterparts (Pruitt & Isaac, 1985). As a result, attrition rates for Blacks are considerably higher than for White students (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). In a qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education, Gardner (2008) reveals that students of color report difficulty “fitting the mold” of graduate school (p. 125). A chemistry student in Gardner’s study discussed the role of race in her experience, highlighting issues of discrimination, respect and hardwork. These negative outcomes, however, are more pronounced for Black who are grossly underrepresented in doctoral education (Strayhorn, 2008).

The experiences of Black men in graduate school have been under researched. Using nationally representative data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, Strayhorn (2009) described the status of African American male graduate students in United States. Findings from his study report that only 40% of all African American males bachelor’s (B.A.) degree recipients enrolled in a graduate degree program by 2003, 10 years after receiving their undergraduate degree. Additionally, only about half of those enrolled in graduate school completed a degree. This raises important questions about barriers to degree completion for Black men, particularly in comparison to their white and female counterparts. Still, other factors shape graduate students’ success; professional identity has been associated with the persistence of doctoral students and, thus, frames the present study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the importance of graduate school training and doctoral socialization to students’ understanding of and sense of responsibility to their roles, we use professional identity as a theoretical framework for our study. Although no single theory exists that explains professional identity as a social phenomena, which, after all, is the expressed purpose of theory (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Strayhorn, 2013), we critically synthesize conclusions from prior research to theorize about professional identity, how it develops, and the role that social identities and other factors play in shaping individuals’ professional identity generally and for Black male doctoral recipients in the field of higher education specifically. Before describing a model of professional identity, we offer an operational definition of the concept that informs the present study.

Professional identity is a term with many definitions. An extensive review of the literature revealed a collection of terms with contradicting interpretations. For instance, some early authors equated professional identity in various fields such as law, psychology, and education with professional aspirations, a duty of care, and understanding of one’s professional field (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Woody, 1978). More recently, professional identity has referred to the “formation of an attitude of personal responsibility regarding one’s role in the profession [or field to which one belongs], a commitment to behave ethically and morally, and the development of feelings of pride for the profession” (Bruss & Kopala, 1993, p. 686). In this way, professional identity refers to multiple dimensions of identity at once—what one understands as their roles or duties in a specific occupation within a professional field, a sense of responsibility regarding such roles, and a commitment to certain values and beliefs that enable them to operate effectively in their respective profession.

As Flapan (1984) explained, professional identity can be exceedingly complex for some individuals, as an individual’s personal traits (e.g., self-esteem, self-worth, self-efficacy) and other facets of identity (e.g., race, social class, gender) comprise healthy development of a professional identity. Factors such as self-esteem or self-efficacy (i.e., confidence) influence professional identity by determining for the individual the degree to which one be-
lieves they are able to carry out the roles and functions of professionals in their desired occupation or to assume responsibility of a professional’s role in their field. Flapan stated succinctly that professional identity is “based on how one conceives the role of [the professional] and how one sees oneself measuring up to one’s own standards and ideals as a [professional]” (p. 18).

Drawing on what’s known from previous studies (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Hall, Townes O’Brien, & Tang, 2010), we posit a three-phase model of professional identity that, while generally linear and marked by progressively increasing levels of identity awareness over time, allows for several alternatives such as “stalling out” (i.e., staying at one phase longer than anticipated), “regression” (i.e., returning to earlier phases), and attrition or “dropping out” (i.e., leaving the development process, usually caused by leaving one’s graduate program). Like others (Bruss & Kopala, 1993), we theorize that graduate school training can be viewed as professional infancy where individuals enter with limited awareness and understanding of the profession to which they aspire and an underdeveloped sense of professional self or identity. In this context, they proceed through at least three phases that can be described as:

Phase One. Initially, students are inundated with a vast array of expectations and demands that may be unfamiliar; their professional identity is largely externally-defined and influenced, in part, by supervisors (e.g., faculty) and other superiors’ ability to respond to changing needs. Phase One is typically marked by confusion regarding one’s personal and professional identities; the nature and duration of this phase is determined, to some degree, by the distance that must be traversed from the students’ role prior to graduate entry (e.g., student, employee, veteran) to the students’ role in graduate school and the norms, practices, and expectations of the graduate field of study or broader profession.

Phase Two. Because of confusion and uncertainty regarding one’s personal and professional identities that mark Phase One, individuals are motivated (i.e., intrinsically or extrinsically) to reconcile these conflicts and, thus, proceed to engage in any number of purposeful activities that shed light on professional duties and responsibilities, expose one to the realities of professionals in a particular field or occupation (no matter how daunting or incongruent with their initial fantasized beliefs (Bruss & Kopala, 1993), and help to promote (or extinguish) confidence in one’s ability to complete tasks and roles expected of competent professionals in such a field. Here students depend heavily on experienced individuals (e.g., faculty, mentors, and supervisors) to help guide their development; mentors, for instance, can have long-term effects on professional development including a significant influence on protégés self-image (Wright & Wright, 1987). Insecurities and doubts may still exist, but one grows in his capacity to manage such inconsistencies and to answer questions of professional worth. Messages received in this phase through feedback, evaluation, or however otherwise conveyed can help to clarify roles and self-images.

Phase Three. The third phase is characterized by clarification, internalization, and subsequent commitment to professional roles and responsibilities—that is, not only understanding what professionals do in one’s desired field, but seeing oneself as fully capable of doing so and assuming responsibilities expected of a professional (Colbeck, 2008). Characteristics like anxiety, excitement, and dependency that marked initial and earlier phases give way to increased confidence, calmness or “coolness,” and autonomy; our hypothesis here is consistent with findings from Friedman and Kaslow (1986) in their work with counseling psychology doctoral students.

Though some authors have referred to this period of professional development as “integration,” we consciously resist such lan-
guage for several reasons, one being that it reflects our epistemic beliefs about the role of race, racism, and other social pathologies that pervasively and insidiously shape the lives (and opportunities) of Blacks in the United States. The term “integration” is indelibly linked to the segregationist history of this country that required Blacks to assimilate to the dominant norms, customs, and perspectives established by those in power and, thus, brings antiquated, historic meanings with it. Instead, we use “negotiation” as it refers to a more dynamic process of deftly balancing external expectations with one’s own internal commitments, interests, aspirations, and other important aspects of identity such as race or sex (Hall et al., 2010; Woody, 1978). For example, as Black men negotiate the larger system(s) in which they are situated (e.g., society, discipline, profession), they enhance their understanding of professional roles and responsibilities, clarify their own internally-derived commitments, and also may begin to identify with people in the environment such as faculty, staff, and other professionals.

Several points deserve mention or repetition. For instance, the initial phases, while marked by confusion, uncertainty, and instability, are not tangential but rather crucial to

**Figure 1.** Strayhorn and Johnson’s Hypothesized Model of Professional Identity. (Digital Image Created by Author; do not duplicate without permission)
the healthy development of the individual and his professional identity. As Niemi (1997) explained, “It is essential for the development of professional identity that the student develops a realistic view of the challenges and opportunities of the profession. Identity formation consists of exploring the available alternatives and committing to some choices and goals,” after working through initial uncertainties (p. 408). Also, there are certain stresses that can occur during doctoral training that, without intervention, can negatively influence, retard, or compromise professional identity development; these include negative feedback, poor relations, and incongruence between one’s expectations and realities (for more, see Kaslow & Rice, 1985). Figure 1 presents a graphical depiction of the hypothesized professional identity model.

METHODS

A constructivist qualitative approach was employed in the present study. Constructivism views knowledge as a social construction that changes depending on circumstances (Glesne, 2006). Crotty (1998) defines constructivism as “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality...is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). This paradigm was selected because of its epistemic underpinnings about the nature of knowledge and how participants in a social setting construct multiple realities (Glesne, 2006). Furthermore, this approach is congruent with our own ethics and values as educational researchers (i.e., that knowledge is socially constructed and truth is subjective and known in part, if ever); enabled us to probe for deeper understandings rather than examining surface features (Johnson, 1995); and allowed us to give voice to our participants’ experiences without causing harm to their authentic voice (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using a purposeful sampling approach (Merriam, 1998). Patton (1990) argues, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling...leads to selecting information-rich cases for the study in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 46). Drawing on various professional networks of the researchers, prospective participants were identified who met the sampling criteria. To qualify for the study, participants had to (a) identify as “African American”2 or “Black” and “male,”3 and (b) hold a doctoral degree in the field of higher education and student affairs or other related areas. Prospective participants were asked to share their contact information with the authors, who contacted them and shared information about the study.

Both participants (n=2) agreed to be interviewed, although participant recruitment was still in progress at the time of this writing. We deemed the sample size sufficient for our current purposes for at least two reasons. First, both participants were ready and willing to talk with us about their experiences in great detail. Since qualitative research focuses on the breadth and depth of the information collected rather than the sheer number of participants, we proceeded with our analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). To this point, Patton (1990) advises qualitative researchers to strive for rich, thick descriptions and to select a sample size based on the question(s), purpose, and what one needs to know. Indeed, it is this logic that guided our decisions in this study. Second, our participants were cases of interest: that is, “cases of

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2 Throughout this article, we use the terms “African American” and “Black” interchangeably to refer to individuals who ancestral origins lie in groups of African descent, including African Americans, Africans, Haitians, West Indians, among others.

3 Male refers to one’s sex or biological assignment at birth to avoid conflating issues of sex with gender, gender performance or sexuality, in consonance with current literature.
interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview subjects” (Patton, 2002, p. 182). Third, we admit the limits of our sampling size and offer these findings as useful information for understanding the phenomenon under study but we do not claim generalizability.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews and a short, open-ended questionnaire. The purpose of interviewing is to “find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Indeed, interviews provide an opportunity for researchers to create and capture insights of depth and level of focus rarely achieved through casual conversations, observational studies and surveys (Forsey, 2012). The interview protocol consisted of 10 questions to elicit stories from each participant about how he defines professional identity, the factors associated with his professional identity and the role of race in his professional identity development. For instance, one question was: “How have you come to understand and learn about the roles and functions of professionals in your field?” Interviews, on average, lasted approximately 75 minutes and were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim for analysis.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze data, we drew on techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), specifically the constant comparison method. First, interview transcripts were read and re-read to generate initial categories of information or “codes;” this is known as open coding. Coding refers to the process of “organizing the material into ‘chunks’ before bringing meaning to those chunks” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 171). Second, we collapsed codes by grouping categories that seemed to relate to each other while leaving intact those that stood independent from all others. This smaller list of categories was used to generate “supercodes,” or preliminary themes. Finally, themes were compared and contrasted to understand the degree to which they were similar; closely related themes were collapsed or renamed so that the name represented the sum of its parts. This iterative process was repeated until no new codes or themes were found—a point called saturation in the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each participant was given the opportunity to review the final list of themes, clarify statements from interviews, or ask questions about our conclusions (Miles & Huberman).

**Trustworthiness and Quality**

In consonance with Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) methods of maintaining rigor and accuracy in qualitative research (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) we followed several steps. First, credibility was assured through member checks. Study participants were presented a list of preliminary results, including a priori description of themes, to which they responded with corrections, questions, or suggestions. We also relied on peer debriefing, whereby we called upon peers to aid in probing our thinking around professional identity, to add to the credibility of our findings and trustworthiness of our design. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick rich descriptions of the participants and research sites wherever possible. Lastly, an audit trail of data analysis and emerging themes was conducted to promote dependability and confirmability.

**FINDINGS**

Three major themes were identified using the analytic process described in the previous section. Each major theme is explained in the following sections. Where possible, verbatim quotes are included to illustrate the meaning and significance of findings.
Professional Identity Defined

Participants used a litany of words to describe professional identity generally and their own sense of professional identity specifically. Words ranged from terms that speak to what professionals in their field do (e.g., “deep thinker”) to phrases that imply a more cognitive assessment of how participants view themselves (e.g., “student-centered”), how others may view them, or a blend of both. Words and phrases used to describe professional identity included: aspirations, abstract, deep thinker, field, job, lifestyle, responsibility, and “to be scholarly,” to name a few. Related to the relatively long list of words that participants used to talk about professional identity, both of our participants reported feeling uncertain about, unsure of, or unfamiliar with the profession and their professional roles or responsibilities upon entry into their doctoral degree program. For instance, Nolan admitted being unsure or uncommitted to his “initial professional aspiration [to be] a faculty member” since his goal was based on limited information about possible career options and “not know[ing] what else to do.”

Not only did participants use choice words or phrases to describe their professional identity, but they also spoke at length about their own sense of professional identity, the origins of their professional understandings, and how they came to construct their professional identity. For instance, Gabe, who was raised in St. Louis, Missouri and selected his doctoral institution based on its proximity to home (i.e., location) offered the following comments about professional identity:

*I think the role of [professionals] in the field is to produce knowledge, not just publish to publish. I definitely think its service to the field and even the campus…so service is important too. And, I think it’s about advising and mentoring…oh, and teaching.*

Nolan, too, offered his perspective on professional identity and described the major roles and functions of professionals in his field (i.e., academic profession) such as faculty members. He shared:

*Major roles and functions of professionals (pause) include like being adequate at teaching, to do good research, to be entrepreneuri* 

*al which I think brings prestige to the institution, and to be a good colleague.*

Our questions also elicited information about the origins of participants’ professional understandings. Generally, participants attributed development of their sense of professional identity to at least three sources: (a) meaningful conversations with experienced professionals in the field; (b) deep, educationally purposeful engagement in structured or guided activities that expose one early on to the nature of professionals’ work including internships, apprenticeships, and assistantships, to name a few; and (c) information gleaned from the doctoral program’s curriculum such as readings, course assignments, and candid in-class discussions about career options. For example, Gabe shared that his professional “aspirations changed from administrator to faculty during the dissertation process...mostly because [he has] a lot of questions that [he] want[s] to answer.” Nolan, on the other hand, spoke at length with faculty, administrators, and mentors about professional values, beliefs, and dispositions; their explicit conversations fueled his professional aspirations and helped to clarify his own professional identity.

To recap, participants used a battery of terms to describe the concept of professional identity ranging from lifestyle and responsibility to deep thinker and scholarly, although both admitted to feeling uncertain, unsure, or anxious about professional matters upon entering their doctoral degree program. They also spoke at length about their own sense of professional identity, the origins of their professional beliefs/values, and how they came to construct their professional selves, using a blend of behavioral and cognitive valuations of what professionals do, believe, or value.
Factors Associated with Professional Identity

Another major finding revealed several factors that seemed to be related to Black male doctoral degree recipients' professional identity. Generally, factors included the nature or form of his doctoral socialization process, frequency and nature of meaningful interactions with faculty and other professionals, years of professional work experience, and a capacity to evaluate the appropriateness of prescribed values and beliefs (or those inherited from advisors or mentors) in order to create new or revise existing ones based on a set of internally derived commitments, which is related to the concept of self-authorship. For instance, participants spoke in detail about how their understanding of their own professional identity matured over time as they learned more about the profession in which they worked, the values of their employing department or unit, and the kind of work in which professionals were involved. For instance, Nolan, who secured a tenure-track faculty position upon graduation from his doctoral program, shared:

A [few] years ago it emerged, just as I was engaged in research with my advisor. I vividly remember analyzing data for [my advisor's] large project and it hit me. I felt like I started to get a sense of ‘what faculty do’ and I thought that I could do it too.

There were other experiences that shaped Black male doctoral recipients' sense of professional identity. For example, Gabe described several experiences, such as informal conversations and working on a research team:

Somewhere I went from ‘I don’t know’ about the things that a faculty member does to here are some basic things a faculty member does and I think working in the [said] lab was it...reading more about the role of faculty has helped clear it up for me too...and like conversations with people, especially older students in the [doctoral] program...I mean, this is an indoctrination process into the academy.

Taken together, their comments highlight how the nature and form (e.g., research- vs. teaching-focus) of one’s doctoral socialization process can powerfully shape the professional identity of Black male doctoral degree recipients, even early on. By engaging in research with faculty, talking candidly with faculty about their duties, and engaging meaningfully with the curriculum or others in the program, Black male doctoral recipients established, clarified, or revised their sense of professional identity.

Professional Aspirations Clarified

A final finding suggests the importance of professional activities to Black male doctoral recipients' professional identity. Engagement in professional activities (e.g., research) during graduate training influenced participants’ professional identity by clarifying their aspirations for a particular occupation within the profession. For example, both participants talked about engagement in research, although the influence of such engagement differed across each. For Nolan, research engagement strengthened his interest in a faculty career, while Gabe's research experience diminished his initial interest in becoming a faculty member. Consider the following:

I became involved in research primarily through my advisor...who is really the first person that exposed me to research. He was doing a large qualitative study project and I worked to analyze data...but I never knew that would be part of my assistantship with him. And so for me that was like my first introduction to research and I really enjoyed doing it so I sought out other opportunities by asking faculty members what types of things they were working on and if they needed someone to help...it was really through...my advisor exposing me to research where I really formed that interest [in being a faculty member]. (Nolan)
Nolan’s comments not only underscore the importance of engagement in research for clarifying Black male doctoral students’ aspirations, but how such engagement promotes career aspirations by effectively raising one’s confidence in his ability to “do” what is expected of professionals in the field. For instance, he went on to say:

I took a course with [my advisor] that really….ummm...one the major projects from that course that we were all suppose to write chapters...it was a students outcome course. And the chapter that I wrote became a chapter in the book that I ended up editing with [my advisor]. I think as a first-year doctoral student that’s when I started thinking I could do this...I think it was the process of working on that book like actively with him that really showed me like the process of like writing and putting a project together, as something that faculty do, which led me to believe that it’s something I could do because I really had fun with it and I liked it...and I think I was pretty good at it. I think the combination of those two lead me to see something that faculty do...that made it more tangible.

Indeed, it was through meaningful engagement in professional activities such as research that clarified (i.e., affirmed) Nolan’s professional aspirations, thereby facilitating development of his professional identity.

Whereas research engagement clarified Nolan’s professional aspirations, research involvement had reverse effects on Gabe’s initial interests in becoming a faculty member. Consider the following excerpt he shared:

When I entered [my doctoral program]...I always wanted to be a professor...so I came here wanting to do that. I got a research assistantship and I had a terrible time...ummm I feel I like I didn’t have any guidance. I didn’t know what I was doing half the time and my writing wasn’t where it needed to be...and I didn’t feel like anybody was taking the time to help me to get there. So that first year of being a research assistant...ummm it really deterred me from being a faculty member. For that to be my first big taste and not have guidance, it really deterred me.

Contrary to the support that Nolan received from his advisor, Gabe recalled feeling frustrated, alienated, and unsupported during his research involvement. Generally, he described his experience using words with negative connotations and attributed his lack of sustained interest in a faculty career to his negative research experiences. Interestingly, Gabe experienced another pivoting moment during his doctoral program where his faculty career interests were stoked: post-candidacy engagement in independent research (i.e., dissertation). Consider the following:

The summer after my fourth year, in the middle of my dissertation data collection and writing I began to open up again the idea of faculty for a couple of reasons. One, I felt like I have more questions that I wanted to get answers to... And two, during the dissertation process and throughout my last four years, I’ve gotten better [sic]... and I’ve gotten to be a better thinker.

Like Nolan, Gabe’s comments reveal how research engagement promotes professional identity development by raising one’s confidence in his abilities in a domain related to the professional role. All of this extends what we currently know about professional identity and we discuss these findings in the context of prior literature in the next section.

DISCUSSION

Recall that the purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand how Black male doctoral degree recipients’ make sense of their professional identity. Three major research questions guided our analysis: (a) How do Black male doctoral degree recipients define their professional identity? (b) What factors do Black male doctoral recipients attribute to the development of their professional identity? (c) What is the role of
race in the development of Black male doctoral degree recipients’ professional identity? Findings from the present study suggest several major conclusions.

First, participants deployed a litany of words to describe professional identity in this study, similar to earlier studies (Friedman & Kaslow, 1986; Woody, 1978). Words ranged from beliefs to assumptions, as well as more psychological assessments of the extent to which one feels a sense of belonging in their respective field. However, more akin to Bruss (1993), we found that Black men in higher education tend to distinguish what professionals do in their field from what professionals believe. Both behavioral and cognitivevaluations were part of our participants’ evolving professional identity.

Second, participants defined professional identity as process—that is, something that develops over time from initial confusion and uncertainty to clarified understandings of what one does as a professional and believes about the profession (Bruss, 1993; Friedman, 1986). Our research, like that of Reybold (2003), provides evidence to support our hypothesis that doctoral socialization is related to professional identity development through cognitive and affective maturation marked by refined aspirations, internally-defined beliefs, and confidence in one’s ability to assume professional duties.

Third, several conclusions can be made about the role of engagement in professional activities, specifically research. For example, findings from this study underscore its role in facilitating professional identity development for the participants in our study. Recall the experiences of Nolan who discusses in detail the role of research in clarifying his aspirations and promoting his confidence. Indeed, through purposeful and meaningful engagement in research with his advisor, Nolan gained interest in a faculty career. These findings are consistent with literature on doctoral socialization, specifically the role of meaningful relationships and purposeful engagement with faculty (Baird, 1995; Barnes & Austin, 2009; Weidman et al., 2001). And consistent with our theoretical framework, Nolan was able to advance to phase 2, sorting through feelings of confusion and doubt as he engaged in professional activities (e.g., research). The opposite is also true.

Negative professional experiences and activities may cause a student to question or revisit professional aspirations, leading to decreased levels of confidence, and concerns of “fit”. In our study, Gabe discussed in detail the nature of his engagement in research and relationship with his “advisor” who he distinguishes from his “mentor.” Similarly, he describes his research experience as negative, lacking structure and support. These findings with consistent with literature on the role of “mentors” providing psychosocial and career development to students. Indeed, the absence of these supports during his engagement in research inhibited professional identity development. As our model suggests, negative experiences with research and lack of useful supervision led Gabe to “stall out” temporarily. However, his professional aspirations are clarified and refined during the latter stages of his doctoral program as he engaged in prolonged, in-depth, and meaningful professional activities (i.e. dissertation). Taken together, findings may suggest the importance of situated learning where students move beyond peripheral participation or mere observance to deep, hands-on engagement in activities that nurture their professional interest.

Findings from this qualitative investigation of Black male doctoral recipients’ professional identity affirm or lend persuasive support to our hypothesized model of professional identity development. For instance, information shared by our participants demonstrates that the initial phases of their professional development are marked by confusion, uncertainty, and instability, similar to more general results reported elsewhere (Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Flapan, 1984). Recall
how both participants initially were unsure of what they wanted to become or could become after earning their doctorate in higher education. And even when career aspirations came into view early on, our participants were uncertain of the path to such careers. Not only does this finding relate to the hypothesized model but it also provides information about where some Black male doctoral students begin developing their professional identity.

Consistent with our hypothesized model, findings from the study suggest that confusion and instability motivate Black males’ attempts to reconcile uncertainty by engaging meaningfully in professional activities such as research. Again these findings relate to those reported by Bruss (1993) and others, although results from the present study relate directly to Black male doctoral students and those who study in the field of higher education. Purposeful engagement in professional activities such as teaching, service, and research help Black men resolve professional identity conflicts, clarify their aspirations, nurture their self-confidence, and enhance their self-image. Advisors, faculty members, and mentors seem to play a critical role in this process, especially at this point of doctoral study. While we’ve known from other research that mentors play vital roles (e.g., Wright & Wright, 1987), our work underscores the role they play in the evolution of Black males’ professional identity.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The study was significant for several campus constituencies. One group that might benefit from the results of this study includes graduate faculty members in the field of higher education. Findings from this study provide faculty members with information about Black male doctoral recipients’ initial aspirations, perceptions of their involvement in research activities, and details about how their professional identity evolved over time. Faculty might use this information to nurture such students’ professional aspirations early on, improve their experiences in research activities, and foster development of their professional identity. For instance, the study’s results suggest the effectiveness of reading assignments about professional roles, close supervision during research internships, and explicit instruction about the norms and values of the profession. Faculty should consider these results when revising doctoral curricula, planning new courses or seminars, and working directly with students through assistantships and collaborative research.

Another group that might benefit from the results of this study includes professional advisors and mentors who work with Black male doctoral students and their peers. Findings from this study provide advisors and mentors with information about the process through which professional identity evolves for Black male doctoral recipients. Advisors might use this information to guide advising sessions with students throughout their doctoral career; for example, early sessions during the first year might be designed to encourage students to explore various career options, “try out” different perspectives (e.g., research- vs. teaching-focused), or learn about possible pathways. Mentors might consult this information when contemplating their role at a certain phase of a student’s doctoral career; mentors can be particularly helpful during latter stages by coaching protégés through conflicts regarding their aspirations, supporting them through moments of insecurity, and persuading them to believe in themselves and their ability to be professionals in the field. Using tactics like those employed by Nolan and Gabe’s mentors may be effective.

Findings from our study also have implications for future policy. For example, both of our participants seemed to stress the role that research involvement played in shaping their professional identity, by exposing them to what professionals do, how they do it, and building their confidence to do it too. This
has implications at the federal and state level, stressing the need for continued support of programs that provide research opportunities to students such as Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP), Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate program, and even more local initiatives. In fact, our findings may motivate policy at the institutional level to foster meaningful research collaborations between faculty and graduate students, to expose doctoral students to various career options through assistantships and curricula, and to adopt appropriate learning outcomes for each phase of doctoral study such as “clarified aspirations,” an outcome educators might desire for first- and second-year doctoral students.

The present study was significant in terms of future theory. To date, much of what is written about graduate and professional students focuses on their socialization process—that is, the mechanisms through which they become bona fide members of their graduate and professional communities—as posited by Weidman and colleagues (2001). Our study offers additional insight into the doctoral socialization experiences of Black males and extends what we know about the evolution of their professional identity. This study might be used to develop new or revise existing theoretical frames, such as our model presented earlier in the paper.

Information from the present study has implications for future research. Consider our findings related to Black male doctoral students’ professional identity development. Essentially our participants described a process through which they evaluated prescribed beliefs (i.e., received knowing) about professional roles and career options, assessed the suitability of each in light of his interests and values, and then make decisions based on internal commitments; in this way, professional identity development is akin to other cognitive processes and models such as self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 2001). Future research should pursue this topic further using a longitudinal, qualitative design.

The present study attempted to understand the ways in which Black male doctoral recipients defined professional identity, as well as the litany of words used to do so. It seems equally as important to access the meaning they make of their doctoral experiences and the extent to which that influences professional identity. Both of these go beyond the scope of our study, but future researchers might explore this area using sense-making frames and other qualitative methods like critical ethnography that appreciate the various contexts in which students are situated. Portraiture, too, may be used to analyze images produced by students. Finally, we urge the research community to remember the value of mixing methods when studying complex social phenomena.

CONCLUSION

When we began this study, we expected to learn a bit about Black male doctoral students’ socialization and we sought answers to our three research questions. But once the study was underway, we realized that our participants were poised to offer so much more. They spoke candidly about their experiences—the good and the bad—and they trusted us enough to share their aspirations, their frustrations, and their vulnerabilities. What we offer here is more than answers to questions; we present a preliminary model of professional identity, conceptual distinctions between overlapping terms and perhaps most importantly the stories of students whose voices have been rendered silent in extant literature on doctoral education. Despite popular belief, Black men do enroll in doctoral education, and many succeed by developing a healthy professional identity like Gabe and Nolan. It is our hope that this study enables future generations of Black men to do the same.
REFERENCES


