



What's working? Critical race theory and African American/black PA student success

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PURPOSE

Physician assistant (PA) programs, much like all health-care professions, are struggling to enroll and support underrepresented minority students. Complicating the issue is that the bulk of the literature tends to batch all minorities into one homogenous group and approach the question of minority experience from a cultural deficit lens, asking what are minorities missing rather than what are the strengths that minorities bring from a critical race theory framework.

This study explored, through their stories, the experiences of African American/black PA students who have successfully completed their PA education. The key research question was: What do African American/black PA students' narratives reveal about their persistence to graduation? There are opportunities to support and complement African American/black experiences. The significance of this research is that it has the potential to effect not only the diversity of PA education but also health outcomes on a national scale.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative, narrative methodology aligned to a constructivist paradigm. The methodology informs the research design and addresses the principles necessary for rigorous qualitative research: ethics, credibility, transferability, self-reflexivity, and transparency. Collected data included transcripts from semistructured interviews and researcher field notes. The interview guide was based on the critical race theory cultural capital

framework and mentorship theory. This research was approved by the institutional review board at Northeastern University, in fulfillment of a doctoral dissertation.

Study participants were six PAs who self-identify as African American/black, who have graduated PA school, and passed the PA National Certification Exam (PANCE) within the last 5 years (2013 or later). The participants represent PA schools from the Northern, Southern, Central, Western, and Eastern United States. Although more detailed demographic information was collected, sexual orientation, details of previous professional experience, branch of military service, school, and geographic location details were omitted to protect the identity of the participants and their PA schools.

RESULTS

Participant narratives surrounding the support of their aspirational capital (motivation and "grit"), familial capital (family and community support), and social capital (mentorship) were boosted by PA programs with a solid PA pipeline, holistic mentorship practices, and a family-oriented program culture. All participants' narratives revealed that their aspirations were supported in a PA pipeline, like minority science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and PA-specific programs. All participants shared experiences with a supportive and caring advisor, beyond what academic advising required. All participants valued family above all else and relied on the support of their PA family to get through. Most significantly, the data emphasized the importance of fostering honest and safe dialogue about race.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of African American/black PA student experiences revealed that supportive programs had engaged in the PA pipeline, provided holistic mentorship, and cultivated a family-oriented culture. The narratives and

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experiences illuminated by this research provide PA educators an opportunity to self-reflect about how we approach race in PA education. Further focused qualitative and quantitative research is needed to continue to understand and improve the PA pipeline, holistic

mentorship, and family-oriented culture in PA programs, while fostering honest and safe dialogue. With this information, PA educators will be able to inform best practices to celebrate the unique experiences and success of African American/black PA students. **JAAPA**