Cultural Wealth: Key Factors of Success for Canadian Women of Colour in a Doctoral Program

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Abstract: Doctoral students who have a background of neither parent pursuing higher education and specifically, women of colour (WOC) with such a background, lack significant cultural capital that could derail their pursuit of a doctoral degree. Even without such knowledge, many women of colour still succeed because of the cultural wealth they have cultivated to navigate their education. This study utilized a theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, Womanist Theory, and Cultural Capital Theory to illustrate the intersectionality of race, gender, and culture of its participants. The study exposed the correlation between the experiential knowledge of 10 diverse female doctoral students from a Canadian university and the formation of cultural wealth. Findings revealed six categories of cultural wealth that contributed to participants' achievements in doctoral programs: 1) Mother's Influence; 2) Age Capital; 3) Mentorship Capital; 4) Survival Strategies; 5) "Know-How" and Navigation of Academic Culture; and 6) Spirituality Capital. This research demonstrated that cultural wealth contributed to increased grant, publishing, funding, and collaboration opportunities with professors. It also contributed to increased retention outcomes in doctoral programs, as all participants who had not yet finished their PhD successfully completed their program during or shortly after the time of this study. These findings suggest that experiential/cultural knowledge of women of colour is valuable and necessitates further research in higher education. Academic supervisors and administrators should consider using cultural wealth as a tool for practical mentorship, academic development, and supervision to ensure better access and successful outcomes for current and future diverse students, especially for women of colour in doctoral programs.

Keywords: Cultural Wealth (CW), Critical Race, Women of Colour (WOC), doctorate, PhD, Higher Education, mentorship.

Introduction

There is a persistent concern among Black Faculty and other academic stakeholders about participation and attrition rates for PhD students in general, and participation rates for Black, female, and racialized PhD students and faculty members in particular (Henry, Choi, & Kobayashi, 2012). In their research, Henry et al. (2012) revealed that only 10% of faculty at most Canadian universities were Black. In addition, out of a total of 9,480 faculty members at a large Canadian university, only 1,574, or 16.6%, were identified as racialized. An even smaller number were identified as Black faculty. The lack of Black faculty translates into the lack of mentorship for Black students, which in turn contributes to poor attrition rates because of limited mentorship and guidance for racialized PhD students (Trower & Chait, 2002).

DeClou (2016) suggests that this is a major problem because the numbers of diverse students who start a doctoral program are alarmingly disproportionate to the numbers of students who actually complete their studies (Lovitts, 2001). In her book, *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study*, Lovitts (2001) indicates that 50% of students drop out of their program for various reasons. However, other scholars have found that cultural wealth attributed to high matriculation rates for Canadian racialized female PhD students who discovered various ways to succeed (Brown, 2012) even without the lack of prior “know-how” (Trower & Chait, 2002, p. 33), or exposure to cultural capital. Primarily, these students relied on their innate wisdom that provided them with unique resilience and exceptional experiential knowledge and abilities. Despite these skills and positive outcomes, all participants in the study still had to overcome particular barriers during their educational pursuits.

Cultural wealth is usually found in culturally diverse communities (Yosso, 2005) as a form of social currency (Gopaul, 2015; Yosso, 2005), or capital (Bourdieu, 1992) that occurs through experiences, skills, and “know-how” (Trower & Chait, 2005, p. 33). The term “cultural capital,” which is a form of human capital that has hierarchal economic value or standing in upper class society, was first introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. However, unlike Bourdieu’s (1992) perception of cultural capital, cultural *wealth* focuses on

capital found in racially diverse communities as it relates to academic strivings of students, especially women of colour from such settings.

Latina researcher Tara Yosso (2005) identified ways that communities of colour use various forms of community cultural capital informed by their experiences to navigate through society and higher education. These forms of capital, seen throughout Yosso's own community, were: 1) Aspirational; 2) Linguistic; 3) Familial; 4) Social; 5) Navigational; and 6) Resistance. As such, Yosso's research served as a starting point for my own inquiry. Incorporating methods similar to Yosso's (2005) study helped me to uncover six unique categories from the perspective of Canadian women of colour in pursuit of a doctoral degree.

Literature Review

The literature revealed that there are no studies addressing the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, and spirituality in the area of cultural wealth for women of colour in doctoral programs (Crenshaw, 1989). Given the range of diversity and globalization that now characterizes Canadian universities, as well as the problem with PhD attrition rates (Henry et al., 2012; Lovitts, 2001), it is critical to expand knowledge about this phenomenon. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bourdieu (1993; 2001) investigate cultural capital from a traditional perspective, while Yosso (2005) presents alternative, non-traditional forms of capital that are found in communities of colour and derive from intrinsic cultural characteristics, skills, and abilities. Although Yosso's (2005) approach does incorporate race and culture, her initial focus was grounded in community cultural wealth as it relates to the Latina/o community. However, Yosso's (2005) observations inform the analysis of how cultural wealth is used to understand the educational experiences of people with diverse cultural and racial backgrounds.

Canadian Context

Research that focuses on the experiences of graduate students through the lens of race, gender, and culture is limited (Collins, 2000; Delpit, 1988; Dulfano, 2017; hooks, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Solorzano, 2000; Solorzano, 2005; Trueba, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Although scarce, an emerging body of scholars in Canada have begun to address this issue (Carty, 1991; DeClou, 2016; Dei, 1991; Gopaul, 2015; Henry, 1993; Henry et al., 2001; Mazzuca, 2000; Samuel & Wane, 2005; Thomas-Long, 2007; Thomas-Long,

2015; Walker & Yoon, 2017). Some of the key issues suggest that both American and Canadian racialized students experience barriers for reasons such as: lack of mentorship by racialized faculty, power relations in the classroom, nominal funding and exposure to prior cultural capital, and doctoral capital (know-how). However, none of the sources discuss issues directly related to the experiences and cultural wealth of women of colour at the level of doctoral studies within a race and gender lens. These women are usually the first in their families to enter higher education (Mazzuca, 2000; Nettles, 1990; Reay et al., 2001; Trower & Chait, 2002). Consequently, when they arrive, they lack know-how (Deil-Amen & Rosenblaum, 2003) to navigate through the power relations and hidden academic curriculum (Margolis et al., 1989; Margolis et al., 2001) that permeate academic culture.

Canadian researchers who have tapped into alternative forms of cultural capital/wealth strive to count the multi-literacies found in communities of colour as a valuable resource, necessary for mainstream classrooms (Cummins, 2001; Cummins, 2004; Gopaul, 2015; Moll et al., 1992; Norton, 1995; Taylor, et al., 2008; Yosso, 2006). According to Collins, women of colour did not just “show up” in higher education (2000, p. 54); the experiential and educational knowledge of these women is informed by both their cultural and racial background. Although some may share the same racial background, their dispositions—values, beliefs or “habitus”—may differ because of their specific cultural lens (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 9). Hence, the experiences of women of colour in doctoral programs might be different from each other, yet can derive from the same categories of cultural wealth (Brown, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

Accessing Academic Knowledge

Austin (2002), in “Preparing the Next Generation of Faculty” suggests that the socialization process in graduate school must change substantially for new faculty members to work effectively in the “ever-changing world of higher education” (p. 95). The ability to access information, resources, have confidence in professional roles, study in predominantly white schools and departments, as well as deal with social isolation, appropriate supervision for specialized topics, funding, and research opportunities are only a few of the areas where students need access to academic knowledge and know-how (Austin, 2002; Barnes & Austin, 2009; Henry et al., 2012; Nyqueist et al., 1999; Solomon & Wane, 2005; Thomas-Long, 2007; Trower & Chait, 2002).

Henry et al. (2012), in “The Representation of Racialized Faculty on Canadian Universities,” revealed that participation rates of racialized staff was difficult to unpack

because they were compounded by a lack of reliable or detailed resources. Yet they were able to formulate their results by using innovative methods to locate racialized data. For example, they searched university website photos to identify racialized faculty, and identified staff members by their ethnic names on university websites. This technique helped to establish the identity of faculty members who were either racialized or who had an ethnic background. Furthermore, Trower and Chait's (2002) study about why racialized women are underrepresented in relation to faculty participation rates found that the limited amount of diverse faculty couldn't sustain the need for mentorship among racialized doctoral students. They also find that 94% of full professors in science and engineering are white, and 90% are male. Overall, at the time of the study, their findings indicated that there were only five percent of the full-time professors in the U.S. who were Black, Hispanic, or Native American (Trower & Chait, 2002, p. 34).

In addition to this shortage of people of colour at higher education institutions, the ability to achieve academically while maintaining one's cultural and racial identities presents conflict especially when people are characterized by their language (accents), dress, or cultural mores and not their skill level (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As Lareau and Weininger affirm, "academic skills should not be excluded from the purview of cultural research..." (2003, p. 598). Cummins (2001) suggests that culturally relevant curricula in schools—especially in communities where a language other than English is spoken at home—are required. In his article, "Multiple Ethnic, Racial, and Cultural Identities in Action: From Marginality to a New Cultural Capital in Society," Trueba argues that:

The mastery of different languages, the ability to cross racial and ethnic boundaries, and a general resiliency associated with the ability to endure and overcome hardships will clearly be recognized as a new cultural capital that will be crucial for success in modern diversified society. (Trueba, 2002, p. 7)

Survival strategies and cultural knowledge are methods that racialized women use to combat barriers they face in the academy. The cultural wealth that comes from the telling of their stories incites political change, and provides healing (Bristow, 1994; Carty, 1993; Collins, 2000; Cook, 1997; Henry, 1998; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1994; Mazucca, 2000; Mogadime, 2002; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Wane et al., 2002). When cultural contributions from one society is lorded over another, especially comparisons between global North and global South regions, this creates a reproduction of centralized knowledge that often gets rewarded in Canadian contexts, and can ultimately challenge the academic success of women of colour in PhD programs (Astin, 2004; Bourdieu, 1986; Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul, 2015; Yosso, 2006).

Mentorship

In Canada, mentorship for racialized women in higher education is necessary for successful outcomes. According to Statistics Canada (2016), the percentage of women aged 26-34 who graduated from a doctoral program in Canada was 50.6%. However, indicators suggest that only 11.4% of First Nations peoples ages 25-64 living on a Reserve have completed a Bachelor's degree or higher; this indicator was not disaggregated by sex so it is unclear how many of those were women. Presently, there are no statistical data that indicate the participation rates in terms of race or gender for educational research in Canada. The lack of representation of Black and racially diverse women in doctoral programs is nominal (Brown, 2012; Thomas-Long, 2007). These dismal outcomes are related to the lack of prior skills, cultural capital, and mentorship, which are necessary tools required for success, particularly for women of colour (Trower & Chait, 2003).

In the U.S. context, Patton and Harper (2003) suggest that African American female graduates and professional students who seek mentoring relationships are at an obvious disadvantage because of the nominal representation of African American faculty members. Clark (2010) indicates that the decision for students of colour to pursue careers in the medical and health profession is determined largely by the level of mentorship they receive from teachers and professors during their studies. Mentorship, from this perspective, is perceived as a "sociocultural participatory activity for engaging students in science learning" (Clark, 2010, p. ii). Cultural capital, or wealth, can play a significant role in how students are mentored, funded for external awards, supervised, and even in their overall success (Thomas-Long, 2007). The value of mentorship for women of colour, as examined by Lori Patton (2009), outlines "(a) how participants defined mentoring, (b) participants' perspectives on their current mentoring relationships, and (c) the significance and availability of having an African American woman as a mentor" (p. 510).

Quinlan (1999) suggests that: "Women often have different needs and concerns from their male counterparts...[and] face a complex, interrelated set of career issues that may be outside men's experience" (p. 32). Specifically, feelings of isolation, high stress levels, and low self-efficacy can cause women of colour to have increased difficulty establishing mentoring relationships in comparison to their male counterparts (Quinlan, 1999). Additionally, in *Teaching to Transgress* (1995), hooks states that marginalized students feel censored in the classroom because their ways of knowing often contradict the norm. Hence, these students learn to comply with dominant rules to receive unwritten rewards that help them advance in the eyes of their peers and teachers. Mentorship is indeed a valuable form of

cultural wealth (Brown, 2012; Thomas-Long, 2006). Canadian and U.S. literature on mentoring infer that the benefits of mentoring provide academic opportunities, job advancement, wage increases, and other job-related opportunities (Allen, Jacobson & Lomotey, 1995; Bova, 2000; Duntley-Matos, 2014; Johnson & Nelson, 1999).

Theoretical Frameworks and Theories

The theoretical frameworks used for this study were Womanism (and Black Feminist Thought), Critical Race Theory, and Cultural Capital Theory. The rationale for integrating these frameworks coincides with the theory of “intersectionality” that was first coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. In her study, Crenshaw (1989) explains that Black women experience both racial and gender discrimination because of their race *and* gender. Hence, Black women find themselves positioned at an intersection of unique barriers that are different from what a Black man would experience (racial discrimination) and what a white woman would experience (gender discrimination). This phenomenon affects the experiences of racially diverse women in general and Black women in particular, as it relates to their cultivation of various forms of cultural wealth. Hence, the woven frameworks for this article suggest that through the lens of Womanist theory (Collins, 1996; Hudson-Weems, 2000; Phillips, 2006; Walker, 1990; Weems, 1998; Williams, 1993) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), the experiences of Black women and women of colour can be better understood. Critical race theory (Bell, 2005; Williams, 2017) is used to reinforce the systemic presence of anti-Black racism and racism in both society and higher education, and is used to frame the experiences of Black women in the study. Finally, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural capital compares the dominant perception of cultural capital with Yosso’s (2005) alternative lens of cultural community wealth. Consequently, this intersectional approach theorizes the experiences of the participants in terms of their race, gender, and cultural locations.

Womanism

In Layla Phillips’ (2007) *The Womanist Reader*, the term “Womanism” is defined as “a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of colour’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving” (p. xx). Phillips (2007) adds that these everyday problems are “extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all

people, restoring the balance between people and environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (p. xx). Phillips’ definition illustrates how women of colour vie between themselves, their relationships with men, children, their spirituality, the environment, and even their oppressors in an effort to restore peace and justice for all. This is accomplished by the acknowledgment of, or adherence to, a spiritual dimension they encounter in their everyday experiences. Womanism theory explains the lived experiences of Black and racialized women through their individualized spiritual interpretation of their world, especially as they encountered various forms of oppression. The idea of Womanism was first introduced in 1983 by Alice Walker’s work, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Since then, “feminists of all colours, as well as Women of Colour who question or reject feminism have been debating the uniqueness and viability of Womanism as a freestanding concept” (Walker, 1983, p. xix). Hudson-Weems (2000) explains why a separate framework, rather than the dominant “Feminism,” was required for Black women:

While many other Black women naively adopted feminism early on, because of the absence of an alternative and suitable framework for their individual needs as African women, more are reassessing the historical realities and the agenda for the modern feminist movement, and have bravely stood firm in their outright rejection of it... (Hudson-Weems, 2000, p. 205)

Unlike the traditional first, second, and third waves of Feminism (Douglas & Hoffman, 2005), Womanist theory incorporates the holistic identity of women in terms of their politics of race, gender, culture, *and* spirituality (Hudson-Weems, 2000; Ogunyemi, 1985).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory found its origins in the legal profession. In the 1970’s and 80’s legal scholars (Bell, 1995; Bell, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Williams, 2017) began to challenge the pervading racial oppression in the American judicial system despite landmark legal gains of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs The Board of Education* which ruled in favour of desegregating the educational system, leading to the enactment of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. According to Parker and Lynn (2002), critical race theory focuses on how race and racism are systemic parts of American (and Canadian) society and how its link to the U.S. legal system is shaped by perceptions of the law, racial categories, and white privilege (Harris, 1993; Rothenburg, 2008). It also extended to other disciplines such as Women’s Studies (Wing, 1996) and sociology (Aguirre, 2000). Critical race theory in the educational

field (Collins, 1991; Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano, 1998; Tate, 1997) is different from the legal paradigm theory. The need for critical race theory from a Canadian perspective, as referenced in Athabasca University's online course syllabus called *The Canadian Context of Critical Race Theory*, emerged out of Canada's not so proud history "of slavery; the genocide, dislocation, and ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples; the internment of the Japanese during World War II; and racialized immigration policies" (Athabasca University, 2016). More recently, the problematic issue of anti-Black racism in higher education, the experiences of faculty and students of colour, and the drop-out rate of Black youth in Canada all necessitate the use of this theory in Canada (Daniels, 2019; Dei, 1993; Wane, Deliovsky, & Lawson, 2002).

In education, critical race theory takes the position that racism is a part of the academic culture in Western societies, and must be addressed because it is not going away (Dixon & Rousseau, 2007; Solorzano, 2000). Parker and Lynn (2002) discuss that critical race theory is "a discourse of liberation [used as a] methodological and epistemological tool [to expose] theoretical ways that race and racism affect the education and lives of racial minorities" (p. 7). According to Ladson-Billings (1998; 2009), this framework "departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling" (1998, p. 7). It also addresses the experiences of African Americans, the Blacks diaspora, and other communities of colour (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, 2005). Ladson-Billings (1998) demonstrates this by revealing her own personal experience while relaxing in the guest hotel lounge, before a conference lecture. She recounts how a gentleman with a strong Southern accent poked his head in and asked, "What time are y'all gonna be servin?" Ladson-Billings was wearing a business suit and reading a newspaper, yet the Southern white man surmised that the Black woman in front of him was obviously "the help" (p. 9). Often, the collective belief is that Western society has come a long way in its dominant perceptions of race and racism. Ladson-Billings (1998) insists that the presence of race is still very significant and current in everyday life.

Critical race theory also distinguishes other paradigms of cultural knowledge such as: Latcrit (Delgado, 1989; Delgado, 1995), Femcrit, and Asiancrit (Chang, 1999), which analyze the experience of women of colour in the area of class and gender *and* race (Crenshaw, 1989). They use the methodology of storytelling to challenge perspectives that falsely suggest that conspicuous or inconspicuous forms of racism in Western society, especially in Canada, are not present (Dei, 1997; Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In this study, the stories of the participants expose persistent critical race issues in higher education.

Cultural capital theory

Cultural capital theory is used in this study to uncover the cultural ways of knowing and experiential knowledge found in the stories of the participants. The term “cultural capital” refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural knowledge (such as language, social interactions, the arts, etc.) valued hierarchically in society. In general, cultural capital is a term used by sociologists to explain how patterns and behaviours are affected by class differences, especially in education. The reproduction of education, according to this traditional interpretation of the theory, safeguards its own structures by establishing symbolic forms of power that must be attained in order to inherit the material and intellectual gains it affords. Hence, if racialized women are not equipped with dominant forms of cultural capital, they risk being excluded from many rewards found in higher education. Women of colour must thus acquire “know-how” (Trower & Chait, 2002) in order to have adequate tools to successfully navigate the playing “field”—that is, doctoral programs, academic culture, and institutions of higher education more generally. Habitus (i.e., ways of knowing, background, beliefs) influences the degree to which these women will acquire capital in this arena, whether it be through economic, cultural, social, or symbolic forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997).

Bourdieu (1991) suggests that language is a symbolic form of cultural capital, and acts as a marker of distinction and classification for educational attainment. He notes that language is an instrument of both communication and power (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1992). In his analysis of Bourdieu’s work, Swartz (1997) explains that the symbolic systems of culture (e.g., arts, science, religion, etc.) shape our understanding of reality. These systems consistently re-establish social hierarchies in the form of dispositions, objects, systems, institutions, or culturally-embodied power relations (Bourdieu, 1992). Specific hierarchies are also reproduced within educational contexts, where only dominant forms of knowledge continue to be transmitted and maintained in the classroom. Hence, there is no need or room for “other” ways of knowing in these settings (Delpit, 2002). These dominant ways of knowing are maintained by universities who reward students who speak and adhere to the dominant culture found in their institutions. Compliance to this way of knowing meets little resistance (Delpit, 2005). Therefore, a person can either be on a level playing field equipped with the advantages of cultural capital, or on an unequal playing field where one does not have those same advantages (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1991). This study demonstrates that racialized women in doctoral programs are at risk of being on an unequal playing field, but can still successfully maneuver their way through using their cultural wealth.

Methodology

This qualitative study reflected a phenomenological research design. According to Groenewald (2004): “A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of people (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2011; Robinson & Reed, 1998) [who are] involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched” (p. 44). Snowball sampling and a web-based survey were used to recruit participants from one Canadian university, followed up by semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect primary data (Creswell, 2009; Kvale, 2007). A six-question web-based survey was initially used to recruit participants (Collins, 2002; Patton, 1990); this direct form of sampling allowed for both the demographic and experiential background of the participants to reflect the specific topical criterion of the study that focused on the formation of cultural wealth. It is important to note that small surveys are effective in that they can isolate specific criterion and sample-based questions to help generate a specific phenomenon from the participants (Patton, 2001). Participants were self-identified through an online invitation on a departmental Listserv on campus; those who came through word of mouth were sent the link for the survey. Based on their answers to the web-based survey, participants were invited to complete a one-on-one interview with the author. In addition to the survey, snowball sampling was utilized to recruit participants, as those who already participated were likely to tell others who had similar experiences and backgrounds. The Ethical Board of the author’s university approved the research protocol for this study.

The data for this study were derived directly from the experiences of the participants who were specifically recruited based on the following criteria: they were racialized; female; a full-time or part-time student in a PhD program, or had graduated with a PhD and were currently working for a university. The rationale for including past graduates was to access the level of professional success and survival strategies after earning the doctorate. The interview process gathered first-hand knowledge of the experiences of women of colour in doctoral programs at one Canadian university. Kvale (2007) defines an “Inter-view” as an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of common interest” (p. 7). The interview is “a powerful method for production of knowledge of the human condition...Interviews allow the subjects to convey to others their situation from their own perspective and in their own words” (Kvale, 2007, p. 7 & 11).

As their stories unfolded, so did the various unique forms of cultural wealth that was uncovered throughout the study. This approach characterizes the qualitative methodology of phenomenological research that Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plan, and Morales (2007) suggest

“relies strongly on the essence of a person’s experience” (p. 239). The participants all experienced the phenomena of being the first in their family to experience the pursuit of a doctoral degree on a predominantly white campus (Brown, 2012).

Research Questions

The driving question for this study was: “What made you decide to pursue a doctoral degree in the first place?” The six web-based survey questions were derived from both Yosso’s (2005) study and the integrated frameworks employed for this study:

- 1) What role did your mother play in your success?
- 2) How old were you when you began your doctoral work?
- 3) Did you have any mentors in the program?
- 4) What survival techniques did you implement to avert racism?
- 5) How did you navigate the academic culture?
- 6) Do your spiritual beliefs help with your success?

The interview sessions lasted for 60-90 minutes and the data collection process occurred over four months, from August-November, 2010. The interviews were both audio- and video-taped using a voice recorder and a PC computer with participant’s informed consent. Interviews were based on the following three research questions, which then guided the open-ended responses of the 10 participants:

- 1) How do women of colour utilize their cultural wealth to navigate barriers during their doctoral studies?
- 2) How can cultural wealth be theorized in terms of uniquely layered identities found in women of colour as they navigate their doctoral program?
- 3) How does the academic culture and power relations in higher education affect the experiences of women of colour in doctoral programs?

The interviews allowed for the extraction of reliable and valuable knowledge from the participants’ stories that helped to alleviate concerns about small sample size (Patton, 1990). There were only 10 participants recruited for the study; however, their responses created volumes of detailed data. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. The following table outlines the demographics for each of the 10 participants:

Demographics of Participants:

Interview Date & Participant #	Pseudonym	Age	Social Identity	Current Level in PhD Program	Duration & Progress (at time of study)
1. August 2010	Rachel	45+	*Middle Eastern, with Children	Candidate, Year 7	7+ Years In Progress
2. September 2010	Gia	Late 30's	Latina, Single No Children	Student, Year 2	2 Years In Progress
3. September 2010	Anne	45+	First Nations Single, No Children	Doctoral Recipient, 2010	7+Years
4. September 2010	Sandra	Late 30's	Black, Married with Children	Doctoral Recipient, 2009	5 Years
5. September 2010	Lynn	45+	Black, Single with Children	Candidate, Year 5	5 Years In Progress
6. September 2010	Grace	Mid 40's	*Asian, Married with Child	Candidate, Year 4	4 Years In Progress
7. October 2010	Dana	45+	Black, Married with Children	Student, Year 3	3 Years In Progress
8. October 2010	Paula	45+	Black, Married No Children	Doctoral Recipient 2006	5 Years
9. October 2010	Aduke	Late 30's	Black, Single with Child	Doctoral Recipient 2010	8+ Years
10. November 2010	Trista	Mid 40's	*Filipino Married with Children	Candidate, Year 4	4 Years In Progress

**Indicates pseudonym racial identity to protect the anonymity of participants.*

Findings: Six Categories of Cultural Wealth

The data uncovered six categories of cultural wealth:

- 1) ***Mother's Influence*** refers to the influence and guidance capital that appeared as a result of the strong encouragement and inner wisdom garnered from the participant's mother (or the memory of their late mother). This cultural wealth contributed to the participants' ability to stay the course.

- 2) **Age Capital** refers to the wealth found in the wisdom that comes with the maturity of age and experience for participants who typically begin graduate work later in life.
- 3) **Mentorship Capital** refers to the value found among supervisors, mentors, and (spiritual) Elders in communities or environments where participants shared similar values, beliefs culture, and race.
- 4) **Survival Strategies** refers to the unique ways that participants implement strategies to survive and combat the systemic barriers that arise as a result of their race, gender, religion, language, or culture.
- 5) **“Know-How” and Navigation of Academic Culture** refers to the knowledge that is discovered and utilized by participants in order to negotiate the difficult terrain of the academic culture, language, and landscape with no, or little, support from the institution.
- 6) **Spirituality Capital** refers to the wealth that comes from a reliance on, and resilience of a strength that comes from outside of oneself, or a higher power. Some participants relied on this form of capital as a protective armor from day-to-day threats, and used it to empower, protect, and inspire themselves during their studies.

Categories Expanded

Mother’s Influence. *Mother’s Influence* represents the cultural wealth that develops as a result of the strong influence and inner wisdom that many participants received from their mothers during their studies. Whether the mothers were educated on the topic the participant was pursuing their degree in, or even formally educated at all, was not relevant. It was the expectation that these mothers had for their daughter’s success that propelled them through their program. Evidence revealed that when a mother journeyed with, and encouraged the participant on her path, success seemed assured, whether it was a physical presence or a spiritual one, as was the case for a participant who lost her mother midway through her doctoral journey. This category was central to the well-being of most participants.

Historically, Black women depended on their own inner wisdom, passed on from their ancestors through the matriarchs of their communities (hooks, 2000). This category was quite meaningful for my participants. Upon my own reflection, I realised it was also meaningful for me. At the time of this study, my mother was still alive. She passed away in June of 2016, yet her influence still remains quite prominent in my life. However, not all of my participants felt the same way. There were two participants who did not feel that their mothers played any

pivotal role in their academic success. However, the rest believed that *Mother's Influence* was a significant element of their cultural wealth.

For example, Anne was of First Nations and European descent. She describes how her mixed identity and her mother's forward thinking taught her early on to strategically keep her native heritage a secret, as a way to survive her early educational experiences. Anne was placed in foster care as a child, but her mother courageously rescued her from the system. Subsequently, Anne's mother fought to put her into mainstream education, where she knew Anne would thrive. Anne vividly describes her mother as follows:

My mother was a very timid woman. But every now and again she would come out fighting. And she went into that school and she fought, and she said, "my daughter should be here, she's smart, and if you don't let her in, I'm going to get a lawyer, and sue you for racism and discrimination. (Anne, personal communication, September 10, 2010)

Anne explains that her mother's lack of formal education did not stop her from breaking down the barriers that threatened to keep Anne from receiving a university education.

Unfortunately, Anne's mother died before she graduated from her PhD. Anne explains that her mother's death created a major setback for her; she even attempted suicide twice.

However, it was the memory and cultural wealth of her mother, and her own survival skills that enabled her to successfully complete her PhD program.

Paula, another participant, also experienced the benefits of her *Mother's Influence* during her educational journey. She came from a family of all female siblings, and her mother pushed them to focus on their education. Paula was a Teacher's Assistant during her doctoral studies, and insists that much of what she implemented, or her pedagogical practice, were values she learned from her mother. Paula explains:

...[My] mother has never once asked me, "What are you going to do with this?" or "Why are you still in school?" Honest to goodness...My mother is the quietest most unassuming. But the wisdom, oh my goodness. My mother likes to sit back and observe and then act.... And I learned that...there is value by observing. And that's the most I learned, and I still do it! (Paula, personal communication, September 28, 2010)

Gia, a Latina woman, has a father who was a Jesuit priest, and her mother was a hairdresser and a psychic. Gia decided she would honour her mother by making sure that her dissertation avoided extensive or dense academic jargon so that her mother could comprehend her thesis, when she read it. It was also important to Gia that her mother would be able to explain to her friends and relatives exactly what her daughter was doing. She states:

I need to write a thesis that my mother understands.... Otherwise if my mother doesn't even know what I'm doing, there is a problem.... They ask her, what does your daughter do? She loses it, so I really want her to be able to say two things that are simple for her to understand. (Gia, personal communication, September 15, 2010)

The impact of the *Mother's Influence* and the desire to make their work accessible to their mothers were extremely important aspects of capital for these participants.

Age Capital. This refers to the cultural wealth found in the wisdom gained as a result of maturity in age. The average age of women that enter doctoral programs is between 25 and 29 years old (Statistics Canada, 2016). While a limited representation of women of colour, the median age of the participants in my study was 42 years old. Sadly, some participants tended to second-guess their abilities because of their age, and because of their unfamiliarity with the academic culture. However, most participants felt that their lived experiences gave them an edge, and felt that they could handle any hardship they encountered while in their program. The mature participants acquired cultural wealth from their work and personal lives, and from the lessons learned from years of experiencing oppression. However, the participants had to learn implicit cues that younger students already knew because of their early exposure to higher education. For example, these older students had to learn how to “language” their papers to be less racialized. On average, women of colour tended to go back to school later in life because of a lack of opportunity, familial support, encouragement, finances, or lost years because of family obligations (e.g., care of small children or senior parent). The wealth that *Age Capital* generated included: Tenacity, discipline, perseverance, and a “do-or-die” second-chance-mentality. The age differential that characterized the participants who returned later to graduate school brought, on the one hand, a great sense of timidity that would prevent some of them from challenging professors or colleagues on issues—even issues relating to their own welfare. On the other hand, most of the participants in the study came into their PhD program on a mission to “prove” and show “them” that they are not stupid and had a right to be there (Participant 3, September 15, 2010).

Paula, for example, was labeled early on as a gifted child. Her strong sense of self followed her into adulthood. Having started her doctoral studies in her mid-40s, Paula knew what she wanted and how she would go about getting it. She made her *Age Capital* work for her and not against her:

I think Black faculty and young Black scholars have the hardest time to find work and to find permanent work. And so, we have to start very, very early. This is problematic

because many Black women come to the program at a later age. (Paula, personal communication, October 8, 2010)

Only three of the 10 participants saw their age as a liability, while the rest described using it to their advantage.

Mentorship Capital. This refers to the capital found in academic mentors or spiritual Elders who mentor and guide students both academically and spiritually, inside and outside of the academy. Only four of the participants acquired this form of capital, from mentors/supervisors/elders who were Black or racialized like themselves, yet for them it proved a great asset. They also experienced success acquiring funding and accessing collaboration opportunities with professors.

Sandra is a confident woman who talked freely about her belief in herself. Although she did not get much support from her family, she expressed a love and admiration for her supervisor, whom she viewed as a supportive mother, confidant, and mentor. Sandra believed the level of trust and support in this relationship was attributed to the fact that her supervisor was Black, and consistently exhibited great “mothering and nurturing qualities.” When asked whether she thought having a supervisor of colour helped her in the program, Sandra replied:

It helps big time, big time! It makes a big difference. Because you need someone who understands you. Not to say you cannot get someone from the dominant culture to truly take you under their wings and fight for you, but where [she gestures, looking around] is it? (Sandra, personal communication, September 27, 2010)

Mentorship by a faculty of colour was extremely limited, and while a limited sample, my findings suggest that those who did find a mentor in their doctoral program had better outcomes than those who did not.

Survival Strategies. This refers to the unique ways that participants utilized survival strategies during their studies. These strategies were developed and employed from prior lived experience and used as leverage against the oppression and barriers these participants reported experiencing on campus. Although this capital was constantly used, there were occasions participants chose to keep silent when faced with opposition from professors, or departments, as a matter of self-preservation and survival in order to stay in their program. Participants, such as Paula, considered *Survival Strategies* as a means to an end and a necessary tool to stay in “the game.”

Survival Strategies were implemented to challenge hegemonic power relations on campus. Participants saw these power relationships in both student and faculty encounters as well as within the institutional structures of the academy. Consequently, some participants chose to remain silent during class discussions, and learned how to “language” (Paula, personal communication, April 30, 2010) academic papers to get funding or recognition from their professors. In other cases, participants simply trusted their inner wisdom when making decisions to help them navigate through their doctoral program. Anne used a strategy she called “double duty” (personal communication, September 10, 2010). Her strategy was to learn everything about an assigned topic, then reshape it with her “Native eyes.” This meant she had to do extra research and analysis for assignments designed through a dominant lens. Anne states:

Yes, I’m going to show you that I understand you from your angle, but here’s an angle you never looked [at]. And it was *double duty*. So, for a 20-page essay, I’d be writing 30 pages...because they don’t get the Native stuff, so you gotta footnote it. (Anne, personal communication, September 10, 2010)

Aduke used this capital to choose her PhD supervisor. Her topic revolved strongly around race and African indigeneity, and the wrong supervisor could easily have derailed her success; Aduke placed herself under the tutelage of a leading racialized expert in the field. As Aduke explains:

I decided to match my topic with somebody who had basically paved the way, you know trail-blaze. So... under the mentorship of this supervisor... I have the potential of being a scholar like [them]... (Aduke, personal communication, May 17, 2010)

“Know-How” and Navigation of Academic Culture. This refers to the value of knowing how to negotiate the barriers of academic language, or the “vernacular” of the academy. Language and writing were two main areas where participants had to discover “know-how” (Trower & Chait, 2002). Three of the 10 participants had English as a second language, and this was a significant barrier for them; others simply did not possess the academic vernacular that is often required for one’s work to be considered acceptable within doctoral programs. These participants needed extra skills to find ways to translate their own language into the language of the academic culture, and to avoid the gaze of appearing inferior from colleagues or professors. The institutionalized value of the academic language was also a burden for some of the participants for whom English was their first language. Lynn, a bilingual Caribbean francophone, discussed the value of English in her home country:

I grew up in a very vibrant linguistic environment in [French Caribbean]. So being able to speak properly and articulate... was something that I figured was a good thing.... but at the same time, Creole was revered for the most part but also rejected... because of its roots in slavery and colonization. (Lynn, personal communication, September 5, 2010)

Participants that had a strong sense of self and confidence in their language skills tended to navigate through the program better than those who did not.

Spirituality Capital. This refers to the wealth of spirituality that was defined individually by my participants. It included characteristics of resilience, resistance, perseverance, reliance on power outside of oneself, faith, and other religious observances and practices. Most participants said that their spirituality formed an integral part of their holistic identity and was used as a means of empowerment to endure the doctoral program. As a reoccurring theme, this form of capital evoked a strong sense of self-preservation and healing for most of the participants. When faced with strong feelings of isolation or oppression, or when participants experienced a heightened sense of deep-rooted pain, they often relied on their spirituality for comfort and protection. When asked why she would wear her head covering, Aduke responded that she did so when she knew she had to confront a negative situation or negative person at school. She shares:

Yeah, to protect my spiritual knowledge and [myself] from the violence of oppression... there are some departments ... that claim to be ... equitable ... when they are in fact the spaces where I experienced some of the most vicious inequities and oppressions.... So yeah, when I would go to those departments... I would always have my head tied. (Aduke, personal communication, May 17, 2010)

Overall, most participants acknowledged the presence of spirituality in their lives and only two of them felt it was necessary to keep spirituality and the academy separate.

Discussion

The overwhelming impact of cultural wealth was significant for the success of the participants in this study. Three received funding and four had opportunities to publish; two still faced language barriers, and half of all participants described systemic racism that they faced during their doctoral program. Despite the challenges, all of the participants graduated during or shortly after the study. The participants in this study demonstrated that a lack of

prior cultural capital was a distinct motivator for the participants' success as they had "something to prove." Although participants felt challenged and even isolated during their educational pursuit, that majority (n=8) felt very confident that they would succeed. However, despite the innovative use of cultural wealth, the findings from this study expose a common concern about the academic culture and language of the academy that presented the most challenges for the participants. Regardless of whether participants had English as a first language or acquired English as a second language, the hegemonic structure of the university and power relations in the classroom were difficult to dismantle with cultural wealth alone (Cummins, 2001; Yosso, 2005). For example, participants who did not have English as their native language stated they were made to feel unsafe, humiliated, and misunderstood on many occasions by colleagues and faculty because of their language barrier and the dominant values of academic speaking and writing that permeated the academy.

This study suggests that the reproduction of education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) becomes the main obstacle impacting the effectiveness of cultural wealth in higher education. The implementation of cultural wealth can become a practical tool that, if adopted by supervisors and departments, could eventually shift the tide toward better cultural competency that would benefit the students, the faculty, and universities more broadly. Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that institutions be encouraged to collaborate with diverse graduate students in such programs to design resources and guidebooks that could facilitate such a change. However, with or without these resources in place, Black women and women of colour will always utilize their innate capabilities as a means of resistance in order to succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

Conclusion

To understand the overarching views of this article, it is important to restate and answer the research questions that drove this original study: 1) How do women of colour utilize their cultural wealth to navigate barriers during their doctoral studies? 2) How can cultural wealth be theorized to understand the issue of intersectionality found in women of colour? and 3) How does the academic culture and power relations in higher education affect the experiences of women of colour in doctoral studies? First, the unique forms of cultural wealth uncovered in the experiences of these 10 participants were forms of resistance they each used to shield themselves from inequitable power relations, feelings of isolation, and the non-supportive environment that often characterizes the academy for women of colour. For

example, students who spoke a foreign language used the power of their strong writing skills to override feelings of inadequacies because of their language barriers and unfamiliarity with the academic culture of the graduate classroom. Second, cultural wealth is theorized through the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of the participants' race, gender, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds. Each of the six categories of cultural wealth was informed by at least two of these specific identifiers. Finally, Lovitts (2001) shifts the blame of low attritions rates from the students to the academic institutions and internal culture, and my findings support the necessity of this shift. Nominal diverse representation, mentorship, opportunities, and racialized faculty all affect the experiences of students, especially women of colour in PhD programs (Gopaul, 2015; Shavers et al., 2014; Trower & Chait, 2002).

All participants in this study graduated successfully from their PhD programs. They skilfully navigated the academy, despite intrusive barriers that threatened to derail them. I argue that this is because of their cultural wealth. Despite receiving their doctorates, two participants decided to leave academia altogether once they were done, while six decided to stay and two participants were undecided about their future. Overall, the experiences from these participants highlight practical examples of cultural wealth that future women of colour deciding to pursue a PhD can foster. This study recommends that cultural wealth and its values should serve the dual purpose of 1) a practical tool for diverse PhD students; and 2) a guide/resource for supervisors and departments who oversee graduate students, particularly diverse and racialized graduate students, because these forms of cultural wealth provide insight into specific cultural codes that these students will continue to bring to Canadian universities.

Consequently, the reproduction of dominant knowledge must be replaced with cultural wealth, because the value of this new knowledge evidently facilitates success for diverse and racialized students. Synthesizing this knowledge into practice can be accomplished by: 1) increasing racialized supervising faculty that support both racialized students and faculty; 2) implementing curricula and policies that reflect racialized/cultural paradigms in higher education; and most importantly 3) the acknowledgment from academic institutions that current structures are problematic and need to change. Finally, deliberate acts to forge collaborative relationships and accessible paths of learning through diverse cultural knowledge across all Canadian universities will benefit not only the diverse student body and practitioners alike, but will produce an example of innovative teaching and learning practices for generations of educators to come around the world.

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