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**DOES FAMILY MATTER?  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY EXPLORING THE LIVED  
EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN PERSISTING IN DISTANCE  
EDUCATION, PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAMS**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Aim/Purpose	The qualitative study aims to examine the lived experiences of women persisting in the distance; professional doctoral degrees as they seek to integrate and balance their family of origin and current family system with their development as scholars.
Background	A vital reason many women choose not to drop out of their doctoral programs is that they experience conflict between their identities as women and scholars – a conflict between “the enduring sense of who they are and whom they want to become” (Cobb, 2004, p. 336). A supportive family is a salient theme that arises in studies on doctoral persistence, with many researchers noting that the family is essential in helping women navigate the doctoral journey (e.g., Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2009; Tinto, 1993).
Methodology	This qualitative study employed Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach through a purposive sampling of eleven women who are enrolled in distance education, professional doctoral programs at two universities in the southern United States.
Contribution	This study furthers the existing research by demonstrating that family is intimately tied to the scholarly identity development and persistence of women enrolled in distance education, professional doctorate programs. While previous research has shown that family support is a factor promoting doctoral persis-

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	tence, previous studies have not examined how women integrate and balance their family of origin and current family system with their development as scholars while persisting in a doctoral degree.
Findings	Findings highlighted that the doctoral journey is marked by personal fulfillment and struggle. Women's development and persistence are influenced by familial support, choosing to continue or discontinue family of origin patterns, and differentiation from the family.
Recommendations for Practitioners	To support women's persistence and scholar identity development, the university can facilitate discussions and provide opportunities that explicitly orient families to the rigors of doctoral training. The university can host family webinars, create family orientations, offer family counseling, and develop family social media groups.
Recommendations for Researchers	This study is an essential step toward understanding the role of the family in the doctoral persistence of women. The study provides a foundation for further research with women who are divorced, never married, or identify as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual). Further study should focus on women enrolled in various disciplines and residential programs.
Impact on Society	If women are to succeed in doctoral programs, the academic institution cannot ignore the role of the family in persistence.
Future Research	The role of the family in doctoral persistence for men and residential students needs to be explored. Experience of women in distance education and residential programs should be compared to highlight differences and similarities.
Keywords	distance education, women, doctoral education, work-family balance, work-family borders, persistence, family of origin, family system

## INTRODUCTION

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Doctoral students develop from students to scholars, whereby they begin to develop a value of research, engage in conducting research (e.g., develop a research agenda, do action research to inform practice, disseminate their research to scholars and practitioners), and cultivate relationships with scholars in the field (Gardner, 2008; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2018). This identity development is a factor influential in their likelihood to *complete* their doctoral programs (Gardner, 2008; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Unfortunately, attrition rates among doctoral students have been documented to range from 30% to 70% (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; National Science Foundation, 2015; Terrell, 2005). These rates are often reported the highest during the dissertation phase where the focus is on students' movement from being *consumers* of knowledge (i.e., students) to *creators* of knowledge (i.e., scholars) (B. Anderson, Cutright, & Anderson, 2013; J. D. Baker, 2014; V. L. Baker & Pifer, 2011; V. L. Baker, Pifer, & Flemion, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012). Given the grim persistence rates, especially during the dissertation phase, the goal of this qualitative study is to shed light on this critical period and explore the role of contextual factors, specifically the family, in the scholarly identity development process, which is influential in doctoral persistence.

Work-family (WF) serves as the theoretical framework that brings together the doctoral degree and the family to reveal the interactions between the two domains (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). This qualitative study highlights the influence of interactions between the doctoral degree and family, both current family system and family of origin, on particular strategies and experiences associated with the final stage of the doctoral degree program. The family of origin is defined as the family in which the student was raised; the current family sys-

tem is defined as a family with biological, marital, and adoptive ties in which one engages in activities with to maintain the familial system (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000).

Moreover, in the study, we focused on women enrolled in distance education, professional doctoral programs. Stimpson and Filer (2011) noted that balancing the degree and family “is a particularly difficult issue for female graduate students as they face more difficulty balancing family commitments, academics, work, and personal lives, as well as have less satisfaction in their ability to balance work and life” (p. 69). This balancing challenge is partially attributable to women’s roles as wives, mothers, and daughters (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Lunde, 2017; Stimpson & Filer, 2011). Ample research has documented that the family has both positive and adverse effects on women’s likelihood to develop as scholars and persist (Johnson, Batia, & Haun, 2008; Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

Although family plays a role in identity development and doctoral persistence for all women pursuing doctoral degrees, the medium of the degree may influence how a woman’s family influences her development and persistence. Many distance education, doctoral students work on their coursework and dissertation within the home. School and home are not physically separated as they are for residential doctoral students. The lack of physical separation may exacerbate stress and negatively affect women. Although there are advantages associated with distance education programs, especially the flexibility, there may also be some disadvantages that could influence how women experience the interaction between their families and degree programs. There is no doubt that the interaction with family for all doctoral students is complex; distance education students, like remote workers (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017), may experience additional complexities that need to be further explored so that higher education faculty and administrators can better support them.

## **FAMILY: A FACTOR IN SCHOLAR DEVELOPMENT AND THE DECISION TO STAY OR LEAVE**

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Over the past few decades, there has been rapid growth in distance education doctoral programs (Baker, 2014). Given the convenience and flexibility of these programs, many obstacles that once kept women from pursuing doctoral degrees have been removed. Before the emergence of distance education, women’s options were often limited. Relocation for doctoral studies was often not an option for women due to employment (especially if a single mother or family breadwinner), a spouse’s employment, school-aged children, or dependence on family support networks (Lyonette, Atfield, Behle, & Gambin, 2015). Distance education has afforded many women the opportunity to integrate their roles and responsibilities as moms, daughters, and wives with that of being doctoral students, when historically they may not have had the opportunity to do so. Women now represent over 60% of the population pursuing distance doctorate degrees (National Science Foundation, 2015).

While women are pursuing doctoral degrees, a large number of women are leaving their programs (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; National Science Foundation, 2015). The largest number leave during the dissertation phase; they often never fully develop as scholars (Johnson et al., 2008; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). While many women attribute persistence to family support (Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2009; McCallum, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, Swezey, & Wicks, 2014), many women attribute their poor scholarly identity development and degree progression to the challenges associated with balancing their doctoral programs with their families (Dabney & Tai, 2013). For example, nine female residential Ph.D. students in Brown and Watson’s (2010) qualitative inquiry identified three primary stressors in their doctoral journeys. These stressors included (a) the conflict between their roles as mothers and students, (b) the consistent balancing act of home and academic responsibilities, and (c) time for academics being slighted by family demands and responsibilities. In numerous qualitative studies, women report feeling stress as their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers are in constant competition with responsibilities of the doctoral program (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006). In some cases, the

stress of family responsibilities experienced during the doctoral program is related to poor well-being. According to female Ph.D. students at a Swedish university ( $N = 12$ ), their well-being is intimately tied to their performance of the balancing act required among their roles (Schmidt & Umans, 2014). The unsuccessful balancing of the degree on top of maternal, spousal, family of origin, and financial duties often results in dissatisfaction and psychological and health issues leading women to depart from their doctoral programs (Johnson et al., 2008; Mason et al., 2009).

Further evidence exists that woman's volition to become a scholar and obtain a doctoral degree wanes as it appears to become incompatible with being a woman, having children, and maintaining familial responsibilities that have been traditionally attributed as women's work (Mason et al., 2009). Normative gender roles tend to associate men more strongly with work and academics, while women are strongly associated with the family. The family may advise women to quit when studies, especially the dissertation, interfere with a woman's responsibilities as a wife or mother. Dissimilarly, male students' social networks encourage the family to make sacrifices for the student to persist in the face of adversity (Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2013). External pressure and negative repercussions associated with gender roles can leave women feeling conflict and shame. For example, Lynch (2008), in interviewing 30 residential, graduate student mothers, found that the roles of mother and student are often in conflict, and women tend to confront this conflict with dropping out or using practices including "maternal invisibility" and "academic invisibility." In social situations, women believe that they must downplay their doctoral degrees to "preserve their status as a 'good mother'" (Lynch, 2008, p. 597). On the other hand, in the doctoral program, they believe they need to hide the fact that they are daughters, mothers, and wives. Women "believe that their status as a mother will detract from the perception that she is a 'serious student'" (Lynch, 2008, p. 596). When being a woman scholar seems impossible as the roles and responsibilities of each appear too incompatible, women, according to Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2017), fail to develop as scholars and often drop out.

In sum, there is attrition of women during the doctoral program, especially during the dissertation phase, and the conflict between the women's development as a scholar, degree responsibilities, and family roles and responsibilities appears to be a principal reason. Alternatively, family support is a reason many women persist. Although there is a growing body of literature documenting that the family can hinder and support degree completion, the goal of this study is to examine women's experiences with their current families and families of origin. This study examines how the interactions between the doctoral degree and family influence the scholarly identity development and the persistence of women enrolled in a distance, doctoral program.

## WORK-FAMILY LITERATURE

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Work-family (WF) literature has been applied to women and how they balance their work and their family, namely their current family system. The concepts within the WF theories are salient for women in doctoral programs. Research has begun to demonstrate that the strategies women use to integrate and create a balance between work and family begin in their doctoral program and post-doctoral experiences (Moors, Malley, & Stewart, 2014).

A woman's work-life balance is associated with the decisions she makes about her career-related behaviors and persistence. WF balance has been defined in a number of ways. More recently, Greenhaus and Allen (2006) defined work-family balance as "the extent to which an individual's effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are compatible with the individual's life priorities" (p. 513). Similarly, Voydanoff (2005) proposed that work-family balance is "a global assessment that work resources meet family demands, and family resources meet work demands such that participation is effective in both domains" (p. 825). Women's WF balance is dependent upon the success they feel in the division of time and attention to each domain (Clark, 2002; Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). In the WF border theory (Clark, 2000) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2007; Nippert-Eng, 1996), theorists note that how a woman constructs, negotiates, and holds boundaries (e.g., level of flexibility and permeability) with time, space, and people profoundly effects a woman's "satisfac-

tion and good functioning at home and work, with a minimum role conflict” (Clark, 2000, p. 751). Clark notes that women achieve balance by setting different levels of flexibility and permeability between work and family. Some find allowing little flexibility and permeability helpful (e.g., segmenters), while others prefer high flexibility and permeability between work and family (e.g., integrators).

Moreover, gendered messages, especially from families, and role constraints for women can affect how women see themselves, behave, integrate their work and family, and experience work-family balance. For example, Eagly and Karau (2002), in their incongruity model of prejudices, purported individuals can face social repercussions when engaging in stereotype-incongruent social roles (e.g., a women’s engagement in a traditionally masculine career). For example, research has documented the existence of the “maternal wall,” whereby a woman who becomes a mother is inhibited in her career promotion (Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008). Negative perceptions of others and repercussions for participation in a stereotype-incongruent social role can have a profound impact on one’s perception of self, identity development, behavior, and decisions (Steele, 2010). Thus, the Work-Family framework and literature illuminate the importance of studying the interaction between the family and degree domains, for how a woman develops as a scholar and persists in the program may be influenced by the boundaries set and the balance between the family and degree. The literature further highlights the importance of considering the prejudices and stereotypes, or lack thereof, that the family holds as influential in the woman’s belief about her ability to develop as a women scholar and how she chooses to integrate and balance the degree and family.

## **PURPOSE STATEMENT AND DESIGN**

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Thus, in this study, we (i.e., the three authors) aim to answer the following research questions. (1) How do women enrolled in the distance education, professional doctoral programs describe their development as scholars and persistence? (2) How do women enrolled in the distance education, professional doctoral programs describe the intersection of their degree and their family systems? (3) How do women seek to integrate and balance their family of origin and current family system with their doctoral development and persistence? Recognizing that “students are central to the doctoral undertaking; yet, theirs is the voice that is least heard” (McAlpine & Norton, 2006, p. 6), we deemed it imperative to give voice to women who are doctoral students. Thus, we selected Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach as the phenomenological design seeks to understand the lived experience of a group of people, women persisting in is distance education, professional doctoral programs. Epoche, the process of setting aside biases by bracketing personal experiences, is central to this design and was employed. While the idea of epoche is controversial and researchers cannot remove all personal biases (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006), we attempted to recognize personal beliefs and ideas that could have potentially deleterious effects. Before and throughout the data collection and analysis process, we engaged in individual journaling about personal experiences relevant to the phenomenon being studied and discussed personal experiences and biases in regularly scheduled meetings with one another.

### ***RESEARCHERS’ INTEREST***

Personal interest is an encouraged impetus for phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994) and acknowledgment of experiences and biases is central to epoche. Thus, personal interests are disclosed here prior to discussing the study methods. We are women who journeyed through doctoral programs and engaged in the struggles and joys surrounding the process of transforming from students to scholars. While each of our stories is unique, we all found that our families played a salient role in our identity development as scholars and our doctoral persistence. For example, I, the first author, recognize the role my father played in helping me envision whom I see myself as a woman scholar. At the age of three, my father, a university faculty, would take me to his college lectures. Before class, he would lift me up in his arms and let me arrange his lecture notes. He would whisper, “You could be a brilliant scholar one day. My little girl can do anything she sets her mind to.” He helped me envi-

sion a “picture” of myself as a woman scholar. He followed this verbal sentiment with a genuine commitment to assist me in pursuing a doctoral degree and publishing.

Moreover, as women employed in higher education and mentors to women in distance education, doctorate programs, we have a keen interest in investigating and fostering their persistence, helping them envision themselves as successful women scholars. Thus, we are committed to giving voice to women in these doctoral programs to tell their stories in a manner that has theoretical and practical significance for them, their families, and the faculty working with them. Acknowledging that (1) women in distance doctoral programs are sorely understudied, (2) women are marginalized within specific doctoral programs within certain disciplines (e.g., Ong, Wright, Espinosa, & Orfield, 2011; Moors et al., 2014), and (3) distance education doctorates are often not esteemed as highly as traditional doctorates in the ivory tower (e.g., Adams & De Fleur, 2006), we sought to advocate for these women in distance doctorate programs.

## METHOD

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### *PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING*

For the transcendental phenomenological study, a purposeful sample of women was drawn from four distance education, professional doctoral programs across two universities in the southern United States. Both universities are fully accredited by the Southern Association of College and Schools. The women selected for participation in this inquiry were delimited to those pursuing distance education, professional doctorates. Invitation to participate was extended via e-mail to doctoral candidates. Doctoral candidates were defined as individuals who completed a comprehensive exam and were working on the dissertation. Recent graduates (e.g., those who completed the program less than six months from when the invitation was sent) were also included. The invitation explained the study and asked those who were interested in participating to complete an online informed consent and questionnaire. The online questionnaire was used to determine eligibility to participate and to collect information on the doctoral journey and family systems. Eighty-one potential participants were sent invitations, and fifty-five candidates responded to the online questionnaire. All fifty-five were eligible for participation based on the purposeful sampling criteria: (a) current enrollment in dissertation coursework and finalizing chapters 4 and 5 of their dissertation or recently graduated (i.e., to delimit to those persisting), (b) evidence of transition from student to scholar (e.g., published an article, presented at a national conference or workshop, or conducted research to inform practice in the professional setting), (c) ability to identify a current family system (e.g., individuals who identified themselves as single were excluded), (d) ability to identify and define self as a scholar, and (e) willing to discuss how family influences scholar development and persistence. As noted, we focused on those in distance education programs defined as programs that required at least 80% of the coursework be taken via a web-based medium. The sampling of participants for interviews and family map activity was based on maximum variation regarding age, ethnicity, marital status, ages of children, and discipline. Interestingly, all eligible respondents ( $n = 55$ ) identified as heterosexual, so the variation of sexual orientation was not considered in the maximum variation sampling strategy. All had children. Very few identified themselves as divorced, and none identified themselves as single. This was not surprising given that the population sampled was primarily heterosexual and married. This is also consistent with what is known about the doctoral population; they are women, married, and have children (Offerman, 2011).

Initially, five participants who completed the survey were contacted via email and asked to participate in a family map activity and interview. Sampling continued until themes within the data collected were repeated. Within the ninth and tenth interviews and family map activity, no new themes and codes were appearing to emerge (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012). Thus, the sample contained eleven women. Table 1 outlines the participants' demographics, marital status, employment status, and program of study. All eleven women were doctoral candidates

( $n = 6$ ) or recent graduates ( $n = 5$ ) at the time of the interview. By the time that the findings were written, all with the expectation of one participant had graduated. In the findings, each participant is assigned a pseudo name.

**Table 1. Participant Information (N = 11)**

Pseudo Name	Race	Age	Marital Status	Have Children	Occupation	Employment Status	Program of Study
Sandra	W	30-39	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	C&I
Micah	AA	30-39	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	IDT
Jade	W	40-49	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	IDT
Kate	W	50-59	Divorced	Yes	Administrator	Full time	EL
Charlotte	AA	30-39	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	C&I
Corine	AA	40-49	Married	Yes	Administrator	Full time	EL
Keisha	W	40-49	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	EL
Candra	W	40-49	Married	Yes	Consultant	Full time	C&I
Beatrice	AI	50-59	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	C&I
Nadine	W	40-49	Married	Yes	Counselor	Full time	CES
Molly	W	30-39	Married	Yes	Educator	Full time	EL

*Note.* EL = Educational Leadership; C&I = Curriculum and Instruction; CES = Counselor Education and Supervision; IDT = Instructional Design & Technology; W = White; AA = African-American; AI = American Indian

### ***DATA COLLECTION***

Data triangulation, the corroboration of three data sources, was used to increase trustworthiness and ensure a rich understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). As previously described, participants completed the online questionnaire, answering questions related to their demographics, doctoral journeys, and family systems. The online questionnaire used multiple choice, multiple selection, and open-ended questions. In these questions, women described their sexual orientation, family make-ups, children's ages and presence in the home, if applicable; scholarship behaviors (e.g., conducted research, publications, presentations, workshops, etc.), and articulated research agendas. As noted, the online questionnaire answers enabled the purposeful sampling of the eleven women who were contacted to complete a family map and participate in an individual interview. The questionnaire responses were also used in structural coding to provide information about familial contexts. The family map was a document that consisted of a Venn Diagram with intersecting circles. Circles represented personal beliefs, family of origin beliefs, current family system beliefs, and spouse/partner's beliefs. On the family map, participants were asked to notate beliefs that each system or person held that were relevant (i.e., hindered or contributed) to their development as a scholar and the assumptions that influenced their persistence. Beliefs held by multiple persons or systems were notated where the circles overlapped. Guided by the doctoral literature and WF theory, interview questions asked about significant factors related to scholarly identity development, persistence, how the family

and degree were integrated, and strategies used to maintain a balance and borders between the family and the degree. Interviews lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. Participants were asked each question from the interview protocol and clarifying questions were asked after participants completed their answers to each question. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then compared to the audio files to ensure accuracy. To establish trustworthiness further, participants agreed to follow up interviews or e-mail contact or member checking (review of data and interpretations to ensure accuracy) as needed throughout the study (Creswell, 2015).

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

To analyze the data sources, Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological procedures for data analysis were employed. We reviewed each survey answer, transcript, and family map, line by line, for "textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Single words and phrases descriptive of and relevant to each woman's experience of persistence and scholarly identity development within the context of the family were highlighted. A document was created with all the highlighted words and phrases. Once compiled in one document, we individually proceeded to reread and group the common words and phrases to form identifiable themes. For example, one of us quickly saw that all participants described a strong sense of pride in their development as scholars. The identified themes were discussed and were then developed into a coherent textual description of what the women experienced. We then followed the same process – reading, highlighting, grouping, and identifying themes relevant to, "How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is?" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The themes were developed into a structural description of the contexts and conditions that led to women's development as scholars, and ultimately, their persistence (Moustakas, 1994). At the various stages of analysis, coding and themes identified separately were discussed and then collaboratively refined through a series of meetings. During the discussions, the textural and structural descriptions were refined and then synthesized to collaboratively develop agreed-upon descriptions and the essence of the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994), that is, developing as a scholar leading to the successful completion of a doctoral degree within the context of the family.

### **FINDINGS**

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By examining the family maps and survey data and listening to the participants' narratives, we discerned several family elements attributed to participants' development as scholars and doctoral persistence. The identified themes describe 1) how women persisting in their doctoral degree describe their development as scholars within the context of the family systems, and 2) how the family of origin and current family system influence the development, resulting in their persistence. In alignment with the literature, women described their development as a "Two-Sided" Coin. Continuing or discontinuing family of origin patterns; differentiation, segmenting and integrating; and accepting family support and involvement were themes that emerged to explain how participants as scholars had persisted with their families.

#### ***THE TWO-SIDES OF "WHAT" PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCE***

The women (N = 11) in the study perceived their identity as a scholar as one of the most salient dimensions of themselves during and immediately following their program. The participants used terms such as "Mother-Scholar," "researcher," and "intellectual women" when they were asked to describe themselves. For all, identifying as a scholar was a source of strength and pride, and the development as a scholar was liberating and resulted in multidimensional growth. Consistent with previous research on doctoral student identity development (Cohen, 2011; Stevens-Long et al., 2012), the women explained that becoming a scholar resulted in increased confidence, intellectual capacity, and independence. Behavior and emotional changes were identified as Jade described, "I found myself counting down the hours until I could go to the library to do my research. I found myself want-



ing to spend more time at the library instead of at home. The doctoral degree helped me to create more balance in my life and growing beyond my family. I was not just a mom and wife anymore.” Emotional dependence for many shifted from family members to colleagues as Kate explained, “When I accomplish something, I find myself Skyping with my peers to share the joy. My husband used to be the only person I shared this stuff with.” Micah discussed that amid a family crisis, she called her dissertation chair for emotional support,

I had my dissertation defense hanging over my head that week. And, then my mom called to say my brother died. I remember saying “ok” and hung up. I immediately called my dissertation chair because I felt like she was the only one who could understand the delicate balance between wanting to grieve my brother while still staying on track with my dissertation.

However, with the pride and liberation, also came internal and external struggle as the women attempted to make sense of who they were as “independent” scholars in light of being nurturing, warm, other-oriented mothers, wives, and daughters. The internal struggle was twofold. First, an internal struggle arose as these women sought to intersect these two “important parts of me” and define for themselves what it meant to be women scholars. Some of the women explained that they needed to redefine what it meant to be a woman, as definitions held, often ingrained in childhood, were insufficient, archaic, and inconsistent with whom they were becoming or had become as scholars. Jade explained the second struggle related to the time and attention she had to devote to being a mother and a scholar,

I like the term, Motherscholar to describe the essence of who I am. It is just sometimes hard to reconcile both these areas of me. ... I find conflict, tension, and guilt within myself as I find it hard to prioritize both. Spending sufficient time and attention on my dissertation and with my kids do not seem possible. I am Motherscholar, but I am still trying to figure out how these two parts of me can interact better.

Again and again, these women used words such as “guilt” and “tension” to explain how they struggled to devote time, attention, and space to their families as well as their degree and development as scholars (e.g., going to training, writing, etc.).

While internal struggle ensued, so did external struggle. Family members’, namely those within the family of origin (i.e., mothers, fathers, siblings), comments and behaviors regarding the enactment of stereotype-incongruent behaviors (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002) evoked hurt, trauma, injury, and a “deep sense of sadness.” Micah summarized this struggle that most of the women had, both knowingly and unknowingly,

Being a scholar and a woman are intertwined with the core of my being. But as I say this, I cringe because it makes me feel abnormal sometimes. I do not want to be abnormal. Or, maybe I want others to see me as a good mother and a good student. I can hear my mother say [she mimics her mother’s voice], “How can you sit on your computer and miss your daughter’s game? That is not how I raised you. I raised you to be a good mother.” While I am growing into who I am as a scholar and learning how it fits with who I am as a wife and mother, the struggle is real. Others’ perceptions of me sometimes hurt deeply.

### ***“HOW” PARTICIPANTS INTEGRATED AND BALANCED FAMILY***

The textual description highlights the joys and struggles women experienced as they developed as scholars and persisted in their doctoral programs. The structural description outlines “how” these women integrated and balanced their family and degrees in their scholarly identity development and persistence.

## MAKE A PURPOSEFUL CHOICE TO CONTINUE OR DISCONTINUE FAMILY OF ORIGIN PATTERNS

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The majority of women in this study developed as women scholars in light of their family of origin. The women did this by *purposefully* choosing to (a) continue family of origin patterns that affirmed the scholar identity, and/or (b) discontinue family of origin patterns that did not.

### *CONTINUE PATTERNS*

The women talked about the direct influence that the familial values and rules, instilled in childhood, of “hard work,” “learning,” and “failure is not an option” made in their development as a scholar and their persistence. Many relayed stories about the intimate connection between their development as a scholar and the role modeling of a significant woman (e.g., mother, relative). Because of experience with women who balanced multiple roles and responsibilities, an internal template, or working model, was formed that provided a map for how “to make it all work.” Participants, like Charlotte, attributed a mother’s example as influential in her view of herself as an “independent female” and a reason that she could easily integrate her role and responsibilities as a wife and mother with that of a scholar. Charlotte explained how she continued the family pattern of “female independence,”

As far as being independent, I learned that from several women in my family... my mom . . . I saw her struggle as a single parent, a college student, and working full-time. I saw her struggle, but she did it. She graduated. She was young, but she showed grit and independence. And, I have to say that [independence] I saw her model as a female, that I adopted, is the main characteristic that motivated me to pursue this degree and persist.

Like Charlotte, Sandra noted that she sought to emulate her mother’s example. Sandra’s mother was a “stay at home” mother, and Sandra believed her mother’s choice to stay at home was central to her development. Moreover, her mother taught her that staying home and devoting time to her children did not mean giving up other parts of herself; she watched her mother engage in educational and entrepreneurial endeavors while being a “stay at home” mom. She expressed a desire to continue the familial pattern and saw earning a doctoral degree as a means to do so. She purported, “I want to stay at home with my kids. . . . I really don’t want to try to get tenure. . . . I do not want to work full-time at the university or college or anything. I want to keep teaching and learning. This is how I see myself as a scholar.” Sandra’s assumptions and definitions of herself as a scholar and desire to integrate her role as a mother and scholar were connected intimately to what her mother modeled.

Participants also skillfully and intentionally discontinued family of origin patterns that did not support their scholarly identity development as women. When a significant family member supported the termination of patterns, a strong affinity and attachment to the family of origin tended to be maintained. For example, Nadine explained how her mother’s encouragement to break a family “tradition” helped her to envision herself as a woman who could be a mother, wife, and scholar,

My mom really fought for my right as far as being able to do things that aren't just traditional for a woman in my family. In my family, as a girl, you go to [high] school. You then get married then, you have kids. That's just all you do. She wanted me to go further . . . And, that has made me consciously choose to go as far as I can in education while still being a good mom and wife. She is part of the reason finishing this degree is important.

Nadine’s mother, albeit not a role model of scholar development and persistence herself, still provided a “map of the possibility of persistence” by having a vision for her daughter’s future that differed from her own. This “visioning” appeared to have fueled Nadine’s ability to successfully develop as a scholar, which ultimately gave rise to her persistence.

### ***DISCONTINUING PATTERNS***

Others did not experience or readily receive support from the family of origin in choosing to discontinue patterns incongruent with academic identity conceptualizations. However, indicative of their valuing of a family member(s) and their scholar identity, they were able to “sit with this relational complexity.” Instead of denying themselves the opportunity to develop as a scholar, failing to persist, they evaluated what could remain openly communicated and purposefully refrained from sharing that which would not be celebrated. Chandra provided an example of discontinuing a family of origin pattern:

For me, as a woman, my dad would say, “You’re just a dumb old girl...” I discontinued that belief. It doesn’t matter what your anatomy is if you are a male or female. There is no . . . you can’t do this because you’re a girl . . . I think we [self and husband] have intentionally downplayed that distinction between gender roles in opposition to the strong gender roles our parents modeled.

Later in her interview, Chandra explained how intentionally changing her beliefs about women was necessary as she pursued her various degrees, especially her doctoral degree, and pursued scholarly activities such as publishing an article. She noted that she never told her father she was pursuing her doctoral degree, as he would find it unacceptable for a woman to do so. Keeping her academic identity invisible was what she deemed necessary to avoid a contentious relationship with her father, “No changes in my relationship overtly occurred because I kept the fact I was getting a doctorate hidden.”

Molly’s father had a similar belief. On her family map, she wrote, “Dad told friends that he would never pay for my college. Not a woman’s role.” In her interview, she related, “My dad wanted me to get married and have children and stay in the house.” Molly chose not to allow her father’s belief about women and education to deter her from continuing her education. Unlike Chandra who hid her degrees from her father, Molly informed her father of her decision to pursue a bachelors, masters, and doctoral degree. She would spend time discussing with her father his “archaic and stereotyped views.” Consequently, he “definitely softened . . . I think that my dad is now on board . . . . He came to my defense and agreed that I turned out all right. I think he was proud.” Both Molly’s and Chandra’s stories, as well as the others, illustrate this dynamic process of choosing to continue or discontinue family patterns to develop as a scholar: (a) balancing family attachment (maintaining intimate connection with her family of origin) with (b) differentiating or separating (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral separateness) from the family of origin as needed to persist. Unfortunately, to maintain family attachment, which all the women communicated was highly relevant, some women saw the bifurcation of their personally defined self as a woman scholar and whom they presented to their family of origin, and even current family system, as necessary.

#### **Differentiate from the family by segmentation or integration**

In reference to their development as scholars and doctoral persistence, the women shared that differentiation was central to the process. The concept of differentiation described by these women is similar to the idea of Bowen’s (1978) concept of differentiation in family systems theory. That is, the women needed to maintain a connection with their families while also having the individual autonomy to grow and develop in their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. On the family maps, this idea was denoted by adjectives such as “personal,” “mine,” and “my own place.” During the interview, Charlotte explained, “It’s [the doctoral degree] an independent thing that I still needed to do for me. . . . The doctorate is *my* thing. It’s about me growing as an individual.” Chandra concurred, “I view myself as an intelligent being who can have goals and aspirations apart from me, that don’t include my children and my husband. . . . I feel like that doctoral process is my own thing . . . It’s like my own safe place . . . allows you to be you.”

On the other hand, participants also recognized that their development and persistence required relatedness and connectedness with family. Beatrice highlighted the interplay between the relatedness to

and autonomy from family, “My husband’s acceptance and support in this degree is important, but this degree is something personal. I maintain a connection with my family and share the process with them, but this process has been about my own growth and fulfillment.” Beatrice further explained that she, her husband, and her children maintain connectedness as she actively chooses to integrate her family into her degree-related activities. She asked her children and husband to research topics and read on similar interests. She explained that her husband, who also taught at the college level, often acted as a colleague, finding articles for her and helping her transcribe interviews for her dissertation. However, Beatrice’s husband and children also encouraged her to seek friendships in the academic community and attend educational events that helped her grow as a scholar.

While some women, like Beatrice, chose to integrate and actively share their development and degree activities with their family to maintain connectedness, other women chose to segment their family and academic lives to maintain familial connectedness while simultaneously developing as scholars.

Chandra explained,

I will say because of my energy level and quirky sleeping pattern, it never affected him [husband]. I did that in parentheses, as I know it affected him. I would work on my dissertation until 2 am and tried to make sure it did not significantly interrupt my family . . . I didn’t want my studies to infringe upon my role as wife, mother, or [other] responsibilities. I’m just too responsible to let that happen. . . . I didn’t think that I needed to hide it from [my family], but it was for my own peace that I kept things separate.

Corinne also articulated that she chose to separate her “academic life” from “mommy and wife life.” She created an office where she could be work on her dissertation and “be my academic self.” She left her “academic self” in the office when she spent time with her family, which is consistent with ideas found in WF border theory (Clark, 2000). Clark found that women set up boundaries with the desired level of permeability and flexibility between family and work to create the desired balance, “satisfaction and good functioning,” with her family and work, or in this case academics (Clark, 2000, p. 751). In the same way, these women made personal the intentional decision about the degree of permeability and flexibility to allow (i.e., how to integrate or segment) between the family and degree to maintain both autonomy and connectedness with the family to develop as a scholar and persist.

### Accepting familial support

While almost every woman shared Nadine’s sentiment “I am fiercely independent,” they also all recognized the necessity of accepting their family’s support. Three subthemes emerged to describe this acceptance, including understanding the family’s value of the degree, developing support and negotiating roles, and having a family as a priority and motivation.

**Understanding the family values the degree.** Most of the women in the study identified the family’s value of the degree and the alignment between family values and the degree as essential to the development as a scholar and persistence. This is similar to the construct of *familial integration*, “the degree to which the candidate’s sense of connectedness with family members is met while pursuing the doctorate” and “the ‘fit’ between the degree and family values” (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014, p. 196). Each participant readily identified the necessary role encouragement and communication of “high value of the doctoral degree” played, as Molly denoted on her family map. Others noted on their family maps that “integrity,” “hard work,” “personal discipline,” or “finishing what you started” were encouraged. For others, their spouses or children “showed interest” in their degree and dissertation work, regularly asking questions and engaging in dialogue. Three of the women told stories of how their husbands encouraged them to become womenscholars. Molly explained,

[my husband] does hold some traditional views, as I do too – comes from my childhood and what I think a woman should be doing. I remember times when I could not seem to find a balance, so I told my husband I needed to sacrifice my degree goal and give up my writing. He said, “No way. We will do what we need to figure this out. You can be a great mom and

academic. So, I think [my husband] has probably been the biggest influence on that - me being a mom and scholar.

**Developing support networks with defined roles.** Many of the women noted that roles and responsibilities in the household in the current family system were negotiated and defined. For some women, who were married, they shared household responsibilities equally. For others, domestic responsibilities remained “the female domain,” but they knew their husband would help when needed. Most of the women stated that managing the household was a “family” or “team” effort and required family adaption and flexibility. Support ranged from receiving emotional support (e.g., “My husband accepts me for who I am,” “My kids tell me they are proud”) to physical support with domestic and child-related responsibilities. The women in the study described that their spouses and children adapted to their ebbing and flowing needs through the process, providing more intensive support and extended hours of babysitting when needed.

Regarding explicitly negotiated roles, several of the participants discussed the importance of having a spouse who is confident in his personhood and embraced the difference between them. Corinne shared, “I am working on my doctorate, and he has a high school diploma. He never seems fazed by it. For some men, it would shatter their ego. It is because he is so content in his life... So he looks at me and says, ‘Well, I am glad you are getting your doctorate.’” Others credited their spouses with encouraging them to be women scholars, “He hasn’t tried to change who I am as an independent woman” and “He has never been threatened by me. He encourages me to be an academic and values who I am as a wife and mother. He never belittles me or makes me hide.”

**Using family as motivation and keeping them a priority.** Family and motherhood served as a central reason to finish the doctoral degree. In discussing her persistence during the interview, Beatrice stated, “I want to set an example for my kids and grandkids. There are many factors here. It’s more than just about me. It’s about my grandkids and my own kids.” Chandra echoed, “It’s just been really fun to watch her [daughter] watch me. I want her to know that she, being a female, can pursue a doctorate in education.” However, not one participant prioritized scholarly development, and ultimately, persistence in the doctoral program, over family and more specifically motherhood. Nadine once believed that pursuing an education was the most important goal in her life. However, in the process of building a family and simultaneously pursuing her doctoral degree, she concluded, “My greatest calling is my family. Even though school is important, failure as a wife and mother is not an option.” Others concurred, “My first role is a mom.”

## DISCUSSION

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The theoretical conceptions and the literature for this study were useful for exploring the development and persistence of women in the dissertation phase of their doctoral programs. The work-family framework illuminated the importance of the interaction between the family and degree domains in how a woman develops as a scholar and persists in the doctoral program. Significant in this study was that family of origin and current family systems play a significant role in women’s scholarly identity development and doctoral persistence.

As prior researchers suggested (Cohen, 2011; Lott et al., 2009), the women in this study found deep reflection on the family of origin beliefs, norms, and values necessary for their development and persistence. Reflection resulted in identifying “external formulas” or assumptions from the family of origin and deciding how to integrate them with “internal foundations” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, pp. xviii-xix) to construct an identity as a women scholar. Upon reflection, the women consciously chose to continue the family of origin patterns that supported their development and persistence in the doctoral program. In continuing family of origin patterns, they spoke of their need and desire to maintain an intimate connection with family members (e.g., having and providing secure attachment with one another; functioning as a “safe haven” for one another, taking care of the needs of family members). They spoke of their need for the family to tolerate, and, ideally, encourage their scholarly

identity development as women. Participants reported that having a role model or “cheerleader” from the family of origin provided a template for envisioning that it was possible to develop as a scholar and succeed in their doctoral programs. Alternatively, evaluation of family patterns also resulted in the choice to discontinue familial patterns that discouraged or inhibited development. When the choice to discontinue a pattern was difficult, when it was met with no support from family members or resulted in hiding the scholarly self-necessary to maintain family attachment, women experienced a deep sense of grief and loss.

Scholarly identity development and doctoral persistence were also made possible by members of the current family system. Consistent with the research of Dabney and Tai (2013) and Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), women in this study echoed that development as a scholar is an arduous process and requires personal and family member “sacrifice,” “communication,” and a “system of support” (p. 214). Central was the family, enabling the women to differentiate. Similar to the theoretical literature on adolescent identity, women’s identity development in a doctoral program is intimately associated with the ability to separate from the family (S. A. Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990). These findings are consistent with Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2017) and others (e.g., West, 2014) who explained that scholarly identity development is supported or hindered by the process of *differentiating from the family*, or “the separating of one’s intellectual and emotional functioning from that of the family” (p. 10).

Family value of the degree, family support, family adaption, and clearly negotiated roles were also essential to development and persistence. While some women in this study had spouses willing to take on more non-traditional or supportive roles, other women reported that their negotiated roles and division of labor remained mostly traditional, a finding consistent with prior research (Lyonette et al., 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Knight, 2015). The theme of motherhood and family as a motivation to develop and persist was not surprising given the fact that all participants were mothers and described motherhood as significant. Just as some of the participants were encouraged by their mothers to continue their education, participants were acutely aware that they too were role models for their children. This awareness fueled their decision to model, especially for their daughters, what it meant to be a woman scholar and persist in a doctoral program. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that “becoming a role model for their children was an important factor” (Lyonette et al., 2015, p. 2) for women who enroll in higher education.

## IMPLICATIONS

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Results from this study provide numerous implications for doctoral students and their families, faculty, administrators, and other higher education personnel. Spousal support and negotiated roles were significant factors associated with development and persistence, suggesting partners need to have candid conversations about responsibilities and roles. There needs to be an awareness that if the wife is returning to school, role reversal in the relationship or differentiation is a likely occurrence and may result in marital stress. Partners thus also need to develop strategies to address and manage the added stress and be prepared to grow and develop together.

The university can be central in helping facilitate discussions such as these at the beginning of the doctoral program by explicitly orienting families to the rigors of doctoral training and emphasizing the role of the family in growth and persistence. The university can host family webinars, create family orientations, offer family counseling, and develop family Facebook groups. In addition to orienting families to the nature of the doctoral journey, doctoral orientation should promote the discussion and profound reflection on the impact of family of origin roles, values, and beliefs on present family functioning. It is also important to underscore the significant role faculty mentorship plays in modeling how women can balance their families as they develop as scholars and persist (Bair, 1999; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Findings from this study demonstrate that while some women have strong role models to emulate and fathers who encouraged them to develop as scholars, some women do not. It is crucial for universities to ensure women across ethnicities are well-represented on the facul-

ty to ensure that students have role models allowing them to envision themselves (or their spouses) as capable of successfully being scholars and persisting.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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This study was narrow in focus and has limitations. The study relied on volunteer respondents who were informed about the focus of the study before consenting to participate. It is likely that individuals feeling elevated levels of stress, whether academic, professional, or personal, may not have chosen to participate in the study due to the required time commitment, meaning the sample was not necessarily reflective of the population from which it was drawn. Participation was also elicited from a limited number of distance education, professional doctorate programs. While this limited the scope of the research, it also highlighted a critical area. The growth of distance education has been instrumental for women desiring to develop their academic identity and pursue a doctoral degree; this population has been understudied. So, this study provided voice and illuminated their struggles. However, the role of the family in doctoral persistence for women in residential programs needs now to be explored and even compared with the findings of this study to highlight differences and similarities.

This study is also an essential step toward understanding the role of the family in the doctoral persistence of women. With most of the participants being married and all identifying as heterosexual women, more in-depth research is needed with divorced or never married participants, as well as with men, and with individuals identifying as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual). Further, with this study focused on women enrolled in the social sciences (education and counseling), more research is needed to understand the experiences of women in other fields including the humanities, creative and performing arts, and the sciences, especially given the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields. A quantitative measure needs to be developed that examines how women integrate and balance their family and academics so examination of this in relation to other variables (e.g., personality, marital status, etc.) can be investigated.

While findings of this study extended McCallum's (2016) research on the role of family in the African American doctoral students' decisions to enroll in the programs, interestingly, McCallum found that parental expectations, which were influential in African American students' decisions to pursue a doctoral degree, differed by culture, socioeconomic status, and gender. This study's findings did not illuminate this idea; thus, McCallum's (2016) work coupled with others suggests that in-depth investigation into culturally distinguishing factors in future investigations may be warranted as a further study on the role of the family in this area is conducted.

## CONCLUSION

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A vital reason many women students choose not to persist in a doctoral program is that they experience conflict between whom they define themselves as women and the emerging identity as a scholar – a conflict between “the enduring sense of who they are and whom they want to become” (Cobb, 2004, p. 336). A supportive family is a salient theme that arises in studies on doctoral persistence, with many researchers noting that the family is essential in helping women navigate the doctoral journey (e.g., Lott et al., 2009; Tinto, 1993). This study furthers the existing research by examining how women integrate and balance their family systems as they develop as scholars and persist in their doctoral degrees. While previous studies have focused on the support of current family systems in doctoral persistence, this study examined not only the role of the current family but also the family of origin, which had not been previously examined. Thus, further support is given to the fact that the role of the family in the study of persistence should not be ignored. If women are to develop as scholars and persist, a greater focus on integrating the family into the doctoral journey is also needed.

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