

THESIS

MY EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT-RESEARCHER IN A UNIVERSITY-LEVEL RESEARCH  
PROCESS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### MY EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT-RESEARCHER IN A UNIVERSITY-LEVEL RESEARCH PROCESS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Graduate students' perspectives on being involved in the research process in academia is not a common topic in research literature. Specifically, researchers have not often studied graduate students' roles in faculty-led projects. Despite students having experiences being a part of faculty-led projects, they have not used autoethnography to explore their involvement. As a result, this process may be unknown and intimidating for graduate students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe and understand my experiences as a graduate student-researcher involved in a faculty-led research study. The guiding research questions were as follows: 1) What were my experiences as a graduate student-researcher in a faculty-led research process? 2) How did this experience affect my identity development as a graduate student? I categorized findings into three themes: (a) Graduate Student Identity Development (IDD as a researcher, IDD as a student of color, emotions alongside GSIDD), (b) Research Patterns in Academics (observed patterns in faculty, observed patterns in students & comparing their approach with faculty), and (c) Power Dynamics (observed power dynamics, sensitive conversations). Using an autoethnographic approach, I explored my participation in a faculty-led study to offer insight into how this process affected my graduate student identity development, and how the power dynamics present in student-advisor and student-faculty relationships played a role in this process. These findings provide insight into my experiences being a part of the faculty-led research study and highlight that more student-led research is needed in this space of academia. Discussion about connections between codes and subthemes, connections between the literature and my experiences, reflections on conducting this thesis, and suggestions for students and faculty are included. This thesis contributes to literature by addressing topics like advisor-advisee relationships, power dynamics, and graduate student identity development.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF KEYWORDS .....	v
Chapter 1 - Introduction .....	1
Positionality statement .....	2
Research Approach .....	4
Theoretical Framework .....	5
Data collection & data analysis .....	6
Autoethnography as Method .....	6
Chapter 2 - Literature review .....	8
Graduate student identity development .....	9
Imposter phenomenon .....	12
Power dynamics .....	11
Graduate student-advisor relationships .....	10
Dominant ideologies and oppressive norms in academia .....	13
Purpose statement & research questions .....	16
Chapter 3 - Method .....	17
Procedures .....	17
Interviews .....	18
Data analysis .....	19
Ethical considerations .....	20
Chapter 4 - Emerging Themes & Assertions .....	23
Theme A: Graduate Student Identity Development (GSIDD) .....	23
Subtheme A1: Identity Development as a Researcher .....	23
Subtheme A2: Identity Development as a Student of Color .....	25
Subtheme A3: Emotions alongside GSIDD .....	27
Theme B: Research Patterns in Academics .....	29
Subtheme B1: Observed Patterns in Faculty .....	29
Subtheme B2: Observed Patterns in Students & Comparing their Approach with Faculty .....	31
Theme C: Power Dynamics .....	33
Subtheme C1: Observed Power Dynamics .....	33
Subtheme C2: Sensitive Conversations .....	35
Chapter 5 - Discussion .....	38
Connecting Codes & Subthemes from Different Themes .....	39
Graduate Student Identity Development .....	40
Power Dynamics .....	42
Graduate Student-Advisee Relationship .....	43
Dominant Ideologies and Oppressive Norms in Academia .....	45
Reflections on Conducting an Autoethnography .....	46
Considerations for Students .....	46
Considerations for Faculty .....	48
Summary .....	50
References .....	51

## LIST OF KEYWORDS

Keywords: autoethnography, culture of white supremacy in academia, power dynamics, graduate student, identity development, student-advisor dynamics

## INTRODUCTION

Engaging in a university-level research project as a student can be challenging, rewarding and intensive. Starting with the power difference between the researcher/professor/supervisor and the student, to the student's experiences of imposter phenomenon (Huecker et al., 2023), being a part of this process might seem intimidating to many (Johnston & Strong, 2008). When conducting a research study in a university setting, I could not find much literature to help me understand the nuances of this process. Added to the pressures of navigating the learning curves of conducting research, I found that being part of a faculty-led project was also not in the literature. I had difficulty anticipating what struggles I might encounter, and what was expected of me. I experienced this difficulty in previous projects and during this study.

I used an autoethnographic approach to dissect and elucidate some of these factors to provide insight for students, supervisors, and professors. Ellis et al. (2011) explains that autoethnography allows for:

ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us. (p. 274)

I was able to describe my experiences effectively using this reflexive and exploratory approach. I am a member of the research team in a faculty-led study. This study was led by faculty members, one of whom also served as my advisor throughout my graduate school experience. The research team consisted of faculty members, business professionals, and graduate students. My experience as a student-researcher in this study will inform the data for this autoethnography.

Throughout the study, I noted reflections about the processes and discussions from the research team meetings and collected data. As a student who appreciates structure, I found that I did not have enough of it during research processes and was hesitant to seek guidance with each step of the process. Certain parts of the process, like deadlines and methodological approaches, were pre-determined by faculty members while some parts were up for discussion. I did not know which decisions I had to make on my own and for which I could seek guidance.

I believe that, through my experiences depicted in this study, supervisors, professors, and advisors could potentially understand implications for their graduate student's experiences. I also believe that this study could provide insight for students about the nuances of being a part of faculty-led research and provide them an example of how this process might look. I believe the study will offer a unique perspective from a female graduate student of Color. I also acknowledge that this autoethnography will follow an emergent design, allowing for various insights considering "gendered, racialized" (Hunt, 2016, p. 734) and other factors, rather than focusing on a singular truth.

### **Positionality Statement**

As Keleş (2022) stated, "as an autoethnographer, you are not only responsible for walking your readership through your thoughts, beliefs, and experiences but also drawing them into the ways you analyze, question, and criticize your narrative consciously, emotionally, and reflexively" (p. 2036). In examining power and privilege as it relates to this thesis, I believe it is imperative for me disclose my identity in relation to the constructs of this study. I am an Indian American, cisgendered, nondisabled, female music therapist and master's student. Demographic data obtained from the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) shows that, in the context of the music therapy field, I am a part of the intersectional minority since most of the field consists of 88.34% white members, and 86.44% female members (AMTA, 2021).

In the context of this study, my privileges lie in having previously conducted research in an American academic institution and having financial and geographic access to databases and a master's

education with professors who are well-recognized in the music therapy field. Relevant parts of my identity that affect my perspective include my cultural background and my commitment to understanding the authentic student experience. To acknowledge various levels of development, I am using de l'Etoile's (2008) application of Perry's Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years to undergraduate music therapy students. I find that I am currently in the process of transitioning from a dualistic student who perceives the world in a polar (right vs. wrong) manner to a contextual relativist: "students can see that what is considered right or wrong depends on the context, with a few exceptions." (de l'Etoile, 2008, p. 113) I am also using Tatum's (2010) application of Cross's (1971, 1978, 1991) model of Black racial identity development. I use this model to represent my identity as a POC and hence generalize a model meant for Black people to my identity as an Indian American. In this context, I recognize that I am in the Internalization stage: "While still maintaining his or her connections with Black peers, the internalized individual is willing to establish meaningful relationships with White who acknowledge and are respectful of his or her self-definition" (p. 12). These parts of my identity will be reflected in an interwoven manner throughout this paper. I recognize that these privileges and my identity inform my perspective on my insights.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

In this section, I discussed the research approach and theoretical framework I employed in this study. I also explained this approach's influence on the data collection and analysis processes. I chose autoethnography to explore this process since the submersion of myself into the cultural phenomenon allows for a unique perspective. Autoethnography can be defined as analyzing (graphy) personal experiences (auto) to learn about cultural experiences (ethno) (Ellis et al., 2011). Since "all autoethnographies are concerned with connecting personal experiences to cultural meanings" (Shaw, 2019, p. 31), I analyzed the process of being engaged in a faculty-led research project, my personal experience of this involvement, and implications for other students who might participate in such an experience. Through autoethnography, I explored dialogues, ethical considerations, power dynamics, the culture of White supremacy in academia, the process of being a graduate student involved in faculty members' study, and how they all tied into the development of my identity as a student-researcher and a graduate student.

Through autoethnography's mostly unstructured approach (Johnston & Strong, 2008), I explored possibilities to "challenge dominant narratives and amplify counter-narratives while capturing distinct perspectives and interactions" (Oswald et al., 2020, p. 117). Research has been conducted from the researcher/professor's perspective, that is, from the perspective of those in power. Autoethnography facilitated an authentic representation of myself, as opposed to the traditional belief that if you "represent yourself falsely, (only) then you'll succeed in the academic game" (Chapman & Sork, 2001, p. 103). I used personal, written journals to note and explore my authentic reflections about processes.

In autoethnography, "the base unit of analysis is...the author, and the researcher" (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 198) and as I collected data, I used myself as an "experiencing agent" (Hokkanen, 2017,

p. 25). This in-depth self-reflection could also lead to questions such as, “(is) my story worth telling?” (Johnston & Strong, 2008, p. 58). As a part of data collection, I “step(ped) into vulnerabilities that... question (my) confidence, to learn to speak confidently from them” (Johnston & Strong, 2008, p. 56). As Bochner (2017) mentions, this process helped me in “discovering something strange about the self you started with as you try to transform yourself into a new being” (p. 71). As I reflected on my identity development through this autoethnography, focusing on topics such as race and culture lead to emotional responses and tension in representation (Tatum, 2001). As Tatum (2001) proposed, “if not addressed, these emotional responses can result in student resistance to oppression-related content areas” (p. 312). I highlighted these emotional responses and tension in the results section to bring further awareness to the graduate student experience in focusing on sensitive topics such as race. The power dynamics, identity development, and other parts of being a graduate student were reflected upon and explored in the findings and discussion sections.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The critical lens was adopted to “reveal mechanisms of oppression” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 764) in the context of analyzing power dynamics in the research process and amplifying counter-narratives from a student’s perspective on the research process as opposed to a professor/researcher’s perspective. Ellis et al. (2011) further explained that critical research can “challenge ideology and oppressive norms that are taken for granted and that unmask power” (p. 764). In the context of this thesis, I challenged ideology and oppressive norms of students conducting research with faculty and demystified the power faculty have and display over students in this process (Rolvjord & Hadley, 2016). More details on oppressive norms and dominant ideologies can be found in a dedicated section of the literature review.

I use a transformative lens to address power differences and inequities in my experiences (Mertens, 2021). This lens was adopted to consciously address these factors in an ethical and culturally responsive manner. I used this lens to examine the nature of ethics and values within the faculty-led study and this study to identify necessary avenues of transformative social change in academia. This lens also

enabled me to engage in a reflexive process throughout this study to understand intersections between my identity and my experiences in the faculty-led study/this thesis.

### **Data Collection & Data Analysis**

I used both the autoethnographic and critical/transformational lenses to inform my perspective for data collection and analysis. Since autoethnography “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274), I worked to maintain transparency in my approach as a human and researcher throughout this study; this process is outlined further in the Method section.

### **Autoethnography as Method**

As Ellis et al. (2011) stated, “as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (p. 273) describing how interwoven data collection and analysis can become. The purpose of autoethnography is to “extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 270). It involves “a descriptive focus, exploring human experience, and acknowledging subjective meaning making” (Cooper & Lilyeah, 2022, p. 201). As these researchers highlighted, autoethnography as a method can look different from traditional qualitative research frameworks and methods.

To ensure quality in data collection, reliability can be viewed in terms of “narrator’s credibility” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 282). As a qualitative researcher, my credibility lies in my experience being a student at a university for the past 6 years in terms of my familiarity with power dynamics and responsibilities and working on a second faculty-led research study in terms of familiarity with research endeavors. While my previous experience with faculty-led research increases my credibility, I acknowledge that I was the first author in the previous publication. In the faculty-led study, I am collaborating with peers and faculty members, I am not the first author, and my experience with power dynamics, responsibilities, and collaborative decision-making has been different. I also attempted to maintain my credibility by presenting an extensive literature review and using transparency in data

collection and anticipated data collection strategies, in line with Chang et al. (2012). Trustworthiness can be viewed in terms of “the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 282). I included as much detail as ethically possible, with the intention of fully describing each experience. In terms of implications of the study’s findings, transferability can be viewed as “if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know; it is determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 283).

Despite all these check points, Shaw (2019) noted that “trying to ensure that the research was rigorous, theoretical, analytical *and* emotional, evocative, creative and inclusive of personal and social phenomena, was a lot to negotiate” (p. 284). I reflected upon my process through this negotiation in the discussion section. As students, professors, supervisors, and advisors read this study, I hope they can gain insight from situations and/or roles discussed from my experiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I presented literature relevant to this study. In the context of being a part of a research project led by professors, I examined graduate student identity development and power dynamics graduate students might experience in the academic landscape. I also discussed literature on dominant ideologies and oppressive patterns in academia. Throughout this paper, I will be using the term imposter phenomenon instead of imposter syndrome to avoid the stigma around the term “syndromes” and since it is not a clinical diagnosis (Palmer, 2021). Imposter phenomenon is described as when a person feels like they did not earn what they receive, feeling like a deceitful hypocrite (Palmer, 2021). It can also be used in situations where someone might not feel like they belong in an environment, like academia, due to their lack of knowledge and other factors. I will be alternating between capitalizing the terms “white” and people of “Color” throughout this section in an attempt to balance the power in written form between the racial and ethnic groups.

In attempting to understand how autoethnography was used as a methodology and approach by graduate students, I used search terms “autoethnograph\*” AND “graduate students” in databases such as Google Scholar and Academic Search Ultimate. I found several studies where graduate students used an autoethnographic approach to discuss their respective graduate experiences. In contrast, when I conducted a brief search of major American music therapy journals, *Music Therapy Perspectives* and the *Journal of Music Therapy*, to find ethnographies and/or autoethnographies published in the field, I found a total of two articles. I used the search term “autoethnograph\*” to find these articles. Neither of them was from a graduate student’s perspective. Researchers utilizing this method and approach to understand and analyze a graduate student’s research experience could help fill a literature gap in this field.

There is limited literature conducted by graduate students on their involvement in faculty-led research. While seeking literature that described or analyzed graduate students' perspectives on conducting research/being a part of the research process, I found one source (Madden et al., 2020). In their book, authors offered graduate students a voice and space to share their experiences and offered readers a framework for how we could think about problems graduate students face. Pertinent parts of her book will be highlighted in the context of the subheadings throughout the literature review.

### **Graduate Student Identity Development**

I found multiple studies conducted by graduate students about their identity development (Carter-Veale, et al., 2016; Gardener & Barnes 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Grady et al., 2013). Since I am a graduate student, I specifically searched for research on graduate students. I primarily found literature related to doctoral students. This shows a literature gap in studies conducted by and about master's level students. Corrales and Komperda (2022) defined identity as “participation in a community or communities informs what we value and what we learn relates to the ongoing development of how we are seen and how we see ourselves” (p. 1748). In the context of this study, I define identity development as how I am seen and how I perceive myself throughout the faculty-led study.

Researchers proposed a model for how PhD students might be best supported, in terms of supervision and to lower attrition rates (Carter-Veale, et al., 2016). Gardner and Barnes (2007) discussed that research involvement is important for PhD students' socialization; they found that professional socialization could be increased through local and national involvement in associations. In exploring potential sources of institutional stress, Grady et al. (2013) found that graduate students experience factors such as role strain, fluctuations in mentor relationships, isolation, and inconsistent/lack of funding that led to unique mental health concerns. Along similar lines, Gonzalez et al. (2021) shared that students who are pursuing PhDs with high levels of stress fare poorly in progressing through their programs. In a systematic review, Cho and Hayter (2020) similarly listed factors that contribute to stress in graduate students: feelings of isolation, existing anxiety levels, high course workload, and so on. Inversely, they

also shared a list of factors that reduce stress levels: sense of belonging, maintaining realistic expectations, positive work-life balance, and perceived support from supervisor (Cho & Hayter, 2020). Researchers have explored factors that affect graduate students' identity development through factors like socialization and stress.

### ***Imposter Phenomenon***

Graduate students often struggle with the development of their identity as researchers. Corrales and Komperda (2022) interviewed chemistry graduate students to understand their perceptions of their identities. Upon reflecting on a student/participant's experience, the researchers shared that: "despite her focus on research, she does not yet recognize herself as a scientist" (Corrales & Komperda, 2022, p. 1752). When exploring music therapy students' experiences of imposter phenomenon, Sims (2017) found that graduate students discussed "feelings of self-doubt, and low self-efficacy, fear of failure, and worry about educational and clinical preparedness" (p. 67). One student stated "I don't know if I'll ever feel... like I've learned enough" (p. 67). Like these students, I have not historically thought of myself as a researcher despite having recently published in a peer-reviewed American journal and my conducting this study. I have also felt similarly that I will not learn enough about research as a master's student, which, in turn, affects my identity as a researcher. Throughout this paper, I explored these themes of graduate student identity development, in the context of my experience being a student-researcher in the faculty-led study.

Being a graduate student can be confusing since we may have minimal experience being researchers and might need guidance to become better professionals and researchers. Chapman and Sork (2001) explored that idea through honest reflections, where a student shared that "things at graduate school were a lot different than they looked on the surface" (p. 96). In seeking to understand doctoral students' experiences with emotional exhaustion, Devine and Hunter (2016) found that 35.5% of doctoral students "reported moderate to high levels of emotional exhaustion...emerging concerns about doctoral students' emotional well-being are well-founded" (p. 51). Nutov and Hazzan (2011) further added that,

“part of the labor of qualitative researchers is emotional labor, which refers to the effort a person invests in expressing or coping with his or her emotions so as to achieve objectives pertaining to his or her work” (p. 20) Through this autoethnography, I will explore some of these factors to share my experiences as a graduate student.

As a new professional and researcher, one graduate student said they “lost some of (their) innocence” but are also eager for guidance (Chapman & Sork, 2001, p. 96). The loss of innocence, in this context, can refer to being privy to a more casual academic environment and to more authenticity from professors as a graduate student. This experience poses a unique conundrum for graduate students as they develop their identities while developing abilities to advocate for themselves and seek guidance. I will explore these concepts through power dynamics, and student-advisor relationships.

### **Power Dynamics**

As Bierdz (2021) defined, “power is an elusive concept that unceasingly changes interpretations throughout time, place, context, illusion and understanding” (p. 3). Social power in higher education “can be defined as a subset of power that brings social attention to particular issues at a college or university” (Bierdz, 2021, p. 7). In academia, power relationships are present in students’ relationships with their supervisors, professors, and or peers. Societal and educational power systems are at play in this thesis.

As McKinney (2006) shared, it is important to name that “those with formal and informal power in the academy have the greatest influence in the social construction of scholarship” (p. 46). Academia is structured so that power is an inherent factor at play. In the context of this thesis, this structural power can affect various aspects of identity, including racial identity. While oppression due to racial differences is prevalent in academia, Harris et al. (2021) explained that people might experience inequality due to holding identities in various oppressed categories. Genao et al. (2022) noted that women of color “face a particular kind of marginalization” (p.29). The intersectionality between race and gender can contribute to a particularly hostile academic environment. Race is an axis along which I will be examining power and privilege/oppression as it relates to my experiences.

Since the nature of being a student is to learn from professors or those who might have more expertise, the relationship between the advisor and student can be rife with power struggles, boundary setting, and navigating roles and expectations. As Godbee (2020) explains, “(graduate writers) navigate complex asymmetrical power relations when working with faculty advisors, committee members” (p. 35). In the context of this study, there is a power difference between my supervisor/committee members and me. These relationships are systemic, where power is inherent since they have more experience, knowledge, wisdom than I might have. This relationship was examined and reflected upon in an interwoven manner throughout this paper.

### ***Graduate Student-Advisor Relationships***

Chapman and Sork (2001) discussed that there had been “much discussion of supervision from a theoretical perspective but less empirical data” (p. 95). While these researchers use the term “supervision” in this quote, they use the terms “supervisor” and “adviser” interchangeably throughout their paper. They shared that despite the student-advisor relationship being the “heart of (the) graduate experience” (Chapman & Sork, 2001, p. 95), there is not much literature and analysis of this relationship in the context of power, privilege, roles, and oppression. Through their exploration of the responsibilities of students and supervisors in research processes, Chapman and Sork (2001) considered how power could be productive in boundary setting in student-supervisor relationships. It is important to actively avoid anything “left unsaid” and to intentionally discuss “power relations,” especially considering my advisor is offering me guidance on this study while also leading a research study I am basing this thesis on (Chapman & Sork, 2001, p. 102). In examining power as it exists in graduate school, Bubar et al. (2016) stated that “dissonance as a feature of privilege is the disconnection between those with power and privilege, and a lack of awareness of power and privilege over people who experience oppression” (p. 289). In other words, awareness of power over those oppressed is essential in connecting those with (supervisors) and those without (graduate students) power and privilege. This theme of resisting and/or reproducing power relations is explored further throughout the study.

In keeping with transparency, it is important to name that I am an Indian American student working with a white advisor. Tang and Andriamanalina (2020) pose the question: “When we consider the high-pressure, high-stakes nature of the dissertation in combination with the racialized experiences of US doctoral writers of color, what forms of support are there for these student-writer communities?” (p. 140). They highlight that support may look different for Indigenous writers and writers of Color (Tang & Andriamanalina, 2020). Similarly, Madden et al. (2020) discuss that advisors and people with authority in academia should ask themselves how students from marginalized groups should be supported and move towards implementing tailored support for those students. As a graduate student of Color, I will be examining my experience of support from my white advisor. Williams et al. (2018) found that “feelings of isolation and alienation.... from a lack of same-race and same-gender peers and faculty members” were highlighted in understanding the relationship between Black doctoral students and their advisors (p. 270). While my advisor/research team and I share a gender, we do not share the same race and a feeling of “otherness” can accompany this relationship due to the societal power difference between white and non-White people. More specifically, the power differential has an added layer when the advisee is a person of Color, since we are often “navigating an institution not created with (us) in mind” (Pfirman, 2018, p. 23). This inherent racial power differential could affect my experiences in the faculty-led study. Further, Williams et al. (2018) discussed “whether related to admissions decisions, workplace expectations, or scholarly authorship, unclear expectations coupled with unbalanced power relationships often left our participants feeling hurt, confused, or otherwise distressed” (p. 272). These unbalanced power dynamics could affect graduate students conducting research negatively.

The power dynamic between my advisor and I could influence the process of conducting research as a graduate student. Researchers have shown that power relationships in academia can be especially difficult to maneuver as a student of Color. I believe this study will offer a unique perspective as I am an Indian American student conducting research in an American institution with a white advisor.

### **Dominant Ideologies and Oppressive Norms in Academia**

While culture can be viewed through categories such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and/or rituals, languages, or systems, “the essential feature of culture is the symbolic learning derived from repeated thought and behavioral patterns shared between people over time that is often, but not solely, developed intergenerationally” (Hadley & Norris, 2016, p. 131). Mahoney (2015) defined culture as: “influencing how people think, what they value, how they communicate, and how they envision themselves in the world” (introduction section). For the purpose of this paper, I will be addressing academic systems, gender, and race as categories of culture. I acknowledge that there are more categories of culture based on gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, and so forth; I will not be addressing these elements of cultures since they are outside the scope of this paper. I noticed the inherent culture of white supremacy present in American academia. Okun (2021) shared that characters such as making people afraid of not being \_\_\_\_\_ enough, perfectionism, prioritizing quantity over quality, worship of the written word, and so on perpetuate white supremacy in an environment. Further, Pensky et al. (2021) note that there is a hidden curriculum in academia that is catered to the social and cultural norms of middle class white people.

The thesis committee supporting me in this study consists of White professors. The faculty-led study I am basing this study off of is happening in a predominantly white space. In my lived experience, in the context of this study, I am surrounded by White academics. My advisor is a white person. In the context of conducting research, the culture I am a part of is mostly White. Since that is the dominant culture, how white people think, what they value, how they communicate, and how they envision themselves in the world of academia influence my experiences. It is imperative for me to have people of Color supporting me through this process in validating my racial battle fatigue and demystifying academic norms.

Smith et al. (2007) proposed that racial battle fatigue occurs when people of Color are repeatedly targeted and oppressed through “social-psychological stress responses (e.g., frustration; anger; exhaustion; physical avoidance; psychological or emotional withdrawal; escapism; acceptance of racist

attributions; resistance; verbally, nonverbally, or physically fighting back; and coping strategies)” (p. 552). Marcos and Kohli (2020) summarized that:

people of Color in traditionally White spaces can experience (a) hypervigilance, (b) hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility, (c) social withdrawal from colleagues, (d) self-censorship in school settings, (e) loss of self-confidence and questioning ability to work, (f) giving up personal goals for professional acknowledgment, (g) adopting the dominant paradigm, practices, rules, norms, and roles (p. 973)

These researchers summarized their findings on how systemic oppression can manifest through emotional and behavioral reactions. I have noticed these reactions in myself while being in white academic spaces.

While acknowledging that I am surrounded by White people in the academic space, I acknowledge that practices such as “co-construction, intentionality, and care and love” are in place in my current research experiences (Parks, et al., 2022, p. 264). These researchers found that said elements are essential in creating pro-Black spaces in an academic environment. I also acknowledge that I do not think that my colleagues/peers/professors/supervisors intentionally perceive me as “other” (that is, an outsider). Other-ing people’s cultures as exotic or interesting because they are different can implicitly make marginalized communities uncomfortable and reinforce the white dominant narrative (Lightstone & Hadley, 2013). I noted how these elements are incorporated into my experience as an Indian American in these White spaces. The details of these elements were discussed in this paper using the transformative lens.

There are various norms present in academia, these norms tell “stories from the perspective of the dominant social group in order to sustain their racial and class privilege” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2007, as cited in Gildersleeve et al., 2011, p. 97). Being a person of Color, these norms do not usually represent my viewpoint. Twale et al. (2016) explain that racial experiences and identity determine how students perceive their faculty-student interactions, peer-peer interactions, and perception of faculty. These

perceptions dictate how students perceive their academic environment and success in graduate studies. Performative allyship is present when a person with power “outwardly appear(s) devoted to a cause while declining to take any major actions to support it” (Rizing Tide Team, 2018, what is performative allyship section). This act can be a norm in various contexts and be relevant to this study since I hold a couple marginalized identities – a person of Color and a student, in an academic environment. I noted, described, and analyzed how dominant ideologies and norms influence my perception of self and success in these environments.

### **Purpose Statement & Research Questions**

The purpose of this autoethnography was to gain an in-depth understanding of my co-researchers'/my experiences as a graduate student-researcher during a faculty-led research study. University-level researchers comprised professors and/or students. Autoethnography was chosen as the best fit for my study to describe and analyze the personal experience of being a graduate student immersed in a university-level research study to understand its cultural meaning. This study helps fill a research gap by adding an autoethnography to the music therapy literature base. By examining my relationship with my advisor, this study offers a graduate student’s perspective of their experiences in graduate school. This research matters because my experiences offer a unique perspective of a graduate student of color navigating a faculty-led study in a predominantly white academic space. The research questions were:

- What were my experiences as a graduate student who is a student-researcher in a faculty-led research process?
- How did this experience affect my identity development as a researcher and as a student of Color?

## METHOD

I used an autoethnographic approach and a critical and transformative lens to analyze collected data. Both the autoethnographic and critical and transformative lens informed my perspective for data collection and analysis. I obtained approval from the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I requested and received permission to retroactively analyze data collect previous to IRB approval. Once I obtained IRB approval, I continued to collect data as a part of the research plan. I also introduced the thesis plan to my co-researchers from the faculty-led study after I received IRB approval. I did this to make sure they were aware of my informal observations for this autoethnography. I prompted them to ask me questions or clarifications about this thesis and how they might be feeling about being observed.

### **Procedures**

I primarily collected data by journaling and by debriefing with peers. I stored all data in a secure online cloud platform. Through journaling (Janesick, 2016), I made observations about thoughts regarding my involvement, power dynamics, and other emergent thoughts that surfaced as I am a part of the faculty-led study. I freely wrote about experiences that stood out to me. These entries were purposely unstructured to allow for data to emerge organically. I maintained a document for this purpose, and it was updated as I had thoughts I wanted to reflect on in brief notes. Once a week, I updated this document with in-depth reflections and expanded on these brief notes. I wrote 37 entries total in this journal. I used creative writing as a means of creative data collection (McNiff, 2013), in line with the exploratory and autoethnographic approach. I “over-included” information through this reflection process, to allow for an abundance of data to analyze (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 200). I used these notes for coding and finding

common patterns between my reflections. Over about nine months, I maintained this journal on the faculty-led study's conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis processes.

I met with two peers periodically throughout the data collection and analysis process to maintain validity of processes and as an “external check” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 343). Peer debriefing also assisted with reliability (Leung, 2015). One of the peers was a graduate student of Color not involved in either study, who had experience conducting faculty-led research, and was outside of the CSU community. They helped me debrief events mentioned in journals by “provid(ing) the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 343). They also discussed interview questions with me. Once I wrote my findings section, they read through it to make sure it made sense from an outsider perspective. I met with this peer two times throughout this process. They additionally helped by reviewing and editing the final draft of this thesis. The second peer I met with was a graduate student in the CSU community who conducted an autoethnography in a different department. They helped me debrief and work through processes for this thesis that were specific to autoethnography. This graduate student also supported me through dynamics with faculty members and my advisor.

## **Interviews**

I sent a recruitment email to my co-researchers from the faculty-led study to ask if they were willing to be interviewed. Three of them expressed interest and signed the consent form. I facilitated semi-structured interviews with each of them to understand their perspectives of situations I had journaled about. I structured these interviews so that questions that arose from journal entries informed the interview questions. I conducted these interviews in a private in-person setting, and I de-identified collected data to ensure comfortability and confidentiality for the researchers. I recorded the audio from interviews using GarageBand software, and transcribed interviews using online software programs such as otter.ai and trint. I acquired consent from each research team member before the interviews, this consent form was included in IRB submission. I conducted interviews with the research team while the faculty-led study was being written up.

I conducted a total of three interviews. One interviewee withdrew their consent after being interviewed, their data was not included and has been destroyed. One of the interviews did not fully record due to technical difficulties. As prompted by my advisor, immediately after this interview, I wrote down responses from my memory and had that interviewee read through these responses to make sure they were accurate. Overall, only one interview was fully recorded and usable for findings.

To protect the confidentiality of the co-researchers I interviewed, I did not offer identifying information and was purposely vague about details regarding the interviews in the manuscript I submitted to my committee before my thesis defense. Upon writing my findings, and after my defense presentation, the committee thought that I needed more details about the interviews in the manuscript. Once I shared my intention to protect my co-researchers' anonymity by avoiding sharing too many details about the interviews, we had an in-depth discussion. Committee members shared that, while prioritizing the interviewees' protection is important, clarifying details about the interviews is essential to maintain full transparency in this thesis. They also thought that the minimal data from interviews seemed to detract from the strength of the other data. Finally, we decided to take out any data/reference to interviews from the findings and discussion sections.

### **Data Analysis**

I used emotion coding and value coding (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Saldaña, 2021) to analyze journal entries, noting similar themes and/or thoughts that arose during data processing to recognize patterns in information. Value coding helped me combine ethical conversations and personal values to revisit my identity development, and emotion coding provided me a reflective way to find common themes throughout the journals and debriefs for data analysis. As I read passages of data, I used an eclectic method of coding that gave me flexibility to choose the most effective method of coding.

As Hokkanen (2017) suggested, I also “[wrote] about [my reflections] at different times, in different genres, and for different audiences” (p. 29) to provide further insight as I imagined myself discussing my reflections with different people like professors, supervisors, colleagues, and fellow

students who might be in an academic space. Upon the first round of analysis, I did not think I had reached saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and hence conducted a second round of analysis.

I used crystallization to analyze the two forms of data:

Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them (Ellingson, 2009, p. 4)

Crystallization gave me a lens to look at the same situation from different perspectives and honor the experiences of everyone who participated in this study. By using this approach to data analysis, I combined the two forms of data, journaling and peer debriefing.

### **Ethical Considerations**

After being interviewed, an interviewee chose to withdraw their consent while I was writing up the findings section. I reviewed my writing to assure that this individual's responses were not included or used. I had initially conducted interviews with co-researchers who volunteered from the faculty-led study to offer an alternate perspective to events/conversations I journaled about. After further consideration, my committee asked me to take out references to/data from interviews I had initially conducted to protect my co-researchers' confidentiality.

My advisor played a dual role since they were also the co-lead researcher of the faculty-led study while I also played a dual role as a researcher in the faculty-led study and a researcher for this autoethnographic study simultaneously. I initiated conversations with my advisor and other faculty about both my roles in maintaining transparency, as is integral to qualitative research (Chang et al., 2012). Since both of us played dual roles in the context of this study, this advisor-advisee relationship was not a traditional one. I constantly negotiated maintaining confidentiality for the participants of this thesis while seeking advice and direction from my advisor. Since my advisor was the co-lead researcher of the faculty-

led study, I facilitated conversations with my advisor with immense sensitivity to protect the vulnerable and confidential responses to questions in the interview. These unique and sensitive situations led me to seek additional support from my committee, other faculty, and peers in analyzing data. These conversations were bound by IRB ethics to protect my co-researchers' confidentiality.

While my advisor and I had conversations about power and our relationship as it pertains to the various studies we were conducting, as Williams et al. (2018) suggested, the overlapping roles caused me to have feelings of confusion in specific instances, and a consistent sense of isolation/distress. While navigating this relationship, I felt isolated in how this situation might be unique to me. The peer conducting an autoethnography at CSU and other faculty members offered me support on the unique relationship I have with my advisor due to the overlapping roles. When I received additional support from other faculty members, these feelings seemed more manageable for me. These feelings might not be common in traditional forms of advisor-advisee relationships. Inversely, these overlapping roles also offered unique and in-depth insight into how advisor-advisee relationships play out, which my advisor and I believed increases the authenticity of findings in this thesis. These overlapping roles offered a unique perspective of our relationship due to engaging in intensive discussions with each other about feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that came up for us during the faculty-led study. Reflections from these conversations were mentioned in my journal as a part of data collection.

Here are some considerations for the findings section of this paper. I did not share these findings with my co-researchers for member checking, these findings are rooted purely in my experiences and observations. I intentionally write in the present tense for most of the findings section since these findings about myself are ever evolving, and I do not want these themes to convey a sense of conclusion about these topics. I used the present tense for instances that I did not perceive have been resolved and the past tense when they seem to be resolved. I will be making this distinction by using *italics for past tense* and traditional text for present tense. I use the plural words "faculty/faculty members" and/or "students" instead of the singular form of those words to provide an added layer of protection of my co-researchers'

and my confidentiality. My hope is, by not singling anyone out, despite not using their names/pseudonyms, I can protect their and my vulnerability. I intentionally use the descriptors “think,” “perceive,” and “feel” in subthemes/themes to distinguish between these experiences since I am presenting data from my journal entries throughout this section. These words were purposely used to create a separation between my mindset when I was collecting data and my mindset when I was analyzing and presenting data.

## EMERGING THEMES & ASSERTIONS

Three themes emerged: Graduate Student Identity Development (GSIDD), Research Patterns in Academics, and Power Dynamics. Various subthemes and codes are listed under each theme. These themes, subthemes, and codes are not listed in a specific order of importance. A summary of themes and subthemes can be found in Figure 2.

### **Theme A: Graduate Student Identity Development (GSIDD)**

As I progress through the faculty-led study, my identity develops as a researcher and as a student of color. This development occurs as various emotions arise. For the purposes of this study, I define my identity development as how I view myself and how I am seen by my co-researchers throughout the faculty-led study.

#### ***Subtheme A1: Identity development as a Researcher***

Codes: Discomfort due to disagreement, progress in self-confidence, navigating lack of structure, imposter phenomenon

“It just feels exhausting to have to constantly disagree with them.... It just is exhausting to have to always advocate for my viewpoint” (Muralidharan, 2023).

*I noticed that I was usually uncomfortable with disagreement. At the onset of the faculty-led study, when I disagreed with someone on the research team, I found it difficult to advocate for myself. I observe that, sometimes, I misconstrue my discomfort with disagreement as the team not considering my opinions. Repeatedly disagreeing with peers and faculty feels exhausting. In conversations with faculty, I hesitate to speak honestly to avoid disrespecting them or speaking against them: “I find myself hesitant since I don’t want to offend/upset/ruin our rapport” (Muralidharan, 2023). My hesitation to speak up and*

disagree with my co-researchers affects how I view myself since I am changing my opinion in hopes to help other people feel more comfortable.

I have trouble navigating the lack of structure in the faculty-led study. *I also observed that a couple team members struggled with the lack of structure.* As a student, I struggle in this situation since I am accustomed to hierarchy in other parts of my academic life, namely being a student in a professor-student relationship in a classroom environment. I thrive in situations where I am provided structure in the context of clear deadlines, established power relationships, and organized timelines on projects. Since these components of structure were not established for most of the faculty-led study, I felt lost in navigating the study and its different dynamics. I also have trouble navigating my perception of how much output is enough from me as a researcher in research projects I am a part of. During the faculty-led study, the environment and interactions with my co-researchers led me to believe that what was expected of me, as a researcher and contributor to the research team, was quite flexible. I struggled with this flexibility since it is in direct opposition to the perfection I expect from myself. I tend to believe that I need to offer more of myself than is expected of me, to feel satisfied with my contributions due to perfectionism.

As a person who tends to pressure myself to be perfect, navigating this conundrum leads me to think I am an imposter. I think I am an imposter for having difficulty negotiating what is expected of me and what I expect of myself. I find myself hesitant to set professional boundaries with faculty since I am not sure they would be considered valid and what is expected of me. In working through this thesis, I think I am an imposter since I am not sure if people would read and/or consume my research. I have doubts about how much this thesis would contribute to the literature base. During one of our meetings, the peer with whom I debriefed, spoke about their experiences analyzing data as a graduate student. They shared that it took them a while to find a system to organize their data. Similarly, I have doubts about if and how I could navigate synthesizing data from this thesis to create meaningful output. Throughout the faculty-led study, I notice that I require structure and navigate feelings of being an imposter and

perfectionism. Due to these factors, I add more pressure on myself and this pressure, in turn, contributes to my self-image and identity development.

### ***Subtheme A2: Identity Development as a Student of Color***

Codes: Cultural moral compass, racial battle fatigue, implicit other-ing

“It feels confusing, freeing, terrifying, to write about this since I’m going against that (cultural) conditioning as well as societal conditioning. As a POC, I’ve been known to assimilate to the dominant culture” (Muralidharan, 2023).

In this subtheme, I will be reflecting on how my various intersecting identities – person of color, young, woman, student – affect my identity development. Throughout this subtheme, I also reflect upon how I have not historically had confidence in my opinion in white dominant spaces, being a person of Color (POC) known to assimilate to the dominant culture.

*I created the term “cultural moral compass” to describe the guiding principles I have learned as an Indian American and how they lead me to make certain decisions, assumptions, and judgements about my experiences being a part of the faculty-led study. As an Indian American who is conditioned to respect and defer to people older than her, I find that I often seek validation and approval from faculty. I was raised with the belief that people older than me have more wisdom than younger people, and that their opinions should be prioritized over younger peoples’ opinions. During the faculty-led study, I found that my cultural moral compass led me to defer to my co-researchers since they were all older than me. Along similar lines, as a young woman, my cultural upbringing has conditioned me to avoid causing tension or disagreement. I observe this conditioning play out during the faculty-led study, when I avoid speaking up to voice my opinions and/or disagree with the team. Throughout the faculty-led study, I observed this conditioning play out in a subconscious level. In journal entries, I reflect upon how these values subconsciously lead me to behave in certain ways in the context of the faculty-led study.*

I experience racial battle fatigue (RBF) in specific instances during the faculty-led study. To clarify, I use the term RBF to refer to situations where I feel targeted and oppressed due to my racial

identity. As mentioned in the previous subtheme, I sometimes experience discomfort in disagreeing with the research team as a POC. *When I searched for the term “disagree” in my journal, I found 12 mentions of this word.* Due to my cultural/racial identity, I find that I often disagree with the majority and that my opinion is often different than the majority. *Through my reflections, I noticed that faculty were especially more aware of what they were saying and their actions due to my conducting this study.* In a journal entry, I reflect on how this adds further burden on me, as a POC, since they might not have been as intentional about their actions/words if I had not conducted this study: “why did it take me conducting this study for them to think more about what they say, etc.?” (Muralidharan, 2023). Due to my commitment to discussing thoughts and observations in my autoethnography journal, not only do I experience this frustration, but I also must report and reflect on it. I experience RBF in circumstances where I notice an added burden to advocate for myself and to report on inequitable situations around me. This, I believe, is RBF given that I already advocate for myself and experience inequity as an Indian American in predominantly white spaces.

I use the term “other-ing” to discuss situations where I am more aware of my differences compared to my co-researchers due to my cultural identity. In conversations with the researchers in the faculty-led study, I think I am “other” due to my cultural identity in a couple instances. These are implicit situations since no one in the research team made direct decisions where I feel separate from the team due to my cultural identity. Due to the sensitivity of this reporting and to maintain my safety in the music therapy program and my relationships with peers and faculty, I will only be describing one example where I felt other-ed. *When my committee prompted me to write a section in my literature review about white dominant ideologies and oppressive norms, I felt that my white peers would probably not have to mention this as a construct in their literature reviews. I perceived this as other-ing since “I wouldn’t need to talk about it unless I was outside the culture” (Muralidharan, 2023) and since an autoethnography reflecting upon academia would only need to mention white dominant ideologies if it was written by a POC. I reflected upon this burden in a journal entry, sharing that, “perhaps because I already talk/think*

*through this topic quite a lot in personal life, I don't want to bring it into my academic work"* (Muralidharan, 2023). *I received support from faculty regarding this situation when they acknowledged this burden, offered to maintain vigilance about the added burden, and prompted me to reach out for support. While they offered support in this instance, there are other situations when I shouldered the burden. I personally other-ed myself as well, while conducting this thesis. When I considered using an arts-based approach to present findings, by discounting my extensive background in Indian classical music, I automatically only acknowledged Western music. "I tend not to embrace my whole self in a lot of situations" by implicitly reinforcing the Western dominant narrative (Muralidharan, 2023).*

These instances where I feel "other" than my white peers, where I notice an added burden due to my racial/cultural identity, and where I observe my cultural conditioning play out, affect the way I view myself.

### ***Subtheme A3: Emotions alongside GSIDD***

Codes: Underlying & consistent overwhelm, confusion due to specific processes/conversations, overall frustration

"I'm not sure if I can disagree with professors' comments and have to incorporate their edits even if I disagree with them? It's frustrating to have to figure out how to navigate these situations" (Muralidharan, 2023)

In exploring my experiences through the faculty-led study, I experience various emotions. These emotions affect how I view myself and how I am seen. I use the word overwhelm in instances where I feel "overpowered in thought or feeling" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I feel a sense of consistent overwhelm in navigating the various research projects I am involved in. I sometimes experience overwhelming excitement when engaging in the research process: "I think engaging in research is and has always been exciting for me... I find the process itself quite invigorating" (Muralidharan, 2023). In navigating writing my literature review and the sensitivity involved in using terms like racial battle fatigue, other-ing, etc., I feel overwhelmed: "I was feeling a bit frustrated with the extensivity of conducting a thesis. I just feel

like there is so much work” (Muralidharan, 2023). In constantly negotiating the timeline of my thesis and navigating the amount of data I collected, I feel overwhelmed. As I progressed through the faculty-led study, my overwhelming research experiences affect my identity development.

In the context of reflecting on meetings with the research team and my advisor, I am confused about how I might navigate this thesis while maintaining the safety of my position in the program as a student. I feel confused since I am unsure about deadlines for the faculty-led study. Since they are flexible, and I am someone who thrives on structure, “I’m just confused about how to navigate these situations” (Muralidharan, 2023). *As I navigated conversation about monetary compensation for my research work with faculty, I was confused about how the decisions whether to pay students/not were made. As I progressed through the proposal stage of this thesis and writing stage of the faculty-led study, I navigated confusion about processes through questions like: “do students usually get written feedback from all their committee members?” and “Is this how it (giving a receiving feedback) usually goes during faculty-led studies?” (Muralidharan, 2023). When I propose these questions, responses from faculty sometimes leave me further confused.* I also navigate confusion in how I can take care of my mental well-being, while completing this thesis. These confusing questions and thoughts lead me to view myself in a certain way. *I observed that my co-researchers viewed me as someone who is known to clarify further when I’m feeling confused about how to move forward after communication or if the communication has been ambiguous.* Asking questions due to confusion has led me to be seen as a clarifier and that affects my identity development.

Throughout the faculty-led study, I experience an overall sense of frustration. I am frustrated due to my perception of other people’s performative stances and decisions. I am frustrated since I think that students are often being given more menial tasks in the faculty-led study. My journal reflections showed that I was frustrated with the decision-making process in the faculty-led study. In the context of this thesis and the faculty-led study, I feel frustrated due to the lack of conversation around how feedback will be given and received. As in the previous subtheme, I am frustrated with the added burden of needing to talk

about white culture norms and ideologies as a POC. My feelings of overwhelm, excitement, confusion, and frustration all affect my identity development as a graduate student.

### **Theme B: Research Patterns in Academics**

For the purposes of this study, academics encompass university-level researchers – faculty members and students. As I progress through the faculty-led study, I notice patterns in some faculty members that have implications for and were different from observed patterns in students involved in the study. I present observed patterns in faculty and tie those patterns with those observed in students. These observations about students and faculty members are rooted in my observations. I name that I am presenting my perceptions of patterns in academics and this perception might not be representative of everyone's reality.

#### ***Subtheme B1: Observed Patterns in Faculty***

Codes: Spectrum of performativity & authenticity, perceived communication issues, ambiguity in roles and processes

“Sometimes I think to myself that I missed something...some things just don't get communicated with the team” (Muralidharan, 2023)

To review, I use the term performativity to describe situations where people behave/say things a certain way to show how they would like to be perceived. These behaviors and/or words can be enacted with a specific audience/reaction in mind. Behaviors and/or words might be perceived as performative even if they were not intended to be performative. I acknowledge that there is a wide spectrum of perception between performativity and authenticity. Throughout the study, I “noticed performative stances being taken, by students and professors alike” (Muralidharan, 2023). While I use the term “noticed”, I clarify that my subjective opinion is that performative stances were taken. In considering my intersectional identities (POC, student, woman), I think faculty's behavior toward monetary compensation was performative. In this context, this performativity seems especially clear to me since, “it's only right if everyone on the team knows how everyone is being compensated for their work” (Muralidharan, 2023).

*I perceived authentic inclusion from some faculty when they brought research-focused topics of discussion, such as deciding which demographic questions to include, to the research team: “I felt more included in these discussions” (Muralidharan, 2023).* I think this shows authenticity since the entire research team was a part of the decision-making process. I perceive authenticity when a committee member encouraged me to use more empowered language in writing. *As I mentioned in the previous theme, when a faculty member emailed me to acknowledge the burden of conducting this thesis and committed to maintaining vigilance, I note authenticity.* These are patterns of performativity and authenticity I observe during the faculty-led study.

Throughout the faculty-led study, I note a lack of clear communication – where I am told something, but it means something else. I notice that myself and others seem confused due to this ambiguous communication from some faculty members. I observe a constant parallel process happening - as the research team communicates with each other, we are also learning about how everyone on our research team communicates. *While I acknowledge that communication is a bi/multi-directional endeavor, I did not feel safe enough to explicitly advocate for clearer/more effective communication.* I perceive this pattern of unclear communication when faculty change their mind about the relationship between this thesis and the faculty-led study.

I find that communication is lacking specifically when there are situations where things are undecided. Some faculty members do not notify the research team when they finally make the decision and move forward based on this decision. In a journal entry, I reflect on the lack of clear communication regarding payment processes between some faculty and students. I often perceive a lack of communication when there is a lack of transparency within the research team. Throughout my journal, I used the code “lack of transparency in communication” 3 times. I note a lack of the number of conversations when I use the term “lack of (clear) communication” and use the term “lack of transparency in communication” to signify lack of quality in communication. Overall, I observe a lack of clear communication and transparency within the research team.

I notice that, at the beginning stages of the faculty-led study, “it doesn’t quite seem like a collaboration... the students are a part of certain decisions, but the professors lead the way.”

(Muralidharan, 2023) Since I do not believe that we had enough number of conversations to clarify the roles of faculty and students in the faculty-led study, I observe a “lack of understanding in terms of what role each of the people on the research team play” (Muralidharan, 2023). *I observed that the team members and I implicitly tend to assume a role in the research team, since we did not have explicit conversations about roles. In the lack of discussions regarding authorship until the research team began writing up our findings in the faculty-led study, I perceived a lack of clarity in processes. I observed varying priorities regarding authorship order, where some people might care more/less than others about where they lie in the author list. I perceive that the lack of clarity regarding authorship caused tension within the research team. The ambiguity in processes and roles can perpetuate barriers to mental well-being. Like the previous theme, I notice a lack of communication about processes related to this thesis: “Is this how the process usually works? Am I supposed to get edits from everyone, or no?”*

(Muralidharan, 2023). I note a lack of clarity about roles and processes.

### ***Subtheme B2: Observed Patterns in Students & Comparing their Approach with Faculty***

Codes: Deterioration of mental well-being, sense of belonging, differences in approach

“I don’t understand how to allow both of these (concepts) to exist at the same time – if I take a break, how do I do work?” (Muralidharan, 2023)

I notice that the academic system/some faculty members perpetuate barriers to mental well-being. When their communication is not clear, this ambiguity contributes to anxiety/stress: “It (payment process) still doesn’t seem fair to me and is starting to affect my mental health” (Muralidharan, 2023). I further reflect that, if we did not have personal lives, we would be able to avoid attrition since, only then, would we have enough time to finish thesis/defense processes. If this is true, I discuss with friends and family, that the only way to fulfill our responsibilities, on a systemic level, is to disregard parts of our lives that contribute to our mental well-being. In journal entries, I share a couple times that I think that students are

pressured to volunteer for more work during the faculty-led study. I reflect on a journal entry that when students receive emails from faculty members during national holidays and school breaks, we are left to wonder when we can take a break and why this expectation is normalized. I also note that, especially considering faculty members encourage us to take breaks and take care of ourselves, this further contributes to that confusion as to how to do both at the same time. I reflect that feelings of dread, panic, and stress are normalized in graduate school. In further communication with friends and family, we discuss how having these feelings during our thesis processes is a way to know that we are doing it right. During the faculty-led study and this study, these are perpetuated barriers to students' mental well-being I observe.

From journal entries, I note a sense of belonging in the research team/in the community. In the context of the students in the research team, I feel a sense of belonging in the student community. I was able to share and receive information in confidence. Due to this sense of belonging, I note “feel(ing) less alone” in navigating instances in the faculty-led study and this thesis (Muralidharan, 2023). *In a journal entry, I explored whether the (lack of) trust/sense of safety within the research team discouraged my co-researchers to bring up sensitive conversation. I also pondered whether this sense of trust/safety could be a determining factor in avoiding unspoken problems within the research team.* I discuss the importance of sense of belonging and safety in research communities.

In comparing approaches in some faculty and students, I observe a pattern of identity related to sense of agency. I notice that while some students tend to show a lack of agency, some faculty show a sense of agency. In discussing the decision-making process, I note that “empowering us to make decisions comes with ambiguity” and “students are historically good at listening to what faculty tells us to do.... we are not necessarily known for making decisions ourselves and that’s how it has always been traditionally” (Muralidharan, 2023). In these examples, I highlight that I tend to hesitate making decisions even when professors empower me to make decisions. I observe that the faculty on the team felt more empowered to make decisions without the approval of the entire research team. While I present this relationship, I

recognize that it is dichotomous and does not represent all student-faculty relationships, just my perception of the relationships present in the faculty-led study. Throughout this subtheme, I present findings where I use the words “feel” and “feelings” more frequently than in Subtheme B1. Since this subtheme addresses personal patterns in students and faculty, I use these terms of emotional expression.

### **Theme C: Power Dynamics**

As I progress through the faculty-led study, I notice various implicit and explicit consequences of power dynamics present between some faculty and some students. In this section, I share power dynamics I observed during the faculty-led study and my observations on sensitive conversations. To reiterate, these observations are rooted in my experiences and were not member checked by co-researchers from the faculty-led study. I also use the plural words “faculty/faculty members” and/or “students” to provide an added layer of protection of my co-researchers’ and my confidentiality.

#### ***Subtheme C1: Observed Power Dynamics***

Codes: Reinforcing power dynamics, ambiguity about student expectations, attempting to mitigate power dynamics, awareness/intentionality

“I wonder if I’d have a similar...hesitation in... bringing this up if they were POC? Even if I had POC advisors, they’d still have more power so I might still hesitate...although maybe I’d be a little more comfortable” (Muralidharan, 2023)

I use the term “power dynamics” to refer to the implicit and explicit ways relationships with peers, advisors, and faculty members shift in the faculty-led study. While these shifts can be influenced by factors like gender, race, hierarchy, systems and so on, I will be reflecting on relationship shifts due to race and academic hierarchies in this section. I highlight a couple sensitive conversations and I perceive how some faculty members/I reinforce and mitigate power dynamics in these specific instances. When I lack clarity about monetary compensation, it seems to me that some faculty reinforce power dynamics by not offering clear expectations/communication. They further reinforce the power dynamics when they do not offer expectations/clarity while beginning a monetary relationship.

I find that I tend to momentarily affirm professors' communication, by nodding or smiling, during conversations with them. Specifically, in this instance about compensation, my momentary affirmations might have been misinterpreted as genuine approval of the contents of the discussion: "while I didn't necessarily feel obligated to agree, I momentarily affirmed their decision" (Muralidharan, 2023). *Despite asking for clarifications once, considering the weight of faculty's approval in being able to graduate and move forward with my thesis, I did not feel safe enough to ask for further repeated clarifications on the monetary compensation.* I note the intersectionality between power and race play in this instance. It seems to me that some faculty reinforce power dynamics when I lack clarity about monetary compensation, and I note that this might be connected to my identity as a POC.

*During the faculty-led study, the research team was asked to volunteer for positions on the author list towards the end of the study. I did not want to invalidate my co-researchers' contributions by volunteering for a position they might think they deserved. It seemed to me that faculty reinforced power dynamics in this instance since I was unaware of where everyone stood in terms of their contributions throughout the study.* In a journal entry, I reflect on some faculty members setting unclear expectations from students regarding feedback: "Do I have to incorporate every single edit? Can I disagree?" (Muralidharan, 2023). *While I acknowledge that I did not ask faculty these questions, I did not feel safe enough to do so.* Due to the lack of clarity about whether students must accept and incorporate all feedback, I observe that faculty often reinforce power dynamics. I used the term "reinforced power dynamics" in the context of feedback nine times throughout my journal. It seems to me that, when I need to clarify repeatedly, faculty reinforces the power dynamics and adds burden to students.

When some faculty attempt to mitigate power dynamics, I note a "shift in my relationship" with them (Muralidharan, 2023). I feel more respected as a student when faculty members actively attempt to mitigate power dynamics: "I feel more valued" (Muralidharan, 2023). Some faculty members seem to mitigate power dynamics when they support my sense of agency. *Specifically, I debriefed with faculty when I thought I could not journal about a certain instance due to the sensitivity of the situation, and they*

said, “no one can tell you what you can journal” (Muralidharan, 2023). When faculty explicitly discuss and name power dynamics with me, I perceive that those power dynamics were mitigated more.

Sometimes, when the research team attempts to mitigate power dynamics, I feel more confused: “they need to...be clear about how the dynamic is going to be moving forward” and “maybe they are attempting to empower me...it’s just not coming across (that way) and adds further to the anxiety/stress of being a student in this situation” (Muralidharan, 2023). When the research team asks questions to understand the dynamics/communication further, we sometimes receive vague responses from some faculty. This leads to further confusion and adds burden since we need to further clarify the dynamics and communication to understand what the faculty members mean. This attempt to mitigate power by talking about it seemed to cause further lack of clarity.

It appears to me that faculty seemed to be aware of the power they hold. When faculty reflect upon how much power they hold and how this manifests in conversations during the faculty-led study, I perceive that they are aware of the power they hold. I also perceive that this awareness leads to intentionality, in certain situations, with how faculty use this power to advocate for students. By being aware of the power they hold, bringing it up in conversation, and using it to help students, they seem to attempt to mitigate power.

### ***Subtheme C2: Sensitive Conversations***

Codes: students’ lack of power in initiating them, professors initiating them & advocating for students, showing vulnerability

“I think more clear/honest conversation about this could be helpful” (Muralidharan, 2023)

I use the term “sensitive conversations” to discuss how students and faculty navigate conversations that require intentional sensitivity. These can be conversations about money, authorship, establishing roles/dynamics, and so on. I specifically included this subtheme as a part of this theme since these conversations can be rife with power dynamics. As a student, I often observe that “conversation would land differently based on who it’s coming from” (Muralidharan, 2023). *I observed this concept*

*play out in 3 journal entries.* It seems to me that faculty might receive sensitive conversations better from other faculty members, than students. While noting this, I also acknowledge that there are power dynamics within faculty interactions as well. I hesitate to initiate conversations I perceive as sensitive by questioning: “Are students allowed to have conversations with them about this? Would professors...view it as disrespect or lack of cooperation?” (Muralidharan, 2023). Due to the perceived lack of power in the dynamics between faculty and me, I tend to avoid initiating these conversations about clarifying expectations, monetary compensation, and so on. It is my perception that if sensitive conversations occur between faculty, they might be more open to critical feedback than if students initiated these conversations. This connects to the codes about lack of clarity in roles from Theme B – the lack of clarity in roles reinforces the power dynamics present in this instance.

I once again acknowledge that communication/establishing dynamics is a bi/multi-directional endeavor. *As a student, I did not feel supported enough to advocate for myself in these instances.* I perceive that there is an added burden to students since professors do not often initiate these conversations: “I think faculty need to be more upfront” (Muralidharan, 2023). During a few instances, I note the benefits of professors initiating these sensitive conversations: “it can set the tone for how the two will begin working with each other” (Muralidharan, 2023). It appears to me that, if faculty were to initiate more sensitive conversations, students might not perceive the burden of having to do so.

As a student, I find it beneficial when faculty show vulnerability in research-related and sensitive conversations in the faculty-led study since it tends to mitigate power dynamics. *In an exchange with my co-researchers, I appreciated being privy to watching the professors go back and forth to figure out the best way to move forward.* I find that, when faculty show vulnerability specifically during sensitive conversations, it helps humanize them. When they are more humanized, power dynamics can be mitigated more easily.

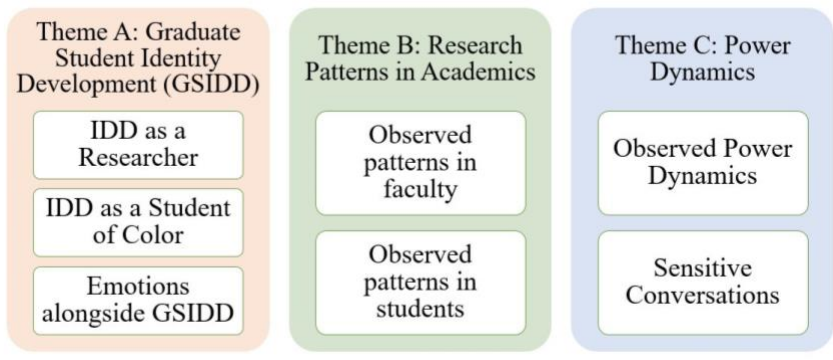


Figure 1: Summary of themes & subthemes

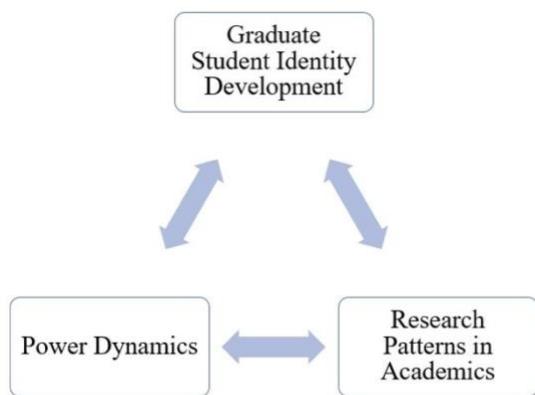


Figure 2: Relationship between themes

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand and depict my experiences as a graduate student-researcher during a faculty-led study. Three themes emerged: (a) Graduate Student Identity Development (IDD as a researcher, IDD as a student of color, emotions alongside GSIDD), (b) Research Patterns in Academics (observed patterns in faculty, observed patterns in students & faculty), and (c) Power Dynamics (observed power dynamics, sensitive conversations). These findings provide an overview of my experiences being a part of the faculty-led study. While starting the analysis process, I noticed that I accumulated a lot of data and chose to only present data that seemed important from my journal and peer debriefing. My primary goal in presenting these findings was to share my implicit/explicit experiences as a graduate student. As noted by Chapman and Sork (2001), there is a gap in literature about supervision and advisor-advisee relationships. I conducted this thesis in hopes to contribute to the literature base through my experiences with advisor-advisee relationships. My findings showed that there is a need for more research conducted by students about their experiences navigating various levels of academia. I acknowledge that these findings are not conclusions about my experiences since my experiences and my learning are ever evolving.

I noticed a substantial overlap between Theme B (Research Patterns in Academics) and Theme C (Power Dynamics) and that the interaction between these two themes informed Theme A (Graduate Student Identity Development), as depicted in Figure 3. A common idea among the three themes was a “hesitation to talk openly/freely.” I found that this code applied to my identity development as a graduate student, academics’ patterns in research, and in power dynamics and hence was discussed briefly in each theme. As I wrote out findings, I observed that I used the words “think,” “perceive,” and “feel” distinctly with difficulty since all these words continue to seem interchangeable due to my depiction of my own experiences and how personal this reporting was.

### **Connecting Codes & Subthemes from Different Themes**

While my findings might appear discreet, various codes and subthemes are interconnected and none of my experiences can be categorized into a single subtheme or a code. I made some connections between codes more apparent in my findings, these codes are displayed in Figure 4. Some connections might not be as discernable to the reader. Specifically, I observed that when I hesitated to speak freely due to my discomfort with disagreement, this could tie to my cultural moral compass. It could also tie this idea to the sentiment that graduate students' experiences are different than how they might appear on the surface (Chapman & Sork, 2001). When I tended to defer to authority in the faculty-led study, I did not want to disagree with them. Similarly, I found that my perception of being other-ed (Lightstone & Hadley, 2013) coincided with my lack of comfort with disagreeing with faculty. Since I did not immediately disagree with faculty in specific instances where I felt other-ed, perhaps they did not recognize as their actions as other-ing. In instances where I was not clear how to navigate feedback provided to me, I felt frustrated that I did not express this disagreement/confusion to faculty. I also think that this lack of clarity is tied to the power I perceived in relationships with faculty. It seems to me that this ambiguity/keeping student uninformed was a way for faculty to reinforce power dynamics.

When faculty attempted to mitigate power dynamics and I did not perceive that they successfully did so, I was frustrated that I did not feel safe enough to tell them that. I was also frustrated about my place in the dynamic and wished faculty had incorporated more intentionality, as Park et al. (2022) suggested, to set the tone so that the research team could be pro-active in having conversations about power dynamics. When I showed a general lack of agency in decision-making and similar processes, this affects my identity development as a researcher since it influences the way I see myself and the way I am perceived. As Grady et al. (2013) found, the fluctuations in my relationship with faculty affected this lack of safety in advocating for myself. In describing the guiding principles that lead me to make certain decisions, assumptions and judgements, my cultural moral compass, I observe that I might reinforce power dynamics to perpetuate the hierarchical structure of academia I am familiar with. As previously

mentioned, considering the data I did not include in my findings, this is a sample of connections I made as I wrote the findings section.

### **Graduate Student Identity Development**

I found that faculty's empowered approach to decision-making, as mentioned in Subtheme B2 (observed patterns in students & comparing their approach with faculty), contradicted the overlapping code I noticed "hesitation to talk openly/freely." I wonder if my hesitation with making decisions in the faculty-led study is due to power dynamics present with my co-researchers. I approached making decisions in the faculty-led study/thesis differently towards the end of the study. Unlike my tendency to assimilate, as mentioned in Subtheme A2 (IDD as a student of color), I found that I felt more confident in making decisions and being more assertive in both research projects. This newfound confidence also affected my identity development as a researcher, as mentioned in Subtheme A1 (IDD as a researcher).

I shared that I felt quite uncomfortable with disagreement at the start of the faculty-led study. Upon further reflection, this idea led to introspection about my discomfort with disagreement in journal entries. As I progressed through the faculty-led study, I gained more confidence in advocating for myself despite still finding it difficult. Towards the end of my data collection period, I noticed that I carried more conviction in my opinions as a researcher than I did at the start of the period. In the context of the faculty-led study, I did not feel as strongly that I needed faculty's validation to make decisions. Towards the end of the study, I talked more freely and openly with peers and professors than I did at the start of the faculty-led study. As I gained more experience conducting research, my confidence grew, and I learned how to navigate sharing my opinions freely. If students were to conduct interviews with their co-researchers, they might find that, like me, it provides them with the courage to be more confident in speaking up within their research teams.

Similarly, I observe a connection between my cultural moral compass and my identity as a "clarifier" during the faculty-led study. My hesitation to speak up/deference to people older than myself, as mentioned in Subtheme A2 (IDD as a student of color), is a part of my cultural moral compass.

Reflecting on my role as someone who speaks up to clarify and understand my co-researchers' communication, my self-image changed. I note that my cultural moral compass is evolving. My identity is evolving to reflect my increased sense of agency and self-confidence through this process.

As Devine a Hunter (2016) found in doctoral students, I recognized emotional exhaustion a couple times throughout this process – when I had to reflect on situations where I perceived I was not treated fairly, and when I approached writing and wrote the findings section. Writing the findings section felt cathartic and tiring since I was verbally processing my experiences throughout the faculty-led study. Due to how deeply personal writing these findings felt, I noticed an underlying tension in myself during this specific part of this thesis process. I did not anticipate feeling this tension throughout the process. In reflecting on this tension, I also acknowledge that I had a sense of agency and choices in a couple decisions throughout this thesis process. I decided to engage in this topic using autoethnography as a method. I decided to specifically work with my advisor for this autoethnography. I acknowledge these choices to maintain transparency by showing the full spectrum of my experiences as a graduate student.

As I discussed topics of race, culture, and advisor-advisee relationships, I often experienced tension and considered questions like “How much do I include,” “Do I feel safe enough to talk about this example,” and “How do I show my advisor this.” I felt this tension partly since these emotional responses were not addressed by faculty, like Tatum (2001) suggested. As Nutov and Hazzan (2011) noted, that I felt the need to constantly question my process, highlights the emotional labor that went into this qualitative writing process. I agree that “things at graduate school were a lot different than they looked on the surface” (Chapman & Sork, 2001, p. 96). Like Grady et al.’s (2013) and Cho and Hayter’s (2020) findings about potential sources of graduate students’ institutional stress, I experienced role strain/fluctuations in relationships with faculty/peers that led to stress during the faculty-led study and this thesis.

In reflecting on de l’Etoile’s application of Perry’s Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years (2008), I observe that a lot of my journal entries were from a dualistic

perspective. I seem to have believed that there was a right/wrong way to have conversations within the research team. As I write this section, I find that I am progressing toward a contextual relativist perspective. I recognize that right/wrong can be subjective and that our subjective realities shape these ethical decisions. I also noticed this shift in perspective in later journal entries. I seem to take partial accountability for the way my experiences went in recognizing that a lot of these instances are informed by both/all parties involved. It seems to me that this shift in stages could be a part of the maturation of college students and new researchers. We might move from black and white thinking into grey thinking during our graduate studies.

To reflect on my identity development as a POC, I continue to relate most to the Internalization stage of Tatum's (2010) application of Cross's (1971, 1978, 1991) model of Black racial identity development. I used Cross's model in addition to Perry's model since Perry's seemed to be a model created based on white people's experiences. I identify more closely with the Internalization stage of Cross's model than with Perry's contextual relativist stage. This could show that my identity as a college student is still evolving while my identity as a POC seems more concrete. I am moving towards better working relationships with those who respect the way I define myself. Naming where I am in the developmental scheme is necessary to contextualize my findings. I use these models to show my identity transformation as I conducted this thesis. I continue to move towards acknowledging multiple "truths" as a researcher and a human due to my reflections from this thesis. These shifts in identity may be helpful for students to consider as they embark on research projects.

### **Power Dynamics**

Upon reflection, I realized that conducting interviews with my co-researchers also benefited my relationships with faculty since it might have mitigated some power dynamics. Being in the metaphoric "seat of power" as the interviewer helped balance the power in my relationships with them and showed that power is dynamic and can shift. Talking about power dynamics in these interviews helped mitigate those dynamics (Chapman & Sork, 2001). It seems to me that faculty were aware of the power and

privilege they hold (Bubar et al., 2016). While they were aware of their power/privilege, I did not perceive that they initiated many conversations about their power/privilege outside of the interview setting. Despite being aware, I also did not perceive consistent vigilance on their part to mitigate their power/privilege.

It is my observation that I felt safer to share my concerns by writing this thesis than sharing them with faculty directly. When I sent faculty writing draft after my defense, they offered me clear expectations on feedback, unlike in previous instances explained in Subtheme C1 (observed power dynamics). They made these expectations clear by distinguishing that some comments were optional to consider while some were suggestions to improve the quality of writing and required. This was a helpful perceived change in their behavior since it informed my decisions in incorporating their feedback.

As Godbee (2020) suggested, I did encounter various complex power dynamics with my advisor and committee members. While acknowledging that all these dynamics involved power, some dynamics were easier for me to navigate since I feel like the dynamics was perhaps more balanced/mitigated in certain relationships. I also perceive more support from some committee members than others. I think I perceived this sense more in relationships where I feel the power was more balanced/mitigated.

### **Graduate Student-Advisee Relationship**

I experienced isolation due to the uniqueness of the relationship with my advisor. As discussed in the ethical considerations section, this relationship was unique due to many factors. I felt isolated from them due to our racial differences (Williams et al., 2018), unclear expectations, power dynamics, perceived communication issues, and because I did not know how to reach out for support. As Twale et al. (2016) suggested, I believe that my racial experiences and racial identity affected how I viewed my relationship with them/faculty and peers. As Tang and Andriamanalina (2020) and Madden et al. (2020) shared, I do not believe support was tailored to fit my needs as a POC in academia conducting a thesis about a sensitive topic. While I was navigating an academic environment that was not designed with POC

in mind (Pfirman, 2018), this lack of support was further highlighted since it made me feel alone in my struggles.

While my advisor offered support in an open-ended sense, I had trouble feeling like I could reach out and knowing when they could offer support. I did not recognize my need for support until other faculty members checked in with me, towards the end of the thesis process, to see how my thesis was going. These statements disconfirm each other, showing me that while I hesitated to reach out for support, faculty members were able to perceive my need for support. Once they noticed that I was feeling stuck in the thesis process, various faculty members reached out and supported me through the end of this process. This may be helpful for students to keep in mind – while they might not know how to reach out for support, faculty may be able to perceive your need for support.

My hesitation to reach out to faculty for support could be due to my lack of agency in advocating for myself, my assumption that the amount of support I received was “normal,” and/or not knowing/trusting that I could reach out for support and that it would be received well. I believe I also perceived this uniqueness since they were the co-PI of the faculty-led study, and the participants of this study shared their vulnerable experiences being a part of the faculty-led study during the interviews. Considering that people invited to interview were those in the research team of the faculty-led study, I felt that sharing details about participants’ responses to questions with my advisor might lead them to identify participants. If they identified participants, I felt participants’ confidentiality would be jeopardized. I did not want to put the interviewee’s confidentiality at risk by showing my advisor details about the interview data. To avoid this breach of confidentiality, I was unable to reach out to my advisor for support with the data analysis process.

Overall, I did not feel that I/faculty were able to anticipate the amount of support I would require to feel successful conducting this thesis. I did not perceive that I was set up for success in completing this thesis with support from faculty. Towards the end of the process of this thesis, I received support from faculty. I wish I had received this amount/quality of support throughout this thesis process.

## **Dominant Ideologies and Oppressive Norms in Academia**

From the findings, it is clear that I experienced the consequences of the culture of white supremacy present in academia. Being a part of a white research team was difficult for me as a POC. I experienced various distressing situations in needing to speak up for myself, and agreeing/disagreeing with decisions while authentically representing myself as an Indian American woman. As I propose in the findings, I wonder if my experiences being a part of this research team would be different if I was surrounded by more POC. I wonder if I would feel a heightened sense of agency in advocating for myself if my advisor/committee had more POC. I wonder if my experiences with the perceived lack of clarity in monetary compensation would be different if I was not a POC. As Smith (2007) noted, I responded with frustration, exhaustion, and used various coping strategies to work through the racial battle fatigue (RBF) I experienced. In Subtheme B1 (observed patterns in faculty), I outline various examples where I perceived performativity (Rizing Tide Team, 2018) in the research team. In reflecting on these instances, I wish I felt safe enough to invite people to have a conversation about my perceptions/experiences and how we could move forward, right after each of these instances.

As explained in Subtheme A2 (IDD as a student of color) and in Subtheme A3 (emotions alongside GSIDD), I experienced a combination of hyper-invisibility, hyper-visibility, self-censorship, loss of self-confidence and questioning my ability to work (Marcos & Kohli, 2020) during the faculty-led study. I felt hyper-invisible when I perceived that my cultural background was not considered in decisions. I experienced hyper-visibility when I acknowledged that I'm a POC in a white research team in the positionality statement of the faculty-led study. During various discussions, I censored what I might have said to assimilate to the dominant white culture. As explained in subtheme A1 (IDD as a researcher), I thought I was an imposter and questioned my ability to conduct this thesis.

These experiences lead me to lose confidence in myself at times. I acknowledge that these are brief examples of my experiences, and I only outlined some examples to protect my safety. To summarize, I experienced feelings of hyper-invisibility, hyper-visibility, self-censorship, loss of

confidence, frustration, exhaustion, and racial battle fatigue during the faculty-led study. For students of color, these might be helpful points to be aware of in considering conducting research in academia.

### **Reflections on Conducting an Autoethnography**

As Johnston and Strong (2008) mentioned, while conducting this autoethnography, I questioned the importance of this topic, my story, and my voice. By instinct, I did not find confidence in my voice and had to often convince myself/sought external validation from faculty, family, and friends to reiterate the importance of this study. I found that this line of questioning led me to think I was an imposter, as discussed in Theme A. As a committee member had proposed, I wonder if my imposter phenomenon was affected by the methodology I chose to use. Perhaps if I had conducted a quantitative research study, a type of research that might be more traditionally accepted as “science” or “research,” I would have more confidence in my voice. I might have felt that this thesis had a more concrete place in literature. Throughout the process of conducting this thesis, I experienced occasional self-doubt and fear about whether I would be able to finish this thesis (Sims, 2017). As William et al. (2018) shared regarding the consequences of the relationship between unbalanced power and unclear expectations, I felt confused and distressed.

Alongside those feelings, going through the process of conducting this thesis also helped me discover my voice in academia, writing, and in my personal life. As I was constantly reflecting on mine/others’ communication and my identity development as a student, I found this thesis almost therapeutic at times. I also re-discovered myself as I noticed increased confidence in my voice in the context of providing therapeutic services and in my personal life (Bochner, 2017). As Corrales and Komperda (2022) mentioned, I conclude this study thinking of and seeing myself as a researcher. I have more empathy for people who might experience a situation differently than me.

### **Considerations for Students**

While I acknowledge the lack of generalizability in autoethnography, here are my suggestions for students who are considering a similar process. I acknowledge that these suggestions are based only on

my experiences as a graduate student researcher. While establishing rapport with your advisor, I would recommend clearly communicating how you would like for them to support you. If you mention needs like the extent of structure, frequency of meetings, expectations, the format of check-ins, your advisor might be able to support you more appropriately. As mentioned in Subtheme A1 (IDD as a researcher), communicating your needs and understanding what is expected of you might help you navigate your research process more easily.

For students considering conducting research that requires a similar level of sensitivity, I would recommend considering the different obstacles you might face as a student within the context of your research topic. For example, as mentioned in Subtheme A1 (IDD as a researcher), the peer with whom I debriefed related to my experience feeling stuck in figuring out a system to analyze and organize data. Since the peer also had a similar experience as mine, this might be a struggle that students conducting research could anticipate. As an initial step of the research process, I would recommend assuring ahead of time that you have a support system (faculty, peers, family, friends, and so on) to support you through those obstacles. I would also suggest making sure the people in your support system are not a part of the experience you are immersed in. This helps maintain the strength of the support system while you might feel more empowered to be critical of your experiences.

As I am sure you are fully aware, your experience with research as a student is not going to be perfect. I believe going in with the expectation of having to contend with this messiness might be beneficial to keep in mind. As a coping mechanism for engaging in an intensive process, such as conducting a thesis, I would recommend keeping a professional journal. This can provide you with a space to be transparent about your feelings, about how things are going, and can be a helpful tool for reflection. I found that this was a beneficial way to check on my perfectionism, imposter phenomenon, and similar tendencies, to understand each situation deeply. As evidenced by this study's findings, I found journaling to be an introspective way to check-in with myself and advocate for my needs when I felt safe enough to do so.

After I finished conducting interviews with the faculty-led study research team, my advisor and I reflected on them. I shared that the interviews helped me understand my co-researchers more and was productive in helping me understand their perceptions on events we experienced. I had the distinct feeling that conducting these interviews might be beneficial for other students who are on research teams with faculty members. I believe this might be a beneficial practice for other students since this might help them understand research team members' approaches regarding things like communication, authorship, decision-making, and so on. Knowing these details about co-researchers could be helpful in navigating a research study.

Overall, I hope students are aware of their responsibilities in communicating with faculty and choosing their research topics. The tension or discomfort you might experience due to role fluctuations, identity development, power dynamics, and so on might be a normal part of being a graduate student. While I acknowledge that this might not be an easy reality to contend with, this might be a part of your experiences. While students do not usually have the power in a relationship with faculty members, I implore you to find ways to name and mitigate this power within your dynamics – whether that might be by holding faculty accountable to their commitments or whether that might be by conducting informal interviews with faculty to understand their intent. While I do not regret conducting this thesis, looking back, I wish I had been aware of the amount of emotional labor I experienced as a part of this thesis. I wish I knew how much this thesis would affect my life overall. I am also thankful for the change in perspective I continue to experience as a part of this thesis.

### **Considerations for Faculty**

While I recognize that this is an autoethnography and that it is not possible to generalize these findings, based on my experiences, I reflect on suggestions for faculty in research teams with students. I acknowledge that these suggestions are based only on my experiences as a graduate student researcher. I wish for clearer communication between faculty and students. In working towards clearer communication, you could begin the process by acknowledging, being aware of, and naming the power

dynamics between yourselves and students. By naming the power present and offering students exercises like conducting interviews with the research team, you could attempt to help students feel that they are a part of the team. I would also recommend fielding questions about how to mitigate power dynamics with the students and being pro-active about incorporating their suggestions, if feasible.

From my experiences, I felt the burden of needing to clarify during most conversations. I recommend you clearly communicate about topics like authorship order, monetary compensation, student expectations, and establishing roles and dynamics early in the research process. If faculty are aware of a lack of communication among research team members, I implore you to initiate a conversation about this with your research team. Perhaps this could help in making communication clearer and more effective moving forward. Taking these steps might help establish trust within the research team and, in turn, might mitigate power dynamics and engender a sense of belonging with co-researchers.

During conversations about sensitive subjects, you could establish openness and vulnerability as this might help the student feel more open to disagree and speak freely (Parks et al., 2022). In empowering students to make decisions/take responsibility in a research team, you could offer clear structure and communication. After communicating, you could follow up with students to make sure they have space to ask questions, understand the you intent, and disagree with you with questions like, “is that clear,” “can you tell me your understanding of next steps,” “do you disagree with what I shared,” and “how can I offer support as you navigate the next steps.” You could also check in with them on a periodic basis to see how they might be feeling about the workload being assigned to them as a part of the research team. This could help support their sense of agency and mitigate power dynamics while they receive the support they need as students. You could also share with students that you would like to advocate for students in the research team, so that they feel that they can reach out to you for support.

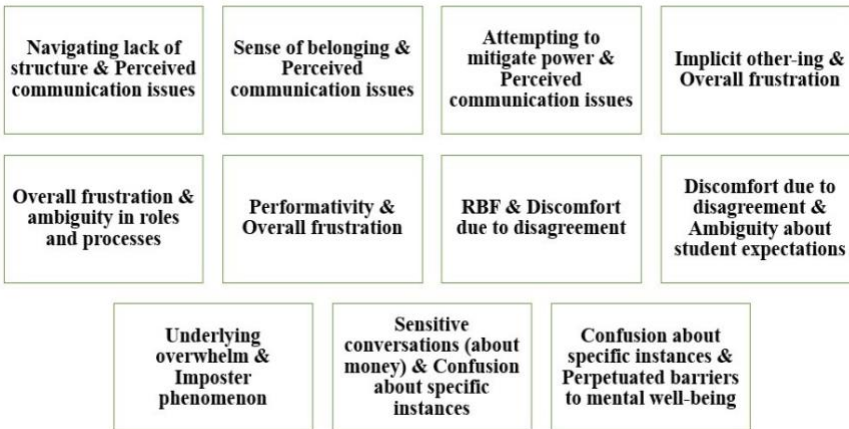


Figure 3: Codes that are tied to each other, as presented in the findings section

### Summary

I reflected upon my experiences being a part of a faculty-led study as a part of this thesis. I further reflected on how these experiences affected my identity development (IDD) as a graduate student. I analyzed these reflections to present my observations on my IDD as a graduate student and as a researcher while noting emotions that arose alongside these IDD processes. I presented my observations on observed patterns in academics, faculty and students. I also shared how power dynamics affected the faculty-led study and my identity development.

Overall, the in-depth reflections and analysis helped me learn more about myself and my co-researchers. I hope that this newfound knowledge helps me navigate these issues differently in the future. Finishing writing this thesis feels like a conclusion to a chapter of my process as a researcher, a student, and a human. I will carry forward the suggestions I offered for students in my own future experiences. This study offers various insights into my experiences being a part of such a process. Once again, I do not intend for this summary to be a statement of finality about my insight/development, just a summary of my process conducting this thesis.

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