Article

(Re)structuring and (Re)imagining the First Year Experience for Graduate Students of Color Using Community Cultural Wealth

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Abstract: Graduate students of color have been entering graduate schools at unprecedented rates, yet these programs and institutions are not ready to fully support their unique needs. Using Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework, we showcase how graduate students of color utilize their cultural capital to succeed during their first year of graduate studies. We interviewed 10 graduate students from various graduate programs in Southern California and found that graduate students of color activated all six forms of cultural capital to persist through the challenges of their first year in graduate education. As graduate students of color used various forms of cultural capital to combat oppressive systems and structures during their first year, we call on graduate school programs and institutions to restructure and reimagine what support looks like for first-year graduate students of color by using an assets-based approach.

Keywords: graduate students of color; community cultural wealth; first-year graduate students; graduate student support

1. Introduction

In the last decade, graduate students of color have been entering post-baccalaureate programs at high rates. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 47% of students entering post-baccalaureate programs in 2020 identified as students of color [1]. Despite the increasing rates of graduate students of color enrolled in graduate programs across the United States, it has been well documented that graduate schools are not prepared to receive students of color in their programs and institutions [2–4]. The extant literature on graduate students of color positions these students in a deficit orientation, resulting in the development and implementation of support services that do not meet their holistic needs.

Graduate schools continue to operate under unidimensional and Eurocentric strategies to support and socialize graduate students of color into their programs and institutions, specifically at predominately white institutions (PWI) [5–7]. While many programs provide support and resources in the areas of faculty advising, peer, and funding support, which are indeed important for the success of graduate students of color, these students need intentional and culturally responsive support to help them transition into and succeed as graduate students [8]. To improve the graduate school experiences of students of color, it is critical that faculty and practitioners closely examine their support programs and systems to gauge how they are currently supporting these students and how they can cultivate an assets-based, culturally responsive, and intentional approach to restructuring and reimagining what support looks like for graduate students of color.

It is well documented that graduate students of color face many barriers due to inequitable systemic and structural issues in higher education [9–11]. For instance, graduate students of color are more likely to indicate that their programs and departments are less equitable and describe them as chilly environments that are unwelcoming [12]. However, instead of focusing our attention on the barriers graduate students of color face, researchers

and practitioners should acknowledge the cultural assets these students bring to graduate programs and institutions to develop equitable support systems that reflect these student's experiences and cultural backgrounds.

This research study utilized Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth (CCW) framework to challenge the traditional notions of cultural capital by acknowledging that graduate students of color enter graduate educational spaces with cultural knowledge and experiences that enhance their graduate school trajectories [13]. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 graduate students to document the ways in which they used their cultural capital to navigate their first year of graduate studies.

The first-year experience in a graduate program is important to explore because it can impact the trajectory and overall experience of students. For instance, the average attrition rate for Ph.D. programs in the United States is roughly 40–70% depending on the field of study, and 40% of those students exit during their first year in graduate education [5] It can also determine if a student decides to pursue faculty positions, which are severely underrepresented by people of color [14–16]. By framing graduate students of color in an assets-based lens, we place the blame on graduate schools for the inequitable treatment of these students. Thus, we call on graduate schools to reexamine how they define "support" to better design equitable systems to support graduate students of color. Our research study was guided by the following question: How do graduate students of color combat systems of oppression through the utilization of their cultural assets?

1.1. Literature Review

Scholarship on graduate students of color is growing [17,18]; however, few studies have focused on asset-based approaches to examining their experiences [19]. Drawing from the existing literature, we first explain the challenges graduate students of color face, followed by a synthesis of the scholarship that showcases how graduate students of color navigate oppressive graduate school experiences. We end by showcasing the limited literature focused on the first-year graduate school experience. Engaging with the existing literature in this way helps position our study within the larger conversation on the urgency of reconsidering how we support graduate students of color during their first year of graduate studies.

1.2. Challenges Graduate Students of Color Experience

Graduate students of color experience a multitude of challenges while pursuing their graduate education. One of those challenges is navigating racialized environments. Scholars have found that graduate students of color experience racism and discrimination in different academic spaces throughout their graduate programs [10,11]. Some graduate students of color experience vicarious racism or secondhand racism through hearing stories or witnessing racism directly targeted at faculty and peers of color [17]. This vicarious racism has resulted in emotional and psychological damage during the graduate school experiences of students of color.

The effects of race and race relations also play a significant role in the graduate school experiences of students of color. In graduate school spaces, students of color experience racial aggression and self-doubt. They begin to question whether they belong in their programs and doubt their ability to complete the milestones of those programs [9]. When doctoral students of color experience racism, are questioned in the classroom, and negotiate when and where to defend themselves, they begin to engage in self-censorship [9]. These racialized experiences lead graduate students of color to reconsider if graduate education is the right path for them.

Graduate students of color also face challenges with navigating field-specific experiences and expectations. In the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field, students of color, specifically women of color, make choices regarding their lab based on "fit" with their PI versus the prestige of the lab [18]. Women of color value PIs who are supportive of who they are, the work they want to pursue, and the safety they feel in

those labs [18]. Moreover, the decisions of graduate students of color to attend, stay, or leave their graduate programs are dependent on who their PIs/advisors are and how they are treated [16]. This presents a problem because women of color and other minoritized students should not have to base their lab decisions or intentions to pursue and continue with graduate education on how safe and welcomed they feel with their PIs and advisors.

Graduate students of color are also concerned about paying for their graduate education. Scholars proclaimed that the costs associated with graduate education, specifically cost of living, are important factors that graduate students of color consider when deciding to enroll and persist through graduate education [16]. Oftentimes, these students cannot rely on familial support to assist with their participation in graduate school studies. Moreover, research shows that social class was a determinant of how much financial support graduate students received from their families [20]. Students from working-class backgrounds understand that their families will probably not be able to help support them financially [20]. Funding a graduate education can prevent many graduate students of color from enrolling and persisting through their post-baccalaureate studies. By closely examining how graduate programs support their students of color, scholars and practitioners can begin to transform the graduate school experiences of these students.

1.3. Navigating Graduate School as Students of Color

Graduate students of color need support services and systems that value their backgrounds and the cultural assets they carry with them throughout their graduate education [21]. Long and Travers, in their study that analyzed the graduate school experiences of Black men who participated in a cohort-based diversity program named the Bell Fellows Program, found that Black men benefitted from curated resources and support services specifically targeting Black men, such as peer-to-peer support, Black male faculty/staff mentors, and financial resources [19]. This not only enhanced their graduate school experiences but also supported their academic trajectory through the Ph.D. and into faculty positions. Esposito et al. also found that mentorship helped nontraditional graduate students of color acclimate to the hidden curriculum of their programs [8]. Specifically, they found that graduate students of color need learning spaces that allow them to discuss real-life struggles during doctoral programs. Graduate students of color rely on the support from faculty and staff of color to persist through the challenges of graduate education. It is vital that graduate students of color have access to professors of color who can help them persist through graduate school [22].

Additionally, mentoring groups are important for graduate students of color because these can help mitigate a sense of guilt by providing a space for observation, sharing, and encouragement and help build bonds through vulnerability. Roberts et al. found that graduate students of color pursued graduate degrees because of their commitments to self, community, and civic engagement [23]. Their involvement and commitment to community was usually with historically marginalized communities of color. Graduate students of color also "employ academic praxes as tools to create or sustain personal and cultural forms of resilience, resistance, and to contribute to educational equity" [23]. As graduate students of color experience oppressive challenges during their graduate education, they turn to mentorship to assist with mitigating those barriers.

1.4. First Year Graduate Student Experience

Most studies focused on the first-year experiences of doctoral students have examined the factors that help these students persist beyond the first year. For instance, Marijanovic and Lee in their research focused on the advising experiences among first-year doctoral students found that during the first year, the advisee–advisor relationship was critical for student success [24]. These scholars found that advisee–advisor meetings were more focused on the technical and professional aspects of graduate education, such as discussing coursework requirements and research interests rather than building personal relationships. Although the technical and professional information was helpful, participants emphasized

the need for both professional and personal support from their advisors. Similarly, found that participants were interested in cultivating relationships with multiple faculty members, but given their program structure, they were constricted to only building relationships with their assigned research advisor [24].

Scholars have also explored the transition into graduate school and found that doctoral students need environments where they feel valued, supported, and nourished in order to succeed beyond the first year [14]. Moreover, Garcia and Yao (2019) in their study focused on first-year doctoral seminars found that seminars help doctoral students with their transition into the program [25]. These first-year seminar courses help build self-confidence and allow doctoral students to learn how to overcome concerns about the transition [25].

Moreover, scholars have also identified factors that lead to the stress of first-year doctoral students. Cornwall et al. in their article focused on identifying aspects of the early stages of doctoral studies that students noted as stressful found that many factors led to stress, such as the impact that financial concerns have on many areas of life, the supervisory relationship, life transitions associated with the first year of study, and student perceptions of the Ph.D. experience [26]. Rogers-Shaw and Carr-Chellman in their study on the role of care and social emotional learning in the first year of doctoral study found that the relationships where students felt cared for helped them to recognize and capitalize on their strengths and gain self-confidence in their abilities [27].

This literature review showcases the challenges that graduate students of color face and how they navigate those challenges. However, the extant literature on graduate students of color has several limitations. First, much of this research focuses on the challenges that graduate students of color face, and very few studies utilize critical theoretical frameworks to analyze the lived experiences of graduate students of color. Second, many studies focus on all stages of graduate education and do not closely examine the first-year experiences of graduate students of color through a critical lens. Lastly, the extant literature explores traditional forms of support (i.e., funding and advising) and does not consider alternative forms of support that graduate students of color need to achieve success during their first year of graduate studies.

Thus, this study utilizes the community cultural wealth framework [13] to showcase counternarratives of how first-year graduate students of color navigate through Eurocentric educational spaces that were not designed with their needs in mind. We attempt to showcase the unique and culturally responsive ways that graduate students of color develop support for themselves and other students of color in their graduate programs. The findings of this study assist with reimagining and restructuring what support looks like for first-year graduate students of color.

1.5. Theoretical Foundation

As the extant literature suggests, support for graduate students of color is unidimensional and is often designed with a Eurocentric lens. This necessitates a critical theoretical framework that centers the experiences of graduate students of color through a culturally responsive and assets-based perspective. Thus, we drew on Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth (CCW) framework as the foundation for restructuring and reimagining how to support graduate students of color during their first year [13].

CCW derives from critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theory is a theoretical perspective positing that race is a socially constructed concept that is used to maintain white hegemony and elitism [28]. The central feature of CRT is that racism is a normative part of people of color's lives. Racism and a racialized experience are not abnormal or obscure because the pervasiveness of racism makes it a normative experience for people of color in our country [29]. CRT also suggests that racism continues to exist in order to benefit the dominant white population that originated the concept [29]. CRT also proposes that Whiteness guarantees the possession of privilege and the need to silence the experiences of communities of color [29]. Therefore, in using the community cultural wealth framework, we sought to highlight the voices and experiences of first-year graduate students of color.

Community cultural wealth challenges the traditional interpretations of cultural capital. Yosso shifts the narratives of communities of color from a deficit view to an assets-based perspective. Instead of viewing communities of color as "places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, she focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" [13].

The community cultural wealth framework consists of six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. These forms of capital are present in every person, and it acknowledges that people/communities of color possess cultural capital that is valuable and important for transformational change. CCW was appropriate for this study in comparison to other critical theories because our focus was to showcase the unique ways graduate students of color develop their own supports and support systems.

2. Materials and Methods

This research is part of a larger study that analyzed the first-year experiences of graduate students of color during the COVID-19 pandemic. We employed a general qualitative research design to explore and interpret how people make meaning of their experiences [30]. This was an appropriate approach for our study because our purpose was to understand and interpret how graduate students of color make meaning of their first-year experiences and how they utilize nontraditional modes of capital to combat the challenges and discrepancies they encounter as graduate students of color in U.S graduate school education systems in Southern California [30].

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews, which matches the requirements of general qualitative studies [30]. Additionally, in general qualitative studies, the analysis of the data occurs through the discovery of recurrent themes supported by the evidence [30]. All the data collected from our study were coded and analyzed using themes to inform our understanding of the participant's experience. These themes were coded using community cultural wealth's six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant.

2.1. Participants

Participant eligibility was limited to students meeting the following criteria: (1) self-identify as a student of color, (2) current enrollment as a graduate student at a higher education institution in Southern California, (3) 18 years or older, and (4) started their first year of graduate school during the 2020–2021 or 2021–2022 academic year. Recruitment emails and a flier were distributed to participants from various graduate school programs across two institutions. We recruited participants using purposeful sampling techniques [31].

The sample included one master's student and nine Ph.D. students (n = 10) from two institutions in Southern California. We chose to include the one master's student because research shows that graduate students, regardless of which program they are pursuing, have similar transition needs in their first year (Bunny, 2017). We ascertained the participants' race and ethnicity during the interviews by asking the question "Tell us about yourself, your identities, program, and research interests". The participants identified as Indian, Navajo/Chinese, Korean-American, African-American, Indian-American, Biracial (Filipino and White), Guatemalan-American, Indigenous and European, Haitian-American, and Mexican-American. Representative areas of study included political science, education studies, climate sciences, communications, biomedical sciences, epidemiology, public health, and psychology.

2.2. Data Collection

Recruitment emails inviting participants to interview were distributed to various graduate program coordinators at two institutions. Respondents were scheduled for interviews during which they received an electronic IRB consent form. Interviews took

60 to 90 min to conduct and followed a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol consisted of 17 open-ended questions, which allowed us to fully capture the first-year graduate school experiences of students of color. The protocol first focused on the overall first-year graduate school experiences followed by the impact of COVID-19 on their first-year experience. The latter portion of the interview asked participants to speak about race relations and their strategies for success.

2.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Otter.Ai software (version 2024). Analytic memos were written after each interview to document initial thoughts and questions. Analysis began by first establishing a preliminary codebook using Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth framework. Our preliminary codebook consisted of the following forms of capital as codes: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant [13]. We also wanted to capture the challenges first-year graduate students of color faced during their first year, so we established the following codes: institutional, external, and racial challenges. These predetermined codes allowed us to better understand how, if at all, graduate students of color used nontraditional forms of capital established by the community cultural wealth framework to navigate their first year of graduate studies. Utilizing our preliminary codebook, we conducted an independent line-by-line analysis of two participant transcripts and used the qualitative coding software MAXQDA (version 2024) to assess interrater reliability with the minimum requirement set at 90%.

We followed a systematic procedure recommended by Creswell and Poth for our data analysis [32]. First, we identified "narrow units of analysis" in the form of quotes that described each participant's usage of each form of capital [32]. This horizontalization of data allowed us to treat each piece of evidence as having equal worth, which in turn allowed us to better capture how individuals experienced the phenomenon [32]. Then, we used those quotes to develop "broader units" or themes to begin to understand the phenomenon under examination [32]. Finally, those quotes and themes were used to write detailed descriptions that described the "essence" of the phenomenon [32]. This included showcasing what the participants experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon in relation to its conditions, situations, and context.

2.4. Researchers Reflexivity and Trustworthiness of Data

The research team consisted of two doctoral students from an Education Studies program in Southern California. One member of the team identifies as a low-income, first-generation Mexican-American man, while the other member identifies as a first-generation immigrant who is a Chinese-American woman. Prior to enrolling in their doctoral programs, one team member worked as a history middle school teacher and the other as a director of a federally funded college access program at a community college. Both team members began their doctoral programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, where they completed their first year entirely online.

During the data collection and data analysis process, team meetings began by sharing their own experiences as first-year graduate students of color. This included discussions around barriers that we faced and the strategies we used to overcome those challenges. The purpose of these discussions was to bracket our views of the phenomenon and to partly set them aside in order for us to better focus on the experiences of our participants [32]. Creswell and Poth suggest that engaging with the process of epoché or bracketing helps reduce bias and subjectivity and instead allows for a more objective analysis of the participants' experiences as they pertain to the phenomenon under analysis [32]. Moreover, to further demonstrate trustworthiness, after each interview, the researchers engaged in thick description of our initial thoughts, questions, and observations of the conversations we had with each graduate student of color. Together, these strategies helped with identifying and avoiding potential biases, identifying unique features of the first-year experiences of

graduate students of color, and exploring the complexity of the experiences of graduate students of color [33].

3. Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how graduate students of color persisted through their first year of graduate studies, with a particular focus on how they leveraged various forms of cultural capital to develop their support system to combat institutional, systematic, racial, and personal barriers during their first year. Our findings suggest that first-year graduate students of color used various forms of cultural capital to navigate the graduate education system—a system that was not designed to meet the needs of students of color.

3.1. Navigational Capital

Participants in this study described the ways in which they used their navigational capital to navigate their first year of graduate studies. Participants used their navigational capital to create and find communities where they belonged and negotiated and constructed their own support systems.

3.2. Creating and Discovering Communities Where They Belong

Graduate students of color activated their navigational capital to create and/or find communities where they felt like they belonged and where they could gain the advice they needed to get through difficult situations such as racism and discrimination. They created group chats and Slack channels and even sought out organizations that helped them find the safe, inclusive, and informative spaces they needed to thrive during their first year. Devonte stated the following:

> I felt that I was very intentional about trying to make an inclusive space. I know that [my program], historically, is not very diverse at all. And so I kind of took it upon myself to try to create that space. So I created a group chat for all the incoming, now first-year grad students, and there's about 80 members in there. And so that helped a lot, at least with me because there were times where I was searching for a community but I didn't really know where to look. (Devonte, African-American, Ph.D. in Climate Sciences)

Other students like Divya and Karisma sought out institutional and local organizations to serve as their support groups, specifically to help them transition into their program. Divya explained how seeking out mutual aid groups helped her make the transition from working in the District of Columbia to graduate school:

> Outside of my time working on the east coast, I was involved in a lot of mutual aid groups and efforts. And so my like, first instinct was to look if there was something similar here, either [at my institution or surrounding areas] more broadly. And so I have been, it was really helpful. And I'm so grateful that I was able to find the mutual aid group [at my institution]. And that's been just like a huge support system for me in the transition. (Divya, Indian-American, Ph.D. in Communications)

Karisma, on the other hand, took on leadership roles as the co-chair at a queer organization and by interning at Unlearning Racism in the Geosciences in order to gain that support system they needed to succeed in graduate school. Coming into graduate school, Karisma understood that graduate education can be inaccessible to students of color and that finding safe, inclusive spaces can be difficult. So, they decided to participate in organizations where they felt seen and could relate to others. They also used their leadership positions to continue to shape how marginalized and underrepresented students of color experience higher education. They stated the following:

> I'm currently a co-chair at [a queer organization on campus], and I am an intern at Unlearning Racism in the Geosciences. And...I am like it that is like just

accessibility in academia is something that I personally feel like very strongly about because community building and emphasis on like creating spaces for people that look like you and spaces where you feel like you belong is super important to just like being successful in academia at least like, I think that that is one of the...biggest support systems that you can have when you're going through any kind of school really, like grad school, undergraduate, or like post grad or whatever. Just having a space where you feel... like you relate to the people around you is so so important. (Karisma, Indian, Master's in Geosciences)

During the first year of graduate studies, some students used social media platforms to gain the necessary information that would help them succeed. Anna, in particular, followed various Instagram accounts focused on public health to learn about being a teacher assistant and to learn organizational skills. She stated the following:

Follow like Instagram accounts or like, I don't have TikTok, but I assume you could find like, PHP TikTok accounts, too. But I have found was really helpful because they share things about like organizing your desk space, or like creating a writing, you know, area, or like, you know, one of the students I follow she's like a TA as well. So it's cool to like, see her experience as a TA in the Ph.D. program, too. So that's another thing like, getting like to see people like you." (Anna, Mexican-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

The lack of safe spaces for graduate students of color in graduate educational spaces led to these students creating their own spaces where they could get the support they needed. These findings support other scholars' findings suggesting that graduate students of color rely on educational spaces where they feel welcomed and supported.

3.3. Negotiating and Constructing Support Systems

Graduate students of color are intentional with who is invited to serve as a member of their support system, and they negotiate the terms of those relationships. Students like Luis, for example, determined that his faculty advisor was an important person to consult with when he needed advice and guidance with his program of study. With research, Luis determined that although he had worked with his faculty advisor on a summer research project, he felt more support with his research endeavors from other faculty who had taught courses he completed. Luis said the following:

So my faculty advisor, the relationship that I had have in terms of what we work on, I guess is a little different than maybe some people [in my program]. I did one research project with her last summer, but the work that I've done beyond classwork has mostly actually been with other people. So things that I happen to start just that started as classwork that I just extended, just happened to be with other professors. And ended up just becoming bigger than I expected. And so the time was just really extended in that way. So my advisor has kind of been somebody who always checks in with me about work and just asks for general advice and general kind of guidance with planning the overall program of study. (Luis, Guatemalan-American, Ph.D. in Education)

Similarly, Divya has learned who she can turn to for support in her program and at her institution. As Divya navigates her program, she has learned which people will be receptive of her questions and who she can trust to answer her questions in a well-intentioned manner. She explained the following:

I'm learning as I learn more about how the department works and who are the people that I am more comfortable going to for help and asking questions that my other people might see as like stupid or basic. I like have been trying to like figure out okay, like, I might get a I will also feel more comfortable and I'll probably get an answer that is kinder from certain places. And so like, as I figure that out, I feel like now, I'm a lot more comfortable and know that those like pockets in

the program exists, and that's been really great. (Divya, Indian-American, Ph.D. in Communications)

Some students like Karisma attributed their success with building a strong support system from their previous experiences networking. Karisma shares that they had three years of networking experiences in the workforce that better prepared them to immediately begin to network and seek out the support system they needed in graduate school. They underscored the importance of building a support system in the first year, or else students might go through their program in isolation. They shared the following:

> I came into this program with like... two, three years of like, networking under my belt, right? So, I just was already used to, like annoying people into liking me. So, it was a lot easier to come to grad school and like...be the initiator for things like this, because I just want to do that. But when you're like fresh out of undergrad, that is incredibly hard. And especially if like you don't look like everyone else in your program. Or if you know if you are like the different one, and that just is super isolating. And if you don't know where to go, or what to do in order to find that community, then you just spend like your whole... time at grad school just being isolated. (Karisma, Indian, Master's)

Graduate students of color also intentionally created support systems and carefully selected faculty and peers to be in their support networks. They used their navigational capital to determine who could best support their professional interests and would be receptive to their questions. They also used their skill sets, such as networking, so that they could build a strong support system in their program. All the participants in the study used their navigational capital to some degree in order to find places of belonging and combat the many challenges they faced during the first year. This study and previous research has shown that graduate students of color face greater experiences of racism and microaggressions in their programs. Graduate students of color are able to use their navigational capital to resist the racism they experience and create places of belonging and support.

3.4. Social Capital

Graduate students of color used and/or built their social capital during their first year of graduate studies. Participants described the importance of faculty and cohort support, specifically how these two groups of people helped them feel validated and heard and how that resulted in a stronger sense of belonging in their programs.

3.5. Faculty Support and Validation

First-year graduate students of color, like Sequoia, Esther, and Anna, appreciated that their faculty advisors provided them with opportunities to connect with other professors who shared similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. They also created spaces where their cultural identities were valued and supported. Sequoia, for example, appreciated that her faculty advisor provided an affinity space where she could connect to other indigenous scholars. Sequoia stated the following:

> I would seek out affinity spaces, because that's one of the things I really appreciated out of, of like my advisor... is that it kind of created an affinity space because the other people who turned to her are also often indigenous. And she's introduced me to other indigenous scholars. So, it's become like, that's the greatest thing I've gotten from that relationship is those affinity spaces. (Sequoia, Indigenous and European, Ph.D. in Education)

Esther, on the other hand, found value in speaking to professors of color in her department. These professors shared their experiences navigating hostile environments as people of color in graduate studies and helped validate her experiences. Esther said the following:

I remember I did connect with another professor from like, the biology department. Someone like recommended that I talked to her because she is a professor of color and just kind of like talking about like, how her experience was when she went to school. Her validating like how I feel. (Esther, Haitian-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

Anna appreciated the cultural connection she made with her faculty advisor. Her faculty advisor came from the same city in Mexico that her parents were from, which built an immediate connection. Additionally, her faculty advisor welcomes conversations in her native language of Spanish by having conversations in Spanish in higher education spaces:

And I enjoy working with him because he's really connected to like, he's also from where my parents are from [town] in Mexico. So, it's like nice to talk to someone and like, we'll talk to each other in Spanish and stuff. And I feel like I have that like mentorship. . . culturally from him. (Anna, Mexican-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

3.6. Beyond the Role of Faculty

Faculty advisors are not only a great source of social capital that graduate students of color utilize for academic advice and validation, but they also serve as genuine sources of personal support. Participants of this study described how their faculty advisor helped them overcome personal challenges beyond the classroom. Devonte, for instance, was loaned money from his faculty advisor to successfully transition from East to West coast. He stated the following:

But I will say that my advisor helped me a lot. Where there wasn't a lot of departmental funding, he helped support me and lent me money to help me move here on top of the money I was getting from NOAA, which is nice, because I was being paid competitively there, but it was still even more than that. (Devonte, African-American, Ph.D. in Climate Sciences)

Sequoia's faculty advisor advocated for them when they needed support for a financial challenge. Their faculty advisor immediately began to advocate for them without hesitation, and Sequoia attributes that to their shared cultural connection. They stated the following:

So she like really stepped up right away. Like, as soon as I told her about it, she was like, in there advocating for me, which in part, I think just like, you know, I don't think she just did it for me, because I'm indigenous. But I do think that it helps that we share culture, and it does make me feel more connected to her. (Sequoia, Indigenous and European, Ph.D. in Education)

In the case of Karisma, their faculty advisor supported them prior to being accepted into their graduate program. Karisma stayed connected with their faculty advisor after meeting them at a research conference in Spain. From there, the faculty advisor supported them by helping them attain crucial skill sets in programming for them to be successful in their graduate programs. They shared the following:

He's great, he's, we've. . . known each other like before, so when I met him in Barcelona, we sort of kept in contact and. . .even before I moved to [the area], or even before I started the master's program, he was sort of helping me with. . . my programming and we were still in touch and. . .because I was doing something that I had no experience with, I had no experience in like R or in modeling for grad school. He sort of like helped me build that from scratch. And yeah, it's just it's been a delight to work with him. Would not give it up to the world. (Karisma, Indian, Master's in Geosciences)

3.7. Cohort Support for Academic Needs

Graduate students of color underscored the importance of building relationships with people in their cohorts. These peer support networks were vital for academic and

emotional support during their first year of graduate studies. Although most participants emphasized the academic support they received from their peers, they also stated that their cohort members helped validate their challenges. Esther utilized members of her cohort for support on homework assignments and gaining information:

> I do feel like. . . everyone in my cohort, there's three of us. We've gotten like super close within the first few weeks of just trying to figure things out that we kind of like, stick with each other and keep sharing information with each other to like what we can do. (Esther, Haitian-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

Ari, on the other hand, was more intentional with her support network. She described working closely with another student in her area of academic interest. She also mentioned that she has a support crew of Asian-American women who she regularly meets with throughout the year. She stated the following:

> I definitely have a close like higher education buddy. He and I, we've been very good friends, talking about just higher education research in general. And I have another friend who is amazing as well. She's been very supportive and caring, and...she makes good food. So she has invited me to dinner. l call her my social network. And taking classes with them has been super fun. And the other Asian American woman in our cohort who we are working on with the project, I feel like we...connect. (Ari, Korean-American, Ph.D. in Education)

All of the participants also used social capital in order to build faculty or peer support. Although other forms of social connections were important, participants specifically shared the importance of faculty and peer relationships for their success in their programs. Students shared that their advisors provided spaces where their cultural identities were supported and helped connect them to other like-minded faculty. Others shared that their professors validated their experiences in hostile and racist environments.

Some students also shared that their faculty provided support in personal hardships through financial assistance. Previous research shows the importance of advisor and faculty relationships for graduate students and this study further exemplifies the need for good mentorship in graduate programs. Graduate students of color also emphasized the importance of peer support not only for academics but also in validating the challenges they faced. Participants sought out peers with similar experiences and identities with whom they could connect. Positive and supportive relationships with peers and faculty helped participants face the challenges they experienced as first-year students in their graduate studies.

3.8. Resistant Capital

Graduate students of color also described how they challenged systems of oppression through writing thoughtful evaluations, critiquing course curriculum, and advocating for change. They activated their resistant capital to improve their first-year experience.

3.9. Towards a Critical Consciousness Curriculum

Graduate students of color, like Mathew, experienced tokenization in his program because he is the only indigenous student in his cohort. He described an experience where one of his colleagues forcefully assigned all indigenous research to him:

> And I think I, sometimes I feel this weird hesitancy from like people in my cohort, my department, they're like, they have an interesting question regarding like something indigenous politics related, but they are like, I can't do that research. That's Mathew's job because he's the indigenous guy. So, he should do it, because it's only right that he does it. And I'm like, no, you have a question, explore it. You don't have to be indigenous to do it. But you should seek an indigenous person's perspective to make sure you do it. Right. That's, that's what, that's what I try to tell them. (Mathew, Navajo and Chinese, Ph.D. in Political Science)

Similarly, Divya experienced tokenization in her program in the more traditional way. She was expected to speak on behalf of her Indian culture when course material was written by Indian or Indian-American authors. In her case, she challenged the "diversification" of the curriculum because the Indian or Indian-American authors that were selected were of a higher caste system in India that helped perpetuate systems of oppression. She stated the following:

> When we were discussing something that was written by an Indian or Indian American like, just naturally everyone would be like, Okay, what does my friend have to say about this? And it's so like, uncomfortable to have to know like, and represent this but also then also, like critique what a professor has put in as part of like diversifying the syllabi. Like critique what a professor has put in as part of like diversifying the syllabi to be like this is actually not that diverse like this is an upper caste person. He was trying to side with, like white power. And so like, this is not it, like, I see what you were trying, but that's not doing it. And it's just that's not good. Um, and so that I have to sometimes be that voice in the class when I already like, don't want to speak up and I don't know, it was like really uncomfortable for me and not something I was expecting to do. So that's been. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. (Divya, Indian-American, Ph.D. in Communications)

Sequoia, on the other hand, advocated for other graduate students of color by writing a thoughtful and action-focused course evaluation. Her experiences in one of her courses led her to want to transform how faculty work with and include the voices of queer students. She described the importance of accountability not only for graduate students of color but also for faculty who oftentimes perpetuate hurtful experiences in the classroom:

> And there was never any follow up, never like...here, we required mandatory queer training for this professor, or for our professors. You know, and so I think like the number one thing is there, there has to be, when there's like pain and hurt... I think there has to be something to like... hold it accountable. Because we're held accountable. We have to turn in our things, we have to meet our deadlines like we, we have to work to be in this program. And we do all of that. But then at the same time, like I don't think there's any accountability in the other direction. And I think there needs to be visible accountability. How are you updating your syllabus when you learn new things? Or like... this is very minute, but why are we learning distributed cognition, and not queer theory, like of all of this series to cut? We're gonna spend like three weeks on distributed cognition or two weeks on distributed cognition and like, not touch on queer theory?" (Sequoia, Indigenous and European, Ph.D. in Education)

3.10. Familial Capital

Participants' families were also instrumental with supporting them during their first year of graduate school. Members of these families included parents, cousins, best friends, and partners. Although the familial support varied from graduate student to graduate student, most participants described receiving emotional support from their families.

3.11. Families as Emotional and Financial Supporters

Graduate students of color need emotional support systems during their first year of graduate studies. This could range from helping them overcome their challenges with feelings of isolation to providing enough income to help relieve financial stress. Oftentimes, graduate students of color opt to escape from the rigors of graduate school and feelings of isolation by reuniting with their families throughout the first year of graduate school. Anna described her strong relationship with her mother and how her mother helped her relieve stress by cooking for her and doing her laundry:

> I think my mom has been like, amazing since I joined this program, and I'm super close to her. My dad's amazing too. But just...like, for as an example, this past

finals week, I just felt like so overwhelmed and burnt out. Where I was, like, Mom, I'm going to come visit you for a weekend and finish my finals out there. And she's like, come down, I'll cook for you like, I'll wash your laundry. And I was like, all right, and I booked like a plane ticket. And I flew home. And it was just so nice to be home and like, away from like, everything happening here. And just eating like her homemade Mexican, like meals and like, just being able to like talk to her about things that aren't the Ph.D. program. (Anna, Mexican-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

Divya's partner was instrumental with her navigation of the first year of graduate school. Her partner was able to provide financially for her, which resulted in her being able to focus more on her academic responsibilities such as reading instead of worrying about working to pay for her basic needs:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I guess something I've also been thinking about a lot and have been so grateful for is that I was able to come here with my partner and to have and to be able to live with my partner through this program. I can't imagine what it would be like, like, not just emotionally, but I mean, like, just the state of doing grad school right now. Especially as a woman of whatever like, I don't know, like they're like, I, it provides me a lot of financial support to actually focus on like, my time on reading, and also just have someone else in the house to help me with like, doing the dishes, doing the laundry, making food when I'm in like three-hour classes, and right after it's like, I'm, like, so hungry, and to have something already made is like, like, I feel like these things add up. And I know that it's a huge privilege I have that, like, completely changes my experience of doing grad school compared to if I had if I was here alone, and had to do that on my own. (Divya, Indian-American, Ph.D. in Communications)

3.12. Linguistic Capital

Some graduate students of color described how communicating in their home language in higher-education spaces positively impacted their first year of graduate school. Participants stated that they valued when faculty provided them with a space where they could speak informally and nonacademically. They appreciated when their home language was included and valued in academic spaces. Anna shared with us how a conversation with her faculty advisor about her self-consciousness with her informal Spanish-speaking skills was affecting her confidence when conducting her research. She stated the following:

And like, we literally are saying like, you know, cross sectional in Spanish or like randomized in Spanish, or like, all these, like really research terms in Spanish, which I had, like, never even been exposed to as a kid. But it's been like, such a cool, like, learning lesson, like a learning curve. Because, like, I remember, I was able to talk to him one on one, when we had one of our check ins. And I was like, you know, sometimes I feel like a little self-conscious of my Spanish, especially like, when I'm talking to, like, full-on professors from Mexico, you know, like, it's intimidating. And he was like, you know, what, like, I kind of just stopped caring about how I sound in Spanish, like, at some point, you have to just stop caring, you know, because you're at the stage, or people are gonna respect you. Because you're, like, knowledgeable to even be in this Ph.D. program. Like, everyone knows, you're hardworking, and like, you know, you're knowledgeable, you're smart, you're intelligent, no one doubts that. No one's gonna judge you for like, messing up a Spanish word that, like, your parents didn't teach you growing up, you know, so it was just like, so good to hear that. From him. (Anna, Mexican-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

3.13. Aspirational Capital

Participants also described their motivations and ambitions for pursuing graduate education as a person of color. Participants shared that they were not only pursuing graduate education for themselves but also for their communities. They described a sense of urgency to use the knowledge and skillsets they would gain from graduate education and leverage it to create change in their communities.

3.14. Graduate Education as a Means for Transformational Change

Luis, and other graduate students of color like him, left his classroom (or previous profession) to pursue a doctoral degree because he wanted to gain the skills and knowledge to transform education spaces. Instead of pursuing a graduate education solely for himself, he described the importance of his work to improve educational outcomes in his community. His motivation to succeed in graduate education is more than just for himself. His work drives his passion:

> You know, the biggest sense for me is just starting off, I just wanted things to be really useful immediately, you know, I, you know, leaving teaching I wanted. It's not realistic, right? But you want to think, okay, I'm going to influence policy, I'm gonna, I want something to change tomorrow, right? I want to write if I write something, I want it to be like, I want the governor to read it and be like, Oh, wow, that's a great idea. I'm going to change the schools, right? Like you want things to have an impact. And I think, for me, it's the most frustrating things are when I feel like, what I'm doing is not going to be useful when I'm like, why am I reading this? Like, what is this paper going to do? I just feel like this time we have is so precious, like we're given five years just to study something that is so important that anytime that I am, I'm using that is not I can tell is not going anywhere, it might be 100 steps down the line, it's going to impact the classroom or a teacher help them but if I don't feel like there's any path to that, to me is just the most frustrating thing. And so really, anything that gets in the way of that, I think is the biggest challenge for me. (Luis, Guatemalan-American, Ph.D. in Education)

Esther's motivation to succeed in her graduate program comes from the fact that less than 10 percent of Ph.D. holders are Black. She wants to use her experiences to show other Black and African-American students that people like her can succeed in graduate school. She underscored this by saying that she will not quit the program despite the challenges she has faced during her first year of graduate education:

> I think like even when I've told people that I've got accepted into like, a Ph.D., and I think like someone from like one of my old co-workers was like saying how she's so proud of me, and you know that less than 10% of people of color actually go and obtain their Ph.D. kind of thing. And like, geez, you got to put a stuck in my head, ever, like, all I can think of is like, well... you know, there's moments where I'm just like, oh, you know, if I like I can just drop out like, this is so stressful. It's like, well, I really can't, because then I'll be that black guy who just dropped out of a Ph.D. Not saying that I want to drop out. But I feel like there's a lot more pressure and there's a lot more focus on how I do. And that, that adds to the imposter syndrome, because I don't feel like I can meet those expectations that everyone's expecting for everyone to perceive me. That makes sense. (Esther, Haitian-American, Ph.D. in Public Health)

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to highlight the cultural assets that graduate students of color utilized when entering their graduate programs. Using Community Cultural Wealth [13], we found that graduate students of color activate multiple forms of capital to successfully navigate their experiences as first year students in their respective programs.

These findings contribute to the limited research on asset-based approaches to examining the experiences of graduate students of color. Moreover, the findings showcase the persistence of graduate students of color and the ways they use their assets and cultural capital to resist systemic, institutional, and racial inequities during their first year.

4.1. Implications for Practice and Scholarship

Given the rich experiences of students explored in this study, a number of implications for both practice and scholarship emerged. Detailed below are recommendations from the researchers of this study, with a focus on amplifying the voices and experiences of graduate students of color in order to dismantle how graduate students of color are supported during their first year of graduate education.

4.2. For Practice

Our study suggests that first-year graduate students of color used all six forms of cultural capital presented by Yosso to persist through and succeed during their graduate education [13]. Therefore, graduate school practitioners need to incorporate targeted programs and resources to capitalize on the various forms of capital that graduate students of color employ during their first year of graduate studies. For instance, our navigational capital findings suggest that first year graduate students of color need spaces where they feel valued and accepted [34]. The University of Virginia established a graduate mentoring institute, which helped promote an inclusive environment for graduate students from diverse backgrounds [34]. The results of the study showed that graduate students of color adjusted well to the university due to intentional faculty/student mentoring and networking opportunities. These services led to establishing a supportive environment for graduate students of color. Instead of forcing graduate students of color to seek out or create those spaces, graduate school practitioners need to develop programs to help mitigate the unnecessary labor put on them, such as the one established at the University of Virginia. One way to activate the navigational and social capitals of graduate students of color during their first year of graduate education is to develop a cross-campus academic and student affairs partnership. These two departments can host a series of events for graduate students of color where they will have the opportunity to leverage their navigational and social capital by connecting with various institutional stakeholders (i.e., university faculty, staff, and advisors; student family members; student mentors, etc.) throughout the first year. These cross-campus sources of support are reflected in the current literature on graduate students of color [6].

Our social capital findings suggest that it is important for graduate students of color to connect with their faculty advisor early on in their first year [5,6]. This can take place as soon as the student has accepted their offer of admission. As evidenced by the voices of students in this study, faculty advisors were valuable sources of social capital prior to the first day of classes. Therefore, embedding opportunities for graduate students of color to connect with their faculty advisors during the summer before starting their first year of graduate education could serve as an asset to graduate students of color [5]. Developing a summer transition program for graduate students of color where they work closely with their faculty advisors could be an important part to establishing a strong social network for first-year graduate students of color.

As our findings suggest, graduate students of color also used their aspirational, linguistic, familial, and resistant capitals during their first year of graduate studies. As a result, we recommend that graduate school practitioners and students of color are exposed to critical theoretical models such as CCW to help frame and give language to the forms of capital that are not traditionally associated with cultural capital. By resisting and challenging the white hegemonic ideals, we can uplift the voices and lived experiences of first-year graduate students of color.

4.3. For Scholarship

This research study presents limitations. Although we attempted to showcase how graduate students of color utilized all six forms of cultural capital, more research is needed to further explore how specific cultural capitals (i.e., aspirational, linguistic, familial, etc.) support the first-year experiences of graduate students of color. Moreover, graduate students of color enter graduate school programs and spaces with multiple and intersectional identities. Thus, instead of clustering all graduate students of color, future scholarship should focus on targeted racial and ethnic groups to explore how these groups utilize their community cultural wealth and to explore the intertwining effects of the intersectional identities of graduate students of color as they relate to the activation of their cultural capital. This will result in learning how to better develop programs that support graduate students of color given their identities and cultural backgrounds.

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