

# Coping as a Double Minority: Reflections of a Black Man Who Achieved His Doctorate in Social Work

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**Abstract:** This article discusses my personal experience as a double minority—Black and male—in a social work doctoral program, emphasizing the unique challenges posed by this intersectionality in an academic context. The narrative explores the correlation between doctoral education and the experiences of Black men, highlighting coping mechanisms and the importance of community support. By explicitly noting the double minority status within this specific academic setting, the examination of implications for social work and recommendations for future research aims to contribute to improving the experiences of the next generation of individuals navigating multiple marginalized identities.

**Keywords:** community, mental health, education

Navigating the doctoral journey presents significant challenges, both academically and emotionally. Highlighted by the concerning doctoral attrition rates ranging from 40 to 60 percent (Ames et al., 2018), these challenges can be particularly acute for Black men in doctoral programs. Data from the 2019 Survey of Earned Doctorates reveals that while 30,151 men received doctoral degrees that year, only 4.18 percent (1,263) were Black men (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2019). This disparity is even more stark when considering that Black Americans make up approximately 13 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2023).

These statistics underscore the critical issue of educational and racial disparities faced by Black men pursuing doctoral degrees.

Beyond the general hurdles of doctoral studies, Black men often encounter unique stressors (Gwynn, 2023). These stressors require them to develop diverse coping strategies to manage the additional burdens they face in day-to-day life (Gwynn, 2023).

Traditionally, social support networks, physical activities, and self-reliance have played crucial roles in their coping strategies (Goodwill et al., 2018). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted these mechanisms through social distancing measures and limited access to Black male mentors (Molock & Parchem, 2022), particularly in social work doctoral programs. This disruption poses real challenges, potentially leading to increased feelings of isolation and stress, which can impact their academic progress.

## What is Coping?

*Coping* is the conscious use of actions and thoughts to reduce or eliminate a stressor (Gwynn, 2023; Saeedi et al., 2023). There are three types of coping strategies—problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping (Gwynn, 2023; Saeedi et al., 2023). Problem-focused coping strategies are direct cognitive and behavioral processes that modify or eliminate

a stressor. Problem-focused coping strategies are used when a threat is perceivably controllable. A few examples of problem-focused coping strategies are studying to reduce test anxiety, practicing a speech for a conference, speaking to a therapist to decrease depressive symptoms, and budgeting to maintain healthy financial habits and reduce impulsive spending. Emotion-focused coping strategies are methods used to regulate an individual's emotional response to a stressor. Emotion-focused coping strategies are employed when a threat or stressor appears uncontrollable. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies are emotional support, prayer, venting to a trusted person, and rumination. Lastly, avoidance coping is used to escape stressful life events, actions, people, or things by ignoring the stressor (Gwynn, 2023). Research suggests that avoidance coping is the most ineffective form of coping and is significantly associated with depression and anxiety (Gwynn, 2023).

Many scholars have asserted that Black men in higher education programs appear to use avoidance coping strategies more than other strategies (Goodwill et al., 2018; Hoggard et al., 2012). Avoidance coping strategies can exacerbate feelings of loneliness (Law et al., 2023) and position some students to be vulnerable to discontinuing their doctoral program. Considering the low number of Black male doctoral degree recipients, there may be a relationship between Black men, coping strategies, and social work doctoral program completion. To contextualize this hypothesis, the Cultural Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (CTT; Kuo, 2011, 2013) was used to help frame a personal narrative.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The CTT was developed to examine the association between culture, mental health, and coping (Kuo, 2011, 2013). The CTT underscores Afrocentrism, collectivism, and individualism as vital cultural and cognitive factors that impact coping (Kuo, 2011). The CTT assumes that culture is embedded into the stress-coping process, affecting the five sequentially ordered levels of the theory (Kuo, 2013). The five levels of the CTT are described as panels: Panel I involves the environmental system (e.g., social climate, stressors, and resources in family and work), Panel II personal system (e.g., cognitive abilities, personality traits, social competence), Panel III transitory conditions (e.g., life events and changes), Panel IV cognitive appraisal and coping skills (e.g., approach or avoidance coping), and Panel V health and well-being (e.g., mental and physical health; Chun et al., 2006). This paper uses relevant concepts from the CTT stress and coping model to frame the challenges encountered during my doctoral program and highlight the significance of personal experiences in shaping effective coping strategies. By examining these themes, this narrative aims to contribute valuable insights to social work discourse, particularly regarding the necessity of fostering supportive communities and culturally affirming environments for Black men in both social work practice and academic settings.

### **Personal Narrative**

This narrative will explore my experiences coping as a double minority in a social work doctoral program. Historically, social work has been a white and women-majority field (Plummer et al., 2021). Since I identify as Black and a man, "double minority" was selected to conceptualize my

position within this specific academic setting (i.e., a social work doctoral program). I want my narrative to reflect the importance of family and community.

### **How Did I Get Here?**

Well, let's start from the beginning. I attended one of the country's best Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) for undergrad. The lessons learned, and the experiences, truly prepared me for life. During my undergraduate studies, I majored in business administration. However, through internships and social interactions, I developed a passion for helping Black men heal. At first, I thought my passions were limited to assisting them to heal financially.

Following graduation, I accepted a job working in the financial industry. I felt stifled because I thought that I was not following my purpose. After seeing a shift in my attitude and emotions, my younger brother recommended that I pursue social work. He said, "You love helping people. You may as well try." Feeling desperate to escape the financial industry, I applied to an HBCU for their Master of Social Work program. It was at this institution that I learned the importance of mentorship. The faculty at my graduate institution were phenomenal. They were encouraging and supportive, and they unlocked a new way of thinking within me. It was also at this institution that I developed a love for research. During the first year of my master's program, I had the opportunity to visit and do research in South Africa. I enjoyed the experience and spoke so highly of it that two professors recommended that I consider a doctoral program. The recommendation was scary. I never thought myself to be an academic, and outside of my professors, I did not know anyone who achieved such a feat, and because of this, I did not believe that I could do it. However, after some convincing, I applied to one social work doctoral program and was accepted!

### **What Were the Challenges That I Experienced in my Doctoral Program?**

I was super excited to begin my doctoral journey. The idea of being a three-time HBCU graduate of three of the most prestigious HBCUs in the country excited me. I remember my first day walking into the orientation. I could not stop smiling. I looked around the room and repeatedly thought, "How lucky am I to be among the number of people accepted into the program?" I listened to every word the speakers said and took copious notes. And later, I went home and watched YouTube videos for hours in preparation for my impending journey. I was going to be ready. I was going to make a difference.

The beginning of the first year was challenging, contributing to my feelings of being an imposter. I had to learn a new writing style, work, and financially support my family. I also had several assignments due every week. It was tough, but I promised my family that I would finish. In my family and community, I was well-known as an academic overachiever. I was a first-generation college student and the only young person in my neighborhood to pursue college. The pressure of thinking that I had to do well for my family and community caused me to develop writing anxiety.

In Panel I, the environmental system, the theory suggests that stress and coping are centered around an individual's social obligations and responsibilities towards family and community (Kuo, 2011, 2013). My family and community celebrated accomplishments, especially educational milestones, as a collective achievement. As a first-generation college student and doctoral pursuant, I knew there was a shared hope that my academic journey would break barriers and establish a precedent for future generations. The weight of this responsibility was emphasized by my family's sacrifices to wholeheartedly support me, both emotionally and financially, in pursuing all my goals and endeavors. Because I witnessed the challenges my mother and grandmother faced while growing up, their investment in my education became a source of significant pressure.

Although they never intentionally pressured me, I internalized a self-imposed sense of perfectionism. I felt compelled to become the person I believed I needed to be to support them, which, in my mind, included excelling as a writer. I viewed it as my obligation to reciprocate the support and upliftment I received from my community and family. Repayment, in my mind, manifested through achieving academic and financial success, providing for my mother's retirement, and contributing to the community through service. This was my Atlas journey, and in anticipation, I crafted a new persona that I believed would assist me in achieving my goal.

In Panel II, the personal system, the theory explores the concept of locus of control. This concept relates to how individuals perceive the forces influencing their lives (Kuo, 2013). This phase of my journey aligns with the internal locus of control concept prevalent in individualistic cultures. Individuals within individualistic environments often prioritize self-reliance and personal responsibility, striving to achieve their goals through independent effort (Kuo, 2013). The persona I adopted reflected this internalized drive. I believed that self-reliance and merit were the sole pathways to becoming an academician. This persona projected composure, strategic thinking, and social adeptness, enabling me to navigate social situations with confidence and humor. However, a continuous internal dialogue questioned my abilities beneath this confident exterior, revealing the underlying self-doubt that persisted despite the outward image.

These expectations extended beyond the individual level; they were ingrained in the fabric of my community, viewing my pursuit of higher education as a symbol of progress and opportunity. While the external validation and recognition were well-intentioned, they contributed to mounting stress and fueled the imposter syndrome during the first year of my doctoral program. The perceived pressure to excel became a constant companion, shaping my mindset and intensifying the writing anxiety I grappled with throughout the first year.

The emphasis on collective well-being resonated deeply with me as someone who values collectivism. In panel III, transitory conditions, the theorists observed that individuals who value collectivism, like me, tend to perceive disruptions to social harmony and security as more stressful than individualistic threats (Chun et al., 2006). This concept became painfully real when my social harmony was unexpectedly shattered in November of my first semester.

The first semester was challenging. While I received valuable writing feedback, it made writing feel like a chore. It worsened further after a phone call from my mother.

She informed me that my younger brother had attempted suicide. Feeling confused and frustrated, I went to the hospital, comforted my family, and headed straight to class. The drive back to my university seemed endless. I fell into a cycle of negative self-talk. I blamed myself for not being there to support him and condemned myself for thinking that I could. I fell further into feeling like an imposter. “How could I ever hope to help Black men if I could not help my brother?” The mental fog shrouded my judgment, and I missed a presentation. The missed presentation resulted in an email requesting that I remove myself from the program.

The sharply worded, straightforward email intensified the emotional turbulence I was already circumnavigating. As I opened the message, the first two sentences read “Colleagues, I have included you all, because of how everything happened tonight with him not doing his presentation. I want to ask you [me] not to respond to this email.” I felt like my spirit was draining from my body and onto the floor, and a wave of anxiety washed over me. The words on the screen seemed to blur as I grappled with the potential consequences of this unexpected turn of events. The ending of the e-mail was crushing. It read, “But let me be clear, you are not going to smile your way through our PhD Program, it is more to earning a PhD than looking good and being nice.” This section of the email was hurtful because I felt exposed and seen. I knew that the persona that I created was not protecting me in the ways in which I thought it would. I was vulnerable and my professor identified my Achilles heel.

The email, initially, felt like a confirmation of my innermost fears and insecurities—a stark realization that I might not be equipped to handle the challenges before me. “Maybe everyone was wrong about me.” It was a moment of great vulnerability, amplifying the sense of isolation that had already taken root in my journey. The weight of the message hung heavily in the air, casting a shadow over my aspirations and reinforcing the belief that perhaps I was not cut out for the demands of a doctoral program. Although I did not respond or comply with the e-mail, I knew quitting was not an option. I had to persevere and trailblaze a new path for my family and community members.

During the struggles of my first semester, I coped with the overwhelming challenges by retreating into isolation. The weight of my brother’s hospitalization and the subsequent fallout left me feeling emotionally drained and unable to reach out for support. Amid my depression, I waited for someone, perhaps a professor, to notice my struggle and offer assistance. However, that lifeline never materialized, leaving me grappling with my difficulties in silence. The perception that no one would help deepened my sense of isolation and fueled the belief that I had to navigate my troubles alone.

Isolation became a coping mechanism, albeit an unhealthy one, as I yearned for someone to question what had happened and provide the support I so desperately needed. The feelings of loneliness, avoidance, and isolation lasted throughout the coursework portion of my program.

Reflecting on my experience during that challenging first semester, I recognize how my coping mechanisms interacted with broader cultural influences. As highlighted in Panel IV, cognitive appraisal and coping skills, individuals employ various strategies to manage difficult situations (Kuo, 2011, 2013). Some approaches focus on directly addressing and changing external stressors (primary control), while others involve managing internal reactions and adapting to the situation (secondary control; Kuo, 2011, 2013). In my case, the overwhelming emotions stemming from my brother's hospitalization and the subsequent isolation I experienced seem to reflect a secondary control coping strategy. While retreating into isolation offered a temporary escape from the emotional turmoil, it ultimately stopped me from seeking the support I desperately needed, potentially hindering my ability to navigate the challenges I faced effectively.

However, the challenges embedded within my doctoral journey bore a profound connection to my identity as a first-generation college student and a Black man, linking my personal aspirations with communal expectations. The weight of familial and community hopes for my success, particularly in the context of historically Black institutions, heightened the stakes and intensified the pressure on my academic endeavors. Every step I took to pursue my PhD felt like a collective stride, breaking through barriers for future generations in my community. This sense of responsibility added an emotional weight, transforming my academic journey into a mission beyond personal achievement.

Being a double minority in academia also meant navigating uncharted territory with a sense of isolation. The perceived unwritten expectations for Black scholars to maneuver independently led me to shy away from seeking mentorship or confiding in professors about my struggles. The fear of being misunderstood or further marginalized deepened my reluctance, creating a barrier to the support that could have alleviated the emotional burden. This hesitation extended to my interactions with fellow students, fostering a sense of disconnection that echoed the broader challenges faced by individuals sharing similar identities. The emotional toll of being a double minority was palpable, shaping the hurdles I encountered and influencing the coping strategies I employed as I navigated a demanding academic landscape.

Learning and navigating through the two-year coursework portion of my doctoral program while managing the initial shock and prolonged experience of my brother's incident was an unexpected chapter in my academic career. The emotional havoc and confusion I felt left me contending to find a sense of balance. I struggled to manage my feelings of inadequacy, educational commitments, shattered sense of self, and grief, which exacerbated my anxiety.

My once well-defined vision of my PhD journey and program now seemed obscured. I lost focus and felt alone. It felt challenging to muster the motivation to develop and complete my research agenda. These feelings were only intensified by the absence of a mentor. I avoided conversations with professors about my research out of fear of judgment. Thoughts like "Will I let them down?" and "Can I write well enough to work with them?" obstructed me from receiving meaningful guidance from professors who could have understood my position and feelings. However, as time passed, I started to remember

a quote I learned from an English professor in undergrad. Maya Angelou's (1975) poem "Alone" says:

Lying, thinking  
Last night  
How to find my soul a home  
Where water is not thirsty  
And bread loaf is not stone  
I came up with one thing  
And I don't believe I'm wrong  
That nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone.  
(stanza 1)

For weeks, I ruminated on these words and shared them with my mother, grandmother, great-aunt, and brother, who encouraged me to focus on healing and coping.

### **What Lessons Were Learned and How Did I Cope?**

Reflecting on my tenure as a doctoral student reveals an intertwining of personal identities that shaped my experience. As a Black man, embarking on becoming the first in my family to earn a doctoral degree brought many triumphs and challenges. My family's wisdom, deeply rooted in navigating systemic obstacles, became an invaluable guiding force in the unfamiliar landscape of academia. Their insight, encouragement, and empathy provided a lifeline, reinforcing my identity and offering coping strategies in moments of stress. Laughter, a seemingly simple yet powerful tool, became a unique bond shared with my mom and brother. It was more than just a moment of levity; it became a means of connecting to my academic destiny. In the midst of challenges, their shared laughter served as a reminder of my innate resilience and determination, grounding me in the belief that I was destined for academic success, even when the path ahead seemed uncertain and unrecognized by others.

Moreover, my grandmother and great-aunt's faith and religious guidance provided a different dimension of support. My grandmother and great-aunt utilized our faith to remind me of the importance of prayer and how "prayer changes things." Their teachings accentuated the importance of spiritual grounding, emphasizing the strength found in prayer. During moments of heightened stress and uncertainty, turning to faith became a source of resilience. Their guidance reminded me of the enduring power of spiritual beliefs and provided a sense of inner strength, enabling me to navigate the challenges of academia with a fortified sense of purpose and conviction.

In the realm of personal identities, the support and lessons extended beyond the familial sphere to encompass a circle of friends who acted as firm pillars throughout my doctoral education. The support I garnered from my friends and fraternity brothers transcended the familial domain,

marking an important chapter in my doctoral journey. Their unwavering presence served as a testament to the strength found in chosen family, offering me a sense of community and understanding that went beyond shared blood ties. In crafting study plans, their assistance was not just about academic guidance; it symbolized a collective commitment to my success. Their unyielding encouragement provided a constant source of motivation, acting as a lifeline during the most challenging moments of life and academic pursuit.

During times of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, my friends became my safe haven. Their collective wisdom, sarcasm, empathy, and care formed a nurturing environment that encouraged perseverance. In this shared space, I found solace and the strength to navigate the complexities of doctoral education. The camaraderie we shared became a force against life and academia's barriers, proving instrumental in my ability to endure and thrive.

The collective strength of my familial relationships and friendships became a cornerstone, guiding me through the labyrinth of academia with emotional fortitude and resilience. I learned that the road to completing and earning a doctoral degree is bumpy, and the significance of community cannot be overstated. This experience deeply connects with cultural influences shaping coping outcomes and well-being, as discussed in Panel V of the CTT (Kuo, 2011, 2013).

As a Black man navigating academia, the support from my family and chosen family served as a powerful buffer against potential feelings of isolation and self-doubt. Their collective responsibility for my success, the emphasis on spiritual grounding, and the shared laughter reflect the importance of social harmony, interdependence, and diverse coping strategies emphasized in Panel V for collectivistic cultures (Kuo, 2011, 2013). Their unwavering presence bolstered my emotional well-being and fostered a sense of belonging and purpose, reminding me that I was not alone in my journey. This experience highlights the critical role of community in fostering resilience and well-being for Black men in academia, particularly when navigating the challenges of isolation and self-doubt as a double minority.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

After reflecting on my experience as a double minority—a Black man in the social work field—I've seen firsthand the stark lack of representation in our profession. This is not just an observation; it's a glaring issue with significant implications. Using my narrative and the CTT, I have identified several implications and recommendations for social work practice, research, and education. First, more attention in social work should be dedicated to understanding the underrepresentation of Black men in social work practice and social work education. Limited research exists regarding the specific factors contributing to this gap. To address it, comprehensive qualitative and quantitative studies are necessary. Social workers should conduct in-depth interviews, focus groups, and surveys to gain valuable insights into Black men's perception of social work, the barriers they face in entering the field, and the motivations and aspirations that could draw them towards this profession.

It is critical to acknowledge the intersecting factors of race and gender that contribute to this underrepresentation. Historical marginalization, systemic racism, and societal expectations of masculinity may discourage Black men from entering a field traditionally perceived as white and feminine. To address this deficit, the social work profession requires multifaceted interventions. Targeted outreach and mentorship programs—developed in collaboration with Black male social work organizations, Black fraternities, and community leaders—can connect with Black communities, particularly young men. These initiatives can showcase social workers' diverse roles and impact, challenging negative stereotypes and emphasizing the empowerment-aligned aspects of the profession, such as advocacy, leadership, and community improvement.

Regarding education, social work educators should consider integrating coursework and readings that amplify the voices and experiences of Black social workers throughout history, research, and contemporary practice. Some examples of Black male social work researchers that could be used in coursework are Jerome Schiele, Anthony Estreet, Laurens VanSluytman, Anthony Hill, and Sean Joe. This gives students a broader understanding of the profession and its contributions to diverse communities.

Additionally, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to effectively engage with diverse populations, including Black communities, through a culturally competent curriculum is paramount. This training should encompass implicit bias, culturally responsive practice models, and addressing systemic racism.

Additionally, social workers are uniquely positioned to collaborate and mentor Black male students. The connection and collaboration of Black male students with faculty mentors could decrease attrition rates for Black men in doctoral programs. Social work doctoral educators should explore the creation of mentorship programs that explicitly support Black men. During the first semester of their program, Black men should be paired with a mentor within their school. The mentor-mentee relationship should be guided by a mentoring contract that outlines expectations and learning objectives. In addition, social work educators should consider using the CTT theory as a framework to understand the well-being of their students. Implementing the CTT within course evaluations or end-of-semester assessments is poised to inform educators of invaluable data. The datum could notify educators of ecological elements that could impact the students' performance or retention.

One of the grand challenges of social work is to eradicate social isolation. Proctor et al. (2023) asserted that Black men in higher education are socially isolated and depressed. It is recommended that a qualitative study follow to explore the experiences of first-generation Black male social work doctoral degree graduates. This study may provide support and understanding to an unexamined population. It could also highlight opportunities for creating culturally based interventions to assist Black men in completing social work doctoral-level education. It is also recommended that a qualitative study be conducted exploring the career choices of Black male social work doctoral degree graduates and the factors that impact those career choices.

Addressing the underrepresentation of Black men in social work requires a sustained commitment to research, discourse, and collaboration. The profession can move towards a more inclusive and representative future by implementing the proposed recommendations and advocating for policy changes to support targeted programs. This will ultimately enhance the capacity of social work to serve all communities effectively and promote social justice.

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