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Joanna R. Love

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Current Practices in Group Counseling: Academic Achievement Groups for African American Adolescents

Joanna R. Love

Abstract: Academic achievement begins with youth empowerment. For adolescents of racial minorities, determining one's ethnic or cultural identity is a significant part of achieving a social identity (Fulgini, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005). Consequently, several groups for African American students focus on healthy identity development. Furthermore, a sense of social belonging can improve academic motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007), and many academic achievement groups focus on interpersonal problem solving skills. Moreover, because a student's behavior can impact school performance, some academic achievement groups also include cognitive-behavioral components and anger-management training. This paper reviews current literature surrounding academic achievement groups, specific groups for African American adolescents, and groups led by European American counselors.

Academic achievement begins with youth empowerment. However, because of negative racial stereotypes, African American youths are often not empowered to achieve a self-respecting view of self or a sense of academic self-efficacy (Muller, 2002). Recent research has focused on the achievement gap between African American students and students from the majority culture (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Bemak, Chung & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). One explanation for this achievement gap is that students from racial minorities contend with stereotype threat, the fear that their behavior or performance will reflect on their entire group (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). African American students tend to perform poorly on intelligence tests because they worry that they will perform poorly and reinforce the negative stereotype that African American students are intellectually inferior to White students (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat affects test scores, general academic performance, and graduation rates of African American students.

Impoverished, urban youth (those who live in inner-city, metropolitan areas), have higher rates of high school dropout due to negative racial stereotypes and access to fewer resources (Bemak et al., 2005). Lower graduation rates may indicate limited career and higher education

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joanna R. Love, Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, Marquette University, P.O. Box 1881, Milwaukee, WI, 53201-1881. Email: joanna.love@marquette.edu.

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opportunities for African American adolescents (White & Rayle, 2007). Many schools fail to provide culturally competent resources and support to empower minority youths to pursue academic and personal goals (White & Rayle). Meta-analytic research indicates that teachers hold higher academic expectations for Asian or European American students than for African American or Latino/a students, and they are more likely to ask questions and provide more positive or neutral speech of Asian or European American students than African American students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Differences in treatment or teacher expectations negatively affect African American students' motivation and performance (Tenenbaum & Ruck).

Furthermore, African American youths are disproportionately absent from advanced placement classes or college preparatory classes, regardless of academic ability; some choose not to take these classes, and others have not taken adequate prerequisite courses to be able to perform well in such classes (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). Correspondingly, African American students are disproportionately placed in special education classes or vocational education (Muller, 2002). Too frequently, students are assigned into classes based on behavior, rather than academic performance, and students who are not challenged with lower-level class material are more likely to act out (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). However, teachers often fail to refer gifted and talented African American students to gifted and talented programs, and as a result these students receive a lower quality education than students who were placed in upper level courses (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). As a result, these youths fail to learn the critical skills for college or career success that are taught almost exclusively in advanced or college preparatory classes (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey).

Many African American adolescents choose not to take advanced courses because they do not view themselves as academically capable (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). African American adolescents may internalize feelings of powerlessness connected with the history of racism and discrimination toward African Americans, and therefore these youths are more likely to have discouraging rather than hopeful educational and occupational expectations (Bemak et al., 2005). Furthermore, the negative stigma surrounding African Americans in academic settings contributes to a greater sense of belonging uncertainty, or a lack of social connectedness (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This can lead to perceived bias, stereotype

threat, or the sense that their own race does not belong in academia (Walton & Cohen). For adolescents of racial minorities, determining one's ethnic or cultural identity is a significant part of achieving a social identity (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005). Students with greater levels of cultural identity are more likely to internalize cultural values and behaviors associated with their cultural group, even negative stereotypes (Fuligni et al., 2005). Harmful messages that African American culture devalues school and education negatively impact students' academic motivation (Fuligni, et al.). The choice not to enroll in advanced courses may also be a result of what Steele (1992) labeled academic disidentification, which is defined as "a lack of relationship between academic self-esteem and global self-esteem" (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007, p. 85). The concept of academic disidentification also helps explain the difference between test scores for African American students and Caucasian students (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Negative stigmas may be attached to academic achievement (White & Rayle, 2007). For African American males in particular, academic disidentification is a psychological defense to protect their self-esteem as some harmful societal messages about "Blackness" or "maleness" do not involve academic achievement (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, p. 85). The peer group of an African American male student may challenge his identity if he performs well in school (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). While academic disidentification protects self-esteem, it undermines motivation to succeed and academic achievement (Steele, 1997).

Finally, adolescents with academic difficulties likely face environmental stressors outside of school, such as poverty, violence, and racism (Bemak et al., 2005). Research reveals that urban youth experience higher rates of delinquency, violence, aggression, psychological and behavioral problems and school dropout (Bemak et al.). Some adolescents may be involved in gangs, or use drugs or alcohol as coping strategies (Bemak et al.). Effects of environmental stressors are more salient for inner-city African American youths. Gibbs and Huang (1998, p. 171) describe African American adolescents as one of the most "vulnerable and victimized groups in contemporary American Society" (White & Rayle, 2007, p. 178). African American males have increased rates of incarceration, HIV/AIDS, suicide and homicide (White & Rayle). Similarly, research indicates increased rates of teenage pregnancy, high infant mortality rates, substance abuse problems, violence and gang membership among African American females (Bemak et al.). Research also indicates

that nearly 85% of low-income, inner-city African American youths have witnessed at least one violent act, and 43.3% have witnessed a murder (Bemak et al.). Bemak and Chung (1998) discovered a psychological recoil effect among youth from impoverished, high-crime areas, suggesting that witnessing a crime is more traumatizing than being victimized, and it may contribute to post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional problems, and aggressive behavior (Bemak et al.). Preoccupation with stressors in family or community life may hinder emotional, social and academic development (Bemak et al.).

There is certainly a need for interventions that address each of the various influences of poor academic performance and foster achievement in African American adolescents. Because a sense of social belonging can improve academic motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007), counseling groups are an ideal treatment for adolescents. Instead of focusing on academic deficits, many academic achievement groups focus on interpersonal problem solving skills, coping skills and healthy identity development. Moreover, because a student's behavior can impact school performance, some academic achievement groups use cognitive-behavioral components or anger-management training. This paper reviews current literature surrounding academic achievement groups for adolescents, specific groups for African American adolescents, and groups for African American adolescents led by European American counselors.

GROUP PRACTICE IN THIS AREA

Counseling Groups for Adolescents

Group counseling is an effective intervention for treating adolescents, and it is more cost- and time-effective than individual counseling (Bemak et al., 2005). Within schools, small group counseling is the most effective means to provide counseling and help students learn appropriate developmental skills (White & Rayle, 2007). Counseling groups have been shown to increase achievement scores and to improve interpersonal relationships (Bemak et al.). Because adolescents spend much of their time in groups at school, home, social events or work, groups are a familiar setting to promote discussion and problem solving (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). Normal adolescent stressors (surrounding school, peers, family, and the transition into adulthood) cause frustration, which

may be manifested in behavior problems, lack of interest in school, poor communication, and increased aggression (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Group work provides a safe environment for youths to talk about common difficulties (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Adolescents have benefited from peer groups, reference groups for assessing personal, social and academic achievements, and topic groups such as divorce, sexual abuse, and dating violence prevention, and academic achievement (Bemak et al., 2005). Furthermore, standard school interventions, including detention, suspension, disciplinary warnings, and behavior modification are less effective than group intervention (Bemak et al.).

Groups for Academic Achievement

The Student Success Skills (SSS) program is a structured small group model developed for school counselors to help students gain essential academic and social skills (Webb & Brigman, 2007). The three main skill sets targeted in the SSS group were selected based on thorough reviews of research and include: cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills); social skills (interpersonal, social problem-solving, listening, team-work); and, self-management skills (managing attention, motivation and anger) (Webb & Brigman). Students are selected for the group based on specific academic, social and self-management needs identified by teachers, and participation is voluntary (Webb & Brigman). The group consists of one 45-minute session each week for eight weeks, plus four additional monthly booster sessions.

Group goals introduced during the first session include: (a) developing a caring, supportive, encouraging group environment, (b) learning skills to help with school work and in relationships, and (c) sharing successful application of learned skills (Webb & Brigman, 2007). Effectiveness research supports utilizing the SSS group counseling intervention (Webb & Brigman). Outcomes were measured using pretest and posttest student scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Participants were randomly assigned to either treatment or comparison groups. Math scores on the FCAT improved 30 points on average by 86% of SSS participants, and FCAT reading scores improved 25 points on average by 78% of the participants (Webb & Brigman). Efficacy research also indicated that scores increased for group participants regardless of ethnicity (Webb & Brigman), suggesting that this program might be implemented for a variety of student populations.

Groups for African American Adolescents

While some empirical research supports structured groups, other researchers suggest that some minority groups (particularly African American females) respond better to a less structured group format (Bemak et al., 2005). It is valuable to include conversations about racial topics throughout the group sessions, although research indicates that racial conversations are seldom used therapeutically (Muller, 2002). Furthermore, it is essential to consider the unique cultural experiences of minorities and impoverished inner-city youth. Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo (2005) state:

...we believe that the group experience and process will assist members to heal, and this is developmentally and culturally relevant in relationship to school performance. To disregard the intensity of the experience of inner-city youth without attention to the daily trials and tribulations that one faces because of poverty, discrimination, and social oppression is to neglect the deep-seated healing that is critical for the success of youth at risk for school failure (p. 385).

Group counselors working with African American urban youth must be culturally competent and responsive, understanding the levels of racial consciousness and racial identity of the members (ASGW, 1999; Bemak et al., 2005). Group counselors must remain nonjudgmental and aware of their own biases and stereotypes (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Bemak et al.). Groups with culturally competent leaders have been shown to increase self-perceptions in African American adolescents (Bemak et al.).

The small group is an essential modality for providing academic, personal, career, and social skills training for African American students (White & Rayle, 2007). African American males often feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences and problem solving within homogeneous groups than in individual counseling (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). Groups can help African American youths discuss and cope with the stressors of racism and oppression (Muller, 2002). Group leaders must work to establish a sense of community within the group, while honoring the unique identities of each individual group member (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). It is also important to reflect on healthy adolescent

identity development (Muller, 2002). Because of stereotypes, dominant group labeling, and denial of power, African American youths may not have the same opportunities as White students to achieve an identity of self-respect and autonomy (Muller, 2002). Groups for these adolescents should allow members to express their feelings, perceive a sense of belonging, and experience interpersonal learning (Muller, 2002).

The Gentlemen On The Move (GOTM) group was designed to foster academic excellence in African American males (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). Gentlemen On The Move includes a Saturday Academy and an Exam Lock-In (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). The Saturday Academy meets three out of four Saturdays of the month, and the Exam Lock-In (ELI) weekend consists of individual tutoring, small group (3-5 members), and peer tutoring to help students prepare for tests (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). The authors suggest that the success of the academic achievement groups for African American males begins with the leader's recognition of the academic disidentification that may exist for group members. Group facilitators benefit from focusing on group member identities and establishing cohesion and rapport before addressing academic matters (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Group leaders must also recognize that males and African Americans and adolescents do not generally utilize counseling voluntarily, and the leader may need to counteract negative ideas about counseling (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). The counselor must also remember that African American males may not identify with values held by the dominant culture, and they may use culturally specific means of responding to others or displaying emotions (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Furthermore, African American students usually share common cultural values, including spirituality, family, and creative expression, and the importance of the collective identity (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Group counseling is therefore effective with African American males, especially when the importance of both group goals and individual accountability are stressed (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Academic empowerment groups provide an environment that allows youths to create solutions that may be employed by all group members (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey).

The group leaders of GOTM also found that it is important for the group leader to recognize that despite being behind, the group members have potential to succeed academically (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). It may be necessary to have the group members tested in core subjects, like math and reading, to gain an accurate idea of the student's current ability, and then individual and group goals can be tailored to fit the students'

needs (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). Leaders should focus on group member's strengths to encourage and foster success (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey). One group tactic implemented by leaders of GOTM is to encourage group members to reflect on areas of personal proficiency, such as sports, music, or art, and utilize the strategies at work for the youth to improve socially or academically (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). Group leaders found that the GOTM group and Event Lock-In were successful at increasing semester exam scores, and that focusing on social development as well as academic achievement helped to maintain treatment gains (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey).

The Strong Teens Curriculum (STC) small group model is a school-based small group program for male African American adolescents (White & Rayle, 2007). The goals of the classroom STC are "to promote the personal/social and emotional resilience, psychological wellness, and coping skills of all high school adolescents" (White & Rayle, 2007, p. 180). The adaptations made for the small group model include culturally and racially specific activities. The 12 sessions are purposely designed to draw on African American cultural values, to use historical figures as role models, and to focus on connecting group members to increase social support (White & Rayle, 2007). It is important for group counselors implementing STC to be aware of psychoeducational group dynamics, ethical issues, and school-based group counseling approaches (White & Rayle). Authors found that it was also beneficial for group counselors to be familiar with multicultural counseling theory, cognitive-behavioral theory, and Yalom's (2005) therapist techniques for strengthening the group process (White & Rayle).

The STC groups consisted of 12 sessions, which alternated weekly among class periods to prevent students from missing the same class each week (White & Rayle, 2007). One session was dedicated to a discussion panel of older, African American role models of group members who bestowed personal wisdom and shared their stories with the group (White & Rayle). After notifying school personnel, conducting needs assessments, and advertising for the group, counselors interviewed for student motivation and commitment to the group and explained the group expectations, rules, goals, and times (White & Rayle). The session topics included: introductions, understanding emotions, dealing with anger and understanding other people's emotions, clear thinking, positive thinking and solving people problems, stress and setting goals, and finishing up and

endings (White & Rayle). They also included two monthly follow-up sessions designed to foster support of each other through attending a social event (such as a sports game) and continued discussion of personal experiences and changes since the group ended (White & Rayle).

Groups With European American Leaders

Research indicates that counselors are most often White and female (Muller, 2002). Some researchers have questioned whether or not European American counselors can provide effective services to ethnic minority groups. Merchant and Butler (2002) found that White counselors could effectively lead groups with multiculturally diverse members. However, European American counselors are challenged by African American students' difficulty trusting White teachers and professionals due to institutional racism, and an extensive history of prejudicial treatment and discrimination (Muller, 2002). Nevertheless, all counselors have a responsibility to provide multiculturally competent services to students of all ethnicities and to use their "sphere of influence" (Tatum, 1997, p. 204) within the profession or school to advocate for oppressed groups and promote institutional change within schools and organizations (Muller, 2002). It is therefore essential for European American counselors to become competent in leading groups of ethnic minority students.

The Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS) approach was created to prevent high school dropout and improve academic performance in at risk populations of adolescent females (Bemak et al., 2005). The group co-facilitators (the university professor and school counselor) were both European American, and the master's level interns were Korean and Taiwanese (Bemak et al.). The goal of the group was to offer "support and help dealing with personal and social problems and improved school performance" (Bemak et al., 2005, p. 381). The original group was seven African American girls in 10th grade, identified as being high risk in an inner-city high school dealing with high rates of expulsion, suspension, teenage pregnancies, absenteeism, poverty and poor academic records (Bemak et al.). The format and goals were explained to the members in a prescreening interview (Bemak et al.). The group members were also made aware of rights to privacy, informed consent, and voluntary status of group membership, and parental consent requirements (Bemak et al.). Prospective members were selected for the group based on needs, expectations and commitment to the group (Bemak et al.). Based

on prior research (Couch, 1995) the group leaders determined students' conceptions of personal failure and hopelessness in prescreening interviews (Bemak et al.).

The EGAS group approach is less psychoeducational and less directive because of the focus on youth empowerment (Bemak et al., 2005). While the process is somewhat unstructured, the goals are clearly defined (Bemak et al.). The group met for 45 minutes each week, during rotating school periods, beginning in October and ending in May (Bemak et al.). The first session began by discussing group norms and procedures. Each week after that, group members determined the discussion topic for each session, in order to encourage perceptions of self-control and group ownership of the counseling process (Bemak et al.). The chosen topics included relationships, deaths of significant others, pregnancy and parenting, experiences with first sexual encounters, smoking, confrontations and poor relationships with teachers, and general academic concerns (Bemak et al.). For the final session, the adolescents presented their experiences at a graduate group counseling class, visited an on-campus art museum at the university, and culminated in a celebration at a restaurant (Bemak et al.).

While group facilitators were unable to research reports of school improvement, due to privacy of school records, self-report measures indicate that the group profoundly impacted the members. Long-range effects (one year later) include: greater ability to share individual feelings and resolve interpersonal problems; continued support among group members; prolonged feelings of universality; more attention to schoolwork, better attendance rates, and improved attitudes toward school; aspirations toward future college degree; and, desire for the group to continue (Bemak et al., 2005).

Muller (2002, 2000) studied the development of groups for African American adolescents led by European American female counselors. The first was a 12-week group of African American female high school students designed to promote healthy identity development and to address the double-discrimination that members experienced as females and members of a racial minority (2000). The White group leaders consulted with African American female professionals and reviewed literature about cross-cultural counseling and groups for African American females (Muller, 2000). The goals addressed in group sessions were to: identify and discuss feelings related to being African-American women, discuss

expectations for themselves, expectations of others, and their feelings about these expectation, discuss relationships with other females, males, teachers, parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors, discuss feelings and experiences with racism and prejudice, and to identify goals and dreams for the future (Muller, 2000). The group members also felt it was important to explore how they can make a difference and discuss African-American women who have made a significant impact on the world (Muller, 2000). Effectiveness was assessed with a brief self-report survey, where members were asked to rate statements such as “The group helped me,” on a scale from 1 to 5; results of these surveys indicated that the group was helpful for the members (Muller, 2000).

In Muller’s second study, two European American female counselors with training and experience in multicultural group counseling co-facilitated a group of seven African American ninth-grade males (2002). Prior research indicates that African American males may prefer opposite-sex counselors to initiate emotional topics for conversation (Muller, 2002). Still, the group leaders addressed the issue of racial differences immediately in prescreening interviews, again at the initial group session, and intermittently throughout the sessions (Muller, 2002). Both counselors consulted with African American male professionals to maintain awareness of implicit racism and to receive evaluation of group activity ideas and goals (Muller, 2002). The discussion topics included: challenges unique to African American males, what it means to be an African American male, media depictions, effects of racism, and the role of spirit in their lives (Muller, 2002). The goals were: to identify and discuss feelings (such as anger, pride, worry, frustration, hope, joy); to discuss expectations for themselves and others and related feelings; to discuss relationships with others; to discuss feelings, experiences, and effects of racism and prejudice; and to identify goals and dreams for the future (Muller, 2002).

The group met for 12 weeks for 45 minutes, during alternating school periods (Muller, 2002). The leaders held pregroup interviews to discuss goals and norms and to screen for willingness to participate (Muller, 2002). The leaders invited the group members to teach them about their culture, experiences, values, life stories, and concerns to empower the students, and foster an enriched environment (Muller, 2002). Members and leaders were encouraged to request clarification of any language, cultural norms, traditions, or age differences (Muller, 2002). The early sessions focused on therapeutic factors (Yalom, 1995) of universality,

altruism, and cohesion through discussions of mothers and fathers, fears and frustrations, and an agree-disagree activity intended to determine members' perceptions of stereotypes (Muller, 2002). Middle sessions focused on support and expression of feelings, with discussions of loss, and grief, sharing stories and feelings of personal loss from deaths of friends, incarcerated or absent fathers, and abandonment (Muller, 2002). They discussed male identity issues, relationships with mothers, and related feelings of anger, resentment, longing and fear (Muller, 2002). The group leaders used poetry, literature, and rap music to initiate conversations of African American identity and history, and group members then wrote their own rap lyrics to express their own experiences and feelings (Muller, 2002). Using poetry or other expressive art with multicultural groups is a constructive way to foster healing and growth (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002). Final sessions were focused on instillation of hope (Yalom, 1995) through a discussion of progress on group goals (Muller, 2002).

The group leaders invited a panel of African American men to share their wisdom and experiences with the group (Muller, 2002). The group processed what members learned from the panel, and discussed specific future academic, relationship and sports goals (Muller, 2002). Members shared worries and fears about the future, but focused on personal strengths, support systems, and resources (Muller, 2002). The group validated members' feelings, experiences, and perceptions and allowed members to share feelings, speak honestly, trust each other, and express themselves (Muller, 2002). A follow-up self-report evaluation at six weeks indicated that members felt that they benefited from group participation by being able to talk about personal losses and feel connected to others with similar experiences (Muller, 2002). Muller concludes that it is possible to provide an effective group intervention for African American males with European American counselors (2002).

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT LITERATURE

A review of literature indicates that academic achievement groups yield positive results for African American adolescents, though researchers measure effectiveness differently. The Student Success Skills group used objective measures of pre- and posttest math and reading scores on the FCAT, compared to comparison group scores (Webb & Brigman, 2007).

The researchers used a true experimental design with objective measures, and they found no differences in improvement among students of different ethnicities. However, the SSS group program is not specifically designed for students of diverse cultural backgrounds, and the leaders did not indicate any considerations of barriers to academic success faced by minority students. Other groups are specifically designed for working with African American youths, but the effectiveness of the other groups is difficult to measure because of the subjective nature of self-report surveys. Future groups should be developed with specific cultural considerations, and which also use objective measures of group efficacy. If one goal is to increase school performance, progress reports might be an appropriate measure of group effectiveness. Group facilitators might ask group members in pre-screening interviews if they would be willing to bring in a copy of their progress report at the beginning and end of group. If group leaders do not have access to student grades, it might still be appropriate to assess school performance within self-report measures. However, subjective measures of program efficacy are uniquely valuable, including whether or not the members felt that they had benefited from group, if they were able to identify and express their feelings, and whether they were able to discuss their cultural experiences as members of a racial minority group.

There is certainly a need for further research of groups for ethnic minority youth. Further study may also include the addition of African symbols, art or poetry in the group process (Muller, 2002). It may also be appropriate to incorporate elements of the youth popular culture, such as music and film, within group counseling approaches (White & Rayle, 2007). It would be advantageous to focus on ways to empower youth through the counseling process. Future group development for adolescents may use a semi-structured counseling style that combines didactic training of specific skills and process elements and discussion topics of import to group members. Finally, there is little literature about groups for adolescents that occur outside of the school or in community settings; further research may determine whether or not the use of community resources (such as a local Boys and Girls Club) is beneficial for adolescent achievement groups.

The findings and similarities among groups from this brief review of literature may be applied to further group development. Each of the groups developed for African American adolescents were designed for either males or females; none of these groups was mixed-gender. An

important consideration for future group leaders who would work with youth is whether the adolescents feel more comfortable speaking about personal issues among members of their own gender. It is also common among groups to include pre-screening interviews to assess motivation to the group and commitment to participate. It is also prudent to address relevant racial differences immediately with group members, and to continue to attend to cross cultural dynamics throughout the group sessions. For groups that take place during school sessions, it is general practice to rotate the hour that the group meets, so that the students do not miss the same class each week. The students are also asked to commit to making up any schoolwork they miss due to the group. Both structured and unstructured groups can increase academic achievement in students, though youth empowerment groups tend to be more unstructured to allow members control of the counseling process.

Because most counselors are White and female, it is extremely inspiring to review positive results of groups for African American male and female students led by European American females. However, some professionals hold differing opinions about the suitability of cross-cultural counselors. While Muller (2002) found that group counselors who are neither African American nor male can effectively lead groups of African American males, White and Rayle (2007) indicate that an African American male group leader can be beneficial as he may provide a good role model for group members. These authors emphasize that a male counselor of any ethnicity will best facilitate the small group experience and “affirm the development of positive qualities and behaviors in young men” (White & Rayle, 2007). Similarly, in response to Bemak et al. (2005), multiple professionals suggested that the inclusion of at least one African American female counselor in a group designed for African American females might have provided both a richer counseling experience for members and leaders as well as a more accurate representation of Black feminism (Bailey, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005).

Nevertheless, White, female counselors can effectively facilitate groups and help youths improve interpersonal skills, manage stressors, and increase academic success. The literature repeatedly indicates that the characteristics of group leaders are most significant; most importantly, group counselors must be culturally competent (ASGW, 1999). Lee (2005) asserts, “counselor awareness, sensitivity, and competence often are far more important than racial/ethnic similarity in counseling encounters” (p.

393). It is important for counselors working with African American youth to be knowledgeable of African American history of racism and oppression in society and in education (White & Rayle, 2007). It is also crucial for European American counselors to maintain awareness of White privilege and inherent power dynamics (Muller, 2002). Muller maintains that counselors should remain open, honest, and nondefensive, and they should be willing to learn from group members and ask for clarification when needed (2000). It is vital for European American group counselors to be aware of their own cultural influences, biases, sentiments, and privilege. Group facilitators from any ethnic background who are willing to validate and to learn from the experiences of African American adolescents can successfully empower youths to achieve.

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Joanna R. Love

Joanna Love received her BA in psychology from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. She is currently in her second year in the Master's Counseling program at Marquette University. Her career goal is to provide direct counseling services for runaway adolescents, adopted children, foster youth, as well as their families.