The "Journey" of Doctoral Study in Applied Psychology: Lived Experiences of Students in Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology

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Abstract

A qualitative methodology was adopted to explore the lived experiences of doctoral level students in applied psychology. A total of 15 students ranging in age from 24 to 43, who were at varying levels of their doctoral education, participated in individual semi-structured interviews exploring themes related to influences for the pursuit of graduate study, experiences in their program of study, and general reflections of the graduate school journey. All interviews were conducted from a constructivist-interpretivist model, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a phenomenological coding approach (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Emergent broad themes included antecedents leading to graduate study, current experience of doctoral education, and reflections on the doctoral experience. Implications for future research are discussed and recommendations for graduate programs based on findings are provided.

Keywords

Lived Experiences, Doctoral Students, Psychology Students, Qualitative Research, Doctoral Study, Applied Psychology

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A qualitative methodology was adopted to explore the lived experiences of doctoral level students in applied psychology. A total of 15 students ranging in age from 24 to 43, who were at varying levels of their doctoral education, participated in individual semi-structured interviews exploring themes related to influences for the pursuit of graduate study, experiences in their program of study, and general reflections of the graduate school journey. All interviews were conducted from a constructivist-interpretivist model, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a phenomenological coding approach (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Emergent broad themes included antecedents leading to graduate study, current experience of doctoral education, and reflections on the doctoral experience. Implications for future research are discussed and recommendations for graduate programs based on findings are provided. Keywords: Lived Experiences, Doctoral Students, Psychology Students, Qualitative Research, Doctoral Study, Applied Psychology

Doctoral-level graduate study engenders many challenges and obstacles, including integrating to the culture and community of a new environment (Austin, 2002; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006; Nyquist et al., 1999) maintaining a family and work balance (Haynes et al., 2012; Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009), and managing peer dynamics (Haynes et al., 2012; Ulku-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, & Kinlaw, 2000). As such, the graduate school process is influenced by a multitude of factors resulting in a multilayered, subjective, and complex experience of doctoral studies.

Although the aforementioned issues permeate the graduate student experience across disciplines (Gardner, 2010; Mason et al., 2009), past scholarship has identified graduate study as a largely individualized experience (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Neisheim et al., 2006). Neisheim et al. (2006) remarked that "Graduate and professional students are an extremely heterogeneous group of people pursuing degrees beyond the baccalaureate in diverse institutional, geographical, disciplinary, and cultural settings" (p. 6). Due to these explicit differences shaping the overarching experience of graduate study, we set out to explore whether any commonalities existed among the students themselves. As psychologists, both in training and in a professional role, we became curious about how students within our field *experienced* their journeys to and in graduate school. Additionally, Anderson and Swazey (1998) identified a need for doctoral programs to annually investigate the experiences of their students in order to take remedial action when/if problems are uncovered.

Moreover, the doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in applied psychology maintains a unique distinction from other psychology subfields in that students are concurrently training for both academic and clinical practice. Therefore, by giving voice to these students, unique inroads can be made into understanding the experience of those balancing multiple professional trajectories. It is this balance in applied psychology, the negotiation of dual expectancies of teaching and research with clinical practice that is explored in this study.

Further, this research is not only an effort to respond to Anderson and Swazey's (1998) call for continual investigation into training experiences but also to provide insight across applied psychology disciplines as to students' process and subjective needs. Thus, the basis for our current investigation is twofold: (a) to understand the graduate student experience within the context of an education in applied psychology, and (b) to investigate individual student processes in an effort to support academic institutions as they craft training experiences.

Literature Review

Graduate Training Experience at the Doctoral Level

Tinto (1993) (as cited in Barnes & Gardner, 2007) outlined a three-stage model of graduate persistence: the *Transition* phase, wherein the student attempts to integrate the norms and culture of the academic program, the *Candidacy* phase wherein the student perseveres to attain competent levels of skill, and finally, the *Doctoral Completion* phase wherein the student has finished coursework and moved into their doctoral research, specifying their connections with particular mentors and preparing for emergence into a professional role. This persistence model takes place alongside an intentional socialization process into the academic setting where faculty effectively train students to take on their responsibilities and roles (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2010; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Nesheim et al., 2006; Nyquist et al., 1999). However, this system is not without its pitfalls as high levels of dissatisfaction and unmet expectations have been found to permeate doctoral education (Gittings, Bergman, & Osam, 2018; Nyquist et al. 1999). Specifically, disruptions to the student-to-faculty pipeline can be seen by examining the attrition rate in doctoral education; Gardner (2008a) reported an attrition rate among doctoral students across disciplines to be between 40%-70%. Therefore, while the training of doctoral students is intended to generate the next wave of faculty, a large number of students enrolled in this process experience challenges to the point of complete disengagement.

A number of these dissuading factors include length of stay in the program, waning interest in pursuing a professorship, a decrease in the perception that academia is family friendly, a loss of a sense of self in favor of the program and/or discipline, lack of supports to address ongoing stressors, and having to manage a multitude of roles at once (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Haynes et al. 2012; Marbach-Ad, Egan, Thompson, 2015; Mason et al., 2009; Nyquist et al., 1999). Moreover, students have noted that a number of these concerns arose from direct observation of and/or discussion with their mentors, citing increasing concerns about possibilities for their own future after doctoral study (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Mason et al., 2009).

Furthermore, previous research on the graduate experience found that doctoral students felt graduate study "...was changing them in ways they did not like" (Anderson & Swazey, 1998, p. 9). Thus the doctoral student finds themselves engaging fully in a process that yields negative evaluations of self as well as future prospects in their chosen profession. Such an internalized incongruence can lead one to ultimately question their choice of academia as a profession and may be a substantial contributing factor to the high levels of attrition previously reported by Gardner (2008a).

Clearly, not all doctoral students opt out of finishing their programs. In fact, a number of factors contribute to graduate student success. Progression through the doctoral experience has been shown to shift attitudes about graduate study toward the positive (Gardner, 2008b; Nyquist et al., 1999); as students move forward through their programs there emerges a lessening in perceived intensity and self-doubt and a self-acknowledgement of competencies (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2008b; Nyquist et al., 1999). Furthermore, both personal and

occupational skills gained prior to beginning a doctoral program contribute to eventual feelings of success for those persons who remain in graduate study. This finding has been largely attributed to a pre-developed reliance on personal self-efficacy and internal locus of control (Austin, 2002). In fact, it appears that these experiences play an important role in guiding an individual toward doctoral study. Explicit factors contributing to pursuit of doctoral study include a desire for knowledge in the field, pursuing research, wanting to teach, and a desire to help others (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Brailsford, 2010; Guerin, Jayatilaka, & Ranasinghe, 2015; Kowalczuk-Walędziak, Lopes, Menezes, & Tormenta, 2017; Offerman, 2011); thus, engagement and goal orientation while a doctoral student is characterized by the notion of self as it pertains to prior experience and the desire to capitalize on earned skills.

Doctoral-Level training in Psychology

Among the psychology training fields considered in this article (clinical, counseling, and school), all have yielded an attrition rate below 6% from 2011-2015 (Michalski, Cope, & Fowler, 2016), directly contrasting the overarching trend across doctoral education. This may be due to psychology students' ability to utilize their social sphere as a means toward necessary social-emotional support (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012). As a field that focuses on interpersonal engagement and promotes supportive relationships as fundamental to well-being, it stands to reason that students within the discipline would put these learned skills into practice. Beyond peers, level of satisfaction in both training and life during doctoral study has been previously attributed by psychology doctoral students as determined by the perceived support of their faculty mentors (Tompkins, Brecht, Tucker, Neander, & Swift, 2016). Further, doctoral-level psychology training contributes to identity development in that a movement occurs from budding professional to mature practitioner within the confines of the training environment (Bruss & Kopala, 1993), mirroring Tinto's (1993) model of graduate student development. What can be generalized from these findings in the literature on doctoral study in psychology is that the ways in which a psychology program fosters its climate, based on encouraging peer interaction and faculty involvement, plays a major role in determining the well-being and development of its graduate students (Rummell, 2015; Tompkins et al., 2016; Veilleux, January, VanderVeen, Reddy, & Klonoff, 2012).

Although the literature thus far has evidenced that doctoral students in psychology maintain a lower attrition rate in comparison to other disciplines, are able to utilize coping skills that either pre-existed or were learned in the classroom, and rely heavily on their faculty mentors for a sense of satisfaction with their programs, what is not known is how these students *experience* these and other facets of their graduate journey. Therefore, in accordance with Anderson and Swazey's (1998) call to forgo broad approaches in favor of more site-specific and context-dependent investigations, we employed a qualitative approach to give voice to the unique and convergent narratives of doctoral students in psychology across applied disciplines.

Research Team

The research team consisted of three co-investigators: Jason S. Frydman received his Ph.D. in school psychology and currently serves as a post-doctoral researcher examining trauma-informed practices in the school setting. Having recently completed his doctoral-level psychology education, Jason is curious about how doctoral peers subjectively experience(d) their training. Further, Jason had mixed experiences in the graduate classroom, ranging from

engaging to discouraging. His curiosity in this subject stems from his deep commitment to rigorous education and an abiding interest in the acculturation process of academia. Jason is a practicing mental health clinician focusing on individual processes and group dynamics.

Linda Cheung recently received her Ph.D. in school psychology. She has worked in a variety of professional settings, which include psychology related and non-psychology related experiences. This study is of particular interest because she is interested in the transformation of the individual while pursuing higher education through her own personal journey of ups and downs within the program. Due to her earlier struggles in school, she has always wanted to work with young children and help them succeed in academics.

Joseph G. Ponterotto is a counseling psychologist and has been involved in conducting and supervising qualitative research since the late 1980s. He is particularly interested in supporting culturally diverse students through the long and winding journey of receiving a doctoral degree and planning their careers in applied psychology. From his own experiences as a member of an immigrant Italian family, he is curious about cultural motivations, and family influences/reactions, in pursuing training as an applied psychologist. As a long-time faculty member working primarily with counseling and school psychology students, he is interested in understanding both the challenges and rewards of doctoral study and uncovering new ideas to better support current and future doctoral students both professionally and personally.

At the time of data collection, the first two authors were student-investigators and the third author provided overall guidance and support throughout the research process. Interest in the overall graduate school experience was pertinent to the student-investigators as they were deeply engaged in their training and noticed specific converging and diverging trends within their personal experiences. The research arose from an attempt to gain insight on what led doctoral students to apply to graduate school and how their experiences while in the program were similar or dissimilar to their peers, specifically seeking what factors before and during training were most salient.

Method

A heuristic design (Patton, 1990) was used within the constructivist-interpretivist model to conduct semi-structured interviews with Ph.D. students in clinical, counseling, and school psychology regarding their graduate school experience (Kleining & Witt, 2000). This methodology was selected to explore emergent themes surrounding the protocol questions to understand the perspective of other doctoral students and whether it resonated with the researchers' experiences. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed the interviewee to articulate their experiences and their transition throughout their journey. An iterative analysis approach was utilized to discover emerging themes as the study evolved. A procedural journal was utilized to keep track of changes made to the study protocol.

Research subjectivity and reflexivity was also considered within ethical guidelines (Goldstein, 2017; Haverkamp, 2005; Levitt, Molutsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Morrow, 2005). Since, the first two authors were participants in this study, a conscious effort was made to bracket expectations, perspectives, and biases by accepting our pre-existing beliefs as our own (Hoffman & Barker, 2017). The first two authors each kept a reflective journal to document and monitor pre-existing notions of the subject matter and acknowledged thoughts, feelings, and changes throughout the study. These journals also acted as credibility checks to bring awareness to any biases that we may have encountered throughout the study. Results yielded a variety of evidence contributing organized themes representing the overall experiences of doctoral students across three psychology disciplines.

Sample and Participants

Purposeful criterion-based sampling was utilized to recruit graduate students in applied psychology programs from the New York City metropolitan area. A total of fifteen students from diverse backgrounds ranging from 24 to 43 years of age were recruited. As shown in Table 1, participants varied in the year of their doctoral study, when they applied to graduate school, and their prior education level. To protect participants' confidentiality, locations and names are shielded and pseudonyms are used (see Table 1). To highlight the diversity and background characteristics of our sample, and to ensure the representation of all voices, Appendix A presents descriptions and associated quotes of each study participant.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Current Age	Age when accepted into program	Year in Program	Highest Level of Education Completed (Subject Area)
1	Male	32	29	3rd Year	Masters (Drama Therapy)
2	Female	31	29	3rd Year	Masters (General Psychology)
3	Male	43	43	1st Year	Masters (Social Work)
4	Female	24	22	3rd Year	BA (Psychology)
5	Male	43	40	3rd Year	Masters (Education)
6	Female	25	25	1st Year	BA (Psychology)
7	Female	25	22	4th Year	BA (Psychology)
8	Female	27	23	4th Year	BA (Psychology)
9	Female	26	23	4th Year	BA (Psychology)
10	Female	29	25	4th Year	BA (Journalism)
11	Male	28	24	4th Year	BA (Psychology)
12	Female	30	27	3rd Year	3 Masters (General Psychology, Counseling, Education)
13	Female	25	22	3rd Year	BA (Psychology)
14	Female	31	27	5th Year	2 Masters (Both in Clinical Psychology, MA; MPhil)
15	Female	29	25	4th Year	Masters (Counseling)

Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained through the Institutional Review Board at Fordham University prior to data collection as outlined by the American Psychological Association (2017). Students were recruited on a voluntary basis through snowball sampling wherein participants are asked to refer others to the study for participation based on appropriateness (Polkinghorne, 2005). Informed consent, acknowledgement of confidentiality, and permission to record the interviews were obtained from all participants. Each participant was read a script prior to beginning the interview, which covered confidentiality and possible risks of the study (see Appendix B). Interviews were held in a private and quiet room and were audio-taped using an electronic recording device. After each interview was conducted, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. All fifteen transcripts were then reviewed and analyzed using a phenomenological coding approach (Creswell 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Individual themes were extrapolated from each transcript and collapsed into three broad themes.

Interviews. The fifteen interviews ranged in length from 19 minutes and 36 seconds to 68 minutes and 51 seconds, with an average of 44 minutes and 23 seconds (SD = 35 minutes and 23 seconds) in length. Following the constructivist, discovery-oriented approach, interviews were semi-structured and non-directive, facilitating participants' exploration and expression of their lived experiences. The interview questions (see Appendix B for working script) were carefully worded by the researchers to ensure that they were: 1) opened-ended and non-directive, and 2) covered the areas of interest, including the reason for pursuing graduate school, classroom dynamics, peer relationships, and research interests. All interviews began with the "grand-tour" question, "Why did you apply to graduate school?" and the protocol evolved and changed within each interview in order to capture the individual's complete experience(s), which is consistent with emergent design and iterative analysis of constructivistic qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Given that the researchers interviewed, transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed each interview, there was intimacy with the data. The researchers utilized a phenomenological coding approach to carefully read through each transcript for emergent and salient themes. The themes within each interview were then compared collectively for common broader themes; a process known as the constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2012). The researchers independently coded the transcripts for open themes, defined as coherent segments of text deemed important to the participants' experiences. The open themes were then compiled together and the researchers worked collaboratively to organize them into logical categories. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate the open codes and logical categories into broader inclusive themes. Both the broad themes and categories will be discussed in-depth in the results section. Open themes that did not cluster into a category and were specific to a single individual were noted by the research team, but ultimately deemed outliers and not coded.

<div align="center">

Results

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Among the 15 interviews across seven universities, a total of three broad themes emerged: *antecedents leading to graduate study*, *current experience of doctoral education*, and *reflections on the doctoral experience*. The initial data coding resulted in 43 open themes

that captured participant experience. The phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to locate the individual open themes, which were then grouped into categories. Within each category, sub-categories emerged that further highlight the individual's lived experiences (as shown in Table 2). The results indicated these experiences were part of a developmental process, best described as a progressive *journey* up to this time point in the student's doctoral study with identified antecedents which, in turn, influenced the current experience of the classroom and how the overall graduate process is viewed. The following presentation of data will feature both broad themes and categories. Evidence of dimensions of themes (sub-categories) is implicit within each presentation of the category level.

Table 2. Broad Themes, Categories, and Dimensions of Themes (Subcategories)

Broad Themes	Categories	Subcategories
1. Antecedents to graduate study	1. Family	1. Family dynamics 2. Family origin/intergenerational influence 3. Continuing legacy 4. Family history informing research

	2. Cultural influences	1. Cultural differences in treatment/knowledge:
		   a. medical
		   b. psychological
		   c. social norms

	3. Prior work or school experiences	1. Work dynamics 2. Pursuit of education/more knowledge 3. Teaching/education 4. Occupational ceiling

2. Current experiences of doctoral education	1. Expectations versus reality of the classroom experience	1. Need for critical analyses
		2. Levels of peer interaction/cohort dynamics
		   a. maturity
		   b. age
		   c. lived experiences
		   d. chronological age vs. psychological age
		3. Faculty relationship
		4. Coursework/level of difficulty

	2. The development of research interests over time	1. Research as a process
	3. Lifestyle Change	1. Finances 2. Doctoral peer support 3. Ecological influences on school

		dynamics
3. Reflections on the doctoral experience	1. The development of the self	1. Taking a pragmatic approach 2. Appreciation for the graduate school experience
	2. Need for social change	1. Helping youth in school settings 2. Outlook on the profession as important and relevant
	3. The societal value of the Ph.D.	1. Ph.D. as a status symbol 2. Seeking validation/proving self 3. Occupational mobility

Antecedents Leading to Graduate Study

Notably, in the field of applied psychology, many Ph.D. programs do not require a master's degree prior to admission to the program; students can apply directly from undergraduate training. Among the sample, six students came in with master's degrees and the remaining nine applied to programs without a master's degree or professional certification. As should be acknowledged, each student's experience differs depending on the circumstances that led them to consider applying to graduate school. Any experience prior to the current graduate experience such as upbringing/family influences, cultural influences, and prior work or school experience were grouped into the broad theme of *antecedents leading to graduate study*.

Family. Several participants brought up their family as one of the factors that played a role in their pursuit of higher education. Specifically, participants reflected on how familial influences brought about themes of complex dynamics within the individual's family of origin, intergenerational influences, and family history. John discussed how his father's history deeply influenced John's views on pursuing higher education of all types:

> My father said that no one can ever take away your education, they can take away everything from you, you can lose your house, you can lose your money, you can lose your possessions, but nobody can take away your education and that came from a place, he's a Holocaust survivor...he would say that over and over again and this was, you know he was a guy that came from pre WWII Poland in Jewish Shtetls, to getting driven out of the country, surviving for a number of years on the fly, and then coming to the States and taking a real advantage, you know getting an education, becoming a doctor...

Similar to John, Helena, spoke about family having a direct impact on her consideration of pursuing higher education. Helena grew up and was immersed in psychology due to broader familial involvement. Here she identifies how this immersion influenced her educational trajectory: "I primarily did anything related to psych… all my training has been about psychology, even when it wasn't, I did a history minor, my perspective has always remained within a psychological sphere." Additionally, she spoke of the pressures of continuing a family legacy, emphasizing that, "I come from a family of psychiatrists." Despite not going to medical school like other members of her nuclear family, Helena found her niche by pursuing graduate studies in counseling psychology, identifying that "(she) really felt at home

in psychology." In doing so, Helena was able to participate in the family legacy while creating her own career path.

Nigel also came from a family of medical doctors in various specialties, and knew "[he] was going to college as a first grader." He cited his desire to help others based on his familial influences that exposed him to a human services trajectory. He stated that,

> both [his parents] have encountered...psych patients in the medical field, so I had that sort of compassion and treating influence, particularly [from] my mom….There [was] a precedent, my dad majored in psychology in college and his mom also majored in psychology and she has a masters maybe in something psych[ology] related...in counseling, she has done some work in the field.

However, Nigel's interests in the field of psychology were solidified when his family sought out psychological professionals to deal with various mental health and learning difficulties exposing him to individual as well as family/group therapy.

Notably, a number of participants identified education as a value instilled in them by their families and saw themselves fulfilling this expectancy by attaining a doctoral degree. In this way, pursuit of the doctoral degree can be partly considered an outcome of a belief system implanted in youth, eventually fulfilling familial values. Beyond youth, being affected by family in adulthood also served as inspiration for doctoral pursuit; spurring the drive to attain professional prominence. On either account, whether participants identified familial roots for pursuing a doctoral degree in youth or adulthood, the inspirational and influential impact was clearly articulated.

Cultural Influences. Related to the topic of family, cultural norms also played a role in the antecedents of pursuing higher education for participants. Given that the participants came from diverse backgrounds and upbringings, cultural influences either encouraged students to adhere to or diverge from personal cultural norms. Cultural differences pertaining to social or psychological knowledge and treatment fell into this sub-category.

For some participants, and beyond individual family values, there was a wider cultural expectation to pursue higher education. Victoria, a Chinese-American, noted that "there is a cultural aspect to it, where it was pretty much drilled into my head that from a very young age you have to go to high school, college, and graduate school." Victoria also cited differences she observed from her own culture when she worked with a variety of populations during training experiences, noticing less of an emphasis on education, commenting, in reference to clients from other backgrounds, "...like it wasn't ingrained in their culture to go to college, like a lot of their parents didn't go to college..." Victoria's statement speaks to a raised self-awareness of how her own culture contributed to a highly concentrated view of education; reflecting that her current applied experiences diversified her understanding of how intensely culture influenced her own educational trajectory when compared with others.

Lisa, who also identified as Chinese-American, addressed cultural differences with regards to her decision to choose her own destiny versus cultural expectations:

> ...I think growing up because I have assimilated so much into American culture, I need[ed] to do things on my own and follow my passion and my path wherever it [took] me, it was always psychology, but in more traditional Chinese families, people don't believe in psychology

Lisa struggled with belonging to more than one group that had seemingly contrasting cultural frameworks, specifically citing in her interview the differences between individualistic versus collectivistic values; in order to pursue her interest, she had to negotiate both an American acculturation influence and ethnic beliefs. Thus cultural considerations were at the forefront of Lisa's decision-making process to enter doctoral education.

Mary, who is of Ashkenazi Jewish background stated, "I think Jews value education and I think it's common to go on to higher degrees." Victoria's family shared similar cultural expectations: "Chinese culture is pretty um...education focused..." While family and culture share a great deal of overlap, in that familial dynamics are often reflective of cultural norms and standards, participants discussed culture in broad terms, identifying an overarching experience of cultural influence.

In fact, not all participants who discussed culture referenced their family. In addition to religious or ethnic cultural influences, Jamie cited ecological factors for expected pursuit of graduate study, stating:

> Just being surrounded by all of the wealth, and so when you're in that kind of environment, and also because I lived in a college town in middle school in Ohio, like I was surrounded by people where going for higher education was not unattainable, it was kind of a given...it was just like a given option, I guess, which is less true for people in not that situation, where like that type of education is a lot harder to obtain when you're struggling for resources.

Moreover, David framed his experience of national culture as a primary influence for pursuing doctoral study. Coming from a small community with few mental health clinicians in South America, where he noted alternative methods to treating mental health, David found himself reaching a professional ceiling. He stated, "There might be two or three psychiatrists in the entire country trying to facilitate the needs of the entire population." As a result, David sought out education in the United States because he felt he needed to learn more in order to address the shortage of mental health services as well as serve the needs of the larger community. In this way, part of David's decision to pursue graduate study was determined by a perceived need to address a deficit within a national approach to mental health.

Prior work or school experience. Beyond the intimate and subjective experience of family and culture, participants also spoke about their prior work or school involvement that paved the road for their decision to switch career paths or continue schooling. Each individual's experience varied as some students went straight into a doctoral program from their undergraduate training, while others entered the workforce. A number of reasons, such as having multiple professional options, the desire to advance their careers, reaching an occupational ceiling, and desire for further academic training were categorized into *prior work and school experience*.

From early on, Zelda knew she would go to graduate school and study psychology: "So I think for a while I was interested in psych[ology] and in undergrad[uate], I studied psych and I think even in high school I had in mind that I wanted to be a psychologist so I think it was just very much in my mind the trajectory of wanting to do that in grad[uate] school. That was always the plan and then the school psychology…piece kind of evolved from there." As Zelda began her educational career, she found and narrowed down her focus of study, stating, "as I developed my interests, in college I was studying educational studies and I was interested in…working with kids, so the school psych[ology] piece made sense."

Some participants purposefully sought out a variety of experiences to diversify their scope of practice. Anna, a double major in psychology and English in undergraduate, decided

to pursue psychology as she believed "psych is a more responsible thing to pursue." Further, she had a set plan to obtain her doctoral degree. First, she would obtain her masters in general psychology, then work in an Autism Center for a couple years prior to continuing her educational career path in a doctoral program, "… to get into a Ph.D. program, you should have research experience…that [was] my ultimate goal." Her work and school experiences in Washington State brought her to New York to gain what she perceived to be "a little bit more worldly than what I would have gotten."

David also continued on a somewhat straight-forward trajectory; however, due to circumstantial obstacles in his career path, he felt that his skills as a social worker were not enough. He expressed that his depth of knowledge was lacking to address and competently support the trauma that his patients were presenting. His prior work experience and training illustrated David's dilemma with being a mental health professional while feeling ill-equipped:

> I felt very stagnant professionally… and I was probably well beyond my competence...I'm one of the few licensed to practice…so I ended up seeing a plethora of presentations, which I didn't really know a whole lot about, going back to school [was] the only solution for me besides continuing to practice …

Similar to David, Mary felt she was unable to follow her career path without obtaining a higher degree. She stated, "I applied because I couldn't do what I wanted to do with just an undergraduate degree." Although she originally wanted to go into teaching, her undergraduate coursework steered her in a different direction, "I started taking psych classes and realized that was also interesting and I could still work with youth in a slightly different capacity, I liked it a lot, I liked all the classes I took, I think most people find psych interesting…like studying human behavior, studying ourselves." She also enjoyed the academic challenges, which she believed would help broaden her educational horizons, "I like academia, I like being a student, I like being in a classroom setting, I like conversations with people and expanding my knowledge."

On the other hand, Jamie's career change stemmed from her humanitarian work at non-profit organizations as a journalism major. Her experiences were interdisciplinary in that she, "spent a lot of time with the clinical department, in addition to the other departments." This allowed her to talk to social workers, research coordinators, and other mental health professionals. Coupled with job scarcity due to an economic recession at the time, Jamie decided to pursue higher education in clinical psychology in order to better serve the population that she was writing about in a journalistic capacity. She commented, "I stumbled upon some clinical psych[ology] programs and I realized that those resonated with me in a sort of visceral way… it just resonated with me more."

As can be seen, prior exposure to work and school environments helped participants in their path toward doctoral study in psychology. In particular, working with others interpersonally, the drive towards meaningful work, and a desire to improve competencies were significant factors in selecting doctoral-level psychology as a chosen profession. Moreover, participants articulated that their prior degrees were insufficient, implicating the doctoral degree as the perceived benchmark for knowledge attainment. The enjoyment of being in the classroom and the potential to elongate this experience was also influential and speaks to the gratification of prior academic engagement noted by participants. It is these experiences that catapulted students into their current doctoral education.

In the interest to better understand whether the expectations set by these past experiences are currently being met, participants provided their thoughts and impressions of the present reality of their doctoral studies.

Current Experience of Doctoral Education

Expectations of doctoral study, research interests, lifestyle changes and classroom dynamics were representative of the overall graduate school experience among participants. Specifically, participants spoke to their understanding of doctoral study within the context of their current awareness. The following sub-categories are reflective of the influential domains with which this time was conceptualized.

Expectations versus reality of the classroom experience. Within this theme, participants discussed obstacles in transitioning to graduate school, perceptions of in-classroom dynamics, and level of difficulty regarding course work and workload. In regards to the level of challenge presented by courses, several participants indicated that they experienced a discrepancy between prior expectations and how classes actually unfolded. This sentiment was acutely represented by John's comment:

> I think there are moments where I am getting a quality education here, but that the dialogue with my peers, the dialogues with my instructors, the actual work I was being asked to do. I was like, alright cool, but like what else, what else, let's tear this apart, let's rip it up, you know. That's what we're here to do, so that's what I feel in the classroom, I feel kind of like sometimes I just feel like, alright I just have to sit here and listen for two hours, which I was hoping was not going to be the case…So, I think, I think, that has been a struggle for me with the program.

Reflective of this latter sentiment, John further commented that he was left wanton in regards to classroom rigor. His expectation for greater dialogue in the classroom as a means for challenging and thought-provoking discourse within graduate school was described as follows: "I think I was disappointed in the level of critical dialogue that was happening in the classroom. I had come from a professional environment…where people think very critically...and there is a high level of dialogue…" Nigel also articulated challenges, but in a slightly different vein. He explained that his classroom difficulties were unexpected, noting:

> Grad[uate] school has been way easier than I thought it would be, I mean it has been really hard from a time management perspective and I feel really challenged emotionally in the clinical work, but the classes are not hard. Coming from (undergraduate institution), my classes, I worked my ass off in college and I was expecting to do the same here...classes will be insanely hard, I will have to write really well...I was not doing high-quality work this past year...it's honestly the case where we are used to writing papers and it's not clear whether anybody reads them and that's sort of frustrating.

Further, Helena wavered in her perception of being challenged:

> In some ways I feel like I am really being challenged and in some way it feels like I am not. I love the professors because I could tell just their intellectual side, their ability to care, like there is a lot to learn from them, just in the sense of them modeling how they are at the same time, the level of rigor, compared to what I experienced in undergrad isn't there. My brain would just hurt from my classes in undergrad, like you are just learning so much that like in that sense I don't feel like I am being pushed in the same way. I do feel like I am

being pushed to think, um, and learn new skills, but they are different skills, but it's still a lot of work but not in the same way. So I still don't totally know, I am still adjusting so much to that, but I was like, my first three years of school were like 500-person lecture halls, like I was nobody, (graduate institution) had no like…this is me, I have a voice and I am adjusting to having a lot of voice, I guess...

However, the expectations seemed to have changed over time for Adam:

So was the level of the work, the level of expectation lower than what I imagined it might be before I started? Yes. That was the case. But where I sit now, five years later; that was just an unrealistic expectation of the world, not necessarily of this program or anything like that, um, I'm feeling, I guess if you had asked me these questions a few years ago I probably would have answered them differently and might have been a lot more pounding my fists on the table, saying it was this and it was this and it was this. But being where I am now and sort of feeling like I am on the downhill or like last year at this time, if you had asked me these questions I would have been singing a completely different song because I was up to my ears in correlational design and psychometrics and all of that stuff…

Findings indicated that student expectations prior to graduate school were drastically different from their current experiences in a number of ways. The first student, John, was ready to be critically challenged in all his graduate courses, while Nigel and Adam expected the coursework to be difficult and found that the work was less than. Although Adam did acknowledge the highs and lows of the program, he reconciled that the experience of graduate study was dependent on his year in the program and associated workload. Helena found that an environmental change into smaller classroom size from her undergraduate studies helped her discover that she was an individual with power in her voice. These testimonials provided a glimpse of the natural fluctuations within the doctoral journey as the expectations of the student changes from year to year and are seemingly dependent on the program's specific approach to its curriculum. Alternatively, rather than tethering a participant's experience to the specific program, it may be that expectations are context-dependent and are influenced by the student's perception of doctoral study at the present moment of inquiry.

The development of research interests over time. As part of doctoral training, students are required to complete research of their own. Interests in research topics vary depending on the individual's prior experiences and worldly exposure. This category implicates research as a component of the current graduate school experience, ranging from specific to broad. The following commentary is representative of participants' research topics and/or interests. Adam, who was in his third year of training, was the only student that expressed an interest in operating within a specific research methodology: "I am intensely interested in process-oriented, exploratory, qualitative investigation and really getting to the heart of lived experience..." Further, Anna, in her third year, had a clearly articulated area of research based on earlier work with a specific population:

I started my research on trying to do a project on um...with kids with Autism, neuropsych[ology] on visual-spatial abilities, to try to see if it would help find an area of strength in kids with Autism, like in functioning abilities. So, I

created this battery that focused on visual-spatial strengths in Autism and I was going to have parents fill out Autism questionnaires to see if the neuropsych[ology] test strengths were commensurate with the way that the parents perceived their child's abilities to be...My IRB is particularly punitive for research with protective populations...Sooo, after that, I kind of went back to my roots; what did I get into the field for? It was to help the parents after they received a diagnosis, it was to support families.

Observably, it appeared that timing of study participation played a role in the specificity of research interest, with participants in earlier stages of training maintaining a broader framework for areas of possible pursuit. For example, Helena, a first-year student, expressed general interest in several topics and no specific paradigm:

So my main interest is, I gave a few and they will link together in what will be a dissertation, but I am not exactly sure how exactly they are going to be related. I will say the words first and then my idea of how exactly they will fit together: Mindfulness, complex or developmental relational trauma, whatever you want to call it, social- emotional learning, resiliency, and attachment. So I have a few questions that come from that. For example, for kids to emerging adults who have experienced developmental trauma, how can mindfulness be used to support attachment anxiety and build social-emotional literacy to improve overall well-being and coping? But I am not sure exactly how I am going to recruit or measure that. So that's my issue.

David, also a first-year, acknowledged that his topic was initially too general: ... "I discovered that it was way too broad and in fact I'm not even sure, now that I've been hit with so many ideas, I'm not sure if those are ones that are really going to stay for me." As the interview progressed, David shared about his growing family as the impetus for his doctoral research interests: "When I moved to (South American country) it was just me, then I got married, plus one, then we had two children, plus two, so three, four in total with myself. So my kids were born in (South American country) and that's the impetus behind my own qualitative research project."

The juxtaposition between these later-stage and first-year students speaks to a developmental process that is indicative of the graduate experience. It appears that ongoing clinical training and exposure to a variety of research practices aids the student in forming a more cohesive sense of pursuit and ultimately provides greater definition to a doctoral identity. Contrary to this, students in their first year may still be more greatly influenced by prior work and life experiences, not yet possessing the structure of research and practice provided along the doctoral training path.

Lifestyle change. A number of participants moved states and/or internationally to further their education, requiring a major lifestyle change. Lifestyle changes noted by participants were largely denoted by adjusting to the pace of graduate student life as well as moving geographical locations. Students spoke about expected and unexpected changes as a result of pursuing graduate study.

Regarding adjusting to a new schedule and living environment, Rachel discussed difficulties having to reduce social time with friends, struggling with overall time management, and feeling like a financial burden to her family. A major change Rachel did not expect was the feeling of losing her independence while in graduate school, a feeling she previously had as an undergraduate:

> I lived on campus, but in grad[uate] school, I'm living back at home, so the difference in terms of, I guess my time availability and how I'm… I can do my work... In terms of undergrad[uate]...I have a dorm room, I go to my dorm room, especially during senior year, I could lock myself in a room because I lived in a single, do my work, kind of shut everybody out. At home, there's a million…there's like a lot of people at my house, so it's hard to...focus… [be]cause for me, I prefer to work like in silence so it's harder to have that silence necessary to do my work at home. I kind of worked with it now, now that I'm in my third year, now that I know how to work with it, or what to do to get work done. So, in that way dealing with that...was something I had to face moving from undergrad to grad school...

Further, Elena relocated from the West coast to the East coast of the United States in order to attend graduate school, noting that "[it was a] total leap, I knew no one…I didn't have any friends or any family who had applied to a Ph.D. program in psychology so I didn't have a lot of help, but I had a lot of support [from my cohort]." Elena's comment suggests that her experience of isolation in service of attaining a high-level education was made easier by the newfound community of her doctoral peers. Elena's experience points to the importance of a foundational community during the transition into doctoral studies as well as throughout the program. She further commented that:

> It has been the most supportive part of the program. Great group, really diverse...Huge range, we range from 27-45... some people had families, everyone was in very different life stages... I think it made our group a very rich group for that reason, so many of the classes are about exploring yourself in order to understand others, so there is a strange experience of being incredibly open and like diving deep with yourself and others.

However, not all participants had as positive of an experience. Samantha encountered challenges within her cohort, stating "my cohort is pretty competitive unfortunately, it's not untypical, but it's not usual in my program." Being the youngest member of her cohort, Samantha cited age as a possible influential factor as some of her cohort members were in their early 30s and 40s. Despite the small size of her cohort, Samantha believed that she was still able to connect with a few peers: "I have three peers that I really respect and love…but I definitely have people I like." In contrast with Elena, who reported depending on her cohort to navigate the doctoral transition, Samantha noted that she had to find her way to feeling connected. As she mentioned, Samantha's age may have played a factor in how dynamics were shaped among her cohort, however, it could also be that peer cohesion is dependent upon the unique composition of each program.

David articulated concerns about transitioning to a new environment. He acknowledged that his decision to move to a new country for graduate studies had a direct effect on his family; specifically adjusting to the customs, weather, food, etc… His concern was how the change may impact his children:

> … they don't know the temperature change and they don't know… you know, people, they don't know friends, they're going to a new school, where for example, they have to learn American history, which they know a little about because Daddy's American, but not much more, it's not what they were tested on in school, you know, so it's difficult.

Most participants expressed that attending graduate school affected their lifestyle in that they had to re-learn to manage time and prioritize school responsibilities. Additionally, students mentioned limited to non-existent social interactions with their non-doctoral friends due to emerging time constraints. Thus emphasis was placed on doctoral peers as a major factor in determining one's experience of acclimating to graduate studies. Such commentary from participants suggests a significant shift across multiple life domains, insinuating doctoral pursuit as a catalyst for necessary personal adjustment and transformation. Sacrifices, both personal and financial, can lay a heavy burden on graduate students for an extended period of time, incurring strains on both the student and those implicated in their personal, social, and familial spheres.

Throughout the interview process, participants responded to direct questions about their lived experiences. While providing these remarks, participants assumed a reflective stance and commented on their broader conceptualization of the doctoral experience, leading to the next, and final, broad theme.

Reflections on the Doctoral Experience

Although students were still enrolled in their programs at the time of data collection, discussions of their academic experience engaged participants in a subjectively reflective process. Participants were prompted to provide their rationale for entering graduate school, how their studies have impacted their livelihoods, and their concrete observations of the doctoral training process. However, participants also took moments within the interview to reflect on the overall gestalt of graduate study. These reflections resulted in the following categories: the development of the self, the need for social change, and attaining occupational mobility.

The development of the self. Enlisting a pragmatic approach, appreciation for the graduate school experience, and completing the program with expediency all spoke to developmental aspects of personal identity. An explicit focus on the self was apparent through Helena's reflection on the unfolding of her identity via the doctoral process:

> I just love learning about the material and could always envision myself in the work, I knew up until like a few years ago almost that my potential to be able to really show what I can do and show my intelligence was not there, I just wasn't able to like shine to my potential almost and I felt that … I knew that I was going to be able to show my potential in the kind of setting that graduate school affords, I think the learning is different, the values are different… I knew I was waiting to get somewhere, like I just had to work really hard to prove myself, to get somewhere. And then once I got there, I wouldn't have to be so worried about how I got there, I would just be. So that's really what graduate school was for me.

Additionally, Brenda remarked that going to graduate school supported her personal journey. Coming from a family that often did not ask about one's emotional disposition, Brenda noted that her doctoral pursuit has aided her personal growth and ability to develop a newfound sense of emotional inquiry and acknowledgment, stating:

> In my program, there is so much processing… until I was studying counseling more and I got more why I keep loving this job and why I am more interested

> in particular areas of counseling than other areas. Emotions, and particularly, talking, is not very common in my family, there is not "how are you doing?" It's not open like that. It's more like "what did you do today?" There is not that emotional curiosity, I feel like part of being a counselor I kind of give that to myself in a way.

As is demonstrated by these participants, doctoral training in psychology nurtured an intrapersonal process in which domains of personal development and insight are cultivated and explored. A number of students noted that there was a therapeutic quality inherent within their training, offering that this element was supportive as they navigated graduate studies and developed as an individual. Further, a number of participants expressed that the interview itself was therapeutic in that it provided a forum for introspection into their initial purpose for attending graduate school, their goals, and exploration of how their doctoral studies are shaping them as individuals.

Need for social change. Participants discussed the desire to help others and positively pursue causes linked to social justice movements, with emphasis on the importance and relevance of becoming a psychologist in order to achieve these goals. Namely, the ethical duty inherent in becoming a psychologist spoke to participants' commitment to a helping profession and desire to serve those in need. Lisa voiced her drive to advocate for children in the urban school setting:

> I'm seeing the kids in the classroom setting struggling. I feel like it makes it more serious for me because I do feel like even if these kids have socio-emotional problems, I do feel like they are not bad kids, you know, it is these circumstances that they are in, or the lack of resources that they are given, and unfortunately that affects how they are going to do in school and whether they succeed in life or not and I feel like it's very important to kind of find out this information early on so you can provide as much help to these children to make sure they do succeed, and it affects us, you know later on in the future.

John noted that there was a need for systems-level change in order to spur social movement:

> Why not go to them (children in schools)? … Trauma is sort of systemic. The idea is tied to systemic trauma like complex repeated exposure trauma, and these kids are in school and they are trying to learn and they have these outbursts that are getting misdiagnosed as depression, as bipolar… as ADHD and… perhaps some of the underlying causes and symptomatology that's more specific to trauma and trauma exposure than to these DSM diagnoses.

Rachel wanted to bring social change back to her country of origin in an effort to "revamp or have some effect on the education policies in Jamaica...looking at the system there, thinking about ways or stuff that might be affecting the students and their performance…" Like Rachel, David also wanted to incorporate his knowledge to better help his community in South America, stating:

> The culture is not one where people are, are welcomed to go and speak to a counselor... there was so much stigma attached to, as there is anywhere in general, but there is even more heightened with going and talking to someone, typically people keep things in the family... the complex presentations of

trauma and anxiety that I want to customize a treatment for and bring back there…

Importantly, it was indicated that students pursuing psychology as a discipline are oriented toward wanting to effect social change. Many of the participants pointed to the idea that pursuing a career in psychology would result in helping others. While it was clear that this altruistic sensibility propelled a number of students into their doctoral studies, it also served as a rationale for the importance of their studies. In this way, participants made meaning of their experience by framing their efforts within a prosocial context. Participant comments highlighted advocacy for underprivileged and vulnerable populations to better serve those individuals. As the field of applied psychology is relational, it is logical that participants located their purpose and efforts in impacting systems, whether they be educational, communal, or governmental, that directly affect others.

The societal value of the Ph.D. Perceptions of the Ph.D. status, proving self-worth/validation, and internal conflict were all articulated as facets of doctoral education. A number of participants voiced their need for learning a required skill set, attaining self-validation, and proving themselves to others through earning a Ph.D. Rachel spoke of obtaining a higher degree to get where she wants to be:

> I knew I was going to college, so I did that. I knew I was going to do psychology…it just felt like that was the best route. And then, while in undergrad, being introduced to like research and seeing how research impacts like policies and stuff like that. I knew that's what I wanted to do. Ok, so then I realized that, I think just in talking to my professors and just kind of just seeing those, the titles of the people who were doing kind of what I wanted to do, I realized that I needed to go past a bachelor's degree, so I needed that Ph.D. so that's why I kind of, that's what lead me to apply….so I needed that Ph.D.

Along the same lines as Rachel, Helena believed that she had to earn a Ph.D. in order to achieve her career goals, "I knew what I wanted to do was whether I could go to a place and study what I want to study. That was research and practice and at the end of the day get a Ph.D. and do what I want to do." This highlighted that higher education was a requirement to work in certain fields and be called a "psychologist" as this title is protected by the New York State Office of Professions (New York State Education Department, 2018). A higher degree also offers financial as well as occupational options or advantages as Mary shared:

> My family knows nothing about psychology and everyone has opinions about the degrees; social workers, they work so hard and make nothing, so get a PhD... you will have more options. So I think some of that came down and was in the back of my head… [I] quickly realized I wouldn't be satisfied at the masters level with an EdM.

Adam acknowledged the importance of attaining a higher degree, sharing "I knowingly chose to do a Ph.D. because in our society there is an advantage to having a terminal degree, to having a doctoral degree."

Participants in this study reflected that having a doctoral degree implicated specific levels of status; allowing them to pursue their professional interests in ways which they desired (e.g., pursue particular lines of research). Further, a number of participants suggested

that the perception of having a doctoral degree elevated their societal standing which, in turn, satisfied an underlying drive toward doctoral studies. Moreover, the Ph.D. was specifically identified as a degree that would provide professional options. In addition to personal desire, or the impulse toward attaining societal status, the practical aspect of the Ph.D. was conceptualized to allow for greater career flexibility, insinuating that the Ph.D., for all participants who mentioned its value, is an advantage for occupational mobility.

Quotes featured in the results section were offered to highlight the thematic content comprising the psychology doctoral experience. While each individual has their own unique story, analyses of all interviews produced themes, categories, and sub-categories outlined above that link the doctoral process and provide insight regarding the graduate journey.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of doctoral students in applied psychology programs. The focus of the semi-structured interviews exploring this topic yielded three broad themes: antecedents leading to graduate study, current experience of doctoral education, and reflections on the doctoral experience. While the experiences were wide-reaching and variable within each domain discussed, cohesive themes became salient to the point of saturation. As much as doctoral study is varied and context-dependent, there may be core processes that are reflective of the individual who pursues graduate education in psychology.

A unique finding in this study is the focus on the individual's family and cultural influences in deciding to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology. Past research has verified the role of family in contributing to high levels of achievement in education among schoolchildren (Davis-Kean, 2005), but no literature exists, to the authors' knowledge, on the role of the family of origin's historical, social, and emotional legacy in the decision-making process to pursue graduate education in psychology. Specifically, participants in our research identified the role of familial struggle and trauma as direct influences on their desire to enter into a helping profession and achieve the highest level of education. Additionally, individuals were motivated to pursue education because of the high achievement of their parents and extended family. Therefore, it seems that higher-level education functions as a means to honor one's legacy or rectify fissures in the familial experience.

Holly and Gardner (2012) found that first-generation doctoral students did experience strong familial influences on their doctoral pursuits, but only cited family as a contributing factor in pursuing doctoral education to the extent that it was seen to advance them economically. Conversely, Tate et al. (2015) reported that underrepresented, first-generation low-income college students experience an inverse relationship between increased family pressure to pursue a career and their own pursuit of graduate education, effectively reducing interest in post-baccalaureate training in favor of more immediate financial gain. Notably, the researchers caution against broad interpretation of this finding in an effort to avoid pathologizing family networks within this population. Our findings provide another angle in that a number of students reported pursuing doctoral education in order to continue a family standard as opposed to explicit identification of financial considerations as an influential factor. However, family income level within our sample was not explicitly asked for and therefore our data should not be considered in opposition to previous findings, but as an additional factor of family influence.

Related to familial influence, an individual's culture served to promote interest in specific research areas and shape the end goals for pursuit of training in psychology. As an example, one participant implicated culture as the impetus for entering into the field, citing psychology as a helping profession that has access to disenfranchised populations. Rachel

identified her own national identity as creating isolation in graduate school, but also providing robust research interests and avenues for scholarly pursuit. Participants in this study reported that culture was a distinct factor in promoting their decision to pursue doctoral studies due to broad cultural emphasis on the importance of education.

Consistent with previous findings (Austin, 2002), past work and experience played a major role for most participants in predicting enrollment in a doctoral program. Overall, participants were split regarding whether they had a clear vision for wanting to pursue psychology. A number of the participants attained a master's degree in a human services field prior to enrollment and cited dissatisfaction with the extent of their training after real-world experiences. Doctoral studies represented a means to address their lack in knowledge and provide higher levels of competence and skills training.

Regarding participants' current experience, the management of workload represented a discrepancy between participants who reported frustration with the amount of work and others who reported dissatisfaction with the level of performance expected. Regarding this dissatisfaction with course content and level of rigor, participants articulated that they found class work to be less focused on critical thinking and more on rote memorization and reproduction of material. A literature review failed to find corroborating evidence that the majority of doctoral students find their program to be less challenging, especially than their undergraduate institutions. Therefore, we conclude that our finding may be due to the sample or the fact that the majority of participants entered with prior exposure to graduate education at the master's level and were prepared to handle the challenges of doctoral education. Moreover, the master's degrees were in a parallel field to psychology and current coursework may cover previously learned material. Furthermore, participants noted that a main challenge with pursuing doctoral education in applied psychology was the management of both scholarly and clinical endeavors, suggesting that the difficulty experienced was attributed to the *amount* of work required rather than the *type*.

Unique to the location of the sample, which is situated in the New York City metropolitan area, a number of participants indicated that the ecology of the city influenced their experiences in graduate school, stating they felt a difference from past education taking place in more rural or suburban areas. Specifically, individuals reported the energy and pace of the city as a support while simultaneously identifying it as contributing to isolation and self-dependence. Consistent with previous findings that highlighted the importance of lifestyle changes on the graduate experience (Austin, 2002; Haynes et al., 2012; Mason et al., 2009), participants noted struggles with moving from full-time employment and self-sufficiency to entering into financial hardship. Moreover, participants felt remorse about how entering graduate school was intended for personal advancement but had negative ramifications on members of their family and social network. This notion highlights the twofold sacrifice experienced when pursuing doctoral studies in psychology; the hardship of managing the responsibilities and activities necessary to complete the program and the impact on the students' interpersonal relationships. This finding is consistent with research in the related human services field of education, where it was noted that personal relationships were both sacrificed at the expense of doctoral work and simultaneously utilized as a support base when needed (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Interestingly, participants in this study mentioned, in the majority, that they relied on their fellow classmates as a strong social support network, more so than outside relationships. The role and importance of peers throughout the graduate experience was a palpable theme that held value for each person interviewed. Past research (Austin, 2002; Haynes et al., 2012) also identified this finding, describing peers as necessary to successful navigation and completion of graduate requirements. Further, self-esteem was boosted and the development and use of social capital was previously reported to be found among doctoral peers (Hesli, Fink, & Duffy, 2003). Our

study revealed similar findings, with most participants highlighting the positive contribution their peers played in their social well-being. Therefore, it may be that the unique requirements of a psychology doctoral education foster greater group cohesion and a strong group identity due to factors mentioned by participants, such as managing concurrent course and practicum responsibilities.

Reflections on the graduate school experience revealed the conceptualization of a journey wherein integration of prior experience and current experience is part of a developmental process. This growth process was reinforced by a number of participants who were in the third year of their studies suggesting they felt less consumed by the process and better able to find balance. This was contrasted by first-year students who reported the graduate experience to be all consuming and a primary focus that overtakes other areas of their lives. This finding reflected past research identifying the emergence of self-assurance and greater capacity to navigate the doctoral experience as studies progress (Austin, 2002; Nyquist, et al., 1999).

Pertinent to graduate school in psychology, many participants reported the need for social change and identified high levels of satisfaction with the professional domain of psychology and the helping professions. Furthermore, the societal representation of attaining a Ph.D. was indicated as being a contributing factor toward perseverance through the program.

Limitations

Participants in this research were a sample of convenience which included the researchers themselves as in Patton's (1990) heuristic model. While this may not be considered a limitation from a constructivist perspective, post-positivist scholars may assume bias in the research process and frame this approach as problematic. Further, this research was conducted with students from the New York City region and may reflect themes pertinent only to the geographic area. Lastly, the research team is comprised of two school psychologists and a counseling psychologist with no clinical psychologist on the team to contribute their perspective. Therefore, the research team may have held a particular bias without consideration for clinical psychology when analyzing and interpreting the data; this may have also influenced the development and structuring of the interview protocol.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study provided both support and nonsupport of previous evidence presented on this topic. Therefore, future research is recommended with the intent to investigate unique findings and further solidify corroborated evidence. Recommendations for future research include expanding the regional scope of this sample pool in order to better understand similarities and differences specific to locale of training programs. While it is warranted to include a regional variety of participants to determine potential saturation of broad themes, future investigations should concurrently examine the impact of local ecologies on students' experience in their programs. Further, one of the main findings of this study was the identification of family and cultural influences promoting interest in pursuing doctoral education in applied psychology. Both factors were described by a number of participants as representing formative reasons for an eventual pursuit of doctoral education. Therefore, future research should explore these psychosocial factors as potential predictors of academic pursuit in applied psychology. Lastly, it is recommended that researchers further conceptualize the developmental process of the graduate school journey, and in accordance

with Anderson and Swazey (1998), continually examine the developmental needs of students as they progress through their studies.

Implications for Doctoral Training Programs

The aforementioned findings have yielded valuable insights into the lived experiences of doctoral students in applied psychology. We offer a number of implications for training programs in considering how to practically apply information drawn from this study. Foremost is the suggestion to continually survey active, non-active, and graduated students regarding the level of satisfaction with course content, perceived rigor, faculty mentorship, and conception of classroom dynamics specific to preceding expectations and actual lived experience. Doing so, may help to better understand factors related to both student success and disengagement. Further, it may benefit graduate programs to conduct focus groups to gain more qualitative insight into the lived experience of students stratified by year in an open-ended, relational format. This may aid programs in further understanding the subjective progression of students' "journey" through their training and inform programming to match developmental needs.

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Appendix A

Participant	Participant Description	Reason for applying to graduate school
1	John is a 32-year old Caucasian, Jewish-American male in his third year of a school psychology program. He graduated with a master's degree in a mental health field and is currently teaching undergraduate psychology. His research interests include systems integration with a focus on trauma, cognition, and therapy.	I was interested in systems integration; I was interested in education. I have been for a very long time, I use to substitute teach H.S. when I first got out of undergrad and I um…I was interested in cognitive assessment; I wrote my master's thesis in cognitive functioning and drama therapy processes and so I wanted to get more formal education on that...
2	Lisa is a 31-year old Chinese-American female in her third year of a school psychology program. She graduated with a master's degree in psychology prior to pursuing her Ph.D. Her research interests consider multicultural studies involving motivation, acculturation, and assimilation	I know I want to do something multicultural ...and having to deal with I guess students that maybe come from a different background. I was thinking, what I want to focus on now is whether students that come from a different background are able to get the same services because their parents don't speak English and if they are from a different country don't know that the schools offer services, so I was thinking about looking into some of those services, or even experiences looking into acculturation, assimilation, because I feel like that resonates with what I have experienced as a child...
3	David is a 43-year old Guyanese-American male in his first year of a counseling psychology program. He completed a master's in social work, where he felt that he reached a professional ceiling and could not provide adequate help for his clients who experienced historical trauma.	I was the only individual practicing as a helping for the practitioner...so there weren't any colleagues to speak of essentially um… the university trained social workers exclusively at the undergraduate level. We didn't have anything beyond that, nor any faculty who were experts in that area, which is probably why there wasn't... the university was just a microcosm of the larger society.
4	Rachel is a 24-year old Jamaican female in her third year of a school psychology program. She applied to graduate school right after completing undergrad and has spoken about adjusting to	I knew I was going to college, so I did that. I knew I was going to do psychology, so I was going to do psychology, it just felt like that was the best route. And then, while in undergrad, being introduced to like research and

	differences in going away to school for undergraduate and how that contrasts with living at home during graduate school. Her research interests revolve around working in Jamaica's education system and revamping policies.	seeing how research impacts like policies and stuff like that. I knew that's what I wanted to do...I wanted to do, I was looking at motivation, as I said, like my whole aim or goal, or I guess my motivation for going, so in school is always kind of um...revamp or have some effect on the education policies in Jamaica.
5	Adam is a 43-year old Caucasian male in the third year of a counseling psychology program. He has explored several human services occupations prior to applying to graduate school.	I was originally trained as a teacher and I was a teacher for about a decade and found that to be alternately very satisfying and meaningful, but also very frustrating and what I liked the most about it was the investment in the relationships with my students. And what I liked the least was the evaluative aspect and the management and discipline aspect, so I always sort of had an interest in moving more toward a relational domain that was free of hurting and um evaluation. So even after a few, my first four or five years of teaching, I was looking into things, like I thought about being a school counselor, I actually looked into like seminary, um, but I made a shift from one type of school environment to another, thinking it would make things more palatable, a private school, from a private school to a public school...four years into teaching I researched graduate programs in counseling and that I sort of went away from that and then I went back to graduate school in music and I then that year when I was a financial aid counselor, I actually took courses toward a college student personnel student services degree. Because I knew that I, this is an area I want to be involved in, but where I was in *X*, *Y* they didn't have a counseling, there was no such thing as a masters in counseling, it was the degree was college student personnel services, that was the degree that was available...
6	Helena is a 25-year old Caucasian	I've known for like ages that I wanted to

female in her first year in a counseling psychology program. She comes from a lineage of mental health professionals and is heavily interested in the study of psychology.

work within mental health. I come from a family of psychiatrists, like all psychiatrists...I really felt at home with psychology...But I also always felt, even though I just love learning about the material and could always envision myself in the work...I primarily did anything related to psych…like all my training has been about psychology, even when it wasn't, I did a history minor, my perspective has always remained within a psychological sphere...

| 7 | Zelda is a 25-year old Jewish-American female in her fourth year of study in a school psychology program. Her long standing interest in psychology involves developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, family work, and high-risk populations. | I was interested in psych and in undergrad I studied psych and I think even in high school I had in mind that I wanted to be a psychologist so I think it was just very much in my mind the trajectory of wanting to do that in grad school. That was always the plan and then school psychology. |

| 8 | Mary is a 27-year old Jewish-American female in her fourth year of a school psychology program. She explored other occupational options prior to deciding to pursue her graduate degree in psychology to expand her knowledge base and expertise. | I applied because I couldn't do what I wanted to do with just an undergraduate degree, um, I like academia, I like being a student, I like being in a classroom setting, I like conversations with people and expanding my knowledge. |

| 9 | Victoria is a 26- year old Chinese-American female currently in her fourth year of a school psychology program. Education was a foundational aspect of her family and cultural background. | …there is a cultural aspect to it where it was pretty much drilled into my head that from a very young age you have to go to high school, college and graduate school. |

| 10 | Jamie is a 29- year old Korean-American female in the fourth year of a clinical psychology program. She pursued an alternative major prior to finding her niche in psychology. | … I was looking thru this list of classes and noticed that I enjoyed a higher portion of psych classes than I did my journalism classes and I was like...oh maybe I should pay attention to that and my psych GPA was considerably higher than my journalism GPA…I enjoyed all my psych classes, they were fun, um...so...I guess….so I was doing psych as my major for fun, still learning |

journalism as a craft, very quickly got involved in the non-profit scene in New York and realized I could use my journalism skills in the non-profit setting to do communication and development work, so that's what I spent most of college focusing on.

11	Nigel is a 28- year old Jewish-American male in the fourth year of a clinical psychology program. He has maintained an avid interest in psychology since his undergraduate studies. His research focuses on exploring specific personality traits.	…in some ways it was kind of just like the path I was on and I think like a lot of people, there are a lot of people who go into a field and they are like that's what I want to do that's what I want, is the job I want to do, and its more than just I was on that path, I was on that path, because I liked psychology. I studied psychology undergrad…I had taken psych and could keep taking psych and figured I would do that until I stopped enjoying it and I didn't stop enjoying it.
12	Anna is a 30- year old Jewish-American female in her third year of a counseling psychology program. She sought out experiences during her studies both in and out of America in order to create her own specialized training in her area of interests, which involves caregiver stressors of children with special needs.	I've always worked with kids with disabilities and I knew that was ultimately where I wanted to end up, but the path I took to get here has been long and academic.
13	Samantha is a 25- year old Caucasian female in her third year of a clinical psychology program. Her family history and early exposure to psychology lead her to research interests of intergenerational trauma.	I applied to graduate school because I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. I wanted to work with children and families who've been affected by trauma.
14	Elena is a 31- year old Caucasian female in her fifth year of a clinical psychology program. She has earned multiple degrees while pursuing her current degree.	I worked um for two different non-profits in the social-emotional wellness and mindfulness arena and I was working in schools with those and I was basically teaching a lot of positive habits, some stress coping skills, strength finding work, mindfulness, so I was doing a lot of this great positive

		psych stuff in school with kids and teachers and parents actually, and I, that's really what have always been attracted to the more strengths based approach to psychology and I knew that's where I wanted to be in that work…
15	Brenda is a 29- year old Middle-Eastern Turkish American female in her fourth year of a counseling psychology program. Her early career experiences supported a growing interest in pursuing doctoral study.	I was much more interested in the field and I decided I would apply for my master's in psychology, I also volunteered at a domestic violence shelter and then, so that combined with the research and connecting with others, intrigued me much more than being in a bio lab…I thought there was so much to learn and really understand in psychology and counseling before being a therapist and that was my main motivation and I just wanted to further my career path as well and have more opportunities, I know as a mental health counselor there's, there is a variety of jobs I think I can have, but as a Ph.D. student, having a doctorate there is, you can pursue all kinds of things, you can be a professor, you work at a hospital, you can private practice you can do a lot of different things...

Appendix B

Script

Thank you for taking part in our study. Just a little background information regarding the study: we are interested in why people apply to graduate school and what your experiences are like now that you are in the program from various aspects. We understand that there might be sensitive information that is discussed, which will remain confidential. This is a voluntary study, so you can terminate the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. I'll start off by asking you a question, but the interview will take a more organic tone. Do you consent to being recorded?

Original Interview Protocol

1. Why did you apply to graduate school?
2. What is your relationship like with your peers?
3. What was your specific research interest prior to attending grad school?
4. Can you share some of your experiences in the classroom?

Author Note

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Article Citation

Frydman, J. S., Cheung, L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2019). The "journey" of doctoral study in applied psychology: Lived experiences of students in counseling, clinical, and school psychology programs. *The Qualitative Report, 24*(6), 1181-1210. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss6/1