



Motherhood and the Pursuit of a Doctorate as a Full-Time Housing Professional

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THIS JOURNAL ARTICLE EXPLORES THE LIVED EXPERIENCES of a Black mother and first-generation doctoral student working full-time in Housing and Residence Life (HRL). Situated within the framework of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) and an asset-based approach (Harper, 2010), this study will examine how this woman draws upon her resilience, strengths, and resources to thrive academically, professionally, and personally. Black mothers in academia, despite facing racial and gendered challenges, demonstrate remarkable perseverance and determination to balance their academic pursuits with family life, contributing to a deeper sense of purpose and community (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Suizzo et al., 2008). The practice of “othermothering” among Black women in higher education enhances their ability to foster strong mentorship networks, cultivating a culture of care and support which benefits themselves and others (Lee, 2018; Strayhorn, 2014). This article addresses the importance of organizational support systems, both on and off campus, to mitigate the isolation often experienced by African American women professionals in academia (Hinton, 2001). It is the hope that this study contributes to the currently scant understanding of working Black mother doctoral students’ unique lived experiences, highlighting strategies for fostering resilience, well-being, and academic success for aspiring and current Black doctoral students and the individuals who support them (Mitchell, 2019).

INTRODUCTION

Pursuing a doctoral degree while balancing full-time professional responsibilities and motherhood is an extraordinary challenge. As a Black woman who navigated this reality for three years in an Educational Leadership and Policy Administration program at a predominantly White institution (PWI), I share this reflective piece to inspire and empower others; particularly Black women, and those who supervise, advise, or mentor them. For many, including myself, the pursuit of a doctorate represents empowerment, self-affirmation, and resistance against marginalization, serving as a means to uplift families, communities, and future generations (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Evans-Winters, 2019; Hooks, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Grounded in Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) and Harper’s (2010) non-deficit framework, this autoethnographic narrative explores how I—as a Black spouse, mother, scholar, and professional—made sense of intersecting identities within post-secondary education, centering resilience, awareness, and collective support over deficit narratives.

To orient the reader, this article is guided by three central questions:

1. *How do Black women who are mothers and full-time professionals navigate doctoral studies within PWI contexts?*
2. *What strategies of resilience, care, and community support sustain them through the intersecting demands of family, work, and scholarship?*
3. *How can reflective writing and autoethnography contribute to scholarly knowledge while affirming the lived realities of Black women in higher education?*

By posing these questions, I position this work not simply as a memoir, but as an effort to document and legitimize the everyday practices through which Black women persist and thrive in academic spaces not originally designed for us.

MY POSITIONALITY

As a Black woman, married with children, and working full-time as an associate director in HRL, I exist at the intersection of multiple identities that influenced how I navigated my doctoral studies and professional responsibilities. I am the granddaughter of two phenomenal grandfathers; one who is now passed on and one who is in his eighties, still encouraging and teaching me. My Papa on my mother's side, who passed away, is the reason I persisted in getting my master's degree and attaining my doctorate. He had an eighth-grade education and worked hard for the Polk County, FL, school board system, serving as a school bus mechanic. With no high school education, he became a landowner and built homes on his land, creating space for family reunions and safe spaces to be prayed for and loved on, leaving a legacy to his children, their children, and his extended family. My grandfather on my dad's side has a sixth-grade education. I am blessed to have phone conversations with him every Thursday. He still tells stories of his realities past and present, good and bad. The reason he has a sixth-grade education is because he grew weary of enduring racism; that led to him quitting school for his personal safety. His resilience and ability to overcome barriers in life, becoming a successful fruit-packer and eventual supervisor for a phosphate mining company for 40+ years, inspires me. These are two of many examples that have contributed to my confidence to embrace being "the first."

My Pursuit of a Doctorate

Prior to applying as a student for the educational leadership and policy studies program in 2021, I worked seven years at this institution. During that time, I deferred my academic pursuits, prioritizing caregiving, career responsibilities, and community commitments, putting everything and everybody else first. In doing so, I became one of many Black women who have taken the mantle of strong Black woman, to my

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detriment. The Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema, while rooted in cultural pride and survival, can be internalized in ways that prioritize the needs of others at the expense of one's own health and aspirations (Simon, 2024; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). It fulfilled me to support and propel others; however, I knew I would need the terminal degree for my next chapter in moving up within student affairs. I knew a terminal degree would strengthen my chances to secure a promotion, due to personal experiences applying for elevated positions and listening to other Black women's stories about their pursuit of upper-mid-level and senior-level roles, and reasons why they were denied those opportunities. I applied to multiple mid-level and senior-level roles, where I would fall short in being considered and selected as the preferred candidate. Upon selectively requesting feedback, it consistently boiled down to conversations about how a terminal degree would have been the defining separator.

METHODOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR REFLECTIVE WRITING AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I chose to write this journal article using the methods of reflective writing and autoethnography because they allow for a deep, intimate exploration of self as situated in cultural, institutional, and professional contexts (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). For some Black women leaders in student affairs, reflective writing becomes a radical act of presence, helping to disrupt institutional silencing and reaffirming self-defined leadership identities (Breedon, 2021; Sobers, 2014). By sharing these stories, deficit viewpoints are countered, highlighting how Black women leaders and their advocates create pathways of access, support, and success for Black women. To contextualize my experiences within a broader scholarly conversation, I now draw on existing literature that examines how Black women navigate the challenges and possibilities of academic and professional life in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black women in higher education, particularly in HRL roles, continue to be underrepresented and face numerous systemic barriers (Myrick & Lewis-Flenaugh, 2022). Their responsibilities as caregivers and academic professionals often require them to navigate institutions not designed for their success (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Patton, 2009).

Black Women Housing and Residence Life Professional Experiences

Black women working in HRL navigate a professional context marked by long hours, crisis response, and invisible emotional labor, while simultaneously contending with racialized and gendered expectations that shape visibility, credibility, and advancement

(Myrick & Lewis-Flenaugh, 2022; Patton, 2009; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Within PWI climates, their labor often includes “othermothering” and the cultivation of counter-spaces that affirm students and early-career staff, which are forms of care that sustain communities, yet remain undervalued in formal reward structures (Collins, 2009; Lee, 2018; Mobley, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Mentoring and culturally responsive supervision buffer these strains, but gaps in identity-affirming support can erode trust and belonging, particularly in cross-racial mentoring relationships (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Brown & Grothaus, 2021). The unique structural features of HRL, such as live-in roles, after-hours “on call” expectations, and constant proximity to work, additionally blur boundaries and heighten urgency, contributing to chronic stress and attrition (Braught, Govert, & Thompson, 2024). These are a few examples of how Black women in HRL manage intersecting care, advocacy, and leadership responsibilities under conditions that demand resilience and community cultural wealth while calling for institutional recognition and structural relief (Collins, 2009; Patton, 2009; Yosso, 2005).

Motherhood & Othermothering

Motherhood in academia is well documented, with about 65% of women in academic roles also parenting (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Suizzo et al., 2008). Mitchell (2019) found that Black doctoral student mothers at PWIs balance parenting with unspoken expectations to nurture peers, illustrating deep resilience and communal commitment. For Black mothers, these responsibilities often intersect with racialized expectations and the added communal labor of othermothering (Collins, 2005; Sakho, 2017). Othermothering is culturally grounded mentorship and care that often surfaces when Black women are relied upon to support distressed students or guide new colleagues (Guiffrida, 2005; Mobley, 2017; Strayhorn, 2014). Lee (2018) describes how Black women in student affairs frequently serve as “office mothers,” offering affirmation and crisis support that strengthens campus communities. Together, these findings show how Black women’s caregiving labor—both as mothers and othermothers—enriches institutional life, even as it remains undervalued within academic structures.

First-generation Doctoral Students

First-generation doctoral students contribute significant experiential knowledge to academic spaces, embodying the resilience, agency, and communal care emphasized in Black Feminist Theory (Gardner, 2008; Smolarek, 2019). While institutional norms in PWIs may differ from their lived realities (Nettles, 1990), these students often navigate doctoral culture with adaptability and critical awareness. Furthermore, Wallace and Ford (2021) demonstrate how Black first-generation doctoral students at PWIs navigate racialized erasure and epistemic devaluation by creatively forging

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support and resilience strategies that affirm their identities and bolster persistence in doctoral education. Lane et al. (2022) further illustrate that Black women doctoral students—many of whom are first-generation—cultivate peer communities grounded in collective care and mutual support. Collectively, these studies highlight how first-generation students enrich academic environments through the relational and community-centered practices at the heart of Black feminist thought.

Black Women in Pursuit of Doctoral Degrees

Black women who pursue terminal degrees are often driven by a sense of duty to their communities and families (Lane et al., 2022). Black women aspire to be catalysts for change, role models for future generations, and voices of resistance within institutions that have historically excluded them (Evans-Winters, 2019; Hooks, 2000). These motivations are often rooted in the desire to impact policy, pedagogy, and leadership structures from within (Hinton, 2001; Patton, 2009). Pursuing a doctoral degree also affirms Black women's intellectual agency and provides a platform for resisting stereotypes and misrepresentation in academic spaces (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

The Power of Mentorship

Despite systemic challenges, the literature also highlights the asset-based experiences of Black women in doctoral programs who persist through the support of mentorship and community. Patton (2009) notes that African American women in graduate programs often rely on culturally grounded mentoring relationships that function as protective and empowering spaces. Bertrand Jones et al. (2015) found that mentoring programs and culturally relevant professional development provide Black women doctoral students with the social capital and the academic skills necessary for success. These relationships serve not only as a buffer against institutional marginalization, but also as catalysts for confidence and identity formation. Similarly, Minnett, James-Galloway, and Owens (2019) describe how peer mentorship among Black women doctoral students becomes a form of resistance and empowerment, fostering sisterhood and shared perseverance. Bertrand Jones et al. (2015) further assert that culturally responsive mentoring is essential for cultivating inclusive environments that acknowledge the unique experiences of Black women in academia and help them thrive.

THE INTENTION OF THESE REFLECTIONS

Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) offers a critical framework for legitimizing the experiential knowledge of Black women whose identities intersect across gender, race, parenthood, and work. In a field that often privileges Eurocentric epistemologies, autoethnography creates space for narrative truth rooted in lived experience. For Black women pursuing doctorates while mothering and working full time, personal reflection is an invaluable and necessary act of scholarship that affirms their ways of knowing, surviving, and thriving. These reflections resist dominant narratives that

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mischaracterize Black women's labor and instead center our capacity to build intellectual communities, care for families, and lead with integrity, despite systemic obstacles (Berry & Mizelle, 2006). In sharing these truths, I hope to inspire and empower others to do the same.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF MY DOCTORAL PROGRAM

The intersection of motherhood, partnership, and doctoral study often requires Black women to navigate heightened emotional labor and institutional expectations with limited structural support (Shavers & Moore, 2019). The path through my doctoral program was filled with both affirmation and challenge. Each season required drawing on distinct sources of strength like faith, family, and community support. These intersections of being a spouse, a parent, a professional, and a student collided throughout my journey; however, I did not view my identities as barriers. I chose to position them as sources of ammunition to better manage my time, to communicate my needs, and to remain inspired to accomplish a personal goal. My husband was my number one fan, and while my children did not always understand why mommy kept a laptop in her lap, they observed work ethic, focus, and how I navigated times of being overstimulated or exhausted. These experiences shaped my persistence and understanding of resilience, guidance, and belonging as a Black woman scholar in predominantly White academic spaces.

Loss of Black Women Faculty

During my program, the departure of the only two Black women faculty members—one being my major professor—deeply affected me. Their exits left a void in mentorship and representation, forcing me to navigate feelings of loss and self-advocacy. My major professor's proactive guidance during her transition modeled culturally responsive mentorship rooted in care and advocacy (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Gooden, 2020; Patton, 2009). Her continued support reinforced my belief in community-centered mentorship that affirms intersectional identities.

Navigating a New Major Professor

When my new major professor joined me in my journey, he asked to revise previously approved work. Though well-meaning, I became frustrated because he could not fully understand the lens of a Black woman scholar, reflecting what Brown & Grothaus (2021) describe as challenges in interracial mentoring, where differing lived experiences can affect trust and understanding. Despite frustrations, and occasional clashing of opinions, I appreciated the challenge and support because I learned to

assert my voice while collaborating effectively, ultimately finishing with both integrity and timeliness, thanks to our established respect and trust.

Support Networks and Peer Mentoring

During this journey, I did not have a dedicated mentor. However, I was able to confide in a support network of women pursuing and/or already having earned their terminal degrees. Similar to what Minnett et al. (2019) said, “These peer mentoring relationships allowed us to be honest about when we were struggling, feeling burned out, or unsure of ourselves. We gave one another permission to feel these things and still continue on our journeys” (p. 228), I was able to find my support network as a space to share the highs and lows of my journey.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AS A WIFE AND A MOTHER

Without a familial blueprint for doctoral study, I relied on faith in God and my family’s encouragement to sustain an “I can do whatever I put my mind to” mindset. Their emotional, spiritual, and practical support functioned as social capital, affirming my belonging as a first-generation scholar (Johnson, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Their love helped me push through writer’s block, steep learning curves, and the tension between work, study, and motherhood, echoing findings that familial support strengthens Black women’s motivation and academic persistence (Lane, 2022).

Balancing Time and Presence, Remaining Committed to My Marriage

Managing coursework alongside spousehood, motherhood, and employment required constant discipline and proactive goal-setting. Whether studying at home or in the library, I worked to remain present for my family while maintaining academic focus. I refused to miss family dinner or lose sight of my biggest cheerleader who empowered me to choose me by applying and accepting this challenge. Consistent communication and shared downtime, like lunch dates or monthly outings, helped my husband and I stay connected beyond parenting and professional roles. These habits preserved our partnership and emotional balance.

Negotiating Sacrifice and Guilt

Black women navigating motherhood, partnership, and doctoral study often contend with intensified emotional labor and institutional expectations in the absence of adequate structural support (Shavers & Moore, 2019). The intersection of my roles as a spouse, a parent, a professional, and a doctoral student shaped my experiences in complex ways; however, I did not conceptualize these identities as barriers. Rather than perceiving these intersecting roles as obstacles, I leveraged them as forms of motivation and discipline that strengthened my capacity to manage time, articulate my needs, and persist toward degree completion. My husband’s steady encouragement and my children’s quiet observations of my work ethic, focus, and emotional regulation during moments of fatigue and overwhelm became integral to my persistence.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AS A FULL-TIME HRL PROFESSIONAL

Working in HRL meant that my doctoral journey unfolded within a field already defined by long hours, crisis response, and emotional labor. In their study of residence life professionals, Braught et al. (2024) highlight how the cumulative demands of shift work, student crises, and the invisible care responsibilities embedded in housing operations compound into sustained psychological and physical strain. Despite this known reality, this professional context also created space for me to practice othermothering, providing counterspaces for students and staff and modeling resilience as a Black woman in leadership.

The Power of Presence and Creating Space

As a 14-year HRL professional, I have effectively supported students and staff in their personal and professional journeys. While I publicize open office hours, lunch chats, and walk-and-talks to everyone, Black students and staff have taken advantage of these opportunities the most. It was a privilege I did not realize I had, to answer their questions about pursuing a doctoral degree while working full-time and being a mom. This positioned me to intentionally create space and opportunities for them to have access to me and/or one another for additional support in predominately White collegiate environments. Through othermothering, I have supported Black male and female students and entry-level staff in ways that reflect both professional care and cultural affirmation (Guiffrida, 2005; Lee, 2018; Mobley, 2017).

I'm Not Superwoman. Let's Build Together.

My residence hall office often became a counterspace where students and staff could exhale, be seen, and be affirmed. They would ask pointed questions and make statements about having no excuses as a result of watching me do it all. Sometimes, I did not know how to receive their perceptions and would try to downplay the assumptions that I was "superwoman," because I did not want to be. I would encourage them to unpack their thoughts and empower them to recognize that their journeys are theirs and that they, too, are managing a lot and making great things happen. I was their biggest cheerleader, and they were mine. As I casually talked about my experiences, it also encouraged them to talk more about their academic successes and challenges and work alongside me to implement strategies to succeed or overcome the challenges experienced.

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Supervision Support and Modeling Success

Having a supervisor who supported me holistically as a spouse, a parent, a student, and an employee made my doctoral experience transformative. As a fellow wife, parent, and professional, she offered guidance and practical strategies for managing coursework and writer's block. This reflects the balanced integration supervision model, where supervisors advocate for student parents through flexibility and holistic care, fostering persistence and motivation (Brown & Grothaus, 2021; Kumar & Kaur, 2018; van der Walt et al., 2024). Her encouragement to use brief daily writing periods, adjust summer schedules, and manage competing priorities modeled success and inspired me to find my own rhythm, with the support of my family and community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from my lived experiences, I offer the following guidance to Black women pursuing doctoral study, and to the institutions, the supervisors, and the advisors who are positioned to support them. These insights are grounded in both my journey and in what research affirms about persistence, support, and culturally responsive practices.

Black Women, This is For You!

- *Believe in your capacity to succeed in a doctoral program and know you are worthy of centering your personal and professional goals.*
- *Intentionally build your support networks beyond family and work to include those who celebrate you and hold you accountable.*
- *Choose programs and mentors that honor your whole self.*
- *Protect your joy and peace and remember, as Lorde (1988) reminds us, self-care is an act of political warfare.*

Institutional and Supporting Cast, This is For You!

Institutions and supporters play a critical role in fostering success. Family-friendly policies, culturally responsive mentorship (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015), and recognition of the emotional labor Black women contribute are essential to sustaining them in academic spaces. Developing intersectional professional development opportunities that affirm their full identities transforms advocacy into action, ensuring Black women can thrive, lead, and complete the journeys they begin.

CONCLUSION

When these actions are adapted, they can create opportunities and avenues for literature to be expanded about Black women's experiences within post-secondary education and doctoral programs. The addition of these new narratives written from Black women's viewpoints will increase the exploration and greater knowing of the intersections of race, parenthood, and work—for and by Black women and those who support them—to dispel misperceptions. Johnson (2021) emphasizes that personal stories of Black women navigating doctoral study at PWIs expose gaps in institutional

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support while revealing the social capital that sustains them, like family, spirituality, sisterhood, and self-belief. Furthermore, Brown & Grothaus (2021) illustrate the necessity of mentoring relationships that acknowledge cultural identity and validate emotional labor. When Black women share their narratives, they create knowledge that informs institutional reform and offers pathways for future scholars who will balance similar roles. Their autoethnographies speak directly to aspiring Black women doctoral students not merely as data, but as evidence that they, too, can belong, persist, and lead. These stories are scholarship, and they matter.

This manuscript shared some experiences of being a Black mother, a first-generation doctoral student, and a professional in HRL. Through autoethnography, I reclaim my narrative not as a story of burden, but of resilience, resistance, and persistence. I call for institutional change that honors the fullness of Black women's identities and supports their academic and professional trajectories. In naming my truth, I hope to empower and affirm the truths of many others starting the doctoral journey, in their doctoral journey, or thinking about embarking on the doctoral journey as a partner, a parent, and an HRL professional. You can do it! ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Hughes' reframing of her intersecting identities—some that may be perceived as barriers—serve as empowerment and a source of motivation in her doctoral journey?
2. Hughes discusses culturally responsive mentorship and its impact on her doctoral journey. What role does mentorship play in supporting Black women who are considering pursuing a doctorate and other career advancement? How can mentorship help Black women prepare for the doctoral journey and navigate academia?
3. Reflecting on the concept of “othermothering” and other informal mentorship roles that Black professionals often take on, why are these practices undervalued, and what could formal reward structures look like for these practices?
4. How can Black women doctoral students establish boundaries and support networks in their personal and professional lives that contribute to their long-term success and self-care?
5. What policies and formal support structures can institutions provide to better support Black women in the workplace and their doctoral studies? What innovative role can ethical AI strategies and other tools play in supporting doctoral students?

Discussion questions were developed by Christina Nwankwo, New York University.