

# NAVIGATING FEAR: UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN AMERICAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN THE ACADEMY

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## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study examines how nine African American doctoral students experience fear within their graduate programs and on their college campus, which is a predominantly white institution in the Midwestern United States. Fear is often described as a psychological or an emotional response to a perceived threat or danger. It can be prompted by social rejection, perfectionism, or even failure. *In order to understand how fear is both experienced, internalized and manifested*, we used theories of self-efficacy (one's belief in their own ability to complete a task) and socialization (the process by which students learn the cultural and behavioural norms and expectations of academic institutions including those of peers and faculty) to frame our study. Participants were interviewed three times for ninety minutes each time over the course of one academic year. There were a variety of fears that impacted their experiences including fear of isolation (i.e., tokenization), fear of not belonging, fear of discrimination (that is; bias in grading, lack of mentorship, lack of opportunities, racial microaggressions), and fear of failure. The results of the study indicated that fear, from the participants' perspective, can be internalized as self-doubt (i.e., feeling that one is not good enough), avoidance (i.e., dodging faculty and situations that are perceived as threatening), and emotional distress (e.g., anxiety and depression). Lastly, fear is manifested through obvious behaviours and practices described by the participants including faculty intimidation and bullying, and competition amongst student peers. This study posits the following conclusions: (1) African American doctoral students experiencing fear negatively impacts their self-efficacy, (2) Fear contributes to the imposter syndrome—a phenomenon in which individuals' distrust their own accomplishments and fear that they will be exposed as a con or an "imposter". This syndrome contributes to lower self-esteem, a lower self-concept, and a lack of confidence in oneself. (2) The socialization process itself is both racialized and psychologically violent. As graduate students transition from novice scholar to more senior scholar, the violent environments in which they are trained become breeding grounds for inducing anxiety, self-doubt, and fear. This is significant because as we are considering the role and the experiences of students and what propels them or deters them from becoming future faculty, as practitioners and scholars in the learning process, we can utilize this study to create a more nuanced and culturally relevant educational practice for graduate students to learn and thrive in the academy.

**Keywords:** *Fear, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, socialization, African American doctoral students.*

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