Graduate Student Mothers of Color: The Intersectionality between Graduate Student, Motherhood and Women of Color\textsuperscript{1} in Higher Education

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\textsuperscript{1} I capitalize the terms Women of Color, Person of Color, People of Color, Faculty of Color and so forth because the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition Manual requires capitalization of proper nouns when referencing race/ethnic groups (i.e. White). By capitalizing terms similar to those above, I illustrate the notion for equality between dominant and underrepresented populations.
If academics are suppose to work around the clock, mothers are suppose to do it with a perpetual smile on their face and a stylish pair of shoes. (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009, p. 439).

Social change in gender roles has contributed to the emergence of women in higher education. The percentage of female students returning and/or seeking out graduate education programs has increased significantly since the 1970s (Kuperberg, 2009). In 2000, women comprised 45% of all doctoral recipients in the United States, in comparison to 10% in 1970 (Kuperberg, 2009). Despite the climb in enrollment and graduate rates, women’s experiences are not equal to those of men. A woman’s path to higher education is still more likely to be interrupted by family life than a man (Lynch, 2008). Attrition rates of graduate student mothers, as a result, are affected by child rearing responsibilities (Lynch, 2008). Also, access and support are not the same for all women. Women of Color experiences (i.e. graduate student Mothers of Color) are stifled on university and college campuses by the dominant, White culture’s socially constructed ideals of gender roles and ethnic/race assumptions (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2010). Within this paper, I explore graduate student Mother of Color (GSMOC) experiences and its connection to the theoretical understanding of intersectionality theory. In addition, the experiences of motherhood, graduate students, and women of color in higher education, are highlighted as means to elucidate the gap in knowledge about GSMOC as a growing population in higher education.

**Intersectionality Theory: Creating Visibility for Multiple Identities**

Intersectionality theory examines the intertwining of multiple social and cultural identities (i.e. ethnicity/race, gender) (Crenshaw, 1989). Interpreted as one line crossing the other or one identity crossing another, intersectionality was originally introduced by Black feminists in the late 1980s as means to explain how People of Color cross gender lines (Knudsen, 2005). Crenshaw (2003) reflected on the impact of intersectionality for Women of Color through the use of a “traffic light metaphor”: the traffic light represents an over-
lap of two or more avenues (i.e. social identities), which generates a complex intersection to negotiate traffic (i.e. society). Collins (1990) stated it is unjust for a Woman of Color to choose between her identity as a woman and as a Black person in personal and political situations. Examples such as the phrasing of “women and minorities” (Linder & Rodriguez, 2010, p. 6) and the librarian’s dilemma, the divided decision to place a Black woman’s history book in a Black or women’s history section (Purdie-Vaughns & Eiback, 2008, p. 383), advance the invisibility of Women of Color. Understanding intersectionality, therefore, validates and creates visibility of individual, Women of Color experiences beyond the mainstream culture.

Theoretically, scholars have divided the term intersectionality into short and long definitions. Intersectionality theory, in the short form, is grounded in the notion of fluid identities with focus on the relationships between personal and social identities and their interaction(s) with one another in social constructions of power (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Dill and Zambrana (2009) advanced the concept of intersectionality through four theoretical interventions:

• Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory;
• Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized;
• Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression; and
• Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions. (5)

Referenced within critical theory, intersectionality creates a paradigmatic shift in theory which includes activism and the deconstruction of power systems. Literature suggests two types of intersectionality, additive and transversal. Berger and Guidroz (2010) suggested
that additive intersectionality remains on one level of analysis and perpetuates the incorporation of diversity among people (i.e. Women of Color) by creating inter-action or separation. The addition of categories (e.g. motherhood and student) from a transversal or wider lens of intersectionality eliminates the competing intersectionality (Lykke, 2005) and intertwines, pervades, and transforms each identity (Knudsen, 2005). The complexity of intersectionality, therefore, takes on an intra-active or integrated (Lykke, 2005) versus separated characteristic when defining social identities and their influence on a person’s environments and interactions with others (Collins, 1990). The integration of intersectionality theory from a transversal lens appropriately highlights the multiple social identities for GSMOC.

**Motherhood: Defining the Good Mother**

Motherhood marks a significant shift in the emotional and familial lives of women and their place in society (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). Williams (2009) implied the celebration of motherhood is tightly coupled with guilt and criticism and cannot be isolated from the social construction of good and bad parenting. Good mothering, from the privileged perspective of White, married women, exists in two forms: traditional mother and supermom (Hays, 1996). The traditional mother is a stay at home mom who cheerfully studies the latest issue of *Family Circle*, places flowers in every room, and has dinner on the table when her husband gets home (Hays, 1996, p. 131-132). In contrast, the supermom can push a stroller with one hand and carry a briefcase with the other to maintain family/ work balance (Hays, 1996, p. 132).

Despite the ambivalence between mother categories, Collins (1991) and Joseph (1991) argue White feminist theoretical perspectives about mothering eliminate race and cultural considerations and therefore do not apply to the lives of Black mothers or other Women of Color. Scholars who attempted to re-discover mother of color experiences, however, focused on deficit thinking and/or criticized mother of color mothering practices (Conway-Jones, 2006). For example, the notion of welfare mothers is often placed in the context of Women of Color versus a social class paradigm. Other demographics such as sexual orientation, nationality, age, social class, and ability are also topics which need to be
included in the mother debate. Demographics aside, a *good* mother must be an intensive one.

The idea of intensive mothering is an exclusive, child-centered, emotional, and time-consuming role (Hays, 1996; Douglas & Michaels (2004). An intensive mother holds herself accountable for providing a seamless progression from conception to birth to child years and beyond (Bell, 2004). Centered on the devotion of care and self-sacrifice (Arendell, 2000), intensive mothering serves the interest of men, capitalism, the state, the middle class, and whites (Bell, 2004, p. 48). Further, male domination and socialized gender roles romanticize motherhood, thus perpetuating the power and inequity in mothering (Bell, 2004). Race inequity divides mothering experiences and removes Women of Color voices from mommy literature, which sends the message: “Affluent white women are the only mothers who really matter (Philyaw, 2008, p. 3). Multiple, shifting, intersections of power relations, between men and women, between dominant and subordinate racial groups, between colonizer and colonized” standardize all mothering practices and politicize the struggle of mothers (Glenn, 1994, p. 17). Collins (1994) uses the term *motherwork*, instead of motherhood as means to eradicate societal expectations on women and situate motherhood as work rather than a mindless and unproductive role (Hays, 1996, p. 136). This terminology eliminates the dichotomization of gendered perspectives on mothering (Collins, 2004); however, the dissonance experienced by mothers and their choice to stay home or return to work still remains a battle for many women.

The ambivalence between each *good* mothering role has resulted in the mommy war phenomenon (Darnton, 1990). The question of Who is the better mommy? creates a no-win situation for women in their child-bearing years and places women from different social categories (i.e. ethnicity/race, class, ability, sexual orientation, age, etc.) against each other (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996). The *mommy wars* is a convenient way to redirect conversation away from real issues facing today’s mothers such as “affordable health care, quality day care, gender and racial equity, fathers roles in parenting, media effects, fair wages and benefits, and family-friendly work arrangements (Zimmerman, Aberle, Krafchick, & Harvey, 2008, p. 204). Although, many women see the *mommy wars* as an exaggerated and superfi-
Social media war (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996), mothers continue to seek balance in their lives as means to contribute to their family well-being (Zimmerman et al., 2008).

Perceived as the only *choice* in *good* mothering, paid work benefits mothers at a cognitive, emotional, and social level (Hays, 1996). Hays (1996) study indicated one-third of all stay-at-home moms planned to work as soon as they found paid employment, while others committed to staying home throughout their children's formative years. Financial need, however, is not the only reason guiding women's decision to return to work (Crittenden, 2001). The majority of women want to work outside the home to maintain their identity and sense of self rather than for monetary gain (Minisky, 2006). Lack of recognition, balance, motivation, and intellectual stimulation are reasons stay-at-home moms seek paid employment and adult experiences.

I loved being in the company of adults. I loved being able to swear freely and not worry that I might be corrupting anyone. It had been so long since I had gossiped about anything besides other people's nannies. I made new friends. (Minisky, 2006, p. 16)

The force also driving privileged mothers initiatives to re-enter the workforce is the lack of value placed on mothering (Crittenden, 2001). Societal descriptors such as lazy, mindless, TV watching housewives create uncomfortable feelings for stay-at-home moms in social situations. Questions such as 'What do you do?' and 'Do you have a job?' dominate stay-at-home mothers thoughts in interactions with adults, particularly other women. Although, negative perceptions on mothering influence many mothers' *choice* to work or stay home, it is important to highlight there are mothers who *remain secure* with their positions as stay-at-home moms (Minisky, 2006), mothers who *lack the resources* to obtain employment outside of the home (Clifford, 2006), and mothers who *do not have the choice* to remain at home during child rearing years (Cheever, 2006).

For mothers who return to work, a *second shift* in identity emerges for paid working moms as they attempt to balance mother and working woman identities (Lynch, 2008). Gendered philosophies of care/guidance
and responsibility (i.e. child rearing, cooking, cleaning) coupled with feelings of guilt challenge working moms' ability to identify with the supermom identity (Hays, 1996). Mother's guilt, however, deepens as society tells working women they are bad mothers for placing their own interests before those of their children (Gilbert, 2008).

So why do I feel so guilty? Because our culture tells me I should. Having been well socialized to take care of others, being rewarded for putting their needs first (and punished for failure to do so), I am constantly refilling my cultural guilt prescription (Gilbert, 2008, p. 208).

Working Mothers of Color, particularly Black mothers, want to yawn at the angst about shouldering multiple burdens and juggling multiple roles many White mothers complain about in memoirs (Philyaw, 2008, p. 3). Historically, Black women outnumbered White women in the workforce since the 1940s due to economic reasons; thus they do not associate guilt with the duality of working mom because it is what they have always done (Philyaw, 2008). Therefore, if a Black mother can have a choice to stay home with her children or opt to pursue a career full-time, society has reached a historical moment (Philyaw, 2008).

**Graduate Student Mother: Balancing the Good Mother & Good Student Identities**

The socially-constructed definitions of good student and good mother stratifies the identity intersectionality of graduate student mothers (GSM) in today's higher education system (Lynch, 2008). Unable to separate the two identities (i.e. mother and student), some GSM default to maternal invisibility (Lynch, 2008) in order to convince their peers (Jiron-King, 2005) and advisors (Bolick, 2010) they are serious and committed scholars. Maternal invisibility, non-disclosure of motherhood identity, allows GSM to appear as committed students (Lynch, 2008), and remove maternal bias from interfering with their academic careers (Jiron-King, 2005). Excluded from the literature on maternal invisibility are demographic characteristics (i.e. ethnicity/race, age, marital status, socio-economic status, etc.) which differentiate the
motherhood and student experience. Jiron-King (2005) specifically talked about the intersectionality of ethnic identity in GSM and the dissonance it creates for traditionally marginalized women (i.e. Chicana women, women of Mexican decent born in the United States), and their perception of maternal invisibility. Defined in previous generations as uneducated and housebound, Chicana women fought to eliminate traditional ethnic attitudes associated with gendered roles such as housewife and mother as means to shift stereotypical thinking. The Chicana mother, as a result; changed, however issues of privilege continue to affect her choice to disclose her GSM identity (Jiron-King, 2005).

Age and partnership (i.e. marital) status also influence the support of a GSM. In particular, the capital associated with maturity and its impact on child rearing practices and the balancing of multiple life priorities can create dissonance for a GSM (Larson, 2004). The cognitive, emotional, and psychological shift which occurs during motherhood coupled with the lack of resources available on child rearing can influence negative parent-child interactions for young mothers (Larson, 2004). Unlike the amount of literature on high risk outcomes for young mothers, the experiences of mothers, age 40 and older, is an emergent topic in scholarly research. In addition, GSMs who identify as being in a partnership (i.e. marriage) differ on the level of support offered and/or received in their relationships. While children are not the sole responsibility of mothers, women continued to be seen as the primary caregivers in the relationship (Stimpson & Filer, 2011). Single, GSMs experiences and its bearing on supportive systems in higher education, however, have not been well researched in the graduate student literature.

Another area not often discussed in graduate student literature is the role of work-life balance and its influence on the support GSMs receive in their respective academic disciplines. Assistantships, academic workload, research, internships, and/or part-time employment are examples of the breadth of work graduate students do on a daily basis (Stimpson & Filer, 2011, p. 70). Coupled together with other life commitments (i.e. family, friends, organizations, religion, hobbies) graduate students work ranges in its complexity. Therefore, the multiplicity experienced by graduate students perpetuates
the level of support received in graduate education (Stimpson & Filer, 2011). In particular, graduate assistants (GA) highlight unreasonable work, stereotypical roles, poor work environments, assignment of supervisors, and tasks assigned as concerns toward an unsupportive culture (Brown-Wright, Dubick, & Newman, 1997, p. 410). These conditions add to the complexity of intersectionality and the socially constructed implications confronting a GSM who also identifies as a GA. The priority disagreement a GSM faces as she navigates from one role to another (e.g. graduate student to mother to GA) is where imbalance and guilt set in as social indicators of bad mother, bad student, and bad GA.

Creating Supportive Structures for GSMs

Good student and motherhood characteristics create dissonance in higher education GSM support systems, classifying GSM as an underserved population with high attrition rates (Lynch, 2008). GSMs, as a result, are faced with several challenges within their individual departments and the university community. Financial aid and child care are among the top two structural areas in higher education which raise concern for GSMs (Lynch, 2008). Institution-based funding such as teaching and graduate assistantships are insufficient to cover immediate needs of GSMs (i.e. health care and child care costs) (Lynch, 2008). Other financial items include the switch to part-time status, the length of loan deference, and the availability of supportive partner resources (Lynch, 2008). Finding affordable and reliable child care can be a huge burden for a GSM. Although some universities and colleges offer on-site child care, vacancies are limited and tuition costs are often high for a GSM budget. Operating hours of child care facilities is another important factor affecting GSMs thus forcing GSMs to look for secondary sources of child care to work on school responsibilities.

Themes emerged throughout the literature related to GSM identity support in academic departments: few institutions are tailored to meet the needs of this population, there is little knowledge amongst faculty on how to support GSMs, and GSM accommodations are considered on a case-by-case basis (Springer et al, 2009). Areas of family-friendly space (i.e. breast feeding/pumping stations, family bathrooms, and changing tables), childcare subsidies, or faculty training on
GSM campus support services were offered by less than 15% of the departments in Springer et al's (2009) study on a Sociology departments' support systems for graduate student parents. Professional development opportunities were listed at 17.5% and family-friendly functions were unheard of by GSM (Springer et al, 2009). GSM, as a result, were intellectually supported by their faculty, but unsupported emotionally (Lynch, 2008) in their multiple identities. The physical environment of a university or college campus and its lack of changing tables or nursing stations sends a message to GSMs their children and families do not belong on a campus (Springer et al, 2009).

Although, GSMs are not receiving the adequate support they need from their university and college communities or academic departments, peers and spouse/partners are helping to fill the gap. GSMs who know other students combining graduate student and motherhood reported having a greater satisfaction in peer relationships (Lynch, 2008). However, when GSMs are the only women in their cohort or department with children and they have no contact with other GSMs, even after they disclosed their motherhood identity, satisfaction drops significantly. The support of spouses, family, and friends, as a result, is utilized to overcome the feelings of stress and isolation (Lynch, 2008). A spouse/partner is often the main source of support for a GSM, which, if available, helps to lower attrition rates (Lynch, 2008). The importance of validation from peers, colleagues, and a spouse/partner for GSM is also reflected in the experiences of Women of Color in higher education. In particular, for GSMOC who plan to pursue a career in higher education as a faculty or staff member, it is important to explore the experiences of Women of Color and create awareness on how they continue to be marginalized in higher education.

**Women of Color in Higher Education: Overused, Misunderstood, and Unappreciated**

I am marked by the color of my skin. (Cervantes, 1990, 5)

Women of Color in higher education face challenges relative to promotion, pay, committee work, membership on policy-making bodies, and appointment to administrative posts (Anderson & Dede, 2004, p. 51). In Moses (1989) study, Black women stated they needed to work hard,
remain quiet, and show appreciation for their jobs in higher education. Black women also expressed experiences of exploitation and overuse through role modeling theory, a phenomenon which labels specific individuals as *go-to* people (Conway-Jones, 2006). Students view women of color as compassionate caregivers, counselors, and symbols and thus receive requests from all students, not just Students of Color and women (Conway-Jones, 2006, p. 125). In this role, Women of Color, particularly women Faculty of Color, suffer in resources and time available for scholarship production toward tenure (Conway-Jones, 2006). The tenure process developed by and for non-minority men do not share the same interests, needs, views or experiences of Faculty of Color, primarily Women of Color (Gregory, 2004, p. 149). Faculty of Color, as a result, are expected to perform extra requests in addition to tenure requirements of teaching, research, and service (Green & McCloud, 2004). In the future, it is important the academy seek better ways to recognize the value of service and teaching that are disproportionately conducted by women faculty (Ropers-Huilman, 2008).

Women more frequently occupy administrative positions marginal to the institutional mission (i.e. counseling, positions for women, and positions for other underrepresented groups), despite their educational background (Warring, 2004). In addition, women administrators reported more barriers to upward mobility in higher education than men (e.g. sex discrimination, family responsibilities, and their education). Women of Color, however, face the *two-for* rule when hired in higher education settings (Anderson & Dédé, 2004). Identifying as a woman and Person of Color, Women of Color not only benefit university statistics, but they also bring unique administration perspectives to campus (i.e. marginalized identity experiences, ideas for inclusionary practice). Yet, literature on the race and gender interaction for Women of Color is limited and assumed to reflect in the experiences of Men of Color and White women (Waring, 2004).

The lack of support and unwelcoming environments contribute to the barriers (i.e. poor retention rates, lack of funding and mentoring for research, inadequate preparation for teaching, and lack of job security) experienced by Women of Color, particularly Black women faculty, in higher education (Anderson & Dédé, 2004). Women of Color administrators, as a result, must perform at higher
expectations than their White counterparts to avoid the above barriers. From a scholar perspective, Women of Color need great articulation skills, better qualifications, and an aggressive, but feminine leadership style (Willis & Lewis, 1999). Anderson and Dédé (2004) suggested universities hire Women of Color in areas other than those traditionally identified as minority programs and/or positions to reduce bias and to educate about diversity.

**Intersections: The Identity of Graduate Student Mothers of Color**

Graduate student mothers of color (GSMOC) have emerged as a visible population within higher education. Literature on motherhood, GSMs, and Women of Color experiences in higher education, however, must merge to reflect ways in which privilege and oppression influence cognitive, emotional, and physical spaces on campus for GSMOC. Intersectionality theory, in comparison, has enhanced scholarship and elucidated the importance of multiple social identities and their impact on GSMOC. University personnel and faculty’s understanding of identity intersectionality theory (Collins, 1990) is pertinent to the success and integration of current and future GSMOC. Questions such as: How do institutions accommodate for women’s multiple identities? Can social institutions and the people who dominate them change to incorporate GSMOC experiences? (Ropers-Huilman, 2008) must guide future decision making on university and college campuses.

Recommendations for inclusive practices on campus should focus on eliminating GSM marginalization in academia and the university/college community. Structural additions such as on-site day care, breast feeding/pumping and changing stations, and family bathrooms near all student centered/support areas will enhance the functionality of campus for GSMs. University faculty/staff perceptions focused on GSMs academic potential and success versus cultural assumptions (e.g. lack of physical ability, difficulty balancing home and school/work) about expecting GSMs and current GSMs will minimize the anxiety associated with belonging in the academy for GSMs. However, to retain GSMOC it is integral to couple culturally competent support with Women of Color experiences (Milner, 2004) to highlight appropriately the experiences of GSMOC (Collins, 1991). Advisor/mentor
relationships with women Faculty/Staff/Students of Color, particularly other GSMOC if available, allow GSMOC to monitor their academic progress, develop relationships with individuals who look like them and share similar experiences, and advance persistence and resiliency amongst GSMOC (Milner, 2004). Increasing the hiring pipeline for more faculty/staff of color, therefore, is necessary to accommodate for mentor programs and services.

GSMOC are also responsible for the quality of their graduate experience. Operating under a prescribed set of scholarly rules, GSMOC can choose to maintain their voice and stories through research and active participation in their institutional communities (Webb, 2006). Strategies for Women of Color to participate and address the differential treatment of women Scholars of Color in their institutions are: speak to issues related to the discrimination of all scholars, encourage supportive networks with like-minded colleagues [and/or students, faculty, practitioners], name traditions of exclusion in academia [higher education], dialogue with students and community about practices of discrimination and the treatment of faculty [and/or practitioners] at their university, identify and understand sources of power within the institution, choose battles wisely, do not accept the disempowerment that says, for example, You do not belong here, and remember to laugh (Balderrama, Texeria, Valdez, 2006, p. 228). GSMOC can couple such strategies with their own experiences to increase the betterment of the institutional community as well as their own academic careers.

Conclusion

The drive toward inclusion and equity in each of their social identities has developed meaning for the GSMOC population in a gendered and racist societal system. Although, literature on Women of Color does not expand beyond a critical lens, Mothers of Color are initiating dialogue amongst their own mommy memoirs (Philyaw, 2008) and institutional communities to create change (Balderrama et al, 2006). With awareness and value placed on multiple social identities and their intersectionality, GSMOC will continue to build in power and spirit in higher education, society, and their individual lives.
Works Cited


