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*African American Students' Perceptions of Influential Factors  
for Attendance in Doctoral Psychology\**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores African American undergraduate students' perceptions of factors influencing their decision to attend doctoral programs in psychology. There is a scarcity of literature examining perceptions held by specific minority groups in regard to influential factors used to make a significant step toward their career development. Eight undergraduate students interested in pursuing a doctoral degree in psychology were interviewed. A semi-structured interview and two paper-pencil measures were used. Interviews were analyzed utilizing the consensual qualitative research (CQR) method. The following themes

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emerged: reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree, navigating the application process, factors influencing interest in psychology, perception of a program's commitment to diversity, importance of ethnic minority representation in a program, financial concerns, family view of psychology, most important factor for attendance, and prior school experiences outside of psychology. The study found that issues related to African American representation and research, as well as the presence of financial aid, are highly relevant in students' evaluation of which doctoral programs they prefer to attend. This information will pave the way for further studies focusing on how to increase the number of African American students in doctoral programs around the country.

**KEY WORDS** Consensual Qualitative Research Method; CQR; African American; Students; Psychology

The enrollment of African American students in graduate programs has been a struggle despite continuing efforts. As professional psychology programs place greater emphasis on training students to work with multicultural populations, it is necessary to increase minority representation in the field. (Henceforth, the term "minority" in this article represents racial minorities within the United States.) There are several important reasons for increasing the minority representation in psychology. These include enhanced quality and sensitivity of services to clients, increased quality of education programs to students, new perspectives generated for theory development and application related to contemporary social issues, and greater congruence with the field's commitment to social justice (Maton et al. 2006).

Between the years 2000 and 2010, the number of Caucasian Americans increased by 5.7 percent, while the number of African Americans and Hispanics increased by 12 percent and 43 percent, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). Because minority populations are increasing in the United States, it suffices for psychology doctoral programs to increase recruitment of minorities to better serve diverse clients. Despite this, recruitment of African American doctoral-level students in clinical psychology has failed to match the induction rates of other minorities (Maton et al. 2006).

In 1865, a controversy regarding the education of African Americans began after the thirteenth amendment of the U.S. constitution outlawed all forms of involuntary servitude. The Civil War began a period of Reconstruction, in which the South was forced to rejoin the Union and the northern ruling class was tasked with providing citizenship to African Americans (Kliebard 1987). Education for African Americans would emerge as a central issue in efforts to structure a segregated South (Arnove 1980). The 1860s also saw the development of the Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency tasked with aiding in freeing slaves and implementing public education for African Americans (Watkins, Lewis, and Chou 2001). The struggle for equal curriculums in African Americans' education would become a political and ideological battle (Watkins et al. 2001). In the South, a special kind of education system was implemented to

“reconcile Negro subservience with the new arrangements of power, defuse potential turmoil, and pacify diverse elements” (Watkins et al. 2001:42). An “accommodationist-styled” system included cultural and political elements from the South’s internal colonization structure and the possibility for corporate wealth to influence government (Peery 1975). This movement caused northern hegemonists and their southern supporters to reconcile an increasing demand for African American education with realities of oppression that still existed (Watkins et al. 2001).

From the abolitionist movement emerged a philanthropic group that held beliefs in the dignity of all humanity, the possibility of redemption, and the need for socialization and began to draw other church missionaries to the issues surrounding African American education (Anderson 1988). Religious ideology would continue to play a crucial role, as these missionaries’ goal was to create an African American leadership (Anderson 1988). Although conditions were improving as the twentieth century drew to a close, several issues required attention. The climate between the North and South gave way to the development of a specialized education system highlighting labor and character training as the most moral and socially uplifting system for the “American Negro” (Harlan 1983).

Despite the lack of funds for teacher training, building construction, and community programming, the United States saw policy initiatives become more focused as it moved into the twentieth century (Butchart 1994). A contribution toward African American education was the Hampton Social Studies (HSS; Bullock 1967). Dr. Thomas Jones established a series of articles concerning the place of African Americans in greater society that highlighted earlier assertions whereby education for African Americans needed to be centered upon moral development and occupational integration, placing them into a subservient role compared to “Whites” (Bullock 1967). Dr. Jones maintained that the supremacist position that African Americans are inherently inferior and that the African American desire for full equality were both incorrect. He blamed evolution for this racial gap and asserted that only time would break the inequality, by allowing Negroes to develop in the same way that Caucasians had (Watkins et al. 2001). The HSS were adopted by corporate bodies that outlined an African American curriculum based on black inferiority. In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court decreed that the practice of educational segregation was unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954). Thus, America heralded the beginning of the civil rights movement and a reformulation by providing education in the same classrooms for African and Caucasian Americans.

Following the civil rights movement, the African American population has integrated more into American society. Beginning in the 1970s, added attention has been given to the sociological impact of race and education with more African American students seeking higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), African American students’ enrollment in higher education institutions has grown from 10 percent to 15 percent between 1976 and 2012. Although this trend suggests that a greater number of African American students are seeking higher education, a significant gap still exists in enrollment when compared to the students’ white counterparts.

The concept of the graduate pipeline for minorities has been introduced as a systemic way of examining trends, strategies, and tactics for the recruitment of individuals from diverse

backgrounds (Maton et al. 2006). This concept follows the rationale that by increasing the percentage of minorities who attain bachelor's degrees, you naturally increase the number of potential candidates for graduate study at both the master's and doctoral levels (Maton et al. 2006); therefore, as more minorities attend graduate school, the presence of more minority students should facilitate recruitment of new minority graduate students. The larger the pool of minorities who receive doctoral degrees, the greater chance that those graduates go on to reach faculty positions. The presence of minority faculty in a department can enhance recruitment and retention of both graduate and undergraduate students as well as enhance the pool of available mentors.

Historical efforts to increase minority receptivity to the field of psychology in the United States date back to 1960s. In 1968, the publication *Black Rage* by African American psychiatrists Grier and Cobbs introduced a fierce debate concerning the mental health establishment and its treatment of African Americans (Spurlock 1999). A number of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) began offering summer programs for students to stimulate African American interest in psychology (Pickren 2004). Also in 1968, the Association of Black Psychologists was formulated by the American Psychological Association after demands were made to increase minority representation (Guthrie 1998). These actions started a powerful movement in which Howard University and the APA worked to develop fellowship and financial-assistance options for black graduate students (Pickren 2004). During the 1970s, the number of minority students enrolled in clinical psychology programs began to increase, though minorities were still underrepresented (Boxley and Wagner 1971).

Researchers have sought answers for why the recruitment of minority students seems particularly difficult. Byrd, Razani, Suarez, Lafosse, Manly, and Attix (2010) looked at specific challenges in recruitment and retention within the subfield of neuropsychology. They identified one of the challenges to be a lack of opportunities for exposure to the discipline (Byrd et al. 2010). This is partially explained by a lack of prominence and visibility of the field of neuropsychology in comparison to other specialties. Although this example remains specific to neuropsychology programs, other barriers to recruitment were cited as having strong effects. Data collected by the APA Center for Workforce studies shows that approximately 68 percent of psychology doctorates report educational debt, 35 percent of whom report student loan balances in excess of \$75,000 (Kohout and Wicherski 2009). Thus, earning a doctoral degree is a substantial financial commitment, especially for minority students more likely to have limited financial resources (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b). Another identified challenge was the lack of minority faculty mentors (Byrd et al. 2010). Studies have shown that programs with more minority faculty are likely to attract higher numbers of minority students (Munoz-Dunbar and Stanton 1999).

Another deterrent is the rigid threshold of scores that must be achieved on the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). Although data on the relationship between GRE scores and minority admission to doctoral programs is unavailable, testimonial evidence underscores a limitation that score cutoffs may place on minority students (Byrd et al. 2010). Excellent GPA, research experience, and recommendation letters can be overshadowed by low GRE scores, which may act as a cutoff for qualified students. This

is regrettable, given evidence that GRE scores have limited predictive validity for graduate success among minority students (Sampson and Boyer 2001).

Central to the issue of minority access to graduate education is whether entry prerequisites are accurate predictors of success in graduate school. In 2001, Sampson and Boyer (2001) sought to determine how predictive GRE scores were of minorities' achievement in graduate study. The most crucial portions of an admissions application are the undergraduate transcript, personal statement, letters of recommendation, and GRE scores. They found that GRE scores were significantly associated with the first-year GPA of minority students but maintained that the GRE is not equipped to determine one's level of success in graduate school (Sampson and Boyer 2001). GRE scores may be only slightly to moderately predictive of first-year GPA (Grandy 1994).

The issue of mentorship was touched upon as an important aspect of graduate school. In their study of recruitment practices among clinical psychology doctoral programs, Munoz-Dunbar and Stanton (1999) found that both minority faculty representation and student representation were important for the recruitment of minority students. The presence of minority faculty members in graduate programs is key because these faculty members can provide support in intimidating situations. Faculty mentoring has been shown to be a crucial element to the success of graduate students (Munoz-Dunbar and Stanton 1999). Data have suggested that minority students respond to role models who share specific characteristics with them and who can identify with personal aspects that encompass their experiences (Byrd et al. 2010).

A critical element to understanding how to increase African American representation in doctoral psychology programs is a comprehensive awareness of what strategies have already been employed with some success. Rogers and Molina (2006) sought to identify these strategies in their study of commendable efforts by programs to increase minority participation, with the goal of providing a guideline for programs interested in building minority pipelines into their programs. They conducted semi-structured interviews with faculty and students at 11 identified programs and departments in an exploratory effort to obtain a picture of their recruitment and retention experiences and strategies. All programs identified employed at least one full-time minority faculty member, ranging from 4 percent to as high as 33 percent of faculty makeup. Additionally, minority students accounted for approximately 27 percent of the student bodies in participating departments and 39 percent for participating programs (Rogers and Molina 2006).

Recruitment techniques for enrollment used to attract minority students were also considered. Results showed that faculty and students both believed that the most influential factors were the presence of financial aid, involvement of existing students and faculties in recruitment efforts, and presence of personal contact between faculty and prospective minority students (Rogers and Molina 2006). In this study, financial-aid packages ranged from full tuition waivers and stipends to periodically distributed stipends without tuition waivers. Almost all (91 percent) of these programs advertised such opportunities in their recruitment brochures and school web pages. Student and faculty involvement in the recruitment process showed some variability in tactics across institutions. A strength identified in one program was the employment of minority faculty who were active researchers in areas related to minority concerns, and another program

used student peer groups during interviews to create discussion among minority and prospective students. Yet other institutions had existing graduate students recruit from their undergraduates (Rogers and Molina 2006).

Aside from these differences, a number of other strategies employed by multiple programs had some success: 91 percent of institutions had faculty who made personal contact with prospective students, 82 percent reported established relationships with HBCUs, 73 percent recruited minority undergraduates at their home institutions, and 64 percent sponsored students to come tour their facilities, speak with faculty, and speak with students. Of this final group, 86 percent covered the expenses of such visits and 64 percent had created recruitment materials specifically catered to minority students (Rogers and Molina 2006).

Significant findings from a literature review suggest areas for further study. It has been 21 years since the Ponterotto et al. (1995) study in which minority students were interviewed concerning their thought processes on applying to graduate programs in psychology, and limited studies since have addressed the ways in which African Americans select psychology graduate programs. Further research suggested by Ponterotto et al. (1995) highlights the need for examination of perceptions of minority and majority students toward the application and admission processes. Currently, no studies have been found that employ qualitative methods to directly ascertain the perceptions and motivations of African American undergraduate students to pursue specific clinical psychology programs. Although other studies have continued on the work of Bernal, Barron, and Leary (1983); Yoshida et al. (1989); and Ponterotto et al. (1995), they used quantitative methods and did not look at African Americans specifically (Bidell, Turner, and Casas 2006). Research studies pertaining to African American recruitment into graduate psychology programs are also sparse, which is significant, as African Americans are underrepresented in doctoral psychology programs (Maton et al. 2006). This study represents the most recent attempt to understand the motivating factors behind African American students' selection of graduate schools for clinical psychology.

Ponterotto et al. (1995), whose work has significant influence on the current study, used a sample of recently graduated master's students, gathering no information from undergraduate students, who make up the majority of students applying to psychology graduate programs (Maton et al. 2006). Currently, much of the research has focused on school and counseling psychology programs rather than on clinical psychology programs. It is important for clinical psychology programs to be represented in the literature, as diagnostic evaluation is a key procedure in the field (Lawson 2005; Ruiz and Primm 2010).

This study utilized a semi-structured interview and two paper-pencil questionnaires to elicit the perceptions and motivating factors that influence African American students' decisions to apply to specific clinical psychology doctoral programs. The following research questions were proposed: (1) Does availability of scholarships, grants, and fellowships present as the most important factor identified by potential students as contributing to their decision on which programs to apply? (2) Are African American students more likely to apply to programs that have scholarships, grants, and

fellowships targeting minority students? (3) Are African American students more likely to apply to schools they feel are committed to diversity? (4) Would the number of African American students present in a doctoral program be influential in student choice? (5) Would African American students be more ambivalent in their decision to apply to a doctoral psychology program if they had lower support from their family for their desire to study psychology rather than another profession?

## **METHODS**

### *Participants and Recruitment*

The CQR method states 8 to 15 participants to be optimal for a study so the researcher can focus in depth on each participant's information (Hill 2012). This study recruited eight undergraduate students over the age of 18 from universities in the Midwest by offering each participant an incentive of a \$15 gift card. Participants were English-speaking undergraduate students (at least junior year) who identified their ethnicity or race as African American. Participants must have been interested in attending a psychology doctoral program. Exclusion criteria included participants already enrolled in a graduate program for psychology, students interested strictly in pursuing a master's degree, and individuals interested in pursuing graduate degrees in other related areas (psychiatry, social work, etc.).

Recruitment involved utilizing contacts within universities in Indianapolis and surrounding states to find willing participants. Mass e-mails including the purpose, procedures, and incentives of the study went out to undergraduate psychology students. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in private rooms, at libraries, designated for the purpose of the research. The interviews were considered highly confidential, which helped the participants provide honest answers to the questions. Consent forms were given and discussed prior to participation in the study. These forms allowed the interviewer to audio-record the interview and informed the participant that recordings would be transcribed by the coinvestigator to further protect privacy. The interviewer discussed the implications of the study and answered any questions before the interview began. All participants were assured that identifying information would be kept confidential and omitted from all written materials. To ensure the highest level of confidentiality, each packet of questionnaires was coded rather than labeled with identifying information. The participants were then given the paper-and-pencil demographic questionnaire and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity questionnaire before beginning the 60–90-minute interview.

### *Measures*

Two questionnaires and one semi-structured face-to-face interview were used. One questionnaire assessed demographic information, and the other assessed ethnic minority identification and perceived importance of that identification. The contents of the semi-structured interview were generated from a review of the relevant literature (Bernal et al.

1983; Bidell et al. 2006; McIlvried et al. 2010; Ponterotto et al. 1995; Yoshida et al. 1989). The studies used identified in their research several themes and important factors of how programs attempt to recruit minority students that carry over to the current study.

The demographic questionnaire assessed basic information such as age, education, and employment. It was also used to identify specific doctoral areas of interest for potential students, adding to the comprehensiveness of students' choices for attendance. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were verified using this as well. This study used the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney 1992) was used in this study. The MEIM is a 15-item self-report measure designed to assess ethnic identity, belonging, affirmation, and commitment to that identity. The MEIM uses a Likert scale ranging from 4 ("Strongly agree") to 1 ("Strongly disagree").

The semi-structured interview was based on prior research that has sought to identify major themes and important considerations in the recruitment of minority students into graduate psychology programs, with additional questions added. The following topics comprised the interview: student understanding of the psychology field, students' perception of a program's commitment to diversity, importance of African American representation by a program in student choice, available noncontingent financial aid, and student perceptions of family support for the chosen field of study.

### *Procedure*

The interviews were held in private conference rooms in several settings across the Midwest. Written and verbal consent were obtained following a discussion of confidentiality, purpose and goals of the study, and potential risks and benefits. Following consent, participants were given the demographic questionnaire, followed by the MEIM and the semi-structured interview. After completion of the interview, participants were offered the chance to ask questions.

### *CQR Methodology*

The CQR method uses a consensus process to establish findings based on the participants' responses to open-ended question regarding their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences (Hill 2012). The CQR method consists of a semi-structured interview using open-ended questions to collect data to be used for the consensual data-analysis process. The author created the semi-structured interviews and transcribed the responses verbatim in order to facilitate accurate analysis. After de-identification, the transcribed responses were analyzed by the primary research team using CQR process. Team members were encouraged to consider and discuss their viewpoints until a consensus was reached. This was done in order to prevent a biased analysis of the data (Hill 2012).

The CQR method comprises the data-collection phase and the data-analysis phase. The data-analysis phase comprises the within-case analysis and the cross-analysis. For the within-case analysis phase, data is first grouped into *domains* by reviewing transcripts and identifying common themes. Then summaries are created

within each domain to create a *core idea*. In the cross-analysis phase, themes and patterns across participants are determined. The similarities are then grouped into *categories* (i.e., subdomains) and *subcategories*. Each category and subcategory is then assigned a *frequency label* based on the number of participants who endorsed each category. The steps discussed include the development of the domain list, the coding of data into each domain, the creation of core ideas, the development of categories and subcategories, and the assigning of frequency labels. The team comprised nine graduate and undergraduate psychology students who were all educated on the CQR method prior to beginning analysis.

Two auditors were also included, in accordance with the CQR method (Hill 2012). These two auditors were in addition to the primary research team and were not involved with the primary data analysis or consensus process. Auditors are separated from the primary research team to maintain the fidelity of the process and serve as overseers throughout the process (Hill 2012). At each step of the process, the auditors reviewed the results from the primary data analysis team and provided feedback based on the raw interview data.

## RESULTS

### *Demographic Characteristics*

Two men and six women self-identified as African Americans and residing in the Midwest participated in the study. The participants had an average age of 22.3 years (range: 20–28 years). Four participants were in their junior year of college, and four were in their senior year. Participants had interests in various areas, including counseling, social, clinical, industrial/organizational, school, experimental, and developmental psychology. Each participant in this study, with the exception of one, reported a high level of identification with his or her ethnic group.

### *Analysis of Data*

The interview transcripts were recorded verbatim and de-identified. Nine domains were created based on collective ideas represented across transcripts. Where possible, the research team developed a category structure to represent the raw data. Unavoidably, some blocks of data did not fit into any category and were assigned to “Other” (Hill 2012); this category is not discussed here because of its lack of relevance. In the CQR’s final step, frequency labels (*general*, *typical*, and *variant*) are assigned to categories and subcategories. Categories present in all or all but one of the transcripts were assigned as *general*. *Typical* categories were those found in more than half of the transcripts, and *variant* were found in at least two but fewer than half of the transcripts.

### *Overview of Findings*

The master domain list included (1) Reason for Pursuing a Doctoral Degree in Psychology, (2) Navigating the Application Process, (3) Factors Influencing Interest in the Field of Psychology,

(4) Perception of a Program's Commitment to Diversity, (5) Importance of African American Representation in a Program, (6) Financial Concerns, (7) Family View of Psychology (8) Most Important Factor for Attendance, and (9) Prior School Experiences Outside of Psychology. (See Table 1.)

*Reasons for Pursuing a Doctoral Degree in Psychology.* The questions were intended to be broad to elicit participants' thoughts and beliefs. Of the five categories for this domain, there were no general categories, one typical category, and four variant categories. These responses suggested that the reasons for pursuing a psychology doctoral degree were not consistent among participants. Five of the participants reported that they wished to obtain a doctoral degree in psychology because they believed that the degree would allow them to work with individuals with different needs from various populations. Two of the participants reported that they would be the first doctoral recipients in their families, which served as a motivation, and two other participants believed that the financial stability afforded to psychologists was their primary motivation.

*Navigating the Application Process.* Participants were asked to elaborate on the strategies they would use to research and plan their application process. One category emerged as a general response, and one category emerged as a typical response. All but one participant indicated that they would rely heavily on personal and professional contacts within a variety of healthcare fields to understand the application process. This finding emerged as the first general category in the study. Several participants stated that they would approach the application process through doing research on programs via the Internet and subject-related books. This method of information gathering emerged as a typical response among participants.

*Factors Influencing Interest in the Field of Psychology.* The line of questioning was designed to inquire about reasons of interest in the field of psychology apart from the doctorate. Four categories emerged in this domain—namely interest in other people's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions; professional interest in psychology (three subcategories emerged); previous life experiences' impact; and family views/perceived influences. Two categories elicited enough responses to be labeled typical. The first was a subcategory under professional beliefs, related to a desire to work in a profession in which one is actively helping others. This was identified by half the participants as a primary influential factor on their interest. The other typical category was the impact that family view/perceived influence had on their interest in psychology. Three other variant categories and subsequent subcategories emerged under the professional-beliefs category. A small number of participants expressed extrinsic/material reasons for pursuing psychology. Another variant category was related to the intrinsic satisfaction derived from listening to others' problems and providing solutions.

Table 1. Frequency Analysis

| <b>Domain, Category, and Subcategory</b>   | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--|------------------|
| <b>1 Reasons for Pursuing a Doctoral Degree in Psychology</b>                      |                  |
| Views of First-generation Doctoral Degree Completion                               | Variant          |
| Financial Stability  | Variant          |
| Impact of Psychology on Self and Others  | Variant          |
| <i>Providing Help to Individuals from Various Populations with Different Needs</i> | Variant          |
| <b>2 Navigating the Application Process</b>  |                  |
| Impact of Life Experiences on Pursuit of Psychology                                | Variant          |
| <i>Perceived Impact of Family Experiences</i>                                      | Variant          |
| Research/Information Gathering   | Typical          |
| Communicating with Personal and Professional Contacts                              | General          |
| <b>3 Factors Influencing Interest in Field of Psychology</b>                       |                  |
| Personal Beliefs/Interest in Psychology  | General          |
| <i>Extrinsic/Material Reasons</i>  | Variant          |
| <i>Intrinsic Satisfaction</i>  | Variant          |
| <i>Desire to Help Others</i>   | Typical          |
| Previous Life Experiences' Impact on Pursuit of Psychology                         | Variant          |
| Family Views/Perceived Influence   | Typical          |
| <b>4 Perception of a Program's Commitment to Diversity</b>                         |                  |
| Minority Coursework  | General          |
| <i>Influence</i>   | Typical          |
| <i>No Influence</i>  | Variant          |
| Diversity Statement in Recruitment Materials                                       | General          |
| <i>Positive</i>  | General          |
| <i>Negative</i>  | Variant          |
| <i>Neutral</i>   | Variant          |
| <b>5 Importance of Ethnic Minority Representation in a Program</b>                 |                  |
| African American Faculty   | General          |
| <i>Positive Influence</i>  | Typical          |
| <i>Not Important</i>   | Variant          |
| <i>Faculty Competence More Important than Ethnicity</i>                            | Variant          |
| African American Students  | General          |
| <i>Positive Influence</i>  | General          |
| <i>Not Important</i>   | Variant          |
| African American Research  | General          |
| <i>Positive Influence</i>  | General          |
| <i>Most Important Influence</i>  | Variant          |

Concluded next page

**Table 1. Frequency Analysis, Concl.**

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| <b>6 Financial Concerns</b>                                   |                |
| Financial Aid a Positive Impact on Decision to Attend Program | <b>General</b> |
| Minority-Specific Aid   | <b>General</b> |
| <i>Positive Impact</i>  | <b>General</b> |
| <i>Less Important than Other Variables</i>                    | Variant        |
| <b>7 Family View of Psychology</b>                            |                |
| Perception of Participant                                     | Variant        |
| Perception of the Field                                       | <b>General</b> |
| <i>Good Understanding</i>                                     | <b>Typical</b> |
| <i>Poor Understanding</i>                                     | Variant        |
| Family Opinion  | <b>Typical</b> |
| <i>Supportive</i>   | Variant        |
| <i>Suitability as a Profession</i>                            | Variant        |
| Family Impact on Participant                                  | Variant        |
| <i>Influence</i>  | Variant        |
| <i>No Influence</i>   | Variant        |
| <b>8 Most Important Factor for Attendance</b>                 |                |
| Investment in Individual Student                              | Variant        |
| Accepting and Comfortable Environment                         | Variant        |
| Racial Diversity  | Variant        |
| <i>Racially Diverse Student Body</i>                          | Variant        |
| Financial Aid   | Variant        |
| <b>9 Prior School Experiences Outside of Psychology</b>       |                |
| Lack of Racial Diversity among Previous Teachers              | Variant        |

*Perception of a Program's Commitment to Diversity.* This domain resulted in two categories: namely minority coursework and a diversity statement in recruitment materials. Within the minority-coursework category, two subcategories—positive influence and no influence—emerged. More than half of the participants indicated that the availability of minority coursework would positively influence their consideration of a psychology doctoral program. Within the Diversity Statement in Recruitment Materials category, three subcategories emerged: positive, negative, and neutral. The positive subcategory elicited enough responses to be considered general. Only one participant indicated that a statement of commitment to recruiting diverse students would not influence the decision to apply to a program. An interesting perspective from one participant was that the manner in which the diversity statement was delivered could negatively influence her evaluation of a program. Other variant subcategories emerged under both the minority-coursework category and the diversity-statement category. Two or three participants reported that neither the availability of minority coursework nor a commitment-to-diversity statement would be influential to their application decisions.

*Importance of Ethnic Minority Representation in a Program.* Participants were asked about three main areas related to representation in a program—African American students, African American faculty, and faculty with African American research interests—that would influence their application decisions. Two subcategories elicited enough responses to be general categories; one subcategory was typical.

All but one participant stated that the presence of other African American students would positively influence their decisions to apply to a particular program, and one indicated that the presence of program faculty who supported or were involved in African American research was a key factor in determining which program to attend, emerging as a general subcategory. This highlighted the most important facet: African American representation as compared to student body or faculty. This subcategory was endorsed by half of the participants, making it a variant response. The importance of African American faculty was seen as a positively influencing factor for application and attendance. More than half of participants reported that they would actively seek a program that had African American faculty members. Other variant subcategories emerged related to the relative importance of one aspect of African American representation over another, with two or three participants stating that faculty or students were not of high importance relative to research interests; however, the most interesting variant responses were related to feeling that a low census of African American students may actually serve to motivate them for success, as there would be a desire to “prove” themselves as deserving.

*Financial Concerns.* Participants were asked about their views regarding the presence of general and minority-specific financial aid offered by a program, which elicited responses regarding how much priority participants would place on managing the financial commitment often taken on by graduate students. Out of two categories and subcategories in this domain, one of each emerged as a general category. All of the participants except for one identified both the presence of general and minority-specific financial aid as highly influential for application to a program. The sole variant subcategory that emerged from this domain related to the idea that financial aid is less important than other factors. Two participants endorsed this idea, with one stating that although financial aid was still important, other factors would be more influential.

*Family View of Psychology.* Participants were asked to elaborate on their families' opinions of their pursuit of psychology, as well as the impact that those opinions had on them. This domain produced four categories and six subcategories. One subcategory emerged as a typical category. Six of the participants reported that their families had a good understanding of the field of psychology and were supportive of their decisions to pursue graduate degrees. Two participants believed their families to have only a basic understanding of psychology. Variant categories in this domain emerged under limited understanding of psychology as a field, support of the participant in any academic endeavor, belief that psychology is a suitable profession, and family perception having no influence on the participant. These categories were endorsed by at least two participants but fewer than half. Of the variant categories, the closest to a typical category within this

domain was related to family members being supportive of the participants, with half indicating their families as approving of their career choice.

*Most Important Factor for Attendance.* Four variant categories emerged, namely investment in the individual student, accepting and comfortable environment, racially diverse student body, and financial aid. Three participants identified financial aid as the most important factor in choosing a program. Three participants stated that feeling that the program is invested in individual students was most important. Two participants identified feeling that the program was accepting and comfortable was most important, and two participants identified a racially diverse student body as the most important.

*Prior School Experiences Outside of Psychology.* Previous educational experiences emerged as a common theme, and one variant category emerged. Three participants indicated that they had experienced a lack of racial diversity among previous teachers at various education levels. In some cases, this caused them to acclimate to having majority Caucasian American teachers. Others expressed some dismay over this realization.

## **DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to gain insight into how African American undergraduates who are interested in obtaining doctoral degrees in psychology will select and apply to specific programs and how those decisions are influenced by diversity factors and program characteristics. The semi-structured interviews of eight African American undergraduates provided insights on factors related to the initial research questions and are grouped by financial concerns, followed by the importance of diversity, African American representation, and family support.

### *Financial Concerns*

Despite financial aid having an impact, the current data suggest a divergence from the work of Ponterotto et al. (1995), in that financial aid did not emerge as the most important factor. Programs with minority-specific aid appeared more attractive to the participants, though they placed equal importance on the presence of minority-specific aid and other financial aid. The emergence of these findings would suggest that although the presence of financial aid matters to African American students considering doctoral degrees in psychology, other factors play an important role as well.

### *Importance of Diversity*

The presence of minority topics in coursework and a statement reflecting the program's commitment to diversity were positive factors for application to and attendance of doctoral programs. The perceived importance of the diversity statement was a general finding, whereas the presence of minority coursework was a typical finding, suggesting that students may value a program's overall stance on diversity

more than the presence of minority coursework. The way a program promotes diversity does affect how a student will respond, however. Two participants stated that the method could dissuade them from applying. Although this confirms that students are more likely to apply to schools they believe are committed to diversity, programs need to pay specific attention to how they address inclusiveness and acceptance in recruitment materials.

### *African American Representation*

The results are corroborative with previous findings that the presence of other African American students in a program would positively influence a student's decision to apply to a program. More interestingly, the variant response that the presence of African American faculty members was not important to a participant's decision suggests that the presence of African American students is more influential than the presence of African American faculty. An unexpected finding was related to the presence of African American-specific research interests, demonstrating that its presence was just as important as the presence of African American students or faculty. Although all but one participant reported that African American research interests in a program would positively influence their decisions to apply to that program, four of the participants indicated that this was the most important area related to African American representation. Participants positively related to the presence of African American research interests regardless of the ethnicity of the professor. This finding is highly relevant to doctoral programs, as it emphasizes the need for openness to African American issues and research.

### *Family Support*

Findings suggest that the questions in this area were irrelevant. The most highly endorsed theme was that participants felt that their families had a good understanding of the field of psychology and saw it as worthwhile to pursue as a career. Other responses suggested that even if parents or family members had little understanding of the role of a psychologist, they were willing to support the participant. A final finding was the variant theme that the opinion of the family was of little influence to the participant. This may indicate that African American students today have less concern for familial influence in choosing careers than previously thought. Additionally, the findings suggest that the general attitude toward the field of psychology may be steadily improving as mainstream acceptance of psychology increases.

### *Limitations*

The current study's participant sample is heterogeneous in several ways. The data do not reflect the opinion of older individuals or students pursuing psychology as a second career. The study was also conducted in a limited geographical area, which may constitute sample

selection or participation bias. It is possible that themes related to the importance of diversity or the consciousness around diversity issues would not have emerged or would have been more prominent if recruitment and/or data collection had occurred in different parts of the country. Caution should therefore be taken in any attempt to apply findings to the larger African American population in the United States. The data-analysis team included only one African American individual. This could potentially pose a difficulty if the homogeneity of the research team decreases the diversity of comprehension, interpretation, and insight into the particular group of study. To control for the effect of researcher bias in data analysis, the use of auditors' feedback and team effort was employed (Hill 2012). The sample in this study comprised undergraduate students who had not yet applied to doctoral psychology programs. It is quite possible that motivating factors may change for students at different points in the educational process. It is important to keep this in mind when considering the results for implementation.

### *Implications and Future Research*

The present study was consistent with previous research, with additional findings for future directions. It could be theorized that the differences reflect group variations with the African American community. Furthermore, one could hypothesize that the relevance of diversity and African American representation is contingent on one's own identification with one's ethnic identity. African American undergraduates who are considering doctoral degrees in psychology value a program's commitment to diversity as part of the decision-making process. There are specific areas that doctoral programs can target to make themselves more appealing to African American undergraduates. Specifically, students highly valued minority-specific financial aid packages, the presence of other African American students, and openness to and encouragement of African American-centered research.

In addition, African American students respond positively to statements in application materials that highlight commitment to diversity and encouragement of all individuals to apply. A small sample of the data also suggests that statements suggesting inclusiveness across a broad range beyond the identification of ethnic minority groups may be more positively received by African American students. African American students feel more positive toward a program if they see other African American faculty or students within it, but the presence of faculty research interests related to African American concerns may be a more important factor. Responses suggested that individuals would still consider applying to a school with a scarcity of African American faculty as long as they felt the program was receptive and interested in them as well as the psychological/sociological concerns of their ethnicity.

Although the data on what factors are most important to African American students suggested significant within-group differences, several participants reported that believing a doctoral program was genuinely invested in students on an individual level would be the key determination in their university selection. These qualitative findings introduce an additional perspective to extant literature that is not primarily representative of the dominant Caucasian American culture. In accordance with APA guidelines and

recommendations (APA 2004, cited in Hill 2012), multicultural perspectives and indigenous psychologies have been incorporated into the present study's design and data analysis. The results of the present study provide rationale for the development of a specific set of ideals that schools can communicate that will help appeal to African American students. Academic institutions can utilize this information to not only attract more African American students to their programs but also provide an environment that focuses on promoting growth and individual attention through a willingness to engage in discussions and research with individuals of a wider variety of backgrounds.

Areas of future research include investigation of the theme of a program's desire for diversity as potentially dissuading to students. It emerged in the data that participants could feel both hopeful toward their acceptance into a program based upon a program's commitment to diversity but also hesitant if that commitment appeared desperate in nature or somehow less genuine.

The present study was a direct response to the limitations and suggestions for future research highlighted by Ponterotto et al. (1995) indicating a need for more qualitative research among specific ethnic groups. In reference to one of the study limitations, future research could consider the potential differences between first- and second-career candidates. This study was limited to participants with an average age of 22 years; therefore, differences may be observed with older candidates. The data represent an effort to represent the direct experiences and beliefs of African American students. Future areas of research could seek to reproduce similar studies with different ethnic groups and thus form a basis for comparison. Such studies would continue to build upon the mission to increase ethnic minority representation in the field of psychology so that as the population we serve becomes more diverse, we, too, change and grow as a professional community to reflect those needs.

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