Phenomenological Experiences of African American Men in the Aftermath of the Zimmerman Trial

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The authors of this phenomenological study investigated the experiences of African American men in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's death and the George Zimmerman trial. The authors sought to understand the lived experiences of African American men during a racially-charged court case where a young African American man was killed by a neighborhood watchman. Study researchers interviewed seven participants in a semi-structured format and identified the following five main themes: Not Surprised, Heightened Awareness of Racial Profiling, Fear, Social Justice and Political Activism, and Significance in Being an African American Man. Discussion of these themes and their sub-themes are presented, along with implications for the field of counseling and counselor education. Additionally, areas of future research will be explored in how to effectively work with African American men within a therapeutic relationship.

Keywords: African American men, Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman, social justice, multiculturalism, diversity

The death of 17-year old Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida (CNN, 2013) exposed unhealed wounds from the racial discord in this country. For some, Martin's death was reminiscent of past cases of racial profiling and brutality against African American men (e.g., Emmett Till, Rodney King), and the lack of equity in our judicial system (Bell, Jones, Roane, Square, & Chung, 2013; Bello, Nasser, & Welch, 2012; Clapp, 2013). Familiar feelings of anger, frustration, and disappointment resurfaced as individuals protested and demanded justice after George Zimmerman, the

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neighborhood watch coordinator who killed Trayvon Martin, was found not guilty (Bell et al., 2013).

Since Trayvon Martin's untimely death, there have been many other injustices against African American males. To name a few, Eric Garner was killed during an unlawful police chokehold in New York on July 17, 2014 (see Lee, 2014; NBC New York, 2014); Michael Brown was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014 (see Fieldstadt, 2014; Ortiz, 2015); and Tamir Rice, a 12-year old African American boy, was shot and killed by Cleveland police on November 22, 2014 (see Liezkovszky, 2015). Again, feelings of anger and disenfranchisement have been a consistent theme as the grand juries in New York and Ferguson, MO decided against indicting the police officers who killed Brown and Garner. As a result, there have been widespread protests across the nation with individuals from diverse backgrounds demanding justice (see Barakat, 2014; CBS News, 2014). This pivotal moment in history cannot go unnoticed by the counseling community.

Counseling Professionals and Experiences of African American Men

Counseling and psychology journals alike have addressed the African American male experience in the United States, in terms of identity development (Cross, 1995) and the psychological impact of race-related stress and microaggressions (e.g., Pieterse & Carter, 2007; Sue et al., 2008). However, there is a paucity of literature that speaks to the experiences of African American men after Trayvon Martin was killed and the George Zimmerman verdict. A few articles were found (see Bell et al., 2013; Dale & Daniels, 2013; Mays, Johnson, Coles, Gellene, Cochran, 2013) that described reactions to Martin's death and the role of psychology in identifying racism and race-based discrimination, and provided suggestions for counseling psychology programs. Yet, the articles referenced above were all found in the *Journal of Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* in a special issue on "Violence against Individuals and Communities: Reflecting on the Trayvon Martin Case." Given the number of incidents that have occurred since Martin's death, more research is needed on the psychological ramifications of these tragedies on African Americans as well as non- African American individuals. Moreover, additional scholarship focused on counselors-in-training is needed that explores how counselors can effectively work with clients experiencing vicarious or *en vivo* trauma from racially-charged situations in a culturally competent manner. Due to the gap in the literature in counseling journals, it is imperative to explore the lived experiences of African American men in order for counselors and counselor education programs to be multiculturally competent.

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) *Code of Ethics* and the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) training standards both support and require culturally alert practices. In line with the popular call for justice on Twitter, #Blacklivesmatter (BlackLivesMatter, 2012), counselor education programs are to prepare future counselors to work with diverse clients and to be agents of change. Infusion of multiculturalism and social justice

pedagogy across the curriculum prepares students to be effective in the therapeutic setting in suspending biases (Arredondo et al., 1996; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015). Additionally, our ethical code implores counselors to be cognizant of their own cultural background and personal biases, knowledgeable about the client's worldview and external factors that may impact him or her (e.g., oppression and discrimination), and to possess the ability to utilize culturally relevant and appropriate interventions in their work with all clients (ACA, 2014).

The Current Study and its Cultural Relevance

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to give voice to how the Zimmerman trial affected African American men and their communities, and to (b) explore the role of counselors and counselor education programs in social advocacy and multicultural competence. Therefore, the main research question was: What were the lived experiences of African American men after hearing the Zimmerman verdict? Subsequent questions explored the affective experience of study participants and how the Zimmerman verdict impacted their community (for the interview questions contact the first author).

   Historical context of the African American male experience. Before we discuss African American men' perceptions of the Zimmerman verdict, it behooves us to provide a historical context of the African American Man experience in America. Although, a detailed discussion is not provided here, various authors have provided a comprehensive study on this topic (see Franklin & Moss, 2000; Stampp, 1984). One can say the emasculation, or weakening, and dehumanization of African American men began with the Transatlantic Slave Trade which initiated a centuries-long institution where people of African descent were considered property. As a result, African American men were as Franklin (1999) posited "invisible" and powerless in protecting their families during slavery. The condition of African American men continued to deteriorate post-slavery where they experienced systemic racism, discrimination, and prejudice while in constant fear for their lives. *Systemic racism* is a sociological theory of oppression that "involves the racialized exploitation and subordination of Americans of color by white Americans" (Feagin & Barnett, 2005, p. 1102) within historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal levels of society (Feagin, 2006). *Discriminatory practices* are negative behaviors against another person due to their social group membership (McAuliffe, 2013), while *prejudice* is a negative attitude about someone's social group status (McAuliffe, 2013).

   Historically, state and federal laws (e.g., Black Codes and Jim Crow) have reinforced African American men' second class citizenship in America which has, in turn, led to what W.E.B. DuBois (1903) described as a "double consciousness." The phenomenon of "double consciousness" refers to the constant struggle of identity for African American in facing racism, which may include internalizing beliefs and attitudes of the dominant group.

   In addition to experiencing racial trauma, the African American male image has

been demonized by society and described as having a predisposition for criminal behavior (Kennedy, 1997; Mauer, 1999; Oliver, 2003). However, as stated by Welch (2007), the negative stereotypes have become progressively worse in the late 20th century where African American men are not only stereotyped as predisposed to crime but are viewed "criminal predators." The widespread criminalization of African American males in tandem with pervasive negative stereotypes has justified excessive and inappropriate actions such as racial profiling (Welch, 2007). In recent decades, racial profiling, or the discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individual's race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2005), has received national attention. Additionally, criminal profiling, or the reliance on a group of characteristics they believe to be associated with crime has been prevalent as well (ACLU, 2005).

Method

In order to explore the lived experiences of African American men, we used qualitative research methods, specifically, phenomenological research. Researchers utilized phenomenological research methods seeking to explore and describe how particular people understand and make meaning of an experienced phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002). Phenomenological methods are rooted in the philosophical perspective that *only* those who have experienced a phenomenon can communicate about it to others (Todres & Holloway, 2004). This research intends to capture the experience of a group of African American men living in the aftermath of the George Zimmerman verdict with the purpose of fostering awareness and building cultural empathy for counselors-in-training and counselor educators. The overarching research question that guided this study was: What were the lived experiences of African American men after hearing the Zimmerman verdict?

Sample

The authors used criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling strategies to enlist participants as discussed by Patton (2002). Criterion sampling includes participants that meet predetermined criteria. In this case, the selection criterion was African American males. Convenience sampling, a method of purposive sampling, allows for the use of easily accessible populations. Snowball sampling allows participants to suggest other potential participants.

The researchers advertised for potential study participants at their respective uni-versities, in local churches, and through word-of-mouth. A total of seven individuals participated in the study. The researchers decided not to interview more participants due to data saturation. Saturation is the point at which new data no longer emerges (Glasser & Straus, 1967).

Participants were seven self-identified African American men ranging in age from 30-54. Majority of the participants self-identified as Christian, were located in the

southern region of the United States, lived in primarily urban environments, and had at least a Master's degree level of education. Demographic information including pseudo-nyms to protect the identity of our participants is listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Study Participant Demographics

Participant	Age Range	Religious Affiliation	Geographic Region	Environment	Education
David	30-34	Christian	South	Rural	Masters
Leon	30-34	Christian	South	Urban/Suburban	Bachelors
Wesley	40-44	Not Religious/Spritual	Midwest	Urban	High School
Mark	50-54	Christian	Midwest	Urban	Masters
Malcolm	30-34	Christian	South	Urban	Bacherlors
James	30-34	Christian	South/West	Urban	Masters
Nelson	35-40	Not Religious/Spiritual	South	Urban	Masters

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this research. An informed consent letter was provided to each participant for review prior to participating in the interview. After reviewing the form, time was provided to discuss any questions or concerns. Upon consent, each participant was provided a demographic questionnaire. Once completed, participants were interviewed for approximately one hour in a semi-structured interview. Both researchers followed the same research guide which included the following five prompts: (a) Taking yourself back to Saturday July 13, 2013 what was your initial reaction to the Zimmerman verdict? (b) How have you been able to process the feelings that you have? (c) What did the verdict mean to you as an African American man in America? (d) How are you the same or different as a result of the verdict (your values, beliefs, outlook on life)? and (e) How did you think the verdict has impacted other African American men, your community, etc.? The researchers asked additional questions for clarification as needed during the interviews. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Researchers also took notes during the interviews to supplement the recorded data.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were first coded independently by each of the authors using inductive coding strategies. Inductive coding allows themes to emerge rather than imposing pre-determined codes, or *a priori* codes (Glasser & Straus, 1967). Initial coding was line by line with subsequent passes completed in larger segments of data. Authors regularly referred to notes and kept memos as the coding progressed and themes emerged. After coding and arriving at themes independently, both authors collaborated to elicit the

common themes that emerged across the interview data that seemed to capture the essence of the phenomenon. Therefore, the independent codes were aggregated into six major themes representing the study participants' experience.

Researcher Bias

On a personal level, both authors have been impacted by the Zimmerman verdict. The first author is an African American woman with members of her family who could have been Trayvon Martin (e.g., husband, brother, nephews, cousins, and friends). The second author is a Caucasian man and father of four children, one of which is a young African American man. In both instances, discussing this traumatic event and creating a sense of community and empathy around the topic has been an ongoing process.

The researchers acknowledge our own social locations and the importance of bracketing our own bias in order to see the realities presented by the participants (van Deurzen, 2014). As recommended by Patton (2002), member checking and peer debriefing were used to establish credibility. Credibility refers to the assurance that the data and the corresponding analysis accurately reflects the participants' experiences (Glasser & Straus, 1967). As each researcher had a personal connection to the topic, processing reactions to the data and the overall data analysis process was important. Thus, a clear audit trail connecting the data, notes, memos, and the results establish the dependability, which speaks to the consistency and logic, of the presented results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Findings

Researchers engaged in phenomenological research seek to understand how people experience social phenomena (Patton, 2002). The goal of this study was to understand the phenomenological reality of African American men since the conclusion of the George Zimmerman trial the resulting acquittal of the defendant, George Zimmerman. The researchers' desire was to hear the unique experiences and perspectives of African American men as a result of this highly publicized legal case. Five prominent themes were identified from the data that provide insight into the phenomenological realities of the seven participants. The main themes are: Not Surprised, Heightened Awareness of Racial Profiling, Fear, Social Justice and Political Activism, and Significance in Being an African American Man. Under each major theme are sub-themes that will be discussed in further detail.

Theme One: Not Surprised

The first and perhaps most prominent major theme to emerge was participants were not surprised at the news of George Zimmerman's acquittal. The participants consistently shared their expectation for the verdict and lack of surprise when it was delivered. David said, "I kind of was expecting the outcome that came from it." He went on to

explain, "it's no mystery that young African American men are shot or seen in American as less valuable than others. Media even demonized Trayvon Martin."

Other participants, in relaying their lack of surprise, deflected their reference to this case specifically and referred to the racism that is rooted deeply in American society. James said he was shocked because he had hopes that the jury would see the racial profiling. However, he went on to elaborate, "I wasn't surprised because, racism is still part of our makeup." In fact, he compares it to the likes of "baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie, it's just the way it is." Leon shared the sociohistorical sentiment when he stated, "Just knowing the history of, of certain incidences in the south I, I really was not surprised that, that man got away with that."

Connected to the expectation that Zimmerman would be acquitted are three sub-themes: sad, blaming the legal system, and media and objectivity:

Sad. For some participants the lack of surprise was evidenced by the sadness it evoked. Malcolm said, "So it was a bit sad, it was a bit sad, definitely… It's sad to say, I get it. I mean, cuz it's just been kinda the lay of the land." He described his initial reaction as sad but not surprised." Similarly, David said he felt "Remorse for the family having losing, lost a son, who didn't experience a lot of things." Leon stated, "I was hurt, heartbroken and I'm just saying to myself how could they?" He continued, "it brought me to another place. A place that I thought I'd never be at. White supremacy is real to me."

Wesley expressed similar thinking when he said, "If it was a female with a hood on, he probably wouldn't of done that, maybe even an African American woman with a hood on, he wouldn't of done the same action, [or] a White kid with a hoodie on." It was Nelson who offered perhaps the best summary of the overarching emotion expressed by the participants when he said, "something like this should never happen."

Blaming the legal system. In addition to expressing the sadness felt in response to the verdict, some critiqued, or even blamed the legal system. They were not surprised because of the flawed legal system or process. In fact, Nelson placed blame directly on Florida's laws, "their law is stand your ground, I felt that he got away with that because the law itself, I think it gives you a blanket license to just shoot anybody you think might commit a crime." David had more to say about the legal process.

Leon expressed concern about the jury. He stated, "They couldn't afford to pay for better lawyers and better representation . . . or to even prepare the defense of people that are part of the case to be on the stand." He further said, "you could see it coming from the composition of the jury no African Americans, no men."

Media and objectivity. The media provided extensive coverage of the Trayvon Martin case. It was David who criticized the media saying they "demonized Trayvon Martin by bringing out all of the other negative things about his life." He suggested the media played a role in the public opinion of Trayvon's culpability. He said, "depending on what you paid attention to, you would have been swayed to think he was the culprit

even though he had no gun."

However, others called for objectivity. Malcolm said he tried to take a "fly on the wall perspective." He repeatedly emphasized the importance of "getting our own perspective." He explained the predominant thinking in his community. He suggested some took it as a joke and others were enraged. He said, "you know, as people, we just want to fight. We want to be right all the time. Do I take it as a joke or do I riot? I can't do either." Malcolm emphasized the need to continue to think independently and arrive at our own opinions. Similarly, Mark said "I have to forgive him, just like I would want to be forgiven."

Theme Two: Heightened Awareness of Racial Profiling

The lack of surprise expressed by the participants was followed closely and perhaps reinforced by the second dominant theme that emerged. Participants suggested that the George Zimmerman verdict and the entire experience of the case had heightened their awareness of racial profiling and reinforced its prevalence. David connected the Trayvon Martin incident to the American's history. He said, "We live in a society that hasn't removed itself from our racial past. Instead we have masked it. We haven't dealt with it." James described the heightened sense of awareness saying it was:

> Always feeling like you have to be on your toes at all time. And I think a lot of young Black men feel that. Like even when a police officer pulls, you know, when you get pulled over by a police officer. I mean, being in a state of agitation, you know? You can be a straight A student, you could be a police officer, fireman. But, you know, as soon as you take the uniform off and you're just walking down the street, you're going to be treated just like anyone else.

Wesley said the change for him was "not to be as lenient and be as comfortable as you have [been] before about letting your kids go out at a certain time and wearing a certain thing, which is wrong." The concern was obvious for the participants as Nelson said, "I don't want to be stereotyped." However, he later said:

> Just because we, just because you, we voted [in] a president of color. That doesn't mean that um, perceptions and racism and ignorance as a whole is not still alive and well. No matter if you're in the north or the south.

The participants' heightened awareness and perhaps feelings of hypervigilance extended into three sub-themes: appearance, location, and their participation in the profiling:

Appearance. A significant part of the heightened awareness revolved around appearances and particularly choices of clothing. Malcolm encouraged "being aware of the

image you project." He continued, don't appear threatening." Wesley had agreed when he said, "You still have to be mindful that when you're an African American late at night with a hoodie on." David echoed the concern around clothing when he said, "I have to be now more aware of you know am I sagging my pants or different things like that."

Nelson said, "I'm a pretty big guy. Uh, so don't be in, don't put myself [laugh] in that situation with someone who'll feel threatened. I've considered cutting my hair taking on a more conservative look." It was Malcolm who posed the question that seemed to be underlying the sentiments of many. He asked "where is the balance of being who you want to be without worrying about how people react in a way and yet being aware of what you project?"

Location. In addition to a heightened awareness of appearances, participants were more aware of their physical locations. Nelson suggested "don't put yourself in those places." David stated "in different places I might be in [as an] African American male, I can be perceived in a different light than who I am and that understanding is high for me." James said,

> If you're going into a certain neighborhood there's certain ways to conduct yourself so no one, you know can think you're going to commit a crime. Knowing that if you're going through a certain neighborhood you have to conduct yourself accordingly.

Participation in profiling. Connected to the idea of heightened awareness of profiling we found that participants' comments coincided with the idea that they were participating in the profiling. In other words, the participants' reflections seemed to place some of the blame on Trayvon Martin. For example, Wesley said "he went out like at 10 o'clock at night to get some Skittles, you know that right there was a little bit stupid. But I mean you should be able to go out whenever you want to."

Mark placed responsibility on Trayvon when he said, "I truly believe that if Trayvon would have stopped and simply talked and had a normal non-threatening conversation he would not have been killed." He then qualified, "now I'm not blaming him, George Zimmerman was the aggressor." James said that Trayvon's parents "should have had the same conversation that my mother had with my brother and I when we were young. There are unspoken ways to conduct yourself." Nelson talked about teaching high school students to avoid suspicions as much as possible. He said, "I tell them, like, you know, if you don't project yourself that way then people have no reason to fear."

Theme Three: Fear

The third major theme that emerged from the data was fear. Fear as relayed by participants seemed connected to the awareness of profiling. However, more importantly, the

fear was connected to the awareness that this type of fatal violence could occur anywhere. Nelson admitted that he is a gun collector and frequents gun shows. However, he said the events surrounding Trayvon Martin made him consider carrying a gun. He said, "you have to defend yourself at some point. It doesn't matter what nationality you are cause its wide open." James said, "we need better gun laws. He was concerned that it would now be "open season on young black males in Florida." Similarly Wesley saw the phenomenon continuing but also kept it confined to certain communities. He said, "I think more or less it's something that will probably be seen in Florida or in that neighborhood where it happened, not as far as in my neighborhood." Related to the theme of fear was the sub-theme, lack of trust, these African American men had as members of society.

Lack of trust. The sub-theme is best summarized by Malcolm who said, "this is a reminder that you can't trust everybody. You never know anymore. You can't let your good merit precede you in a dark alley."

Lack of trust extended to the legal system and beyond. Leon said, "the law does not work for us. People perceive that it doesn't matter, It doesn't make a difference." He clarified, "my view is definitely more jaded of my White brothers." Mark agreed and suggested that when the law does not work "We, you need to look at alternatives to voice your grievance outside of [the] law . . . street law."

Others were aware of the temptation to fear but refused to entertain it. James re-called watching the Los Angeles, CA riots and asking his mom, "why do they hate us so much?" He continued by saying we must "Be aware but not live in fear." Malcolm shared the assessment and stated, "I wish we as human beings can understand that people are different from us and not feel so threatened, not feel so fearful."

Mark captured the effect of mistrust has on interactions with police officers and the importance of teaching younger generations. He suggested:

> Teach your boys to release some of that anger and just be normal
> people and communicate. If you're confronted by a police officer,
> number one learn the law, learn your rights, and just learn them.
> Number two just be friendly, it's not gonna make you a punk or
> weak, or a sissy.

Theme Four: Social Justice and Political Activism

As a result of the dynamics surrounding the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, some pointed to this case a clear indication of the America's lack of pro-gress…please be clear what "progress" you are referring to. Wesley said, "even though it is 2013 or whatever you still have to be mindful that when you're an African American late at night with a hoodie on, you know." David agreed saying "we live in a society that hasn't, um, removed itself from our racial past. Instead, we've masked it and put it into law or put it into different other things, but we hadn't dealt with it." He went on to talk

about the condition of being numb to the current realities saying "the ramification of being numb are you won't be part of the solution."

Other participants echoed the same idea with a clear call for action. Leon said, "my spirituality says, let's make right, the wrong. I have never gone to a rally I'm not a rally person but after Trayvon Martin I attended the rally." He continued:

> We need to advocate for ourselves. I mean we're dancing, we got a Black President, but dammit we see how hard it is for him to get anything accomplished. We have to become more politically sophisticated and see that's it's not just about political [national] elections, but it's about state elections and local elections.

James echoed a similar sentiment addressing both his awareness of current realities and opportunities for change. He said:

> Perceptions and fear and ignorance and how all those together can turn an incident of a young man going home to a tragedy. Um, it definitely is an awakening. That even with the President taking office, there, there's still a lot of challenges that we, as a nation can come together and improve on. Even though it was a tragedy, I do believe there is an opportunity.

Theme Five: Significance in Being an African American Man

The final theme related to the significance of being an African American man in the United States. The theme emerged consistently across participants suggesting the Trayvon Martin incident served as a clarifying reminder of the unique experience of African American men. David said, "it's no mystery that um, young African American men that are, are shot are seen in American as less valuable than others." he later added, "we live in a society where the achievements and/or the, the advancements of African Americans can still be kind belittled to a single incident" and described the reality as "trying to prove that we're not criminals."

The unique experience of African American men was evident the statements of James when he said:

> The neighborhood that I grew up in it was upwardly mobile African American community and that's one thing all of our parents and them they were taught how to speak to if you ever get stopped how to speak to the police how to make it you know just yes sir no sir give em your information and if that officer were to take it too far we have legal revenues to take care of that.

As a result of the "double consciousness" of African American men, some participants

pointed out the need for them to recover their significance and invest in younger generations. Leon said, "So many of the issues we experience individually we also experience corporately. We've gotta get back to being inherently valuable." He continued, "we have to advocate for ourselves. African American men have to have healthy self-worth, healthy self-esteem. We've got to be determined we're going to get an education, learn a trade, to be productive citizens."

Mark pointed out the importance African American men mentoring younger African American men. Sharing his own personal experience related to this issue, he said:

> I see the difference when I used to volunteer in the school system and there would be tons of teachers. And most of them were women. And some were Black, some were White, some were Hispanic, but once Black males were in the room kids acted differently. And, it's that yearning for someone to model.

He continued, referring to what he called the "Tarzan mentality: you swing in and you swing out, but I'm talking about really having a presence." Currently he explains, "there is a vacuum in our communities." Accordingly, David encouraged recovering unity and empowering the African American community. He said we need to "empower the culture and the richness of the, of the different talents there is in our community again.

Discussion

The current responses of our seven participants shed light on the pervasive experiences of systemic racism, discrimination, emasculation, and racial profiling experienced by many African American men throughout the U.S. history and the continued prevalence of such social phenomenon today. The three themes (Not Surprised, Heightened Awareness of Racial Profiling, and Fear) represent the emotional effects of long-term oppression of a racial group. McAuliffe (2013) reminds us that oppression in its simplest form "is the condition of being subject to anothers group's power" (p. 51).

Bell et al. (2013) highlighted the impact of oppression through their personal experiences and confirmed three of the sub-themes in our study. In regards to "not being surprised," the verdict was expected due to a legacy of injustice for African Americans in the U.S. One of the authors stated that "the Trayvon Martin murder is not a real surprise to me. For decades people have gotten away with killing Black boys; it seems it has become a way of living for some people" (p. 95). Additionally, Bell et al. (2013, p. 96) noted the constant reality of African Americans to be aware of their Blackness and how others may perceive them: "We continue to live in a society where we, African Americans, must change who we are, how we dress, and how we speak." Moreover, their study echoed sentiments of our participants related to fear in their reflections of having African American sons and wanting to protect them from a premature death. Finally, the findings of this study are also consistent with previous literature that discusses the demonization of African American men (see Kennedy, 1997; Mauer, 1999, Oliver, 2003)

and lack of trust in the African American community (Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002).

However, some differences between Bell et al. (2013) and our study are noted. First, we found two additional themes: Social Justice and Political Activism, and Significance of Being an African American Man in our study. Bell and colleagues enumerated themes of anger, frustration, and raw emotions. However, in this current study, participants expressed the overwhelming sentiment of "lack of surprise" and "sadness." A second difference relates to timing; specifically, when participants were interviewed. Our participants were interviewed after some time transpired after the Zimmerman verdict while Bell et al.'s study was prepared after the death of Trayvon Martin. Lastly, our study found that participants joined in the profiling and partially blamed Trayvon Martin for being out late and wearing a hoodie. This phenomenon has been explored in other contexts (e.g., education) where the oppressed becomes the oppressor, in other words, taking on thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes of the dominant group (Freire, 1970). Thus, perhaps study participants who blamed Martin may have internalized oppression on a subconscious level and viewed Martin's behavior from the standpoint of the dominant group.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Professional Counselors

What is the role of counselor educators in addressing injustices among the client populations we serve? That is a question that is addressed in our ACA (2104) *Code of Ethics*, wherein it states that counselor educators need to be multiculturally competent and "infuse material related to multiculturalism/diversity into all courses and workshops for the development of professional counselors (F.7.c.)." The Code further states in F.11.c that "counselor educators actively train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practice." Therefore, counselor educators need to reflect and process their own reactions to the recent injustices against African American men.

Additionally, it is important for counselor educators to help counselors-in-training empathize with their clients' cultural backgrounds. Specifically, with African American men clients it is important for future counselors to understand the historical context where African American men may feel discriminated against or emasculated due to their race, and thus experience psychological distress (Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006). However, not all African American men feel a heightened sense of awareness of racial profiling or experience a perpetual state of fear as we see in this study. Student counselors need to be cognizant of the complexities within the African American community and have an overall understanding of African American men' experience. Thus, they can build rapport and create a therapeutic environment where the clients can fully express themselves in session (Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006).

Next, it is important for the classroom to be a facilitative environment for students to process their own reactions. Thus, counselor educators can integrate current events into the curriculum to heighten awareness, increase knowledge of culture, and discuss

appropriate counseling interventions and reiterate that modern racism exists (Daniel, 2000). Specifically discussing Trayvon Martin's death, for instance opens up discussion of power, privilege, and equity. Additionally, Dale and Daniels (2013) noted that these discussions are relevant in exploring White students' reactions and the impact it has on their identity development. It is our responsibility as educators to have an open dialogue with students. For example, in past counseling diversity classes the first author has asked students to bring in current articles about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, and other cultural/social groups for discussion. Some prompts to engage students in small group or class discussions that were used were: (a) How does this current event relate to themes we have discussed in class? (b) Describe the intersectionality of culture that is represented in this current event? (c) If you were the counselor in this scenario, how would work with this client? (d) How could you advocate for this client on an intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional level, community, public policy, or international/global affairs level? (Ratts et al., 2015), (e) Identify and discuss some personal strengths and challenges that you foresee in having this particular client? and (f) What might be some best practices that align with our code of ethics to effectively work with this client in a culturally competent manner? The absence of such conversations further perpetuates the invisibility of African American men in American society.

Additionally, the role of counselor educators and counselor is to promote social justice as described in the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* Preamble. According to the Code, counselors are to advocate for their clients, when appropriate, at the "individual, group, institutional, and societal levels to address potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients (A.7.c.)." Given, the qualitative experience of African American men in this study and prevalence of injustice against them in general, it would behoove counselors to engage in advocacy and equity work. Social engagement deepens the empathy of helping professionals and helps counselors to more effectively interact with clients (Vera & Speight, 2003). Creating therapeutic bridges between counselors and African American men is especially important when they may be hesitant to engage in counseling due to previous negative experiences and historical/cultural mistrust experiences (Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations are present in every study and need to be appreciated when interpreting the results. One limitation of the study is that the demographics of our study participants are homogeneous. Majority of the participants are between the ages of 30 and 34 years old, identified as Christian, and lived in the urban Southern part of the United States. The lack of diversity within our sample may have influenced the themes that were identified in the data. Thus, our findings cannot be generalizable to the entire population of African American men. Lastly, despite our best efforts to reduce researcher bias, there might have been unintentional bias during various phases of the research process (e.g., during the semi-structured interviews and/or data analysis).

However, despite the above limitations, this study contributes to the literature by giving voice to African American males' experiences in the United States. Future research can clarify the unique experience of African American men in our society. Of particular interest is the increased awareness participants reported, particularly in the area of appearances and location. James described as being "on your toes all the time" and a constant "state of agitation." As a profession it would serve us well to better understand the phenomenological reality of this type of hypervigilance and how it may manifest in a therapeutic relationship. Not only looking at the phenomenological components but applying a wellness perspective and giving consideration to the possible physiological manifestations as well.

Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the role of religious beliefs and faith that has on African American males when faced with perceived and/or actual racial discrimination. There was a constant theme of spirituality in our sample where participants relied on their Christian religion to make sense of the Zimmerman verdict. Future research could explore the role of faith as a protective factor in dealing with racial injustice.

Conclusion

In summary, we investigated the phenomenological experiences of African American males after the death of Trayvon Martin and the George Zimmerman verdict. Our interviews resulted in identifying five themes experienced by our study participants: Not Surprised, Heightened Awareness of Racial Profiling, Fear, Social Justice and Political Activism, and Significance in Being an African American Man. Based on the themes we found both similarities and differences compared to previous research in this area.

Findings of this study offer implications for counselor educators' pedagogy to foster their students' multicultural competency and areas for future research in the counselor education and development. Integrating multicultural competencies and increasing social engagement is one step in honoring the voices of our study participants. It is disheartening that some African American men still feel disenfranchised and targeted within their communities and law enforcement in the 21st century. As one participant alluded to, we have an African American president but we need to do better.

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