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Article in *Journal of Humanistic Counseling* · April 2015

DOI: 10.1002/j.2161-1939.2015.00064.x

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African American School Counselors in Predominantly White-Culture School Districts: A Phenomenological Study From a Humanistic Perspective

LISA A. WINES, JUDITH A. NELSON,
AND RICHARD E. WATTS

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This study examined the phenomenology of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts from a humanistic perspective. Interview data were collected and analyzed using Giorgi's (1997) 4-step process. Six essential essence statements emerged, including recommendations for school counselors and implications for humanistic approaches in school counseling.

Keywords: African American, school counselor, phenomenology, humanistic

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The truth is that the human experience can scathe people's thought processes, dispositions, and actions. In the world, the "discontinuities in life" (e.g., tragedy, pain; Task Force for the Development of Practice Recommendations for the Provision of Humanistic Psychosocial Services [Task Force], 2004, p. 5), "problems arising out of human weakness" (e.g., exploitation, prejudice, contempt, selfishness; Maslow, 1956, p. 11), and delimitations (e.g., genes, physical constitution, culture, accidents of fate) are rampant and tend to cause grave concern for humanistic philanthropists. As a philosophical base, humanism is often described as a psychology that requires human beings to be understood before service providers, such as psychologists, therapists, and counselors, can improve them (Maslow, 1956; Task Force, 2004). In fact, "[h]umanistic psychologists are oriented towards promoting the psychological development and growth of individuals, families, and communities through the support of their own creative and self-initiated efforts" (Task Force, 2004, p. 5). Individuals with humanistic interests "are

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likely to include phenomena such as the aspirations of whole persons, their goals, their desires, their fears, their potential for growth, their higher selves, and qualities such as empathy, congruence, authenticity, presence, and intimacy” (Task Force, 2004, p. 5).

Humanism in counseling is multiculturally robust—largely built on paradigms such as healthy human growth and development, holistic understanding leading to self-actualization, responding to environmental and socially constructed experiences, and change in organizational systems (Brady-Amoon, 2011; Scholl, 2008). Historically, the Association of Humanistic Counseling originated in support of women, one’s civil rights, and issues of social justice proclaiming that humans are irreducible (Perepiczka & Scholl, 2012) and unable to be simplified. In fact, there is evidence that “humanism gained an appreciation for [one’s] conscious experience and human subjectivity” (Hansen, 2005, p. 5).

In conducting a review of the literature that draws on humanistic constructs and school counseling, we found evidence of research that pertained only to student-centered foci, thus advocating for academic and within-the-environment achievement (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012; Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014; Villares, Lemberger, Brigman, & Webb, 2011). Lemberger and Clemens (2012) communicated their assumption that

students who feel connected and are better able to self-regulate might be able to confront the social inequities that they are associated with in inner-city environments and, in turn, maximize their potentials as learners and social beings. (p. 450)

If this is indeed plausible, then the inference here might be that African American school counselors who feel connected in their work environment (the schools) may be better equipped to navigate potential experiences of social disparities.

Perceptively and duly noted, clauses are included in the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA, 2010) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* that are congruent with humanistic underpinnings, such as maintaining professional relationships (C.1.a); treating colleagues with respect, courtesy, and fairness (C.1.b); developing personal competence as it relates to prejudice, power, and various forms of oppression (E.2.b); and affirming multiple and cultural linguistic identities of all stakeholders (E.2.d). One may consider how the ethical standards for school counselors are very humanistic in nature (i.e., there are undeniable linkages between this professional organization’s expectations and humanistic principles) and, therefore, should govern the practices that school counselors use. When we searched for the term *African Americans*, we found one article that described the humanity of African American men as “being attacked,” and argued for counselors to exert a humanistic approach as an important corrective response or action (P. D. Johnson, 2006).

In a recently published school counseling textbook, Wright (2012) made a connection between Abraham H. Maslow and humanistic psychology by

stating, “[t]his new school of thought was not focused on how a counselor could fix a problem experienced by a child or client, but rather the capacity of individuals to become self-directing and psychologically whole” (p. 13). Philosophically speaking, some of the fundamental concepts from humanism were borrowed from existentialism and phenomenology (Hansen, 2005), which makes it pluralistic and most substantiated to use in the realm of school counseling,

When investigating the factors that contributed to the influence and progression of the school counseling profession in the United States, we included significant events, societal changes, and the development of counselor roles and functions (Tang & Erford, 2004; Wright, 2012). Although these factors have been pertinent to the development of the school counseling profession, they did not depict the historical or current relationship of and interactions among other educators and professional school counselors in practice. Tang & Erford (2004) commented that “[r]eviewing the history of a profession generally serves two purposes . . . to answer the question of how our profession came into being and how it reached its current status” (p. 11). These comments are relevant because addressing the history and tracking the current status of African American school counselors’ experiences certainly add to the knowledge base and literature, which lack evidence of African American counselors’ experiences with other practicing counselors or individuals within their school systems.

We conducted an investigation of educational, occupational, and cultural experiences relevant to the African American population. Although the literature is replete with the experiences of African Americans as clients and students (Abrams & Trusty, 2004; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Helms, 1995; Pierce, 1974; Salazar & Abrams, 2005; Sanders & Bradley, 2002; Sue et al., 2007, 2008; Utsey, Ponterotto, & Porter, 2008), no existent literature documents African American school counselors’ experiences and relationships with White counselors. However, literature does reflect the cultural mistrust often found among African Americans regarding Whites in areas such as education and training, business and work, interpersonal and social relations, politics and law, and medicine and medical research (Avery, 2009; Corbie-Smith, Thomas, Williams, & Moody-Ayers, 1999; Jacobs, Rolle, Ferrans, Whitaker, & Warnecke, 2006).

Historically, African Americans have experienced a continuation of oppressive practices that include racism, stereotypical connotations, discriminatory behavior, a claimed color-blind society, and a pervasive lack of equal educational and occupational opportunities (Sanders & Bradley, 2002; Sue et al., 2008; Utsey et al., 2008). When coexisting in a predominantly White-culture work environment, the stressors and daily effects of these practices are still frequently misunderstood (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Utsey et al., 2008). Hill (2009) further explained this notion of the misunderstood effects of oppression by describing the experiences for African Americans in the general labor market as tolerating “anxiety, low

self-esteem, physical complaints, decreased immune functioning, decreased longevity, depression, acts of violence, and decreased productivity" (p. 55). As such, we believed it was relevant to investigate the phenomenology of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts, with hopes to contribute to extant literature that connects humanism, phenomenology, and school counseling and highlights the lack of collegiality while working in and among other school counselors and educators in their schools. This article serves as a way to enlighten school counselors in the field about this undocumented systemic dynamic.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to report the phenomenology of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts through a humanistic lens, which endorses "an important perspective on the nature of human beings and human change" (Task Force, 2004, p. 7) and describes individuals' socially and environmentally constructed experiences from a multifaceted, multicultural perspective. The research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts?

Unsuccessful efforts were made to locate an operational or functional definition of White culture in the literature. As a result, a functional definition of White-culture school districts was created based on a synthesis of pertinent literature. In this study, predominantly White-culture school districts were identified as one of the 78 suburban school districts located in a state in the southwestern United States (F. Garcia, personal communication, February 3, 2011) that have a predominantly White administration, including counselors, faculty, staff, and a culture that permeates a privileged or hegemonic disposition (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Stovall, 2006); a pervasive and institutionalized way of excluding others (Day-Vines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007); and a lack of cultural competence, sensitivity, and understanding (Constantine et al., 2008). Our study filled a void within the literature, provided a voice to an underrepresented population (Carbado & Gulati, 2003; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), and shifted researchers' investigative lens away from the client-to-counselor relationships (Corey, 2009; Jones-Smith, 2012; Nugent, 2000) to the systemic dynamics among African American school counselors, White counselors, and other educators in their complex school systems.

METHOD

For over a half century of scholarship, Amedeo Giorgi has ascertained that the field of psychology was lacking a needed component indicative of capturing one's mental processes or cognitions (Applebaum, 2011; Giorgi, 2000). Specifically, there was an internal prompting—perhaps a sense of

urgency—on the part of Giorgi to move psychology from a natural science to a human science that reveals experience, consciousness, or behavior (Applebaum, 2011; Giorgi, 2000). Hence, “psychology as a human science privileges the researcher’s fidelity to the meanings of lived, phenomenal human subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (Applebaum, 2011, p. 519).

Maslow (1956) articulated an additional plea for the field of psychology; he stated that “psychology should be more humanistic and more concerned with the problems of humanity” (p. 12), “should be more problem-centered” (p. 17), should study “the depths of human nature” (p. 19), and should understand “the inner, the subjective, the meditative, the private” (p. 20). According to Matthew Lemberger (personal communication, October 6, 2013), Giorgi was unapologetically humanistic, making this methodological framework unequivocally humanistic.

We explored the phenomenology of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts by utilizing Giorgi’s (1997) data collection and analysis process. Phenomenology can be perceived as both a philosophy and modern psychology and can be conceptualized as an opportunity to observe natural phenomena through empirical evidence (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenology has a rigorous, descriptive approach that embraces the phenomenon of consciousness and has its roots in the experiential human sciences of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science (Embree, 2008; Ferch, 2000; Giorgi, 1997; Sanders, 1982). From a humanistic perspective, “the realities people live in are always constructed to some extent, out of their cultural experiences, and out of their personal histories, values, and perspectives” (Task Force, 2004, p. 14). In its most comprehensive sense, phenomenology refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single person (Giorgi, 1997), and ultimately was designed “[as] a qualitative research method [that] attempts to probe the lived experiences of the individuals who are being investigated” (Sanders, 1982, p. 357).

Participants

According to Farber (2006),

[p]articipants of a study are gatekeepers or informants who allow you to immerse yourself in their own environment, observe them, and ask them questions; it is important to first establish rapport with the person or people who will allow you entry into their lives. (p. 369)

After obtaining institutional review board approval, we recruited participants for this study by searching for African American school counselors. In rhythm with humanism, part of our process for recruitment was to ensure that potential participants understood how interested we were in the magnitude of their experiences and how it was less important for us to acquire the desired number of participants for this study.

We wanted the potential participants to trust our desire to experience a “lived-encounter with [perhaps] a profoundly different worldview” (Applebaum, 2011, p. 522).

One recruitment strategy consisted of providing an announcement for this study at a counseling conference attended by African American school counselors. At the same conference, this topic was presented, and attendees who met the criteria for participation were invited to participate. Finally, we conducted a search that explored all predominantly White-culture school districts. Then, we sent all potential participants an announcement, resulting in the selection of 10 participants through purposive sampling (i.e., the ability to select a sample based on the researcher’s experience or knowledge of the group to be sampled). Selection was determined by participants who shared experiences and met specific criteria based on the following qualifiers: (a) was an African American man or woman, (b) was a current or former school counselor, (c) had at least 1 year of school counseling experience, and (d) was working or had worked in predominantly White-culture school districts within the state of Texas. Out of 10 participants, eight (80%) were current school counselors, and the remaining two were former school counselors (one retired and one promoted to a district-level position). All participants (100%) reported being certified school counselors; nine (90%) were women and one (10%) was a man. Their ages ranged from 27 to 55 years, with a mean age of 41.7 years. Their years of counseling experience ranged from 4 to 25 years, with a mean of 11.4 years. For the purpose of this study, the participants identified as African American. Other intersecting or complex identities, such as cultural or ethnic heritages, were not revealed in this study.

Procedure for Data Collection

According to Darlington and Scott (2002), “qualitative research is refining a variety of data collection techniques that represents some possible tools for researchers to use in their phenomenological projects” (p. 26). In this investigation, we implemented several data collection methods, such as prebriefing interviews, participant interviews, and debriefing interviews (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008), which are phenomenological, qualitative, and humanistic in nature. What unifies these processes for data collection is the relational- and rapport-establishing aspects, along with our sheer interest in the individual experience of these African American school counselors.

Prebriefing interview. Before interviewing each participant, we conducted a prebriefing interview (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). The prebriefing interview was designed to thank the participants for their participation, to cover other essential elements pertaining to the interview, and to make certain that each participant was comfortable and ready to begin the interview. Another purpose of the prebriefing interview was to establish a mecha-

nism for building rapport and to begin somewhat of a structured process in obtaining information.

Demographic questionnaire and interview questions. The demographic questionnaire was significant in describing the participants' gender, age, years of experience in school counseling, certification, and whether they were current or former school counselors. After completing the prebriefing interview, participants engaged in the interview designed to understand the experiences of African American school counselors. Interview questions were adopted with permission from Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, and Smith (2004), whose research study was designed to examine the experiences of African American doctoral students attending predominantly White institutions. The interview protocol consisted of five questions revised to fit our study and one additional question inviting participants to make any other comments they so desired (see Appendix). We selected the interview protocol because there had not been a study that examined the phenomenology of African American school counselors. Each interview was audio recorded and took no longer than 90 minutes.

Debriefing interview. After completing the interview questions, participants experienced a debriefing interview designed to create a platform for any further questions and to report their overall feelings regarding this study (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008), the interview process, and the overall experience with participation. The debriefing interview can be used in the following cases: (a) to deal with undisclosed information concerning a study, (b) to notify participants of some or all of the findings, (c) to help resolve any potential tensions that might have developed between the participants and researcher, and (d) to negotiate elements of the participant's story that appeared in the final report (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). For the purposes of our study, the debriefing interview allowed participants to disclose any additional information that was not addressed in the interview and to resolve any tensions that the participants might have felt during the interview process.

Procedure for Data Analysis

The data analysis process resulted in the identification of phenomenological themes and subthemes. The first author analyzed the data for this study. A phenomenological theme is a word that summarizes all subthemes. Phenomenological themes and subthemes emerged by following the four-step process recommended by Giorgi (1997): (a) *epoche*, (b) *eidetic reduction*, (c) *imaginative variation*, and (d) *essential essences*. According to Giorgi (1997), a phenomenological research inquiry must first include (a) reading the data, (b) dividing the data into parts, (c) organizing and expressing the data from a disciplinary perspective, and (d) synthesizing and summarizing the data for the scholarly community. The first part of the process, described as *epoche*, is where the first author attempted to suspend her potential biases,

preconceptions, and assumptions. The second part of the process, described as eidetic reduction, is where the particular phenomena were transitioned to universal essences. The third part of the process, imaginative variation, is where the data were analyzed with imagination to stimulate possibilities in the identified essences. The fourth part of the process, essential essences, is where more contextualized language from a disciplinary perspective in counseling was created (Giorgi, 1997; Sanders, 1982). By completing these aforementioned recommendations, we obtained the results in this study.

Establishing Validity and Trustworthiness

We implemented methodological processes to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of this study. In our study, we established validity through the use of descriptive and interpretive validity. According to R. B. Johnson (1997), “[t]hese are important to qualitative research because description of what is observed and interpretation of participants’ thoughts are two primary qualitative research activities” (p. 286). *Descriptive validity* is a factual account of observations reported by the researcher that includes accuracy in describing the setting, time, place, events, and any other observable phenomena (R. B. Johnson, 1997). Another form of validity applicable to our study was *interpretive validity*, a term that refers to accurately portraying the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied. More specifically, interpretive validity refers to “the degree to which the research participants’ viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood by the qualitative researcher and portrayed in the research report” (R. B. Johnson, 1997, p. 285).

To ensure the validity of this study, we implemented other methodological processes: researcher reflexivity, which is used when researchers self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs, and biases that may shape their inquiry (Creswell & Miller, 2000); journaling, which is used to “track[s] the emotional and intellectual journey of the researcher, explaining how we learn and evolve over the process of conducting research” (Banks-Wallace, 2008, p. 24); and member checking, which is used to verify participant feedback before analysis, interpretation, and validation of conclusions drawn by the researcher (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell & Miller, 2000). We used all of the aforementioned methods to reduce the amount of potential bias and researcher reactivity (or threat to validity). Researcher reactivity is “[t]he influence of the researcher on the setting and individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124).

RESULTS

The results of this study are situated in humanistic perspective and principles. Understanding the forthcoming outcomes of this study, we invite readers to coalesce the following humanistic principles with the results of

this study: (a) Humans are irreducible to the sum of their parts; (b) emotion (whether past, present, or future), experience, intuition, and values are vital parts of being human; (c) humans are never separated from their world and relationships with others; (d) opportunities to dialogue, communicate, and make meaning are essential; and (e) humans inherently are creative and host sophisticated ways of experiencing themselves (Task Force, 2004).

In response to the research question, this phenomenological study revealed six essential essence statements derived from phenomenological themes and subthemes: (a) privileged and hegemonic mind-set, (b) pervasive evaluation, (c) cultural encapsulation, (d) workplace resistance, (e) self-help preservation, and (f) acceptance of African Americans. Each essential essence statement is introduced with a summary of the analyzed phenomenological themes and subthemes from the participants of the study. We derived these statements from overarching themes that encompass participant experiences from a holistic conceptualization. To provide the reader with a clear example of the essential essence statement, we selected one participant's sentiment, although there may have been other examples available in the transcripts. The following essential essence statements answered the research question, "What are the lived experiences of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts?"

Privileged and Hegemonic Mind-Set

The first essential essence statement that emerged was that the participants believed there was a privileged and hegemonic mind-set (within schools) that exists among those belonging to the dominant culture. The participants described this essential essence statement as middle-class, White values; upper hierarchical echelon; parental distrust; forced assimilation; and keeping an open mind to being tested because racism still exists. A participant provided one example:

I've been faced with the free use of the term "nigger" on my campus. . . . There were three different faculty members, one of [whom] was a counselor, who felt . . . comfortable enough around me to say that . . . I questioned . . . had I assimilated so that she felt it was okay to use that term . . . after questioning and consulting with other professionals, I came to the conclusion that it was not about me . . . the racism she carries . . . was sheer ignorance and . . . [W]hite privilege.

As a whole, participants reflected on how challenging it was, at times, to work with counselors, teachers, administration, and parents with this particular mind-set.

Pervasive Evaluation

The second essential essence statement that emerged was that the participants believed they were constantly being evaluated by administration, counselors, teachers, and parents. Pervasive evaluation is different from

privilege and hegemony in that it takes mind-set—the way one thinks—one step further and allows those from the dominant culture not only to carry a mind-set of dominance and superiority but also to look at African American school counselors with high levels of scrutiny.

The participants described this essential essence statement as having existing cultural and experiential differences, being culturally cognizant, maintaining an open mind, and being willing to accept this form of scrutiny. Participants reported having to think before speaking because they were concerned about possible misinterpretation from persons from the dominant culture. Some participants also carried cultural and dialectical concerns within them. For example, some participants felt that African American school counselors are subjected to constant evaluation. In particular, one noted, “Think before you speak, because everything you say is always being evaluated, assessed, [and] so you need to be reflective before you open your mouth. Just be reflective before you do that . . . [your words] can come back to bite you.”

Cultural Encapsulation

The third essential essence statement that emerged from this study was that African American school counselors believed they were culturally encapsulated. Cultural encapsulation would be thought of as being culturally isolated or reclusive, in the sense of feeling isolated from the dominant culture because of the lack of knowledge and understanding of relationships with persons of other cultures. Participants described this essential essence statement as believing that they were alone; that Whites were culturally insensitive; that African American school counselors were assigned as cultural ambassadors, resident African Americans, or African American spokespersons; that the participants had a double consciousness; and that they remained professional by being aware of their personal communication boundaries and the lack of understanding of African Americans by Whites. For example, two participants mentioned feeling like resident African Americans in relation to the White counselors. One participant reported that “[she] did feel like sometimes [she] was asked some questions of the administrative team because [she] was African American to deal with African American parents or African American issues related to the students. So they would come to me because of certain issues.”

Workplace Resistance

The fourth essential essence statement that emerged was that the participants experienced different types of workplace resistance. The participants described this essential essence statement as teachers being hesitant, resistant, and reluctant by demonstrating their oppositional and blatant disrespect toward African American school counselors. Teachers seemingly were not

forthcoming and lacked experience with African American school counselors and perhaps African Americans in general. For example, three out of 10 participants reported feeling a sense of reluctance on the part of the teachers. One participant reported, "The faculty were not very forthcoming to the counselor," whereas another one stated, "They did not appear to be very comfortable interacting with me." Another participant believed that this hesitance was because of a lack of the teachers' understanding of the role of the counselor: "They were not aware of the counselor's role."

Another way participants discussed workplace resistance was how a divide existed between African American school counselors and assistant principals—a divide in that they did not mix well and perhaps saw their job roles and functions as polar opposites. Finally, participants identified differences between African American school counselors and their White counselor counterparts. These differences indicated nonequivalent standards and expectations and the concern that White counselors did not welcome the perspectives, experiences, or suggestions of African American school counselors.

Self-Help Preservation

The fifth essential essence statement that emerged was that the participants believed it was necessary for African American school counselors to implement self-help preservation skills, which included physical and mental tactics or coping mechanisms to sustain themselves in environments that could cause stress or upset feelings. Participants described this essential essence statement as maintaining a positive outlook, a necessary presence, and a confident nature; remaining true to who they are, remembering that the counselor's craft belongs to them; developing a toolkit; experiencing a predominantly White-culture school district; maintaining broad shoulders; disclosing who they are; developing a support group; and not using race as an excuse. One participant voiced needing this toolkit by stating, "Don't go into it with a chip on your shoulder" and "do a little bit more research . . . because the problems you're going to face are going to be different and how you handle them . . . you need to really have a toolkit for handling those different situations."

Acceptance of African Americans

The sixth essential essence statement that emerged is that African American school counselors felt the need to suggest the acceptance of African Americans and that those belonging to the dominant culture need to develop greater multicultural awareness. The participants described this essential essence statement as expectations of greater diversity; initial acceptance; multicultural awareness and development; supportive administration, faculty, and students; willingness to educate on diversity; development of district policy; and being a role model to African American students. Participants

revealed that this as an integral part of their day-to-day work experience. One participant stated, “As a minority person to begin with, I always have a concept that, you know, I’m going to be looked at in a different way and I have to be on guard all the time.” Another participant revealed,

So coming in, I felt that some of the challenges would be being accepted by my counterparts and the little things that everybody doesn’t have to think about when you’re going to a job; I had to think about my dialect . . . but just watching my accent and the way I pronounced words and making sure I enunciated and not having such a lazy tongue.

The humanistic principles that suggest that humans are incapable of being simplified or made smaller; that affect, insight, and values are inseparable; and that opportunities for purposeful interactions and creativity are essential to the core of all human beings are evidenced here in the outcomes of this study.

DISCUSSION

The essential essence statements were a candid reflection of the participants’ phenomenological experiences. It is germane to understand that

problems are not considered to be solely a product of abstract dysfunctional internal structures . . . and that they arise from the whole person’s attempt to adapt and cope demands made upon the self by the world . . . political structures or environments . . . and the self’s own anxiety generated by its encounter with uncertainty of life (Task Force, 2004, pp. 17–18)

Although the previous idea has truth embedded in the results, deciding if each essence statement was reflective of humanistic principles warrants pondering. The phenomenological essence statements of privilege and hegemonic mind-set, being under pervasive evaluation, feeling culturally encapsulated, experiencing workplace resistance, and merely desiring authentic acceptance are certainly nonhumanistic in nature—they simply contradict what it means to be humanistic. The only essence statement that is demonstrative of humanistic practice was the methods that participants used for physical and mental sustainability while existing in these adverse and difficult work environments.

We included the following recommendations and implications for school counselors and, more specifically, for African American school counselors. The following section offers a discussion that emphasizes the significance that humanistic paradigms place on un-reduced conscious experience, which “deeply values differences in human meaning systems” (Hansen, 2005, p. 5).

INTEGRATION OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND HUMANISTIC PRINCIPLES

From a humanistic perspective, African American school counselors who work in predominantly White-culture school districts appear to have had experiences contradictory to humanistic principles, implying that counsel-

ing (or counselors) should have good relationships (Scholl, 2008). Because humanism celebrates individual experiences and glorifies that people author and bring meaning and understanding to their own lives, proponents of humanism would affirm the experiences encountered by the participants of this study. According to Suthakaran (2012), “the essence of humanistic ideology is the consolidation of disparate selves to achieve a whole or integrated self” (p. 228).

Although the literature lacked documentation of African American school counselors’ experiences with White counselors, there is an abundance of literature that describes African Americans’ educational, occupational, and cultural experiences relative to the dominant culture. According to Lemberger and Hutchinson (2014),

[t]he school [counselor] will inherently be perceived as part of the community system of power and privilege. It is this very power and privilege that allows the [counselor] to make a choice; perpetuate the unjust system of oppression or work with the oppressed toward a more socially just school environment as a proxy agent (p. 35).

The findings of our study were consistent with those of a continuation of oppressive practices that include racism, stereotypical connotations, discriminatory behavior, a claimed color-blind society, and a pervasive lack of equal educational and occupational opportunities (Sanders & Bradley, 2002; Sue et al., 2008; Utsey et al., 2008). Some of the literature describes African Americans’ perspectives on receiving counseling services, but the majority of literature reflects cultural mistrust among African Americans regarding Whites in areas such as education and training, business and work, interpersonal and social relations, politics and law, and medicine and medical research (Abrams & Trusty, 2004; Avery, 2009; Corbie-Smith et al., 1999; Day-Vines et al., 2007; Helms, 1995; Jacobs et al., 2006; Pierce, 1974; Salazar & Abrams, 2005; Sanders & Bradley, 2002; Sue et al., 2007, 2008; Utsey et al., 2008). Finally, African Americans have reported that when coexisting in a predominantly White-culture work environment, the stressors and daily effects of these practices are still frequently misunderstood (Constantine et al., 2008; Utsey et al., 2008).

According to Freire (2000),

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. (p. 42)

The integration of previous literature and the current results of this study reflect corroboration and triangulation in terms of Whites possessing a privileged and hegemonic mind-set. African American school counselors are also under pervasive evaluation through dominance, superiority, and oppressive practices. The results of this study further identified feelings of cultural encapsulation through having to live with a double conscious-

ness. There were claims that the dominant culture possessed a color-blind perspective and that African American school counselors adopted self-help preservation to manage levels of stress. Finally, there is a call to accept African American school counselors for whom they are, which may abolish the discriminatory behavior exhibited by Whites and perceived by African American school counselors.

General Recommendations for School Counselors

Hansen (2009) discussed *the displaced humanist* in the field of counseling. He posits a vital question, "Do certain professionals have a meaning-based, literary intellectual temperament and others have a disposition that is more suited to reduction and categorical descriptions?" (p. 65). This question is prolific and quintessential, in that it requires school counselors to decide with which side of the coin they most align. If school counselors are of the latter (reductionistic) disposition, then it is evident there is work that needs to be done. Most immediately, making an effort to become more humanistic in our approaches and working relationships with others is necessary. Because school counselors already have a proven track record and reputation of affecting environments and systems, in that they "can supplement the social and learning skills of students . . . and the learning culture of classrooms" (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012, p. 450), our expectations of these same qualities are no different in collegial or humanistic relationships with one another.

Other general considerations for school counselors to implement within their personal lives and departmental practices were gleaned from the results of our study. One recommendation for school counselors—if they are members of a hiring interview committee—is to continue to diversify their counseling teams and to embrace the knowledge and experience that someone of a different culture has to offer the counseling team and the total school population. There may be a predetermined criteria established by a district or campus, whereby counselors who are culturally different may not fit their perceptions of whom or what a school counselor should be; however, everyone offers various strengths to a team. Counselors who are cautious of diversity, changing or challenging practices, or privileged mind-sets should not serve as a discouragement to those who would like to recruit minority counselors. Most importantly, individuals from other cultures should not have to compromise their own culture to merge into the dominant culture's lifestyle.

Another recommendation is for counselors to adhere to the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development's Multicultural Counseling Competencies, which suggest that counselors know themselves, their value systems, and their biases (Arredondo et al., 1996). School counselors might consider taking the Multicultural Counseling Competencies recommended for working with students and clients and use them in the interpersonal

relationships developed among African American and minority counselors. For example, the multicultural competencies address counselors' awareness of their own assumptions, values, biases, and understanding of the worldview of a culturally different client. These competencies can be used among counselors in general for better teaming and collaboration in the counseling department. Another example of creating further multicultural breadth and depth is to continue to support "[school counselors being] uniquely situated to provide socially just humanistic interventions" (Lemberger & Hutchinson, 2014, p. 30), which, through fortitude, will inevitably strengthen their multicultural virtue.

A final recommendation is that school counselors should consider a willingness to talk about difficult topics with one another. Hansen (2006) stated, "One person can reduce the psychological suffering of another by orchestrating particular types of conversations" (p. 115). Because as a profession we pride ourselves on—and have been extensively trained in—being genuine, unconditional, and open, this should allow us to have discussions on difficult topics. These topics may include culture, personality differences, and current perceptions that the administration, faculty, staff, parents, or students may have about the counseling department or the specific counselors within the department. School counselors should be willing to use their obtained skills to brainstorm with one another ways to work with people's differing views and cultural differences.

Specific Implications for African American School Counselors

Although there is no justification for the experiences incurred by African American school counselors of this study, we offer this conceptualization, perhaps even rationale, regarding what the causes of these debilitating experiences might be. Through a humanistic lens, we borrowed this notion from Hansen (2009), who suggested that the counseling profession "has been overtaken by reductionistic ideologies" and that although our training and preparation was "forged out of meaning-based ideologies (client development, strengths-based, and the individual human experience)," we are on the other side of the swinging pendulum because of the "[over] emphasis on diagnosis, treatment, and even psychopharmacology" (p. 70). Therefore, perhaps all educators have had similar experiences in their personal lives and training that jointly sponsor both meaning-based and reductionistic elements.

Furthermore, this study revealed implications that are relevant for African American school counselors. One implication of this study is that throughout the process, African American counselors need to remain who they are and maintain their culture. Although the research described in the literature review and in the results of our study suggest that there are moments of cultural crystallization or challenges in having to live and work marginally, double consciously, and biculturally, seeking ways to ground oneself culturally and

to maintain one's identity is very important (Salazar, Herring, Cameron, & Nihlen, 2004). One form of biculturalism is being an emissary and becoming an advocate for both cultures (Grant & Breese, 1997). One essential essence statement of this study was self-help preservation, which may serve as one example of being an emissary. An emissary serves as a go-between for both cultures to avoid stagnation and as the perfect blend for both cultures. As suggested by Del Pilar and Udasco (2004), individuals who live marginally (between one's own culture and the dominant culture) tend to withdraw. African American school counselors need this type of self-regulation (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012) and optimal awareness to avoid isolation.

Earlier in this article, we discussed a moment of cultural crystallization in which participants recalled the moment they discovered what it meant to be African American. As reflected in the literature, racial identity development (Abrams & Trusty, 2004) is a process through which African Americans realize the importance of their race in lieu of the dominant culture and begin to socially construct (Stovall, 2006) and refine their identity (Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006). Results of this study suggested that African American school counselors should consider seeking employment in a predominantly White-culture school district. Their experiences in a predominantly White-culture school district allow them to better develop their own racial identity.

Another implication of this study for African American school counselors is to know the importance of one's role as a school counselor, to embrace counseling as a craft, and, until there is change, to welcome the appointments of cultural ambassador, resident African American, and African American spokesperson as assigned by the administrative staff. When the interests converge between African Americans and Whites, these appointments could be viewed as an opportunity for cohesion. Salazar et al. (2004) further described an appointment of African Americans as the designated multicultural default expert. Although the participants of our study could view these appointments as negative, overall they reported feeling that their culture and presence were needed and were integral for their campus as a whole in working with teachers, parents, and students.

A final implication of this study is to acknowledge that there may be evidence of resistance and prejudice from other counselors, administrators, teachers, and parents. As discussed by the participants, it is African American school counselors' challenge to dispel resistance, bias, and misunderstanding through professionalism, by educating professional colleagues and parents about African American counselors' understanding of their culture, and by carrying a spirit of willingness and cooperation to do so.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were definite measures taken in the methodology to prevent researcher reactivity from occurring, such as researcher reflexivity, journaling, and

member checking. One limitation of this study was that African American school counselors might have perceived their experiences to be reflective of existing in the dominant culture because of the school's rationale for having a predominately White culture. Another limitation of our study was the small number of male African American school counselors, which reflects the lack of gender and cultural diversity in the field of school counseling. Although we made attempts to balance the number of men and women, reported experiences and findings might be gender-relational and not representative of all African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts, especially because this study serves as a baseline for future studies. Additionally, this study reflected a difference in age among the participants. The experience of the participants in their late 40s and 50s could vary from those who were in their late 20s and 30s. A final limitation is the difference in the participants' years of experience as school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are recommended future research endeavors that can serve as extensions to this current study. The consideration of conducting research that emphasizes humanism in school counseling definitely needs more attention and documentation. One recommendation is to replicate this study in a different region of the country or perhaps on a national level. A second recommendation is to explore the experiences of African American male school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts. The results of this study may vary based on the gender of the participants being male. A third recommendation is to investigate White counselors' experiences with African American school counselors to gather baseline information or possibly compare the results of both studies. A final recommendation for future research is to explore the experiences of White counselors working in a predominantly African American school or school district.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

ASCA's (2010) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* requires the fair treatment of colleagues and school counselors' professional growth and development. In harmony with humanistic principles, "humanistic psychologists agree that it is important to aspire to the highest standards of professional conduct" (Task Force, 2004, p. 60). Particularly, "ethical responsibility in colleagues . . . [inclusive of] genuine respect and concern for other persons" (Task Force, 2004, p. 60) is of utmost priority. It is simply unethical to "participate in or condone unfair overt and covert discriminatory practices, not commit to their own personal growth, and not understand the experiences of non-dominant group members" (Task Force, 2004, p. 60).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to describe the phenomenology of African American school counselors in predominantly White-culture school districts from a humanistic perspective. Moreover, as school counselors, we are called to monitor and reflect on our internal biases and to acknowledge others' subjective perceptions related to their less-than-favorable experiences. According to Hansen (2006), "Humanism, however, also tempers this rosy picture of humanity. Psychological growth, although built into the psyche, can also be stunted or derailed as the will becomes paralyzed by developmental debris" (pp. 120–121). We intended to provoke thought and initiate discussion among all school counselors, especially about the counselor-to-counselor interpersonal dynamic. The recommendations and implications offered allow the opportunity for transformation and progress toward beginning, developing, refining, and solidifying professional relationships in and perhaps beyond the school environment or workplace. Although "humanism is an appreciation for the complex and idiosyncratic versus the simple and categorical, . . . each person must be appreciated as a unique being with a vital intrapsychic life" (Hansen, 2005, p. 7). As professional school counselors, we are called to expect this of our students (ASCA, 2005); therefore, it should be no different in our expectation of working with one another and others within our school systems.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Debriefing Interview/Rapport Establishment

- Explain to the participants that you would like for them to be genuine in their responses, be open, be honest, be relaxed, be unreserved, speak freely, and not feel rushed.
- Explain researcher reflexivity and tracking my emotional and intellectual journey through note-taking about my experience, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and predispositions.

Demographic Guide

1. Are you a current or former school counselor? _____ current _____ former
2. Are you currently a certified school counselor? _____ yes _____ no
3. What is your gender? _____ male _____ female
4. What is your age? _____ years
5. How long have you been a school counselor? _____

Semistructured Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your experiences when you first began as a school counselor in a predominantly White-culture school district. What were your preconceived thoughts and feelings about the district, the campus (including administrators, teachers, and students), and the community environment?
2. Please describe your experiences as an African American school counselor in relation to White counselors in your building or your department.
3. Please describe your actual experiences with administration, faculty, teachers, and students at your school. Were your experiences reflective of your preconceived notions and feelings? Please elaborate.
4. Based on your experiences, what kind of advice would you give other African American school counselors?
5. What, if any, recommendations would you give to the district guidance and counseling department and counselor educators to support the professional success of African American school counselors?
6. What other experiences have you had as an African American school counselor that affected your professional practice as a school counselor that we have not covered that you would like to share?

Debriefing the Participant

- Tell me how you feel.
- Tell me about your overall experiences in this process.
- Do you have any questions?

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