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The Voices of Family Therapy Doctoral Students of Color: Aspirations and Factors Influencing  
Careers in Academia

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study examines key factors influencing career aspirations of doctoral students of color from family therapy doctoral programs across the country, with a special focus on factors influencing the choice to pursue an academic career. Qualitative interviews with students at varying levels of degree completion revealed factors influencing career aspiration. Respondents discussed their views regarding the barriers to careers in academia as well as suggestions for overcoming those barriers.*

*Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.*

- Barack Obama

## INTRODUCTION

The population of the United States is becoming increasingly more diverse. According to the 2006 U.S. Census data, Hispanics (18.5%), African Americans (16%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (5.5%), and Native Americans (1.2%) together represent over 41% of the total U.S. population of almost 300 million (U.S. Census, 2006a). Over the past years (from 1981 to 2005), American colleges and universities have attempted to make their student bodies reflect the racial and ethnic characteristics of the general population (U.S. Census, 2006b). The percentage of undergraduate students of color has more than doubled from 11.2% (in 1981) to 24% (in 2005). The ethnic diversification of doctoral students of color reflects a similar increase from 8.4% (in 1981) to 15.3% (in 2005). Despite these inroads, the racial and ethnic diversity of the nation's faculty is starkly different. In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that racial/ethnic faculty members represented 19.8 percent (8.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.5% African American, 3.5% Hispanic, 2.1% Other) of all faculty across all institutions (Cataldi, Fahimi, & Bradburn, 2005). This is an increase over the years as indicated in previous studies that reported 12.3% representation of racial/ethnic faculty in 1991 and 14.9% in 2001 (Ma, 2004). Nonetheless, faculty of color are still disproportionately underrepresented in higher education. In contrast, Caucasians comprise 59 percent of the general population (based on 2006 U.S. Census) but account for 80.2% of the fulltime undergraduate and graduate teaching force.

There is an established body of literature that focuses on graduate students of color in their respective programs of mathematics, sciences, social work, counseling, and special education (Bowie & Hancock, 2000; Herzig, 2004; MacLachlan, 2004; Wasburn-Moses, 2007).

Much has been written about the recruitment and retention of graduate students of color (Rogers & Molina, 2006; Wright, 2003), minority student support programs (Maton, Kohout, Wicherski, Leary, & Vinokurov, 2006; Young & Brooks, 2008), mentorship (Davis, 2008; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007), and academic experiences (Gay, 2004; Mahtani, 2004; Vasquez et al., 2006; Xae, 2005). A 1993 study by Wilson and Stith examined the experiences of African American master's level students enrolled in family therapy programs. The results of their study suggests that some of the factors that influence retention of students at the master's level include mentorship by at least one faculty member, role modeling, financial support, and connection with other students of color. In 2005, Miller and Lambert-Shute (2009) surveyed family therapy doctoral students from across the United States regarding their career aspirations, training opportunities, and self-perceived level of preparedness for their chosen career. The results indicated that over half of all respondents (57%, n=47) reported their desire to become a professor, while the remaining chose either private practice (22%, n=18) or non-profit agency work (20%, n=17).

Despite the plethora of literature on racial/ethnic graduate student diversity, there is little published research on the career orientation of family therapy doctoral students of color. Specifically, what factors appear to influence their decision to choose either a career in academia, or private practice/clinical work? The purpose of this study was to contribute to a greater understanding of career choices of doctoral students of color by identifying factors that influence stated career aspirations. In doing so, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten doctoral students of color in accredited doctoral programs from across the country. Interviewees were asked about their career aspirations, graduate education experiences,

and thoughts on how doctoral programs can enhance the attractiveness of pursuing a career in academia.

## **METHODS**

### *Procedures*

Recruitment for participants began with a letter to all 21 program directors of accredited doctoral programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE). This letter was followed by an email with the same information along with a request for each program director to forward the informational email about the study to all their current doctoral students. Doctoral students who self-identified as “students of color” were then asked to email the primary investigator if they wished to participate in the study. Those respondents were then telephoned by the authors to provide verbal explanation of the study and to obtain verbal confirmation prior to the interview as evidence of respondent’s voluntary willingness to participate. Participants were provided with the interview questions via email prior to the telephone interview.

Semi-structured, individual telephone interviews were used for data collection. The interview guide was informed by previous studies in this area, and included initial demographic questions, followed by open-ended questions (Hertlein & Lambert-Shute, 2007; Miller & Lambert-Shute, 2009). Individual interviews were conducted via telephone at a prearranged time and typically lasted 30 to 60 minutes in length. Questions with varying degrees of structure were asked to elicit responses in each area of interest. Questions included: What are your career goals/aspirations? How did you choose the field of marriage and family therapy? What are some of your supportive experiences in your academic program? What are some of your non-supportive experiences in your academic program? How important was mentorship or other

people who influenced you? What could be done to encourage students of color to pursue academic careers? What do you think are the most important factors associated with a decision to pursue careers in academia?

### *Participants*

The authors completed qualitative interviews regarding the career aspirations of doctoral students of color (N=10; 6 women and 4 men) after receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval. All the participants in the study self-identified as “students of color” (defined as African American, Asian American, Latino, Native American, and/or bi/multiracial). Five interviewees self-identified as Hispanic, three Asian American, and two African American. Participants were students in doctoral programs located in the Midwest (n=3), Southeast (n=3), and Southwest (n=3). The mean years into their doctoral program was 4 years (range=2 to 6 years). At the time of the interviews, participants were in their internship phase (n=5), recent graduates (n=2), dissertation phase (n=2), or beginning coursework phase (n=1). Six of the participants were married and four were single during the time of the interview. Their mean age was 33.7 years (range=26 to 63). Eight of the participants entered into their doctoral programs directly after earning their masters degree. One participant was employed as a counselor for several years and another participant was employed as an attorney prior to beginning the doctoral program.

### *Data Analysis*

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality was maintained by allocating each interview transcription a number. Transcripts were analyzed using the process of thematic content analysis (TCA) (Anderson, 1998; Anderson, 2004; Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Fisher, 2006; Moustakas, 1990). After entering the responses to

each question into a Microsoft Word spreadsheet, the authors independently read all transcripts to identify initial themes and patterns that emerged from the responses. All descriptions that were relevant to the topic of inquiry were highlighted. Each highlighted area was marked as a distinct unit of meaning, with each unit separated by a break or change in the meaning. Each unit of meaning gleaned from the transcripts was grouped together according to theme. The researchers' epistemological stance when reviewing the data was objective, and any interpretation was avoided. Every effort was made to use the actual words of the participants when naming the themes (Anderson, 1998). Data interpretations were based on the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Each transcript was analyzed employing this process. Themes that emerged were recorded by the authors and a second review of the transcripts was conducted independently by each researcher. Initial themes were confirmed and new themes added or collapsed with existing themes. A final review of the transcripts was conducted independently by each researcher to confirm that all themes had been explored. The authors then met and compared and combined the results generated from each of their reviews of the data. The authors found a high consensus between their TCA of the transcripts. Experiences described in the interviews were compared to others, and tentative categories of response regarding themes were developed (Anderson, 2004). The categories were: a) career aspiration, b) supportive and non-supportive experiences in the doctoral program, c) importance of mentorship and educational support, d) factors influencing career aspiration, and e) opinions regarding factors that would encourage more doctoral students of color to pursue careers in academia.

## **FINDINGS**

Of the ten interview participants, career aspiration ranged from full-time academia (n=3), full-time private practice work or non-profit agency work (n=5), and a combination of part-time

teaching and private practice (n=2). In an effort to gain further understanding regarding the factors that influenced career choice for students of color, the authors analyzed the ten qualitative interview transcripts.

With regard to supportive and non-supportive experiences, respondents reported that faculty support both personally and professionally was important. Personal support included having a faculty member who “took interest” in the student, which increased confidence. Other supportive experiences included sensitivity to unique individual needs. For one respondent this involved a faculty member being “very supportive and flexible” with timelines and academic requirements when personal medical issues arose. Additional supportive experiences expressed by the participants included elements of the cohort, college, and academic setting in general. Notably, the most important supports at this institutional level included having a sense of connection to a community. For some, this community was comprised of members of the cohort who were of the same racial and ethnic background. For others, this involved a community that may be more diverse, but was supportive of the cultural and ethnic issues that arose in the program. One respondent discussed the importance of this support for her educational experience:

I was fortunate enough to come in with a cohort... out of seven of us, five of us were African American females. Usually there aren't very many African Americans in a Ph.D. program with you...but the majority of them in my cohort were African Americans...and those women were my best friends for that time. I received a lot of support from them. I also remember there was one professor who was very supportive. In addition to that, the Graduate Student Association was another source of support...those three were really my primary support systems.



Professional support discussed by the respondents included help with specific tasks and activities of scholarship. Respondents reported that their experience of mentorship about how to present papers at conferences and produce scholarly publications were instrumental in their professional development. Having faculty members “introduce them to other notable people in the field” also was seen as an encouragement for students who were interested in pursuing a career in academia.

All the participants indicated lack of research funding or financial aid as predominant non-supportive experiences. Some requested more support about the post-graduate licensure process. Respondents also want help with basic post-graduate clinical practice development skills. Another respondent discussed the desire to have more specific direction around degree completion requirements. Several respondents discussed the *lack* of mentorship as one of the main non-supportive experiences stating that “*not* having a faculty member take you under their wing can be disheartening.” and “coming into a program expecting a close mentorship relationship and having it not pan out that way was difficult for me.” Ultimately, one respondent decided to leave the doctoral program, partially because of the desire for greater mentoring.

### *Mentorship*

Faculty mentorship was described by participants as important in “keeping on track” for the future and crucial for professional and personal development. One participant expressed that mentorship was instrumental in “boosting self-esteem” and networking. Participants also believed that mentorship was a positive factor in promoting self-confidence, giving lectures, and presenting at regional conferences. As one respondent who has made several presentations at local conferences explained, “I would not have even thought of giving presentations on my

papers at conferences had my faculty mentor not urged me to do so.” Another respondent discussed the importance of the support from her faculty mentor stating:

I would not have gotten involved (at the national and state level) and done those kinds of things if it wasn't for her saying, “Hey, this is an opportunity, you need to get out there.” She also encouraged me to submit all these articles...I would not have done that if she had not pushed...or encouraged...me to go in that direction. The fact that she listened to me meant a lot. I found that really supportive...and I don't know what I would have done without her, honestly.

Another participant described her major advisor as her mentor and stated that she “learned vicariously from her what an effective teacher is and does.” Most voiced their mentors gave the feedback that “you have something to contribute that is valuable”:

Mentorship was pretty important. I think that knowing what to do to secure an academic position is really where the mentoring came in. As far as research and presenting at conferences and things of that nature, the mentors that I had kind of pushed me toward that direction. That's where mentoring was really helpful. Also seeing young, female assistant professors juggle work and family was also helpful.

All participants reported having a Caucasian faculty mentor. The cultural and racial sensitivity of the mentor/professor was reported by one participant as “the most important aspect of having a positive mentorship relationship with my faculty”:

My mentor was very helpful...she was not African American, yet she was a great mentor. A lot of people ask if a mentor should be someone of the same race. The main thing was that she was concerned about me...she would always make sure

that she would put me in touch with different people at conferences and helped me consider who could be on my committee.

*Choosing the Field of Family Therapy*

The predominant reasons for choosing the field of family therapy for the doctoral students who were interviewed included the field's orientation to "a systemic view of the family," the desire to "work with the whole family system," and "knowing someone already in the field." Most had some psychology, counseling, or mental health background prior to choosing the field of family therapy. Participants reported that the field's unique view of the family "made sense" and "seemed to match my own perspectives." Another discussed their clinical experience in a school setting prior to entering the field and how it led them to family therapy:

I noticed that whatever it is that we worked on (with students)...I kept asking myself what is the difference between this week and last week...and basically, they went home and away from the school environment and away from therapy...and they were at home. I realized that the home really does influence a lot of the behavior, so I became more and more interested in family therapy.

Some discussed how the doctoral program was a natural progression from their undergraduate work in psychology or social sciences. Others discussed the influence of having a family therapist as a supervisor in their job after their undergraduate degree and being "encouraged to go that direction." One participant, formally in another professional field was invited by a family member to attend an annual conference and "fell in love with it." Two respondents discussed the importance of early family and community service experiences as reasons to pursue the field. One stated:

I did a mission with my church and that was where I realized that I wanted to work with families. I got into family studies for my undergraduate major and did research with a couple of students and the ball started rolling and I went onto the master's degree and now doctoral program after that.

Another explained:

I was actually serving a 2 year mission for my church...and I met someone who was doing his studies there in marriage and family therapy, and he told me all about it and I thought that that was something I could do.

None of the respondents indicated that they were mentored to pursue academic careers in their undergraduate programs.

#### *Factors Regarding Career Choice for Doctoral Students of Color*

Half of the respondents reported that they believed graduate students of color do not pursue academic careers because of the perception that there are few faculty of color in higher education, thus “many do not know that academia can be an option if you are not exposed to professors of color.” One participant articulated that doctoral “students of color may not be from an affluent family of origin, and they choose clinical work because the private sector pays more,” thus enabling them to financially support their extended family. Another voiced a similar perspective, saying that “maybe they (doctoral students of color) are supporting not just themselves, but other family members of multiple generations.” Further, respondents also indicated that “having a private practice would allow them the flexibility needed to focus on raising a family.” Another respondent indicated that pursuing a faculty position at an academic institution may involve moving out of the state and away from extended family, thus “people of

color may be choosing to stay closer to their family” and electing to pursue clinical positions located near home.

*Encouraging Students of Color to Pursue Careers in Academia*

Respondents were asked to offer ideas about what programs could do to encourage doctoral students of color to pursue careers in academia. Several respondents offered advice about encouraging younger people to get interested. One explained that:

If you are grooming people of color to be professors, then you get people interested in that when people first go into a bachelor’s program. Let people know that there are options to go further past a four year degree. When I went to college, I didn’t know about scholarships, grants, and financial assistance. My parents have a sixth grade education. Let kids know very early, like in high school...maybe a career day that exposes kids to people of color who are successful in their fields.

Another participant discussed activities that the national association may pursue:

I think at our national level, there could be an opportunity to incorporate a session that includes professors of color who can talk about their experiences and research and some perspectives of what could be helpful...is something that will be of benefit. There are a lot of students from a lot of different programs going to the conferences and I think that is something that the association can do to help.

One respondent offered advice about how students of color should be mentored to see themselves as more than a limited, one-dimensional definition as a minority student:

I think good mentorship is needed because that was crucial to me. (Students should) not allow themselves to be encased into a box...not think of themselves

only as a “minority.” Not think of themselves only as being defined by “student of color.

## **DISCUSSION**

While the population of the United States is becoming more diverse, colleges and universities have struggled to make their student bodies reflect the racial and ethnic characteristics of the society. Of the ten respondents in this study, only two planned to pursue a full time career in academia. Half of the respondents attributed this to the lack of visibility of faculty of color to serve as guides and role models for the pursuit of a career in academia. Interviewees felt this was a factor at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Others felt that careers in academia are not “family friendly.” Many of the respondents discussed the importance of remaining close to their family of origin and believed that taking a faculty position would require them to move. Others discussed their desire to start their own families, and felt faculty positions would provide less career flexibility.

Respondents also discussed the importance of funding to support graduate education for students of color. This concern voiced by the participants reflects the acknowledgement at the national level for more financial help for all students attending college. In response to this need, the American Association for Marital and Family Therapy (AAMFT) has made significant efforts toward providing more support for students of color, such as the *Minority Fellowships Programs and Scholarships* (AAMFT, 2008).

The respondents in our study all expressed the importance of mentorship in helping them succeed in the program. Cusanovich and Gilliland (1991, p.1) describe a mentoring relationship as one that “involves professors acting as close, trusted, and experienced colleagues and guides...It is recognized that part of what is learned in graduate school is not cognitive, it is

socialization to the values, practices, and attitudes of a discipline and university.” Many of the graduate students of color are the first members of their family to attend college (Thomas et al., 2007). About half of the respondents reported that they were not exposed to any faculty of color in their graduate education. Faculty mentoring is a vital link in encouraging and determining the success of students’ doctoral education. Mentoring goes beyond being a good faculty advisor, it involves encouraging, nurturing, and providing support for a student and at times, even pushing the student forward. Howard Adams (1992), when discussing the essential factors in mentoring doctoral students of color, has recommended some useful guidelines and mentoring strategies: 1) serving as an advocate for the student, 2) suggesting that student’s expand research experience base, 3) emphasizing writing and “how to publish” skills, and 4) providing feedback to students regarding self-assessment and longer-range career goals. These strategies seem especially relevant given the results of our study.

All of the family therapy doctoral students of color emphasized how mentorship helped in their professional and personal development. It can be a challenge to find a mentor and some of the difficulty may arise out of assumptions surrounding the mentor process. Debunking some of the myths and misunderstandings may make it easier to establish a mentor/protégé relationship. Brown, Davis, and McClendon (1999) discuss five myths surrounding mentoring graduate students of color: 1) the myth that students of color can only be mentored by faculty of color; 2) the myth that any senior person can mentor any junior person; 3) the myth that engaging with students during class, seminars, and scheduled office hours constitutes a sufficient commitment; 4) the myth that mentoring is only extra advising; and 5) the myth that a mentor and protégé’s research interests, philosophical position, and political/social/racial experiences

must be a perfect match. The results from our study indicate that fundamentally the mentoring relationship involves both a personal and professional connection.

Also, interviewees frequently stated that effective support for graduate students of color included opportunities for career advancement. These opportunities were varied, and included activities such as attendance at national conferences, publication opportunities, positive internship experiences, and networking with practitioners and scholars. Finally, it was noted that it is useful to be able to network with other graduate students of color within the university, and nationally. Collectively, the advice given by the interviewees focused on academic success. In particular, they discussed the importance of: 1) having clear goals, 2) asking questions, 3) being assertive about their intellectual and professional development needs, and 4) looking for a faculty mentor whom they can relate freely. Interviewees for this study had some suggestions regarding how to encourage students of color to pursue careers in academia. One suggestion was for graduate schools to begin recruiting at the high school level by providing information about careers, graduate programs, and by providing general encouragement and support. This idea has also been suggested in the literature regarding training of psychotherapists as a group (Pritz, 2002), and may provide an exciting avenue to cultivate the next generation of academics of color. The process of early recruitment may prove very effective in fully utilizing the potential of our future scholars and practitioners. In addition, effective recruitment of graduate students of color entails adequate pre-admission support as well as detailed explanations of the application process and formal financial and social support programs employed by the graduate institution (Granados & Lopez, 1999). Other suggestions offered by the respondents included having successful graduates of doctoral programs (those who have secured an academic position



program) give a question and answer presentation about their experience to current students who are interested in or currently studying in family therapy doctoral programs.

In closing, some of the most important factors influencing career choice for those who did choose to pursue academic positions included early exposure to people in academic jobs, mentoring, family support, and financial support. The recent historic election of the first African American president for our country has stimulated a national discussion regarding the influence and power of representation. Many of the respondents of our study discussed the importance of seeing someone in the career that they could relate to on multiple levels (race/ethnicity, gender, family life, etc.) before considering it a viable path. While none of the respondents in our study had mentors “of color”, half reported that the lack of representative faculty of color overall was in their view a reason students of color were less likely see academia as a viable career path. Likewise, about half of the respondents suggested greater visibility of faculty of color for the next generation as a way to promote students of color to pursue academic careers.

Our nation has made many advances in increasing diversity of students and faculty at the university. The systemic effects of recruitment and retention of graduate student of color and faculty of color are evident. Faculty of color not only inspire students who are persons of color to enter academia, they also serve as role models and mentors for students to make an important contribution to the pool of clinicians and academicians who can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. Increasing more persons of color into the field only helps to increase the appreciation for diversity and learning of culturally competent practice. Our findings will hopefully shed light on the efforts to promote careers in academia for doctoral students of color.

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