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Foundational Curriculum for the African American Student Network: Synthesis of Discussion Topics and Themes

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Abstract

The African American Student Network (AFAM) is a therapeutic counterspace associated with positive educational and social outcomes for Black undergraduates at a predominantly White institution in the Midwest. We adapted consensual qualitative research methods to explore discussion topics and synthesize themes across hundreds of AFAM meetings spanning more than a decade. We found that AFAM students talked most about navigating college life followed by understanding racism, exploring identity, standing up for justice, and finding love, respectively. Importantly, these themes map on to and extend traditional psychosocial tasks for emerging adulthood, particularly in terms of racism and social justice. Additionally, the topics and themes uncovered here can provide a foundational curriculum or roadmap for others interested in developing therapeutic counterspaces like AFAM.

Keywords: African American Student Network; Counterspace; Curriculum

Foundational Curriculum for the African American Student Network: Synthesis of Discussion Topics and Themes

Promoting the health and wellbeing of African American young people in educational settings is important. To that end, I (the first author) co-founded the African American Student Network (AFAM) in 2005. The development and evolution of this network was informed by my training as a counseling psychologist and work in college counseling centers. Specifically, I was inspired by a dynamic group of psychologists of color at California State University Long Beach, who during my internship with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), showed me how to adapt counseling to diverse communities on campus. For example, during the noon hour, Dr. Pamela Ashe who was part of a Sister Friends network would often take her lunch and eat in the Women's Center, where students could join her to talk. In contrast, Dr. Phi Loan Le and her Lotus Women's group would all bring their lunches into the counseling center once a week, while Dr. Rosa Moreno hosted a Latinas Unidas Conference. All of these outreach efforts seemed to break down barriers and create community to support women of color on campus.

I (the first author) took this lesson with me when I co-founded AFAM as a new Assistant Professor. AFAM is a unique space on campus and a unique space in general. Yet, like many of the outreach efforts I was exposed to, food is at the center of AFAM, which meets once a week over the lunch hour. AFAM works to create space for Black students to connect, share, and make meaning of their experiences on campus. As an open networking group, new students are always welcomed. Black faculty and/or graduate students facilitate discussions, and participation in the network has been associated with positive outcomes (Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman 2016; Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley,

2008).

In fact, one of the initial aims of AFAM focused on improving retention and graduation rates for Black students on campus (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). In an initial study, Grier-Reed et al. (2011) reported that even though AFAM students did not have higher first-term GPAs or ACT scores on average, these students did demonstrate higher percentages of retention and graduation than their non-AFAM counterparts. These findings were supported by Grier-Reed et al. (2016) who also found higher retention rates among AFAM students when compared to a random sample of Black students on campus who did not participate in the network. Moreover, Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) found positive social outcomes for AFAM students. When compared to non-AFAM Black students on campus, those who participated in the network tended to be more connected. Specifically, when asked with whom they discussed important matters, AFAM students tended to identify a higher number of people in their network (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). These students also tended to be connected to more people at their same university and to more people who were the same race and gender as them than their non-AFAM counterparts (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016).

The importance of social ties to overall health and wellbeing is well documented (Seeman, 1996), but social connections or what Tinto (1993) would call social integration have also been identified as important to retention in higher education. As a social networking intervention, AFAM seems to facilitate positive educational outcomes by improving students' connections in school; that is, providing a cultural space of home that facilitates communal bonds with others. In fact, AFAM has been described as a safe space on campus that generates "connectedness" (Grier-Reed et al., 2008).

For Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)—who often experience

isolation, invisibility, and unfair treatment—supportive relationships and affirming spaces are crucial (Ancis, Sedlacek, Mohr, 2000; Davis et al., 2004; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Solórzano et al. (2000) call these counterspaces or spaces that counter deficit notions of people of color by uplifting the voices, cultures, and identities of those who are often silenced and marginalized. Case and Hunter (2012) demonstrate how counterspaces mitigate race-related stress.

Powell and Jacob Arriola (2003) find that Black students who talk to others about being treated unfairly tend to have higher GPAs than those who do not. Along those lines, Hope, Hoggard, and Thomas (2015) emphasize the importance of discussions in which African American emerging adults can analyze and make sense of structural and interpersonal injustice, can value African Americans as a group, and can resist assimilation. AFAM provides space for such discussions, where students share experiences with inequitable treatment, particularly in educational settings (Grier-Reed, Gagner, & Ajayi, 2018).

The importance of these discussions to wellbeing and positive development as asserted by Hope et al. (2015) seem to bear out in AFAM research. Not only has participation in the network been linked to positive educational outcomes (Grier-Reed et al., 2011; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016), participation in AFAM has also been linked to resilience and empowerment along with many of the therapeutic factors associated with group work (Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed et al., 2008). In fact, Grier-Reed and Ajayi (2019) have described AFAM as a therapeutic counterspace or culturally responsive counseling intervention. Notably, AFAM meets outside of the counseling center and operates as more of an informal network where students come and go freely. In other words, students are not required to attend a set number of meetings nor are they required to arrive on time. Minimally structured with

introductions and check-ins, where everyone shares a high and low moment from the week, discussion in AFAM is open for exploring whatever topics students bring.

Especially given that these students are more likely to rely on informal sources of support than on professional counseling (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004), informal spaces for Black students to connect and talk about the issues they are facing are critical. In AFAM, Black faculty and graduate student facilitators create and hold the space for students to share and make meaning of their experiences on campus (i.e., engage in reflective coping). Importantly, reflective coping is associated with positive mental health outcomes in contrast to suppressing one's emotions or simply losing control and reacting (Heppner, Cook, Wright, & Johnson, 1995; Szymanski, 2012; Wei Heppner, Ku, & Liao, 2010).

AFAM has been identified as a sanctuary for talking about racial microaggressions (Grier-Reed, 2010). In this space, students report feeling intellectually stimulated, empowered, safe, and validated (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). To extend research on AFAM, the current study focused on synthesizing the content of discussions in the network. Prior AFAM research has primarily focused on outcomes and processes rather than discussion topics. We aim to address this gap by synthesizing themes across AFAM discussions for the first decade of its existence. This work is important because over the years I (the first author) have received requests for an AFAM curriculum from practitioners interested in developing their own AFAM groups. Moreover, AFAM has been adapted for high school students (see Gbolo & Grier-Reed, 2019). Yet, there is no curriculum for facilitators to use.

A summary of discussion topics and synthesis of core themes can serve as a foundation to guide those interested in developing and facilitating this kind of counterspace. To advance this research, we have engaged in a qualitative study using archival data to analyze hundreds of

AFAM discussions. Specifically, we adapt consensual qualitative research methods (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) to analyze AFAM facilitators' notes from academic year 2005-06 to academic year 2015-16 with hopes that this research can inform future practice.

Method

Case Study

Methods for this project are based in case study research. Case studies are useful for bringing attention to cases that are unique, under-examined, not well understood, and even marginalized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies are also useful for illustrating problems, issues, and specific concerns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We engaged in a case study of AFAM with both sets of goals: 1) describing a unique case (i.e., AFAM); and, 2) highlighting specific problems, topics, and issues raised by students in network discussions.

Consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 1997; 2005) methods were adapted to analyze discussions in the network over roughly the first decade of its existence from 2005-06 to 2015-16. During this time, there were a total of 702 participants in the AFAM network. These were undergraduate students at every level (i.e., first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior), and many attended during multiple years of their education. Sixty-eight percent of participants were women, 30% were men, and 2% were unknown. Students were native-born African Americans, immigrants, and recent immigrants, including but not limited to Nigerian, Liberian, Cameroonian, Somali, Kenyan, and Eritrean. AFAM participants also identified as biracial and multiracial. The mean number of students who attended a network meeting over the entire period was 20 (*SD* = 8.5), and on average students came to eight meetings (*SD* =

12.5).

Setting

AFAM was developed at a PWI in the Midwest. This institution consisted of 16 colleges and schools (e.g., Liberal Arts, Education, and Business). A large university, the institution had approximately 53, 800 students, of which 30, 500 were undergraduates. Within this institution, the gender composition was 47.1% men and 51.7% women. The racial and ethnic demographics were 1.2% American Indian, 9.3% Asian, 4.3% African American/Black, 0.2% Hawaiian, 3.1% Hispanic, 12.6% International, and 65.5% White.

AFAM was an open, informal networking group that met weekly over the lunch hour. An educational counseling intervention, AFAM was designed to help Black students make meaning of their experiences and find support in school. The network was co-facilitated by faculty and graduate students. From 2005-06 to 2015-16, faculty co-facilitators included two African American men who were professors/instructors and one African American woman who was a professor. Graduate student co-facilitators included two African American women, two African American men, and one biracial man. Two of the students (one woman and one man) were master's level, and the rest were doctoral students. The African American woman professor who is the principal investigator for this study co-founded AFAM and was a co-facilitator over the entire period.

Procedures

This case study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board at the participating university. The research team was composed of an African American professor, graduate student, and undergraduate student. The principal investigator of the study was an African American woman and professor at a PWI; as previously mentioned she is also

the co-founder of AFAM and the first author. The graduate research assistant was an African American man who was a doctoral student at the PWI and who is currently an assistant professor at a Midwestern university; he co-facilitated AFAM meetings from 2014 to 2016. The undergraduate research assistant was an African American woman and McNair Scholar at the PWI, who also participated in AFAM; she served as an internal auditor on the project.

The research was archival—relying on facilitator notes, where researchers focused on uncovering themes across students' discussions at AFAM meetings. The data were based on AFAM facilitators' notes from academic years 2005-06 through 2015-16. As part of the record keeping for AFAM, facilitators—primarily the principal investigator and graduate research assistants who co-facilitated the group—created a case note or group note that captured the content and major themes discussed during each meeting. The principal investigator of the study maintained these records; she was able to locate notes for 75% (n = 226) of the 300 AFAM meetings that occurred between 2005-06 and 2015-16. Although 74 notes were missing, the data included in this study spanned all academic years of the study. There were only two semesters (spring 2010 and fall 2012) for which there were no notes from any meetings.

The principal investigator compiled and coded facilitator notes for each AFAM meeting by date, and then adapted CQR methods (Hill et al., 1997; 2005) to analyze the archival data. CQR is a team-based qualitative method in which data are first grouped into domains and then analyzed to determine the core idea(s) within each domain (Hill et al., 1997; 2005). To create domains using CQR, one or more researchers group(s) similar content together (Hill et al., 1997; 2005). The creation of domains can occur independently or as a group. If the work is completed independently, researchers must come together to agree on the domains (i.e., that the content for each domain hangs together) before moving on to the next step—developing core

ideas. The final step, determining themes is collaborative and based on the domains and core ideas that have emerged. CQR can also include at least one auditor to check the work of the primary team and to counter tendencies toward groupthink (Hill et al., 2005). For this study, the principal investigator and graduate research assistant formed the primary research team and the undergraduate research assistant served as an internal auditor to check the work of the primary team.

Analysis

To begin the analysis, the principal investigator and graduate research assistant reviewed the adapted CQR process and outlined the approach to the data. The principal investigator and doctoral research assistant worked independently to group similar discussion content into initial domains; then the principal investigator and the graduate research assistant met together to discuss and agree upon the domains and core ideas. This cross-analysis included discussion of whether there might be additional domains not initially included. Once the domains and core ideas were established, the principal investigator and graduate research assistant worked to find consensus regarding major themes in the data.

Consensus is integral to the CQR (Hill et al., 1997; 2005) process and forms the basis for trustworthy interpretations of data. Testimonial validity has also been used to address trustworthiness in CQR (Hill et al., 1997). Testimonial validity involves taking the findings back to the participant(s) to ascertain whether the results accurately reflect participant experiences. To that end, this case study included an undergraduate auditor who had also participated in AFAM. Auditing involved the following tasks: examining dates for which there were and were not facilitator notes in the archive; identifying notes included in and excluded from the preliminary results; examining whether the content in each domain fit together;

evaluating the core ideas; and, providing feedback on whether the themes seemed to adequately capture the data. The audit lasted approximately 6-8 weeks and occurred during a 10-week summer research program. During this time, the undergraduate auditor reviewed and cataloged the entire AFAM archive—reading all of the facilitator notes in their original form, auditing the preliminary domains and core ideas, and providing feedback on the overarching themes.

The auditor provided a measure of testimonial validity. As an African American undergraduate at a PWI who participated in AFAM, the internal auditor on the research team provided an important perspective and voice. Results were finalized once the audit was complete.

Results

AFAM discussions spanned five general content areas focused on navigating college life, understanding racism, exploring identity, standing up for justice, and finding love (see Table 1). Our results were based on 75% (n = 225) of the 300 meetings that occurred between 2005-06 and 2015-16; one meeting focused on ghosts and Halloween did not fit any domain. Each domain spanned the entire period of our study and included dozens of meetings. For example, even the domain with the least amount of content (Finding Love) spanned 27 AFAM meetings that ranged from fall semester 2005 to spring semester 2016.

Table 1

Summary of Discussion Content from 2005-06 to 2015-16

Domain/Discussion Topic	Theme
Navigating College Life (*n* = 84 meetings)	Students were challenged by college life in terms of lack of racial diversity on campus, isolation, keeping up with academics, financing their education, and feeling like their education is connected to their life's purpose, where students felt stressed and pulled in many directions struggling to find balance and support as they managed transitions.
Understanding Racism (*n* = 59 meetings)	Students struggled with racism and navigating racial situations, including White supremacy, Halloween parties, racist stereotypes, use of the N-word, "reverse racism," police profiling, and unjust educators.
Exploring Identity (*n* = 58 meetings)	Students tended to defy stereotypical notions of Blackness but struggled with defining what it means to be Black, where they experienced tensions regarding feeling authentic and feeling like they are losing their core self, transcending race, divisions within the Black community, and representations of Blacks in media, politics, and popular culture.
Getting Involved, Standing Up, Building Allies for Justice (*n* = 49 meetings)	Students felt challenged to build allies and stand up for social justice issues on campus, in the Black community, and in society (i.e., social movements).
Finding Love (*n* = 27 meetings)	Students experienced challenges dating and finding the right person, where staying connected with one's values, navigating stereotypes, sexuality, and interracial relationships were major factors.

Note. At times more than one topic was discussed at a single meeting; hence, the total number of meetings reported in Table 1 is greater than 225.

Navigating College Life

The highest number of meetings (84) focused on navigating college life at a PWI. Students discussed the lack of diversity on campus, where they talked about feeling misled about the University being more diverse than it actually is. Students also expressed "feeling 'used' to meet a diversity quota on campus and feeling isolated." There was a sense that the University advertised and promoted diversity in order to attract students, but did not actually live up to the promotional materials. As a result, students expressed frustration, feeling like their experiences were not represented or visible. Lack of diversity in the curriculum was connected to students feeling disconnected from their courses--questioning the point of classes, particularly with respect to better understanding themselves and helping their communities. There was tension regarding whether the purpose of college was for self-discovery or simply to find a job. Below is an excerpt from a facilitator note summarizing the discussion at one group meeting.

> [Students discussed] tension between following your passions and the need to make a living in choosing a career path. One student lamented that 'Black people always seemed to see college as a means to an end' i.e., job rather than an avenue for personal growth and discovery. Others stated that when you are the first one in your family to go to college and are coming up out of poverty with everyone depending on you, you do not always have the luxury to focus only on your passions.

These discussions reflected an existential struggle for AFAM students in making meaning of their education and of whether the education they were receiving felt meaningful. In addition, students discussed the stress of feeling like they have to make adjustments that their fellow White students do not. Below is an excerpt from one facilitator's note.

> Discussion from the prior week continued as the students talked about feeling the strain of being a Black student on a PWI campus. Many of the students discussed feeling 'pulled in different directions' when they want to hang with their Black friends and friends from other races. Many of the African students discussed feeling as though they sometimes have to make the choice of hanging with Black

> students or African friends. The students stated that sometimes they feel as though they cannot trust their White peers because they have different experiences. The students discussed the term 'Healthy Mistrust', however, they had difficulty with the conceptualization of the term.

Needing support but having difficulty feeling supported was part of students' experience as they tried to find balance and manage finances in navigating college life.

Understanding Racism

Students spent 59 meetings discussing racism in life in general and in the media, in high school, and in college. Racial profiling and racism in interactions with the police was a recurring topic, where "Black male students talked about how they often felt criminalized even on campus." Discussions also included experiences of racial microaggressions in classes. Students shared stories of feeling the pressure to write about race because they were the only Black person in class and/or feeling picked on to represent their group. This hypervisibility extended to being the target of negative interactions with educators. AFAM students often shared experiences of being the target of low expectations, prejudice, and racism in educational settings as is demonstrated in the quote taken from one facilitator's note:

> Two students had an experience in class in which they were working in a group that had all Black students and one White student. The students noted that this was the first time they had worked together with these other Black students. They finished the assignment early. Noticing that they were not working, the teacher confronted their group. The students said that the teacher said, 'You guys always blow off these assignments. You need to find another group to work with or just leave.' The students said they were stunned, and just sat there. However, the White student in their group did leave to work with another group. The students in AFAM spent time discussing this incident and whether the teacher was racist. They also discussed whether his actions were racially motivated. In this discussion, other students shared stories of where they felt racially profiled and struggled to define racism and differentiate racism from prejudice. A discussion of internalized racism also emerged.

AFAM was a space in which students struggled to make sense of and understand racism in their everyday lives, particularly subtle, less explicit, covert racism. Yet, students also struggled with how to navigate more explicit racial situations, especially discussions of race and racism with White students when they were one of one or one of two Black students in a class or when White students claimed "reverse racism," e.g., people discriminating or being racist against White people. AFAM was a sounding board for sorting through such experiences as exemplified in the somewhat lengthy facilitator note quoted below.

> How to address/respond to ignorant racist statements in a productive manner. In other words, how do we avoid being seen as the loud angry Black person? An aside about another White international student who makes frequent ignorant racist statements. It was suggested that this person may have come from an environment where these types of thoughts/views were normative. Ignorance isn't always a choice. This was disputed by some and argued that people can choose the information they are exposed to and choose to believe. Came back to the issue of how to change people. Speak in a clear, articulate, calm tone and explain why their statement was wrong/ ignorant/ problematic. Others argued that we shouldn't just let things go, for example, White people or Hispanic folks using the N-word. Then it was asked, why can't we just express our feelings without worrying about looking like a stereotype. Others argued that we need to learn how to pick our battles. The point was made that some can't empathize (i.e., people just don't know or understand the lived experiences of Black people). One way to deal with that is to use statistics to prove your point. Some argued that we aren't responsible for educating people. Point made again that it is hard because there are so many stereotypes about Black people that we are damned if we do or damned if we don't. Issue of Spring Jam also came up because there are more Black artists coming this year. Statement from a White student saying: 'Oh the Black people are going to be happy.' Returning to the way of how to address ignorant people: When you confront a person you have a chance to impact them. Calm reactions and angry reactions are both valid and have a place. There was a Martin and a Malcolm. Our feelings are our feelings, and you have the right to express them. Also, mention of concern about the use of the N-word at the concert. Final comment: 'We should all get together and wear shirts that say N-word police.'

Trying to understand how best to respond to racism was an important part of this domain. This included the catch-22 of saying something and potentially reinforcing a stereotype by appearing angry and/or aggressive or not saying anything and reinforcing stereotypes by not contesting racist ideas. In AFAM students worked in tandem to make meaning of racism and share specific, practical strategies for dealing with racism and the many ways it manifested in their lives.

Exploring Identity

Students spent 58 meetings exploring identity. In AFAM students critically examined Blackness. This included the tension between feeling authentic and like students were losing their core self, where students discussed feeling like they have to "fit in on-campus" or turn into someone they are not. Students also discussed "leaving a part of themselves behind for college" and "selling out." Students worried that adapting to the campus environment would basically result in assimilation, and they expressed wariness and ambivalence about code-switching. Identity exploration also examined heterogeneity and division in the Black community. Students discussed diversity and lack of unity within the Black community, including hypocrisy (e.g., being pro-Black but not supporting Black businesses) and not supporting Black organizations. In addition, students explored negative stereotypes and cultural tensions between Africans and African Americans. Below is a quote taken from one facilitator's note:

> The students discussed the differences in being African and African American. Many of the students discussed stereotypes they have believed at one time about each group and how these stereotypes were either validated or invalidated by their experiences. The students discussed messages they receive about each other through media, family, and members outside of the group. The discussion ended with the students talking about how these stereotypes affect the way they interact with one another.

The representation of Blacks in media, politics, and popular culture was a major touchstone for exploring Black identity, where students seemed to acknowledge a collective or

group identity and recognize that the portrayal of "Blackness" had implications for how others view and judge them as individuals. In AFAM, exploring the intersection between a collective Black identity (including positive and negative images of Blackness) and one's individual identity as a Black person was significant.

Getting Involved, Standing Up, Building Allies for Justice

Students spent 49 meetings discussing topics related to standing up for justice on campus, in the Black community, and in society. For AFAM students, this included questioning their responsibility for educating others, struggling with ways to make the campus feel more safe and welcoming, and finding ways be a part of change in the University community. Identifying ways to act against oppression was a core aspect of this domain. Students in AFAM pushed back against White dominance by identifying tangible ways to value their race and culture (e.g., through celebrating Black History Month and maintaining cultural spaces) on campus and by making their voices part of the wider campus community, thereby decreasing distance between Black and White experiences and perspectives.

Mentoring and giving back to the Black community were also major threads, where students discussed community responsibility, leadership within the Black community, and their responsibility as Black people and as citizens. However, discussions revealed a tension between focusing on self and helping others. For example, one meeting note captured a discussion of students: "feeling a responsibility to go back to the community they come from to bring people up. Some of the students disagreed, stating others can use the same skills they used to pull themselves out." Below is another quote from a facilitator's note where students wondered:

> ...whether it was possible to give back to the Black community while in college, rather than focusing on 'just getting yours.' There were mixed opinions with most students underscoring the need to pull someone up with you. However,

> some students shared the belief that it is enough to just try to keep yourself afloat as a Black college student, and that in itself was giving back to the community.

Critical discussions of voting, activism, social movements, current events, politics, incarceration, and allies occurred in AFAM. At times students were empowered, and at times students were exhausted by the prospect of activism. Students also critiqued social movements and patriarchy in the Black community, discussing intersecting systems of oppression and what it means to be an ally. Below is a quote taken from one facilitator's note:

> One topic suggested: Race and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Then shift towards White Allies. Why is there a push back against White people who show an interest in learning about Black people? Black people have to ally with White people in order to make political change. Someone shared that they like allies, but they have a problem with White allies who take up space where people of color could've spoken. Prefer if they don't take the limelight. Allies do bring a sense of solidarity, but they need to know their place. They are there to help us in the movement, but not to make any plans in the movement. Push back against the idea. Suggestion that we use White allies to help us understand the way White people think. Question posed: 'As a Black woman, who do you feel is more of an ally, Black men or White women?' One student said they've found other women of color (Asian) to be more understanding. Most said that they identify more with Black men than White women unless it has to do with feminism. Point made that Black men have at least experienced Black womanhood in their lives. But, another student pointed out that Black men can't really understand the Black female struggle, and said that it's on a whole other level of struggle. Also discussion about Whitesplaining (White condescension).

AFAM students tried to make sense of various intersecting systems of oppression such as racism and sexism and pondered how to respond or act against these systems. These included questions such as: How to address patriarchy in the Black community? Was it enough to just pull oneself up, or did students have a responsibility to also help others of their race succeed? What did it mean to be a Black citizen or an activist? Was it important to have White allies, and if so what should be their role? For students in AFAM developing their sociopolitical conceptions of the world was important.

Finding Love

Students spent 27 meetings talking about dating, sexuality, and intimate relationships. In AFAM, students explored the costs and benefits of dating within or outside of their race and/or religion. Students also questioned whether it is racist to not be attracted to one's own race (i.e., whether it is a devaluation of one's own race to date exclusively outside of one's race). Moreover, students explored whether interracial dating in general was a rejection of Black culture by Black people. One facilitator noted that: "While some students shared preferences for dating within their race, others discussed the importance of being open-minded. Students seemed to think that as long as someone does not lose their culture, dating interracially is okay."

Race was a constant factor in students' exploration of love relationships. This included navigating stereotypes and the difficulty of finding a same-race mate. Below is a quote taken from another facilitator's note:

> Specifically, they posed the question of why is it so hard to find a Black man, and on the contrary, the men posed the question of why is it so hard to find a Black woman. Interestingly, complementary stereotypes about Black women being successful and Black men being intimidated arose, where women suggested that men are too afraid to speak to a successful Black woman, and men suggested that many of these successful women seem uninterested or unavailable—each group assuming the other is not interested.

Students also examined hyper-sexualization as captured in the note of one facilitator discussing "Black women being fetishized, degraded, and approached inappropriately on Tinder" [with] "[p]eople only looking for a 'chocolate experience.'" Less frequent were discussions of homophobia. On occasion, however, students in AFAM did explore and challenge heterosexism in African American culture. Discussions of dating and finding the right person seemed to include a constant navigation of cultural narratives and stereotypes—not to mention the challenges of dating within a small a pool

of Black students comprising only about 4% of the University population.

Discussion

The five topic areas uncovered through our analysis of discussions in AFAM align with and extend traditional notions of emerging adulthood focused on tasks such as making connections between identity and work, dating, and exploring various worldviews (Arnett 2000; 2015). In addition, students spent a significant amount of time discussing racism and standing up for justice. Race was a constant factor across discussions in AFAM, illuminating tensions between self and others or "self and society" (Keniston, 1971). Even in discussions of finding love, unpacking and navigating racial stereotypes and cultural narratives such as the "strong black woman" or hyper-sexuality, were central (Ferber, 2007; Harris-Perry, 2011; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016).

Narrating and making sense of racism has been connected to developmental milestones for racially and ethnically diverse emerging adults and for African Americans in particular (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Hope, Hoggard, & Thomas, 2015; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). In the AFAM counterspace, students spent a significant amount of time reflecting on personal experiences of racism and examining the best ways to respond. Identifying ways to act against systems of oppression by getting involved, building allies, and standing up for justice was also thematic. The domains of understanding racism and standing up for justice echo the importance of sociopolitical development in African American emerging adulthood, where sociopolitical development has been associated with empowerment and adaptive coping in the face of racial discrimination (Hope et al., 2015).

In AFAM people worked to make meaning of the social categories in which they found themselves. Intersectionality was a meta-struggle, where students explored potential stigma

across identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic/cultural affiliation, and religious affiliation). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality provides a lens for understanding power and interlocking systems of oppression.

For students in AFAM this included exploring racism, sexism, heterosexism, and even ethnocentrism. For example, in exploring Islamophobia AFAM students wondered whether and how this type of religious discrimination intersected with race. With respect to race and gender, Black women questioned whether Black men or White women were stronger allies particularly in light of patriarchy, and for Black men race and gender intersected in experiences of being criminalized also known as the "criminalBlackman" a term created by Katheryn Russell-Brown (Alexander, 2012). Moreover, intersections between race and culture/ethnicity appeared through discussions of friction and stigma (including internalized oppression) between native-born African Americans or African descendants of slaves (ADOS) and African immigrants. Students also discussed race and sexuality, i.e., what it means to be LGBT in the Black community.

Furthermore, AFAM students were constantly navigating intersections between their experience as an individual and part of a collective, exploring the multidimensionality of Blackness. Race was even a factor in discussing politics; students questioned what it means to be a Black Republican (e.g., "Is it selling out?"). Being Black was an overarching identity or social category, and students examined how this overarching identity intersected with their other identities. For the students in our study, it was difficult to be seen as just simply an individual outside of race.

Implications

Our case study provides a nuanced portrait of AFAM discussions. Analyzing notes from over 200 network meetings, we found that students spent the most time discussing college life followed by racism, identity, social justice, and love, respectively. As aforementioned, these topics align with traditional psychosocial tasks for emerging adults (Arnett 2000; 2015) as well as literature focused on milestones for racially diverse young people (Azmitia et al., 2008; Hope, Hoggard, & Thomas, 2015; Umaña-Taylor, 2016; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Our research on AFAM exemplifies praxis, where we are able to integrate practice wisdom with theoretical understandings of emerging adulthood.

The themes and topic areas uncovered through this research provide future practitioners with a guidepost for facilitating discussion in spaces like AFAM. The evolution of the group process and specific skills needed for group facilitation have been outlined elsewhere (see Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed, 2013; Grier-Reed & Ajayi, 2019). In the current study, we extend previous scholarship by providing a comprehensive synthesis of discussion topics.

Moreover, we include excerpts of facilitator notes to provide a sense of how discussion topics evolve over a single meeting. In AFAM, facilitators help students explore and make meaning of their struggles, rather than try to solve students' problems. In essence, facilitators facilitate reflection and meaning-making which have been associated with positive mental health outcomes (Heppner et al., 1995; Wei et al., 2010; Szymanski, 2012). Solórzano et al. (2000) describe counterspaces as important for people of color, and we assert that counterspaces may be beneficial for any minoritized group that has been marginalized at the macro levels of society.

We believe that while our work on AFAM may be particularly relevant for those seeking to support Black students at PWIs, some of the issues raised may also be relevant for other

groups, particularly other people of color. Navigating college life, understanding racism, exploring identity including racial/cultural identities, standing up for justice, and finding love are issues that transcend AFAM, and that are particularly relevant for young people and emerging adults. Although we recommend against inflexible curricula or imposing topics on to students, which go against the spirit of AFAM, the general discussion topics and themes presented in the current research may provide structure or a foundational curriculum for those looking to create and facilitate an affinity group like AFAM. We have found that particularly for younger students, i.e., at the high school level, more structure including facilitators suggesting topics is helpful (Gbolo & Grier-Reed, 2019).

A few words of caution. Our analysis of facilitators' notes may portray conversations in AFAM as more linear and focused than they feel when one is facilitating. Rather than transcripts that capture every digression, silence, or topic that falls flat, facilitator notes summarize the discussion. Hence, the foundational curriculum included here cannot fully capture the in vivo dynamism of meetings. In real life, facilitators must be comfortable navigating ambiguity and exploration with a focus on group process and meaning making rather than on giving students answers to their problems.

The most important task of the AFAM facilitator is to create and hold space for student voices; this is what makes AFAM unique, and it requires facilitators to refrain from rushing in to fill the space or change the topic to matters they deem more worthy, important, or relevant. The best and most energizing AFAM meetings are those in which facilitators are able to help participants find or co-create meaning that promotes understanding of self, of others, and of the contexts in which they exist. Although it is not necessarily apparent in the notes presented here, AFAM discussions often start with references to popular culture, e.g., celebrities, TV shows, etc.

Rather than shutting these topics down, good facilitators help students explore why these people, programs, or icons are important to them and what meanings they have in the larger culture.

The most challenging AFAM meetings are those in which students do not seem to have the energy or interest in going deep. These meetings can feel tricky when students are high energy and engaging in crosstalk about trivial or superficial topics. Reining in the group and focusing the conversations without stymying the group energy can be difficult. These types of meetings call on facilitators to honor space for students to just be. Yet, it can be tempting for facilitators to see these conversations as pointless. In these instances, understanding that sometimes students will be topical, just want to get to know each other, or just want to come up for air is important; honoring this space allows them to be more fully humanized in educational settings. Students are not only their race or stigmatized identities; they are more than that. Moreover, every network meeting does not have to be about doing the work of racialized labor. Sometimes, students just want to talk and have fun, sharing opinions about their favorite musicians, pop stars, and celebrities. Although the miscellaneous nature of these types of discussions are hard to capture in our thematic analysis, this kind of socializing is an important part of connecting and an essential component of AFAM meetings.

Openness and familiarity with group process are key to facilitating a counterspace like AFAM. This includes understanding the rhythms of the school year. For instance, the beginning of the semester may be a time for students to get to know each other and get reacquainted, so attempts to go deep may be at odds with the norming and forming stages of the group process. Moreover, groups that have just gone deep may tend to want to come up for air by discussing topics that are more superficial. In addition, as the semester wears on, students who are stressed with exams during midterms or finals, may show up to AFAM for space to breathe, escape, and

relax or they may show up to problem-solve. In sum, facilitation requires being open, meeting students where they are, and remembering to honor the importance of play and socializing in building community and social support. There is no formal curriculum for AFAM, but we do operate from a humanistic perspective. For more information on the humanistic orientation, group process, and facilitation skills, see Grier-Reed (2010; 2013) and Grier-Reed and Ajayi (2019).

Limitations

This study represents efforts to integrate research with practice by synthesizing what we have learned from listening to emerging adults in AFAM for over a decade, but results should be interpreted in light of limitations. First, we were unable to obtain notes from 25% of the network meetings that occurred between academic years 2005-06 and 2015-16. Had these data been available, it is possible that we might have identified more domains and core ideas. Second, the archival nature of our data may be considered a limitation, where we relied on facilitators' notes or summaries of discussions rather than recordings or transcripts; no such recordings or transcripts existed. Third, we only included one auditor in our study; including more than one auditor might have strengthened our results and interpretations. Finally, we used the term African American broadly—including native-born U. S. Black people or African descendants of slaves (ADOS), immigrants, recent immigrants, and biracial/multiracial people which may have glossed over themes unique to any of these groups.

Conclusion

Through research on AFAM, we translated the lived experiences of AFAM students as summarized in their weekly meetings into scholarship that can inform future practice. Highlighting the centrality of race, we illuminate the ways in which college students grappled

with the racialized contexts in which they found themselves, and we provide a foundational curriculum for counselors and educators interested in creating therapeutic counterspaces like AFAM. We believe that this kind of engaged scholarship can advance praxis that integrates theory, research, and practice in fostering the health and wellbeing of people of color.

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