Ph.D. Students of Color and their Academic Work Experience

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Abstract

Over the past years, much research has been done about factors that influence the academic experience of Ph.D. students. Although this is a valuable topic to explore, most researchers fail to take issues related to racial background into account. Therefore in this study, we aim to get a better understanding of how Ph.D. students of color experience their work environment and how they cope with possible stressors and hardships at The University of Groningen. We conducted semi-structured interviews with nine current or former Ph.D. students whom were affiliated with the University of Groningen. Using thematic analysis, we found that most Ph.D. students didn't directly feel that their racial background affected their work environment. However, participants shared that they did experience situations where they were prejudiced or experienced isms. The remaining themes revealed how students cope with stressors. Students emphasized how important it is for them to have a social support network. This social network includes family, friends, colleagues, partners, and supervisors who give affirmation and emotional support. These results suggest that it is vitally important to have a supportive community for Ph.D. students of color to avoid additional stress during an already demanding time. Limitations of this study were the inexperience with qualitative research, a non-saturated sample size, intermingled identities being a POC/international student, and the use of a convenience sample.

Keywords: Ph.D. students of color, academic work experience, ism's, microaggressions, racism, tokenism, stereotypes, racial identity, coping strategies

Ph.D. Students of Color and their Academic Work Experience

33% to 70% of the students who start their Ph.D. never finish (Jones, 2013). High dropout rates, delay in the academic journey, and dissatisfaction with the overall work experience of Ph.D. students are the most heard problems these students encounter. Over the past years, much research has been done about the factors that influence the Ph.D. career (Anderson, 1998; Austin, 2002; Bieber & Worley 2006; Conrad et al., 1993; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001). Although these findings are important, not much research has been done about a specific subgroup in this field namely Ph.D. students of color. Moreover, The University of Groningen has not taken racial background into account in their surveys amongst Ph.D. students (Dijks et al., 2020). In this research, we define the term person of color (POC) as anyone who is not considered white. We are aware that this term includes a wide range of ethnicities and cultures and that each person has their own unique experiences and struggles. The experience of the general majority of Ph.D. students may not be the same for Ph.D. students of color. In predominantly white academic institutions (Brunsma et al., 2017), Ph.D. students of color face unique experiences and struggles related to their racial background like isolation, loneliness, and discrimination (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Ph.D. students of color are challenged to create coping strategies to successfully graduate their doctoral career. Clark and colleagues (2012) found that these hardships could lead to high emotional distress, difficulties in completing their programs and impact well-being and performance (Hyun et al., 2007). Therefore, it is important to study and understand Ph.D. students of color at the University Groningen to support their well-being and to alleviate their academic time. The following studies mentioned in this paper were all conducted in the United States of America. It's important to note that bases of social inequality vary across societies and that the findings in previous studies may not be typical in other countries.

Self-determination theory

To get a better insight into the academic experiences of POC Ph.D.'s and how they may cope with stressors and hardships, we look at the self-determination theory. Self-determination theory (SDT) explains to what extent people are motivated to make their own choices without external influence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). More specifically we use the so-called basic needs theory. The basic needs theory postulates that three basic psychological needs need to be fulfilled to experience autonomous motivation, which leads to positive psychological and behavioral outcomes such as wellbeing and learning. These needs are the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

"The need for competence refers to feeling successful in one's endeavors, to experience mastery" (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Feelings about confidence in one's abilities as a researcher can be achieved by providing support in obtaining academic skills to Ph.D. students, like research techniques, academic writing, planning, and management. The need for competence seems important to predict academic performance. Doctoral students who feel confident that they can successfully perform research tasks are more interested and motivated to conduct research (Bishop & Bieschke, 1998; Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002) and are more productive, including submitting articles and presenting at conferences (Brown et al., 1996; Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002).

"The need for autonomy concerns the experience of volition and freedom" (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the research paper of Nickola et al. (2011) the degree to which supervisors acknowledged the student's perspective, encouraged the student to be open with their ideas, and provided opportunities for students to make their own decisions, was the strongest predictor of students' confidence in their research abilities. Autonomy support is an important factor for academic success. Stressors of ethnic minority students can contribute to lower perceptions of autonomy, which influences long-term outcomes like graduating on time and

persistence in education (Lambert et al., 2009). Thus, supervisors that give students autonomy have a decreased risk of low autonomy due to stressors and therefore autonomy support could be a protective coping strategy.

"The need for relatedness is about connecting with other people, caring about others, and feeling cared for" (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the paper of Vasquez et al. (2006) ethnic minority students in higher education have shared that peer support and faculty mentorship provided them with the support they needed to thrive in academia despite the barriers they faced as ethnic minorities and could therefore serve as a coping strategy. Supervisors could for example give personal support through being friendly, understanding their private situations, and reassuring them in case of stress (Ali et al., 2016). The need for relatedness could also return in finding community. While a supportive community is vitally important in general, It is especially relevant for graduate students of color given the fact that minority graduate students often face social, cultural, and intellectual isolation as well feelings that their department do nothing about the problem and hope it will solve itself. Such experiences significantly impact well-being and academic performance (Hyun et al., 2007). POC students use community as a coping strategy to manage microaggressions (Allen et al., 2013). Microaggressions are insults or remarks that have to do with a person's membership in a minority group. This term will be explained more in detail in the following section.

Isms: Tokenism and Microaggressions

If we look across studies that have researched multidisciplinary views of the graduate school experience (American system of Ph.D.) (Anderson 1998; Austin 2002; Bieber & Worley 2006; Conrad et al., 1993**;** Golde 1998; Lovitts 2001), we find that there is a big gap of knowledge when it comes to analysis of race. This gap of knowledge lies within the lack of taking issues related to racial background into account while researching experiences of Ph.Ds. One way in which the experience of POC can differ is in dealing with isms. Isms is an

umbrella term for definitions like racism, discrimination, microaggressions, tokenism, etc.
that are often hostile beliefs and behaviors based on stereotypes, fear, and ignorance.

From all the factors that influence the POC work environment experience,
microaggression may be one of the most influential. Racial microaggressions are "brief
everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to
a racial minority group, often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs, or
dismissive looks, gestures, and tones" (Sue et al., 2007). Although ethnic minority graduate
students may be unlikely to experience overt racism on university campuses, they do deal
with the everyday racial microaggressions (Brunsma et al., 2017). Psychological effects of
racial microaggressions can be as severe as those of overt racism (Smith et al., 2007). Studies
have documented that students who are targets of racial microaggressions are at increased risk
for depressive symptoms (Torres et al., 2010), encounter emotional exhaustion and distress
(Clark et al., 2012; Grapin et al., 2016), experience decreased sense of belonging (Clark et al.,
2012), and have diminished academic engagement (Proctor & Truscott, 2012**;** Solórzano et
al., 2000).

Additionally, The feelings of being tokenized are also addressed in negative race-
related experiences. Tokenism is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort
to be inclusive to members of minority groups (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). Tokenism
in higher education can manifest in different ways like hiring a minority person because of
their race or an institution presenting themselves as diverse by marketing their small
population of minorities (Chance, 2022). Tokenism leads to similar consequences as
microaggression like, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and exhaustion (Miller & Groccia,
2011**;** Walker, 2016).

Supervisor relationship

Another factor that could influence the work experience of POC Ph.D. students is the supervisor relationship. Supervisors of Ph.D. students play a major role when it comes to the student's satisfaction and completion of their studies. Research highlights that strong mentorship positively correlates to increased productivity, self-efficacy, and career satisfaction (Baker and Griffin 2010; Dawson, 2014). One of the most effective ways of supervision is a mixture of academic support and personal (Engebertson et al., 2008). If we compare mentorship with minority and majority students, research states that underrepresented minorities in academia do not receive good mentorship in comparison with their white counterparts (Noy and Ray, 2012; Segura et al., 2011; Spalter-Roth et al., 2013). Thus, having a secure supervisor relationship could serve as a buffer/coping mechanism against negative race-related experiences.

In conclusion, Ph.D. students of color may experience their work environment differently than their non-POC peers. In the Ph.D. student survey (Dijks et al., 2020) that was taken at the faculty of behavioral and social sciences of the University of Groningen a few results were found about the experiences of Ph.D. students. Students voiced issues of workload and a suboptimal work-life balance, stress about finishing in time, large focus on publishing, having the feeling of a high responsibility making the Ph.D. project a success, and insecurity about future career. Several Ph.D. students also report having problems with their supervisor and feeling isolated. The university has not done research yet about the experiences of POC. The experiences of POC could differ from their non-POC peers at the RUG. Therefore in this research, we aim to find out how Ph.D. students of color experience the work environment at the University Groningen. More specifically, the central question in this research is: How do Ph.D. students of color experience their work environment and how do they cope with possible stressors and hardships at the University of Groningen?

Methods

We used qualitative research to get a better understanding of the experiences of Ph.D. students of color and to get a better in-depth insight into their work environment at the University of Groningen. Qualitative research allows for a more flexible approach that obtains rich data and reveals information that numbers alone do not show. It allows the participants to talk about previous experiences that have shaped current perceptions and feelings about different matters. Here, the aim is not to add predictive value to the existing literature but to describe and explain experiences as they occur (Willig, 2008). In qualitative studies, researchers play an integral role in the collection, interpretation, and reporting of the data. This requires an enduring self-awareness of our presence within this study (Finlay, 2002). Our reflexive statements are as follows.

- Sterre: My interest for this research comes from the aim to create an equal society. I have this expectation that in general POC have a dissatisfactory work experience. This might influence the research. My ethnicity as a white female may have influenced this research since participants might didn't feel comfortable sharing their experiences and I as an interviewer could not relate to their stories. However, I didn't get the impression that this was the case. I'm aware that I'm not part of a racially diverse friend/family group so talking about racial topics is something that is not commonly spoken about. I try to educate myself when it comes to these topics but I acknowledge that there is still space for me to educate myself more.

- Keziah: As a person of color, I try to reflect aspects of my identity in my work to gain a deeper understanding of my experience as well as learn from others. This research also gave other people of color a platform to voice their experiences. In a way, subconsciously, this project may have been a means to access people like me who are older and can affirm my experiences. Because I am also a POC, participants may have

felt more open to talk about their experiences with me, however, I did get the impression that most interviewees would have responded in a similar manner to an interviewer who was not a POC.

- Yvette: Generally, I try to educate myself on societal issues by reading, yet I do not often engage in conversations in which personal and daily experiences of discrimination are being shared. Therefore, I felt nervous about interviewing participants about a sensitive issue in fear of overstepping their boundaries. Moreover, as a white person I do not have the lived experiences of a person of color. Even though I felt a sense of openness during the interviews, participants may have held back on some of their true feelings and struggles.

Participants

Our sample consists of nine current or former doctoral students, all of whom are affiliated with the University of Groningen. Throughout this study, we will address them by their pseudonymized names: Maxine, Bright, Sebastian, Jessica, Stacey, Lana, Amber, Isabelle, and Nick. Their ethnicities can be characterized as Black (2), Asian (3), Hispanic/Latino (3), or multiracial (1). Moreover, all participants have non-Dutch nationalities, which may have an effect on the results of this study. This sample represents doctoral students from the faculty of Science and Engineering (4), Medical Sciences (3), Campus Fryslân (1), and Behavioral and Social Sciences (1). At the time of data collection, participants had been doctoral students for at least one year or, if graduated, completed their doctorate less than one year ago. Potential participants were invited to take part in this study through an open call (Attachment 1) which was promoted by the Graduate School, Ph.D. councils, Ph.D. associations, and other community groups. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to reach theoretical saturation, therefore the inclusion of nine participants was an arbitrary number. To recruit participants we used a convenience sample, participants were

selected based on availability and willingness to participate. No compensation was offered for their participation. The open call method of recruiting participants could lead to a volunteer bias since those who chose to participate in this study may be different from the general population.

Procedure

We made use of semi-structured interviews, with freedom to deviate from the interview guide (Attachment 1) and add or remove subjects. The interview guide was adaptive and subjects were interchanged based on the interviewee's responses. We also selected important and not-so-important points of our guide in case the interview reached the time limit. An additional note we would like to make is about Question 3 which is extensive in nature and has many examples which may be confusing to participants. In particular, in the interview with Jessica, more attention was given to the negative aspects of Ph.D. students of color experience. In this way, it could have been a leading question to ask and it may have influenced the answer outcome for this specific question.

The interviews were given in person or online through google meet. The duration of the interviews ranged between 50 minutes and 100 minutes. There were no prior relationships between participants and researchers, except for Bright whom one of us was acquainted. We've put similarities or common interests forward if there were any, acknowledged the general experiences like hardships and struggles and gave the participants the option to choose the space where they felt most comfortable to conduct the interview. In addition, we made use of silences, non-verbal body language, and encouragements to motivate the participant to share their experiences.

Interviews were audio-recorded. We used F4 transkript to manually transcribe the interviews. After an initial round of transcribing, the audio was reviewed a second time for

accuracy. In the transcription, words that indicated no meaning (e.g. 'eh', 'like') were not transcribed. Non-verbal signals were also noted, if relevant.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen. Code for approval: PSY-2122-S-0013. At the start of the interview, we asked participants to verbally consent. Moreover, we emphasized the participant's rights, including the right to withdraw, right to make changes, right to not answer any questions, right to view the transcript. Names, faculties, nationalities, and most countries were kept anonymous in the transcript unless otherwise stated or deemed relevant for the research. The interviewees were asked for their preferred pseudonymized name. If they did not have a preference, a name was allocated. Lastly, audio files containing the interviews were encrypted and kept at our University accounts.

Thematic analysis

This study uses thematic analysis to distill themes from the transcripts. In this process of data analysis, we consider the data through the lens of our research questions and the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory. We assume that a pattern exists in the experiences of our participants resulting from their identity as a person of color or being an international Ph.D. student, despite not sharing a uniform nationality, ethnicity, or cultural background. This study used a thematic analysis with a hybrid deductive and inductive approach. This means that we coded the data within self-determination theory to some extent, but also built a coding scheme that does not consider this framework. The three basic needs constructs of self-determination theory were used to organize the data to begin with. These contain need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2017). These theoretically derived themes and new emerging themes were then integrated to have a complete thematic description of the data.

Data analysis: coding

Transcripts of the interview make up our data, which contain the subjective lived experiences of our participants' work environment. Byrne (2021) denotes six phases of thematic analysis. Our starting point corresponds to Byrne's first phase: we familiarized ourselves with the data, which was accomplished through transcribing the interviews manually and preliminary readings of the transcripts. Afterwards, phase two followed, which is the production of initial codes for the first two transcripts that reflected the content of the data closely. For this purpose, we used Google Docs which allowed us to highlight meaningful excerpts from the transcripts and suggest codes using the comment function. We then transitioned to ATLAS.ti to code all transcripts. The software allowed us to code systematically throughout the dataset and to group and organize the codes and record the definitions of each of the codes. Newer codes that were developed further down the coding process were noted and previous transcripts were revisited and reviewed. Some older codes were deleted or replaced with better-fitting codes. After finishing coding, we transitioned to phases three, four, and five which provide an outline for generating and evaluating themes (Byrne, 2021). We created an overview of the codes through a scheme in Excel and printed this out. We then marked codes that fit together with different colors and tried to come up with themes that stood out for all of us. After separately working on the themes our supervisor gave us feedback. Our individual results highlighted some of the same information with a slightly different focus. However, how we structured the information differed considerably. Together, we agreed upon the main structure containing themes and subthemes, using a mind map that shows how the codes within a particular (sub)theme interrelate.

Results

The topic that returns in all my (sub)themes is, the influence of the Ph.D.'s identity as a person of color on their academic career. More specifically the hardships and stressors these students experienced concerning their racial identity.

Main-theme: Overall good experience but also faced prejudice and isms

When we asked if our participant's racial background as a POC had influenced their work environment most responded that in general it didn't have any influence on their work: *"I didn't experience any negative things from the environment' about my identity" (Jessica).* Isabella mentioned that when her background as a POC influenced the work environment that it had more to do with the informal work environment: *" I guess it has more influence how people talk to me or the topic they brought up to me in corridor chats more than in formal work".*

Even though the Ph.D. students didn't directly feel that their racial background affected their work environment, most participants shared that they had experienced situations where they were prejudiced or experienced isms. Amber shared an example of a situation where she felt discriminated at the university:

> *"And one day there was a colleague, and she brought a Master student […] And then, when she passed by with the Master student she said in Dutch [...] because I understand: 'Those are just foreigners, it doesn't matter' and then she didn't introduce us to her Master student. She just turned to the other side".*

Lana brought an example up where one of her colleagues made fun and mimicked accents from other colleagues: *"[…] I have a colleague in the department […] she likes to make fun of other people's accents. She was making fun of like Indian English accents kind of thing. […] she is also a person of color but not Indian".* These examples seem to be clear and could

be defined as explicit racism where the intentions or attitudes are obvious harmful towards another minority group.

However, the reason why most Ph.Ds. may didn't directly feel that their racial identity had an influence could be due to that they experienced more subtle denigrating remarks that are defined as microaggressions. Majority of the Ph.D.'s uttered that they were aware that most people didn't mean these comments as insulting:

> *"They didn't say it in an insulting manner but, I do find it a bit insulting when people say like 'oh my god your English is so great' like why are you surprised? Do you think we have no education like I don't know I feel like it's quite offensive (Lana).*

In addition, a few Ph.D. students mentioned that stereotypes were made in regards to their racial background. Amber shared that she had received stereotypical questions for Asian nationality. Lana shared a comment she got about how people thought her country of birth was a poor country and expressed her disappointment that people had this perspective. Nick gave us an example of the Latin American stereotype about not arriving on time. Nick seemed upset with this stereotype since time management is principal to him:

> *"There's this stereotype, for me that's a problem. Because I hate being late. […] I was like a couple of minutes late. So I was like, 'I'm sorry that I'm late' […] and the person said, "Oh no, it's fine, you're (Latin American nationality). That was very hurtful".*

Some Ph.D.'s shared their thoughts about feeling tokenized: *"Was I hired because my supervisor does work with persons of color? […] and not because they wanted someone in diversity and inclusion?". (Maxine).* The feelings of tokenism made Maxine feel very pressured: *"You gotta prove that you weren't hired because of this […] you go through that whole mental roller coaster […] which puts the pressure one […]".* Bright mentioned something quite similar:

> *"Sometimes I had a feeling that people are trying to be nice to you because of your race, [...] just because maybe it makes them feel tolerant or something like that [...] don't give me respect or try to be nice to me because I am a person of color".*

This shows that Tokenism comes with stressful situations where the Ph.D. students constantly second-guess themselves and made them extra aware of their minority status.

A recommendation that was made by students to diminish prejudices and isms was cultural sensitive training: *"I think the university should give courses to emphasize people on how hard it is to be a person of color in Groningen" (Isabelle).*

However, facing these hardships of ism's did not seem to be the case for every student. Two Ph.D. students stated that they didn't experience many hardships and were aware that this was unlike other peers around them:

> *"I think I have a very different experience from most Ph.D. students of color. [...] I never really felt a lot like an outsider. [...].But this feeling that I sometimes hear from my colleagues, like being looked at differently or of feeling less worthy, I haven't had."(Nick).*

Second main theme: social network important for satisfaction and coping

The second main theme that emerged in our interviews was social network. Social network seemed to be an important factor for coping with possible stressors, hardships, and how satisfied the Ph.D. students were with their academic career. A social network is a network of social interactions and personal relationships (Oxford languages, 2021). The sub-themes that will be discussed under this main theme are: importance of being affirmed and supported by support network, work-related relationships, and lack of affirmation and support and its consequences on well-being.

First sub-theme: Importance of being affirmed and supported by a support network

All Ph.D. students expressed the importance of having a support network during their Ph.D. This could include support from family, friends, colleagues, partners, and supervisors. Nick expressed that support from his past relationship with a Dutch person helped him understand the Dutch culture more and therefore helped him integrate pretty quickly. Integration could be: *"I had the support from the relationship which made me more and more integrated. […] He was also very (inaudible) to introducing me, showing me around and teaching me about the culture"*. The Ph.D. students mentioned that having a social network helped them feel affirmed. Affirmation could play as a buffer against isms. For example, Maxine talked about how sharing her personal experiences to Facebook groups would give her emotional support and affirm that her feelings were valuable:

> *"I joined other groups, Facebook groups of my work, and black-girl doctorate Facebook group. I was part of all these groups and I had to do that […] to hear other people say 'no it's not just you' […]. Sometimes you wonder if it's just you reading too much into something […] so I needed that and those experiences. So, a part of these Facebook groups have been really good […]".*

Lana sought out other people of color to share her experiences with to feel validated: *"I go to another fellow person of color to complain about because they will understand what is what" (Lana)*. Isabelle shared that she would go to family or friends for support when she felt uncomfortable to cope with negative experiences: *"Talk about it actually. Either with friends or family. Yeah just talk about it and try to say ooh why do I feel uncomfortable or what can I do? Or yeah how to solve it"*. Sharing experiences with other fellow people of color or family made the participants feel understood since this support network could relate to the experiences the participants have encountered.

Additionally many Ph.D. students talked about finding a community or even creating one. A community is a group of people sharing similar characteristics, backgrounds, values, interests. Jessica spoke about finding a community of international students in a Ph.D. event organization called Gopher. This was a very welcoming experience for her.

Bright shared how having a church community helped him with coping and making friends:

"And I think for me one of the main things that really help me during my Ph.D. is the church I was part of. Yea, and what was it about church that helped with alleviating, for example almost feeling lonely. […]as time went on, I was developing friendships with many people in the church."

Isabelle and Sebastian even made efforts to reach out and create a sort of community, which indicates that having a community is very valuable. Sebastian emphasized that the social side of a Ph.D. is salient: *"I do a lot of (community work)[…]. What comes after is also important: the social side of doing your Ph.D. and how one can reach out to others. You need to find a way to distress."*. Isabelle would create a community on her initiative by reaching out to other international Ph.D. students: *"[…] I reached out to them like 'hey is there anything you need?' and then people are always so lost like 'ooh many thanks I had no idea how to do this no one told me'." (Isabelle)*. The students shared how being part of a community could help them cope and therefore could be essential for their well-being: *"And I needed that, that was like nourishment to my soul [laughs] I don't think people understand how affinity groups, how they work, and how much it's needed for people of color" (Maxine)*.

Second sub-theme: work-related relationship

So far we mainly talked about the importance of having a personal support network. This shows that the well-being of Ph.D. students goes beyond the work floor and that having personal relationships could be an important factor that indirectly influences how Ph.D.

students experience their work environment. While having a personal relationship is significant, building a good work relationship is also of importance.

Friendly relationships at work with colleagues seem to be greatly appreciated by all participants. Support from colleagues could make it easier to cope with struggles POC Ph.Ds. encounter. Students shared that colleagues from work made them feel welcome: *"When you really start your work at the faculty at your campus yeah the people here are very nice yeah and very friendly they are very curious about your background, your national background, your research interests" (Jessica).* Bright mentioned that in his case colleagues would even come up with initiatives to motivate each other to do writing during the covid pandemic: *"We would have zoom meetings and meet from time to time, around twice a week. […] We motivated each other, we were checking up on each other, we were reading each other's work, proofreading, giving suggestions."(Bright).*

Additionally, supervisors also play a major role in the student's satisfaction and completion of the studies. In general, all Ph.D. students were satisfied with their supervisors. For instance, Maxine tells:*"I have 3 strong women supporting me, that's amazing, I cannot complain. Who understand my work and understand the process. Each person over time has fulfilled a different role […].* Many interviewees told that they felt autonomy when it came to their research, they felt like they could make their own choices and that supervisor gave them the freedom to do research in their interest field: *"If I want to do something, they fully support. And, if I don't want to do something, they also fully support. They always ask me if I really want to do this" (Amber).* Supervisors could also play a role in how competent a student feels in their academic skills. A couple of Ph.D. students voiced that their supervisors made them feel more confident about their abilities: *"Sometimes I doubt myself a lot, but they have never doubted that I am capable of this" (Stacey).*

When we asked the Ph.D. students what their ideal supervisor relationship would be like and how this deviated from their current supervisor relation, many students mentioned they would like to see a balance between professional and personal relationship between them and the supervisor: *" [...] I appreciate the small talks and the non-work-related conversations as well" (Lana)*. Isabelle expressed that she missed the personal relationship in her main supervisor: *" I think workwise it works with my supervisor but personal wise I do miss a bit of maybe empathy or closeness but then yeah I mean if the person is not like that then yeah it's okay I guess"*. A couple of other ideal supervisor characteristics were mentioned by the participants that they would like to see or, that the supervisor already had like, encouragement: *"I'd want someone who would encourage me and just like [laughs] 'there it's okay'" (Maxine)*. Being cared for: *"I think it's a relationship where you know you can trust the other person, and also that the other person shows that she cares for you" (Stacey)*. And lastly, openness/honesty: *"I would also want a supervisor who would just be honest with me when I'm doing something wrong" (Bright)*.

Third sub-theme: Lack of affirmation and support and its consequences on well being

One of the reasons why Ph.D. students occasionally experienced lack of affirmation from people around them had to do with the difficulties finding community and befriending others. Stacey talked about how hard it was for her to find community:

> *"When you are starting in a new country, you don't know anyone and it's really hard to just try to find people you connect with". "And it was also hard to find like a community of people. I know there are (Latin Americans) here but I haven't met a lot of (Latin Americans)".*

Also more specifically, a couple of students voiced the difficulties befriending other Dutch Ph.D.'s:

"So to find a community can be a bit difficult also when everyone is Dutch because they all have their own Dutch friends […]people tend to be a little more closed to making new friends. So in that sense, it was a bit difficult to make friends during the Ph.D." (Isabelle).

Most difficulties with befriending other Dutch Ph.D.'s had to do with the language barrier of not speaking Dutch: *"But to be honest, it was kind of like isolating because I also felt like okay everyone is Dutch, and I don't speak their language and I kind of didn't want to bother by just being there and they have to switch to English" (Stacey).* Nick shared that learning the Dutch language has helped him to get people to open up to him more and made it easier to connect with Dutch people*: "I start learning the Dutch language and the Dutch culture and then I am very curious as well. […] On the one hand, this made people more open to me and made me more comfortable to be around these people because I was more secure".* A few students came with a suggestion in regards to the university to make it easier for POC/international students to find a community: *"I think it would be really nice if they kind of like set you up with a contact or maybe if they had a group or something" (Stacey). "I think a buddy system would work. I know that some faculties do want to implement a buddy system" (Sebastian).*

Another way how students could feel lack of affirmation is not being surrounded by a diverse population in academia. Lack of diversity was a topic that was frequently talked about In our interviews: *"Here, my colleagues here, they are almost like 99% white." (Amber). "There are not many people of color to begin with."(Maxine).* This lack of diversity made students feel isolated and made them feel like they stand out:

"So at first point I feel lonely because 2 years ago I was the only Asian in this faculty and […] I was very isolated because only myself here and without other Asian students surrounded. So it could be like yeah I'm very unique, I'm the only

one."(Jessica).

Participants voiced how having a diverse climate could be essential to international students to avoid feelings of being the only one and loneliness: "*These international students will feel more at home when they see that the staff is also very diverse. when they see that, you know, people of color are also teaching them, are also supervising them.*" (Bright).

Numerous Ph.Ds. voiced how they didn't see diversity around them and therefore felt that the university provided a false diversity image which again, could cause feelings of being the only one: *"Especially when the university sells itself as being very international, I thought this is just for marketing purposes or PR purposes because I don't see that"* (Bright). It's important to let these dissatisfactions about the lack of social network be heard since lack of support could lead to fewer coping strategies against negative experiences and this eventually could lead to decreased well-being.

Discussion

This study looked at the work experience of POC Ph.D. students and how they might cope with possible stressors and hardships. There is no distinct answer to this question given that each Ph.D. student experienced his or her work environment differently. In general, most Ph.D. students experience their academic career as positive. Although most students shared that their racial background didn't directly influence the work experience, the majority of participants told that they had experienced situations where they were prejudiced or experienced isms. Most participants expressed that the isms they encounter the most, are covert and that they are aware that people giving these remarks do not realize these are harmful. This finding is consistent with Smith et al.'s (2007) work that explained that although graduate students may be unlikely to experience clear racism, they could experience effects of microaggressions that can be as severe as those from overt racism. As well the study from Brunsma et al. (2017) goes in line with the finding that students of color have to deal

with racial microaggressions. We must also mention that 2 students didn't experience much of these isms at work and thus contradict the results previously described. A reason for this could be that perceptions about what isms are different for each person. It may be that these 2 participants didn't see certain remarks as offensive.

Other stressors that participants often experience during their academic career are feelings of being the only one/isolation due to lack of diversity and difficulties finding a community or friends. This correlates with Shavers and Moore (2019) that found that the lack of diversity in the programs heightened the participants' awareness of their minority status and contributed to their sense of feeling like an outsider while signaling to participants that diversity was not valued. As an additional note, the participants shared that the university presents itself an international school but they don't see this in reality. This finding goes in line with the literature of Embrick & Rice (2010) that uttered there is little to indicate any serious attempts to recruit or retain faculty of color even though departments may espouse a desire for diversity. A reason for this could be that faculty search committees are often not trained in recruitment and the majority of this committee is still dominated by white people. This leads to hiring people just like them rather than striving for a diverse department (Gasman, 2016). Some students came up with a recommendation for the university to create more intercultural interactions where students from different cultural backgrounds work in teams and join activities. Intercultural interactions could make students feel less like an outsider since it lets them see there are other minority people with the same problem. Additionally, white students could also learn from these intercultural interactions. White students may gain an increased awareness of their racial socialization and privilege at the same time students of color may have new insights related to their own racialized experiences, resulting in improved learning for all students (Linder et al., 2015). Lack of diversity also

makes it hard to find similar others to create a community that could serve as a support network.

Being supported by a social network at work and outside work is a factor that was mentioned by many students and thus, seems to be an important factor for coping with stressors and hardships and how satisfied the Ph.D. students are about their academic career. The need for relatedness, which is part of the self-determination theory more specifically the basic-need theory, could return in finding community (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The Ph.D. students mentioned that having a community network helped them feel affirmed and that they could share their negative experiences with these groups of people. This correlates with the finding from Johnson-Bailey (2004) that support systems are an important component of academic persistence for POC's in doctoral programs and these support systems can have a positive impact on their overall well-being. However, finding a community or making new friends was a tough task for many Ph.D. students. Therefore a few students came with a recommendation in regards to the university to come up with a buddy system to make it easier for POC/international students to find a community.

Furthermore, students expressed that building a good work relationship also played a significant role. In the study from Vasquez et al. (2006) students in higher education shared that peer support and faculty mentorship provided them with the support they needed despite the barriers they faced as an ethnic minority. Additionally, Solórzano et al. (2009) found that if students do not feel that they are socially supported by their peers and professors, they may be less able to maintain adequate levels of psychological adjustment and consequently can not achieve academic success. It could be that in this study, the good relationships with peers and supervisors serves as a buffer against racial difficulties and therefore the overall work experience of our interviewees is quite positive. A few studies stated that underrepresented minorities do not receive good mentorship in comparison to their white counterparts (Noy &

Ray, 2012; Segura et al., 2011; Spalter-Roth et al., 2013)**.** However, this was not the case in our study since no participant voiced any notable concerns about not receiving good mentorship from their supervisors.

The main quality of supervisors that was mentioned by most students was the feeling of autonomy. The need for autonomy is one of the elements of the self-determination theory more specifically, the basic need theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy support is an important factor for academic success. In the research paper of Nickola et al. (2011) the degree to which supervisors encouraged students to think and act autonomously was the strongest predictor of students' confidence in their research abilities. Also, many students mentioned that their supervisors made them feel competent in their research abilities. The need for competence is the second element of the basic-need theory. As previously mentioned, doctoral students who feel confident that they can successfully perform research tasks are more interested, motivated to conduct research, and productive (Brown et al., 1996; Bishop & Bieschke, 1998; Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002). When we asked the Ph.D. students what their ideal supervisor relationship would be like the following characteristics were named: balance between professional and personal relationship, encouragement, openness/honesty, and caring. These characteristics correspond mostly to research that has been done about qualities a good mentor should have. In a 2014 article, Anderson suggested that there were five main qualities one should look for when seeking a good mentor: curiosity, discretion, generosity of spirit, honesty, and self-reflection. This shows that mentoring goes beyond giving feedback and giving support with research and that it is of importance to have transcending characteristics.

Certain limitations of this study could be addressed in future research. For example that this was my first attempt to do qualitative research, which means that the process of giving interviews, transcribing, and coding were fully new skills I had to pick up. Even

though we tried to carefully create the interview guide, leading questions might where asked due to inexperience. The next limitation of this study is that the identities of the participants being people of color and being international students are intermingled. Since it was not possible to distinguish between these two identities, we should take into account that the answers that were given during the interview could concern being both identities at the same time. Another limitation of this study is that we used a convenience sample to recruit participants. Participants were selected based on availability and willingness to participate. This way of recruiting participants could lead an underrepresentation or overrepresentation of populations. The fourth limitation relates to the number of participants. Initially, we had to interview 12 participants in total but due to time limit 9 participants were interviewed, which led to a non-saturated sample size. To make a more compelling conclusion we might need a bigger sample group. Lastly, this study was done during the covid pandemic in 2021. This general negative experience could influence how Ph.D. students experienced their academic career.

In terms of future research, it would be useful to extend the current findings by examining how the covid pandemic might have influenced the experiences of Ph.D. students of color since some participants mentioned that the covid pandemic caused an abrupt change in the way of studying and doing research. In addition, not much research has been done about POC Ph.D. students and even less qualitative research about this specific subgroup. Future qualitative research could use a saturated sample size to make more reliable conclusions and could discover new recommendations for the university and its POC Ph.D. students. Since we focused on The University of Groningen in this study, we can't generalize the results to other universities in the Netherlands. A way how to generalize this topic to a broader sample is to use a quantitative approach like administering surveys that ask about

thoughts and opinions. This current study could help with developing a survey by basing the questions on topics that were frequently mentioned in this study.

Despite these limitations, the present study has enhanced a deeper understanding of the experiences and coping strategies Ph.D. students of color use against hardships and stressors like prejudices and isms. We hope that the current research will stimulate further investigation of this important area since hardships like isms and feeling like the only one could cause additional stress during an already demanding time in the lives of these students.

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Appendix

Attachment 1: Interview guide

Motivation
1. You are dedicating 4+ years of your life to contribute to academia and to the knowledge on [insert research topic]. What drives you to do so?

(Probe) What year of your Ph.D. are you currently in?

a.   In your research project, to what extent do you feel like you are able to make your own choices? Can you give me an example? (Autonomy)
b.   Do you feel confident in your abilities as a researcher/academic ? How so? (Competence)

POC experience

2.   Have you experienced that your identity as a person of color has influenced your work and can you give an example of how it has or hasn't?

3.   Could you talk a bit about how you yourself have experienced this?

(Probe) Did you voice your experiences? Which responses and support, or lack thereof, did you receive and by whom?

4.   (If the answer to Q2 is that it has influenced them) What are some of your coping strategies to get through this experience?

(Probe) I would like to revisit [insert challenge] briefly. If a friend/colleague were to go through a similar experience, what advice would you give them?

*(Probe) What was particularly helpful to you to overcome [insert challenge]?

(If the answer to Q2 is that it has NOT influenced them) I think that's really great that you feel comfortable at your work. Have you always felt this way during your Ph.D here? What aspects of your work have helped you feel at home?

Relationship supervisor
5.   How would you describe the relationship with your supervisor?
(Probe) Can you describe how you and your supervisor are similar? (Relatedness)

(Probe) How does that affect your relationship?

6.   What is your ideal supervisor relationship? To what extent does your relationship deviate from this ideal, and why?

*(Probe) Would you like to change anything in this relationship?

7.   * You mentioned some qualities in an ideal supervisor relationship such as [list qualities] how would having a supervisor who is also a POC affect your work experience?

Experiences specific to the University of Groningen

8.   How would you compare your experience as a POC Ph.D. student here Vs. your previous institute?

(If they did their Bachelor and Master here) Do you observe any changes or improvements with regards to diversity, for example, with the number of POC staff and students? What would those changes be?

9.   What advice would you give to the university in regards to improvements they could make for the issues you mentioned? Do you have any tips for improvement?

1.   * To end this interview I would like to ask you one more question, do you want to continue in academia after your Ph.D.? Why? Or why not?

Attachment 2: Informed consent

<div align="center">

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

"THE EXPERIENCES OF PH.D. STUDENTS OF COLOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN"

(INFORMATION ABOUT STUDENT CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH)

</div>

- The purpose of the research has been explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw my contribution at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

- I am aware that an audio recording and a written transcript will be taken of the interview.

- The following about the processing of my data has been explained to me:

  - The transcript will be pseudonymized and identifiable information will be removed.
  - I will be given the opportunity to check the transcript for any factual mistakes or sensitive information.
  - The original audio recording will be retained at the University of Groningen, encrypted, and will be deleted after the publication of this study.
  - The anonymized transcript of my interview will be retained for 10 years at the University of Groningen.
  - I can request a copy of the audio recording or transcript at any time while it is in storage, as specified above.

- The transcript of my interview will be used for analysis and anonymous excerpts from my interview *may* be used as part of the bachelor theses of Sterre Pauly, Keziah Seifert and Yvette Compaijen.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

- I hereby consent to voluntarily participate in the current study:
  [] yes   [] no

- I hereby give permission to record the interview:
  [] yes   [] no, but the interviewer can take notes of the interview

Attachment 3: Open call

Dear Ph.D. students,

For our bachelor thesis project, we aim to explore the experiences of Ph.D. students of color* at the University of Groningen. We would like to interview you about how you experience your research project, work environment, well-being and the collaboration with your supervisor. The interview will take about one hour. Please feel free to participate in our research if you would like to share your experience. We look forward to hearing your perspective.

Requirement: You are a Ph.D. student at the University of Groningen and have been for at least one year, or you have finished your Ph.D. less than one year ago.

You can contact us at phdstudentsexperiences@rug.nl.

* In our study we define people of color as anyone who isn't white. However, we realize that this includes a wide range of cultures and ethnicities and that people of color are not a uniform group. We recognize that people may identify in a number of different ways.

Kind regards,
Sterre Pauly, Keziah Seifert and Yvette Compaijen