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## Multicultural Leadership in School Counseling: An Autophenomenography of an African American School Counselor's Successes and Challenges

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This autophenomenography describes multicultural leadership in school counseling from the perspective of a female African American school counselor; who served as a lead counselor, researcher, and participant of a research study, while employed in a predominantly White-culture school district. The theoretical framework grounding this study was critical race theory (CRT). Methodological processes were implemented to collect and to analyze data, as suggested by Giorgi (1997) and Saldaña (2013). The concern is that multicultural leadership in school counseling needs specificity and expansion, thereby making the rationale for this study meaningful. This article contributes to the lack of evidence in the literature regarding multicultural leadership experiences of an African American school counselor. The results are thematically reported as successes, challenges, and implications of leadership experiences in school counseling.

**Keywords:** African American lead counselor, African American researcher, Critical race theory, Autophenomenography studies, White-culture school district

The role of the school counselor is multifaceted (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005), whereby all students are provided behavioral and psychological support (Leggett, Shea, & Leggett, 2011). Not only are there inherent expectations for school counselors to provide these support services, but also professionals in these fields are charged to serve as leaders within their complex systems. Leadership in school counseling has been defined in a variety of ways such as promoting advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change within a school system (ASCA, 2005). Froeschle and Nix (2009) outlined school counseling leadership roles as creating positive partnerships with school principals and teachers, and facilitating student success through solution-focused methods while improving school counseling programs. Specifically, Mason and McMahon (2009) underscored leadership for school counselors as visionary individuals, who engage with others in constant practice of change and development, suggesting that these leaders possess transformative practices, with an egalitarian framework, whereby power is shared and relationship variables are used to achieve desired outcomes.

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Although these descriptions of school counselor leadership are relevant and ideal, leadership for school counselors needs further refinement and is still in its beginning stages (Mason & McMahon, 2009). Arredondo (2008) expanded the meaning of leadership in counseling by offering her perspective on multicultural and social justice agendas as,

referring to . . . the multidimensional capacity to know oneself as a cultural being . . . ; [as having] behav[ior] attributed to individuals who are elected, appointed, and or otherwise assume a role of leadership; [as having] knowledge about the . . . worldview of others . . . [with a] philosophy and practice of fairness, justice, and advocacy on the behalf of individuals who cannot speak for themselves or otherwise are oppressed . . . (p. 15)

Chung and Bemak (2011) conveyed multicultural social justice leadership strategies in working with immigrant populations, as follows:

It is critical for counselors and psychologists to understand issues such as . . . political and economic context of the home country, language barriers, loss and grief, changes in identity, dealing with xenophobia, discrimination, stereotypes, family relations and intergenerational conflicts, acculturation, cultural shock, survivor's guilt, mental and physical health problems . . . [while simultaneously having] the skills and the

## MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: AN AUTOPHENOMENOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

ability to collaborate and work in interdisciplinary teams, [expanding their roles to] consultant, advisor, teacher, therapist, facilitator, advocate, change agent, and case manager. (p. 96)

Collectively, understanding the meaning of leadership in the schools, in counseling, and multicultural leadership is all relevant. Although these descriptions of leadership are progressive and advance current leadership definitions in the counseling profession, the definition of multicultural leadership in school counseling appears to be non-existent. Furthermore, most of these leadership descriptions seem role driven, whereas they highlight the responsibilities, duties, skillset, motivation, and intrinsic awareness of the school counselor (ASCA, 2005; Chung & Bemak, 2011).

Conversely, these leadership articles negate descriptions of inherent challenges within any personal leadership journey, and tend to lack the usual contrast evident in most professional experiences. Arredondo (2008) recognized this void in the literature by describing the dichotomous nature of leadership and offered readers her personal exemplar:

As a professional leader, I have had experiences that have been stressful . . . painful . . . disappointing . . . [and] metaphor[ically speaking] of a wounded bird whose wings weaken [during] flight. Particularly, “[p]rofessional leadership on behalf of issues [related to] multiculturalism and social justice is very challenging. Unchecked biases, assumptions, micro-aggressions, and the ignorance of others [regarding] what it means to be oppressed are communicated on a daily basis. (p. 14)

Authors of another article highlighted challenges of school counselor leadership in multicultural advocacy when warning against systemic resistance among colleagues and school districts when school counselors attempt to serve as change agents (Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, & Duffey, 2011). The cautions were captured by accentuating counselors who “enter the profession [and are] ill equipped to respond to underlying needs of culturally different students and families . . . [and that] counselors run the risk of confronting resistant systems” (pp. 55-58).

Smith and Roysircar (2010) described leadership from the perspectives of African American male leaders in the counseling profession. When considering leadership from these male participants, themes pertaining to the interviewees’ leadership styles and strengths, strategic or structural leadership, collaboration, and vision were highlighted. However, studies describing leadership experiences from the perspective of an African

American female leader in the school counseling profession are non-existent.

Although leadership in counseling has its inherent benefits and challenges, researchers should consider expanding the meaning of leadership to indicate a school counselor’s active pursuit toward career advancement. Consideration of leadership from a multicultural (African American females’) school counseling perspective warrants documentation in the literature. Although there might be systemic barriers that prevent school counselors from taking on leadership positions, regardless, these options should be exercised if they become available. School counselors can gain exposure and experience in leadership positions via serving as a lead counselor, conducting and participating in research within the counseling field, and advancing their careers by obtaining a terminal degree—catapulting their opportunities beyond the school district for which they are currently employed.

Hence, the purpose of this autophenomenography is to describe my personal experiences as an African American female serving as a lead counselor, researcher, and research-participant of my own study conducted in a predominantly White-culture school district. This article highlights the inherent successes, challenges, and implications of multicultural school counselor leadership. Guiding this autophenomenography study was the following research question: What are the lived experiences of an African American school counselor employed in a predominantly White-culture school district?

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) was the theoretical framework underpinning this study and refers to “... the new analytic rubric for considering difference and inequity using multiple methodologies—stor[ies], voice[s], metaphor[s], analog[ies], critical social science, feminism, and postmodernism” (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005, p. 291) for social change, reverse marginalization, and eradication of oppressive practices (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Because African Americans typically experience a state of being silenced, they “[t]oo often, don’t speak [their personal] truth out of fear of offending, appearing angry, or sounding ignorant” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 60). Singleton and Linton (2006) further claimed that adopting this intrinsic form of expression “often leads to deeper confusion, mistrust, and misunderstanding” (p. 61). More often than not, when African Americans attempt to tell their stories, their experiences might be reformulated as either exaggerated or misinterpreted altogether because of the tendency to safeguard these experiences and feelings internally. Consequently, this form of silence can carry with it the ability to become defensive and even hostile. In

addition, silence can be misconstrued and inferred as one's mature way of coping with the issue at hand. Withstanding the aforementioned, this study embraces these possibilities because leadership for African American female school counselors has been underrepresented and unreported, and their voices have been unheard.

The CRT serves as mental preservation for marginalized groups given that much of [their] reality is socially constructed, and having a voice heard can have a major impact on the oppressor (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) or individuals unaware of these reported experiences. Additionally, CRT is most appropriate to use when an individual is a participant of her/his own study (auto), is describing her/his observed experiences in multicultural school counseling leadership (phenomenon), and is authentically recording and documenting her/his own voice (graphy). The integration of autophenomenography guided by CRT strengthened the quality of this study.

#### **Literature-Based Definition of White-Culture**

Efforts have been made to locate a functional definition of *White-culture* in the literature. Researchers have made attempts to define White-culture as a culture that permeates a privileged or hegemonic disposition (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Stoval, 2006); a pervasive and institutionalized way of excluding others (Day-Vines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007); and/or as having a lack of cultural competence, sensitivity, and understanding (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008). Although some authors and researchers might agree that they attempt—perhaps even outright fail—to provide a functional definition applicable to a specific culture, it was my decision not to perpetuate flawed or perhaps inaccurate definitions of White-culture. Instead, recognizing these attempts to define White-culture allowed the author to create a limited, but functional definition of *White-culture school districts*, which was developed based on a personal communication received from a Texas Education Agency representative and for the purpose of this study.

In this study, predominantly White-culture school districts were identified as one of the 78 suburban school districts located in a state that has parts in the southwest, midwest, and southeastern part of the United States (F. Garcia, personal communication, February 3, 2011). These school districts have a predominantly White administration, counselors, faculty, and staff. This definition, coupled with information in the literature, describe the possible environment in which African American female school counselors are charged to work; with the onus and expectation that these school counselors create positive collaborations among all stakeholders, establish effective teams, and become systemic change agents (ASCA, 2005)

in spite of the situations experienced in their work settings.

#### **African Americans' Experiences in Predominantly White-Culture Environments**

Researchers have used both qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the experiences of African Americans who work in dominant culture environments (Alfred, 2001; Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Davis et al., 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005; Holder & Vaux, 1998; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997; Solórzano et al., 2000). These findings have led to the conclusion of African Americans as having felt unwelcome[d] and alienated, underrepresented, racially discriminated against, having (had) little opportunity for collegial support or mentorship, and having no voice within the workplace (Bradley, 2005; Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005). The evaluation of literature unveiled the experiences of African Americans as being oppressed, treated unequally, subjugated, or inferior in relation to the dominant culture (Dent, 2000; Dubois, 1903; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Spring, 2004). Although these findings are not directly reflective of leadership experiences faced by African American school counselors, there was a recent publication wherein the authors (i.e., Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013) highlighted the phenomenological experiences of 11 African American counselor education students in predominantly White institutions (PWI). Henfield et al. (2013) captured several of the themes that corroborate the information herein. However, there were additional descriptions offered, such as the participants experiencing peer disconnection and sarcasm, having had faculty misunderstand and disrespect them, feeling pressured to code switch (being someone other than themselves), and feeling uncomfortable with their selected style-of-dress. Because this section depicts 16 years of published research related to the experiences of African Americans in predominantly White-culture environments, it is significant in drawing conclusions or making generalizations relevant to the challenges that African Americans have faced, and continue to face, when existing in predominantly White-culture environments.

#### **Methodology**

##### **Integration of Autoethnography and Phenomenology (Autophenomenography)**

Creswell (2013) discussed five approaches to qualitative inquiry and research design, and, of these approaches, narrative research was among the five. According to Creswell (2013), narrative research “consist[s] of focusing on studying one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of

## MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: AN AUTOPHENOMENOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences" (p. 70). More specifically, narrative research houses a few approaches, of which autoethnography is one. As described by Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010), "[a]utoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self, and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context" (p. 2). It begins with a personal story with the emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (the sociocultural connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Wall, 2008). Another way to conceptualize autoethnography is to understand that "[t]he researcher is at the center of the investigation as the 'subject' (the researcher who performs the investigation) and an 'object' (a participant who is investigated)" (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2).

Phenomenology is quite similar to autoethnography. In particular, phenomenology is a rigorous, descriptive or interpretive 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). In its most comprehensive sense, the term refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single person (Giorgi, 1997). Qualitative researchers have imparted an ideology of exactness and transparency related to humanistic incidents that "explore attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of a number of parties involved ..." (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 195).

Qualitative research also has grown in popularity (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). However, the methodological approach in researching counseling phenomena has historically been quantitative in nature (Bangert & Baumberger, 2005; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Procedures for phenomenology necessitates that the researcher determine whether the study is best investigated by this method; that the lived experiences are captured; that data are collected through interviews from individuals who are intimate with the phenomena; that the research questions are few, broad, and open-ended in nature; that there are steps to capture significant statements; and that the themes or essences are reported (Creswell, 2013). Giorgi (1997) posited that phenomenology impacted 20th century thinking, not only because of its rigorous narrative approach, but because it offered a method to access the complex phenomena of human experience. Giorgi (1997) believed that all phenomenological inquiry must thematize and reveal essences, getting straight to the pure and unencumbered vision of what essentially is an experience. The following techniques were established by Giorgi (1997): (a) epochè, (b) eidetic reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d)

essential essences. In this study, epochè was not employed because "investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). To state that epochè in this study was implemented would be less than authentic. However, exact implementation of eidetic reduction, imaginative variation, and essential essence techniques were utilized in this study and it allowed the researcher to take phenomena and angle them from many different facets. Extrapolation through reduction techniques and description of [themes] and essences provided an opportunity to report results through use of discipline-related language.

Because autoethnography is focused on the story of an individual (Ngunjiri et al., 2010) and phenomenology is engrossed in how elements appear to [ones] consciousness and lived experiences (Giorgi, 1997), integration of both of these qualitative research approaches were conducive to this study. Allen-Collinson (2011) brought notice to an author who made reference to the term autoethnography. Gruppeta (2004) discussed this term and the development of autoethnography from several biographical methods. Allen-Collinson (2011) interpreted Gruppeta's work by stating the following: "she argues that if an autoethnographic researcher analy[z]es her/his own experiences of a phenomenon rather than of a 'cultural place' (as would be the case in an autoethnographic study), then the appropriate term would be autophenomenography" (p. 53). Further, the author succinctly described autophenomenography as an, autobiographical genre in which the phenomenological researcher is both researcher and participant in her/his study of a particular phenomenon or phenomena, rather than of a particular group *ethnós* (social group that shares a common culture) subjecting her/his own lived experience to a sustained and rigorous phenomenological analysis (p. 53)

### **Qualifications and Positioning Myself as a Single Participant**

Qualitative research studies tend to require researchers to make reference to their experiences and qualifications that make it appropriate for them to investigate such a topic. Creswell (2013) modeled positioning himself by specifying, "[that] you need to know my background in order to understand my approach" (p. 6). As the African American author of this article, my qualifications at the time of this study allowed me to highlight that I met the necessary criteria to become a participant of my own study. The criteria were based on the following qualifiers: I needed to: (a) be an African American, (b) be a current or former school counselor, (c) have had at least 1 year of school counseling experience, and (d) have worked in a predominantly White-

culture school district. Additionally, this study brought heightened awareness to the delicate nature of being a researcher-participant and the unique dynamic that this experience brought to the research process. Ultimately, I brought to this research endeavor my cultural affinity; experiences as a multicultural lead counselor, researcher, and participant of my own study; and my desire to be a multicultural school counselor leader in my profession.

In qualitative research studies, there are usually discussions regarding the appropriate number of participants to select as a representative population. In narrative research, Creswell (2013) indicated that “[n]arrative research [or an autoethnography] is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual” (pp. 73-74). Further, many researchers have indicated that the relationship between the researcher and participants of a study is dynamic (Ganga & Scott, 2006), powerful (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004), and legitimate (Stebbins, 1987). Also, researchers have reported that this relationship is developed, fulfilled, and enduring (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007); and that the researcher influences the participants; and the participants influence the researcher (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008; Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007). Researchers of a study also have been described as having an insider-outsider dynamic, inasmuch as they share similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national, and religious heritage (Ganga & Scott, 2006); being a participant-as-observer (Stebbins, 1987); and being a peripheral-member, as discussed by Adler and Adler (1987). More relevant to my study, a researcher has been described as a learner, a participant (Stebbins, 1987), and even a complete-member (Adler & Adler, 1987).

With the aforementioned in mind, and the apparent relationship that exists between a researcher and his or her participants (Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, & Frels, 2013), it was seemingly appropriate to serve as a single participant in my own study. Being able to report my personal experiences afforded an opportunity, not only to conduct research on this phenomenon, but also to participate in this undocumented research endeavor. Undoubtedly, there was a vulnerability experienced when writing this autophenomenography as reflected in the following quotation. As stated by Ngunjiri et al. (2010), “[r]esearchers have discussed the challenge of telling their stories in light of representing others in that story” (p. 8) and, in my case, *others* refer to my experiences with school counselors, administrators, teachers, and support staff during my multicultural leadership endeavor.

**Researcher bias and objectivity.** There is much inconsistency, perhaps even vacillation between whether or not autoethnographies or

autophenomenographies are objective and non-biased. Some authors appropriately question the researcher’s bias and objectivity (Gruppeta, 2004; Meekums, 2008; Wall, 2008), whereas others have not (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). However, in this study, the strategies and methods utilized to maintain objective and true to the accounts of my own experiences with multicultural leadership as a school counselor in a predominantly White-culture school district, were implemented.

Maxwell (1992) outlined the following three types of validity: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and theoretical validity. According to Maxwell (1992), descriptive validity is a factual account of observations reported by the researcher that include accuracy in describing the setting, time, place, events, and any other observable phenomena (Johnson, 1997). Researchers address descriptive validity by employing “multiple methods used to triangulate a research phenomenon such as multiple triangulation, data triangulation, methodological triangulation, investigator triangulation, and theor[etical] triangulation” (Johnson, 1997, p. 47). Interpretive validity refers to portraying accurately the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied, whereas theoretical validity involves moving beyond simply documenting the facts and involves an accurate and meaningful explanation of any emergent theory (Johnson, 1997). In this study, descriptive validity was implemented by reporting my personal observations while working in a predominantly White-culture school district. There was also use of theoretical triangulation. Johnson (1997) stated, “this means that you would examine how the phenomenon being studied would be explained by different theories” (p. 286). Johnson’s (1997) recommendation is supported through the use of CRT as an underpinning framework by which one may understand better the experiences detailed herein. Other methodologies used to address researcher subjectivity and bias include journaling (Stone, 1998). The use of journaling throughout the process allowed me to track my emotional and intellectual journey (Stone, 1998) as a means to integrate my personal and professional life (Banks-Wallace, 2008). The value in implementing these processes was to guard against validity threat or “a way [in which] I might be wrong” (Creswell, 2013, p. 123).

#### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Interview questions were adopted and permission granted from Lewis et al. (2004), whose research was designed to examine the experiences of African American doctoral students attending predominantly White institutions. The interview protocol had three sections consisting of a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured questions, and a debriefing guide. The semi-structured questions were modified for this study to suit better the research question under investigation,

## MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: AN AUTOPHENOMENOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

and were developed to explore my experiences employed in a predominantly White-culture school district, in relationship to White counselors in my department, and with administration and teachers (see Appendix). Questions on the interview protocol were designed to inquire about the advice that I might offer other African American school counselors, directors of guidance and counseling departments, and university counselor educators about ways to support the professional success of African American school counselors.

Aloud, I stated the question and proceeded to answer each question. While simultaneously responding to the interview protocol, my experiences were audio-recorded. Later, I undertook a debriefing interview, conducted by a peer, which was designed to describe my overall experiences with the study (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). An external individual, with no vested interest in the outcomes of this study, transcribed the audio-recordings, where there were approximately more than 20 single-spaced pages of data. Once transcribed, the transcriptions were sent to me to verify the efficiency of capturing the exactness of what I articulated during both the interview and debriefing interview.

**Debriefing the researcher as a participant.** The debriefing interview can be used in the following cases: (a) when there has been 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). A peer conducted the debriefing interview "to keep the researcher honest" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Because the debriefing interview allows undisclosed information concerning a study to be obtained, an additional part of the interview identified as the researcher debriefing guide included questions that inquired about how I felt being a participant of my own study and my overall experiences in the process (see Appendix). Guba and Lincoln's (1989) referenced criteria for authenticity can be utilized when debriefing the interviewer. Although there are five authenticity criteria, the one most appropriate for this study was ontological authenticity. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008) described ontological authenticity as "debriefing interviews [that] can play a very important role in helping the researcher leave and articulate an audit trail of both the participants' and researcher's growth" (p. 8), and because I serve as both participant and researcher in this study, my understanding of my growth that was conveyed in the results of the debriefing process section, are reported later in this article.

### Qualitative Data Analysis Process

In order to develop themes relevant to my experiences as an African American female, lead counselor, researcher, and participant, it is "imperative that qualitative research be explicit and detailed about strategies so that the rigor is evident" (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995, p. 166). After data were obtained, they were analyzed for themes. 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. This study utilized an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which has its "theoretical roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography" (Smith, 2011, p. 9). Smith (2011) stated, "IPA requires an intensive qualitative analysis of detailed personal accounts derived from participants...[and] believes in a chain of connection between embodied experience, talk about that experience and a participant's making sense of, and emotional reaction to, that experience" (p. 10).

The data analysis process involved a series of steps. First, it was important for me to be explicit and holistic, and to read the text in its entirety prior to beginning my analysis (Giorgi, 1997). Obtaining an overall sense of the data was appropriate without prematurely schematizing the data. Second, Giorgi recommended dividing the data into parts. Given that phenomenology is concerned with meanings, the basis of the division was to avoid discrimination. Third, because organizing information was essential, data were sorted and coded and gathered in a systematic and meaningful way by "sift[ing] through data and not[ing] recurring themes, patterns, or concepts, [and] labeling pieces of data to indicate what theme, pattern, or concept is reflected" (Farber, 2006, p. 371). Saldaña (2013) postulated,

[t]hematic analysis or the search for themes in the data is a strategic choice as part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review . . . Theming the [d]ata is perhaps more applicable to interviews and participant generated documents (p. 177)

Finally, data were analyzed for themes to determine whether there was a relationship between the findings and the components of CRT.

### Results

The results of this study reflect my successes and challenges in multicultural leadership as an African American lead counselor, researcher, and participant of a study. Additionally, nine themes are provided giving voice to the journey, along with describing experiences that emerged from the data collection and analysis process, as recommended by

Giorgi (1997). These themes then were separated by the successes and challenges experienced as a lead counselor, researcher, and participant. The following sections describe autophenomenographical themes that emerged from the interview protocol and debriefing guide (see Appendix) that are dichotomous or opposing in nature. However collectively, these themes of successes and challenges lead to greater implications.

### **Autophenomenographical Themes as a Lead Counselor**

There were many autophenomenographical themes obtained that reflect the paradoxical experiences of being an African American female lead counselor. Themes were derived from responding to the interview protocol during the data collection and interview process. This section will describe both the successes and challenges of leadership as a female African American lead counselor in a predominantly White-culture school district.

**Successes.** There are many leadership opportunities inherent in being an African American lead counselor. The role of the lead counselor is to develop and to manage the school counseling program to which he/she belongs (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Some responsibilities are to train all new counselors to supervise the activities of the counseling office clerical personnel and volunteers, to implement the guidance and counseling developmental plan, to serve as a liaison to administration and other staff, to interview candidates for available counseling positions, and to coordinate the capital outlay and other aspects of the budget for the counseling department. Following is a compilation of themes that emerged from the data that references the success that I experienced as an African American female lead counselor:

Being an African American lead counselor created opportunities to implement district and campus policies, to remain in compliance on state-mandated initiatives and laws related to servicing students; to serve as a liaison between the campus and district; to train other counselors, faculty, and staff; and coordinate site-based programs. Being an [African American] lead counselor is the primary way I can advance [my] career within a school district, offering little monetary gain, but great professional experiences.

**Challenges.** The challenges inherent in being an African American lead counselor ranged from inner-departmental resistance from other counselors to resistance from the paraprofessional staff. Although there were many positive experiences obtained in leadership, there were many difficult experiences too, making my leadership as an African American school counselor extremely

demanding. The following details a few examples of this:

Being the lead counselor had significant challenges. Before I got the job, the principal had to go in and speak to the other counselors about hiring me as the lead. He wanted to make sure the other counselors felt ok with it, which appeared political. There were significant trials in trying to lead the other two counselors. It was strong levels of resistance, passive-aggressive [behaviors], [refusal] to honor requests, [they demonstrated] obstinate behavior, and blatant disrespect.

Another theme that emerged when answering questions from the interview protocol was the appearance of an upper-hierarchical echelon within the school district and on various campuses. This upper-hierarchical echelon was embodied by the perspectives of both district and non-district employees who believed that the district had an elite status, that only a few and the best African American counselors were selected for employment, that the White employees of the district carried an aura of perfectionism, that White counselors preferred counselors of their same cultural likeness, and that there was a philosophy within the counseling department that was entrenched and not receptive to change. Following is a brief reflection of this elite status:

[The predominantly White-culture school] district had a reputation of being a very difficult district to get into as an African American, and that if you were hired or brought in, [they] considered [you as the] elite option within your African American culture.

Another apparent, but unspoken, example of inflexibility was the campus-based departmental philosophy. What this suggested was that the system in place was not up for refinement or change, as exemplified by my following comment:

I came in with a lot of ideas . . . [but] what I quickly learned was the way to do things kept being reiterated and reiterated . . . as to say that there is no way, range, or flexibility in doing things differently . . . they [White counselors] were not open to new ideas. When administrators or counselors wanted to communicate their lack of receptiveness to your ideas or if they did not like how you were being or acting, they would say this is not *our* way of doing things.

Further, my relationship with the White counselors felt overwhelmingly isolating and exclusive. I recalled this experience with the following anecdote.

I saw the relationship between the other two counselors . . . they seem to connect . . . they seem to have better communication . . . I did not feel a part of these two ladies . . . [it felt like] it was those two and then there was me . . . [they] did everything together . . . in



## MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: AN AUTOPHENOMENOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

constant communication . . . I felt like an outsider . . . held at bay . . . [they] had different expectations of me than they did of each other . . . I had to work harder and longer, and was challenged in ways the other counselor was not . . . very difficult to manage.

A final theme that emerged when answering the questions from the interview protocol was the extraordinary experience of living marginally between White dominant culture and the African American culture. Although not preferred, I experienced challenges from both the White and African American culture in a predominantly White-culture school district. Because of the distinction made between Whites and Blacks employees in this school district, it created a dilemma for me as an African American lead counselor. It forced me to be hyper-cognizant and vigilant of both White and Black culture. I offered this reflection in terms of living marginally as an African American lead counselor:

. . . for African American teachers, I had a lot of struggles with blending with them. They thought that because I was a counselor and somewhat represented the administrative team . . . that I would rat them out . . . [and that I was] non-trustworthy being in this position. Not only did I experience certain things from White counselors and my administration, but I also experienced difficulty blending with my own culture in terms of teachers. It is very difficult to live on the margins the way that I had to live.

### **Autophenomenographical Themes as a Researcher**

There were many autophenomenographical themes relevant to leadership opportunities inherent in my being an African American lead counselor who pursued a doctorate degree in counselor education. Themes were derived from answering questions from the interview protocol. A large aspect of obtaining my doctorate of philosophy (Ph.D.) is the expectation of conducting research, including scholarly writing and publishing. The rationale behind this pursuit was to obtain the highest degree possible in the field of counseling and, if desired, to generate avenues for career advancement beyond the K-12 experience. Additionally, conducting research afforded me an opportunity to become more aware of the germane issues within the counseling profession, with a chance to describe both the successes and challenges of pursuing a doctorate degree, while simultaneously becoming a researcher in and of a predominantly White-culture school district.

**Successes.** There are many leadership opportunities inherent in being an African American researcher both employed in and conducting research on a predominantly White-culture school district. It is important to note that although the

journey does not appear to be positive, the successes here are delineated in the outcomes of this study. One theme derived from the data collection and analysis process is the need for administrators of school districts and faculty members of universities to *demystify the rose-colored glasses*. Demystifying the rose-colored glasses implies that these individuals in school districts and universities are not able to see the phenomena related to the experiences of African American school counselors. What should be considered first is the placement and hiring of African American school counselors, the professional quandaries—whether in-district or out-of-district—and career strains that they encounter during their professional pathways. Next, a strong consideration should be given to revising the multicultural competencies as adopted by Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), to leaping beyond counselor-to-client relationships, and to addressing counselor-to-counselor interpersonal relationships.

Following are examples related to demystifying rose-colored glasses. I provided this reflection. A career strain [was experienced] when “. . . I realized that when you do not necessarily have the blessings of your principal, [his or her failure to] support you becomes very evident.” It is inevitable that when school counselors are considering moving to a different campus or simply applying for other opportunities in the district, your principal’s support—or lack thereof—is the cornerstone of their potential to advance. These hiring practices tend to be political, which can limit African American school counselors’ ability to advance or to be promoted.

Another example of this phenomenon describes the need for universities who offer counselor education programs to shift their lens of practicum and internship courses to a more intentional experience. Supervising faculty members can provide an opportunity to discuss with school counselor interns the possible cultural and occupational experiences that African American school counselors might encounter while employed in predominantly White-culture school districts or environments. This discussion with these interns likely would help bring clarity to an unidentified phenomenon.

The final example of this phenomenon suggests that the multicultural competencies need to include both the counselor-to-client relationships *and* counselor-to-counselor relationships. Demystifying the rose colored glass in this case illustrates the insufficiency of the competencies as they currently stand, and that the client-to-counselor relationship is only one aspect. I recommended,

. . . what about bridging and pairing the relationships of counselors day to day . . . what [does] that look like and sound like? There is not a lot out there on how to be relational with other counselors and how could you

implement the multicultural competencies in just working with each other?

As a researcher, understanding these phenomena of demystifying the rose colored glasses and being able to communicate them through literature is considered a success. Becoming a researcher by way of pursuing a terminal degree is a valuable vehicle for leadership.

**Challenge.** The challenges inherent in being an African American researcher were few in number. The major theme that emerged was the assumptions that others made about my own interpretation of self. I reported,

[When] I got accepted to my doctorate program, that message was a communication [to the White counselors on the team] that I thought I was better than everybody else and that they felt like I was leading from the position that they [White counselors] did not know as much as I knew. There was a lot in question there. They believed [that] I thought they were incompetent because I was pursuing a terminal degree.

Some evident observations were the moments when I conducted our team meetings and offered new strategies or ideas that were learned from my program. They would refuse to attempt anything new and would state that because these ideas were obtained from my program, it did not mean that we had to implement these ideas in our department. It is my belief that school counselors becoming researchers via pursuit of a terminal degree is highly unusual and, therefore, might cause these school counselors to believe that my perception of self was greater than was my perception of them as professionals.

#### **Autophenomenographical Themes as a Participant**

Being eligible to participate in a research study is a unique opportunity. In a more exceptional way, being eligible to participate in your own study is considered more uncommon. As a participant of my own study, there was one major autophenomenographical theme that emerged from the data collection and analysis process relative to the successes and challenges experienced. Following are the reported themes that are indicative of both internal and external influences, which represent those influences that are imposed on self (intrinsic or internal), and those influences imposed by others (extrinsic or external).

**Success.** There was one major leadership opportunity inherent in being an African American participant of my own study, which reflected experiences from my employment in a predominately White-culture school district. The theme that emerged when I answered the questions from the interview protocol was the desire to maintain my intrinsic or internal awareness. This theme embodied rejuvenating tactics like staying

mindful of my purpose to serve others, to work to advocate and to dispel myths about African Americans, to maintain a connection to my higher power, and to remain eager to learn. I provided this synopsis of working with others who have an automatic negative perspective.:

... come in with an eagerness to learn, a desire to know the culture, and willingness to observe for a while. It is important to be the best that you can be at all times and to give 100% ... I think that this is stereotypical that Whites have a preconceived notion about African Americans that they have certain tendencies, characteristics, or traits. So, when you come in, you are already working to change that notion [they have] about African Americans.

Consideration of maintaining intrinsic awareness simply implies implementation of wellness practices. It serves as a coping mechanism or strategy, and because this automatic negative perspective was my interpretation of truth, I deem it as a successful leadership experience.

**Challenge.** The one major leadership theme that derived from answering the questions to the interview protocol was the challenge of extrinsic or external influences. Being an African American participant of my own study, who experienced these pressures or external influences, I only had these experiences as a result of my employment in a predominately White-culture school district. I offer the following personal vignette in resisting these external influences:

Sometimes we go in feeling the need to change ... to merge ... to differ ourselves ... and, of course, [it is o.k.] if it betters who we are. But if it is an in-crowd thing, losing a part of who you are just to make others feel comfortable, I suggest against doing that. Maintain who you are. When you feel that things are lining up against you, and it is difficult to convince people [of] who you are ... do not allow these experiences to detour you from the main objective, which is to be there for the people you serve. If you have spiritual beliefs, keeping that relationship with your higher power is an absolute necessity.

Another way to describe the aforementioned is the challenge that leadership caused in my experiencing marginalized feelings or feelings to be more like those of the dominant culture. If it is believed that this sort of personal change is needed, then it is not considered a challenge. It is only when there is a belief that working in that predominantly White-culture environment is initiating the perception that White colleagues would rather African American school counselors be different or unlike their natural selves, should it become problematic.

### **Autophenomenographical Themes from Debriefing the Researcher as a Participant**

The purpose of debriefing the researcher as a participant was to allow undisclosed information concerning a study to be obtained, as developed by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008). The ability to debrief as a researcher-participant was most exhilarating, because it offered a chance to reflect and to resonate in the moment of such an accomplishment. I reflected on my experiences as a researcher and a participant of the study and responded with the following reflection:

The experience of being able to answer these questions has been very therapeutic for me. Having an opportunity to engage in this process as the researcher and to share my personal experiences as an African American school counselor has been very rewarding. There is a payoff and sometimes the things we tend to endure somehow contribute to the greater good.

I also had expressions of feeling very fortunate at this rare opportunity by stating,

I don't know how many people in their lives get a chance to work, have experiences, talk about those experiences, research others similar to them and discover their experiences, then voice their experiences, and have an opportunity to then publish and print these experiences . . . it is just amazing.

### **Discussion**

This article presents the successes and challenges in multicultural leadership from an autophenomenographic perspective as an African American lead counselor, researcher, and participant of my own study. The themes that evolved consisted of successful leadership opportunities that appeared inherent in serving as a lead counselor, such as developing and managing my school counseling program inclusive of supervising and having input on hiring other counselors in my department. As a researcher, the results of this study supported the opportunity for career advancement by pursuit of a doctoral degree, and clarified the need to research a topic where the literature is scant or non-existent. As a participant of my own study, my experiences of being employed in a predominantly White-culture school district were revealed—in my need to remain cognizant of my purpose, to dispel the myths that others might have about African Americans, and to maintain an eagerness to learn and to reflect throughout the entire process.

Conversely, there were additional themes that were a result of the present challenges in multicultural leadership for me as an African American school counselor. Challenges were inner-departmental resistances, resulting in discord and lack of harmony; an upper-hierarchical echelon, where change, new ideas, and inclusion of others felt

impossible; having to live on the margins of your culture and White-culture (a double consciousness), whereas a constant negotiation of the understood self and the self, imposed by others, were exacerbated. African Americans (tend to) face the dilemma of double consciousness as they struggle to survive in two distinct cultural worlds—one White and one Black: “This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois, 1903, p. 9). Double consciousness refers to the continuous pushing/pulling that is experienced by many ethnic or racial minorities as they simultaneously resist and assimilate the mainstream Eurocentric (or other indigenous) culture that prevails within the United States (DuBois, 1903).

The findings of this study complicate our understanding of school counselor leadership because it offers new insight to a phenomenon that traditionally only has been described from a *glass half -full* perspective. The interpretations of these findings were eye-opening, causing me to feel exuberant about the notion of African American school counselors being able to experience leadership as greatly as I had experienced it. It was encouraging and spirited optimism for others who will be successors of my journey. Contrary though, it seems to me that there is still room for growth among people who are representative of the dominant culture, a call to be open and accepting of those who are diverse and not fitting the established norms. It seems tragic and despairing that I was greeted with such resistances—having to negotiate my cultural affinity because of the discomfort of others, their lack of understanding, and their irrational thoughts of who they believed I was as a person in this leadership position. But the opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree, to research, and to report my personal experiences via sole participation was nonetheless cathartic.

### **Implications for Aspiring African American School Counselors Leaders**

Leadership for African Americans school counselors includes rewarding and challenging experiences. As evidenced in this article, avoiding both aspects of leadership are highly unlikely and unrealistic. Because leadership appears to have an inherent nature for both positive and negative outcomes, African American school counselors should pursue leadership opportunities because they offer a foundation for career advancement. Leadership also provides a chance to understand yourself and others better, along with the implementation of current practices and trends as recommended by state and national standards (ASCA, 2005). Although some experiences appear contrary to what may be ideal, there are options to challenge systemic barriers while advocating for stronger bonds among school counselors. More

importantly, to have voice, no longer to feel silenced, and to understand the potential of certain work environments might feel affirming or rewarding.

### **Implications for Multicultural Leadership as a Lead Counselor**

The role of a lead counselor can be multilayered and complex. Although this study depicted my challenging experiences as an African American female lead counselor relative to inner departmental resistances—including the appearance of an upper hierarchical echelon, a subtle but entrenched philosophy, having little room for creativity or change, and having to live marginally between Black and White-culture—there were successful experiences such as having a role that encompasses site, community, and district-level roles and responsibilities.

When serving as a lead counselor, there are enhanced skill development, implementation and advocacy of programs and services, and initiated trainings of faculty and staff. Only in this role are there opportunities to initiate supervisory roles of other counselors, interns, counselors-in-training, or assigned secretarial staff within the department. Additionally, African American school counselors inadvertently become the model for future minority leadership within that department or district, and, finally, there are chances to initiate discussions—perhaps courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006)—which should promote better communication, relationships, understanding, and trust among school counseling professionals. All these experiences are what make leadership as a lead counselor rare, trajectory driven, and germane.

### **Implications for Multicultural Leadership as a Researcher**

One way to increase school counselors' options for career advancement is to pursue leadership by way of obtaining a doctorate degree in counselor education. Not only does that present likely possibilities for career advancement, but also automatically, there are inherent opportunities to conduct and to present research at state, national, and international levels. This is an expectation of an aspiring counselor educator, and might not be readily and abundantly available for school counselors serving in K-12 school districts.

Additionally, conducting research provides access to unexplored or uninvestigated phenomena. Discovering the need for counselor education departments and universities to begin having discussions about placement and hiring practices of African American school counselors, is recommended. Having knowledge of the subtle and entrenched political nature that administration exercises, especially when they promote or detour an individual's ability to advance into other positions, whether in district or out of district, is

information that promotes a school counselor's optimal awareness of this phenomenon.

Another leadership opportunity is evident because it has been documented by researchers that African Americans tend to feel reluctant to participate in research studies (Lipford-Sanders & Bradley, 2002). What a great way to lead these individuals, who would otherwise feel reluctant, to a chance to express themselves and to describe their subjective experiences working in a predominantly White-culture school district. Researchers have many responsibilities in the process of qualitative research. One leadership responsibility is to make certain rapport is established with the participants (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008) so that they understand that their participation is appreciated and is contributing to a greater need or better understanding. Participants also need to know that how they communicate their experiences is embraced by the researcher and not judged (Johnson, 1997; Nelson et al., 2013). Not only should rapport be established, but researchers should create opportunities for the participants to disclose their perceptions and feelings about the process. Additionally, if interviewing individuals from minority populations, cultural characteristics like their dialect, race, and economic status should not impede the research process in any way.

Nelson et al. (2013) mapped Charlé's (2007) framework for hostage negotiation of nine interactional communication strategies onto the interview process. Specifically, Nelson et al. (2013) modified these nine strategies as follows: (a) establishing and maintaining a relationship with the client (interviewee); (b) understanding the context of interviewee's experiences; (c) using the language of the interviewee; (d) including expanded or larger systems in the interview; (e) maintaining flexibility in conversation; (f) attending to the process of the interview; (g) using a *restraining* or *go slow* approach; (h) using a team process effectively; and (i) ending and summarizing the interview process. According to Nelson et al. (2013), these nine strategies represent what they called the *therapeutic interview process*. Through this process, rapport is established, experiences are accepted in an authentic way, and cultural characteristics are embraced by the researcher and not judged.

Further, the suggestion to revise the multicultural competencies to incorporate counselor-to-counselor relationships is just as pertinent as addressing counselor-to-client relationships. Counselor educators can begin updating these competencies to make them more relevant to present day practices. As evidenced by the results of this study, there might be disparities between how we are expected to treat and to work with clients versus how we treat and work with one another.

## MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: AN AUTOPHENOMENOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

### **Implications for Multicultural Leadership as a Participant of a Study**

The present study is unique in its differentiated approach to obtaining rich data from me, as the researcher, who served as a participant to this study with leadership experiences. As noted earlier in this study, I was eligible to participate in this study as a result of meeting the criteria established for participation. There are many leadership implications for researchers who meet the criteria of their own studies and choose to participate in the process. Whether or not researchers choose to participate in their own studies, current research suggests that researchers have an automatic, intricate part in research studies (Nelson et al., 2013).

The first implication as a researcher and participant of this study is to recognize my intrinsic feelings that are present before, during, and after engagement in this process. I believe that there tends to be high levels of altruism that exist in deciding to participate in one's own study. Not only do researchers expect others to participate, but most recognize their own relevance to the study and that their research comprises a system that inevitably integrates researchers, co-researchers, and participants (Nelson et al., 2013). Additionally, this process can be therapeutic for researchers, as it was for me, especially if their experiences have been challenging or life-changing. Having an opportunity to have voice and to reflect on the successes and challenges of leadership experiences, all serve as vehicles for therapeutic remedy. Following was an opportunity for me to reflect on my experiences as a researcher and a participant of the study. I responded with this reflection:

This experience of being able to answer these questions has been very therapeutic for me. Having an opportunity to engage in this process, as the researcher and then having an opportunity to share my personal experiences as an African American school counselor from my perspective, has been very rewarding. There is a payoff and sometimes the things we tend to endure somehow contribute to the greater good.

### **Linkages to Critical Race Theory**

The framework utilized for this study was CRT. The detail that this framework offers allowed me, as the researcher of this study, to utilize it, because CRT enriches the voice of underrepresented or silenced individuals and groups. CRT captured the voice of an African American female school counselor, who served in a multicultural leadership capacity coalesced in multiple ways, allowing it to be heard and authenticated. CRT promotes social change, reverse marginalization, and eradication of oppressive practices. The results of this study revealed inner-departmental resistance from other counselors and the paraprofessional staff, along with

the aura of an upper-hierarchical echelon within the counseling department and a school district that was not receptive to change. Therefore, an apparent nexus exists between CRT and the outcomes this study. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) advocated for the use of CRT in the field of counseling, highlighting one's experience related to race and racism. The relationship that existed between the White counselors felt overwhelmingly isolating and exclusive living marginally between White dominant culture and the African American culture and being hyper-cognizant and vigilant of both White and Black culture and challenge to change oneself.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to consider pertaining to this study. It must be noted that my study does not speak for all African American female school counselors serving in leadership capacities similar to mine, and that being a key informant does not speak for all individuals in my culture (Grupetta, 2004). Excluding culture or race as a rationale for these experiences, another limitation might be the geographic area that the study was conducted in the southwestern part of the United States in a public educational environment. At times, educational environments are simply resistant to change; thus, a new school counselor might be subjected to the outsider phenomenon. Although my goal was not to generalize beyond my personal experience, it must be conveyed that in order for my findings to be generalizable, the sample size would need to be larger. Further, this research served as a baseline in developing a functional definition for predominantly White-culture school district based on literature that describes predominantly White-culture work environments and a personal communication. A final limitation might be that the reader's perception of successful versus challenging experiences in leadership might be different from the way these experiences are conceptualized and reported here in this article. As an example, others might perceive what I consider as challenging experiences as successful ones and vice versa.

### **Future Research Endeavors**

There are several recommendations for future research. Because the literature is scant on African American female school counselors and the voices of African Americans are typically silenced, there is a need to hear the voices of other African American female school counselors who have served in predominantly White-culture school districts. The use of autophenomenography in school counseling research investigating this issue from the perspective of African American male school counselors in a multicultural leadership capacity also is recommended. Beyond the general

recommendations set forth by ASCA, a study should be conducted among school counselors who assist in expanding current multicultural leadership definitions.

### Conclusion and Support of Extant Literature

Multicultural leadership in school counseling inherently has successful and challenging experiences. This study has been particularly unique because it has integrated autoethnography and phenomenology, creating an autophenomenographical study utilizing CRT as an underpinning framework. Specifically, this research has been impactful because it is multifaceted and helps to fill the gap in the counseling literature. It strengthens and diversifies the meaning of multicultural leadership for school counselors and moves it beyond the recommendations set forth by ASCA (2005). This study also documents the lived experience of a member of an understudied population, being an African American female school counselor serving in a leadership capacity. Further, it is important to consider the creation of the functional definition of White-culture as making an important contribution to the literature based on a personal communication that helped to operationalize the meaning of this word, which was conducive for this study. Finally, this research is most timely in that, as a profession, we have combined efforts to understand phenomena within our field, which promotes professionalism and creates understanding of individual experiences.

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MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL COUNSELING: AN AUTOPHENOMENOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

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**APPENDIX**

**Demographic Guide and Semi-structured Interview Protocol**

**Demographic Guide**

1. Are you a current or former school counselor?
2. Are you currently certified school counselor?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your age?
5. How long have you been a school counselor?

**Semi-Structured 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, campus (including administrators, teachers, and students) and the community environment?
2. Please describe your experiences as an African American school counselor in relationship 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 Guide**

1. Tell me how you feel?
2. Tell me about your overall experience in this process?
3. Any questions?