Perceptions of Help-Seeking in African American Males

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Abstract

College completion rates for African American males are lower than it is for all racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Part of the reason that African American males struggle in college is because they come into college underprepared. With African American males, there is a negative stigma towards seeking help (Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005).The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American male students' experience in seeking help. The information collected from this study could be used to generate ways to encourage African American male students to ask for help and to teach them how to better respond to other African American male students needing help.

Keywords: Help-seeking, African American males, first generation

For every African American male in the United States who begins college and persists until graduation, two more African American men will not finish (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). College completion rates for African American males are lower than it is for all racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Two-thirds of African American males at public institutions do not graduate within six years (Harper, 2012a). Only 35.2% of African American males completed college within six years of their starts at four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012c). These rates show a significant disparity in the educational trends for African American male college students when compared to the rates of Hispanic (47.5%), White (59.5%), and Asian (66.6%). Part of the reason that African American males struggle in college is because they come into college underprepared. With African American males, there is a negative stigma towards seeking help (Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005).Reasons behind African Americans' mental health stigma include lack of exposure and unfamiliarity with mental health resources (Wallace & Constantine, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American male students' experience in seeking help. This phenomenological study consisted of two primary research goals: (1) to understand the experiences with help-seeking lived by first year/first generation African American male students at an institution in Georgia; and

(2) to understand how their experiences and perceptions can be used to develop programs and services that will lead to an increase in help-seeking behaviors.

The information collected from this study could be used to generate ways to encourage African American male students to ask for help and to teach them how to better respond to other African American male students needing help.

Literature Review

Help-seeking is defined as the process of seeking external support when dealing with academic, personal, or psychological concerns for the purpose of improving those concerns. The review of the literature focuses on factors that shape help-seeking such as family influence, cultural values, spirituality, and mistrust. Stigma, self-concealment, pride, and spirituality religious involvement as well as adherence to masculine norms and familial and cultural values have been linked to help-seeking and utilization of professional counseling services by African American males.These concepts are integral to this framework because they form a possible rationale for how African American male students perceive help-seeking, and as to why they underutilize professional services that can help them, such as counseling services. Gender Role Conflict Theory may possibly fill in this gap and further explain why African American male students are reluctant to engage in help-seeking.

Gender Role Conflict Theory

Gender Role Conflict (GRC) Theory is a possible theoretical assumption that could explain the attitudes held towards help-seeking by African Americanmale students. Due to GRC, men experience an emotional and psychological anxiety from not adhering to the traditional and stereotypical roles that society has created for them (Harris III, Palmer, & Struve, 2011). GRC manifests in the negative consequences that men experience when their behaviors are consistent with or even in contradiction to the expected gender role norms of masculinity (O'Neil, 2008). There are several negative consequences for males. Firstly, Male GRC is linked to emotional restriction (Palmer, 2015). Research has shown restrictive emotionality in men to be related to anxiety, depression, negative views of help-seeking, and negative attitudes towards emotional expression, which causes intimacy issues in relationships (Wong, Pituch, & Rochlen, 2006). Secondly, GRC is linked to poor academic performance, poor help-seeking attitudes, and even to substance abuse issues that develop in men (Dancy, 2011; Harris et al., 2011).

According to Addis and Mahalik (2003), the higher GRC is, the greater avoidance there will be of psychological help-seeking. Consequently, when men experience greater incidences of GRC, they will more than likely avoid seeking help through mental health resources, such as counseling centers. O'Neil (2008) also noted that men who experienced greater incidences of GRC viewed help-seeking for psychological reasons in a more negative light than those with lower GRC. Due to GRC, men avoid asking for help, which ultimately leads to even bigger problems for which they need help. Only, that help is unlikely to be sought because of the conflict.

Particularly insightful to this study, Vogel et al. (2011) conducted a multicultural study to investigate male's adherence to dominate masculine norms in the U.S. and their resulting attitudes towards help-seeking and counseling. The study included African American males amongst its sample of 4,773 men and found that African American males were more approving and encouraging of masculine norms than were Caucasian males. This study, however, was focused on noncollege-age men.

Family Influence and Cultural Values

Family members have a significant influence on reluctance to seek counseling services, especially when it comes to the help-seeking behaviors of African American male college students. In a study of 219 African American college students, it was shown that African American males were less likely to seek help if their family members had negative norms associated with help-seeking (Barksdale & Molock, 2009). On occasions in which they do ask for help, African Americans prefer receiving help from non-mental health related sources (Ayalon & Young, 2005). African Americans tend to hold family members as well as close friends and trusted community members as primary sources of assistance for problems or concerns rather than mental health professionals (Wallace & Constantine, 2005). African Americans are also more inclined to seek help from a clergy member (Ayalon & Young, 2005; Wallace & Constantine, 2005).

Self-concealment

Self-concealment is linked to help-seeking attitudes (Cramer, 1999; Wallace & Constantine, 2005). Self-concealment is "the tendency to withhold personal, sensitive information that is perceived as negative or upsetting" (Wallace & Constantine, 2005, p. 371). It leads one to hold any distressing event, issue, or personal information to oneself, rather than seek help in the form of sharing this information and talking about it to other people (Larson & Chastain, 1990). Cramer (1999) found self-concealment to have a negative impact on the likelihood of help-seeking. Wallace and Constantine (2005) also found there to be an inverse relationship between self-concealment and positive attitudes towards help-seeking for African American males.Self-concealment makes talking to professionals about problems or concerns taboo in the African American culture. It is a by-product of adherence to Afrocentric cultural values (Townes, Chavez-Korell, & Cunningham, 2009; Wallace & Constantine, 2005). And in fact, adherence to cultural values and norms are linked to African American college males' stigma toward mental health. In a study of 251 African American college students, Wallace & Constantine (2005) revealed that for both African American college males and females, increased adherence to Afrocentric cultural values was associated with increased self-concealment as well as increased stigma about seeking help through counseling.

Cultural Mistrust

When it comes to help-seeking, specifically for mental health and psychological related reasons, the bulk of the existing literature on African American Americans, including college students, focuses on perceived racism and cultural mistrust due to our nation's long and tense history with racism and mistreatment of African Americans by Caucasian persons (Duncan, 2003; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006; Whaley, 2001). As a result of cultural mistrust, African Americans distrust Caucasian persons, who are the majority, and distrust the culture and institutions they perceive as being affiliated with them (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). This is particularly present in educational settings (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). This cultural mistrust can become so pervasive that African Americans develop a cultural paranoia in which they have a suspicion and skepticism of any interactions with the majority culture (Whaley, 2001). The majority of counseling and therapy studies on cultural mistrust has been conducted with college students and suggests a negative relationship between cultural mistrust and attitudes held by African Americans towards mental health services (Whaley, 2001). Duncan (2003) attributes this mistrust as a possible explanation as to why African Americans underutilize help-seeking services, such as mental health centers. More specifically, cultural mistrust has been shown to have an impact on the help-seeking attitudes and behaviors of African American males (Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001). It is also another reason why African American males do not seek counseling (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011).

As a result of cultural mistrust, African Americans tend to prefer African American counselors (Townes et al., 2009; Whaley, 2001). Even particularly amongst college students, Duncan & Johnson (2007) found that African Americans with high African Self-consciousness and cultural/racial mistrust prefer to have an African American counselor. Therefore, if African American males perceive that help services such as counseling centers are staffed by White employees, they may be less likely to use such services because of cultural/racial mistrust (Duncan, 2003; Whaley, 2001). In fact, they may not even come if such facilities are staffed by White people (Townes et al., 2009).

Spirituality and Religious Involvement

Another factor in the help-seeking tendencies of African American males is their spirituality. Research has shown that African Americans' spirituality and religious involvement plays a major role in their use of professional help services (Bierman, 2006; Wallace & Constantine, 2005). The findings of a study at East Carolina University of 192 college students (109 European Americans and 83 African American Americans) consisting of questionnaires in the form of Likert-type scales "were consistent with previous research suggesting that African Americans have higher levels of spiritual beliefs and religious participation than European Americans do" (Wallace and Constantine, 2005, 197). Comparably, in a national sample of African American Americans, it was found that "African Americans who contacted clergy or other spiritual resources first were less likely to seek help from other professionals" (Wallace & Constantine, 2005, 379). Tovar-Murray (2010) confirmed this preference specifically for African American male populations, finding that African American males preferred using religious resources when in need of support.

Another study by Taylor, Chatters, and Levin (2004) highlighted the propensity for religious forms of coping used by African Americans, such as the frequent use of prayer and religious resources to deal with stressors. Drawing upon data from the National Survey of African American Americans, Taylor et al. (2004) found that prayer and asking for others to pray for them on their behalf was the preferred and most often used coping strategy by African Americans when faced with personal issues.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe the help-seeking experiences of first year/first generation African American males and explain how these occurrences impacted their current views and likelihood to engage in the process of seeking help when needed. This required the interpretive approach of a qualitative research design, which seeks to understand how people have constructed meaning based on their experiences (Merriam, 2002). This study aimed to examine the participants' experiences with asking for help, then to uncover the lens through which they viewed help-seeking based upon their prior experiences.

The research site was a public institution located in Georgia. A purposive sampling approach was used for this study. The sample was comprised of African American undergraduate males who were first generation college students and in their first year of college. In comprising the sample size for this study, the researcher selected ten participants for individual interviews.   In determining the sample size for phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) recommends selecting up to ten participants for long-length interviews.More recently, Creswell (2013) recommends selecting three to ten participants for a phenomenological study.

Individual student interviews lasted one and one-half hours and took place in a soundproof room in the institution's counseling center to protect confidentiality. Each interview was recorded to maintain accuracy for data analysis. During the interview, the researcher took notes. In-depth interviewing was appropriate for this study because it is used to understand the behaviors of a population by putting into context the meaning they have shaped from their experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Data Analysis

After concluding each interview, the researcher wrote memos/field notes comprising observations, reactions and potential interpretations. The interview was then transcribed, noting reactions, pauses, and idiosyncrasies in these transcriptions within the margins of the text. The transcripts of the recorded interviews were coded for data analysis. As the researcher re-read through the transcripts, like-information was marked off in the form of keywords, terms, and phrases within the margins, and patterns were highlighted that appeared throughout the interviews. Connecting strategies were used to construct themes based upon relevance to the research design and the conceptual framework and to categorize recurring themes to form concepts. Matrixes were used to condense these data. The matrixes connected codes with their relevant categories/themes.

Validity Issues

A threat to the validity of this study was the researcher's subjectivity. In addition to completing research identity memos to remain mindful of biases, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal. Through these reflexive entries, the researcher made a note after every interview on how the interview may have been influenced. This helped with self-awareness so that the researcher would not continue any behaviors that could influence the interview. The use of feedback from the researcher's professional peers and colleagues was also influential in this process of strengthening the validity of this study by limiting personal bias. To ensure accuracy in the data collection process and in the conclusions that were drawn from these data, member checks were used by clarifying with the participants during and after the interviewing process whether these data and conclusions that were drawn from their responses accurately captured their experiences and perspectives (Maxwell, 2013).

Results

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed by identifying central ideas, quotations, and phrases that embodied the crux of the participants' responses to the interview questions and classifying them as themes. These themes were then compared across all of the participants who were interviewed.

The participants were asked to describe what they learned about help-seeking prior to coming to college, including information about who they were, as well as thebackground and context under which their understandings about help-seeking occurred. Two themes were constructed from the first year/first generation African American males as they described what they were taught about help-seeking.

First, the participants were taught to be self-reliant. They spoke of at some point in their early years prior to coming to college having learned to believe that it would be better for them to do things on their own rather than ask for help. This took place either by way of a conversation or their direct observation of others.The participants were taught masculine ideals that conflict with help-seeking. Their beliefs about help-seeking were influenced by masculine norms that they were directly taught or observed through their social environment.Being taught to be self-reliant did not necessarily mean that the participants were completely averse to seeking help or that they believed help-seeking was a bad thing entirely. In fact, seven of the participants stated that they were instructed to ask for help by their parents if they really needed it.

Rather, these teachings on self-reliance meant that they were taught that addressing their problems independently and not needing any help would be the better and more preferred alternative. They were taught that if it was absolutely needed, they should seek help. However, it would be more acceptable and favorable for them to do it themselves without outside help. For three of the participants, this self-reliance was modeled to them by their parents, who themselves preferred to be independent and do things on their own, rather than ask for help. One participant remembered how much his father did not want to ask for help even though his family was very caring and willing to assist. He stated, "And they're loving about it, but I see how he feels about it and I'm like, 'Ok, I understand you don't really like asking for help. But since they're your family, they're willing to give it to you." A second participant recounted his parents' attitudes towards help-seeking. "They didn't ask for help at all, because they didn't want help. They wanted to figure it out on their own." Another reflected on his mother's self-reliance after his father abandoned the family. "Well my father left when I was nine, so he didn't teach me nothing about help. My mom, she don't really ask for help. She tries to do it herself."

What these males were taught about masculinity played a significant role in how they viewed help-seeking. The masculine ideals they were taught represented norms for how a man should behave and represent himself. These norms were characterized by strength, lack of emotion, and the expectation for males to be providers rather than needing others to provide help to them. Help-seeking was commonly understood as being in opposition to being strong. One participant stated, "I feel so weak when I'm asking for help. I don't like… I just don't like asking people for help. I just feel so weak and I feel like they're [going to] take advantage of you as well because they know you needed help. I don't like that at all." This ideal of a man having to appear strong and fear of seeming weak was a recurring idea throughout the responses. In fact, the word "weak" was mentioned a total of 18 times throughout the interviews. Another participant processed the idea of being told to "man up" and realized that he did not even fully understand it. It did not seem to make sense to him. He said, "It's funny because 'man'ing up'…what's that supposed to mean? Like, putting more pride in yourself? Stuffing everything into a jar? Is that considered man'ing up?" However, even though he did not understand it, he felt that he still had to adhere to these learned expectations to "man up," saying, "But it's like you have to do what you have to do. Sometimes you just have to go with it."

Four of the participants grew up in families in which there were very limited financial resources. Their parents and families were unable to help them; consequently, they came to believe that they would have to become more independent and self-reliant by meeting their own needs. The desire to be self-reliant was often so predominate, that one participant in particular believed he would be a burden for asking for help. After Thomas lost his glasses, he felt as though a burden to his mother for needing a new pair. "I put her in a bad situation because my shortcomings I guess." Thomas even took it as a failure on his part and believed that as a male he should not be a stressor to the women in his family. "But you know, still I'm the only boy in the house so it's kind of like you don't want to put any extra stress on the women of the house or your mom or anything like that."

All of the participants were asked a series of guiding questions that were oriented towards their early experiences of asking for help. They were asked to give an account of these experiences and to explain what it was like for them to go through them. One very significant and recurring theme was constructed from first year/first generation African American males as they described what happened when they needed help and when they sought help. This theme was negative peer evaluation.

Every participant mentioned being negatively evaluated by their peers for seeking help or fearing being negatively evaluated by their peers when they needed help. This negative peer evaluation ultimately made them feel more reluctant to seek help.When participants mentioned facing negative evaluation by their peers, this evaluation manifested in various forms. Judgment was one of these forms.

One participant recalled how he was judged as inferior for seeking help and said, "…back then they would judge; try to make it seem like they were better than me." Another participant talked about how even until this day when he needs help the first thing that comes to mind is how he could avoid someone judging him. "Then I think quick, 'Who can I go to that would help me? And who wouldn't judge me?" Negative evaluations also came in the form of ridicule. Peers laughing at them for seeking help conveyed a message of disapproval and demeaning criticism. One participant made a powerful statement in describing how shameful, isolating and embarrassing it would feel when he would ask for help and his peers would ridicule him for it. He said, "Yea, everybody laughs and you're the only person not laughing." Name-calling that questioned the intelligence of the participant due to their help-seeking also occurred.

Six participants mentioned either being called dumb or stupid or feeling dumb/stupid as a result of their peers' reaction to their help-seeking. The impact that this name-calling had on participants was further illustrated by the frequency in which these words were mentioned in the interviews. In fact, the words dumb or stupid were mentioned by participants a total of 18 times throughout the interviews. These participants were very sensitive to the responses they received from their peers when they asked for help and how their peers would view them for needing help. This process of the participants seeking help and observing negative outcomes, which in turn influenced their behavior, was an example of social learning at work.

The participants viewed help-seeking as a behavior that clashes with their pride. Their pride tells them to go about challenges by themselves. One participant came to the realization that in order to be successful in life, he must put his pride aside. He said, "I'm [going to] have to swallow it but I'm gonna have to ask for help. I don't want to fail so I try to succeed in everything I do." The impact of pride in these participants' lives was very notable, especially in the sense that "pride" was mentioned a total of 18 times in participant responses. Five of the participants saw pride as a detriment or negative issue. When asked to elaborate more on what he thought of pride, one of these five participants responded, "Ugh, it's a deadly sin. And I believe it. Like, pride gets you." Two of the participants saw pride as a positive construct, something that encourages them to be self-reliant, which is what they were taught to be. They simply viewed pride as the fuel that drives their self-reliance and as something in which to take satisfaction. Such was illustrated by one of them stating, "That's why I take pride in doing the work by myself first." Regardless of whether they viewed pride as being positive or negative, they were cognizant of the role it plays in their help-seeking. This finding connects with the concept of pride listed in the conceptual framework and builds upon the research of Palmer, Davis, and Hilton (2009), which found that African American males hesitate to seek help due to their pride.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study examined African American males' lived experiences with help-seeking prior to coming to college. It shed light on common lessons they learned about help-seeking, common experiences they faced, and the perceptions they developed as a result. One of the recommendations for addressing this issue is to implement and evaluate the effectiveness of first year learning communities for African American males. First year learning communities could aid African American males in improving their support systems in college. The effectiveness of these learning communities should be evaluated through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitatively, evaluation of these learning communities should measure the impact that participation had on help-seeking attitudes and behaviors, as well as the impact it played on building a support system. Quantitatively, evaluation of these learning communities should measure the impact that participation had on grades. It should also measure whether participants had higher graduation rates than those who did not participate.Knowing that African American males may be coming into college with unfavorable help-seeking experiences, professional counselors and on-campus counseling centers can play integral roles in helping this population develop healthier help-seeking attitudes.

Counseling-sponsored outreach programs, such as presentations, workshops, panel discussions, and psycho-educational activities on campus, could prove very useful in normalizing help-seeking and dispelling myths and unrealistic views regarding help-seeking. Future study is needed to determine the effectiveness of such outreach programs in promoting healthier help-seeking attitudes and behaviors.

The majority of the participants in this study indicated that the masculine norms they were taught conflicted with help-seeking. Interventions are therefore needed to address African American males' perceptions of masculinity and their conformity norms that discourage help-seeking. Implementing healthy masculinity trainings would be helpful in addressing this issue.

These trainings would help African American male students positively construct their masculinity, challenge attitudes that deter them from seeking help, and motivate them to engage in healthier help-seeking behaviors. Counseling center staff could be trained as facilitators to provide healthy masculinity training to male students on campus. Student mentors could also then be trained as facilitators to provide the training to other students. Evaluation of these trainings should not only include their effectiveness in reducing unhealthy masculine norms, but more specifically, their effectiveness in developing healthier help-seeking behaviors.

These recommendations can be useful in guiding student affairs professionals and instructorsworking with African American males in college. However, as Benjamin Franklin once stated, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Attention should be given to the effectiveness of sensitivity training provided in classrooms to make students more aware of responses that their peers may find to be offensive when they ask a question or seek help. This could increase students' empathy, helping them to understand how difficult it can be to ask for help and how harmful it can be to feel criticized or judged for seeking help. This could also help students to better sense when they have responded to a peer in a way that may have hurt their feelings, made them feel inadequate, or otherwise discouraged them from asking for help again.Further research must be conducted on early prevention programs to challenge unhealthy beliefs about help-seeking and build self-esteem to prevent African American males from internalizing their need for help as indications of lacking intelligence or ability. Prevention programs could also be an opportunity for counselors to teach students that needing help and feeling vulnerable is not a sign of weakness.

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