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Men Passionately Pursuing Purpose (MP3): A Group Counseling Intervention for Black Male Student Athletes

Paul C. Harris, Renae D. Mayes, Carol Freeman, Brian Eberly, Najwa Tatby, and Sarah Wiener

University of Virginia; Ball State University; University of Arizona; Charlottesville City Schools

ABSTRACT

Black male student athletes are at risk for over-identification with their athletic role to the detriment of their other identities. This paper describes a study that explored the meaning ascribed by high school Black male student athletes to an 8-week group counseling experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants after the group experience and two major themes emerged: sense of self and connection with others/brotherhood. Implications for school counselors are discussed.

Although participation in sports is typically correlated with positive outcomes such as increased academic achievement, this is not always the case for Black males. Interventions that pay particular attention to the educational experiences of Black males in general, and Black male student athletes, in particular, are warranted. Researchers suggest that Black males are more at risk for over-identifying with their athletic role to the detriment of their academic identity and success and are more likely to be less ready for college and career than their White counterparts. While many interventions might be feasible to consider in addressing the unique needs of Black male student athletes, group counseling is the intervention of focus in this study. Some of the commonly experienced factors in group counseling experiences that might influence role identity clarity include universality, altruism, instillation of hope, cohesiveness, catharsis, interpersonal learning, and existential factors. These therapeutic factors are particularly useful for Black male student athletes because they facilitate their being able to recognize shared feelings or thoughts, develop a desire to help others, believe in their growth, feel a sense of belonging and trust, experience a release of feelings associated with experiences, engage in introspection, assume responsibility for life decisions, and ultimately see themselves as more than just an athlete. Specifically, role identity, given its relevance to college and career readiness, is the primary focus of the study. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that the Men Passionately Pursing Purpose (MP3) group counseling experience has on the identity development of Black male student athletes.

CONTACT

Paul C. Harris, PhC3y@virginia.edu, University of Virginia, 415 Emmet Street South, Charlottesville, VA 22904

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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Black Male Student Athletes

According to Harris, Hines, and Hipolito-Delgado (2016) and Moore and Flowers (2016), Black students, in general, are less likely to be college and career ready than their peers. Black students, for example, are more likely to attend high schools that offer less rigorous courses, hampering their readiness (ACT, 2015). Even when heavily enrolled in college prep math and science courses (79.6 and 73%, respectively) Black male students are still far less likely to continue enrolling in academically challenging courses later on in high school (Lamb, Arceneaux, Cox-Moses, Sweat, & Owens, 2013; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). In order to combat the low post-secondary success rates of Black males several factors need to increase: teacher and faculty support; positive role models and mentors for these students; and positive peer influences and relationships (Lee, 2011). Such factors have consistently been linked to student achievement (Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, & Bagley, 2014). When students, in general, perceive that they matter to others at school, it generally means there is a healthy school climate and cohesion, both of which translate into increased academic achievement (Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010).

The issues facing Black male student athletes are multi-faceted (Martin, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2010). Black student athletes face a particularly unique risk of not being college and career ready due to the potential over-identifying with their athletic identity (Harper et al., 2013; Harris, 2014). Sports participation for Black males is often seen as the primary way to accessing economic, social, and political mobility (Cooper, 2016; Rhoden, 2006). This is often due to the structural arrangement within society and athletic systems, both of which disproportionately celebrate the athletic prowess of Black males and fail to actively cultivate other aspects of their identity (Cooper, 2016; Howard, 2013). Such inequalities within society are only exacerbated further within athletics, where Black males are often deceived as to what their participation will garner for them (Harrison, Bimper, Smith, & Logan, 2017). Black male athletes, for example, are socialized to view sports as the high-status, attainable, endeavor for which they are best suited (Harrison et al., 2017).

Researchers (Harper et al., 2013; Harris, 2014) clarify that the benefits of sports participation decrease for Black males as they move from junior varsity to varsity (high school) to college. Many argue that Black males are the victims of academic exploitation (Anderson & South, 2007; Benson, 2000; Hawkins, 1999; Singer, 2009); Specifically, Black male student athletes at Division I institutions are graduating at lower rates than other groups of student athletes and their non-athlete Black male counterparts (Vereen, Hill, & Lopez, 2015). Harper et al. (2013) also found that even though Black males made up only 2.8% of college undergraduates they still represented 58.4% of the football and basketball teams for the 76 schools within the top six conferences in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). At the same time, only 50.2% of Black male athletes graduated with a degree as compared to all student athletes (66.9%). This gives evidence for the notion that many Black male student athletes are being prepared to succeed as part of an athletic organization without equal attention being given toward their academic preparation. Even as young Black males grow up, if they show any sign that they have athletic ability, there is a propensity in our society to focus upon the athletic ability before even considering academic ability (Comeaux, 2018). Black males make up only 6% of the total U.S. population, yet they represent over 66% of all professional football players and 82%
of all basketball players (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012). These positions are thus far more visible to young males than being a doctor or lawyer, where Black males represent only 3 and 2% of those positions respectively (Morris & Adeyemo, 2012). As such, increased attention given to the identity formation process of Black male student athletes is warranted. Specifically, the need for Black male student athletes to tie a solid educational agenda to their athletic pursuits needs to be reinforced and cultivated. There is a clear need for the empowerment of multiple identities within Black male student athletes.

**Empowerment Theory**

Empowerment refers to the process of increasing the personal, interpersonal, and political power of individuals such that they can significantly influence their situations (Gutierrez, 1995; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). It has its roots in early feminist theory and counselors utilize it when counseling minorities or other populations who have experienced oppression within society (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Empowerment first involves the development of critical consciousness, which for a member of a marginalized group (i.e., Black males) includes an increased awareness of oppression in society and the sociopolitical implications that follow (Gutierrez, 1995; Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). A part of the development of critical consciousness also involves the development of an empowering, positive identity, and the increased capacity for social action (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Empowerment is further characterized by linking personal strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Such a strength-based approach to work with Black male student athletes is critical to ensuring that they not only avoid negative circumstances but also thrive in their college and career endeavors. Black male student athletes, given the over-identification with sports to the detriment of other identities, are prime recipients of interventions delivered through this framework. Such focus with Black male student athletes will promote their knowledge of the larger system within which their participation happens, and facilitates their use of sport as a platform to accomplish larger purposes versus it being the end purpose in and of itself. Empowerment at this level, then, could lead to multi-generational empowerment as future generations are socialized with more influential significant others which is critical for educational attainment and a host-related positive outcome (Harris, 2014).

Harris et al. (2014) suggest that Black males’ participation in sports can actually complement their overall educational experience. Having students recognize their talents beyond sports is a necessary step in that process of them developing a multidimensional sense of self, which in turn increases the likelihood of their overall college and career readiness (Conley, 2010). School counselors are well positioned to shepherd this process and facilitate the healthy identity development of Black male student athletes using group work.

**Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). A salient athletic identity correlates with a variety of outcomes and can be potentially both helpful and hurtful (Heird &
Steinfeldt, 2013). For example, student athletes with a high athletic identity may be more likely to engage in long-term exercise behaviors, have more superior athletic performance, have higher self-esteem, and perhaps even better social relationships and confidence. Alternatively, student athletes with a high athletic identity could potentially ascribe an inordinate amount of their time, energy, and effort to their athletic identity, such that their athletic and self-identity become one. Over-identification with the athlete role might lead to dysfunctional practices within the athlete role, such as overtraining, anxiety when not training, disordered eating, or substance abuse (Carter, 2009; Ford, 2007). It can also be detrimental to other identities (i.e., academic identity) relevant for one’s college and career success (Harper et al., 2013; Harris, 2014). The challenge is to maintain a healthy identity, one that values the importance of the role of athlete, while also valuing and being empowered in other roles assumed as well. Such a multidimensional sense of self protects one’s self-concept in the event of failure in one dimension (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Although this refers to collegiate student athletes, preventive maintenance at the high-school level would greatly aid in this process. MP3 is an 8-week small group counseling experience that promotes the identity development of male athletes with emphasis given to Black males.

**Men Passionately Pursuing Purpose (MP3)**

Counseling groups in schools are both practical and have a distinct advantage given the benefit of serving more students with few resources, and they yield similar treatment outcomes as do individual counseling interventions (Steen, Vannatta, & Liu, 2016). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) includes group counseling as an integral component of comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2012, 2014). School counselors facilitate groups through which students can have a safe setting to address all academic, developmental, social or situational stressors that some may not have accessibility to outside of schools (Newsome & Gladding, 2003). Group counseling is a resourceful method where school counselors can reach more than just one student in the same amount of time (Holcomb-McCoy, 2003). Group counseling can, in certain circumstances, be more effective than individual counseling because it allows students to share new experiences that might be foreign to others, and the group dynamic nurtures and enhances better social skills (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005).

Research indicates that Black male adolescents internalize negative messages from society that foster high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem and poor school performance (Bradley, 2001). Further, sports participation is often seen by Black males as the primary mechanism to achieving success, in terms of prestige and economic advancement (Cooper, 2016; Rhoden, 2006). Counseling groups give the opportunity for them to individually and collectively reflect upon such dynamics, learn coping strategies and feel less isolated (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003).

Research also indicates that a counseling group dedicated mainly for adolescent Black males allows students to discuss race issues, exchange ideas regarding environmental and educational challenges they face, and provides them a sense of belonging and universality within the group given their unique personal and social challenges (Bradley, 2001). Group counseling can prepare Black males with skills that increase positive social skills and enhance personal and emotional psychological wellness.
through a supportive environment (White & Dixon Rayle, 2007). It is particularly useful for Black male student athletes because it can help to ensure that a solid educational agenda is tied to Black males’ athletic pursuits. A group setting can help to facilitate a multidimensional sense of self in Black males, such that their athletic participation does not serve as a detriment to their academic, college, and career endeavors. MP3 meets for 8 consecutive weeks for approximately 45 minutes each session. The group meets during the school day, most often during a block in the day dedicated to studying or receiving extra help from teachers as needed. When scheduling prohibits this block from being used, the sessions are scheduled such that no class is missed more than once, and the students are expected to proactively make up any work that is missed during that time.

**Research Question**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that the MP3 group counseling experience has on the identity development of Black male student athletes. The overarching research question for this study is: What perceived impact does the MP3 group counseling experience have on the identity development of Black male student athletes in high school?

**Method**

After given approval by a university Institutional Review Board, local school officials in one school on the East Coast were contacted to assist with the screening and selection of participants. The director of school counseling compiled a list of 15 students, recommended by counselors, teachers, and administrators based on interviews and data from the learning behaviors scale (Myrick, 2003). The principal investigator on the research project met with all of the potential participants in small groups to conduct a secondary screening to determine their level of commitment to the 8 week MP3 process.

Specifically, school counselors were asked to identify Black male student athletes in high school who were performing beneath their potential academically, in large part due to their disproportionate efforts in their respective sport. The teachers of those students, along with administrators, were also interviewed regarding their thoughts about the students’ fit for the group. A learning behaviors scale (Myrick, 2003) was also given to all teachers of the students recommended by school counselors. This scale measures the frequency of healthy learning behaviors displayed by students, and the authors used this quantitative measure in concert with the qualitative interviews, to determine fit for the group. The measure also provided a baseline for teachers and facilitated their observation of growth over the course of the group experience for the participants.

The next steps in the process included contacting parents to obtain their permission for the students to participate in the group. Of the 15 students, all of whom verbally expressed commitment, 9 returned the necessary permission slip to participate, and those 9 began and successfully completed the 8-week group counseling experience. Totally, 8 out of the 9
group members participated in the qualitative interviews for this study. Table 1 shows the 8 participants’ pseudonyms, year in high school, and sport.

**Positionality**

The first author is a Black male, and a former high-school student athlete. Although he had potential to pursue athletics at either the Division II or Division III level, he opted to forego playing collegiate sports in favor of attending his college of choice, which happened to be a Division I school. He played intramural sports in college, coached high school and college teams, and ultimately pursued a career as an educator (i.e., high school counselor and school counselor educator). The second author is a Black female whose personal experience as a first-generation college student heightens her awareness of the unique experience of underrepresented populations such as Black male student athletes. She received graduate degrees from programs that focused on promoting equity in schools and is keenly aware of the school supports necessary to ensure success for Black students. Further, her own work in schools, as well as her consultation with school systems, has yielded numerous refereed publications and national presentations on related topics. The third author is a White female who has worked as a high-school counselor in an urban setting for over a decade. She, too, is acutely aware of the diverse needs that exist in marginalized populations, and actively facilitated the group counseling experience associated with MP3. The fourth author is a White male in graduate school studying school counseling. He participated in sports during high school and has a strong interest in studying the impact of group counseling on diverse populations. The fifth author is a Moroccan female in graduate school studying school counseling. She also participated in sports in high school, and is passionate about understanding ways that school counselors can intervene to promote positive development in historically marginalized groups.

The sixth author is a White female in graduate school studying school counseling. A former college athlete, she is keenly aware of the challenges associated with balancing academic and athletic endeavors.

**Intervention**

The participants engaged in an 8-week long group counseling experience, facilitated by the first and third author, and guided by select ASCA Mind-Set and Behavior standards (ASCA, 2014) (see Table 2). See Table 3 for session topics and activities. As part of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Sport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norm</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
group experience, the young men also experienced a college visit, and had the opportunity to meet with Maurice Clarett, former Ohio State University football star and subject of ESPN’s 30 for 30: Youngstown Boys. Although the focus of this article is on the group process, specifically, the combination of these experiences provoked thought and facilitated development with regard to how the young men perceived themselves. The intentional efforts encouraged the young men in their athletic pursuits while equipping them with the tools to think beyond their sport and about their larger purpose in life.

**Interviews**

Eight out of nine participants were available for, and completed, interviews following the intervention. All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted at the high school in private spaces, and the first four authors conducted the interviews. Open-ended questions with prompts and follow-up questions were employed during the interviews in order to elicit responses (Breakwell, 1995). The interviews generally asked the participants to speak about the meaning they ascribed to the group experience, particularly with regard to their identity development (see the Appendix). There were 12 questions that helped to guide the semi-structured interview (see the Appendix).

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis, a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was the methodological approach for this study. After conducting interviews and transcription, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading through transcripts other than the ones they completed. They were aware of who conducted the interview when reading through the transcripts. After producing a list of ideas about what was in the data, the research team generated initial codes from the data, coding for as many patterns as possible. After initial coding, the researchers then sorted the codes into broader themes and reviewed those themes several times in order to refine, collapsing some themes into others as appropriate. Member checks and peer debriefs were also employed to determine credibility of our conclusions, as well as trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2007). For peer debriefing (or auditing, as it is also referred to), the fifth author, who had not facilitated the group, nor conducted any of the interviews, nor

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**Table 2. Select ASCA Mind-Set and behavior standards.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mind-Set Standard 2 (M 2)</th>
<th>Self-confidence in ability to succeed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mind-Set Standard 4 (M 4)</td>
<td>Understanding that postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Standard Learning Strategy 7 (B-LS 7)</td>
<td>Identify long- and short-term academic, career, and social/emotional goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Standard: Self-Management Skill 7 (B-SMS 7)</td>
<td>Demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Standard: Self-Management Skill 8 (B-SMS 8)</td>
<td>Demonstrate ability to balance school, home, and community activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Standard: Social Skill 2 (B-SS 2)</td>
<td>Create positive and supportive relationships with other students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Standard: Social Skill 3: (B-SS 2)</td>
<td>Create relationships with adults that support success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 3. Session topics, objectives, and procedure.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 1: Introduction to the Group (B-SS 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Group members will learn about the purpose of this group and confidentiality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Group members will be able to create and subsequently follow the group rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Group members will begin to develop rapport with each other and with the counselor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materials</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper, pen/pencil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Explain the purpose of the group and ask if students have any questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Explain confidentiality – stress the importance of keeping the topics discussed by other group members private. Provide examples of what is and is not appropriate to share. Ensure that group members understand before continuing with the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “What’s in a name?” Icebreaker – Participants will share how they got their name with the rest of the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Group members and counselor discuss what they consider the components of a successful group (i.e., group norms) (Gladding, 2011; Greenberg, 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● “What’s in your world” activity – On a sheet of paper, group members will pictorially depict their “worlds.” No further direction is given – it is purposely an open prompt. After 3 minutes, each participant will share his story with the rest of the group. Facilitators participate as well. Group members can also share what their worlds have taught them about being a Black male. Facilitate a discussion around how our worlds shape the lenses through which we view and experience life (e.g., education, friendships, etc.), while highlighting strengths inherent in each participant’s “world.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Group members answer the question “What does it mean to be passionately pursuing purpose?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Homework: Genogram – Participants will try to go back at least 2 generations – include siblings, parents, aunts, and uncles, etc. Note strengths within individual family members. Participants may have to talk to other family members to complete this assignment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 2: Discovering Strengths (M 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Assess need for group with counselor input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Identify potential members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Determine suitability of potential group members through individual pre-screening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Meet with potential group members to identify suitability for the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Assess if students have interest in joining the group, are willing to participate and can commit to follow the group rules and adhere to confidentiality (Greenberg, 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Send an e-mail to teachers or meet with them in person to explain the general purpose of the group, and confirm that students are responsible for any work that they miss when out of class for group activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Have teachers of all qualified and potential group members complete the learning behaviors scale pre-assessment (Myrick, 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● From the students who qualified after pre-screening process, randomly choose 8–10 to participate in the group. For those students who are not selected, they will receive the group intervention the following semester.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Create group objectives that align with the ASCA Mind-Sets &amp; Behaviors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 3. (Continued).

**PRE-GROUP PREPARATION OUTLINE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Group members will continue to develop rapport with each other and counselors through genogram sharing.</td>
<td>● Group members will unearth the external assets that exist in their family.</td>
<td>● Group members will identify the strengths they possess that mirror those identified in their respective families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Group members will unearth the external assets that exist in their family.</td>
<td>● Group members will identify the strengths they possess that mirror those identified in their respective families.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Materials**

- Paper; pen/pencil

**Procedure**

- Group members share genogram with other members and facilitators.
- Sample facilitator thoughts/questions:
  - What was the process of creating the genogram like for you?
  - What surprised you?
  - What strengths do your family members possess? Do you see those strengths in you?
- Homework: Write a 125–200 word statement response to this question: “Who am I without the ball”
  “Control” activity: On a sheet of paper, group members will draw 2 concentric circles (the inner circle will be labeled “in control” and the outer circle labeled “out of control”). Group members will list all of the things in or out of their control in the respective circles regarding their academic, athletic, and career achievements.

**SESSION 3: WHO AM I WITHOUT THE BALL? (M 4)**

**Objectives**

- Group members will reflect upon their identities outside of their sport.

**Materials**

- Computer, projector, screen

**Procedure**

- Participants will each share their reflection on who they are without the ball
- Facilitator will encourage group members to ask follow up questions to sharers.
- Facilitator will gently challenge, as appropriate.
- Facilitator will discuss the concept of athletic identity, and the implications, particularly relevant to Black males in sport
- Homework: Write a 125–200 word statement of purpose.

**SESSION 4: MEN PASSIONATELY PURSUING PURPOSE (B-LS 7)**

**Objectives**

- Group members will reflect upon how they will pursue purpose during high school.

**Materials**

- Notebook; pen/paper
Procedure
• Have group members discuss what they think the significance of the number “720” is for them.
• Share that it represents the number of days in one’s high school career and that they can adjust accordingly given how many are now behind them. Facilitator thoughts/questions:
• How will students plan to make use of their remaining days of high school?
• Keep the focus on what is in front of them, utilizing positive language about the progress they can make.
• Encourage students to begin with the end (e.g., graduation from high school) in mind.
Ask students what is their “end?” Where do they want to be (at the end of high school, in 10 years, etc.)?
• Homework: Participants write what dynamics are in and out of their control as it relates to their pursuing purpose.

SESSION 5: CONTROL ISSUES (B-SMS 7)
Objectives
• Group members will reflect on what is in and out of their control as it relates to their pursuing purpose.

Materials
Large dry/erase board, chalkboard, or flipchart

Procedure
• Check in about the overall process of completing the homework assignment
• Group members collectively share their results of the exercise, while one of the facilitators record on the board.
  Facilitator thoughts/points:
• Acknowledge the “out of control” as real, influential, dynamics on participants’ pursuing purpose.
• Resist “blaming the victim” commentary.
• Show clips of videos of Black males in sports to illustrate dynamics in and out of our control.
• Note the “out of control” forces that impacted their lives, in addition to the results of their “in control” efforts (good and bad).
• Character, integrity, and strong work-ethic are examples of what can be added to and emphasized in “in control” elements.
• Homework: Generate a list of specific questions about what decisions in our control we could use help managing.

SESSION 6: CHOOSE TODAY (B-SMS 8)
Objectives
Group members will understand how to make healthy decisions regarding what is in their control

Materials
Paper; pen/pencil

(Continued)
### Session 7: Teammates Matter (B-SS 3)

**Objectives**
- Group members will understand the importance of accountability.
- Group members will become more familiar with the process of termination and be able to discuss ways to have a successful termination as well as how they can maintain progress once the group has terminated.

**Materials**
- Paper; pen/pencil.

**Procedure**
- Participants share their answers to the question: Why are teammates important?
- Counselor facilitates discussion about accountability.
- Homework: Have your adult and peer accountability partners sign the MP3 accountability agreement.

### Session 8: Termination (B-LS 8)

**Objectives**
- Group members will reflect on the progress that they have gained over time in the group.

**Materials**
- Paper; pen/pencil.

**Procedure**
- Participants will sum up in one sentence what the other group members mean to them.
- Facilitator will provide the following final thoughts:
  - 1 individual compliment/observation of growth/strength of each group member.
  - Revisit meaning of men passionately pursuing purpose.
  - Revisit importance of confidentiality.
  - Admonition for continued progress/follow through.
- Participants complete post assessment.
completed any of the initial coding, reviewed the data to refine the coding scheme, as appropriate. Lastly, member checking included sending the finished themes to participants to ensure that the researchers captured what they intended to convey.

There were several methodological decisions made throughout the analytic process that we want to make explicit. First, the research team decided, in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006), that a theme would be anything that captured something important about the data in relation to the research question and representing some patterned response within the overall dataset. There are two primary ways through which the themes can be identified, and our research team decided upon a deductive approach over an inductive approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). The deductive approach, in our study’s case, is reflected in our viewing the entire study within the athletic identity framework (Brewer et al., 1993). Further, we focused on the semantic content of the data, that which were identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, to ensure trustworthiness of the data, we conducted peer debriefs and members checks (Creswell, 2007).

**Results**

The overarching research question for this study was: What perceived impact does the MP3 group counseling experience have on the identity development of Black male student athletes in high school?

Two main themes identified through our analysis of the data were: 1) Sense of self; and 2) Connections with others/Brotherhood. Sub-themes of these overarching themes included, but was not limited to: Universality; motivation to succeed; clearer understanding and solidification of college expectations; interpersonal learning; self-awareness; accountability, support network, facilitator as role model; empowerment; and vulnerability and trust.

The sense of self theme was identified based on the participants’ commentary about how the group provided a space within which they felt comfortable being transparent about their lived experiences. The participants described how they’d not previously learned as much about the strengths they already possessed (e.g., mental and physical strength, both of which are transferrable to other domains such as in their academic endeavors). They also described their family influence on their sense of self, and that they no longer only viewed it through a negative lens but could see the positive impact as well. Mike, Ray, and Tim for example, talked about how the group helped them reflect more on who they were as people and who they wanted to be, in and out of sport:

Mike: I Just feel like it [the group] helped me improve myself. More or less.

Find out who I am.

Ray: Umm, like, like it made me really think about, like football is not always going to be there, like ... cuz, like I gotta think about a plan b. That’s what really, mostly like, got me to think about doing good in school ... ... It helped, like open my eyes to the future mostly. What I need to do, and how I got to do it. And ... it helped me more about like choosing the right people to hang with and being around the right people.
Tim: ... it kind of helped me realize like how serious you have to be about high school to like make it to college. Umm, and like, we talked about stuff like financial aid, like FAFSA, and ummm ... that I hadn’t really known anything about that before. And we went on a college visit ... ... .it was different because I had never really done anything like that before.

The connection/brotherhood theme was identified in part based on the participants talking about the importance of confidentiality and the bonds amongst the group members being strengthened throughout the experience. The participants spoke at length about how it was refreshing to be able to safely share with others and experience vulnerability and trust for the first time. They also appreciated the accountability that existed in the group after having spent such quality time with each other over the 8 weeks:

Derrick: I know we don’t have anybody out there to go to like anywhere at home, school ... ... .just having a group and knowing that they’ll keep it to themselves and they’re not going to say anything outside of it ... ... ... . I could really open up and like say my true feelings about anything and ... .that helped out a lot cause after I did that I felt like I got a lot off my chest and things were easier from there on.

Tim: Trust. I think trust because like I said before there’s a lot of people you can talk to but in that one group everything gets confidential ... ... . I could trust everybody in that group ... .you could all just talk about things and no one else would know what we were talking about. ... ... . these were subjects that we ... that I’ve never really thought about. Like, with my friends, or anything else like that. So ... it was ... umm ... it was cool

Mike: ... When we were down one day you would be like guys you can get anything off your chest and it was just like a place where you could just share anything you want. ... Just a place that welcomes with open arms.

Other participants also commented on how hearing others’ experiences helped them to have a new, more refined perspective on life and empathy. Charles, in particular, shared how life-changing such moments were for him and how such increased awareness of others’ life experience deepened his bond with others in the group:

Charles: ... learning how to like my other teammates, their backgrounds were like their parents, some not having a father, some having fathers that passed away and stuff like that that really touched my heart and like see why they are grinding like playing football, basketball doing what they got to do in school, trying to make it to the next level and that like moves my heart.

**Discussion and Implications**

A sense of self and connection to others is critical for all students and particularly relevant for Black males, many of who experience isolation in K-12 schools (Rogers, Scott, & Way, 2015). An awareness of oneself within the context in which one exists, and how one wants to pursue the future, is paramount to being adequately prepared for postsecondary endeavors. For Black male student athletes, in particular, it is crucial that they understand
that their identity does not have to be solely wrapped up in their athletic role. Rather, they can assume a multidimensional sense of self that will help facilitate their success in multiple spaces, in addition to their athletic endeavors. This realization can be crucial for their being able to use their athletic status to bring light to issues beyond sport. While these high school students may never reach the professional status of Tommie Smith and John Carlos – the Olympic athletes who famously protested various social ills on the Olympic podium in 1968 (Edwards, 1969) – they can certainly speak truth to power in unique ways when they recognize the strength, power, influence, and genius inside them in and out of sport. Further, if the peer group can reinforce this sense of self, the likelihood of the permanence of such change and positive trajectory increases. The notion of accountability cannot be understated. Group counseling creates a space within which cohesion, or sense of togetherness occurs (Steen, Vasserman-Stokes, & Vannatta, 2014). Such cohesion can foster accountability in behavioral change for Black males.

The sub-themes told the story of a group of young men who hadn’t experienced a safe and vulnerable space within which they could let their metaphorical guard down and share their authentic life experience with others. In so doing, they were able to both grieve the losses in community with others, and learn from others how to not just cope but to thrive with the internal and external assets already available to them. Each was sure to mention that the next iteration of the group should be much longer than 8 weeks to see even more impactful results.

High school counselors are in a great position to facilitate such groups, as it would likely complement the classroom guidance and other interventions they implement that focus on healthy identity development. Their strengths-based, collaborative efforts with teachers, coaches, and other stakeholders can increase the amount of reinforcement that Black male student athletes receive for identities outside of sport. Research suggests that when Black students, in general, do not persist in postsecondary endeavors, it can be due to a number of factors, one of which includes self-worth (Ross, Powell, & Henriksen, 2016). Elementary and middle school counselors can also intervene as well, as role identity development is a process that begins well before students get to high school. Small group counseling experiences at these levels can incorporate elements of the MP3 group experience such that Black males who go into sport do not have to recover from mistakes made due to a lack of a multidimensional sense of self. Rather, preventive maintenance and efforts toward thriving (and not just avoiding negative circumstances) can already be in motion. Elementary school counselors, for example, can facilitate groups around academic and career self-efficacy, collaborating with teachers and administers to ensure that Black males have opportunities to succeed at tasks and receive positive reinforcement while doing so. Given the dire state of Black males in education (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013), the preventive maintenance at the elementary level could arguably be the most important time for intervention. Counselor educators, then, would be wise to include such preparatory training in the master’s programs for pre-service school counselors as well. While there is a group counseling course in all CACREP-accredited programs, it is particularly important to infuse themes of equity and access, as such would be incredibly relevant for populations such as Black males who have a historically oppressed narrative in the United States (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). Helping pre-service students understand how to facilitate critical consciousness
among Black male student athletes, while facilitating a positive identity and eventual social action, is crucial.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The results of this study, while it is informative on a number of fronts, also have limitations that should be considered in future studies. As with most qualitative work, the quality and quantity of the data collected is often dependent upon the researcher’s skills and the extent to which data can be elicited without leading the participants. Further, the small, regional sample makes it difficult to generalize the results to a larger population, though certainly they are worth considering as a place of departure for future studies. Also, the deductive approach to analyzing the data can serve as a limitation in that the results are viewed through a specific theoretical lens. Future studies that embrace an inductive approach would provide a more broad description of the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Future studies that further analyze individual sessions will also help to unpack how identity development is enhanced in Black male student athletes, and such data can inform efforts of practitioners desiring to replicate the intervention. It would also be interesting to note differences in the experiences of Black male student athletes across type of sport.

Given that educators are increasingly being called upon to demonstrate measurable contributions to student success (Steen, Henfield, & Booker, 2014), future studies should also incorporate quantitative measures that align directly with school outcomes (i.e., attendance, behavior, and achievement) to further illustrate the impact of MP3 on Black male student athletes. The learning behaviors scale used during the screening process could also be a pre- and post-measure to gauge the effectiveness of the group. It is clear that Black male student athletes are at risk for lagging educational achievement and attainment (Harris, 2014). Most of this is due to their increased risk to ascribing a disproportionate amount of time and effort to their athletic endeavors or their athletic ones. More explicitly tying this work to such distal outcomes will inform the efforts of many education stakeholders.

**Conclusion**

Group counseling is incredibly advantageous for black males for its opportunity to provide a chance to individually and collectively reflect upon their unique lived experience, learn coping strategies, feel less isolated (Day-Vines et al., 2003), and develop a multidimensional sense of self that increase the likelihood of their mitigating the negative effects of an exclusive athletic identity. Results from this study suggest that such a group experience provides a sense of safety and self for Black male student athletes, and that it increases their self- and other-awareness, and research suggests that these are critical precursors to a host of positive outcomes, including academic, socio-emotional, and career success (Conley, 2015).

**Notes on contributors**

*Paul C. Harris* is an assistant professor in School Counseling at the University of Virginia.
Renae D. Mayes is an associate professor in School Counseling at Ball State University.

Carol Freeman is a school counselor in Virginia.

Brian Eberly is a school counselor in Virginia.

Najwa Tatby is a school counselor in Virginia.

Sarah Wiener is a school counselor in Virginia.

References


**Appendix**

**Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me about yourself. Describe yourself to me. (*Prompt: Future goals?)

2. Tell me about the value you place on your sports participation?
a. Follow-up probes: When did you begin to value sports in this way?
   Tell me about others in your life who influenced these values?
   How has it changed since your involvement with MP3?

3. How does your value of sports compare to other things in your life? (Prompt: Studying? Doing homework? Thinking about the future?)
   a. Follow-up probes: How did you decide what was given more or less value?

4. Do you change at all depending on where you are? For example, are you different at MP3 than in class or at home?
   a. Follow-up probes: If yes, why is that?
   How do you feel about that?

5. Do you feel differently at MP3 meetings than you do during the rest of school? Than at home?
   a. Follow-up probe: In what ways do you feel differently?

6. Do you ever act in a way that you feel is not really who you are? (Prompt, if necessary: for example, do you ever change your behavior/dress/speech in a situation in a way that makes you feel like you are not being yourself?)
   Follow-up probes: If yes, what aspects do you change?
   How does that make you feel?
   What are your reasons for acting differently?

7. Give me the five words that you think describe you best.
   Follow-up probes: Tell me a little bit about what these mean to you.
   Which of these are the most important to you?
   Do you expect to be these things in the future?

8. Give me the five words that describe who or what you think you may be in the future.
   Follow-up probes: How did you decide on these things?
   Is there any particular person or experience that made you want to be these things?

9. Can you tell me how you feel about MP3? (Prompt: Other members? What happens in the group?) Do you think this group is different from other groups you’re in? How?

10. What do you get out of being in the group? (Prompt: Emotions? Experiences?) Do you get things like emotions or experiences that you also get other places, for example at home or on your team?

11. How important is MP3 for you? Is it worth the time it takes? What’s most valuable about it?

12. Do you think MP3 makes you feel different about being at HHS? Does it have any effects outside of the group itself? How? What?